

Death 'Un'Wish'ed'

(The Guntur liquor tragedy case)

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People have devious minds. Different people have different types of devious minds. In police profession we come across such devious minds very frequently. We try to deal with it as professionally as possible. But sometimes we cannot escape the emotional aspect when we find that victims had no enmity with accused and still they lost their lives. This incident which we solved recently is one such bizarre expression of human mind which has no logical justification.

While working on this case, apart from solving the case the trial and tribulations the CID team underwent are typical of today's socio-political scenario, but the good news is that the team stood firm on professional ethics.

The NH-5 running between Vijayawada to Chennai passes through Tadepalli, Mangalagiri, Guntur, Chilakaluripeta, Ongole, Kavali and Nellore. All these are busy centres and shops hardly ever shut down and shop keepers make arrangements to run them round the clock. The dhabas and liquor shops are kept open for long-route drivers all the time. Though the police and State Excise Departments have made certain regulatory norms, they are rarely implemented for reasons well-known to all of us. I am not saying that this was the reason for this offence. But it is a fact that this round the clock liquor sales approach and the aggressive sales policy of the Excise Department makes the liquor available even at 6 in the morning and to our surprise we found that there are consumers of liquor at 6 a.m. This incident indicates that there are people in the society who get and consume the liquor any time and are affecting their life and the lives of people who are related to them adversely.

Another trend emerged and kept us confused for quite sometime: the activities of liquor syndicates and their willingness to try dangerous tricks to enhance the sale of different brands of cheap liquor and to damage the sale prospects of rival syndicates. The syndicates are notorious. Members of such syndicates are people with dubious reputation and their activities right from annual auction to tax-evasion is criminal and needs serious attention.

No less surprising was the intensity of the powers that be in the Government and the opposition, who were hell bent on taking maximum advantage out of this situation, thus complicating the facts, situation and the investigation.

On 17th August 2003 the Urvashi Bar at Seethanagaram locality was open at 6 a.m. Quite a good number of labour class people who were regulars in this bar or at least knew that the bar would be open at the early hours in the morning, entered the bar to have quick pegs and then move on to their daily routine. This bar was owned by a member of a particular syndicate and this syndicate was promoting the 'Black Horse' brand of cheap whisky. Therefore, the people who liked this brand were coming to this bar. Though this bar was authorized only to sell liquor, it was unauthorizedly facilitating the drinking also by providing water, glasses and seats to customers who wanted to consume liquor instantly. For this purpose, they had installed a water-cooler also in their premises. All those who bought the bottles and went away that day were lucky. But a few persons who preferred to consume in the bar, destiny played cruel.

Nani Kanaiah and Pudi Satyam came to Urvashi bar with 2 other friends and bought Black Horse liquor bottles and sat at a table. They found a water jug also placed on the table. They asked for 4 glasses. But the two friends disclosed that as they were under 'mala' for 'Ayappa', they were off liquor. So, only two glasses were brought. Liquor and water was mixed and they consumed one large gulp each and within seconds choked and fell off the chairs. The two friends were dazzled and did not know what to do. In panic they started shouting and on the advice of the counter-Clerk immediately rushed them to Govt. General Hospital, Vijayawada, where they were pronounced brought dead. Similarly Dali Narsimha Rao, 30 years old, also had bought another bottle of whisky. But he instead of sitting inside the bar, went in the backyard, where jugs filled up with water were kept, took water from jug in a glass, mixed liquor in it, emptied the glass and within few seconds his body was emptied of life. He had no friend accompanying. Therefore, the bar-counter man put him in an auto and he found a known alcoholic of the area loitering near the premises and made this man to take the body to the hospital. Narasimha Rao was also taken to casualty where he was pronounced brought dead. In this melee, the bar personnel had not bothered about the fourth unknown person, who was lying in the corner behind the water cooler, thinking that he was badly drunk. When they tried to wake up this man, they found him also dead. He was loaded in another auto and sent with an auto driver to the same hospital where he was also pronounced 'brought dead'.

By this time, sensation and panic had gripped the general population and the bar owners in Tadepalli and Vijayawada towns.

Police had 4 dead bodies in their hand, with no clues about the cause of death and no apparent connection in these 4 dead persons. The police party led by the local DSP reached Urvashi bar by 9 a.m. After arriving, he found that the local Excise Inspector had already removed the liquor stock from the bar in the name of seizure and had kept it in her jeep and was leaving the place. It was a serious omission on her part and it amounted to tampering to screen evidence and it was highly unbecoming of an officer. The DSP still did not object to it and she was allowed to get away with the stock. This indicates the deep nexus between law enforcement agencies and liquor sellers of all hues. The media got rich fodder. The vernacular news papers served the hot stories with their own mirchmasala for breakfast next day. The gory photographs with different stories and conjectures – at times conclusions – who did it, why, how– etc. For the next 3 days it was the top story concluding definitely that it was a result of brand-war, by a particular syndicate of Vijayawada, to beat the sale of 'Black Horse' brand whisky- that they poisoned the bottles of this brand of whisky and these dead persons consumed liquor from those dreadful bottles.

Till now, the local police was struggling with the investigation. They had seized some empty bottles of Black Horse whisky, one half-filled bottle of this whisky, another empty bottle of this brand whisky from the pocket of one of the deceased. They had sent viscera of these deceased to Forensic Science Laboratory, Hyderabad. By this time 3 days were over, police had no clear line of investigation, FSL had not completed the analysis, and there was no clue to the cause of death. It was suspected that somehow the liquor was poisoned, but which poison was still unknown. The media blamed 'syndicate hand' was well entrenched in the mind of the public and the local investigators had accepted this theory without an iota of evidence till then.

The actual culprits also were following this development through newspapers. The repeated emphasis on the 'Syndicate handiwork' theory made them doubtful about their own prowess and efficacy of their tool. They quietly decided to retest themselves and their weapon.

The devil struck again with same cruelty but at a different time and a different place. It was on the 19th. The time was around 7 p.m. at Mangalagiri town at Kanakadurga Wines. Within minutes 3 persons were dead. The most pathetic was the death of a 19 year old boy.

This put the State Government, which was in tizzy so far, into a spin. In an emergency meeting it was decided to handover the investigation to the Crime Investigation Department. CID took over the case and DIG Sri Umesh Sharraf was dispatched to conduct the investigation. I was away on camp outside the State. I was asked to return immediately as I am looking after Vijayawada Regional Centre and this area falls under this Centre. Umesh reached Mangalagiri on 20th morning and he assembled the haphazard investigation of local police into meaningful and systematic order.

I returned to Hyderabad on 20th evening and went to FSL on 21st morning. I interacted in the lab with the analysts and they understood our problem. I convinced them that without their result we cannot ground the investigation. By 2.30 p.m. they gave me the conclusive opinion that cyanide was the poison consumed by all the 4 persons who died in the first incident.

Armed with this information, I reached Mangalagiri P.S. at 11.30 p.m. We decided to probe on 3 lines – one how the cyanide got mixed in the drink, second whether the syndicate rivalry could have been reason, third whether there was any deliberate foul play in the bars and what was the possibility of assailants striking again.

The first team had analyzed the possibility of presence of cyanide in the liquor bottles. When they checked the seals on intact bottles, it was found that seals were very loose and it was not impossible for a determined person to open the cap of the bottle with the seal and mix something in the bottle and put back the cover with seal paper. It was because seal was with a paper label and it was fixed only on the cap. As a result, the batch no.47 of 'Black Horse Whisky' became a suspected item. The matter was conveyed to CID Hq. to send an officer to Beverages Corporation at Hyderabad and collect the details of stocks distributed all over the State and make an express request to withdraw the remaining stock. This was done on 22nd. In the meantime the manufacturing unit of Black Horse Whisky was being touted as the culprit by media.

Another team was tasked to collect the members of a particular syndicate which was alleged to have masterminded this incident. Some of these members had been interrogated on previous days, but no fruitful lead had emerged and so they were let off. But they were asked to come again.

Even the role of Excise Inspector was under suspicion and her action appeared to be a cover-up. It is well known that they have to frequently meet these syndicate groups and in course of time they develop closeness to one group or the other. In this case it was clear that this Inspector was acting like a partner in the trade of this syndicate. It was making the situation more precarious for the Govt.

But no less precarious was our situation. I was mulling over a scenario – that if one more such incident took place we would be completely on the defensive. In several such earlier situations I have seen that the attitude of every person, media, Govt. and officers

becomes nasty and they look upon us as if we have committed the offence. The other bete noire of investigators today is the media – which launches a parallel probe and starts publishing sensational tit-bits and justifies them in the name of investigative journalism. My experience says that most of their hypotheses remain uncorroborated. This case is a good example.

In the morning we visited the scene once again and made some seizure, sealed it for sending it for analysis. At around 10 a.m. we phoned up the Director, FSL, asking him the results of analysis of further materials. He informed that one of the water samples collected from a jug had a very high quantity of cyanide. This led to another question – whether cyanide was mixed in the water or the liquor bottle? We decided to probe this angle too and after combining all the facts we concluded that as the water jugs were placed in the backyard and this area was frequented by the consumers, it was possible that some body might have put cyanide in those jugs. But what could be the motive?

Armed with these facts we found some seriousness in the allegation of rivalry? We started the interrogation of syndicate members, bar-owners and staff working in bar. We dug up an enmity angle between the neighbouring rival bar owners. The excise Inspector was also interrogated.

During all this while we had to repeatedly answer the phone calls from Hyderabad. There were continuous review meetings at the highest level – sometimes 2 to 3 a day. On 21st by 1.30 p.m. we received an advice-cum-instruction that as the whole world believed that it was the handiwork of a syndicate, better we should also believe it and arrest the syndicate members and send them for remand. We asked for some time to consider the evidence. It was granted. After half an hour we phoned back and conveyed that no evidence was available indicating any omission or commission by this syndicate and we had no grounds to arrest them.

A miracle happened. The Sub Inspector of Mangalgiri Rural PS mustered enough courage and narrated an incident which had happened on the intervening night of 17th and 18th. Two beat Constables, who were on night beat around Mangalgiri Railway Station, had come across a vagrant who was sleeping on the platform. In a routine manner they accosted him because, this person was a local drunkard. He was in the habit of stealing small items like utensils, clothes and other sundry items and sell them to drink. When the Constables accosted him he was fully drunk and he misbehaved with them. These beat PCs took him into custody and forcibly brought him to the PS with his bag. It was around 1.30 – 2 a.m. and the SI was present in the PS. The SI was present because the SP and other officers were present in the Town PS which was just 25 yards away from Rural PS. The SI also knew this person as a petty thief. The SI made some routine queries, searched the pocket of this person and found a small tightly tied packet containing a white powder. As this man was highly inebriated, the SI thought that this substance might be some drug. He kept it in his drawer and sent this man away on. The SI took a personal surety in writing and under the signature of the subject. This document proved very crucial later on. This tightly tied packet was haunting the SI's sixth sense. But in the light of the second incident of Kanaka Durga Wines, he was so scared that he did not reveal his doubt earlier. I immediately discussed this with Umesh and we decided to pursue this lead. We called the SP and asked him to call a few goldsmiths. He immediately called them and we gave the packet one by one to them to conduct a test and

find out as to what substance it was. By 3.30 p.m. the third goldsmith concluded his test. All the 3 tests confirmed that it was cyanide.

Cyanide with a drunkard petty thief was connecting to the offence remotely. Hence, getting this person and clarifying the availability of cyanide with him was paramount. On consultation with a few constables and head constables of Mangalgiri Town & Rural PS six places were identified to hunt down this man. Four teams were dispatched by 5 p.m. on 22nd to look for this man. Main locations were railway stations where reportedly this man used to sleep. Interestingly, this suspect was local person having parents, brother, wife and one child. But due to his bad habit he was discarded from his own house and was not allowed to stay. We spoke to his father, wife, brother but none could give any clue.

Our teams were in touch on regular intervals. Finally, at 2 a.m. he was located at one of the Railway Station yards sleeping in a fully drunken condition. He was not in a condition to talk immediately. The policemen gave him some oral antidotes to bring him to his senses. His father also helped. After two to three hours of hard work he started understanding where he was. By 5 a.m. he was in a state of shock seeing his father and brother in the police station. In the meantime, in his bag we found almost a similar tightly tied packet of white substance, but in a much bigger quantity. When he was shown the previous packet and on our revelation that it was cyanide, he got the second jolt, which was visible on his face. A small dramatic sequence also we had prepared with co-operation of his father and brother. They were taken into two separate rooms and they started shouting as if they were being beaten. He asked me why were his relations were being beaten. We told him that they were suspected in this offence and he was suspected to be the source of cyanide supply. Very confidently he said that they were totally innocent. He said that he would reveal the truth. For revealing the hard truth he requested for some liquor. We told him that after listening to his promised truth only we would give him liquor. But we kept a liquor bottle before him on the table.

He started revealing the sequence of events. This incident was planned and executed between 15th and 19th.

In this case only two persons were involved. Till 15th, they did not even know each other. For sake of convenience and because the case is sub-judice I will name them Shyam and Hari. Shyam was the subject from whom we recovered the cyanide packets. Shyam belonging to a poor family, semi-literate, discarded from house, petty thief to arrange his regular drink, casual worker again earning for drinking was continuously in need of money as his daily expense on drink was between Rs.50 to 75. Hari also was in need of money – big money- because he had to pay dues of more than 10 lakhs to various people. Pressure on him was acute, as the people had given money to get house sites. He was working in a real-estate office in Guntur and had collected this huge sum from customers but had not deposited the money in his head office. So the head office had refused the demand of these customers. These customers were chasing Hari and several times they had treated him violently. He also had the habits of drinking and womanizing. But unlike Shyam, he came from a reasonably good family and also married a decent girl in a well-to-do family. Hari had one male child and his wife was expecting another child. Shyam and Hari met each other by chance at a teashop on 13th in Guntur. Both got along and they moved together. Hari introduced himself as a professional railway offender. He impressed upon Shyam that by robbing rail passengers they would make good money and

they could live a luxurious life. While wooing Shyam, Hari kept him supplied with liquor and good food. After moving in Guntur, Mangalgiri, Bapatla, Vijayawada, staying in lodges, having good food, liquor and women, all paid by Hari, Shyam was totally convinced that he was in right company and this company would bring him a luxurious future.

Then Hari revealed his plan. He showed him the powder, which he said would be smeared on the lips of unsuspecting sleeping passengers in train. Within minutes, such passengers would become unconscious. Then both of them would comfortably relieve the passengers of all their cash, jewellery and other valuables. Shyam by now had developed full faith in the abilities of Hari and agreed to become his partner.

But no less intelligent was Shyam. He proposed to Hari to test the efficacy of this powder. Hari also agreed. With this agreement our case was launched. Shyam, as he was a regular visitor of bars in Mangalgiri, Tadepalli and surrounding areas, was fully aware of the topography. Very carefully he chose those bars which were right on the main highway having rear exits. The first test was executed in Urvashi bar. There was one more reason for choosing Urvashi bar as the first target. A week before this incident the workers of this bar had humiliated, beaten and thrown him out of the bar. So in conducting this test, he would bring harassment to the bar workers as vengeance. So he entered the bar, purchased a bottle of whisky, went to the back of the bar where he knew the water filled jugs were kept. He had kept a packet carefully opened and he poured it in two water jugs and threw the paper and polythene cover there itself and came out through the rear alley on to the road. He was followed all along by Hari. Both were waiting outside on the other side of the road to see the result. It soon happened. Four dead persons were moved to the hospital. Hari and Shyam in fact accompanied one of the dead bodies in the same auto up to Vijayawada hospital and they even spoke to the casualty doctor. This good doctor identified them subsequently during investigation. Their test was successful. They saw it. But what made them unsure? What forced them to conduct a second test after two days at Kanaka Durga bar?

It was the newspaper reports. The newspapers were continuously harping on the theory of syndicate-war, brand-war and portraying the incident as their handiwork. This generated doubt in Hari and Shyam's mind. They decided to conduct a second test. This time Shyam poured cyanide powder in only one jug and they got conclusive result in killing three persons. Besides, Shyam got greedy. On 19th night when they were sleeping in a lodge, Shyam snatched away the bag in which Hari had kept the cyanide packets and escaped, leaving Hari asleep. This was the night on which Shyam was brought to the police station by the beat Constables.

By 10.30 a.m. on 23rd the case was cracked, all the direct and circumstantial evidence collected, corroborated and one of the accused in our hand. Another dilemma hit us hard. Who will believe this sequence of events in the backdrop of widely published hypotheses of syndicate rivalry, brand wars, political positioning and highest of the officials monitoring the progress of the investigation? This could have been the Waterloo for an investigator if he succumbed to these things and compromised on facts, truth, logic and his own gut instinct. I am happy that the CID team stuck to the truth.

Hari remained absconding for six long months. But finally he was also apprehended in March this year and now both the perverts are languishing behind bars.