Investigations also revealed that there had been a breakdown of the vehicle and one of the drivers had left the place. The two drums were removed during the breakdown. The whole operation had been carried out in tandem with some company workers. "Our boys did a marvellous job," says Lahiri. "But the issue became political during V.P. Singh's rule and we dropped the case." But the clients keep flocking to the agency. "We normally charge the client on the merit of the case," said Lahiri. "If it involves enormous amount of legwork we charge accordingly."

Goliath Detectives, which has its office in a posh south Delhi locality, has built up a reputation through sheer hard work. It owner, Ramesh Chandra Madan, 51, is the first non-English to win the world's best detective award of

the Massachusetts-based Council of International Investigators. In the profession for over three decades, Madan runs offices in places as diverse as Alwar, Muzzafarpur and Srinagar and has over 500 investigators on his staff, including 130 women.

Each centre of Goliath is meticulously managed and has a chief, the only person having access to files. He prepares the blueprint for the mode of investigation in each case and delegates various tasks to his investigators. "Each one is given the job he can handle well," says Madan. The job itself entails tailing, interviewing, finger-printing, gathering information and video-taping the person being investigated. The agency has disguises for every situation, including attires from different parts of the country. Madan has a fabulous collection of hats, disguises, chemicals and weapons. "You don't know when you are going to need it," he says.

Though the company makes its services available for 41 types of cases, the most common ones it is called to

tackle involve fraud, employee verification, matrimony-related inquiries and infringement of trade marks. "Most common are cover negotiations," says Madan. For instance, if a firm employs a person with a good technical knowhow, the rival firm will be looking to lure him to its side. This is where a detective comes into the picture.

The rival company hires the services of a detective agency to find out the subject's habits. The detective strikes up a conversation with the man, telling him that he certainly deserved a better salary than what he was drawing. Most people usually swallow the bait. The technical expert is thus grabbed from the original company.

Madan gets a lot of cases pertaining to dowry deaths, too. But the agency is cautious while accepting such cases.

Arvind Kumar Auluck, who set up Associated Detectives, a one-man show, in 1980, complains that it is always more work and less money.

"I accept the case only after satisfying myself that the case in genuine," says Madan. However, after a case is solved it has to be handed over to the police for the follow-up action and often it is the latter who hog all the credit.

Madan's wife Pramila, and his son and daughter too are giving him a helping hand. Besides, his three brothers run different agencies in Delhi. "This way I keep out of trouble because the rival agencies are always eager to plant spies in our organisation," says Madan.

Arvind Kumar Auluck had started his sleuthing at Globe. In 1971, he resigned from Globe and started operating as a freelance private eye before setting up Associated Detectives in 1980. Recalls Kumar: "There were times when we were unable to quote the fee for fear of losing the client. The times have changed now. The client pays up even if the detective asks for Rs 6,000."

But solving the cases often demands back-breaking work. Kumar recollects the case when he was approached by a military officer whose jewellery box

was stolen by his orderly. Kumar placed an advertisement in local Hindi dailies seeking information about the missing man. Three days later he got a threatening letter from the orderly along with a clipping of the ad. The smudged postmark had only three letters: RAN.

Kumar found out that the letter was not from Ranchi but Ranjhi near Jabalpur in MP. He contacted the hawker of the area who told him that he distributed the paper in 10 houses. Disguised as a raddiwallah, Kumar trudged to the 10 houses looking for his quarry. At one he chanced upon the newspaper from which the ad had been torn. He informed the local police, who raided the house, arrested the orderly and recovered the jewellery box.

Operating from his flat in Friend's Colony in Delhi, Kumar claims that his one-man show barely provides him with sustenance. "It is always more work and less money," he grumbles. And the final pat often goes to the police. The police and the detectives detest each other. The police believe that the detectives are meddlers who interfere with their job while the latter think the police are incompetent.

Madan, too, has had his brushes with the cops but is proud that he could save six people from the gallows. On February 28, 1973, one Asha Ram was found murdered in a well in Lakhaur village of Saharanpur district of UP. The police arrested six people for whom Ram had worked as a servant. Police believed that Ram was murdered as he had turned against them in a court case. But what Madan and his team found out was dramatically different from the police version. The investigating officers had sided with the real murderers. He presented the clinching evidence to the sessions judge who acquitted the six accused.

Apart from the wrath of the cops, the detectives face constant danger to their lives. Madan has escaped three attempts on his life. But he is unfazed. "The professional risks are everywhere and frankly speaking I enjoy all this," he says. Yet he has been smart enough to install burglar alarms all over his house. There are chemical weapons, loaded pistols and multipurpose knives, too, just in case. "The moment you start penetrating the case deeply, the risk to your life increases," explains Madan.

But that has not stopped the detectives from snooping around. Being the desi version of Sherlock Holmes or Perry Mason may be hard, but at least they can do a Karamchand.

—RAVINDRA DUBEY