The Snoopgate story starts with the abduction and cold-blooded murder of an innocent young woman, who was framed as a terrorist by her killers [1]. One of them, G.L. Singhal, kept recordings of his telephone conversations with Minister of State for Home Amit Shah, in case he might need them to exonerate his own conduct. It is clips from these recorded conversations that were released by Gulail and Cobrapost. But the clips they released pertain not to the murder of Ishrat Jahan but to the surveillance of a young woman architect, whom they called Madhuri, over more than a month in 2009 [2].

The BJP’s panic at the release of these tapes is evident from the incoherence of their response. They released a statement, purportedly by the architect’s father, saying he had been anxious for her safety, since she had to commute at all hours between her hotel and the hospital in Ahmedabad where her mother was undergoing treatment. He had appealed to Chief Minister Narendra Modi to provide her with security, and Modi obliged [3].

Far from helping the BJP, this statement made matters worse for them. In the tapes, Shah only referred to the person on behalf of whom he was carrying out the surveillance as ‘saheb’, but the statement identified ‘saheb’ as Modi. Worse, by giving out the statement in the father’s real name, the BJP disclosed the architect’s identity to the media, thus violating her privacy and spurring further investigations.

Anyone listening to or reading a transcript of the tapes can make out immediately that the snooping is being done without the woman’s knowledge or consent. References to trying to ‘trap’ her and (repeatedly) to preventing her ‘escape’ make it clear that she neither knows about the spying nor wants it. The khap panchayat mentality of the BJP – including spokeswomen like Nirmala Sitharaman, Meenakshi Lekhi, Madhu Kishwar and Pinky Anand – was on full display when they openly justified a father requesting surveillance of an adult daughter without her knowledge or consent [4].

The khap panchayat model of gender relations may suit supporters of patriarchy in all communities, but it is lethal for women’s rights. If illegal snooping is justified because ‘her father asked for it,’ forced marriages (in which rape is inevitable) can also be justified because ‘her father wanted it,’ and even honour killings can be justified because ‘her father wanted it’. If a daughter is seen as her father’s property, anything he does to her can be justified.
If the purpose was to ‘protect’ the young woman when she travelled at night between hospital and hotel over a period of three days [5], why would personnel of the Crime Branch, State Intelligence Bureau and Anti-Terrorist Squad need to keep watch over her in public places in broad daylight for over a month? Why tap her phone? Indeed, the transcripts reveal she was also being spied upon by yet another agency that was reporting to ‘saheb’. Intelligence agencies scanning all Central and state records for 2009 did not find any written sanction for the phone-tapping, and therefore concluded that it was illegal [6]. Clearly, this was not ‘protection’ but surveillance. But why was such an intensive operation carried out against an individual who did not pose any security threat?

It soon emerged that former IAS officer Pradeep Sharma was also being spied upon, and after a distinguished career was suddenly thrown in jail on corruption charges in January 2010. In a 2011 petition to the Supreme Court, he alleged that he was being victimised because the very same young woman had confided in him about her intimacy with Modi and shown him text messages from Modi’s private cellphone. In November 2008, Sharma had saved Modi’s private number on his phone, and some time later he dialled it by accident from his own phone, thus alerting Modi to the possibility that Sharma had obtained the number from the young architect [7]. Sharma’s allegation was corroborated by evidence that prior to the surveillance, the woman’s cellphone and fuel bills were picked up by the Gujarat government [8].

This evidence links and explains both the obsessive surveillance of the architect in August-September 2009, and the subsequent arrest of a senior IAS officer whose integrity had previously never been questioned. Indeed Sharma, through his lawyers, submitted a plea before the Supreme Court that the tapes supported his contention that he was being victimised by the Gujarat government and asked for a CBI probe into them [9].

A second carefully-worded letter from the young woman’s father to the national and state women’s commissions stated that his daughter ‘is fully aware’ and ‘is fully conscious’ of the snooping (implicitly admitting that she was not aware of it at the time), and requested that there should be no further probe into it [10]. However, using the state machinery for illegal snooping and phone-tapping cannot so easily be brushed under the carpet, especially if there is evidence that illegal state-sponsored phone-tapping of political rivals, journalists and private citizens is ‘rampant’ in Gujarat [11].

The Snoopgate tapes provide direct evidence in ongoing cases, especially the petition filed by Pradeep Sharma. They also provide a vivid picture of the modus operandi whereby Modi orders an operation which is supervised by Amit Shah and carried out by the Gujarat police force. This throws light on all the ongoing fake encounter cases, including that of Ishrat Jahan. Given evidence that Modi’s arch-rival Haren Pandya was also subjected to phone-tapping before
he was killed [12], and two of those killed in fake encounters could have been paid to assassinate him [13], the tapes could also throw light on Pandya’s murder. Pandya’s father and widow (who also claims she was snooped upon [14]) always maintained that it was a political assassination, and repeatedly demanded reinvestigation of the case [15].

Finally, Modi’s alacrity in granting ‘protection’ to a woman who has not asked for it contrasts grotesquely with his refusal to grant protection to the residents of Gulberg Society when requested to do so by Ehsan Jafri [16]. Sixty-nine people were butchered there, and Modi has been named as the prime accused [17]. Indeed, this demonstration of his complete control over the police contradicts his claim that he had no control over the massacre of Muslims in 2002. Systematic victimisation of officers who protected Muslims makes it clear that he had ordered them to do the opposite [18].

Snoopgate reveals the Gujarat model of governance to be a near-fascist dictatorship in which the head of state has absolute control over the state machinery, and uses it to crush anyone who disobeys or displeases him. The only hope of justice for victims of state-sponsored crimes in Gujarat is the fact that it is part of a country where the rule of law still prevails. This is what Modi aims to demolish by becoming Prime Minister, so that cases of communal massacres, fake encounters, Hindutva terror and framing of innocents can be dismissed, and complainants, their witnesses and lawyers, along with political rivals, opponents and critics, will be eliminated, as Modi promised in his Patna speech.

Hitler and Mussolini used a combination of violence, mass support and democratic elections to first come to power and then destroy democracy and the rule of law, and Modi has done that in Gujarat. Now he aims to do the same in the whole of India. At present, governance in India is far from satisfactory, but under a Modi-led BJP it would be unimaginably worse.


