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FROM THE STATES

KERALA

Heroin sharks ride on crabs

THE plot was foolproof. Hide tins of heroin among samples of crab meat. Cochin being a seafood exporting centre, no one would smell anything fishy. And being samples, customs at both ends would pass them without checking. Samples are usually of superior quality. No adulteration, no monkey tricks—the cardinal export trade principle.

For Narayana Pillai, one of the partners of Jaya Enterprises, it was a windfall. Two enterprising businessmen wanting to buy his sick Jaya Enterprises and make a profit out of it. The offer was fabulous. They called themselves David and Yakob. They had a market for tinned foodstuff in UK. The party wanted samples. Could Jaya help? They wanted to use the can seaming machine at Jaya. Just about 50 tins. If the samples were accepted they would buy up Jaya.

Pillai jumped at the offer, and reportedly gave the keys of his factory to the promising clients as he had more important things to attend to! According to him that is all he did—he let them use his plant for a while. (However, official sources have a different story to tell). Thus, those who called themselves Yakob and David and their pal one 'Simon' used Pillai's seaming machine to seal off tins of crab meat to be sent to UK as samples.

Like crabs that crawl on to the Cochin beach, customs men crawled on to Jaya factory area at Palluruthy in Cochin on July 28, to unfold the mystery of the tinned heroin. And Pillai found himself in soup—a real crab soup.

The raid was a follow-up of something that happened at Manchester airport in UK on May 25. Though samples are not usually examined, UK customs made an out of routine check and opened



Dream powder by air. The cases of tins intercepted at Manchester.

the tins marked *Boatman, Indian Crab Meat*.

There was a brown powder inside. It was second grade heroin. The fine white powder could send the user to a temporary heaven when injected. The brown powder if injected, would send him to a permanent hell. Instant death. It is good only for smoking. In two cases the 48 tins weighed 5.118 kilogrammes. UK sources estimated their value as 2.5 crore. If the stuff were pure it would have fetched more.

UK customs did not publicise the seizure, alarmed as they were at the high in-flow of heroin from Pakistan and India to UK. In 1982, 100 kilogrammes of heroin had trickled down to the country

and this year, by May, the total quantity seized was much more. So they waited to know who would come to collect the stuff.

It was a Pakistani. He was caught.

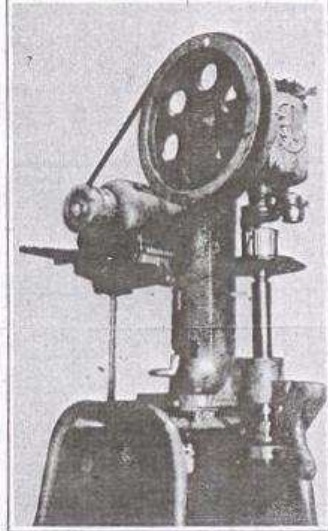
Cochin was alerted and pictures of the seized tins rushed to the Cochin customs. The manhunt had begun in Cochin the moment the news came. After a long and hazardous search the customs knocked at the door of Jacob Thomas Simon, alias Ambachan at Nazareth in Cochin. It was just one letter from Harrison and Crossfield to Ambachan that they had airfreighted the stuff that gave the authorities the vital clue. To mislead the hands of law, the consignment was sent in the name of one Moideenkutty, Panickers Road, Calicut. But there was none in that address bearing the name.

Ambachan has no canning factory. Hence the hunt for the supplier of the tins and tinned crab meat led to Ambachan. From the photographs of the tins the name of the factory was got: Brite International Malippuram. The second to fall in the customs trap was Y M Ebrahim who runs the firm on behalf of his son.

Ambachan's nest is behind the cemetery of Nazareth church, Cochin—the parish priest can see his white walls from the church. His mother is a daily communicant. Of her 12 children seven are girls. One of them is in Bangkok—her husband is in the jewellery business there. Unmarried and dare-devilish in nature, Ambachan lives in style. In fact, people



Bright idea. Heroin in sample tins of a famous brand of crab meat



If only the walls could talk. Brite International factory on Malippuram Island. The seized tins contained Brite label. Right—The machine that put the lid on sin. A can seaming machine seized from Jaya Enterprises.

of Nazareth shiver when questioned about Ambachan. For reasons best known to them they are afraid to talk about him.

Ambachan's father who is no more, was an ex-employee of Harrisons and Crossfield who airfreighted the stuff. The father's connection helped the son a lot. H&C also thought of bringing up an exporter who was down and out. A freezing business with which Ambachan was connected, with factory in Malabar, was in a mess. So H&C viewed the sending of the samples only as an attempt by Ambachan to open new avenues.

Now the authorities are after the real big fish. The surmise is that Ambachan might have got the stuff from Pakistan. In that case the route has to be Punjab-Delhi-Bombay-Cochin. Who supplied the stuff to Ambachan?

Business circles here recall the arrival of some north Indians especially a man who called himself Anand and Roshan Lal Handsome, claiming to be a Punjabi. Anand went around offering aid to many sick units in the canning sector in Cochin. He was willing to buy up or finance any number of sick units. A particular businessman told THE WEEK that he rejected Anand's kind offer for two reasons: Anand did not have an address. Secondly he said he would route the funds through a third person. All that he wanted in return was some export done on his behalf—crab meat or any tinned foodstuff. It was aid with heroin

strings. Once indebted to Anand the Cochinite involved had no alternative but to export the 'stuff' supplied by the financier alongwith the usual items.

An official confessed that what was intercepted at Manchester was only the second consignment. The first one, sent

sometime in April went unnoticed. No one knows how many of those tins contained heroin.

Insiders say that already those involved in the deal have fallen out. While x is blaming y for having supplied heroin instead of crab meat y is accusing x of using his labels. Again the 'foolishness' of using one's own brand name and factory-marked labels to do this kind of a thing is being debated upon. Will an international smuggler be that foolish? Or, was it a case of dare-devilry?

A diary of accounts kept by Ambachan has come to the aid of the customs. The diary, reportedly gives a lot of information to the authorities, regarding the flow of funds. Some feel that the Cochin link in the international chain has got a very negligible margin compared to the huge profit the real dealer wanted to make.

The customs men are also after an export deal Ambachan has had with a Canadian firm. According to official sources, the value of the exported items is only about Rs 5,000 while the returns have been about Rs 60,000. Is it a mere bid to whiten some black money or is that the real commission for something else done? The authorities are trying to find out.

The investigating officers at Cochin feel that they have touched only the tip of an iceberg. The big fish is still eluding them.

—MAXWELL FERNANDEZ

Customary hurdles

THE customs department tried its best, in the interests of the case, to prevent Ambachan from getting out on bail. The argument was that he might try to influence the witnesses and tamper with further evidence.

Ambachan won, the customs failed. He was out on bail after spending a day in jail. The arrest had taken place on a Saturday. On Monday, July 18, he was out again.

Then came the question of bail for the others held in connection with the episode—Narayana Pillai and Ebrahim. Customs sources revealed to THE WEEK that in their case the powers that could keep them behind the bars were willing to 'co-operate' with the customs and hold them in prison.

But the hurt governmental wing politely turned down the good will move. Why hold the small fry in jail when Mr Big was out, was their line of thinking. Jail them not, let them go on bail.