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PHONE-TAPPING EXCLUSIVE

We, The Eavesdropped

The government has been tapping the cellphone conversations of these prominent political leaders

SAIKAT DATTA



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Digvijay Singh, Congress general secretary February 2007

Digvijay Singh was driving from his house in South Avenue through Sardar Marg Patel having a conversation on his cellphone with a Congress leader from Punjab. The two were discussing possible candidates for 2007 chapter of the Congress Working Committee elections, which are held every three years. The leader from Punjab was seeking Digvijay's support for his possible candidature. Unknown to them, their entire conversation was being tapped and filed in a computer system. Digvijay had this to say about the surveillance: "I think it is illegal and unethical."



Nitish Kumar, Bihar chief minister
October 2007

The Bihar CM was on his way in his official car from Bihar Bhavan in Chanakyapuri to South Block for a meeting when his conversation—on a cellphone belonging to the then Bihar resident commissioner, who was travelling with him—was tapped. Nitish was discussing with a colleague how to get more funds from the Centre for his state. Other related issues like projects on the Kosi river also figured in his call.



Sharad Pawar, Union agriculture minister
April 2010

Discussions between the minister and IPL commissioner Lalit Modi were tapped and taped last fortnight in the wake of the scandal in the cricket league. The recorded conversations allegedly threw up inside details of the deals that were struck in the bidding process for the various teams.



Prakash Karat, CPI(M) general secretary
July 2008

The cellphones of Opposition leaders were tapped to ascertain their plans regarding the Indo-US nuclear deal and the consequent no-confidence motion in Parliament at the time. Karat was targeted since he was leading the charge against the UPA government.



M.K. Narayanan, Then NSA

He was instrumental in bringing the new tapping technology to India in 2005-06. During a demonstration at an NTRO facility in Delhi on Jan 7, '06, his phone was tapped successfully.

In February 2007, Congress general secretary Digvijay Singh was on his cellphone with a party leader from Punjab. With Congress Working Committee (CWC) elections due soon, the Punjab leader was discussing his possible candidature. Neither was aware that the conversation was being tapped and taped. In fact, a team from the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO), an intelligence agency created in the aftermath of the Kargil war to cover all aspects of technical intelligence-gathering, was monitoring the conversation. The call was recorded, logged and filed away.

Likewise, Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar's mobile phone was tapped during an official visit to Delhi in October 2007. The call was intercepted while he was going in his official car from Bihar Bhavan in Chanakyapuri. Sources familiar with the interception say Nitish had called a colleague in Delhi seeking his help to lobby with the Planning Commission for more funds for Bihar. The CM was using the phone of the then Bihar resident commissioner who was with him. He also discussed certain projects for flood relief, and spoke about a project related to river Kosi. Currently a close aide of Nitish Kumar, the resident commissioner categorically confirmed to *Outlook* that the Bihar CM did make such a call and that he had this discussion.

Digvijay expressed surprise when *Outlook* sought his comment. While he couldn't recall the exact details of his conversation, he conceded that there was a distinct possibility of it having taken place. It is a matter of fact that the CWC elections were due later that year. The CWC nominations and elections are held every three years. They were held last in 2007 and are due again in the latter half of 2010.

"The conversation may have taken place," Digvijay told *Outlook*. "But I think this is very disturbing. I am very surprised to know that the government has been eavesdropping on political leaders, which I think is illegal and unethical." While he wondered how such tapping could go on in a government headed by Dr Manmohan Singh, he felt that modern (surveillance) technology should be used only for national security.



Both Digvijay and Nitish's phones were tapped using the new off-the-air GSM monitoring device, which can track and tap into

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The calls were tapped using a new off-the-air GSM monitoring device, which can track phone signals within 2 km.

any cellphone conversation within a two-km radius. Nor have Digvijay and Nitish been the sole victims of such tapping. The device, sources say, was used extensively to listen in on the conversations of opposition leaders during the July 2008 no-confidence motion on the Indo-US nuclear deal. One intelligence agency targeted some leaders of the Left Front, including CPI(M) general secretary Prakash Karat, to fathom the Left's strategy to bring down the government. More recently, in fact last fortnight, the conversation between IPL

commissioner Lalit Modi and Union agriculture minister Sharad Pawar was tapped and allegedly used to pressurise Pawar to call for Modi's resignation.

"The whole system works on deniability," a senior intelligence official told *Outlook*. "It can be deployed anywhere. We don't need to show any authorisation since we're not tapping a phone number at the exchange but intercepting signals between the phone and the cellphone tower and recording them on a hard disk. If too many questions are asked, we can remove the disk and erase the conversation. No one gets to know."

Outlook has also learnt that an air vice marshal, then posted as an air defence commander in the Western Air Command, was put under similar surveillance. The officer's cellphone, besides those of his wife and other family members, was tapped for several weeks in the early half of 2006. Ironically, the air vice marshal also applied for a position in the NTRO as a joint secretary since he had been overlooked for promotion by the air force.

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Throughout the world media is used by intelligence agencies and Govts to carryout disinformation campaigns,most of the media is biased all over the World as the owners are corporates or semi govt agencies.The tapping may have some iota of truth but most of it is disinfo campaign to make opposition restless.An agency which could never trace any calls of preemptive terror strikes is not capable of carrying out such covert