



Small, discreet cameras that can be hidden inside clocks, etc



An audio device to fit inside a cigarette



Video camera with audio effective up to a range of 300 metres



Microwave transmitter for both audio and video surveillance



Video cameras with audio, complete with an inbuilt microwave transmitter



Tiepin camera that can plug into any pocket recorder or transmitter



Satellite phone that can be used from any location

Bedroom Bugs and Other Truths

Prabhakar isn't the only one. Bosses, employees, spouses, businessmen and politicians—they are all playing I Spy.

By SHEELA REDDY

A corporate chief suspects a senior executive of disloyalty. A decade ago he would have kept his suspicions to himself, or hired a detective agency to shadow the employee. Now he installs a spy camera and recorder, and with the help of a multiple-button switchboard hidden in the drawer of his office desk, tapes every conversation and keeps an eye on every visitor inside the closed doors of his employee's office room.

Hi-tech and user-friendly spying devices like pen and tie-pin cameras, tiny camcorders and flycams and button-sized recorders are turning hundreds of Indians into amateur sleuths like cricketer Manoj Prabhakar. Suspicious bosses, disgruntled employees, business rivals, political enemies, competitors for tenders, beleaguered proprietors trying to get past greedy officials, not to speak of disputing spouses, brothers, uncles, cousins. Anyone, in short, with unlimited cash and limited scruples is now eager to tape arm-twisting truths.

Take the corporate chief who installed the spy camera and recorder in his executive's room. So useful did he find this hidden

sound and video device that he soon set in place a more ambitious operation: wiring his entire headquarters, office rooms of his executives, even the areas where his employees gathered for a coffee session, monitoring and taping some 100 employees at their workplace. Another proprietor of a five-star hotel recently flew to London only to shop for de-bugging equipment—transmitters that can detect devices at any frequency—costing around Rs 3 lakh.

And it is not at the workplace alone. An industrialist recently wired his own palatial bungalow in Himachal Pradesh, installing hidden cameras in every room to keep an eye on his wife during his frequent absence from home. Then there is the property dealer in Delhi who routinely tapes everyone who enters his office. "You never know what will come in useful when," he confided to a friend. The

result: he is the most feared property dealer in the city, and many are afraid to step into his office for fear of the incriminating tape.

Indians' new-found fascination for bugging has reached even middle-class homes. One daring 24-year-old tried to plant a spy device in his cousin's drawing room the other day. Involved in a property dispute with this cousin, the youth decided it was



Illustration by JAYACHANDRAN

the best way to figure out what was going on in the cousin's mind. The sound recording device was small enough to hide in a flower vase in his cousin's drawing room. But in his nervousness, he left the antenna cord dangling outside the vase. The family had no trouble in recognising the bug, or in tracing the amateur sleuth.

Perhaps because of these risks, most still

The micro-tape recorder has been of considerable use to its owners long before it became so easily accessible. A shipping magnate used it to tape his conversation with a minister refusing to sign a licence for buying ships until he paid Rs 2 lakh under the table. He took it straight to the then prime minister, who far from being impressed with his sleuthing, refused to even listen to the tape. "Tu Raja Harishchandra samajhta hai apne aapko (do you think you're Raja Harishchandra?)" he asked the deflated magnate. Another five-star hotel proprietor found it the simplest—and cheapest—solution to getting a fire clearance without paying endless bribes. All he had to do was to hint at the tapes he now had to get a fire clearance on the spot.

AMONG politicians, however, the hidden tape recorder is now passe. They prefer instead to leave the sleuthing to private agents. Says Ramesh Madan, chief of one of India's oldest private investigation agencies, Goliath Detectives: "Demand from politicians hots up during elections. They ask us to collect all possible information about their rivals—bank

accounts, benami deals, who he is sleeping with...." Madan is reluctant to touch this kind of espionage, not because he does not have the required equipment—including zoom lens at a 90° angle which face one way and shoot the other way—but because he does not want "uninvited problems".

But he did once do a sting operation for a chief minister, he says, who wanted to keep track of his entire cabinet. Business, of course, is booming for private agents like him, who are called in either when the client lacks the knowhow, or the courage to carry out his own snooping. "In a week I receive at least two to three calls asking for the latest spying devices," he says.

And it's not only bugging devices Madan

gets calls for. He receives as many calls for de-bugging operations. "I've become an expert at both," says Madan, who started his agency back in 1958, when it was hard to find a client even "when I offered my services for Rs 25". Today Madan has imported sophisticated equipment worth more than Rs 3 lakh to detect spying devices operating at any frequency, but is still unable to cope with the sudden demand for his services. With liberalisation and the entry of MNCs, Madan says, "snooping on each other has become a part of the new business strategy—whoever gets information first is the winner".

Taping confessions on pocket-sized dictaphones is now so commonplace that the services of a professional are required just to transcribe the tape into several copies. Lawyers dealing with family disputes, including divorce, routinely direct their clients to private agents for transcribing their secret tapes into three copies—one for the court, one for the defendant and a third for the claimant. While professional micro-tape recorders can cost anywhere from \$2,000 upwards, cheap pocket-sized ones can be had for just Rs 1,200. And

for about double that price, security agencies hire out a handycam video recorder, with instructions on how to hide them in handbags and briefcases with carefully-camouflaged holes for the lens.

Availability is not the only advantage of a pocket tape recorder. The risk of being caught with one are also considerably less. "The more incriminating the evidence, the higher the risks for those using it," points out Ramesh Sharma, a self-taught expert on the latest spy technology. And with privacy laws being almost non-existent in India, those caught red-handed can get away with anything from an FIR to a severe thrashing. That's not enough punishment to stop the snooping. ■

When he opened his agency in '58, no one was willing to accept his services for Rs 25. Today Madan can't cope with calls.