

Veerappan - The Legendary Bandit No More!

Known by different nomenclatures like bandit king, elephant poacher, sandalwood smuggler and the much recent Robinhood of India, Veerappan the forest brigand was finally killed in an encounter this month. This man popular for his handlebar moustache, hacked more than 120 people to death during his reign of terror spanning over four decades, felled thousands of sandalwood trees worth and sandalwood worth 22 million, and poached about 2,000 elephants for more than 88,000 pounds of ivory worth 2.6 million and what not! It took about 20 years and more than Rs 1000 crores to finally kill Veerappan, making this manhunt, Indias biggest and most expensive.

In the beginning there was a brigand

The year was 1952, the date 18th January. Kuse Muniswamy Veerappan Gounder was born in Gopinatham Village in Karnataka state (India). He was lovingly called Veerappan, which means he who is brave. He started off with committing crimes at a very young age. In fact Veerappan began his career in crime as an ivory poacher and is reputed to have killed his first elephant when he was just 14. He committed his first murder at the age of 17 too small an age when boys his age would be falling in love. He used to operate from the dense Sathyamangalam forests and used to reportedly distribute money earned from smuggling and kidnappings to villages around the forests. Doing this earned him the title of Robinhood of India and the local people would worship him as their king. But then as they say, every coin has two sides Veerappan too had a scar face hidden behind his generous image.

It is said that Veerappan used to boast about how he killed his victims, cut them into pieces and fed the flesh to fishes in ponds around the forest. Veerappan was notorious for his guerilla tactics, kidnappings, beheadings of his victims and killing more than 120 people of which majority were police officers and forest department officials. His fame to crime increased day-by-day, forcing two of the biggest states in India Tamil Nadu and Karnataka to launch a massive manhunt and also form a Special Task Force (STF) for capturing Veerappan, dead or alive. Despite this, he could never be captured in fact, the only time Veerappan was put in jail was in 1986; but he soon escaped killing four policemen and paying a bribe of 2,000. The STF formed by both the states had more than 1,500 officers and personnel. As if that was not enough, even the Border Security Force (BSF) was assigned a task to capture the brigand; though they failed miserably in it.

So, how was he hunted down?

Capturing Veerappan was not an easy task. He had informants in villages around the forest to tip him off about any police forces entering the forest to hunt him down. Reports say that his jungle hamlets were often booby-trapped and heavily mined, to keep trespassers away. Moreover, his people were in and around the 6,000 sq km jungle and so it proved to be a hell of a task. And he did all this with old hunting rifles, while the police forces had all the latest gadgets, including AK-47 assault rifles and night vision binoculars. At one point for time, 2,000 police officers were searching for Veerappan around the forests. Finally their efforts paid off on 18th October 2004 at Dharmapuri village in Tamil Nadu (India). Veerappan was killed in an encounter that had been planned over months. Police officials say that all through these years, Veerappans troupe was getting weaker and weaker and he was on a lookout to hire more youngsters into his group.

The first step of their plan was deemed successful, when the police officials intercepted a letter sent by Veerappan to his brother, who was then lodged in jail. The letter said that Veerappan wanted his brother to arrange for a few youngsters to join his team through his contacts with extremists. That's when the police decided to send their people instead into Veerappans group to record his daily activities. However, the police did not want to send their team members, because Veerappan could get suspicious. Therefore they called for volunteers and they got volunteers in the form of a few villagers and two college students. These volunteers armed with Veerappans letter, went into the forest to meet the brigand claiming that his brother sent them. Fortunately, Veerappan didn't have any suspicions and the team of volunteers was accepted into his group little knowing that these volunteers would be cause of his death in the coming days.

The police officials received daily reports from the volunteers about Veerappans daily activities. Also it is said that Veerappan was suffering from sight problems that's when the police decided to act. The volunteers were asked to offer Veerappan, a trip to an eye hospital to get his vision corrected. Veerappan too agreed without much

suspicion. The day for the hospital visit was decided to be 18th October 2004, time 10:50 p.m. The STF had already laid a trap on the route Veerappan was to travel while on a trip to the hospital. The volunteers had arranged for an ambulance for Veerappans hospital visit the ambulance was to be driven by an STF official undercover. As the ambulance neared the trap laid by the STF, the driver of the ambulance hurled a hand grenade into the ambulance before escaping. The STF opened fire on the ambulance without warning, though STF claims that they had asked Veerappan to surrender, but he opened fire and so they had to retaliate. The encounter lasted

for 20 minutes and finally Veerappan was dead along with three of his associates. Jubilations prevailed among the STF as they had finally hunted down the hunter.

Is Veerappan really dead?

When Veerappans body was brought to Pappirappatti village large number of villagers gathered around his body. But there was something amiss his trademark handlebar moustache had been trimmed down. Many people who saw Veerappans body claimed that the man dead didnt look like Veerappan. STF Chief and Additional Director General of Police, K Vijaykumar however said, "Veerappan had trimmed his moustache. He was not wearing his traditional green clothes and was dressed in white. DNA tests have not been done yet. But we are sure the man killed is Veerappan.

The villagers werent really happy with Veerappans death because he was like Robinhood for them. He was known for distributing huge amounts of money among the villagers. The National Human Rights Commission has also ordered a probe into the killing of Veerappan and has suggested that a DNA test be carried out as soon as possible.

The treasure hunt begins

Veerappan, during his reign of terror had collected millions of dollars in ransoms and by smuggling ivory and sandalwood. Veerappan has reportedly hid this money into the vast forestland on the Karnataka-Tamil Nadu border by digging up pits, concealing the cash into plastic sheets, and covering the pits with leaves and mud. After the fall of forest brigand, the STF is all set to launch a new operation to unearth the treasure trove of cash and jewellery that the sandalwood smuggler may have left behind. Villagers around the forests too have joined this treasure hunt in expectations of hauling up huge loot from the forests.

Filmmakers throughout India are also keen in cashing in on the brigands death by making movies on his life. In fact, a dubbed movie Veerappan starring Kannada star hero Devaraj is being released in Hindi shortly. This action movie released in languages Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam and Tamil emerged a mega money-spinner and broke all box-office records. However in the film, the climax shows a guy who is caught by the police in the film, turns out to be a deceptive clone, while the brigand keeps evading the police. The Hindu newspaper had reported Veerappan commenting on movies made on him. He had once said, I wish they would look on me differently. I am a human who loves and gets hungry. They make me out as this gangster. But in Hollywood, gangsters make great films. I have seen 'The Godfather' a hundred times. That is the kind of film our film-makers should make about me.

One of the top filmmakers in India Ram Gopal Verma had recently planned a movie on Veerappan titled Lets Catch Veerappan. The film will now be re-titled as Lets Kill Veerappan.

Short note about the author

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