

SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT FORTNIGHTLY

# Down To Earth

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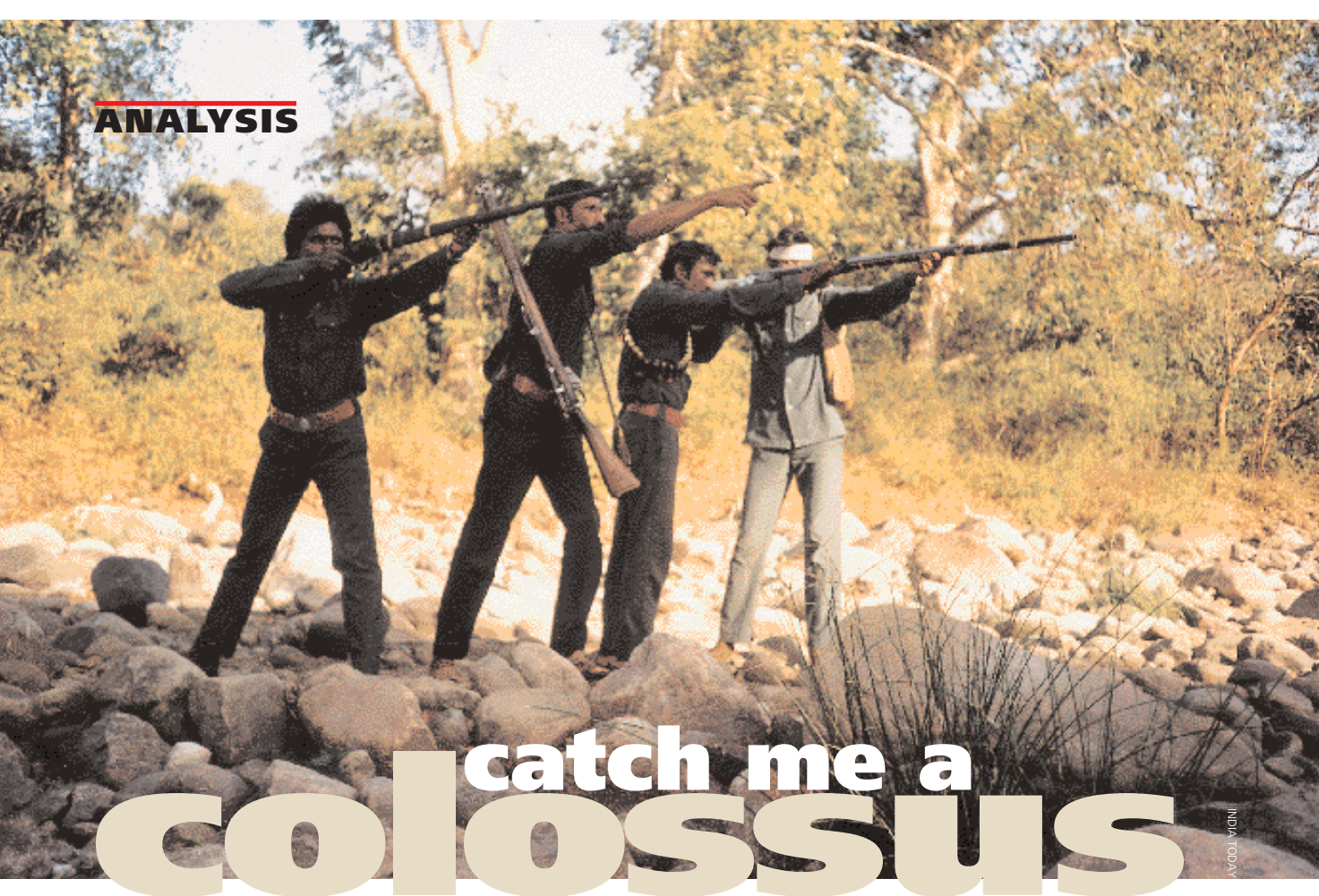
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## The power of Veerappan

**When trade in sandalwood is outlawed  
only outlaws will trade in it**

Producing poison: A factory that has brought destruction  
Melting mountains: Himalayan glaciers shed weight  
Lucky strike: lasers to fight lightning



**Catching Veerappan, who amuses himself upsetting the government cart, is like trying to cage a titan. The State is in no position to meet his conditions for surrender. But his willingness to give up an outlaw's life has raised questions about precedents and antecedents. Can the government provide amnesty to a criminal who admits to having killed five score and nineteen people? How can such a person escape the law for such a long time? What gives rise to people like him who openly flout the law? Is it the result of a policy which increasingly alienates people from what should be theirs and encourages them to support outlaws? Is something rotten in the State machinery?**

**RAJAT BANERJI finds that politicians today do not understand the issues. Or are they playing games in the interest of outlaws?**



**C**ALL him what you will — poacher, smuggler, murderer — Veerappan is a phenomenon that has vexed two state governments for close to a decade. But how does a 'brigand' like Veerappan evade "the strong arm of the law"? Is there a ghost in the law-and-order machinery that trips the keepers of the law just as they are close to nabbing him? What sustains him and others like him? Is Veerappan a by-product of a system that turns a blind eye to local rights and compounds the wrongs? Are Veerappans, as it were, born from the alienation of the people from what is theirs?

With a record that would match the most infamous Indian dacoits', Veerappan has become a public figure. Opinions on what he is may vary. For the agencies of the State — the police, foresters, administrators and revenue officials — as well as wildlife conservationists, he is Public Enemy Number One. For some villagers in Karnataka — who protect him from the police — he is a 'rogue saviour'.

This is the paradox of Veerappan. He thrives on — and is born of — the uneasy alliance between the law and the law of the people. The law hounds smugglers, murderers and poachers. But it deprives the people of the resources of their land. The law of the people says that the crop that you grow in your fields is yours. But the law says that citizens who cannot protect a tree that grows on their land from loggers will be penalised. Today, Veerappan is identified more with sandalwood smuggling than poaching. But both these — plant and animal resources — have been governed by policies that do not allow local communities to benefit from conservation.

**Veerappan is a creation of the State, which alienates them from the land's resources and penalises them if they cannot protect State property**

## Trial by terror

**Is Veerappan playing his last ace? Or is he having the last laugh on the incompetence of the State machinery?**

WHEN eight Karnataka forest department personnel held hostage by Veerappan were released in end-August after 45 days in captivity, the Karnataka and Tamil Nadu state governments — besides the hostages and their families — heaved a sigh of relief. Veerappan has an exceedingly bloody track record, but had only used them to send out a desperate signal that he is willing to surrender. The man charged with killing 119 people (see boxes: *The making of a criminal* and *Trigger happy*), many of them police and forest department personnel, seems to be at the end of his tether.

The release of the hostages was accompanied by a list of fresh demands with a one-month deadline. Veerappan did not want to be tried under the law, wanted imprisonment not exceeding two years with special treatment, and Rs 50 lakh for rehabilitation. He also indicated that he might embark on a career in politics.

This is not the first time Veerappan has offered to surrender. "His earlier overtures were spurned by the Special Task Force (STF)," says R Rajgopal, the government emissary in the recent hostage drama and Editor of the Chennai-based bi-weekly, *Nakkheeran*. Rajgopal is the only representative of the State — and of the Press — who has met Veerappan several times.

"It appears that Veerappan will surrender," says Karnataka

## The badlands

**Veerappan's writ runs large in these jungles**



Source: DFO Kollegal

home minister Roshan Baig. "Discussions with the Tamil Nadu government are on, and we hope to arrive at a conclusive surrender package for the outlaws." According to Baig, earlier efforts to capture Veerappan or get him to surrender had been lethargic. Both state governments are now keen to end the story. "With continued ground efforts to nab him, and a certainly increasing intelligence in terms of knowing Veerappan's ways of operation, we feel that he is under increasing pressure," says A X Alexander, additional inspector-general of police, Tamil Nadu.

## The making of a criminal

**How poor decision-making encourages crime**

Veerappan, if he knew how to put it, could claim to be a refugee in the war that short-sighted development unleashed on the environment. His grandfather, Muniya Gounder, was a Mettur Dam oustee from Oothanagere village, and moved to Gopinatham village in the 1930s. On his death, his two sons, Koose Munniswamy and Kiriya Ponnuswamy, inherited his land and augmented their income by shooting and selling the meat of the *langur* (called *musiya* in these parts). Munniswamy's three sons, Koose Madiha, Molakan Veerappan and Arjunan assisted him in poaching.

The area had a fair sprinkling of dacoits who would waylay pilgrims as they made their way to the temple in the M M Hills. Veerappan's father supplied rations to a dacoit called Maleyanoor Mamootiyan in the forests. The young Veerappan joined the gang, and uses the tactics

he picked up from Mamootiyan. He first teamed up with another poacher, Sevi Gounder of Karangalur village, before setting up his own gang. Tusks brought more money than monkey meat and he moved on to elephant poaching.

The first case was registered against Veerappan in 1983, when he shot a forest watcher, Puttu, in Kodagu district. He then killed two of his own gang members who sold tusks and divided the proceeds between themselves.

His gang has posed a serious law and order threat to the government agencies since 1986. According to the officers of the Special Task Force, the gang has indulged in murder, extortion and kidnapping for ransom since 1986. It has killed 119 persons, 55 from Karnataka and 64 from Tamil Nadu. Among them are 32 police officers, 10 forest officers and 77 ordinary people. There are 135 cases of murder, kidnapping and extortion against the gang, 59 registered in Karnataka and 76 in Tamil Nadu. There is a long list of crimes committed by this gang (see *Trigger happy*).

**Opinions on what Veerappan is may vary. For the agencies of the State, he is Public Enemy Number One. For some villagers in Karnataka, he is a hero**

## Trigger happy

### A chronology of major crimes committed by Veerappan

Date/Year	Person(s) killed	Site of incident
1983	Puttu (forest watcher) Lambani Arjuna, Madachetti (gang members)	Forest area
May 1986	Koteyur Madiha & Thangavelu (rival gang members)	M M Hills area
1987	Chidambaranath (Regional Forest Officer, Sathyamangala)	Near Gunderi Dam
January 1989	Ayyan and four others (rivals)	M M Hills area
August 4, 1989	Mohaniah (forest watcher)	Palar Bridge
August 7, 1989	Two forest watchers and one member of the public	Forest area
April 9, 1990	Three Karnataka sub-inspectors	Gopinatham-Hogenakal Road
November 10, 1991	P Srinivas, Deputy Conservator of Forests	Yerakhella forests
May 19/20, 1992	Five police personnel	Ramapura police station
August 14, 1992	T Harikrishna, Superintendent of Police, Mysore, and five police personnel	Meeniyam Road
April 9, 1993	22 Special Task Force (STF) personnel killed by landmine	Near Palar
May 24, 1993	Six policemen in the convoy of Superintendent of Police, STF	Rangaswamyvoddu
November 2, 1993	Eight cowherds	Manjugummapatti
January 28, 1994	M K Ponnappa, police officer	Forest area
September 17, 1994	Three Border Security Force personnel	Kailasapallam
October 8, 1994	Five villagers	Gaddesalu village
May 21, 1995	Two villagers	Nullur village
August 8, 1995	Five Soliga tribals	Sapehalla forests
August 9, 1995	Five more Soligas	Punjanur village
February 1996	One STF jawan	Forest area

Source: Karnataka police

The 10 Karnataka forest department personnel were kidnapped on July 12 close to Marapalla in Kollegal taluka. The jeep in which they were travelling was surrounded by Veerappan's gang near a bridge. They were taken to Burude forest guest house, some 10 km away. The driver was released and brought back an audio cassette with a recording listing Veerappan's demands — a ransom of Rs 5 crore and general amnesty. Though this was rejected by both states, a hostage who was unwell was released a few days later.

The days in captivity were a nightmare for the remaining hostages. They were constantly on the move, often walking for days. At one stage, Veerappan pointed his gun at one of the hostages, Chika Kumba, 35, an epileptic. "Chika trembled and asked Veerappan to kill someone else instead," says Velayudhan, a forester. He recalls the terror of the moment: they all knew that their lives were dangling by a thread. Another hostage, Aandani, lives in Kollegal and has been in the department for 25 years. He took the ordeal in better form than most of the others. "I'll have some stories to tell my grandchildren all their lives," he grins. But Dasiah, who lives in Doddanvadi, 10 km from Kollegal, is a nervous wreck. He is afraid of meeting outsiders. His neighbours ask visitors to spare him and he does not venture out of his house.

**Wild trail:** the Editor of Nakkheeran (fourth from left) follows the bandits into the jungle. A group of hostages trails along



NAKKHEERAN

## Veerappan wants to surrender. This is nothing new. But he is no more willing to face State prosecution and wants money for rehabilitation

Rajgopal risked his life to act as an emissary of both the state governments and went into the dense jungle twice to secure the release of the hostages. He had a 44-hour meeting with the brigand on his second visit. "I realised that Veerappan was using Phoolan Devi (the well-known bandit queen who is today a member of Parliament) as a role model, wishing to have a film made on his life, and eventually to enter politics. I used this to convince him that if he released the hostages he would be seen by the world as a magnanimous person," says Rajgopal. This apparently worked on Veerappan.

While the incident ended without mishap for most concerned, the Karnataka state government came under considerable flak for genuflecting to Veerappan. Karnataka chief minister J H Patel had to defend his government's handling of the situation. Following the release of the hostages, efforts to catch Veerappan have cooled down considerably even in Tamil Nadu. Sources at the Karnataka police headquarters indicate that the Tamil Nadu STF had almost ceased functioning since 1995. "As of now there are some 250 soldiers in the force," says P Kalimuthu, inspector-general (law and order), Tamil Nadu. Asked what the state's STF was doing at the moment, Kalimuthu, who is in charge of the force, was cryptic. "Ask the Karnataka police," he said.

### Elusive trail

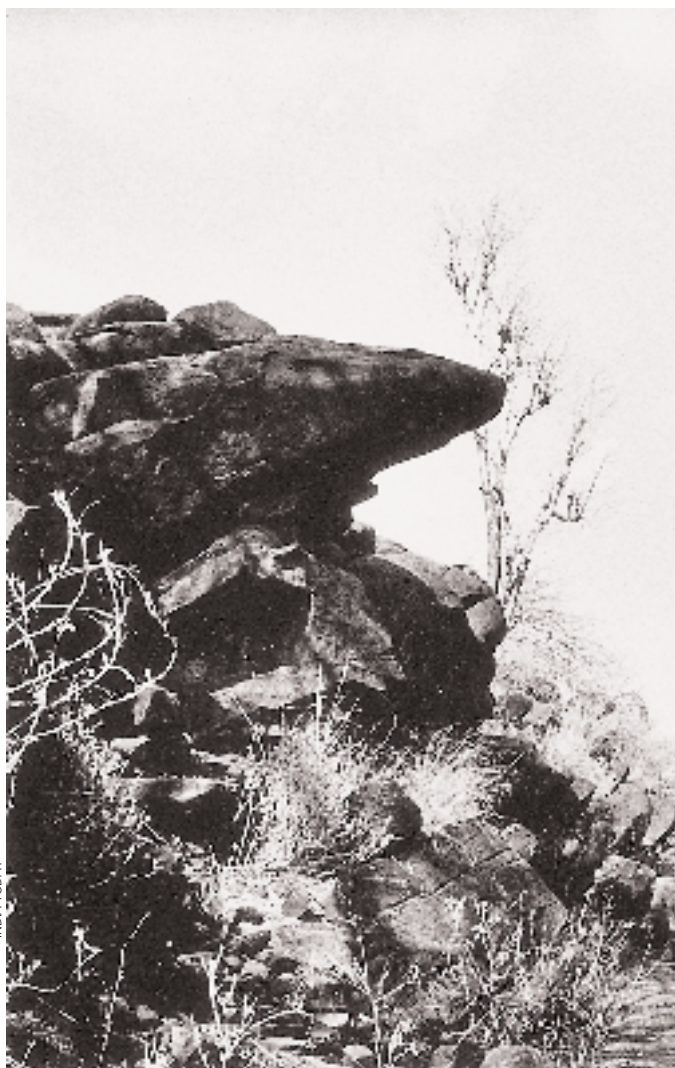
**Despite heavy deployment of police, Veerappan has remained elusive. The Special Task Force used the ugliest tactics to track him down, but failed**

AN ELEPHANT poacher-turned-sandalwood smuggler, Veerappan has used his intimate knowledge of the territory and his influence and terror among the locals to avoid capture. Over the years he has extracted a heavy price from the state of Karnataka. Crores of rupees have been spent, and 32 police personnel and 10 forest officers have lost their lives, apart from 77 locals.

Seen as a sort of hero by villagers and tribals of the area, he hasn't spared even them when he thought it was



INDIA TODAY



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## Previous attempts to capture Veerappan failed miserably. Veerappan and his gang, with a better knowledge of the territory, have remained elusive

necessary. Suspected police informers and competitors have been ruthlessly eliminated, as have police parties. Even police stations were not safe: he attacked the Ramapura police station in May 1992.

Initially operating in a 6,000 sq km area that encompassed thickly wooded forests of the two states, Veerappan had increased his area of operation by another 2,000 sq km. Police estimates that he has killed about 2,000 elephants and has smuggled sandalwood worth around Rs 100 crore out of the jungles. While this claim is disputed by many, most agree that this killer's reign must end. "If a man has amassed Rs 100 crore, why should he live the life of desperado? I would imagine that he would buy himself a new identity and live a comfortable life," opines Rajgopal.

"Serious efforts to nab Veerappan began in May 1990, with the formation of the STF, after he had ambushed a police party and killed three police sub-inspectors on the Gopinatham-Hogenekal road," says T Madiyal, the current additional director-general police (law & order), Karnataka.

Madiyal had been chief of the Karnataka STF between June

**Lone raider: Veerappan (left) is more a child of the laws which alienate people from natural resources. An STF platoon (below) stumbles along in search of the desperado. STF atrocities have turned the locals against it**



1991 and December 1992. The STF has its headquarters at Mahadeshwara Malai Hills (M M Hills), which is in Kollegal taluka. Veerappan's village, Gopinatham, is around 45 km from M M Hills.

### Close encounters

By the time the STF was set up, Veerappan had already killed one regional forest officer, four forest watchers, three members of the public, at least seven other poachers and three sub-inspectors. The STF was involved in a number of raids on Veerappan's hideouts, and seized elephant tusks and sandalwood. They also 'arrested' a number of his gang members. The last claim is disputed by people in the area, who say that many of these arrests and 'encounters' were fake, and innocent villagers were killed to make the police records look respectable.

The STF operations peaked in the 1993-95 period, when Walter Devaram and S M Biduri headed the STF in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, respectively. Five companies of the Border Security Force were also sent into the jungles to assist STF in apprehending the brigand. Nothing worked. "The STF used a counter-terror tactic on the villagers. On the one hand, the villagers were scared of Veerappan's wrath, and on the other, the police were terrorising them, booking even suspects under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act (TADA)," says V Jayaprakash, *Nakkheeran* reporter at Hosur. According to him, there were several instances of rape as well in this period.

He adds that Veerappan was aware of police excesses and often killed policemen who were supposed to be involved in these excesses, thereby adding to the legion of supporters among the local people. Jayaprakash has interviewed several villagers who are on record on film. Since the revelations of the tape are startling, Jayaprakash has been lying low, fearing repercussions.

But how has Veerappan evaded arrest despite such heavy deployment of forces? T Madiyal refutes charges that the STF has been incompetent. "Veerappan has been in the forests since his childhood. He doesn't need the logistic support that a fully-equipped force such as the STF needs. He doesn't stay at one place more than once, and he knows all the forest tracks and routes. There have been some instances in the past when he has had a close shave with the STF. But, realistically speaking, only a chance encounter would be successful."

### Wrong approach

While admitting that Veerappan's information network is far superior to that of the police, Madiyal says that Veerappan terror amongst villagers in the area has prevented the police from getting information about him. "These forests have hamlets of 6-8 huts. Even if the villagers choose to inform the police, it would take a few days to reach the police. Veerappan would be gone by the time our forces reached the spot. And later, he would take out his wrath on the entire settlement if necessary."

This is partially true. In 1993-94, at the height of the STF operations against Veerappan, he decapitated two in Nullur village. He had suspected them to be police informers. This village is less than 6 km from the large STF camp at Naal Road.

But people like Rajgopal point out that the terror tactics

## Villagers in Veerappan's area accused the Special Task Force of committing atrocities and even petitioned prime minister H D Deve Gowda, to no avail

### Victims of circumstance

How smuggling has affected villagers in Veerappan's area

About 10 years ago, Thangavelu of Nullur village was 'called'. At the time, the government presence in the area was negligible, and the only power in the area was Veerappan. There was no question of not obeying a summons. Reaching the predetermined spot, one of Veerappan's known lieutenants, Mariappan, asked him to 'arrange' at least five able-bodied boys to 'work for the talaivar (leader)'.

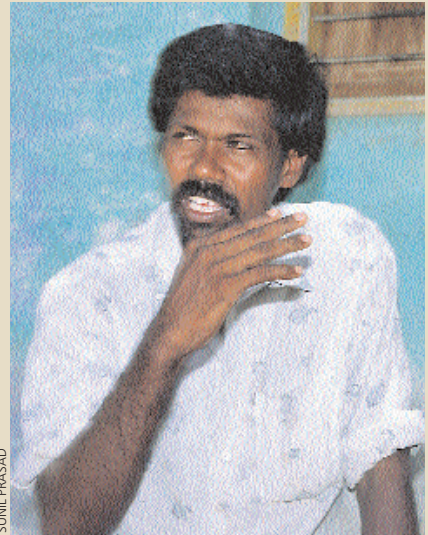
"We had to cut sandal trees for 20 days deep in the forest. Veerappan did not visit the camp site, but it was almost as if we could feel his presence. At the end of the 20 days, the sandalwood was transported to Silvaikal near the Marthahalli forest range, where the forest officers held the sandalwood. Thus we didn't even get the promised wages."

What Thangavelu and others like him did get was police attention. By the time they returned to the village, they had been dubbed 'members of the Veerappan gang'. Most turned themselves over to the police, only to be booked under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act (TADA) and spent between 1-1.5 years in Mysore jail. Now out on bail, they still have cases pending against them.

That was not the end of woes for the villagers of Nullur. They claim that 60 such youth were arrested and booked under TADA, out of which 10-12 were 'killed in encounters'. The villagers here have been demanding a Central Bureau of Investigation inquiry into these 'encounter' deaths. They had approached H D Deve Gowda, when he was prime minister, with a petition. But there was no follow-up.

But it's not as if this village did not have any contribution towards the gang. Baby Veerappan, considered to be the brigand's right hand man, was also from this village. He was killed in May 1997. While the STF claims responsibility for this, local journalists state that another member of the gang had killed Baby Veerappan, who was having an affair with the other's wife.

Numerous villagers in Nullur are certain of one thing. That Veerappan's white-collar associates must be punished. "The politicians, governments officials and policemen all line their pockets from smuggling. We are proud that one of our boys (Veerappan) has also done well for himself. So if there is such a hue and cry to get him, why doesn't the government get after them as well? They are still in office, still in uniform and still in power. Who will book them?" they ask.



Thangavelu: dubbed a sandalwood smuggler and booked under TADA

were used more by the police. "Police atrocities (see box: *Inquiries of a citizen*) far exceeded what Veerappan did. While he targeted suspected informers, the police used an almost scorched earth approach," he says.

"Veerappan has harmed the forests and its wildlife to a very large extent," states Madiyal. "When a poacher is credited with having killed over 2,000 tuskers, you can well imagine the damage he has caused." Ironically, Veerappan's presence in the forests has saved it to a certain extent from the consequences of mining. In Kollegal *taluka*, Mysore district, the government has suspended granite mining, after Veerappan's gang attacked one mine depot and took away the explosives. These he used against the STF, and with deadly effect. Granite from this area is considered to be of an extremely high quality.

While Baig admits that "the strategy adopted was probably not proper," he refuses to comment on the alleged STF excesses in the villages and hamlets of the area. The period 1993-94

saw the STF on maximum offensive. Reports of large-scale detention under TADA, a counter-terror tactic adopted by the STF, and killing locals in false encounters were reported to be the order of the day. "These are only allegations," insists Baig. When reminded that Nullur village, some 60-65 km from Kollegal (see map: *The badlands*) had been abandoned by terrified villagers after the alleged atrocities by the STF at their peak, Baig responded by saying that 'no such village' had been abandoned.

B K Dikshit, deputy conservator of forests, Kollegal division, insists that the recent hostage drama did not have an adverse effect on the working of his people. "It is not likely that Veerappan can afford to antagonise the average villager beyond a point. He depends on them for his rations, protection and also information. If he upsets them by constantly terrorising them, he would lose his support base and alienate himself," states Dikshit.

According to Dikshit, those under possible threat are

## Veerappan's atrocities on locals suspected to be police informers and sustained pressure from the police has diluted support for him

## Veerappan has extracted a heavy price from the state of Karnataka. Crores of rupees have been spent to try and catch him

senior-level forest officers, who are posted to the area for a limited duration and most often are not from the area. "They have to keep their movements secret," he says. Though Dikshit says that this does not undermine their efficacy, it is hard to imagine how the forest department officers can carry out their regular work under such circumstances.

Director-General of Karnataka police, T Srinivasulu, did not wish to comment on the issue. Other senior officers at the Karnataka police headquarters in Bangalore said that it is not

surprising that a brigand can get away for so long. "Look at the dacoit gangs in Uttar Pradesh and the Chambal. They too had evaded the police for 20-30 years. And here, our men were in a jungle area, alien territory for them." They add that the Veerappan phenomenon is a media creation.

"Humbug," says a Mysore-based journalist, who has been covering the issue for a long time. "No other criminal, be it a smuggler, poacher or dacoit, has been such a persistent thorn in the flesh for the police. His deeds or misdeeds haven't been created by anyone but himself. What prompts the police to react in such a manner, is their inability to get him."

"While it is certainly not impossible to catch a fugitive in the forests, it is extremely difficult," says Dikshit. "Veerappan and his men are from these hills. At least two generations of their forefathers have roamed these forests and they have grown here. They belong to the 50,000-odd settlers in Kollegal division, and can mingle and mix with them," he adds. M K Srivastava, currently deputy inspector-general of police (planning research and special units), Karnataka, who had headed the Karnataka STF for a year, from June 1996 to May 1997, agrees.

The more adventurous police officers are of the opinion that this exercise started off on the wrong note. "We have this penchant for grandeur and make a big deal of whatever we do. Instead of having such a large force announced to the world, we should have had a small, carefully selected band that would seek out Veerappan and flush him out of the forests." Another is of the opinion that the government could have placed a price on Veerappan's head. "That may have induced a gang member to act on his own, to claim the reward."

### Weakening force

Alexander says that Veerappan has probably reached the end of his tether, and cannot continue the life of a desperado for much longer. "Even locals have voiced dissatisfaction over the state of affairs. They realise that they are in almost a war zone because of Veerappan and would like this situation to end," he says.

In Nullur village, P G Thangavelu, a village youth with four charges under the TADA, says that he for one, would be relieved when Veerappan surrenders, and the drama ends. "We have come under tremendous threat from two sides." But he thinks that Veerappan will not surrender, but will have to be brought down (see box: *Victims of circumstance*).

Kalimuthu says that there is conclusive evidence that the man is suffering from asthma and some other persistent ailments. "Even if he continues to evade us, that cannot be for too long. He will fall some day."

However, Rajgopal disagrees with these theories. According to him, Veerappan wanted to surrender in 1993, and was willing to serve a 20-year sentence then. "But Walter Devaram, who was heading the TN STF, wanted to kill Veerappan and turned down the offer," says Rajgopal.



NICKY THOMAS

**Veerappan is probably at the end of his tether and cannot continue the life of a desperado for much longer**

**Certain vested interests appear to be at work. That politicians are involved in sandalwood smuggling is common knowledge**

## Between the lines

**Veerappan's history has been written in red in official records. But support from high places as much as from the ordinary people has sustained him**

THERE seems to be more than meets the eye in the case. Veerappan appears to be, despite his notoriety as a law unto himself, the tip of the iceberg, an epiphenomenon. For one, political involvement in sandalwood smuggling is common. Apart from Veerappan, other gangs are known to deal in sandalwood, and are said to be politically well connected. "Recently, when the forest department apprehended a vehicle carrying a load of sandalwood, a minister rang up the forest department and had the vehicle released," says John Peter, a correspondent for a Bangalore-based English daily.

Even in Veerappan's case, his arrest in 1986 (before he attained his notoriety) and his mysterious escape, point towards other forces that encourage the existence of this mafia. Ethnic differences also have a role. Karnataka STF personnel at their headquarters in M M Hills smirked when asked about the efforts of their counterparts in Tamil Nadu. They point out that TN STF had been ordered into their barracks several months ago, as Veerappan 'enjoyed protection from very high up'. Allegations are aplenty.

Veerappan himself was involved in supporting Raju Gowda, the Kollegal Congress MLA in 1989, when he is reported to have forced people to vote for Raju at gunpoint. At the time, the relatively unknown Veerappan was also into extortion, with granite mine owners in the area his targets.

According to most observers, there are probably many other smugglers and poachers who are carrying on business as usual. Where Veerappan went wrong, they insist, is that he killed forest officers and guards and police personnel. So there could well be several other low-key operators who are cleaning the forests of sandalwood. Observers feel that Veerappan may be a smoke-screen that many vested interests want and need.

Forest officials admit that it is not difficult for sandalwood to be smuggled out of the forest area. "We know that forest guards accept small payments to allow vehicles to pass out of the forests. But with so many roads and tracks leading out of the area, it is not realistic to hope to stop everyone." And even when there is a seizure, the smugglers are soon back in action.



### Local support

According to Rajgopal, the majority of villagers support Veerappan. "Out of 10 villagers in the area, six would be Veerappan's informants," says Rajgopal. With such a massive ground support, it's no surprise that Veerappan has evaded capture so long and so successfully. At Marthahalli village, close to the spot where the STF recovered an estimated 65 tonnes of sandalwood in 1990 from one of Veerappan's hideouts, villagers say that they are proud of Veerappan. "He is a hero, one of us who has made it very big," says Ramaswamy.

In reply to questions regarding how they viewed the sandal tree, villagers at Marthahalli, Nullur, M M Hills, Ramapura and Hannur say that they stay away from the tree. "It seems to

**Veerappan is reported to have forced people to vote for a Congress MLA in the elections in Kollegal in 1989 and it is said that he has connections in high places**

## The law makes sandalwood an exclusive property of the government. Every tree — be it on forest, revenue or *patta* land — belongs to the State

bring us bad luck,” they opine.

Another factor which works in Veerappan's favour is the ethnolinguistic identity of people in the area where Veerappan operates. While the townfolk are Kannadigas, most of the interior villagers and tribals are of Tamil origin. This divide comes to the fore in a letter to *Nakkheeran* from villagers in Mysore district (areas bordering Tamil Nadu's Salem district) speaking of the 'atrocities' committed by the STF. "Since we are Tamilians, we get no support from the police and public of the Mysore area," it says.

It is not as though Veerappan has differentiated while

killing people. But it is likely that his actions in knocking off informers and competition has the approval of the majority of the people. Of the 77 members of the public that he is credited to have killed, 64 belong to Tamil Nadu. Yet, the aura of a people's hero remains around him.

Veerappan has also used terror tactics against the local people, when he suspected them of being police informers. On November 2, 1993, he killed eight cowherds at Manjugummapatti in the Guttiyellattur forests. On October 8, 1994, he attacked Gaddesalu village, in Satyamangala taluka, and killed five people. On May 21, 1995, two people in Nullur

### Inquiries of a citizen

**A scribe did what the State could not — he reached Veerappan**

*Why did you contact Veerappan?*

As a journalist, I saw this as a challenge. The man seemed impossible to trace. Then there were rumours that the villagers were suffering on account of police atrocities. We had been informed that the man had killed 2,000 elephants and looted sandalwood worth over Rs 100 crore. This seemed most improbable. Moreover, more than Rs 150 crore had been spent to catch him. This was the taxpayers' money. I wanted to know whether this money has been wasted. He had killed more than 119 people... a loss to the nation. We also wanted to expose the Jayalalitha government. In April 1993, she informed the state Assembly that Veerappan was in Mumbai. Ten days later, he ambushed a police party and killed 22 police personnel at Palar.

*How did you manage to contact Veerappan? And why do you think the government failed to reach him?*

Meeting Veerappan took a lot of time and effort. Our first contact was through one of our reporters, Sivasubramanian. Thereafter, we carried several stories on police atrocities in the area where the STF were operating. One had to try several times to meet him. Tribals and informants are sensitive, if they suspect your motives, they will not help you. They were the only link.

As far as the government is concerned, they underestimated him. He knows the jungles like the back of his hand and enjoys the support of majority of the people in the area. The police instead chose to antagonise these people. They alienated the (people, their) only way to get to him.

*Do you feel there is a shortcoming in the forest policy that has helped create a*

*brigand like him?*

I am not sure of forest policies, but yes, Veerappan received initial encouragement from local MLAs and politicians. The law and order situation needs to be re-examined. Devaram had informed the press that 145 members of the gang had been killed by the STF. That doesn't seem possible. Veerappan says that his gang was never that large. Who were the rest? What was their fault? We know for certain that village youth are used as human shields while looking for him. What tactics are these?

*Did Veerappan share any special information in those meetings?*

He told me that his sister had been raped by the DCF Srinivas and that is what incensed him to kill the man. He told me about each of the killings he orchestrated. And he wanted to know why the local people were being harassed. He accepted that he had killed 119 people, but asked the police to own up to the deaths they had caused.

*Have you or your publication been under threat? To what extent have you got involved?*

After we had met Veerappan twice, the STF had orders to shoot us if we re-entered the

**Rajgopal (left) in conversation with Veerappan**



Three years ago Veerappan offered to surrender. He was willing to spend 20 years in prison. But Devaram refused saying that he would rather shoot him. Last year, too, he wanted to surrender, but on condition that the atrocities on villagers stop immediately. No one is justifying him or his actions, but that was one condition.

forests. We then sent a petition to the Press Council of India. They promptly warned both the state governments not to interfere with our work. We have got involved on humanitarian grounds. Six months ago, three Karnataka STF personnel raped a 12-year-old girl, Nalamma of Nullur village. We have filed a case on this.

village were killed by Veerappan. On August 8, 1995, he is also reported to have killed five Soliga tribals in Periyar district, Tamil Nadu. The next day, the gang struck at the Panjanur village and killed five more Soligas. In all these instances, Veerappan is reported to have suspected the people to have assisted the STF.

### Alienating the people

While it took sustained pressure from government agencies for some people to become disenchanted with Veerappan, it was a flawed policy on sandalwood that accounts for their supporting him in the first place. The law makes sandalwood an exclusive property of the government. This translates into a situation where every tree — be it on forest, revenue or on *patta* land — belongs to the State.

While the citizen doesn't have any responsibility for the tree that is on government land, he is responsible for the protection of the tree when it is on his land. The government expects him to declare the presence of a sandal tree on his property. In case of theft of wood, the individual must report the incident. "This puts undue pressure on the people, who have a mental block towards this tree," says a senior official at the office of the principal conservator of forests, Tamil Nadu. "In most cases, the *patta* owner is the prime suspect. Unless the man is able to prove his innocence, he is penalised."

Even if an individual looks after the sandal tree, the forest department issues a licence for its removal, and pays the man 75 per cent of an amount predetermined by the department. While the current market rate of sandalwood is between Rs 5-6 lakh per tonne, the forest department has valued sandalwood at Rs 1.44 lakh per tonne. Moreover, payments are not immediate.

Tamil Nadu minister of state for forests P N Palaniswamy, while refusing to comment on the Veerappan case, is of the opinion that illegal trade in sandalwood gets a fillip because of the inconsistency of Indian laws towards sandalwood. "There should be a uniform policy on sandalwood. Laws applicable in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are separate from the rest of the country. Thus, when a truckload of sandalwood enters any other state, we cannot do anything about it," he says. He, however, has not much of an idea as to why it is a nationalised tree, and what changing that policy would bring about.

There are efforts to change the government rules regarding sandalwood at the state level. At the state forest department in Aranya Bhawan, Bangalore, a note recommending various changes in the forest policy has been drawn up and is currently at the state Assembly, where the proposed changes will be



SUNIL PRASAD

**Guruswamy, of Nullur village, states that if he is allowed to grow sandalwood on his own terms and get something like a 90 per cent of the market value on sandalwood, he would defend his trees**

deliberated over.

"Among these are recommendations to changes in rules governing sandalwood," says conservator of forests, Bangalore circle, Praveen Chandra Pandey. "This policy has alienated people from a very valuable resource. It has also created a psycho-logical barrier in the people who are closest to the areas where sandalwood grows," says Pandey.

### The wood of contention

There are two opinions in the forest department on sandalwood policy. One is for opening it up and encouraging common farmers to plant and grow sandal trees. The proponents of this policy feel that when the tree is made accessible to the people, sandalwood smugglers like Veerappan would be marginalised. The other view, epitomised by the principal chief conservator of forests, Karnataka, B S Adappa, is against liberalisation. "When there are no controls, anyone can exploit the situation," he says. Under the present policy, when a seller brings sandalwood to a government depot, which has the exclusive selling rights, he has to bring along documentary evidence that the sandal belongs to him. Any change in policy, Adappa argues, would do away with this check, and anyone could sell

sandalwood to the depots. He does have a point.

Changes that would make sense, he says, are payment of 90 per cent of the market value to the grower and removal of the responsibility clause, which has created the maximum resistance among people. According to Adappa, the state machinery would be involved in the process only when the grower wished to cut a tree. "We want to see sandalwood grow on a plantation scale. We want even private companies to take it up and plant sandalwood as other cash crops such as tea, coffee and cardamom. It is only then that the strangle-hold the sandalwood smuggler and other vested interests would be broken for good." But will not an open policy avoid a situation when the problems of smugglers assume gigantic proportions? "That can happen anyway, unless there is adequate protection," argues Adappa.

He is not alone in this aspiration. Guruswamy, of Nullur village, states that if he is allowed to grow sandalwood on his own terms and get something like a 90 per cent of the market value on sandalwood, he would defend his trees. "I'll shoot anyone who tries to cut a tree that is so valuable," he says. Here lies the crux of the issue. If farmers feel this way, the creation of another Veerappan — on the gains from sandalwood — doesn't arise.

Yet, such chances are slim. "Sandalwood will continue

**Politicians may have contributed to Veerappan's immunity, but it was a flawed sandalwood policy that alienated the people in the first place**

## The Tamil Nadu minister of state for forests has not much of an idea as to why sandalwood is nationalised and what changing the policy would bring about

to remain state property,” says Karnataka’s law minister M C Naniah. “Whatever the proposal to amend the sandalwood rules, this one aspect cannot change. We may consider changing the payment rules, at best. Nothing else seems possible.” Senior forest officials, in Karnataka as well as Tamil Nadu, violently disagree with the minister. The officer at the office of the principal chief conservator of forests, Tamil Nadu, asks, “Why should there be government licences and controls at all? It is a crop as far as a farmer is concerned. Give the people a stake in such resources, and we’ll see them defending their crop with their lives,” he argues, echoing Guruswamy’s opinion.

“If the tree is allowed to come above ground, the smuggler will vanish on his own. Let the market forces dictate sandalwood policy,” he adds.

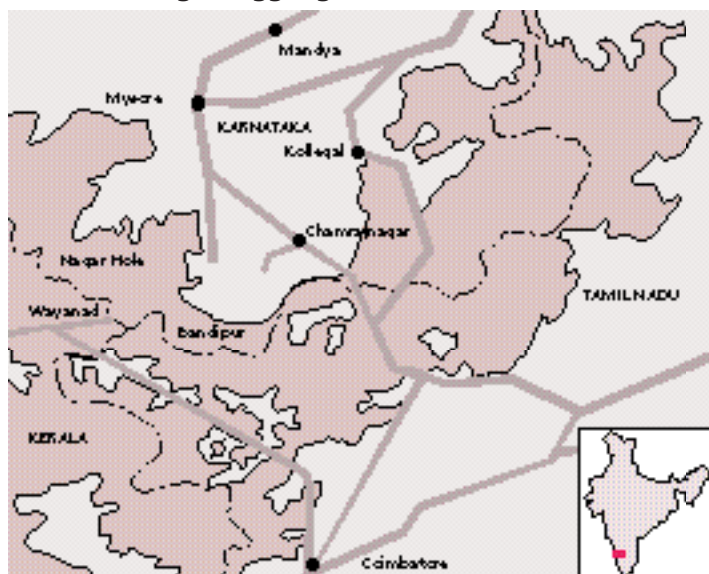
### Policing policy

While the government refuses to relinquish its hold over sandalwood, the fact that it is considering making the tree more people-friendly is certainly an improvement. Chandrashekhar Murthy, chief conservator of forests (production and management), Karnataka, says that once these changes come about, illegal activities could come down drastically.

This may be a late move, but a positive one that should remain in force and, if possible, improved upon. Too many lives have been lost and a lot of the taxpayer’s money wasted on a battle that serves little purpose. The government has lost face as well. This may be the only solution to a vexing problem. If the Veerappan case shows anything, it is a reminder of how a top-down bureaucratic system alienates the people and encourages them to support

## Inter-state problem

**Veerappan’s territory touches three states, making smuggling activities easier**



SHRI KRISHNAN

## The political dimension

### Sudden slacks in the hunt for Veerappan

Attempts to ferret Veerappan out of his lair have not been without some surprising moves on the part of the two state governments. Almost from the time he attained notoriety, there has been talk about the man’s political connections.

In December 1992, after Veerappa Moily came to power at Karnataka, the Special Task Force (STF) was disbanded. While this act was criticised by Moily’s political opponents, he defended the move saying that the police personnel were needed elsewhere in the state. Karnataka was one of the worst affected by the communal clashes that shook the nation after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Moily, however, set up the STF again soon after and by mid-1993, STF operations had touched an all-time high.

A few months after the disbanding of the STF in Karnataka, in March 1993, Jayalalitha’s AIADMK (All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) government came under severe attack from the opposition in the Tamil Nadu Assembly. Defending the government’s seeming lack of enthusiasm in the hunt for Veerappan, Jayalalitha went on record saying that the reason for this was that Veerappan was no longer in the forests but in Mumbai (then called Bombay). On April 9, Veerappan’s men blew up an STF convoy near the Palar bridge, killing 22 personnel.

In terms of seizure of smuggled sandalwood in Tamil Nadu, 523 tonnes were seized in the last year of the AIADMK rule, as compared to 151 tonnes in the first half-year of the DMK rule.

what is against the law.

The law of the land derives from the people. The written code must follow the law of the land, not vice-versa. The colonial approach of governance was full of pitfalls precisely because it ignored this simple rule. Veerappan is the illegitimate child of the post-Independence approach of continuing policies formulated by the British. This is especially true of the policies on forests and wildlife. At face value, these appear to be in keeping with the socialist aspirations of the State. But that alone does not make them appropriate. The failure of state farms (*sovkhoz*) in the erstwhile Soviet Union are a good example of the direction such policy experiments may take.

Force, it is said, is the crudest form of politics. Laws are violated and crimes committed. Unable to comprehend the genesis of crime, the State applies force to counter those crimes. And so are Veerappans born and sustained, the antithesis of the way the system should function. What is required is serious rethinking of the decision-making process. It is only when people are involved will they stand by policies that affect their livelihood. ■