

Living Wirefree

Ten Stories



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Special thanks to all those who have been featured here & the BPL Mobile employees who helped in producing the book: Arif Ali, Sangeeta Chandran, late Sanjay Nathani & Kamal Krishna.

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Foreword	I
Preface	II
Introduction	IV
Sherpa's Cliffhanger	1
Clueless Cops, Wireless Victims	15
Merry Christmas!	25
Action On The High Seas	37
Interceptor, Intercepted	47
Dialing a Virtuous Circle	57
Dear Diary	67
Fishing In Troubled Waters	79
Call to the Cooler	91
Call For Help!	105

Foreword

Today the world we live in has become a truly wirefree world, a world where we are unfettered, free, empowered. A world where a person's physical presence at a particular place has been rendered irrelevant. Earlier one needed to get to the office physically every morning. But in this amazing age of wirefree existence, he can conduct his business no matter where he is - through his mobile phone. He can stay connected, conduct video conferences, send emails or faxes and download pictures and music.

BPL Mobile pioneered mobile technology in India, and it has been an event-filled journey ever since that first day, that first small step. It has been several long years since that first wirefree step, years of sweat and smiles.

And in these years we have seen technology reach the distant corners of this country; have seen innovation change the way we have lived for centuries.

This book has tried to capture the lives of real people and how BPL Mobile's wirefree technology played a role in their lives.

With best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rajeev', followed by a long, sweeping horizontal line that extends to the right.

Rajeev Chandrasekhar

Preface

It all began, like most good things usually do, with a germ of an idea, which I shared with my friend Sanjay Prabhu, who amongst other things was heading the Brand Management team at BPL Mobile. I had never really expected anything to come of that discussion, and was genuinely surprised when Sanjay called me the week after and proposed to give shape to that idea, an idea that finally resulted in this book which I hope will give the reader as much reading pleasure, as it has given us in creating it.

BPL Mobile pioneered mobile telephony in this country. The BPL Mobile story is one of a first generation entrepreneur's belief in a new technology, and his grit and determination in creating a successful business harnessing the same.

However BPL Mobile besides emerging as a trusted cellular operator in the country has also touched lives in a manner that very few even within the company were aware of.

Living Wirefree, is what BPL Mobile believes in... and mobile telephony has truly set people free. This small device has helped save lives, catch thieves, solve crimes, trace lost children, and helped small business flourish and prosper.

Picture this. A thirty-something fish merchant living in his traditional mud-house in the coastal city of Kochi. He leaves for work at the crack of dawn to review the early morning catch and fix the best bargains of the day. Nothing much has changed in his profession. The fish, the jetty, the boats and the people are all the same. He pretty much carries on the tradition that his fore-fathers had set. But he has an edge over them. He may not necessarily be sharper or more able bodied but he has technology on his side. Twenty first century technology and he's proud to be in an era where wirefree is the way to be. His mobile phone is an example of this remarkable genius and this simple gadget has changed the scope of opportunities for him and thousands of other people. The advent of the wirefree technology has definitely changed the lives of millions of people around the world.

This book is an attempt to capture such real life stories, stories of real people, in real situations, stories of trials, of emotional trauma, stories of real grit, courage, tears and smiles. Stories about how a high tech device such as the mobile phone touches the emotive chord of people in a manner few can really imagine.

The first few days of researching the book was trying, to say least. The stories were not forth coming, numerous meetings resulted in very little, and people all around were losing patience with the project.

But we stuck on doggedly. And our efforts finally paid off.

In Pune we met additional commissioner of Police Sanjay Yadav, who told us stories of how he solved several crimes with the help of BPL Mobile's cellular network.

In Cochin we met the fishermen who today swear by their mobile phones, In Coimbatore and Pondicherry too we met grateful customers whose lives have changed thanks to this handy device.

Finally when it came to the short listing of the stories, we faced a problem of plenty. We had to select ten, the ones that you are going to read, but then there are those which we could not carry in this book, may be those are for a different day!

All the incidents that you will read about in the following pages are true, and happened to real people, though seen through the eyes of the writer. At times the writer's imagination may have over dramatized a certain scenario, but then that is poetic license, and one needs to remember the writer was not there when the incident actually took place, though the attempt has been to stick to the truth, in all sincerity.

However in some cases on the request of the people involved we have changed names to maintain confidentiality.

Once the stories were selected, it was left to Harmit Singh our photographer to get on the act. His brief was to live the stories and he has come up with some really haunting images, images which Ramnathkar and his team of designers placed with a lot of love and care to craft this unique book, Living Wirefree.

In the course of researching this book we have met many people, who will come alive through the following pages, people whom we are eternally grateful to for sharing their experiences with us, giving us their valuable time, and making us welcome no matter what time of the day we called on them. This book would not have been possible without them.

Then there are the numerous members of the BPL Mobile family who have guided us, given us time, and heard us with patience, and contributed to make this effort worthwhile.

One last thing, in the course of writing this book, we have made some genuine friends, met some real people and shared their lives, and on behalf of the entire Spero Media Concepts team, I would like to sincerely thank our new found friends for being what they are - good friends.

With best wishes

Rajarshi Roy and the Spero Media Concepts team.



*Man has always yearned to fly,
unshackled, unfettered..
to wing the distant sky...
boundless and free,
master of his own destiny..
a yearning shaped in science,
a freedom rendered true by technology,
a freedom steeped in connectivity,
a freedom to be mobile...
to live wirefree,
the dream...
finally a reality.*



1

SHERPA'S CLIFFHANGER



Date: Saturday, August 2002 *Location:* Lonavala Hills *Time:* Afternoon



Sherpa Harsh Roongta

It's a **nickname** he is proud to flaunt,
and the day he acquired it is one that the good **Sherpa**
is unlikely to forget easily.

Sherpa Harsh Roongta. It's a nickname he is proud to flaunt, and the day he acquired it is one that he is unlikely to forget. The 43-year-old CEO of Apnaloan.com, a Mumbai-based online loan services company, has been an avid trekker all his life. Every Sunday morning, especially during the monsoons, he leaves his busy corporate life behind, hits the back roads, dirt trails and mountain tracks, inhaling the fresh air, living up the great outdoors.

Roongta treks with either friends or family, discovering new trails and newer experiences among the assorted rugged hills that dot rural Maharashtra.

So that Saturday afternoon in August 2002, the trekking eve exhilaration was building up.

Roongta has just finished a gruelling meeting at office and was looking forward to a new trail in the Lonavala hills that his 24-year-old cousin Vaibhav had been raving about for sometime now. The trek was to change his name forever.

It was a different trip from the word go, reminisces Roongta. A professional banker, he is prone to evaluate every decision he takes - even in his personal life. However, after a prolonged, fatiguing meeting that day, his urge to break free, to go climbing his beloved hills, spurred Roongta into a small indiscretion.

Breaking the tradition of starting off early, Roongta and Vaibhav left the city well into Saturday afternoon. "It was straight after this long meeting that didn't seem to end," Roongta remembers.

The duo headed towards Khandala, a picturesque hill station in the Sahyadris, 120 kms off Mumbai. They were to climb Duke's Nose, a treacherous piece of rock that juts out into the skies, like the throne of Simba, the Lion king.



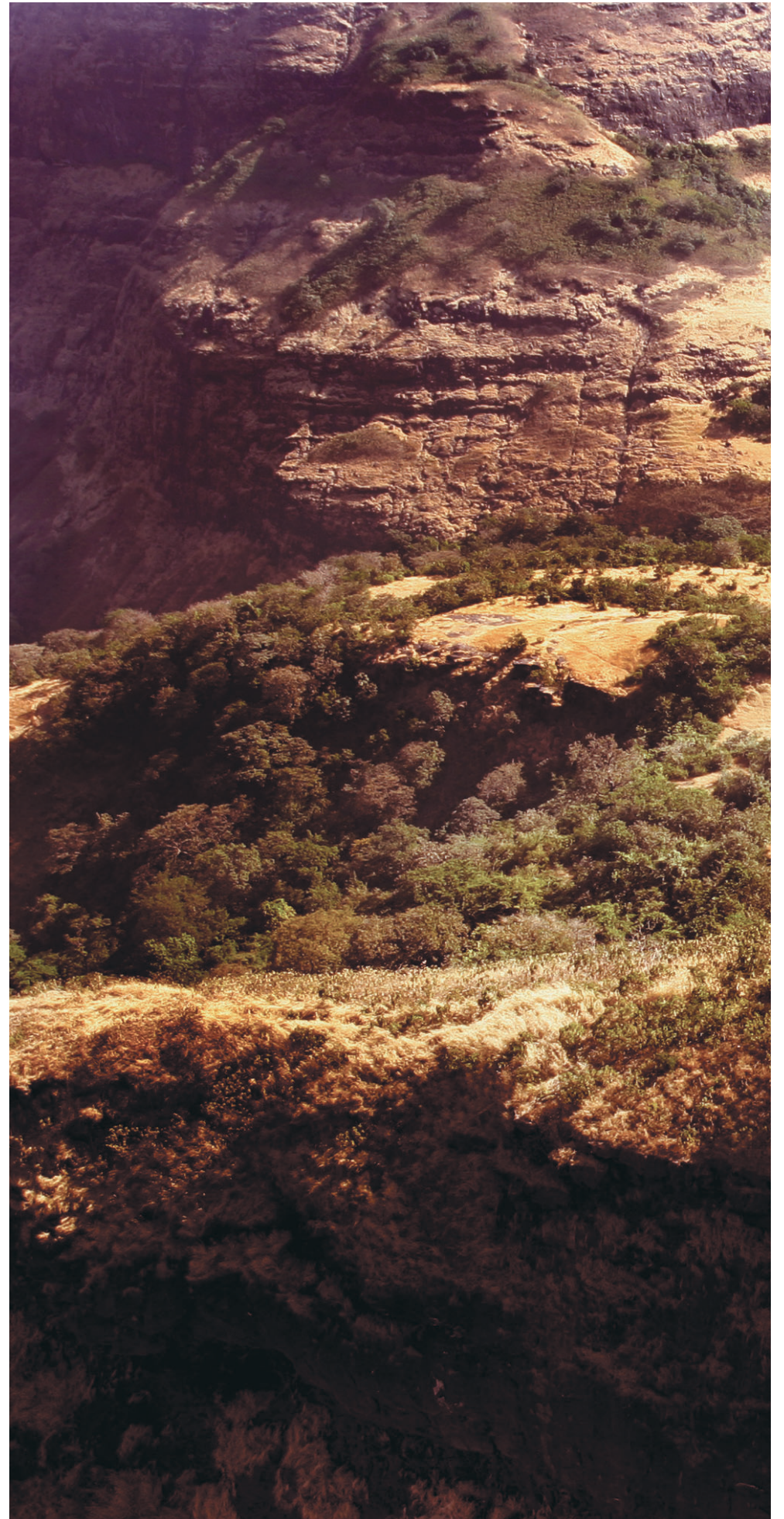
An Internet search had thrown up two options for conquering Duke's Nose - an oft-travelled easy route and a second more difficult climb. Armed with roadmaps, the duo, predictably, took the not-so-beaten track. "We were going to return by the easier route," says Roongta.

Scaling a lush, post-monsoon Duke's Nose was something that Roongta had wanted to do for a long time. Every time he drove past the ghats along the Mumbai-Pune expressway, he had eyed the Duke's Nose, which appeared even more imposing from that level.

Again, breaking tradition, Roongta carried one of his three cellphones. Normally he doesn't carry any. "There can be nothing more annoying than carrying a mobile phone on a trek," he says.

Roongta says he still does not have any idea how the phone found its way into his trouser pocket.

It was the duo's second attempt to scale the Duke's Nose and they were determined to make it this time. They had made an attempt to climb it a week earlier, but had to abandon the pursuit after trudging 2 kilometres up the wrong track. This time they were sure of the trail, having downloaded the details from the internet.





"It was so **steep** that for a moment
we considered **abandoning** the trek."



3.30 p.m.

The drive down to Khandala had been peaceful. The usually harsh Sahyadris were clothed in the molten green of fresh monsoon grass. There were no dark clouds on the horizon; the air carried the unmistakable whiff of recent rains.

They parked their red Honda City in a nearby village and began the climb. Once in a while, they came across villagers who would overtake them in no time, carrying fuel wood or returning home after the day's work. The undulating hills and the idyllic surroundings were rejuvenating.

"The going was easy initially, but soon we encountered a steep climb... a 7-8 feet gradient. That was a shock, that looming rock. For a brief moment we considered abandoning the trek," says Roongta.

He was soon amused: the clutch of villagers who had passed them not so long ago were casually going up the rock using their hands. Roongta was against climbs that required using hands. "But then, we also realised that we were fast approaching sunset, and we were nowhere near the top. I was also thinking that the climb could get tougher as we go higher," he said.

From their standpoint, the Duke's Nose appeared just a short distance away. That was encouraging. Egged on by his ebullient cousin, Roongta decided to go for it.



They started climbing up. Soon, they found themselves on a narrow ledge. The view from the top transfixed them. The ledge ended in a sheer drop of 1,500 to 2,000 ft.

And just when they thought that they had crossed one impediment, another emerged from the mist. This time the gradient was 9-10 feet. "It was so narrow that one wrong step and nobody would have heard of us again. The ledge was misleading. We hadn't a clue what lay ahead. We couldn't see it," Roongta shudders, remembering the events.

It wasn't the climb as much as the descent that scared him witless. "Climbing up was okay but coming down was going to be impossible. We would have had to use our hands again. More than the physical act, it was psychologically daunting," he said.



Thanks to the downloaded map, they had made it this far. But Vaibhav was determined to get to the top. He wanted to visit the temple on the Nose.

This time, Roongta refused to budge. The hour of the Cicadas was upon them, the drone of other insects was getting more irritating, the dusk was giving way to darkness.

"I realised it was mistake coming this far and going ahead would be foolish. We had to call for help," he says.

Experience had taught him not to panic. Only reaching out to family and friends would help. That's when he remembered the BPL Mobile he was carting around inadvertently. He first called his wife. "Thankfully, she was out or she would have panicked. I then spoke to my son. Not wanting to scare him, I told him we were enjoying the trek," Roongta says.

The clock was ticking and pitch darkness was around the corner. The sounds of wild animals only added to the primal fear building inside. It was another indication that the trek had begun on an unusual note - never had they embarked on a post-lunch outing.

But this was no time for introspection. He had to be pragmatic. The rescue had to happen fast. "I was following the dictum: If you can't do it yourself, seek help," says Roongta. A call to his Mumbai office, and his partner Kashi Vishwanathan was on the line. When Vishwanathan heard the familiar voice at the other end saying, "I'm stuck", he doubled up with laughter. "He thought I was playing a prank," says Roongta.

But once Kashi understood the situation, he sprung into action. He summoned his other partner and also contacted Roongta's wife. They all rushed to the McDonald's outlet at Panvel to chart out a rescue strategy. He also touched base with a mountaineering group from Pune, which promised to put together a five-member rescue team.

Kashi & Co also got in touch with a familiar name in Khandala / Lonavala - Raj Rathod, owner of the famed A1 Chikki brand. They even sought help from INS Shivaji, the naval training institute. Officials there said they didn't have the people but could help with equipment.

Rathod sought the help of four villagers and a police inspector. And while the rescue teams were gearing up for action, Roongta and his cousin were kept informed about every move on their mobile. "Ah! those were such reassuring rings - and I had thought carrying a cellphone was a nuisance," Roongta said.

"I was terrified. It was okay to climb up
but coming down was going to be **impossible**.

We would have had to use our hands again.

More than the physical act,
it was **psychologically** daunting."





7.00 p.m.

The rescue party had reached the foothills. The sun had set and a nervous Roongta could foresee another looming problem. Help was at hand, but his only mode of communication was on the verge of letting him down. The cellphone battery was gasping for breath.

So desisting from making phone calls, he began messaging fervently. "They say that SMSing is better than a call if you want the battery to last," he says.

As the rescue party came closer, Roongta could hear them clearly in the gaping, inky stillness.

Roongta's **cellphone** battery
was gasping for **breath.**



8.30 p.m.

Voices made Vaibhav peer at the dark, jutting Duke's Nose. He could see silhouettes of people, hear bits of agitated conversation. Having climbed up the easy and fast route, these rescuers were now throwing down ropes towards the hapless duo. Roongta and Vaibhav lost no time in strapping themselves to the lifeline.



9.00 p.m.

A tired Roongta and Vaibhav were soon hauled up. Biscuits and beverages awaited them on the hilltop. All of them then trudged down the easy route. Roongta wanted to pay the villagers, but Rathod stopped him. "We will felicitate them later but there should be no cash rewards, only in kind," he said.

For Roongta, it was an experience he was going to relive and narrate for the rest of his life. "For me, the mobile battery became the defining thing," he says. The duo pledged to make it to the top once again. But this time, they would have no qualms taking the easy way up.



Monday was another day.

*Back at the office, the CEO was rechristened
Sherpa Harsh Roongta, for his brave ordeal
on the Sahyadri slopes.*





2

CLUELESS COPS, WIRELESS VICTIMS.



Date: December 03, 2003 *Location:* Pune *Time:* 3.00 am, early morning

Pune city is in Delta Sleep at 3.30 a.m. on December 03, 2003. Only the occasional, distant dog-bark can be heard in the inky, cold stillness. In the residential areas, security guards are becoming weary, some flopping about in their cabins. Taking advantage of the slackness, a gang of burglars cat-foot into a bungalow, deftly open cupboards and scamper off with the loot in 10 minutes flat. When the head of the family wakes up an hour-and-a-half later, he turns numb with shock. He wants to call out to his wife snoring beside him, but the voice just isn't there.

Quivering like an aspen leaf, he wants to calm down, but the more he surveys the disarray that is his house, the more he panics. Ten minutes later, the palpitations transform into a plaintive shriek, shattering the locality's serenity. The cry jolts family members awake, who in turn call out for one another.

They rush to check their belongings. Jewellery, cash and mobile handsets are missing. It looks like a tornado had come a-visiting. Their minds start to sort out the suspects: domestic help, household attendants, regular visitors... who could have done this?

By 6 a.m., a police complaint is lodged and cops rush to the unpretentious house. With no tracks to be found, they are unsure where to begin.





Between December 2003 and January 2004,
72 cases of **robbery** were registered
at police stations around the city.



4.00 a.m.

Another housebreak is reported to the downtown police headquarters. Then another one three days later. And yet another one the day after. Between December 2003 and January 2004, 72 cases of robbery are registered at police stations around the city.

Time is running out for the cops as their credibility is being battered. The only way out is to nab the culprits fast. The cops detect a pattern: All the incidents took place between 3 a.m and 5 a.m, the hours of deepest sleep. Also, in each of these crimes, apart from the jewellery and cash stolen, cellphones were whacked too.

With such circumstantial information, the cops in Pune get down to work. Scanning their records, they zero in on 24-year-old Daulat Singh, primarily because he has been a history-sheeter – there were 37 burglary offences registered against him.

Daulat is a *shikhalkari* – a tribe of illiterates that draws sustenance from petty crimes. But unlike his kin, Daulat is educated and knows English too. His gang operates not just in Maharashtra but in neighbouring Gujarat also.



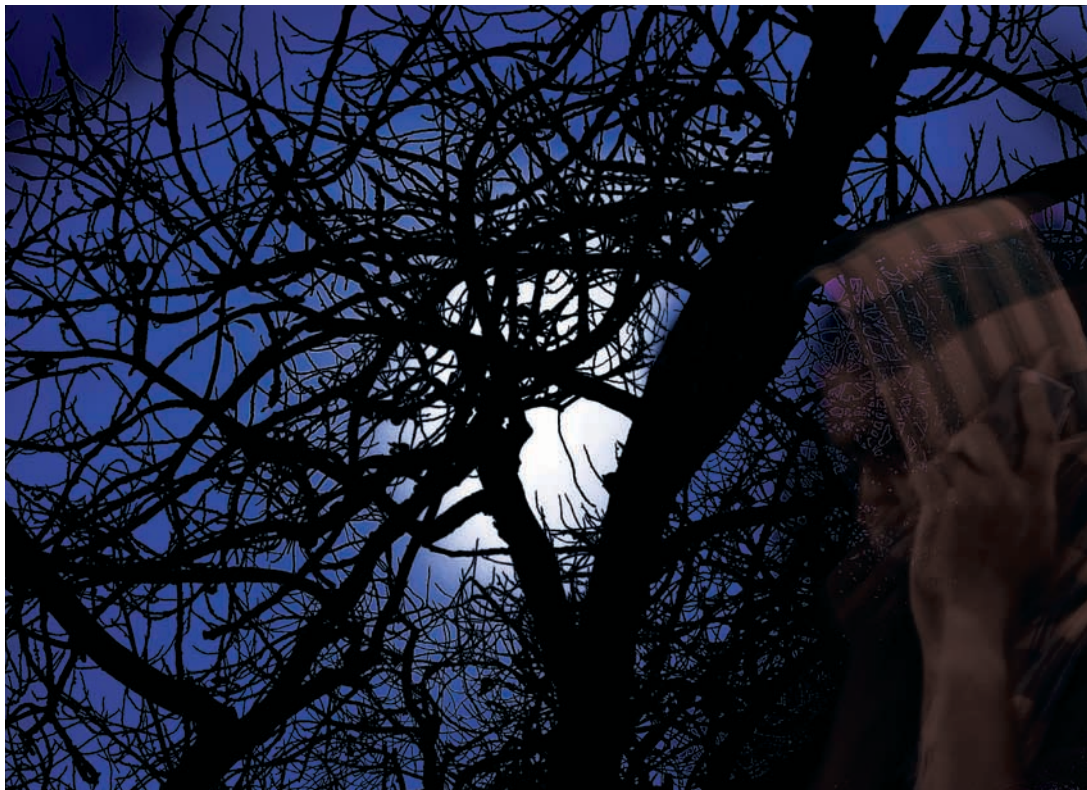
Says a Pune cop, refusing to be identified: "It was obvious that the burglars planned well. During the day they gathered information about their prey and struck at night." Trying to nab the gang was going to be difficult. With a warrant out on him, Daulat was constantly on the move.

The intriguing thing about these robberies was that the gang seemed to be constantly in search of different handsets. Every time a handset was found missing, an alert was sounded on its SIM card and IMEI numbers.

IMEI, or International Mobile Equipment Identity, is a unique number used by cellphone companies to identify valid devices. It is usually found printed on or underneath the phone's battery and can also be found by dialing *#06# on the handset. The number can be used to stop a stolen phone from accessing the network.

For example, if a cellphone is stolen, its owner can call the network provider and instruct them to bar the IMEI number. This renders the phone useless, regardless of whether the thief has changed its SIM card or not. It's another matter that IMEI barring is not very prevalent in India because of a lack of unity among competing cellphone companies.

Once the IMEI and SIM card numbers were had, intercepting calls was a breeze, thanks to some help from BPL Mobile. The culprits, however, were blissfully unaware that the law was catching up because of their wireless folly.



Soon, eleven hoodlums from Daulat's gang are in custody. On February 2, 2004, the cops nabbed four more gang members in Hadapsar. A quick interrogation of the quartet helped the lawkeepers rush to the gang's next crime spot fast enough to apprehend four more members.

By now, 19 members of Daulat's gang were in the cooler. But the mastermind was still on the lam. When accomplices didn't respond to his calls, Daulat knew it was time to move – and fast. He changed disguises twice a day, and relied on very few people around him.

He had long ago learnt that the only way to shake off the cops was to keep moving.

Making matters worse for the police was the fact that Daulat was not averse to cooling it in hideouts that human beings don't think of -- such as bang in the middle of the city's garbage dump.

At other times, he took to the nearby jungles.



Making matters **worse** for the police
was the fact that Daulat was not averse
to cooling it in novel **hideouts**.

For the cops, time was running out and they had to answer an increasingly vocal public. Then their luck changed. Intercepting a stolen BPL Mobile cellphone, they gathered that the remnants of the gang had assembled in a particular location. On February 12, they sat up all day planning on how to trap the ace criminal. This time, they didn't want to take any chances.



From 8 p.m. that day, the cops were on watch. They surrounded the two-storey house where the gang was. It was pitch-dark, a night of no moon. The cops took this as divine intervention. Even if it hadn't been so inky, the thick foliage around the building would have given ample cover.

Then they saw them. The silhouettes on the balcony. They were scanning the surroundings and don't seem to note anything amiss. They didn't talk much, the cops thought.

At the stroke of midnight, they glanced around one more time and walked back inside.

The latches clicked into place and the lights went off inside the house.

The countdown had begun.

Well before the crack of dawn, the shadowy men tiptoed out of their hideaway, and trod softly down the road... only to be overpowered and handcuffed by the waiting cops.

One of them was Daulat.



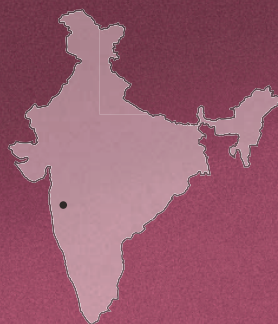
3.30 a.m. February 13, 2004

The man who gave the cops and citizens of Pune sleepless nights was caught at exactly the hour that he used to strike at his victims. And it was all because of the cellphone, swear the cops.



3

MERRY CHRISTMAS



Date: December 23, 2003 Location: Pune Time: 7 pm





It was a pretty festive atmosphere in the hall, as the last of the balloons was hung up. And when the music, mainly carols, was turned on and the fans whirled, the colourful bunting and other bric-a-brac fluttered in the breeze. It was as if they were merrily keeping in step with the music.

The occasion? Christmas Eve 2003, and like most such events, what better way to ring in the Yuletide than by partying.



The occasion?
It was **Christmas Eve 2003,**
and like most such events, what better way
to ring in the Yuletide than by partying.

Soon, the hall filled up, and the disc jockey turned up the volume. As the first strains of Dean Martin's *Rudolf The Red-nosed Reindeer* were belted out, the moppets cheered, pulling each other to the floor, running in a single file to resemble a sleigh.

Colin loved Rudolf, as did his classmates and best friends Mark and Kevin. They jived, laughed and ran around, as carols alternated with classical hits.

The waiters were giving finishing touches to the colourful medley laid out on the table. The star attraction, of course, was going to be Uncle Santa. It was a kiddy party of sorts, also thrown open to the parents.

By 7 p.m, the children arrived accompanied by their chaperones. They were all in party attire - frilly frocks, bright shirts, capris and pants, big bows. A few boys, like Colin D'Souza, had even tucked decorative handkerchiefs into their pockets. Some had combed their hair to resemble their favourite actor Shah Rukh Khan. As for the girls, they were miniature replicas of their idols, which included veejays of some music channels. Some were even Barbie wannabes.

A few kilometres away, at the Assistant Commissioner of Police office near the GPO in Pune, cops were getting ready to wind up. One of them wanted to celebrate Christmas the next day and was hoping to retire early. If time permitted, he wanted to even go for the midnight mass.



His seven-year old son was **missing**
from the Christmas Eve party.



Ah, a peaceful way to wrap up the year, he thought. Just then the phone rang. A frantic man was at the other end. He said his seven-year old son was missing from the Christmas Eve party. May be he had just wandered around the hall, suggested the cop. "We've searched everywhere for Colin," said Michael, breaking down on the phone.

His voice was cracking up in fear now. The music had stopped, and the chaperones were clutching their wards tightly. Blinking lights, floating balloons and confetti were the only signs that said this was, till some moments ago, a place of gaiety.



The cops were not sure what to do. What they did know was that they had to return Colin to his parents fast. With no time to waste, they shed their uniforms for civilian attire. If it were a case of kidnapping, they had to melt into the revellers to find out clues. If the abductor was around, he would panic at the sight of cops and then it could be too late.

Jumping into their jeeps, they rushed to the party venue. By then, everybody had searched high and low, and all the nooks and crevices in the vicinity for Colin. "It soon dawned on us that the child was kidnapped," remembers inspector Jadhav, who was in the team rushing to help.



The team alerted fellow cops at other police stations. The shrill ring of Michael's BPL Mobile phone rattled those huddled around him. He dug into his shirt pocket and took the call. The cold voice at the other end confirmed everyone's worst fears: Yes, Colin D'Souza was indeed abducted, and the kidnapper wanted Rs 4 lakh as ransom.

But it was the call the cops were waiting for. At the police headquarters control room in Pune, they were already trying to trace the number. From then on, every time the kidnapper dialled, the control room would despatch a fresh batch of cops to the call's point of origin.

It was a wild goose chase and each time the kidnapper outwitted the cops, moving on to a new location before the law keepers could close in.

The midnight mass had ended, and Christmas day had dawned. Cars zoomed down the road, returning from revellery elsewhere in the city.

It was 10 a.m when Michael's mobile phone rang again. This time, the abductor coolly explained how the money was to be handed over. He would meet Michael at a secluded spot on Platform No. 3 of the Pune railway station.

Soon the station was crawling with plain-clothed police, some dressed as coolies, some as kiosk attendants, and others as office goers. Inspector Jadhav, pretending to be Michael, approached the spot the kidnapper had directed him to.

Yes, Colin D'Souza was indeed **abducted**,
and the **kidnapper** wanted Rs 4 lakh as ransom.



On his way, he spotted a nervous lad sitting on the floor of Platform No. 3, fear writ large on his tear-streaked face. Walking up to him, Jadhav enquired who he was.

It was Colin.

His abductor had left him there to collect the money from Michael at the rendezvous spot.

Handing over Colin to colleagues, Jadhav went on to meet his quarry. He spotted him soon, at the exact spot he was told to meet him. The quarry had a face to match his cold-blooded voice.

Without batting an eyelid, he asked for the money. Jadhav began to open the bag he was carrying to hand over the cash - it was the signal for his colleagues to swoop on the abductor.

Colin was soon returned to his distraught parents waiting in their car outside the Pune railway station.

As for the cops, they had solved a crime in 12 hours flat. So what if one of them hadn't made it for the 12 a.m. mass?



•Names have been changed to protect identities.



*"I was so happy with our success
that I danced on the road, oblivious of who
or where I was," said the ebullient Jadhav.
It was party time yet again.*



4

ACTION ON THE HIGH SEAS



Date: Friday, early February 2004 *Location:* Ernakulam, Kerala *Time:* Little before noon



The flora-stippled waters of the Arabian Sea look tranquil along the Marine Drive in Ernakulam. But quietude soon gives way to garrulity as you saunter northwards, towards the Boat Jetty.

Now that place is abuzz: boats take to the greenish waters every few minutes, ferrying scores of chattering passengers and their accoutrements to the islands littered across the harbour, only to return later.

These boats belong to the Kerala Shipping & Inland Navigation Corporation (KSINC), and most of them have a story to tell. Stories of weathering many a storm. For in the world of the sea, very few vessels are lucky enough to skirt the elemental trysts till their hulls creak with age. And then one fine day, an underwater reef splinters that record.

But fewer still sail into turbulence with their very first voyage...





It sure was an interesting sight:
a **colourful** little flotilla bobbing about,
but maintaining navy-esque row **discipline.**



That bright Friday in early February 2004, five spanking new boats set sail for the first time a little before noon. They were plying from the jetty to Fort Kochi across the harbour. All the boats were commissioned by the State Water Transport Department and KSINC was delivering them to its client.

It sure was an interesting sight: a colourful little flotilla bobbing about, but maintaining navy - esque row discipline. The tropical sun was beating down fiercely on the sparkling hulls.



Ah, another nice sail, thought Gopan Nair*, as he steered his boat, the last in line, towards its destination. Shaji* would soon unspool the anchor line and tie up this new boy to one of the *Shiva lingams*, he thought. The anchoring stones at the mooring always reminded Nair of the primordial, holy stone.

The fleet was some distance away from its destination, half an hour since its first real journey began, but the masters could spot the familiar contours of Fort Kochi on the horizon. The little Chinese fishing nets dotting the pier were swaying to the breeze.



Nair planned to head for Rahmatulla's in Mattanchery, to gorge on the "world famous" mutton biryani, the moment he could leave the quay.

The scream, however, snapped him out of his reverie. "Gopetta, there's water welling up under my feet," Shaji shrieked.

Nair rushed to the engine room and saw the gusher. There was a bad gash in the wood and water was rushing into the hull. The vessel was becoming heavy. These veteran boatmen were well-versed in handling emergencies. But they still broke into a cold sweat every time there was a crisis. Nair looked up in silent prayer. At least, he had zeroed in on the fault.

He cut off the engine and rushed to call the other vessels. They were way ahead, and there was no way to contact them. He pulled out his BPL Mobile and called up the KSINC authorities back at the Boat Jetty in Ernakulam.

The landline at P. Ashokan's small, functional office along the rickety ailings rang. The traffic superintendent of KSINC adjusted his spectacles as the news sunk in. He then ran out to inform his colleagues about the emergency.

Two rescue vessels rushed to Nair's boat. By then, he and Shaji had used whatever they could lay their hands on to seal the gash. Water was still trickling in and had reached midway to their knees.

"Without the **Cellphone**,
the boat could have **sunk**.
It was so very useful."



Nair's boat was soon towed to the shipyard for repairs. "The boat could have sunk but for that telephone call," recounts Ashokan, running his fingers through oily hair. That he has his hands full is obvious.

Pulling back his hair to the top of his head, he looks across the harbour to recount yet another incident.

On September 6, 2003, the *Marie Jacqueline* carrying five men rammed into a passenger vessel carrying 25 people. "It was a fishing boat that seemed to be in a hurry," Ashokan remembers.



The passengers in the other vessel could see the speeding boat approaching them. They thought it would swerve past in the nick of time, but the *Marie Jacqueline* torpedoed their vessel. It careened and struck a concrete pillar at the Murukumpaduvur jetty, 7 km off Kochi.

The impact cracked the pillar and in the ensuing commotion, the boat managed to speed off. It couldn't go far, though. When the desperadoes arrived near Oochanthuruthu jetty one km from Kochi, a police boat was waiting.

The boat master of the passenger vessel had informed KSINC and the jetty police station about them through his cellphone.

The culprits were let off after they coughed up a fine of Rs 15,000, Ashokan said, smiling.

** Names have been changed to protect some identities.*



*Life around this place gets exciting
once in a while for Ashokan.*

*His job is such that he is always expecting
a distress call. It has been some time
since the last one came. That, he agrees,
is not such a bad thing after all.*



5

INTERCEPTOR INTERCEPTED



Date: September 29, 2004 *Location:* Paud Road in Kothrud, Pune. *Time:* 'Afternoonish', midday



He was the **mastermind** of a cyber crime
that had foxed mobile companies for almost a **year**.

That was enough cause for cheer. If the cops were jubilant, it wasn't so much because they had caught the culprit. Sure, that was their primary job. But what excited them was that despite being technologically challenged – most of them didn't know how to operate a computer - they had just cracked a complicated cyber crime.

What they found with Batra staggered them; four routers, 36 SIM cards including 24 of BPL Mobile, six mobile handsets, a laptop and a switchboard. The value of all this? Rs 4.25 lakh.

Earlier that day, sleuths had visited Jhelum Apartments in the city's Erandawana locality. The parking lot there looked bare as owners had driven off to their daily destinations.

On September 29, 2004, Sanjay Kumar Batra was doing something he had been doing for some time now. He was about to amble across to yet another cellphone company's office. He wanted to buy a new SIM card and this time he chose the BPL Mobile office near the MIT School on Paud Road in Kothrud, Pune.

There were many there who had been waiting for hours to meet him. Now Batra was no politician or film star. He was the mastermind of a cyber crime that had foxed mobile companies for almost a year. After months of tracking his whereabouts, the cops had laid a trap and Batra walked into it.



Their arrival caused a minor stir because of the phalanx of police jeeps. Peeping residents thought many of the cops looked familiar. They were right because for the past two weeks, some of these very men were staking out the apartment, trying to know more about the occupant of Flat No. 14, called 'Vishal Manik Bharadwaj'.







Breaking into the flat, they arrested two persons for illegally running an international telephone exchange. And the exchange's revenue? An eye-popping Rs 20 lakh a month.

What the duo was doing was simplicity itself. Under the international telephony system, a call from the US came to India through the designated international carrier Videsh Sanchar Nigam Ltd. Batra simply rerouted the calls.

For an incoming call, the Jhelum Apartments exchange would bypass VSNL by using the Internet and deliver it direct to the receiver using a SIM card.

The initial capital investment in routers and SIM cards was nothing compared with the neat pile made from the service.

The glib-talking Batra is a qualified engineer and a technocrat. What's more, he hails from a well-to-do family. The going was good, but the number of SIM cards he bought would have sooner or later alerted the mobile companies.

The minute Batra **diverted** a call, it became a local call
and mobile firms lost **airtime** charges.



Because, while he was making money, the cellphone operators were losing it. The minute Batra diverted a call it became a local call and mobile firms lost airtime charges. Though blissfully unaware of the losses, the manager of a phone company had informed his superiors that Bharadwaj had bought eight SIM cards to make international calls.

That started a nine-month pursuit for evidence. Batra had found a great, business. To set up the exchange, he had purchased the Jhelum Apartments flat under the fictitious name of Vishal Manik Bharadwaj. To authenticate the acquisition, he had provided an Income Tax Permanent Account Number. He also floated a company called Prestige Services. Under interrogation, Batra sang like a canary. But in the end, and unlike most crimes, the cops were completely in awe of the culprit.





As an inspector put it:

"The way Batra had rigged up a telephone exchange at home was simply amazing. From then on, other cyber crimes looked like amateur jobs."



6

DIALING

A VIRTUOUS CIRCLE



Date: September 2004 *Location:* Police Academy in Thrissur, a two-hour drive from Kochi *Time:* 1 pm, afternoon

The highway police in Kerala are a wary lot these days. Wary, because they want to avoid this helper who can often be found on trucks hunkering down the sylvan state's arteries.

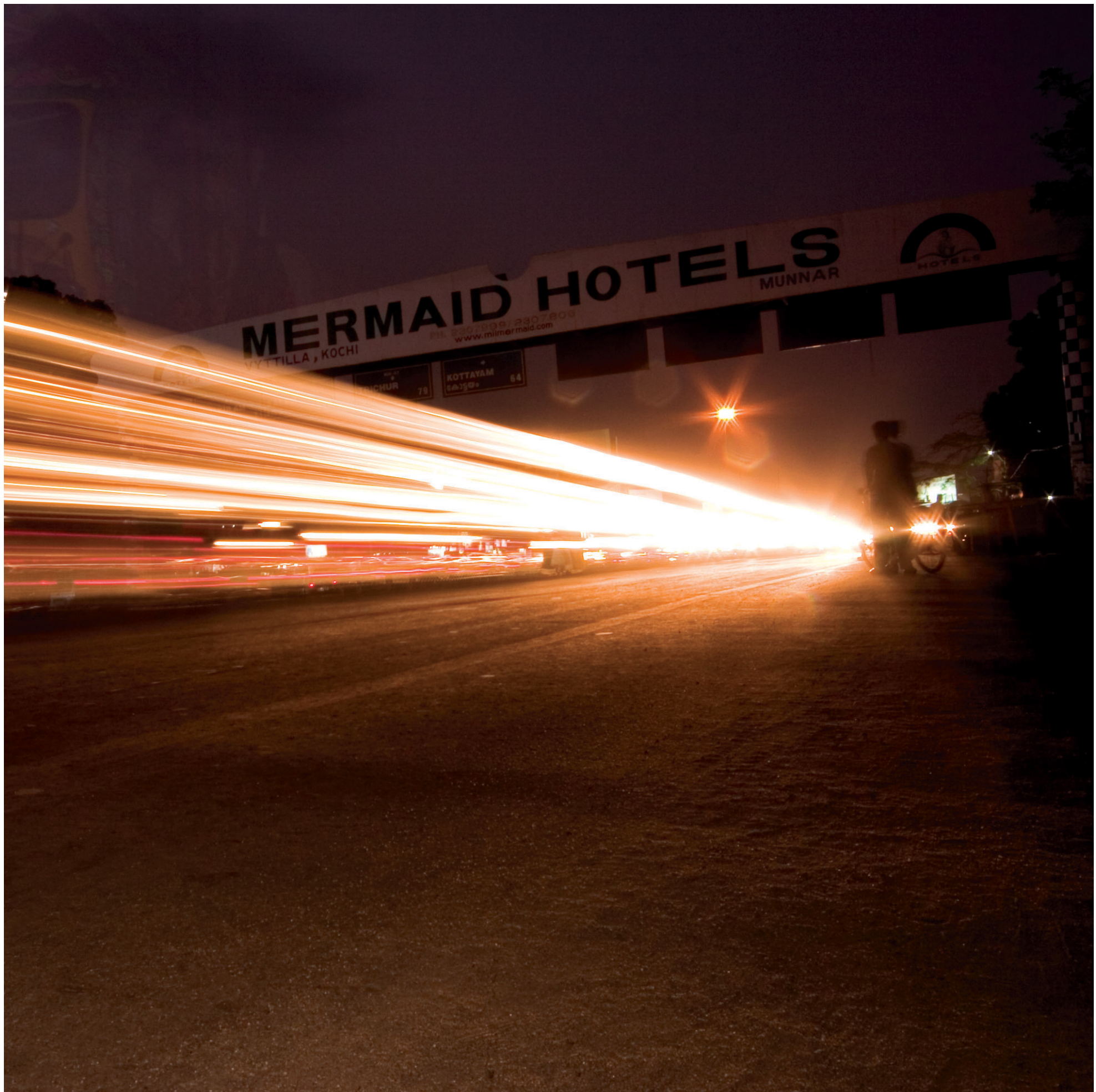
If a highway cop flags down such a truck and demands a bribe – as is often the case - he would find this helper happy to oblige.

But then, Rishi Raj Singh is no ordinary truck helper. He is the Inspector General of Kerala Highway Patrol.

"You can be sure there would be a suspension order waiting for the rogue cop the next morning," says a Kochi journalist.

The tough, colourful, cravatted Singh is sipping a cup of seriously hot tea at the Police Academy in Thrissur, a two-hour drive from Kochi. He is catching a break from his busy schedule as the head of the reception committee for a national symposium of directors general of police.







Twirling his impressive handlebar whiskers,
the **flamboyant Singh**,
dressed in gray trousers, a green shirt
and a printed red silk scarf.

Early last year, on April 29, the Kerala Police ventured on a mission to create road awareness among the people living along the national highways and the central roads. It set up an Alert Service. A toll-free number-98426-100-100-valid across the state was allotted by BPL Mobile for the service.

The state police then set up a call center to monitor SOSs coming on this line. Once a call comes in, the caller's location is immediately tracked through land lines and wireless, and help is at hand in an average of 8 minutes.

"This way we hope to reduce the casualties," says Singh.

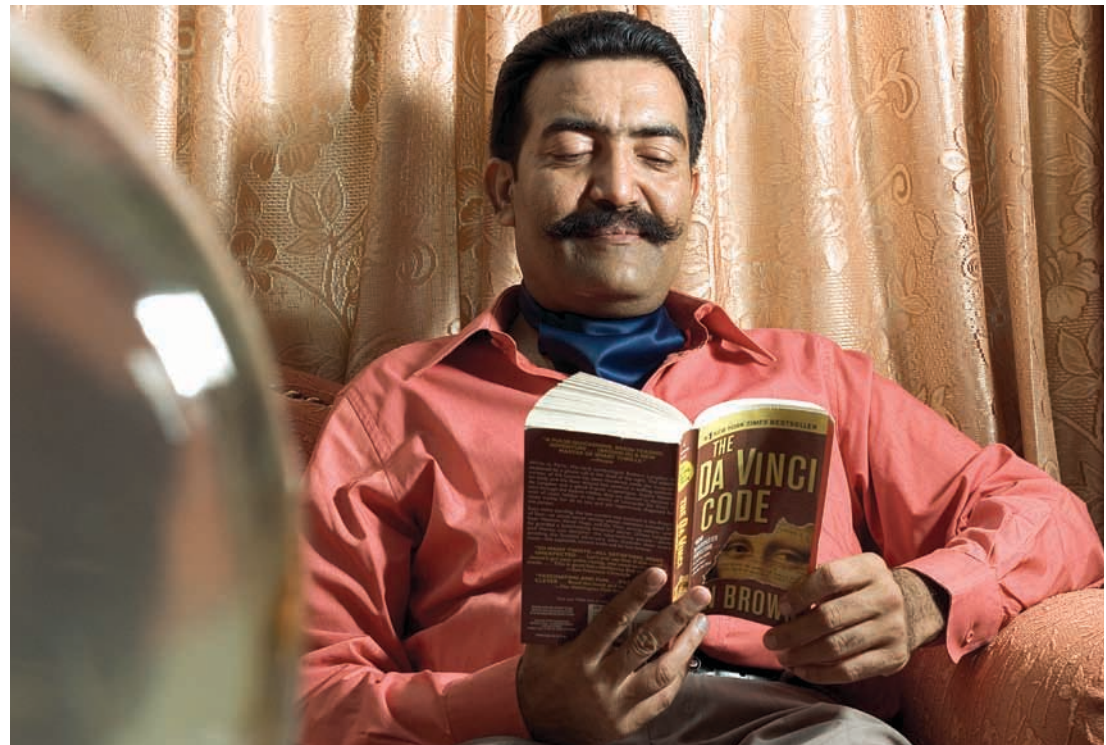
Singh & Co are clearly succeeding. There are many today who are thanking and blessing – that's a big change - the cops for the service.

Outside, colourful plastic buntings flutter as rains pitter patter. Constables in white t-shirts and khaki shorts are giving finishing touches to the stadium nearby, where the country's top cops will congregate for the next couple of days.

Twirling his impressive handlebar whiskers, the flamboyant Singh, dressed in gray trousers, a green shirt and a printed red silk scarf, rushes towards the large doors of the Academy every time a jeep carrying yet another top cop arrives.

The Rajasthani speaks Malayalam almost like a native. "That's because I've been here since 1986," he says. "It was difficult in the early days."

Kerala, he says, has one of the highest road death and accident rates in the world. "The annual toll is 40,000 accidents, 50,000 injuries and 3,000 deaths. It keeps mounting every year." Singh is clearly uncomfortable reeling off the morbid data. He's already moving to change things.





Like the two young men who had been hit by a speeding vehicle on the busy Trivandrum highway in the wee hours one morning in July last year. As they lay unconscious, vehicles continued to pass by, their drivers oblivious or unconcerned.

Satisan*, a local farmer, was on his way to work. He saw the duo and thought they were sleeping on the road. But sixth sense prompted him to try and shake them awake. When no response was forthcoming, he knew something was seriously wrong.

He stepped on to the road, and using a small cloth bag that he was carrying, began frantically waving at passers-by. Finally, a vehicle slowed and stopped. Its driver realised the situation and immediately called up the toll-free Alert Service. The highway patrol arrived within 5 minutes along with a doctor. The men were taken to the Trivandrum Medical College where they were immediately operated upon. The duo recovered and went home a month later.

Any delay, Singh says, sipping the scalding tea, would have been the end of the two.

The highway patrol
arrived within **5 minutes**
along with a doctor.



He narrates another case of five-year old Shreyas. The child had wandered far away from his home in Kanyakumari district.

A volunteer of Jeevan Rakshavedi, a local social group, found him on the morning of October 13, 2004, loitering in the bylanes of Thrissur, his clothes filthy and hair unkempt.

The boy looked tired and frightened. The volunteer talked to him and found out that little Shreyas had been pining for his parents since the past two days. The volunteer brought the boy to the Rakshavedi office in the temple town. People there were intrigued by the fact that Shreyas had managed to wander hundreds of kilometres away from Kanyakumari.



They gave him bread, biscuits and milk, and soon called up the Alert Service.

Constable Suresh Kumar picked up the call. He then dashed to the Rakshavedi office along with a colleague. But they couldn't get much information from Shreyas. So Suresh Kumar returned and contacted the Kanyakumari police station.

Cops there sprung into action and spread the word on the wireless. Soon they found that a complaint had been filed two days earlier at the Pattikada police station by Shreyas' parents.

That Wednesday night itself Shreyas returned to his tearful, thankful parents. The Kerala Police gave cash rewards to three people for their efficiency.

98426-100-100 today has become quite a lifeline. It seems to have been ingrained in the local psyche. So much so, people call up the Alert Service to report even run-of-the-mill thefts.

** Name changed upon the Good Samaritan's request.*



*"Now people take the service for granted,
which is good. Let it proliferate to all walks of life,"
says Singh, twirling his moustache,
as he rushes out to receive yet another dignitary.*



7

DEAR DIARY



Date: December 11, 2003 *Location:* Pondicherry *Time:* 7 am (early morning)



When I went to pick up my morning cuppa,
I heard the hushed **sobs**.
Sunayna was **crying** in the common bathroom.

Saturday, December 11, 2003

What a tumultuous 24 hours it had been!

A day of sadness, loss, hope, patience and relief, in turns. And its memories are etched into my being forever.

When I woke up, it felt like any other December morning - from the balcony, Pondicherry seemed stirring to life ever so slowly.

But when I went to pick up my morning cuppa, I heard the hushed sobs. Sunayna was crying in the common bathroom.

"What happened?" I asked her, knocking at the door. "Nothing," she said, unlocking it.

Obviously she had been crying for some time. Her eyes were red and teary; traces of her kohl eyeliner had smudged her left cheek. Her knuckles were white from clenching her sari *pallu*.

"Then why are you crying? Is everything alright?"

"Yes" she had said, unconvincingly.

"Then why are you crying?" I had asked again.

"It's Shiva," my wife said. "He has been acting very odd these days and Nandita is worried. He lies awake till the wee hours of the morning, not eating properly, not talking. When she tried to ask him, he rebuffed her by saying that he wanted everything to end and only then would he be at peace. Do you think he wants to leave her? Is there another woman? She's very worried."

Women! They jump to conclusions all the time about my favourite brother in law!

Sunayna's sister and Shiva look so happy together. I told Sunayna if something was really wrong, Shiva would tell me. I was that close to him.



“Shiva’s **missing,**”
said Nandita, crying.
“And he has left us a **letter**
asking us to carry out his wishes.



That reminded me, Shiva had indeed sounded a little depressed on Sunday.

I thought this was because he had recently lost his father. Being the only son, there were responsibilities...

But he would never think of deserting his family and Nandita. He loved her dearly and leaving her was the last thing he'd do.

Promising Sunayna to sort out things, I dressed up to attend my daily routine, which was all regular stuff - meetings, interviews, strategising... the works.

It was 7.30 p.m. when I returned home and suddenly I remembered I had to talk to Shiva.

Imagine my shock when I stepped into the house; Not only was Sunayna in tears but her sister Nandita and other members of her family were sitting in the drawing room, which had a funereal air about it.

My heart started pounding. "What's wrong?" I asked no one in particular.



"Shiva's missing," said Nandita, crying. "And he has left us a letter asking us to carry out his wishes. Dada, please do something. I will die if he does not return. He's not taking our calls and nobody knows where he went."

I could feel my chest heaving now. I asked Nandita to narrate the course of events and read the letter Shiva had left behind. Shiva had placed the letter on their bed sometime during the day and taken off.

I decided against calling the police because that would indirectly invite media publicity. Better wait till it became unavoidable.

I tried reaching Shiva on the two cellphones that were with him but there was no response.

I asked a few friends to try his numbers and they failed to get through too.



I started panicking but was determined not to show it. That's when it struck me: Surely, the mobile companies would have some technology to trace calls? Only if they could tell us that he was well and alive...

I called up the customer care service centre of BPL Mobile. Emanuel, the executive who took the call, was very helpful and took down details of the number and promised to get back immediately.

I was feeling better.

The other mobile company whose phone Shiva was carrying admitted its helplessness in the matter.

As the hours passed, Nandita turned paler and hopes started to dwindle. Her sobbing had stopped but she was slipping into trauma mode.

Emanuel called to say the only hitch to putting a trace was Shiva's lack of response to the calls.

Then at about 2 a.m., Emanuel called again.

"Sir, we have managed to get across to him," said Emanuel. "We have been trying him from various numbers and finally he did pick up a call."

Boy was **I relieved!**



Although he didn't speak, it is safe to conclude that he is alive. From our investigation, it seems he is sitting at some place at a great height perhaps - because the air was whooshing. But the call got cut off in a few seconds."

Boy, was I relieved!

I could see a glimmer of hope in Nandita's and Sunayna's eyes.

If only Shiva would come back home soon.

Minutes passed like a thousand years... Soon it was dawn and we could hear the crows cawing.

It was another day. When would this wait be over? The clock struck 6.00 a.m. It had been over ten hours now and slowly, I was getting more and more nervous...





The phone rang. At last! Thank God! But no wait! What if it was bad news?

My hands shook as I lifted the receiver. I looked at my wife's tear soaked eyes as I started to speak, praying 'Oh God, please have mercy!'



It was the most soothing voice in the whole world. It was Shiva. He was apologising for the disappearing act. I yelped in delight and everyone in the house beamed.

So where was he all night?

He said, "At the stadium, retrospectively on his life."

Emanuel was right. The stadium is breezy late in the evenings.

I quickly handed over the phone to Nandita and took Sunayna in my arms and gave her a huge hug.

Everything would be all right now, she said, slightly embarrassed and gleaming with joy.

**Those mentioned in this story are important members of society, and have requested that their names and identities be kept secret.*



It was time to get some sleep.

Good night!



8

FISHING IN TROUBLED WATERS



Date: February 01, 2004 *Location:* Kochi *Time:* Evening

It was a balmy, windy morning in early May, 2003. There was a whiff of rain in the air, though the sky was clear.

The jagged Kerala coast, shaped by thousands of islets and dotted with zillions of coconut palms that reached out to the stars, seemed tranquil on that Wednesday. The only sounds were of the gulls taking wing over the Arabian Sea.

The morning glow reflected on the green backwaters of the thriving Panavadaman jetty in the outskirts of Kochi.

Rarely does one walk past the quayside without spotting something of interest - the array of fishing boats, the ice-fillers crushing frozen water with their ungainly machinery, the fishing net repairers, the cacophony of fish auctions, the catch being loaded onto trucks...

Ah, then there are also those folks drying their Chinese nets, their *mundu* folded up to their knees with a deft back-flick of the right leg.





The big **change** happened for Satishan
almost six years ago when he purchased
his **first** cellphone.



The forty-something Satishan, a fish-commissioning agent, was sipping his morning cuppa at the jetty, gazing at no one in particular.

He lived in Monambam, a small village located a few kilometers away from Kochi with his wife and daughter.

Satishan's fortunes were on the ascendant of late: he owned two houses now. The second one stood on a half-acre plot he had bought two years back. He also owned a boat named *Pallithara*.

But the times weren't as good some years back, he remembered - when his family had to make do with whatever meager earnings he would get home.

The big change happened for Satishan almost six years ago when he purchased his first cellphone. Business boomed as deals could be made right when he was at sea.



He caresses his “brand new” Sony Ericsson as he reminisces. He had clicked his daughter with it last evening. My little one looks pretty and boy, doesn't she look grown up in that new dress, he thought.

He could smell the monsoons – he always did. Call that extra sensory perception or pure genetic ability because of being the son of the sail.

The season is seldom accident-free.

Last year, a few fishing boats had capsized – consumed by giant waves whipped up by swirling winds from the Arabian Sea. He had lost four friends.

But then, that wasn't the first time he'd seen a mishap like that.



Satishan had been a commissioning agent for as long as he could remember.

Soon, Ashokan joined him. He was another fish commissioning agent, dark and stout, with tired pale eyes and pearly white teeth.

He wasn't as rich as Satishan but they shared a deep bond.

Satishan had saved his life a year ago.

Ashokan used to work as a helper in one of the fishing boats. During one such trip last year, he suffered a massive heart attack – in the dead of the night, in the middle of the sea.

Ashokan's body had been giving indications of trouble ahead, but he had dismissed the symptoms as heartburn. Heartburn was something he has had a lot of times over the last so many years.

Ashokan's colleagues immediately informed Satishan over his BPL Mobile.

The boat was almost four hours away from the closest pier and any delay on Satishan's part would have cost Ashokan his life.

Satishan remembered Ashokan had small children and a young wife. One of his daughters was as old as his own and they went to school together.

Within minutes, Satishan spoke to the doctor on duty at the Don Bosco Hospital and made arrangements for Ashokan's treatment.

Doctors recollect how Ashokan just about made it.

Today, Ashokan can no longer go fishing but at least he has his life.

Satishan had **saved** his life a year ago.





November, 2003

Satishan and Ashokan were busy discussing the price and the catch for the day when Satishan received a call on his mobile.

The voice at the other end was cracking and Satishan could hardly hear what was being told. But the frantic tone told him something was wrong – and terribly so.

A chill went down his spine as he had recognised the mobile phone number. It was from Jogi, the owner of the *Bella Lotus* - and they were out in the sea.

Satishan remembered the engine of the boat was giving problems because he had seen mechanics at work on it. He looked around: the gale was strong; the weather was capricious. The *Bella Lotus* could be thrashed around by the waves...

Satishan thought there would be at least seven men aboard.

Immediately, he tried to return the call to the number but the network was failing. Aw heck! Why do things always happen like this?

He continued jabbing and after a few more tries, got through to Jogi.

Satishan remembered the engine of the boat was giving **problems** because he had seen mechanics at work on it.



This time, the SOS was clear: the *Bella Lotus* had serious engine trouble and the boat was drifting farther into the sea.

Satishan knew that help needed to reach them fast. He took their location.

He remembered they were very close to sea. He knew that once the boat entered the sea, it would be the end. He immediately called the Coast Guard and alerted a few fishing boats close by.



Meanwhile, the crew of *Bella Lotus* was in a frenzy of fear - they were on a boat near the sea, without engine and power.

The weather was changing fast and there was no way they could get out of there.

The only call they could make was to Satishan. But they couldn't hear him. They were not sure that he had heard them either.

Hopelessness was spreading fast.

After two nerve-racking hours the crew spotted a fishing boat on the horizon. They waved but there was no response. But a few minutes later, there was a collective sigh: the vessel was heading towards them.

Satishan had heard them, after all.

Jogi pulled the klaxon repeatedly, and the sounds resonated like a thousand Hallelujahs.

The rescue boat arrived but they couldn't leave right away because of low tide.

They had to wait for two more hours for the tide to rise in order to return. But that was okay, for they were alive.



*At the crack of dawn,
they were home.*

*Satishan was a hero once again.
Ashokan looked at him in awe.
His pal had made a habit of it.*



9

CALL TO THE COOLER



Date: 27th December, 2003 Location: Ooty Time: 2.00 am



Kumaraswamy's **agitation** had roots
in the workplace - he was a senior police officer
and **crimes** were scarring the reputation
of the tranquil tourist town.

Kumaraswamy hadn't slept well in days.

It wasn't because of the unusually cold December weather in Udhagamandalam – or Ooty, the picture-postcard hill station in Tamil Nadu.

He had actually fell in love with the town the moment he arrived more than a year ago.

Kumaraswamy's agitation had roots in the workplace - he was a senior police officer and crimes were scarring the reputation of this tranquil tourist town.

As he tossed and turned in his carved-wood bed, mosquitoes buzzed around his ears. He thought their drone would drive him insane before dawn.

"Where's the Good Knight?" he barked in the dark, groping zombie-like for the electrical repellent. "Have these mosquitoes also become thick skinned like the criminals?"

His wife Padma stirred beside him. "It's already switched on, right beside you," she said. "Maybe your blood is getting sweeter and they are getting smarter. Just cover yourself up well and go to sleep. They'll go away," she mumbled, half-asleep herself.

But mosquitoes weren't the only vermin bugging Kumaraswamy. The overworked cop had been getting anxiety attacks frequently these days.

His wife of more than twentyfive years, Padmashri - or Padma, as he calls her – has been telling him to take it easy for a long time now.

These were difficult times. Every other day, some cop or the other was being ticked off by a local politician for questioning a local goon, while other colleagues were succumbing to alcohol.

At least I am lucky to have been posted in Ooty, he thought. Life was very difficult for colleagues posted in crime - infested zones like his former room-mate Arockiasamy Pandian.

He remembered those tough early days of training at the Chennai crime branch; workouts in the wee hours, parades and chases, and reading naughty books. It was tough but fun.

The salary...well that was another matter altogether. It was no good then, it is no good now.

But he enjoyed the adventurous existence. Everyday was a new journey, a new lesson in the school of life.

Kumaraswamy had turned forty five in October. Worry lines were creasing his chiselled, Dravidian features.

His two sons were settling into their jobs. He had to get them married soon. So many responsibilities, so many things to do...



“She has just been **robbed** of Rs 3.5 lakh, saar.
She was on her way to The Abu Babaji Trust.”



The ring interrupted his train of thought.

Ah trouble, he knew, because phones rang at 2.30 a.m. only to convey bad news.

“Hello saar, this is V Ramesh from the Town Central Police Station. A lady is here to file a complaint, saar. Her name is Mrs Vidya Rao and she’s from Delhi. She has just been robbed of Rs 3.5 lakh, saar. She was on her way to The Abu Babaji Trust. Her driver was also beaten up by the assailants. She would like to meet you the first thing in the morning, saar.”

“Wokay,” replied Kumaraswamy, and ordered the sub-inspector to take down all the details for the first information report.

“I will see her by seven or so. Give her some (Ital) and get a *shardha* (a woman constable) to speak to her. And detain the driver. I want to talk to him too.”

Kumaraswamy curled up inside the quilt only to be shaken awake again by the 6 O’clock alarm. Rushing through his ablutions, he recalled the conversation with Ramesh.



Kumaraswamy’s years of experience told him this was an insider job - someone close to the madam.

He reached the Town Central Police station at around seven. The early morning air was nippy and the sun rays were filtering through the fog.

He was greeted by Ramesh, who introduced him to Mrs Rao, a fair, medium-built lady with a pashmina shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

The trauma of the night showed on her face, thought Kumaraswamy.

Mrs Rao and her husband were members of The Abu Babaji Trust in Ooty for many, many years now. The trust helped the locals by running several hospitals and providing the needy with care and medical attention. Her husband was a doctor in the US and she used to visit Ooty often to hand over money and offer services.



On that fateful day of December 28, 2001, she landed at Coimbatore around noon from Delhi.

The trust, as always, had sent her a white Ambassador car to take her to Ooty from the airport.

Getting out of the airport, she saw the familiar face of Ravi, the driver.

Mrs Rao asked Ravi to take her to the closest HDFC Bank on their way to Ooty. At the bank, she encashed drafts worth Rs 3.5 lakh. The money was to be handed over to the trust for charitable purposes.

By five in the evening, they were cruising towards Ooty.

In time, they swerved into Metropolitan – only to find themselves in a huge traffic snarl. A landslide had brought the traffic in the area to a crawl. “Oh God!” Mrs Rao exclaimed. “How will we ever get out of this?”

“Don’t worry madam,” Ravi said. “I know of another way through Kotagiri. We shall take that route. This clog doesn’t look like clearing anytime soon.”

Mrs Rao agreed to the detour, but asked Ravi to stop at a phone booth so that she could inform the trust about the delay.

The drive to Ooty via Kotagiri takes about 2-and-a-half to 3 hours. Mrs Rao was relieved that she would be in Ooty soon. She knew Ravi well but sitting in the car alone for so many hours in the night was making her fidgety.

About 10 kms from Ooty the Ambassador stalled and halted on the highway.

Ravi opened the bonnet and tried to identify the problem. “The fuse is gone, madam,” he told her. “I will try and get some help. You please be seated inside only, madam.”

Ravi tried to stop passing vehicles to no avail.

Suddenly, out of the darkness two shadowy figures sprang towards the car. Mrs Rao could hear Ravi beginning to argue with the men. They sounded like Keralites, she thought.

Ravi opened the bonnet
and tried to identify the **problem**.
“The fuse is gone, madam,” he told her.
“I will try and get some **help**.”



Soon, they began to attack Ravi with a stick. She tried getting out of the car to shout for help but the men rushed to pin her down too. She pleaded with them to take everything. The desperados only wanted the wooden box with the money. They didn't know about the jewellery she was carrying inside her suitcase. They wanted only the cash box.

Mrs Rao fell to the ground as the goons slapped and shoved her before fleeing.

She lay there for a while, and after making sure the duo had left, helped Ravi to his feet. Together, they rushed to the Town Central Police Station to lodge a complaint.

"Thank you for the account madam. Can you please describe to sub-inspector Ramesh how the suspects looked? You may leave after that madam," said Kumaraswamy.

"Let me also speak to Ravi and get some more information from him. Also, madam, I forgot to ask you, do you suspect anyone? Anybody, who knew that you would be carrying the money on that day and hour?" Kumaraswamy asked.







“No”, Mrs Rao said. Only her husband, some people from the trust and of course Ravi knew, she pointed out.

He thanked her and told her that he would be in touch if anything came up.

Kumaraswamy knew Ravi, a fair, balding 30-year-old, who looked shaken and bruised. Often, the cops had used the services of the travel agency that he worked for. Kumaraswamy recollected that Ravi had a cellphone. Ravi confirmed that he still carried it.

“Wokay”, he told him, “you could go now but don’t leave the town without informing me,” he told Ravi.

For two days, Kumaraswamy and his team wracked their brains for clues but got zilch. The cops ran a fine tooth-comb through the area where the robbery took place. No clues there too.

It suddenly occurred to Kumaraswamy to run a trace on the BPL Mobile that Ravi had, requesting the call centre for details of calls made and received on the 27th and 28th of December.

He checked out Ravi’s background for clues-drinking habits, family, friends, motive-but returned empty-handed. The trust gave him a clean chit too.

Also madam, I forgot to ask you,
do you **suspect** anyone?



Mrs. Vidya was horrified to hear that Kumaraswamy suspected Ravi. She was sure Ravi was innocent and urged the cops to go after the real culprits and not harass ordinary citizens.

Kumaraswamy received the call details the next day. As he began browsing it, he sighed.

What had struck him as being odd was that between 12 a.m. and 2 a.m. on the 29th, there were three calls made to a landline number from Ravi's phone. This, he thought, could be because Ravi contacted someone for help when the car broke down.

But the landline number was traced to Ravi's mother who lived in Ooty.

Kumaraswamy immediately summoned Ravi and asked him just one question: "Did you make any calls from your cellphone that night?"

There was a startled look in Ravi's eyes. Kumaraswamy knew then and there that Ravi was guilty, but he denied making any calls. But it was not hard to break an offender driven by avarice. The threat of corporal punishment was enough.

Breaking down, Ravi admitted to the crime. His younger brother and his unemployed brother-in-law turned out to be the two assailants and the money was with them.

Ravi also informed the police that his family had left for Coimbatore for his sister's treatment at Rama's Hospital.

That night of 30th December, Kumaraswamy left for Coimbatore.

He and his team searched the premises of the lodge where the family was living, while other plain-clothed cops searched the Gandhipur bus stand.

Kumaraswamy found Ravi's brother-in-law at the lodge. But the cash was with Ravi's brother Manmohan, who had taken a bus to Salem.

Manmohan was picked up at the Salem bus stand, towing a soft suitcase with the money inside. He had been on the move after committing the crime. Ravi and his kin were sent to the cooler for two years' rigorous imprisonment.





*With that effort, Kumaraswamy got himself
a new fan in Mrs Rao.*

*But as he lay in his bed that night,
he told Padma that the real hero was somebody else
– Ravi's cellphone.*



10

CALL FOR HELP



Date: September 2004 *Location:* Kochi (Rajagiri College in Kalamassery, 10 km from Ernakulam) *Time:* 12 noon



The office tucked inside Rajagiri College in Kalamassery, 10 km from Ernakulam is nondescript. But where children are concerned, it is a haven. Dour phones and a toll-free number provided by BPL Mobile in the office receive scores of SOS calls a day-from distressed children, adults, parents and neighbours.

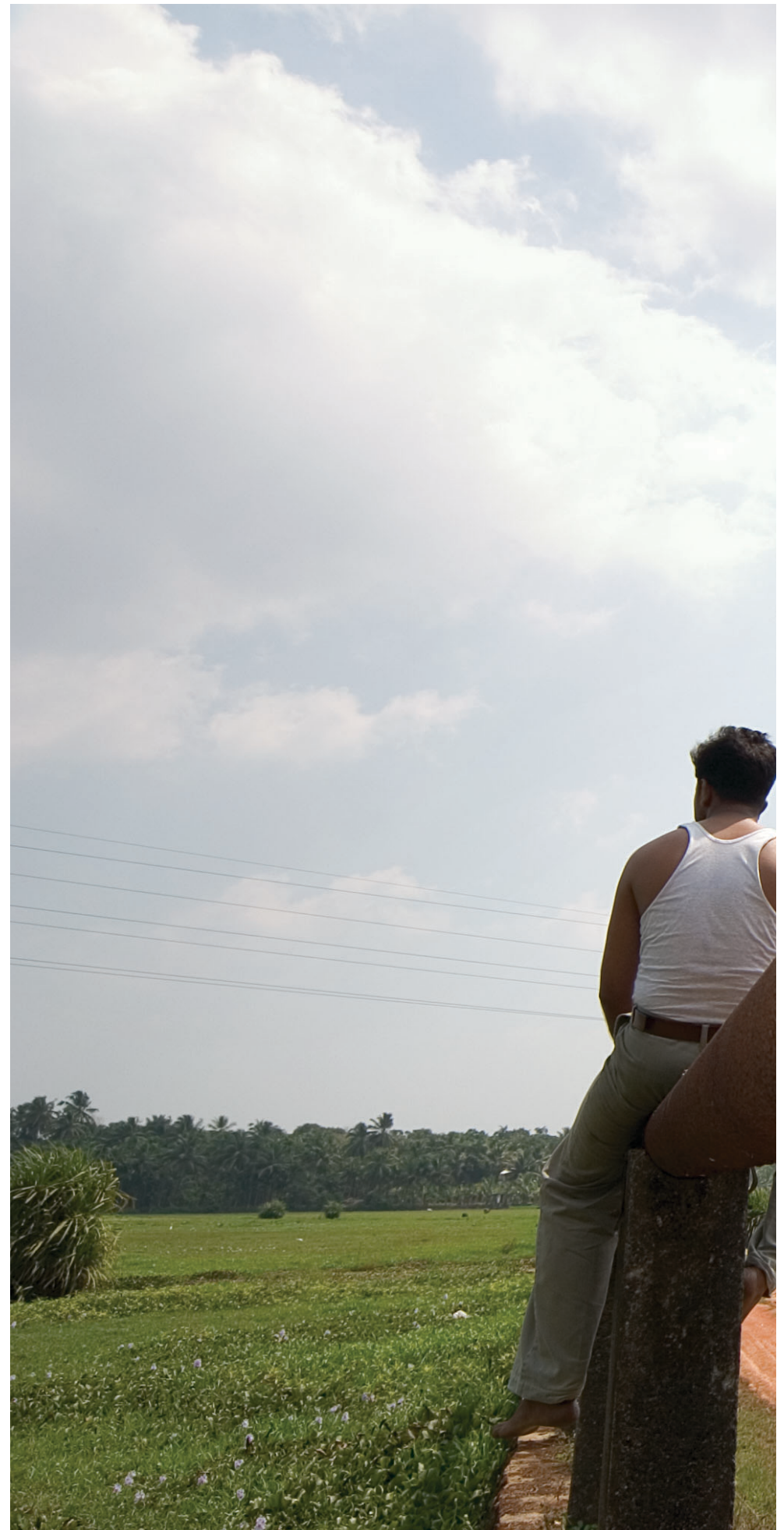
The office is the nodal point of the Childline project promoted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment to protect child rights and provide service to children in various states.

The incidents that the helpline encounters each day could well melt a rock. That's why reaching out to children and helping them is something that Binoo V. K. treasures.

"It is the most satisfying job for me. If you give them something at the beginning of their life, you get something, which is very beautiful," he says, smiling ear to ear. Binoo is the District Co-coordinator at the helpline office. He says more often than not, it is children in the 8-10 years age bracket that seek help.

Once the call comes, his job is to go to the field and collect information on the caller and the case, and subsequently tie-up the respective social links. Needless to say, his mobile works overtime.

Some cases are bone chilling, others disgusting, while many beg a description. Like one dark day in July 2004. Even as the rains were lashing down accompanied by thunder and lightning, the call that came in the morning was clear.







"I want **money**
to look after my brother and sister.
Can you **help?**"

Paravur is a small farming village, dominated by Muslims. Seeing their plight, neighbours and local social work organisations called on affluent villagers who had settled abroad to show magnanimity.

They did, and the Samaritans could rustle up a princely Rs 4 lakh for the family. But then, suddenly, Salim's 46-year old father passed away. And even before the Kochuveetil children could recover from the devastating loss, came an unbelievable blow: Salim's mother eloped with a neighbour, abandoning her three children. She left home with the Rs 4 lakh. The children—two boys and one girl—were now left to fend for themselves in their one-room hut.

Binoo was out, gathering clues about other cases. One of his four colleagues at the office had answered the phone. On the other side was a tearful Salim Kochuveetil*, a 10th standard student studying in Paravur, a Kochi suburb.

"I want money to look after my brother and sister. Can you help?" asked the boy. His desperation was palpable. The tall, well-built Salim was the eldest of three siblings. "He said they were very poor and helpless," recalls Binoo.

A colleague called him up on his mobile. Dropping his assignment at hand, Binoo rushed to Salim's help. "The assistance had to be immediate," he says.

What Binoo saw stunned him. Salim lived in a hellish hovel. He sat down to give a patient hearing. Salim's father had been ailing for a while, and a neighbour had been helping them financially. The children were somehow still managing to go to the nearby school.



Having **cheated** them of the welfare funds,
he was not going to let her have
what he believed was **rightfully** theirs.
His need was greater than hers.



Circumstances made a man out of the 15-year-old Salim overnight, and he took on the role of parent and big brother to his siblings. He was going to fight tooth and nail to protect them.

Some days before he called Binoos office, he received a letter from the Life Insurance Corporation informing him that a policy that his father had taken was maturing.

And the nominee? As fate would have it, it was his mother. But this time, Salim was determined to have it his way and keep his mother out of it.

Having been cheated of the welfare funds, he was not going to let her have what he believed was rightfully theirs. That's why he had called.

Binoos met with Salims relatives in the village. He was told Salims mother was living with her paramour at Kothamangalam, about 40 km from Kochi.

Binoos went to Kothamangalam but could not meet the couple. Somebody had tipped them off and they had fled.

As part of the Childline project, one of Binoos duties is to impart awareness on child rights and conduct training programmes for various sectors.

As luck would have it, at one of his workshops in Angamaly (formerly Kalady, the birthplace of Adi Shankara), he had met P Jairam*, an LIC officer who hailed from the same village as Salim.



Jairam informed Binoos that Salims mother was to visit the LIC office on August 2 to collect the cheque. On that day, Binoos turned up in Paravur at 12 sharp. He confronted Salims mother as she stepped off the autorickshaw. Binoos tried to convince her that the children too have a claim to the money but the woman would not budge.

That's when Childline, along with some self-help groups approached the police to see if they could freeze the LIC policy. They were taken to the Chief Judicial Magistrate who dispatched a letter to the LIC to freeze the amount.

In September, Childline filed a case requesting for a portion of the amount to be given to the Kochuveetil children. Today, the local Panchayat members are helping Salim fight out the case against his mother in the courts. LIC has frozen the amount and it will be a while before the court gives its verdict. But for now, Binoos is glad his mobile helped him to respond to Salims desperate pleas in time.

Ghastly Torture

At another time, the Kalamassery Childline had received a call from an informant, who said she was the neighbour of a child who had been held in captivity and was being tortured in a Kochi suburb. She said she had heard the child crying late into the night.

Binoo along with his colleagues rushed to the house. Manisha had been brought by a child trafficker from Tamil Nadu and sold to a man in Kochi for Rs 1,000 on an “11-month contract”.

Supposed to be a servant, the 12-year old was virtually living like a slave, was beaten mercilessly and made to starve for days on end.

When the Childline team reached the venue, they realised that Manisha was living in a small room which doubled up as an outhouse. With no sanitation, a foul odour emanated from the dark place.

The team waited for almost half an hour for the master of the house to leave. The moment he did, cops broke open the outhouse door. What they saw staggered them. The room was as small as a kennel and it stank because Manisha was eating and defecating in the same place.

She looked much smaller than her age, her big frightened eyes filled with tears. There was hardly any cloth to cover her frail frame, which displayed injury marks. Together, they took Manisha to the Magistrate's Court, which issued orders for her to be rescued and handed over to a shelter home.





Manisha had been brought by a **child trafficker**
from Tamil Nadu and **sold** to a man in Kochi
for Rs. 1,000 on an “11-month contract”.

Exam Pressure

That wasn't the case with Adityan Nair*, a 9th standard student from Vazhakulam in Perumbavoor, 30 kms from Ernakulam.

In March 2004, Childline received a call from a school teacher asking the agency to counsel a school boy who had tried to commit suicide.

Once again, Binoo rushed to help. Adityan's parents were doctors who had no time for their only son. He hadn't done well in Maths – he had failed in the subject, due to which his parents had berated him.

A day later, Adityan, who was given some pocket money, bought sleeping pills. He waited for his parents to go to work and then popped them.

Adityan always went to school with his neighbour's son. When he didn't venture out at the appointed time that day, his friend tried to open the door.

When that didn't work, he called some of their neighbours. Together, they broke open the door. They found Adityan lying dazed on the bed, frothing. They rushed him to the hospital and contacted his parents.

Three days later, when Binoo received the call on his mobile from Adityan's schoolteacher, he was in the midst of one of his training sessions. Binoo introduced Adityan and his parents to the Childline's counselling centre.

**Names have been changed to protect identities.*





Fortunately, the boy has recovered from the shock and so have his parents. Just how much Childline values every phone call is evident in Binoo's earnestness. As he puts it: "For us, every call is a Holy Calling, Children have their own innocent reasons. We must not fail them."

