

Indian Space Research Organisation, Sriharikota

Dr Rangarajan, preferred a stroll rather than taking the official car. The renowned ISRO (Indian Space Research Organisation) scientist, who was in his late fifties, stepped out thoughtfully from his office to go home, that was a couple of blocks away. It was past 7 pm. It was the month of March and early spring, a time when it is supposed to be pleasant and cool, but is seldom so in reality. Located by the coast in southern India, the vast township of Sriharikota is generally hot and sultry throughout the year, often registering above normal temperatures. The ISRO Complex, also known as the Satish Dhawan Space Centre, was a fortress of sorts, being the hub of the nation's prestigious rocket launch activity. The sprawling estate wedged in-between the Bay of Bengal on its eastern side and the spectacular Pulicat Lake on the west was a high security zone protected by an army of commandos armed to their teeth.

Successive ISRO chairpersons had worked tirelessly to transform the campus into a rainforest with a variety of flora and fauna. For the fortunate residents of ISRO, it was nothing short of 'heaven' on earth. That evening in question though, the scientist did not come across anyone on the deserted road. From a distance, he could hear faint mellifluous tones of a *shehnai* coming from one of the houses in the employees' colony. The particular musical instrument, he knew, was usually played on auspicious occasions. He silently nodded in appreciation of the instrumentalist's expertise in navigating through an octave of complex notes of the Poorvi raga.

Dr Rangarajan reached his official residence. His wife Sangeetha was away in Bangalore spending time with their son, who worked for Infosys. For the past week, the scientist had been staying alone. He unlocked the front door and switched on the lights. Dropping the keys in a tray next to the main entrance, he sat on the sofa and closed his eyes. The silence calmed his mind. A couple of minutes later, the serenity of the night was disturbed by the jarring sound of something hitting the floor with a thud in his bedroom. He guessed it to be a book or a vase that had landed softly on the carpet.

Intrigued, he went to investigate the source of the noise. No sooner had he entered the room, when someone pounced on him from behind and pushed him on to the bed. He was instantly blindfolded with a plastic carry bag and punched hard on his back. Anticipating a shriek, the assailant had put his hand on Dr Rangarajan's mouth. The scientist's cry of anguish came out as a muffled squeak.

Agonising seconds passed that seemed like an eternity. When he was almost certain of death by strangulation, the assailant released his grip and spun him around on the bed sharply. He removed the blindfold and their eyes met for the first time, face-to-face in close range. Dr Rangarajan, recovered from the initial jolt, coughed and studied him. His attacker was tall, well-built, muscular and clad in black trousers with a matching full sleeved tee-shirt with a hood. Only his eyes and the tip of his nose were visible as he towered over the scientist.

‘Who are you?’ the scientist spluttered.

As if irritated by the question, the assailant whipped out a gleaming revolver in the dim light and pointed it between the scientist’s eyes.

‘No...no...please...please...let me go...,’ Dr Rangarajan cried in desperation.

‘No?’ The assailant stopped dead in his tracks. Stunned by the bizarre reaction, Dr Rangarajan lay still, paralysed with fear.

The assailant politely enquired again gesturing in sign language, ‘You mean you don’t want to die?’

The scientist nodded, tears rolling down his cheeks, repeating, ‘Please don’t kill me.’

The assailant stepped back from the bed, and threw his hands up in mock despair. He paused dramatically, as if caught in a quagmire. He weighed the plea’s pros and cons with mock gestures. A few seconds later, he said with a tone of finality:

‘Fine, relax...take a deep breath...!’

He appeared apologetic for initiating the violent act without the victim’s consent.

And before Dr Rangarajan could recover his wits and help himself off the bed, the assailant vanished, melting into the darkness as quietly as he had appeared.

A MINI emergency meeting was called in Dr Rangarajan’s home. The chairman, Dr Anil Bhansal rushed to the aid of his seniormost colleague on hearing about the assault. The Chief Security Officer was summoned, who arrived with a group of commandoes as if they were entering a battle field.

Dr Rangarajan was attended to by the principal doctor on the campus who certified he was okay. ‘He is just a bit dazed, sir. I will give him a mild sedative, and he’ll be better by the morning,’ he informed the chairman.

‘Thank god!’ Dr Bhansal exclaimed in relief. ‘Ranga, don’t worry my friend, I’m not moving from here until I get to the bottom of this,’ he declared. The rest of ISRO’s officials gathered in the hall stiffened in response. They knew the chairman to be a reticent man and they had never seen him so charged up.

The medical team moved out of the bedroom, allowing the scientist to rest. An armed security officer was placed right outside the bedroom.

‘Will someone explain to me what’s going on here?’ the chairman asked the Chief Security Officer (CSO). ‘Last, I

checked, this was a supposed fortress. Didn't realise it is only as safe as a railway platform!

'Sir,' the CSO stung by the sarcasm, began somberly, 'I can assure you no one can enter this site without proper scrutiny. This is'

'Cut the bullshit and come to the point?' the chairman visibly upset, interrupted him.

'I'll find out and revert soon, sir' he said.

'How much time do you need?' the chairman roared. 'Soon, near future? This isn't acceptable, officer.'

'I...I need...' the CSO muttered.

'You have one hour. I'll be waiting right here until you bring the culprit to me. Or else, heads will roll today. I'm reporting this matter to the PMO. I want this place protected by competent officers,' he shouted an ultimatum.

The CSO blinked helplessly. 'Sir, it may not happen within an hour, I am afraid, but I'll arrest the person very soon... sorry, at the earliest. Please give....'

The chairman's secretary came to the CSO's rescue. 'Sir, we will oversee the investigation. Meantime, you can rest at home, sir.'

'You guys have already wasted two minutes....,' the chairman said regretfully looking at his watch.

Sweating profusely, the CSO rushed outside with a few of his men following him.

Half an hour later, an official came up to the chairman, 'Sir we've a problem here....,' he said grimly.

'What?'

‘Sir, one of our administrative staff’s daughter got engaged this evening in the campus. The groom’s relatives are stuck here since morning....’

The chairman gave him a cold look.

‘Of course, with prior permission, sir....’

‘Why are you telling me all this?’

‘Sir, their function is over. The groom and his relatives want to leave... but are being held back, forcefully. Our employee’s family are worried that in the light of this incident...,’ he paused seeing the adverse effect his words were having on the boss. ‘Sir, this might strain the delicate balance,’ he quickly concluded.

‘They can get the hell out,’ the chairman thundered.

‘Thank you, sir, very kind of you,’ the official said and fled before the chairman could change his mind.

None had noticed that the camera team’s assistant, employed for the engagement ceremony had been missing during the event. He had joined the unit only that morning. He returned quietly, just in time before their unceremonious departure. What’s more, he carelessly dropped a bag, containing a black tee-shirt and a hood in the bin.

THE FOLLOWING morning, Dr Rangarajan woke up with a light headache. The events of the previous night had distressed him both physically and psychologically. A few points he could decipher with his sharp, scientifically inclined mind. Clearly, the unknown assailant had not come

with an intention to kill him. He could've, if he had wanted to, but didn't. His sinister agenda was perhaps only to scare and soften him up. To a large extent, he conceded, the plan did succeed. The flawless execution of the assailant required meticulous planning to start with. He and his back up team, if at all he had any, had gone to great lengths to make it work and seem a simple, harmless intrusion.

But what was the assailant's motive? He was just one of the many scientists working for the Government of India. A nationalist at heart, he wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone an individual or an organisation. However, since the start of the year, he had this uneasy feeling that he was being watched. His hunch was rarely wrong. He had also mentioned this to the chairman, who had casually brushed it aside. He had never mentioned this to his family members, lest they panic. His phone too may have been tapped, but he wasn't sure.

In the aftermath of the mysterious assault, armed guards were posted around his home. It was too little, too late, the scientist thought. The horse had already bolted. The presence of guards was hardly reassuring and in fact made him more uneasy. He wanted to put the unpleasant experience behind and move on. Suddenly, he heard a commotion from the ground floor and heard the loud clicking of boots as his guards sprang to attention. The chairman, Dr Anil Bhansal was back in his home.

'Good morning, Ranga, hope you're feeling better, today,' Dr Bhansal greeted him with a smile and a warm handshake.

'Morning chairman, I'm fine,' he replied.

‘That’s my man, exactly what I wanted to hear,’ the chairman responded.

‘Now let’s sort out a few things quickly. First, you can take it easy for a few days. And it’s not a request, it’s an order from the PMO. I briefed them last night. Secondly, they wanted to know if you still wanted to lead the delegation to Frankfurt for the European Space Agency meeting? I said, I would revert after checking with you.’

‘You bet, I’m going to Frankfurt,’ Dr Rangarajan stated categorically. ‘I’m afraid I’ve to disobey the rest of your orders, Anil,’ he replied, quietly. ‘I’ll be fine for only as long as I work. There’s so much to do. Sitting idle at home will make me anxious. The ESA meeting is important for us. Any collaboration deal will benefit us enormously and push our space programme forward by leaps and bounds. And pardon the lack of humility, but I’m the best man to negotiate and get the job done for ISRO.’

‘Ranga, you’re tougher than I imagined! Great!’ The chairman leaned forward and stroked his shoulder. ‘I’m so proud of you. Moving forward, some bad news first. The security team have turned blank about your assailant, that too after my threats of suspending them all. Seems like an incompetent bunch of idiots,’ he said, loud enough for the guards outside to hear his opinion. ‘If you want, we can lodge a formal complaint with the local police. They could come in and investigate.’

‘Not necessary,’ Dr Rangarajan quickly replied. ‘Nothing happened fortunately, so there’s nothing to complain about.’

‘Right, let me talk to Delhi on this. One theory Ranga...’ the chairman abruptly got up and closed the bedroom door, ‘is that this is all about *Mission Antariksh*. As the date is drawing near, some enemies of the nation are apparently getting desperate. It’s not a secret anymore that apart from the PM, and a few close aides, me and you...’ he spoke in whispers. ‘No one else is privy to this classified information. Add to this, the fluid scenario, general elections in two months’ time, the whole atmosphere is bloody vitiated,’ the chairman lamented.

Dr Rangarajan remained silent. He too had considered that angle. Suddenly, it occurred to him that he was the weakest link in that chain! He squirmed uncomfortably.

‘But what the anti-national forces don’t know,’ the chairman’s continued in a voice hard as steel, ‘... is that we aren’t the type to buckle under such cheap threats. For us, the nation comes first over everything else including family.’ He paused, then continued.

‘Ranga, the launch is just three weeks from today. That’s it, after that they can do whatever they want. We need to stay calm. We are on the cusp of making history!’ he concluded animatedly.

‘True...’ Dr Rangarajan mumbled, thinking about his wife and son in Bangalore.

He wasn’t to know that much more agony and anxiety awaited the family later that afternoon.

IT WAS around 4 pm when Dr Rangarajan received a call from his son, Satish, whom he had fondly named after the great visionary of Indian space research, Satish Dhawan.

‘*Appa*,’ Satish’s voice sounded tense, ‘how are you?’

‘I’m fine, how’s *Amma* doing?’ he enquired about his wife.

‘She’s good. All well here, but...I’ve to tell you about something...a strange incident that happened today,’ Satish hesitated.

Dr Rangarajan felt his chest tighten. ‘What?’ he could barely be audible. His mouth had unexpectedly become dry and seemed incapable of producing sound waves.

‘Don’t panic, everyone is good...,’ Satish’s voice was reassuring, but it didn’t comfort him much.

‘Tell me what happened,’ he snarled at his son.

‘*Amma*, wanted to go out today. She was getting bored sitting at home. So, I dropped her off at Forum Mall on my way to office. Told her that I’d pick her up again in the afternoon. About half an hour later, I received a message from her phone.’

‘Kidnapped your mom. She’s going to die!’

‘I thought it was a prank initially. But why would mom do that? I tried calling her. Her phone was switched off. I rushed back to the mall. And thereafter, along with my friends launched a search.

‘Where is she now?’ a distraught Ranga demanded.

‘She’s here, I’ll give the phone to her,’ Satish said.

‘Hello! No need to worry, I’m fine,’ Sangeetha spoke with a light chuckle! She found the incident amusing. ‘Satish

freaked out unnecessarily. I was fine. Bumped into an elderly lady who lives close by. She was also in the mall for window shopping. We went to a coffee shop and were chatting. Afterwards, she invited me to her home. I told her I'll inform my son first, but realised my phone was missing. We looked for it but could not find it. She was a very kind lady and offered her phone to call, but I didn't know the number. In any case, I knew he was going to come back to fetch me. She left me at the spot where Satish would pick me up. And you know what? It was she who found my phone. It had been in my bag all this time!' she laughed at her own forgetfulness.

Dr Rangarajan fumed, 'How many times should I tell you not to speak with strangers?' he commanded.

'Why are you angry? What is the matter?' Sangeetha asked, her tone suddenly serious.

'Nothing,' Dr Rangarajan murmured. 'Give the phone back to Satish.'

'Can you locate the woman who was with *Amma*?' he asked tersely.

'No... I mean we didn't look for her...*Amma* is fine right, why should we...?'

'Now, listen carefully,' he snapped, 'until the end of the month, *Amma* is not to go out anywhere alone. Am I clear?'

'*Appa*, you're freaking me out! And what is happening at the end of the month?'

'Don't ask stupid questions, just listen. Employ someone reliable to be with her, while you're at the office.'

'*Appa... Appa...*' Dr Rangarajan had disconnected. His

heart raced, just like an ignited rocket. Another 'threat' staged with incredible precision but ostensibly made to seem innocuous! A subtle message, implying that 'we can do anything.... to anyone in your family....'

As if on cue, exactly at that moment, the chairman, Dr Bhansal walked into Dr Rangarajan's office unannounced. It was rather unusual. Whenever the chairman needed something, it was he who would summon people to his office.

'Ranga, how's Sangeetha and Satish?' he asked casually.

'Huh' Dr Rangarajan glared at him with disbelief.

'Is everything...all right?' Dr Bhansal halted looking at his face.

'How did you know what happened...?'

'What happened to whom? When? Where?'

'Sangeetha and...and...Satish...?'

'You told me they were in Bangalore!'

'No, I did not.'

'You didn't?' the chairman seemed puzzled. 'Anyway, maybe someone did last night, but that's beside the point. How are they?'

'They're fine,' Dr Rangarajan muttered suspiciously.

'Right...,' the chairman continued, 'I just dropped by to tell you to ask Satish to take her to Forum Mall! My wife, Usha was there last month. Apparently it's a good place for passing time. Sangeetha could get acquainted with other ladies who share common interests.'

'That's it, thanks!' Dr Rangarajan brusquely got up and stormed to the door leaving the chairman gaping after him.