

Abhishek Verma: The Dealer's Deceit

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*Who is Abhishek Verma? Is he a businessman, a pawn, a front, a billionaire, or simply a fraud? **Brijesh Pandey** finds out*

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He was the king of guile, with a web of deceit so confidently woven that it would be a while **before** even the best of the best realised that they had been taken for a ride. Nothing escaped him. In his world, everything was grand. From the grand lie of opulence and power, which fed on several smaller lies, to the naked display of desire, which had the high and mighty panting for more. Welcome to the world of Abhishek Verma, defence middleman and conman extraordinaire. Currently languishing in Delhi's [Tihar Jail](#) since 9 June 2012, he is someone without whom no defence deal would be complete.

Photo: India Today Images

With their names resurfacing in the ongoing [AgustaWestland WIP chopper scam](#), Verma, 44, and his Romanian wife Anca Maria Neacsu, who have been in Tihar for the past 10 months, find themselves under scrutiny once again. Though Verma's involvement in the [chopper scam](#) is yet to be established, investigating agencies are leaving nothing to chance and probing every aspect of the deal.

So what went wrong for this high flier? A land deal gone sour with one-time business partner and US attorney C Edmont Allen turned the tables on him. The partners fell apart after a Greater Noida land deal went **wrong**. After much bickering, Allen was saddled with a liability of Rs 1 crore. The [CBI](#) also investigated the roles of senior Congressman [Jagdish Tytler](#) and his fashion designer son Siddartha in connection with this deal.

In 2012, Verma filed a criminal suit against Allen in the US for damages accrued in the said land deal in the Yamuna **Expressway**. This led to perhaps one of the most rocky chapters in Verma's life. Allen felt he was being swindled of both land and money (the allotment was scrapped by the authorities and a fine was imposed on Ganton, the firm Allen owned), made a complaint to Indian authorities and started sending incriminating documents to investigating agencies, including the [CBI](#) and the Enforcement Directorate (ED).

Allen alleged these documents were given to him by Verma and contained classified communication between Defence [Minister AK Antony](#) and various firms about defence outlays. The documents, he said, also contained minutes of [meetings](#) where defence acquisition plans were discussed.

Besides this, Allen wrote six letters to Antony, Finance Minister P Chidambaram, Commerce Minister Anand Sharma and senior officers of the [CBI](#) and ED about how despite being blacklisted, Verma continued to interact freely with defence ministry officials.

In June 2012, Verma's past finally caught up with him, when the [CBI](#) registered a case under the Prevention of Corruption Act against him and his wife Anca. According to the agency, Verma received payoffs from the Swiss company Rheinmettal Air Defence to ensure that the firm was not blacklisted. Rheinmettal is involved in the manufacture of air defence systems and in 2010, it was proposed that the firm be blacklisted after the [CBI](#) filed a chargesheet against it.

The company hired for the job was Ganton US, owned by Edmont Allen. According to sources, Ganton is a 100 percent subsidiary of Ganton India, and was paid \$353,000 to give as bribes to push the deal through. Anca was director of Ganton India and many other companies.

Sources in the CBI and people familiar with Verma's history say that this union was a mutually beneficial one. Anca was no stranger to the murky world of arms deals and the fact that she was able to meet the then MoS for Defence Pallam Raju as a representative of the Swiss arms manufacturer showed her clout and access in the ministry.

Insiders say that given Verma's track record, there were not many who liked to be seen with him. In this scenario, Anca was the ideal front for him and it worked out pretty fine for both of them, till the deal came unstuck. Against the backdrop of the AgustaWestland scam, the letters written by Allen have come as a major embarrassment for the government.

However, what surprises investigators is that despite being under probe in the Naval War Room Leak case, Verma continued bribing officials and bending rules in defence purchases with impunity. He allegedly made a fortune from a number of arms deals involving European, Israeli and Russian defence companies, and has parked \$410 million in the US.

In the Naval War Room Leak case, in which the CBI chargesheeted among others, serving and retired military officials for conspiring to trade off secret documents, Verma was accused of having close links with the prime accused Ravi Shankaran, a retired Indian Navy officer, who is now facing extradition from the UK to India.

Who then really is Abhishek Verma? And how come his name invariably crops up in all kinds of dubious defence deals? Born of illustrious parents, he rose to the ranks of the rich and the powerful, or at least gave the impression of being one of them. Abhishek's father Srikant Verma was an eminent poet, journalist and famously known as Rajiv Gandhi's Hindi tutor. In the 1980s, he joined the Congress and went on to become general secretary and spokesperson of the party. Both he and his wife Veena Verma served multiple Rajya Sabha terms. At 55, Srikant was diagnosed with cancer and passed away in New York while undergoing treatment.

Veena Verma was Congress MP for 14 years after her husband's death. Abhishek's bio reveals that after graduation, he started an airline company named ESAM India Ltd. People close to him say that one of the reasons he was able to fool so many people for so long was because of his lineage.

How and when Verma got drafted into the world of defence deals is not clear, but one thing is certain; from his early days, he had realised the importance of appearances. According to someone close to him, Verma spent close to Rs 20 lakh on renovating the Safdarjung Lane government bungalow allotted to his mother as an MP.

Verma's penchant for living the high life was evident from the start. When he appeared on the cover of *India Today* magazine in 1997, it was nothing short of a coup. The article lent credence to the hyperbole surrounding Verma.

With success came the perks associated with it. Verma's brush with the law started early and by 1997, when he was arrested by the CBI, along with infamous ED official Ashok Aggarwal for allegedly framing Delhi-based jeweller Subhash Barjatya, he already had a string of FERA cases against him.

During the investigation, he admitted before the magistrate that he had helped V George, private secretary of Congress President Sonia Gandhi, launder Rs 3 crore. Though this investigation was dubbed as politically motivated, many in the Congress alleged that Verma had known George for a long time and exploited the latter's crucial position in the party. George faded into oblivion after the CBI lodged an FIR against him.

A one-time close confidant of Verma says the line that best describes him is "*aisa koi saga nahi, jisko humney thaga nahi*", a slogan borrowed from a famous sweet shop in Kanpur. It literally means "there is no one we haven't conned, even our own relatives."

It sits true with Verma. Almost everyone who has known him has been played. From people who rented him a house or a car to the high and mighty, including the likes of lottery kingpin Mani Kumar Subba, to various foreign firms desirous of having a share of the Indian defence pie, all have been conned by Verma at one time or the other.

Verma's association with Subba dates back to the late 1990s, when he convinced the Congressman that a lottery stall would be put up at every petrol pump in Delhi, and that he had spoken to a foreign firm about it. That way, any customer who came to fill his car would gamble away the small change he got from the pump. Verma apparently told Subba that he was already talking to the government about the idea.

The deal allegedly cost Subba close to Rs 200 crore. When he later enquired about his investment, Verma told him that he and his partners had formed a company to route the money to foreign shores through hawala and had lost trace of it.

In 2006, Verma was arrested by the CBI in the Navy War Room Leak case and spent close to two years in jail. For most people he had known — and subsequently conned — Verma's lineage helped him bag many contracts. The remaining were taken in by the spectacular display of wealth.

Parties thrown at his farmhouses were the talk of the town. Expensive cars were lined up to put on a show, foreign models to "entertain" guests and the free flow of expensive champagne, all were done on such a scale that it floored even the most seasoned partygoer.

Verma left no stone unturned to augment his status as a mover and shaker. In one such case, he even duped Fashion TV head Michel Adam Lisowski into believing that he was interested in buying his yacht. Adams got his channel to cover one of Verma's parties, clips of which were played in the backdrop at other parties thrown by him.

Vikki Choudhry, former director of defence firm Sig Sauer India, who knew Verma socially, got involved with a couple of projects like the GT Telecom proposal, but they went nowhere. Choudhry openly calls Verma a fraud, who managed to create a big facade. He relates how Verma would often send him an SMS saying that he had just bought one fancy car or the other to give the impression of affluence.

In truth, all the cars he had were on rent. Delhi-based Mann Tours and Travels had given him six cars on rent, which they were able to get back only after an injunction relief provided by the Delhi High Court in 2012. Verma still owes them Rs 72 lakh.

Further, Choudhry reveals, the five-acre farmhouse and party venues were all on rent and a court case is going on in this regard. To add to the facade, Verma had installed a high-end Siemens telephone at his house, so that anybody who wanted to get in touch with him would first have to give him a voice sample. Only after the system verified the voice, would the person be able to talk to him. Verma also got his private security guards to dress up like SPG commandos, complete with walkie talkies and microphones to create the aura of importance, sometimes to even fool people into believing that the government was providing him security.

A month before his arrest in 2012, Verma had managed to get six vehicles on zero down payment — two BMWs, two Jaguars and two Range Rovers — based on forged documents of a company. When the company denied the authenticity of the papers against which the loans had been taken, the car agency conceded that their salesmen were so enamoured by Verma's display of wealth that they ignored the due diligence before okaying the deal.

Such then was the charisma of Abhishek Verma.

Part conman, part businessman, part bombast, part lineage. Unfortunately, to those smitten by the opulence, they realised only too late that the sum was a zero, disguised as many parts of substance.

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