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Introduction

Vappala Balachandran is a leading public intellectual in India on matters of intelligence and national security. Following a distinguished career in policing and intelligence, he established himself as a leading analyst of intelligence and national security.

Born in Burma on 15 June 1937 where his father worked for the Telegraph Department,[1] Balachandran's family moved back to India in 1940. On receiving a BA (Honours) degree, which was equivalent to a modern-day MA, from Loyola College in Madras, Balachandran qualified for the Indian Police Service (IPS) in 1959. He was allocated to the Maharashtra State cadre where he served until 1976 before moving to work in the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), India's external intelligence agency, rising to become one of the Deputy Chiefs of India's foreign intelligence.[2]

At the time he joined the R&AW, the agency was entering the most controversial period in its existence. Raised in September 1968 on executive orders from Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the R&AW was to serve as India's dedicated foreign intelligence agency. In this capacity, it had to both produce strategic intelligence for policymaking as well as conduct covert actions in India's neighbourhood. By the time Balachandran moved to the agency on deputation, the R&AW had built its reputation through the spectacular success of the 1971 War of Bangladesh Liberation.[3] Not only had the agency accurately predicted the secession of East Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh, it was also actively involved in India's covert action to strengthen the Bengali rebels who were fighting for independence. From the R&AW's point of view, the liberation of Bangladesh was crucial because it offered India's northeast much needed protection against encirclement from a hostile China in the north and Pakistan in the south. In 1975, the R&AW further strengthened India's security in the northeastern region through a covert action that saw the merger of the Kingdom of Sikkim into the Indian Union.[4] However, two months later, Mrs. Gandhi proclaimed the Emergency, curtailing civil liberties and other democratic freedoms, giving birth to rumours and perceptions amongst her political opponents and critics that the R&AW was her secret police force. It was during this time that Balachandran joined the R&AW.

During his career, the R&AW was primarily focused on India's immediate neighbourhood. Even though the agency's stations spread to various parts of the world, the objectives were always focused on generating intelligence on India's neighbours, primarily Pakistan and China, or to tackle insurgencies that drew support from the diaspora population in western countries. Balachandran's areas of specialisation when working with the agency included political, military, scientific, and economic developments in India's neighbourhood, especially Pakistan's quest for a nuclear bomb. During the 1980s, Indian intelligence established a practice of liaising with British intelligence agencies on matters of counterterrorism. This practice was extended to US intelligence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During the years 1993 and 1994, Balachandran led the delegation of Indian

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intelligence officers to Washington, DC to meet a joint delegation from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

After serving in the R&AW for 19 years, Balachandran retired in 1995 as Special Secretary. After his retirement, Balachandran's services were once again solicited by the Government of Maharashtra as part of a two-member High-Level Enquiry Committee to examine the police response to the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks (the 26/11 attacks).[5]

Since his retirement in 1995, Balachandran has dedicated much of his time to writing on intelligence and national security matters. His articles and commentaries have appeared regularly in national newspapers and leading magazines.[6] Balachandran has also authored four books. A collection of his articles was published as *National Security and Intelligence Management: A New Paradigm* in 2014. Divided into six sections on national security, intelligence reforms, foreign policy, police, terrorism, and miscellaneous issues, the book offers Balachandran's insights into select issues and topics and provides new data sets by way of correspondence between the author and key intelligence and policy leaders. For instance, readers will find personal correspondence between Balachandran and key figures within the Indian intelligence community such as Rameshwar Nath Kao, the founder chief of R&AW, who was renowned for secrecy.[7] This correspondence offers an insight into the minds of individuals like Kao who played a pivotal role in the evolution of Indian intelligence. In 2017, Balachandran wrote a biography of A.C.N. Nambiar, a largely forgotten Indian freedom fighter who had been based in Europe.[8] Nambiar was a close friend of the military figure Subhas Chandra Bose[9] as well as Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter, and Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. As an officer of the R&AW posted in Europe during Mrs. Gandhi's term as prime minister, Balachandran had the privilege of interacting with Nambiar extensively on advice from the Government of India. The biography is a combination of Balachandran's personal interactions with Nambiar and a meticulous analysis of the archival record. Titled *A Life in Shadow: The Secret Story of ACN Nambiar*, the book sheds light on an important, yet lesser-known dimension of the colonial and post-colonial period.

In 2017, Balachandran authored a further book titled *Keeping India Safe: The Dilemma of Internal Security* where he combined his personal experiences as a police and then intelligence officer to address some of the key challenges facing India's internal security. This book exposed the structural limitations in India's approaches to internal security by highlighting some of the colonial continuities in its security organisations. His latest book, *Intelligence over Centuries: From the Land of Canaan in the Pre-Biblical Times to Ukraine in 21st Century*, was published in 2022. Adopting a global and historical canvas, Balachandran critically engages various themes of intelligence such as secret and open-source intelligence, the intelligence cycle, intelligence liaison, counterintelligence and covert action. Besides these works, in setting out Balachandran's contributions to intelligence and international security, it would be remiss not to mention that he has delivered numerous lectures at both academic and security conferences in the US, the UK, Singapore, and India.

In this interview, Balachandran discusses his career as an intelligence officer and certain important themes of intelligence with India as reference. What follows is an edited transcript of an interview conducted via Google Meet on 3 August 2023.

Interview

Dheeraj Paramesha Chaya (DPC): Let me begin by asking you about your drift into the R&AW. I use the word 'drift' as I understand that you consider your career in the R&AW to be purely an accident.

Vappala Balachandran (VB): Yes, I joined the Maharashtra Police as an IPS officer in 1960. I served in various districts for several years where I handled law and order. Later, I was appointed as Deputy Commissioner of Special Branch in Bombay, something like the London Metropolitan Police's Special

Branch, that has overarching responsibilities for the whole city. The practice in those days was that the Special Branch head had to report to the chief minister every morning about the developments in the city. It was started by former chief minister Morarji Desai and continued under subsequent chief ministers like Y.B. Chavan and Vasantrao Naik. With Bombay being the financial and industrial capital, there were several national security threats to the city. There were the textile mills agitations,[10] the birth and rise of the Shiv Sena,[11] etc., political and labour activities had to be monitored. In addition, those were the days before the birth of the Special Protection Group (SPG) to protect the prime minister.[12] So, whenever the prime minister visited Bombay, her security was my responsibility, and I must have done that five or six times.

And then, came the Emergency in 1975 when all together my job took a different turn when the entire security and intelligence mechanism was controlled by the centre (New Delhi).[13] So, I thought that working for the Government of India was better. I would not have to do law & order duties, arrests, and detention as in Bombay. Instead, I could do work on a wider canvas under a better working environment, at a national level connected with collecting national security intelligence. Therefore, when I learnt that a newly created organisation, the R&AW, was seeking people with good track record, I joined the organisation in May 1976 where the whole atmosphere was different. I had both foreign postings as well as in Delhi, and I retired after a satisfying career in 1995. It was satisfying mostly because I was working at a national level, on a more intellectual plane compared to the restricted and parochial law and order work in the state.

DPC: As a career police officer who transitioned to intelligence what is your take on the popular criticisms that Indian intelligence is dominated by policemen?

VB: I will tell you as someone who served in the police and then as an intelligence officer for 19 years, there are some aspects of police work that will come in handy, but for most parts, it is not good at all. We should limit deputation from one cadre to another because the professionalism of foreign intelligence takes a long time to build.[14] Even for a small country like Libya, for example, we will need years to build the requisite expertise and to understand the society. For a country like China, it takes a lifetime. This is why Mrs. Indira Gandhi was particular that the R&AW should not be another police organisation. She had nothing against the police, but she felt that foreign intelligence required a particular type of specialisation, like knowledge of the country's history, political background, economic development, science and technology, and to understand the peculiarity of the situation in which India's interests are involved. That is why she asked Mr. Kao to recruit from outside the police. Even though some of the founding members were from the police, they had spent decades as Intelligence Bureau (IB) officers in foreign intelligence. I too stayed for 19 years and that was a long period for me to understand the craft and overall dynamics of foreign intelligence, not necessarily every country. But short-term deputations are dangerous because it exposes our officers. For instance, there was a case of an officer who was on a short-term deputation to a hostile country going back to a highly visible police job in India. That led to the exposure of his successor in that country leading to exposure of our unit there.

DPC: What are the advantages?

VB: I won't say there is any particular advantage of police officers handling foreign intelligence except in unforeseen circumstances, like what is now happening in some African countries. The experience of a policeman in dealing with riots in India can be useful in understanding such

situations. So, in a way it should be a mix of the right people – police, army, scientists, and journalists. Mr. Kao had recruited officers from the Foreign Service, Postal service, and all kinds of talented people for intelligence work. The point was that they must be capable of working anonymously, unlike police officers who are asked to keep their chests out. And here I would quote Stella Rimington who said that most efficient spies are dull and boring people who go on doing the same thing over and over again, and the counterintelligence people are also matching them!

DPC: Your career took a transition during the Emergency era. Can you reflect on that period?

VB: I hated every moment. I will tell you why. The Bombay Special Branch had an excellent relationship with all the opposition parties. For example, I had an excellent working relationship with the firebrand Socialist leader George Fernandes who was in Bombay then, the communists, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Dalit Panthers, labour leaders, etc. Overnight, I was arresting all of them and putting them in Yeravada jail. I felt very hurt. A list used to come from Delhi, and I had to arrest all of them. There was no provision for questioning if arrest was necessary or not.

And then, there was also the press censorship. Some of the journalists were my close friends and had been discreetly informing me about so many things. I had to send my officers to various newspaper offices and literally prevent them physically from publishing anti-Emergency news. I also had to prevent the Bar Association from passing a resolution. So, we went and occupied their office. It was an extremely agonising moment for me. So, that was the reason I wanted to escape, and when the moment came, I opted for the R&AW.

DPC: There was a popular perception at that time that the R&AW was used offensively by Mrs. Gandhi during the Emergency.

VB: I can tell you that I am not aware of any R&AW operations inside the country during this period. I will give you an example for this. Mrs. Mrinal Gore was a renowned agitator in those days but was also my very good friend. When the Emergency was proclaimed she had made a speech and disappeared into thin air, and we, while I was in the police, were told to arrest her. I had to chase her for about nine months to arrest her before I moved to the R&AW. Later when she became a Member of Parliament (MP), I had met her and found that she had no anger against me. On this matter, I told her that as a Special Branch officer I had 700-800 officers under me whereas as an R&AW officer I had only four or five officers. So, I asked her if it was possible for me to watch her with that staff. I told her, you people were shouting 'Mr. Kao's special police kept a watch over people'. With 700 officers, I couldn't keep a watch over you, you slipped out and ran. What can I possibly do with four-five officers? There was just a perception that Mrs. Gandhi had used the secret police to watch people, and Mrs. Gandhi also behaved in that way. For example, in those days whenever a politician, even from her own party met her, she used to look at a paper and then talk to him. That gave a misleading impression that she was reading reports prepared by R&AW on such politicians. She made no attempts to dispel that impression.

DPC: Moving from Indira to Rajiv Gandhi. Rajiv's era is considered the golden age of Indian intelligence. In light of this, can you comment in general about the intelligence-policymaker relationship during your time?

VB: Mrs. Gandhi's management style was aloof. Kao as the chief had direct access to her, but generally intelligence reports were not sent to her. They used to be sifted through the cabinet Secretariat or through Kao. When she returned to power in January 1980, Kao was not appointed as an advisor immediately. Actually, in her second tenure from 1980, she did not want to appoint her old advisers. Kao was appointed by her only on Mr. Nambiar's advice in May 1981 when she visited him in Zurich. I had started meeting Nambiar in Zurich every 3 months from March 1980 as desired by Mrs.Gandhi, conveyed through our then Chief, Mr.Suntook.[15]

But that was not the case with Rajiv Gandhi. He used to meet both the R&AW and IB chiefs every day at 09:00/09:30 in the morning and task them regularly. I remember this as I was working as the principal staff officer (chef de cabinet) of S.E. Joshi, A.K. Verma and G.S. Bajpai, and all the prime minister's instructions used to reach my table. We used to get instructions from the prime minister at 09:00/09:30 in the night and by 09:00 in the morning, he wanted answers to what was happening in very remote places where our communications were also difficult. Those days we had to rely on Morse codes for communication and there was no guarantee whether our man would see the communication in time in a place like Kabul or Libya. I have mentioned one instance of serious riots that happened in Algeria in my book [*Intelligence Over Centuries*], where he wanted to know of the developments within three hours, since the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) was not able to report on this.[16] So, in that way, he was a hard taskmaster. To put it a different way, that is the difference between a police officer and an intelligence officer. As a police officer, whether you enjoy the trust of a chief minister or not, your duties are clearly known. You have certain things to do. But in foreign intelligence, it is not like that, unless you are tasked by a higher authority. That keeps any organisation very alert.

Towards the end of 1986, Rajiv Gandhi issued orders to the IB and the R&AW to send him a crisp one-page summary of important happenings in their domain by 9:30 p.m every day. This was called the 'Executive Intelligence Summary', which deviated from the hitherto practice of receiving oral briefings from the intelligence chiefs. He used to call the chiefs personally if it did not reach him by the deadline. As I have already mentioned, he had held R&AW responsible for keeping him informed on important global developments since he felt that the MEA was slow in briefing him. This new order resulted in an additional burden on me as I had to compress the voluminous daily reports from all analysis desks into a one-page summary. Also, I could not leave my office until that report, approved by my chief, had reached the PM's residence.

Besides this, Rajiv also paid attention to other aspects of intelligence. He wanted to introduce electronic units for communication since he felt that the existing modes of communication seemed outdated. This was not the 18th century, there was no need to rely on archaic methods. In another instance, he told us what Yasser Arafat had told him after a visit to Pakistan: that the Pakistan Army was more afraid of R&AW than the Indian Army. Arafat had just visited Pakistan and then came to India. I do not know if that impression was correct or not, but it was a great morale booster. I am sure the Indian Army may not have liked it.

DPC: What about the other political leaders' approaches to foreign intelligence?

VB: You know, the funniest thing until my retirement was that there was no charter for the R&AW. What were we supposed to do? All that was said in the government order was that a new organisation would be created called the Research and Analysis Wing, which would do everything that the Intelligence Bureau was doing in foreign intelligence. But by the 1980s, there were lot of functional struggles between the R&AW, the Army, the BSF and others. When VP Singh was the prime minister, for the first time, I was asked to prepare a charter which was sent to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).

The Cabinet Secretary, Mr. Vinod Pandey, accepted my recommendations that other organisations should not interfere in strategic monitoring. If too many organisations were doing this, then it would be easy for our hostile countries to detect what was happening and deal with it. However, the VP Singh government was short-lived. The later governments did not take much interest in such matters and the R&AW never received a charter of duties until I retired.[17]

DPC: In your recent book *Intelligence Over Centuries*, you have spoken about a 'hegemonic' intelligence relationship between some countries. I want to ask you if you think that India's intelligence relationship with some of its smaller neighbours, especially during the period you served in the R&AW, can also be categorised in this way?

VB: No. When I say 'hegemonic relationship', it is for example, the relationship between the Stasi and the KGB. I have quoted similar examples from around the world in my book.[18] To some extent, this was also the kind of relationship between the British MI5 and the IB after independence for a short time. Christopher Andrew has written that one of the unwritten provisions of the transfer of power was that a liaison officer would be stationed in India.[19] Based on his access to MI5 records, he has written that the IB still continued to pass information to MI5. This was true and I know it because the IB continued to censor ACN Nambiar's letters even after independence and the censored letter was sent to the Security Liaison Officer (SLO). The media learnt about this and created a huge ruckus that even independent India had kept a tab on friends of Subhas Chandra Bose. In reality, it was just the IB, as a bureaucracy, sticking to its old practice. It was like the famous story of the Russian Imperial Guard originally mounted to guard Catherine the Great's special flower surviving long even after she was gone.

DPC: So, how would you characterise India's intelligence relationship with its smaller neighbours, if not hegemonic? They do have a certain degree of dependency on India.

VB: You could say that it was hegemonic for a brief period in Sri Lanka when the Rajiv-Jayewardene accords were signed in 1987.[20] But once the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) started attacking us, the accord dissipated, and the relationship changed. But you cannot say the same about Bangladesh, Nepal, the Maldives, or any other country in the Indian Ocean region. Not even Bhutan. They might have had a dependence, like during the Manmohan Singh period when Sri Lanka was fighting the war with LTTE, of which I have no personal knowledge. I only gathered from the newspapers. But the smaller neighbours have become more independent and our relationship with them is on equal terms.

DPC: In an article published by the *Free Press Journal* on 10 April 1983, a former R&AW chief was wrongly termed a traitor, which suggested a certain tension in the media-intelligence relationship. Against this backdrop, I would like to ask you,[21] what was the nature of media-intelligence relationship during your time?

VB: That news article was very weird. It was totally false. Unfortunately, even from the beginning we had no relationship with the media. We were afraid to go near the media. I remember Mr. Kao never gave a single interview, even informally. We simply followed the same practice and kept away from

the media. When I was in the Bombay Special Branch, I had a very good relationship with the media and some of my friends became national media leaders. So, I could have done the same in the R&AW, but we were asked not to. And we actually suffered because of not having such a relationship.

In the 1980s, there was a strike in the R&AW and the IB,[22] and certain disgruntled elements who wanted to make it sensational, started placing exaggerated and, in some instances, false stories in the media. For example, they started saying that there was no insurgency in the North-East, and it was the intelligence agencies that started the violence. Even with Khalistan,[23] they started saying R&AW was orchestrating it. These stories were absolutely false. When the Bodo insurgency[24] started, there were sensational reports that we were training them. My chief A.K. Verma asked me to tap some of my good friends in the media and I had to go and meet the chief editor of *Statesman* and point out that these were all false stories. Then there was a discussion on whether we should have a PR officer or similar. It led to a question on what such a position would entail. If we hold a press conference, then they would ask various things which may affect our operations and access to certain channels of information. So, as long as I was there, we remained undecided about how to approach the media.

But I can give you one instance when we broke that unwritten taboo since it was a larger strategic issue. From 1977 onwards, we were monitoring Pakistan's clandestine nuclear weapons programme. However, nobody was willing to believe our findings. It was quite frustrating that the Americans were not believing us, and our own Atomic Energy Commission was reluctant to do so. Two *New York Times* journalists, Steve Weissman and Herbert Krosney, were investigating Pakistan's covert nuclear programme.[25] For the first time, the government took a conscious decision to reach out to foreign media because only then would the Americans be convinced. We gave them our assessment with a request to not reveal the source. So, this was the only time we interacted with the media for a strategic reason.

DPC: You retired in 1995 and the 1990s saw the kidnapping of Rubaiya Saeed,[26] the Kargil surprise, and finally the 9/11 attacks. Observing these incidents as a student of intelligence, you found the need to rework the intelligence cycle by incorporating 'intelligence adjudication' as an important step. Can you explain this concept?

VB: After I retired in 1995, I started writing for the first time around 1997/98. At that time, the BJP government wanted to set up a National Security Council (NSC). In some form an NSC had already existed since Rajiv Gandhi's time but wasn't working well. So, I wrote then in the *Times of India* (TOI) that the NSC would have to be created under a law like in the US.[27] If not, it would be toothless and go defunct. Then in 1999, the Kargil attack happened. The NSC met one month after the first intrusion was noticed. They said that they had met and discussed in the Cabinet Committee on Policy Affairs (CCPA). Then why have the NSC? It is because you need an intelligence arbitrator, policy adjudicator, and performance monitor. You need a smaller body, not a high-powered body like the CCPA. So, this is how my dialogue started and I wrote another article for TOI in 2000, which Mr. Kao appreciated and wrote to me.[28]

The point is that it is not enough for raw intelligence or an intelligence report to be sent to the government. Somebody with adequate experience must interpret the intelligence after 'adjudicating' or 'arbitrating' in consultation with other intelligence agencies and by plugging gaps in intelligence. The 9/11 Commission report had also mentioned that they didn't have the necessary 'imagination'. The intelligence cycle is collection, collation, analysis within the organisation. Dissemination is made to consumers like PMO, Defence, Home etc. At this stage the intelligence coordinator, i.e., the JIC or the NSC, takes over to adjudicate or arbitrate intelligence, plug gaps in knowledge, task agencies to do further verification. After getting further inputs, the NSC under the

PM decides policy and implementation. The 9/11 Commission said the same thing in different words. They said that the policy makers 'did not have the imagination' to interpret the portends. Therefore, I spoke on the need to arbitrate intelligence in my address on 19 June 2003, to the National Advisory Council, South Asia Affairs, a voluntary advisory body of South Asian academics living in Washington, DC which was meeting at the Cosmos Club on the subject of terrorism and whether the US and South Asian nations were prepared to face terrorism. This seminar was attended by major think tank experts and State Department officials.

Then, I studied the work of Thomas Copeland,[29] the case of the Pearl Harbor attacks,[30] French intelligence reform under Pierre Marion,[31] and the Agranat Commission findings, and most importantly, Bruce Riedel's analysis of the Yom Kippur War.[32] In all of these, there were warnings available, hundreds of them, but there was no clarity about what was going to happen. Even when I was appointed to the two-member 26/11 review committee, I observed that there were 16 alerts but nothing was done on that. The same goes for Kargil also.[33] This is why I called for better intelligence adjudication, where people who are experts from the military, have an economics background, and so on, would sit down and make a complete picture. You take into consideration different viewpoints until a clear picture emerges.

This happened in 1986, after an attempt was made on Rajiv Gandhi's life. We had intelligence that a Sikh militant would target Rajiv Gandhi in Rajghat. We informed all the concerned agencies that he would be dressed as a gardener and take a shot at the PM. The police checked all the bushes but failed to search the treetops. This chap was sitting on a tree for 72 hours and since he was poor, he could afford just a primitive muzzle loading gun. So fortunately, there was no serious damage, although he fired. At that time, Mr. Chidambaram was the minister of state for internal security. After this incident, he started the practice of holding weekly meetings with all stakeholders. During these meetings other security agencies in charge of implementation wanted confirmed intelligence on threats, which was not always possible. So, I told the minister that in foreign intelligence, sometimes the source was not totally under our control, and we cannot always 100 per cent verify the information. In such cases, should we report or not? Chidambaram suggested that I seek the advice of the PM on this question. When my chief, the late S.E. Joshi, approached Rajiv Gandhi, he told him that every warning should be taken seriously and reported immediately. So, these are all the problems that come in intelligence, especially in terrorism. Whenever you don't have that type of adjudication, you will be surprised as in the case of 9/11.

DPC: You mentioned 26/11 and that you were part of the two-member review committee along with Mr. R.D. Pradhan. Could you reflect on your experience serving on the committee and then take us through some of the lessons learned?

VB : The first thing that struck me was how the entire intelligence process of the Mumbai Special Branch and the Maharashtra State Intelligence Department was disrupted and dismantled compared to what existed in the 1970s when I was in the state.

In those days the Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) of Intelligence CID of the Maharashtra State and Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) Special Branch (SB) of the Bombay city police used to be considered as the first point of contact in the police department by the higher echelons in the State Government for any information or action to be done in the field of political, labour or security matters. They were also consulted by the political leadership on these subjects. In those days the DCP SB of Bombay city police used to brief the Chief Minister every morning, a long-standing practice since the 1950s.

As DCP(SB) of the Bombay city between 1973 and 1976 I used to brief the successive two Chief ministers every morning and convey their instructions every day to the higher echelons of the

Maharashtra State in civil and police administration. Besides, DIG (Intelligence CID) & DCP(SB) were the links with Central Intelligence Bureau (IB) on intelligence and security. All IB alerts used to be first sent to these two officers.

In 2008 I was aghast when I heard from the Commissioner, State Intelligence Department (SID) [earlier DIG, Intelligence CID], that he was not in the loop when the Union Home Ministry's prior intelligence alerts on 26/11 were received by the State Home Department and by the Director General of Police (DGP). He came to know about the alerts only when the DGP sent him copies. Consequently, he could not give timely cautionary instructions to the Mumbai Special Branch on 26/11. There were 16 intelligence alerts between 2006 and September 2008 almost correctly identifying some of the targets, modus operandi like sea borne approach to the city, multiple attacks etc.

The second point which I noticed was that there was no application of minds at the senior level before a Central intelligence alert was conveyed to the field units. It was mechanically copied to the junior police officers as text messages adding 'For necessary preventive action'. In the 1970s the SB used to convey these alerts, adding their own comments as applicable to Mumbai city: like positioning police teams at specified vantage points etc. In addition, regional SB teams were also deployed as liaison with uniformed police and to convey developments to the DCP.

The third point which I noticed was that an excellent system of 'watchers' in Bombay city police, which we had inherited from the British days, was abandoned sometime after I left Bombay police in 1976. These were our field intelligence and surveillance men who used to adopt deep covers as hawkers, taxi drivers or pushcart pullers to merge with the public to collect intelligence. They were not exposed to the public like the uniformed police and never attended the SB office to prevent their exposure even to the uniformed police. They were also deployed to watch the members of the 'All India Suspect list' on dangers to the VVIPs including the Prime Minister. These lists were prepared by the Central Intelligence Bureau. Unfortunately, this excellent system was given up in the 1980s.

The fourth point I noticed was that police gave no importance to the open-source intelligence (OSINT) for terrorism related security responsibilities. At the same time, they did consider OSINT for performing law-and-order duties like 'Morchas' (Protest processions), hunger strikes etc. or even for preventing crimes. However, somehow there was a mindset that for terrorism they needed Central or State agencies' alerts, as most of the cases of terrorism affecting the city in the past were conducted by culprits who lived beyond their jurisdiction.

This is not how terrorism is handled. Had they adopted the practice of studying the OSI, they could have noticed the following incidents as harbingers of the 26/11 attack:

(1) A local TV channel [CNN IBN] had broadcast a survey on 30 July 2006 that there was no sea patrolling even after the National Security Adviser had forewarned that a sea borne attack might be made on the Mumbai Coast, most probably on nuclear energy installations, a warning which was widely published by the media.
(2) Another broadcast by the same TV channel was on 16 June 2007 that some terrorists who came through the Western Sea route were arrested by J&K police. In this case they had even interviewed the J&K DGP who told them that the terrorists had carried fake ID cards with Hindu names as the 26/11 attackers had done. Less than one and a half years later, the 26/11 terrorists used the same sea route and the same modus operandi observed in the 2007 'test run' to enter Mumbai in what was one of the most brutal urban terrorist attacks in the world, killing 166 innocent people and causing huge destruction of property.
(3) Also, Mumbai police officers did not consider similar attacks on luxury hotels in our neighbouring countries, forewarned by the terror alerts from 2006: First, Serena Hotel in Kabul was attacked by armed Taliban on 14 January 2008 killing 6. Second, a massive vehicle bomb attack in front of Islamabad Marriott Hotel on 20 September 2008 killing 56.

These were some of the important observations I made when I was part of the 26/11 review committee.

DPC : But you have been a critic of review committees in general because they are not given sufficient access to information.[34] So, what role do you think review committees in general have played in enforcing positive reforms in India?

VB: Frankly, most governments have used review committees only as diversionary tactics. Now, what happened after 26/11? We wrote a report, and the whole report was written by me, because I was specially chosen by the government because of my experience in both intelligence and the police. When we submitted the report, besides what I have mentioned in response to your previous question, we also highlighted some complaints against certain politicians for delaying procurement of weapons, as a result of which proper training could not be given to the police. Also, they had not called the Coast Guards in advance to do coastal patrolling.[35] So, some ministers did not like this, and they pressurised the chief minister to classify the report and hide it from the public. The original idea was that the report would be presented before the public and they should know what went wrong. But then the public had no chance of seeing it, and by making it classified even some police personnel who should read and take measures to improve also did not have a chance to see it. They were handicapped. It was a ridiculous thing.

When the Bombay High Court wanted to publish it, they reached the Supreme Court and prevented its release. This type of behaviour affects public lives and the review commissions do not result in any improvement in the situation. Intelligence should not be so secret and kept under a lock and key. There must be a way to communicate with the public, or at least with people who are interested or who are charged with responsibilities of doing public security.

DPC: So, you have been an advocate of transparency and public participation in intelligence policy. Do you think your writings have helped bring about this change?

VB: I am not very sure at an individual level. We have had too many tragedies. A lot of publishers come to me to write about juicy spy stories. But I am not going to do that. That is the reason I wrote this book on intelligence: to show that it is not very glamorous. During the 1990s, I had led the Indian delegations twice for annual dialogues on terrorism with USA. At that time, in a social group, a student asked me to recommend a book on the role of intelligence as part of governance over the years. I looked around and there was no such book. There was the *Craft of Intelligence* by Allen Dulles. He mentions Sun Tzu, but there was no mention of Chanakya.[36] Much later, Christopher Andrew's book came in 2018.[37] It was an excellent book, but I wanted to write a cyclical or sector wise form of history. I wanted to talk about the difference between secret and open-source intelligence, intelligence liaison, hegemonic intelligence, intelligence failures, how terrorism has impacted traditional intelligence collection, and how different intelligence agencies work.

My other focus was on the need to pass a law because right now, without a law, intelligence is operating in uncharted waters. We need a law to both prevent misuse and also to protect our own people. So, either way, for better accountability, we need a law. With better accountability we will have greater transparency. In saying this, I don't want India to become like the US where we have to go to the congressional committees to ask for money for operations. I don't want to say that our politicians are not so mature, but we are still not at that stage where we can give all these powers to

them. So, within these constraints, we should be doing something to increase transparency. That was my intention for writing.

DPC: Before coming to your writings, I would like to follow up on the question of intelligence oversight. What do you think the ideal form of oversight would look like? What does it need to balance?

VB : I would consider the lapsed private bill (The Intelligence Services-Powers and Regulation-Bill 2011) introduced in the Lok Sabha by Congress MP Mr. Manish Tewari in 2011 would be acceptable.[38] In fact, he had consulted some of us before drafting the bill. It is more or less like the British law regulating agencies: a clear charter for each agency, strict rules on telephone interception, annual reports to the Prime Minister to be placed before the parliament, supervision through a 'National Intelligence and Security Oversight Committee' headed by the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha (Vice-President) with members including the Speaker, Prime Minister, Home Minister and Leader of the Opposition, creation of an Intelligence Ombudsman to address departmental grievances and a 'National Intelligence Tribunal' chaired by a retired Supreme Court judge to investigate public complaints.

Unfortunately, Tewari's own government (Congress led UPA) was hesitant to accept this bill and hence it lapsed.

DPC: Coming to your writings, my assessment is that the number of English readers is growing in India and so is their interest in intelligence literature. Today, there are a lot more people reading your work than in 1998 when you started to write. Moving forward, how do you think academic intelligence studies should take shape in India?

VB: Tragically, there is no academic interest in India on intelligence. There is not a single university which has intelligence study as a subject. For example, in Gujarat and other places, we have started police universities, security universities and so on. Whenever I get a chance, I do deliver lectures at some universities. But the general perception at the level of government, bureaucracies and even the intelligence departments is that intelligence should remain secret and not spoken about in public. In the UK and the US, there is so much literature available, and that is why most of the examples I have cited in my book are also from this literature. You don't get anything here in India because of classification. There are so many grey areas in the 1962 war. Even in the 1971 war. So that maturity has not come among the top bureaucrats and interest is also lacking among academics in India. That is a sad thing.

DPC: And how about your organisation? Was reading books and academic literature encouraged during your service?

VB: As I have told you, I worked for three chiefs as principal staff officer. Out of them, the late A.K. Verma was unique. As soon as he took over, he prepared a list of books published in India and abroad on security, foreign policy, and intelligence, and distributed it among the senior officers in his first meeting with them. He told this puzzled group that he would expect each one to read a book and submit a review. He asked me to collect all the reviews and circulate them among the group after his perusal. He also said that this would be a continuing additional responsibility for them. Mr. Verma was

the first boss in my entire 36 years of service who insisted that senior officers should not only read files but also books to widen their knowledge. I don't know if that practice is continued now. I hope it is.

DPC: Balachandran sir, thank you very much. This has been a fascinating discussion.

Notes

1. For a brief history of the department, see https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/places-in-history/colonial-communications-hub-linked-myanmar-outside-world.html (Accessed on 7 September 2023).
2. The chief of the R&AW is designated Secretary (Research) under whom there are two Special Secretaries. One of the two Special Secretaries is chosen as the successor to the chief. Mahadevan, *The Politics of Counterterrorism in India.*
3. See chapter 6 in Chaya, *India's Intelligence Culture and Strategic Surprises*.
4. See chapter 13 of Gokhale, *Gentleman Spymaster*.
5. *The Wire*, 26 November 2019. Available at https://thewire.in/security/26–11-mumbai-terror-attack-inquiry-committee
6. Links to a collection of Balachandran's articles can be found at https://muckrack.com/vappala-balachandran/articles
7. Rameshwar Nath Kao (R.N. Kao) was the founder chief of the R&AW. For a biography of Kao, see Gokhale, *Gentleman Spymaster*.
8. Arathil Chandeth Narayanan Nambiar (1896–1986) was an Indian nationalist and freedom fighter with a complex career trajectory. Declassified MI5 files indicate that Nambiar was an agent of the GRU in the 1920s. By the start of the 1930s, he was an enemy of the Nazis, arrested and deported to Prague. However, in 1942, he joined the Free India Centre as Subhas Chandra Bose's deputy and allied with the Axis powers with the goal of defeating the British and achieving India's independence. In 1944, he was based in Berlin and was appointed Minister of State in Bose's Provisional Government. After the war, he was imprisoned for collaborating with the Axis powers. But he managed to escape to Switzerland. There, against the wishes of the British government, the interim Indian government under Nehru granted him an Indian passport. Thereafter, he served the Indian government as Ambassador to Scandinavia and then, the Federal Republic of Germany. For more biographical details see, https://www.thankyouindianarmy.com/a-c-n-nambiar/ Contrary to the noting in the MI5 files, Balachandran's research on Nambiar indicated that there were British efforts to enlist his services to spy on the Nambiar government, which had failed. Balachandran, *A Life in Shadow*, 267.
9. A former member of the Indian National Congress, Subhas Chandra Bose was a key figure in the Indian freedom struggle who rejected the Gandhian means of freedom struggle. During WWII, he actively collaborated with the Axis powers to liberate India from the British rule. In 1943, he raised the Azad Hind Fauj (Indian National Army) in Singapore that liberate the Andaman and Nicobar Islands from the British and eventually engaged the Allied forces in Burma alongside the Japanese forces. His death remains a subject of mystery and has given birth to several theories. For examples, see *The Times Now*, 23 January 2018. Available at https://www.timesnownews.com/india/article/india-netaji-subhas-chandra-bose-death-mystery-plane-crash-renkoji-temple-russia-indian-government/191717?utm_source=inshorts&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=fullarticle
10. Textile mills were a symbol of economic growth in the city of Bombay. Beginning from the colonial era, the textile mills were one of the largest employing bodies in the city. However, in the decades after independence, the mill workers were engaged in constant strikes demanding better wages and working conditions. A detailed year-wise evolution of the textile mills strike can be found in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. Available at https://www.epw.in/engage/debate-kits/story-strike
11. Shiv Sena is a Maharashtra based political party built on nativist agenda that has witnessed the emergence of violent agitations against immigrants in the city of Mumbai. For the origins of the party, see *India Today*¸20 June 2023. Available at https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/how-the-idea-of-shiv-sena-was-born-2395432–2023-06-20
12. The Special Protection Group (SPG) was created in 1985 in the wake of the killing of PM Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1984. The roles and responsibilities of the SPG have undergone numerous changes since its birth. Presently, the SPG provides security to the incumbent Prime Minister and immediate family sharing his residence, and to former Prime Minister and his immediate family for a period of five years from the date he departs from office.
13. The Emergency period in India lasted from 21 months from 1975 to 1977 and is considered the darkest period of Indian democracy due to the severe curtailment of civil liberties and mass arrest of political opponents of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. It was widely speculated at that time that the R&AW was used in enforcing the Emergency. However, close to five decades later, there is no evidence of the agency's participation in the enforcement of the Emergency. For a journalistic account insinuating an R&AW hand in the Emergency, see Zaidi, *Dongri to Dubai*, 88.
14. The Indian Intelligence Bureau, which was inherited from the British, was largely a police organisation. In 1968, with the formation of the R&AW, Mrs. Indira Gandhi had tried to make the composition of this agency

heterogeneous through open market recruitment. However, owing to a lack of proper guidance and corrupt human resource management, the agency had resorted to deputation from other services. *IDSA Task Force Report*, 43–44.

15. Nambiar had been a close family friend of Jawaharlal Nehru since 1926 and was the guardian of Indira Gandhi while she was a student in Europe at a time when Nehru was imprisoned in India for his freedom struggle. Indira had close family bonds with the aged Nambiar who was staying in Zurich. One of her first acts in 1980 was to ask her external intelligence chief, N.F. Suntook, to nominate a reliable person stationed in Western Europe to 'keep an eye' on Nambiar and his health. Balachandran was nominated for that assignment by Suntook in December 1980. When Indira Gandhi visited Nambiar in Zurich in May 1981, he made a suggestion to appoint Mr. Kao as a security adviser. Balachandran, *A Life in Shadow*.
16. *The Asian Age*, 15 November 2005. Available in Balachandran, *National Security and Intelligence Management*, 89.
17. As mentioned above, the R&AW was created through an executive order issued by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Since then, until Balachandran's retirement, a charter of duties was not issued for the agency. Based on the recommendations of the 2001 Group of Ministers' report, a charter was issued, which made the R&AW responsible for collecting and analysing all forms of external intelligence. However, it still lacks the sanction of a specific legislative enactment. *IDSA Task Force Report*, 33.
18. Balachandran, *Intelligence over Centuries*, 127–152.
19. Andrew, *Defence of the Realm*, 442–443.
20. Known popularly as the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord that was signed on 29 July 1987, it led to the commitment of an Indian Peacekeeping Force to Sri Lanka to oversee the surrender of arms by the Tamil rebels and resolution of the Sri Lankan civil war. However, within months violence resumed and the IPKF found itself engaged in a bloody counterinsurgency war in a foreign land.
21. A reference to this incident can be found at: *India Today*, 15 May 1983.
22. *India Today*, 31 December 1980. Available at https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19801231-raw-employees-announce-pen-down-strike-773687–2013-11-30
23. The Khalistan movement is a separatist movement aimed at the creation of an independent Sikh state from the Indian state of Punjab. The movement gained a violent character during the 1980s and early 1990s. Since 1993, the movement has remained significantly weak in India and is mostly sustained by the diaspora population in western countries. Jetley, 'The Khalistan Movement in India'.
24. The Bodos are the largest plains tribe in the state of Assam who started an armed struggle for an independent state in the mid-1980s. Nath, 'Bodo Insurgency in Assam'.
25. Weissman and Krosney, *The Islamic Bomb*.
26. On 8 December 1989, Rubaiya Sayeed, daughter of the then Indian Home Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, was kidnapped by Kashmiri militants demanding the release of five jailed members of the separatist organisation, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). The government gave in to the kidnappers' demands and released the jailed militants, thereby, securing Rubaiya's release on 13 December 1989.
27. *Times of India*, 15 July 1999. Available in Balachandran, *National Security and Intelligence Management*, 12–14.
28. *Times of India*, 21 September 2000. Available in Balachandran, *National Security and Intelligence Management*, 59–61.
29. Copeland, *Fool Me Twice*.
30. Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor*.
31. During the Cold War, especially from the late 1970s onwards, India had begun to develop to develop close ties with the French intelligence. The period had witnessed significant exchange of knowledge and technologies. Chaya, *India's Intelligence Culture and Strategic Surprises*, 251.
32. Riedel, "Enigma," 25 September 2017.
33. For a detailed analysis of the Kargil surprise see chapter titled 'Surprise on the Kargil Hilltops' in Chaya, *India's Intelligence Culture and Strategic Surprises*.
34. Balachandran, *National Security and Intelligence Management*, 44.
35. India's coastal security is the responsibility of the Marine Police of the coastal states that patrol the shallow waters up to 12 nautical miles from the coastline. Beyond that, the territorial waters are monitored by the Coast Guards and the Indian Navy. The complaint raised in this instance is that, on receipt of multiple warnings, the state police should have sought the help of the Coast Guards to patrol the coastline, which was not done.
36. Dulles, *Craft of Intelligence*, 1.
37. Andrew, *The Secret World*.
38. See, Tewari, 2011.

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