

Lipstick on your collar? Take a polygraph please

Use of lie-detector tests spirals as Indians use them to smoke out cheating spouses, track missing jewels or nab dishonest staffers

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It was a scene reminiscent of an '80s Bollywood tear-jerker. A distraught pregnant wife suspected her husband of infidelity. She had seen red marks on his shirt and the anxiety of being cheated on was stressing her out. The couple reached out to Mumbai-based Helik forensic laboratory explaining that the husband was keen on dispelling his wife's doubts with a lie-detector test. "The report said he had shown no signs of lying. He worked in a paint company and the red marks on his shirt turned out to be paint," says Rukmani Krishnamurthy, forensic scientist and CEO of Helik Advisory.

The lie-detector or polygraph test has been in the news recently because of its use on the accused in the Shraddha Walker murder case where law enforcement authorities hoped to find some clues about the missing murder weapon and the dead body through the so-called truth machine. But the test is no longer being used by just law enforcement authorities alone. Several private detective agencies and forensic labs across the country offer the polygraph, with some even offering home tests to maintain client confidentiality. Priced between Rs 15,000 and Rs 2 lakh, the test has seen a rise in demand. Agencies say they are conducting 4-5 polygraphs a week from just two a month a few years ago.

So who is using it besides couples who want to catch cheating partners and are treating it like the new-age agnipariksha? Agencies say their clients range from corporates who suspect an employee of theft to wealthy families missing solitaires.

Delhi-based detective Sanjay Singh says that the lack of trust in personal and professional relationships has led to the huge demand. "The test gives us information that we cannot access from our investigations. Sometimes between couples, a partner lies about how far they have gone in an extramarital relationship. The polygraph gives a good idea of such information," says Singh, who runs the Indian Detective Agency.

Lawyer Gaurav Kaushik, who runs a detective agency and a forensic lab in Delhi, estimates a 200% spike in demand for such tests compared to seven years ago when his agency, International Truth Detection Bureau, introduced them. Their cheapest is a five-question test for Rs 20,000. "We have found that in 98% of cases of suspected infidelity, couples opt for the test to dispel their doubts. In most cases it is the woman who is subjected to the test," he adds. No surprises there!

Customers who have been victims of theft and corporate espionage also turn to these labs. Helik's Krishnamurthy recalls how the sister of a Bollywood A-lister lost a solitaire worth over a crore some years ago. Her team conducted polygraph tests on all the domestic help and recovered the jewellery. The theft had been an inside job.

Last month, a Mumbai-based corporate reported an intellectual property theft. Reluctant to go to the police, it hired the Helik team that set up investigations inside the offices, conducting polygraphs on over 100 employees. The suspects were first narrowed to six and the guilty party identified.

Lawyer Kaushik recently sent his team to Surat after a trader reported over a dozen diamonds missing. The trader's employee who

was supposed to deliver the diamonds swore he had done so while the customer claimed he had not received the package. The trader was in a bind as the employee had been in his service for 20 years and was considered above reproach. A polygraph test was done on the employee and he was found to be lying. "Nothing in his manner or behaviour betrayed him. We were able to catch him only because of the test. The trader was happy because we recovered the diamonds soon after," Kaushik says.

Sometimes tests have helped in uncovering fake cases. A student was found to be lying about a teacher sexually harassing her. The polygraph revealed that the student had been graded poorly in her studies and decided to take "revenge." In another such case, a girl accused her cousin of harassment, nearly causing a split in a joint family till it was discovered (after a polygraph) that she was jealous of him.

Chad Crowe



Helik lab's Krishnamurthy recalls how the sister of a Bollywood A-lister lost a solitaire worth over a crore. Polygraph tests were done on all the domestic help and the jewellery recovered

Despite these success stories, academicians and forensic experts look at these tests — narco-analysis, lie detector and brain-mapping — with skepticism. In India, a 2010 Supreme Court has ruled these tests inadmissible in court as direct evidence though it can be used to acquire indirect evidence. For instance, no statement by the accused during the polygraph can be used in court to incriminate him but if he discloses where the body is buried and the investigating agency finds the body in the place, that can be used in a court of law. Even in private use, clients cannot use the polygraph test for legal purposes like for custody battles in a divorce case.

Despite these restrictions, the test continues to be popular in India being used for some sensational criminal cases like the Aarushi Talwar murder case and the Sheena Bora murder case.

Author of 'The Truth Machines: Policing, Violence and Scientific Interrogations in India', Jinee Lokaneeta says the test has been discontinued in several parts of the world as a scientific method of investigation. "The lie detector is popular because of the spectacle of science that is created in the public imagination by its use. Over the years it has been comprehensively proved that lie detector tests are not just unreliable but an unscientific method to find if a person has lied. There have also been instances where people have been able to beat the test. But its popularity continues not for its scientific use but because it has become part of pulp fiction," she says.