

Jayant V. Narlikar

The Return of Vaman

A Scientific Novel



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Preface

It gives me great pleasure to present this sample of my science fiction work to the international reader. So far my sci-fi stories and novels have only been published within India where they have received a warm welcome. However, this happens to be the first occasion when a novel and a short story are being jointly published by Springer.

Since this is the first time that my science fiction is being projected abroad, the publisher made the very pertinent suggestion that I also write an introductory article describing my association with this form of literature. It is all the more pertinent because by profession I am a scientist working in the field of astrophysics. This exercise includes a brief description of my background and why and how I got into writing sci fi. Knowing full well that other sci fi writers may have different viewpoints, I felt that I should stick to my own views in a personalized autobiographical statement.

Life in India is inextricably mixed with Indian mythology and this shows up in the two examples of sci fi presented here. This is peculiar to India, and one may wonder how ancient myths can be combined with futuristic ideas that arise in sci fi. Thus Ganesha and Vaman are part of those myths but, through various rituals, they have become part of our modern world of jets, computers and cell phones. So why not take a step into the future and integrate them into science fiction?

Anyway, since my views *in extenso* are given in my introductory article, I will be brief here. It only remains for me to thank the Springer publication staff, and in particular Chris Caron, for a very helpful interaction. Their help and advice are much appreciated.

January, 2015

Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics

Pune, India

Jayant V. Narlikar

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Part I

A Short Story: Ganesha (1975)

The Rare Idol of Ganesha

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As I stepped off the bus outside the Oval, I had a premonition that I was going to witness something unusual. Today, looking back after the events, I see no reason to account for that premonition, but the aren't premonitions, by definition, unaccountable? So far as I can see, the only thing unusual was that I had found time to watch a test match live; and this was fully accountable. As I presented my complimentary pass at the gate I fingered the note which accompanied it:

14 August 2005

Dear John,

I sincerely request you to watch my performance in what is going to be my final test appearance.

Hope you can make it!

Regards,

Sincerely yours,

Pramod Rangnekar

Pramod and I were Cambridge blues in the team which won the Varsity match in '89. Later, Pramod became a professional, rising to great heights as his performances against the West Indies, Australia and the M.C.C. have testified. I, regrettably, gave up cricket altogether, such were the demands of my work as an Indologist and (now) as a museum curator. Indeed it came as a shock to me that I was visiting a cricket ground after 15 years!

Today was the second day's play and I had chosen this day because India was going to field and I would be able to watch Pramod in action. Yesterday, on a perfect wicket in bright sunshine India was expected to amass a huge score. However, the Indian batsmen did not fulfill these expectations and England was left to face a relatively modest first innings score of 308.

The second day's play began quietly with no hint of what was to come. In one hour the England openers Willis and Jones put up a score of 40 for no loss. After the drinks, the Indian captain Bhandari called in Rangnekar to bowl—and the unusual chain of events was set in motion.

Pramod was greeted with great applause which had an element of sympathy about it. For, as all followers of the game knew, this was his last test. Indeed, during this series his performance had been indifferent. The old fire and magic had gone from his bowling, which could now be easily 'read' by the England batsmen. There had been an increasing demand that Pramod be dropped from the team. Nevertheless, the selectors once again plumped for experience, rather than quality and gave him this last chance. Would he live up to their expectations?

The first hint of the unusual came when Pramod prepared to bowl, "Right arm, over the wicket?"

asked umpire Coates, who was familiar with his style of bowling. “No,” said Pramod to the umpire’s surprise. “Left arm over the wicket.”

Pramod had never bowled with his left arm. Even Bhandari was puzzled and wanted to discourage Pramod. However, Pramod persisted. “OK, I will allow the old ... one over of this nonsense,” muttered Bhandari to himself.

By now the commentators on radio and TV had learnt of Pramod’s intention and had started commenting on it. How could a right-handed bowler suddenly decide to bowl left-handed? And that too in a test match when his side badly needed a wicket? This was against all precedents.

But then everything that followed was going to be against any precedent.

With his first ball, which was remarkably accurate, Pramod knocked off opener Willis’s leg stump. As a confounded Willis made his way back to the pavilion he warned the new batsman, “Take care! The joker sent down a funny one to me.”

The warning was to be of no avail. Pramod’s left-handed bowling was completely unexpected and neither No. 3, nor any of his successors could make any sense of it. From 40 for no wicket, England was bundled out for a total of a mere 78 runs.

As I munched my sandwich during the lunch interval, I pondered over the remarkable transformation which had come over the game in such a short time—a transformation which perhaps distinguishes cricket from any other game. Would England recover in the second innings as they followed on 230 runs behind? The old gentleman sitting next to me wondered moodily whether Rangnekar would overtake Jim Laker’s record of 19 wickets in a test match. He went on describing that eventful match which he had seen in his youth half a century ago.

Yes, this is what happened in the second innings when England collapsed once again for 45 runs, their lowest ever score against India. And Pramod had a tally of 20 wickets.

Then this remarkable match was followed by another remarkable event. As the last wicket fell Pramod ran towards the pavilion and even before the jubilant Indian spectators, excited newsmen and TV crew could get anywhere near, he was whisked away in a waiting car.

Where did Pramod go? Nobody knew. The manager of the Indian team, the police and the newspapermen began a frantic search. The next day, an unknown person with an Indian accent telephoned a Fleet Street newspaper office and conveyed a message from the missing player:

“I am safe; don’t worry, I will return within 24 hours.”

Was this a hoax or a genuine message? By way of authentication the caller told the police a location in Croydon where Rangnekar’s shirt would be found. Sure enough the police located and identified the shirt.

Meanwhile, the newspapers had a field day. ‘An Indian Rope-trick?’ ‘Superb bowling or Eastern hypnosis?’ ‘Rangnekar out-Lakers Jim Laker’, blared some of the tabloid headlines. Even the *Times* felt driven to writing an editorial eulogizing Rangnekar’s achievement but confessing to being puzzled at developments during and after the game. The Wisden promptly added another record to its annals cricket history.

The next day Pramod was found at the Bow Street police station. But what an anticlimax! He did not remember a single thing about the test match or what happened afterwards. In all other respects his brain was sound and he ridiculed any suggestions that he had played such a major role in the test match.

“I could not get the wicket of a schoolboy if I bowled left-handed,” he said modestly—and there was a ring of truth in his voice.

13 December 2005 is a date I will never forget. I had finished my breakfast and was about to leave for an important appointment when the phone rang:

“John, it’s for you. The caller won’t identify himself but says it’s important,” Ann said. I cursed

inwardly—I would certainly be late for my appointment now.

“Yes? John Armstrong speaking,” I tried to be as polite as possible.

“Good morning, John! You will be surprised to hear from me. This is Ajit calling—Ajit Singh.”

Ajit Singh! After so many years! Annoyance gave way to surprise as I continued to listen. “May I see you tonight? It is very important. About eight thirty?” He seemed to be dictating all the arrangements. I asserted myself, “Come for dinner. Ann is threatening to poison me with her curry. We will both be her victims.”

“Sure, thanks,” said Ajit. As he was about to hang up he seemed to remember something. He added, “And John—I hope you and Ann will not mind if I eat with my hands instead of with knife and fork.”

Why this reference to knife and fork? Before I could ask him if he was serious, Ajit rang off.

Ann was only too happy to try her hand at a curry. She also decided to experiment with some Indian sweets. I left her with her cookery cards and hastened for the train. But throughout the day my thoughts were on Ajit and on our forthcoming encounter. What was he going to tell me?

Pramod and Ajit were fellow undergraduates with me at Cambridge. We had rooms on the same staircase of the college. Pramod and I shared an enthusiasm for cricket and by the end of our first summer we were both picked for the University Eleven. With Ajit I had a different type of bond. We both used to hold long discussions, lasting sometimes into the early hours of the morning, on Indian philosophy. Indeed it was these discussions which really shaped my career as an Indologist. Ajit, however, was a physicist. After taking the third part of the Mathematical Tripos, where he won the Mayhew Prize, he elected to do physics. Here also he distinguished himself. I left Cambridge after three years but he continued a research career at the Cavendish. Off and on we had met and corresponded; I do recall writing to him when he won the Smith Prize. But later our contact was less frequent. I had been on several archaeological expeditions in the Indian subcontinent before settling down to my present museum curatorship in London.

Ajit had been a loner all along. I doubt if he ever had any friend apart from me. When we last met which was five years ago, Ajit had given up his college Fellowship and joined a research establishment in England. I believe, though he never mentioned it, his work was of a highly classified nature.

Was he going to tell me something of it tonight?

Exactly at 8.30 pm the door bell rang. I had no trouble recognising Ajit. He had become leaner and had a few grey hairs. But there was another subtle change in him which I could sense—I can testify to that even today after all these events. To be honest, however, I must also record that at that moment of our meeting I was not able to pinpoint what exactly was different about him.

His manner of speaking soon put my mind at rest. So far as his attitude towards me was concerned it hadn't changed a bit.

At the meal, which was served in Indian fashion in *thalis* (another of Ann's attempts at artistic verisimilitude!), Ajit was reticent, leaving aside the usual small talk. But this did not surprise me as Ajit was never a sparkling dinner-table conversationalist. What did surprise me was his manner of eating. Out of deference to his whimsical suggestion we had all dispensed with knife and fork in favour of fingers. But Ajit's way of eating with fingers showed the same awkwardness that a Westerner exhibits when he attempts to eat Indian food with fingers. Ann and I commented on this. But Ajit had an explanation: “Living in the decadent West for so many years, I have lost the knack of eating with fingers.” The explanation seemed to satisfy Ann, but I had my doubts.

My doubts about Ajit's unusual behaviour were reinforced towards the end of the meal when my seven-year-old son Ken came with a book.

“Uncle, you sent me this book on my last birthday but you forgot to sign it. Would you please do

now?”

This was a fact. Last year a book had arrived for Ken from Ajit’s lab. It carried the inscription ‘To Ken, on his seventh birthday’ in what I knew to be Ajit’s handwriting. Ajit in his peculiar way had remembered Ken’s birthday but had forgotten to sign his name!

Ajit took the book and glanced at it in a cursory fashion. Then he shook his head and returned it to Ken.

“I am sorry, Ken! My eyes are hurting me today so I can’t sign this right now.”

“Come on! You don’t need to exert your eyes to sign your own name,” I protested on Ken’s behalf.

“But my doctor has expressly forbidden me to read or write anything in my present condition. As a compromise, Ken, I will bring you another book soon when I am well and I will sign both of them.”

Ajit’s tone had an air of finality; so Ken and I did not press further. Ken appeared satisfied with the offer of another present—he had already developed a liking for books. But I found Ajit’s response highly uncharacteristic of him.

“Now Ajit, perhaps you can tell me why you came here tonight.” My suppressed curiosity finally burst out as I pointed him to an armchair in my study and offered him a glass of port. We were alone now and I expected something momentous from him.

“Take it easy!” Ajit had a relaxed smile on his face. He slowly took out a packet from his briefcase and opened it carefully.

It was a beautiful idol of the dancing *Ganesha*, the elephant god of the Hindus. (The elephant god has the head of an elephant and its idol is usually in a sitting posture with legs crossed as in the Buddha’s sitting statues. This particular idol showed the elephant god in a dancing pose, which is not so common.) I recognised it immediately, for a similar idol existed in my museum in the British Indian Section. It belonged to the Maratha rulers, the Peshwas who controlled most of India before the British became dominant. *Ganesha* was one of the important deities of the Peshwas and this particular idol in my museum had been recovered from their palace, the *Shaniwarwada*, when Elphinstone’s army marched into Pune in 1818. How it finally made its way to this museum is a long story. My immediate reaction was to ask how Ajit managed to get a replica of this valuable piece.

“Look carefully! Is it really a replica?” Ajit had a provocative smile on his face.

I subjected the piece to the many visual tests of authenticity that I knew. Yes, so far as I could tell this piece was made by the same craftsman who had made the idol I had in the museum. Then suddenly, I noticed one glaring difference: how could I miss it in the first place?

The trunk of the elephant head was turned to the right instead of to the left as with most idols of *Ganesha*.

This particular aspect not only distinguished the idol in my hand from that in the museum but it also made it far more valuable because of its rarity. I explained this to Ajit.

“Indeed? I would like to see them side by side for comparison.” Ajit seemed more amused than surprised. He continued, “May I present your museum with this piece since you find it so valuable?”

I thanked him for this generous gift and promised him a properly worded formal letter of gratitude from the trustees of the museum. But I could not contain my curiosity and asked, “What is the history behind this piece? How did you come by it?”

“All in good time: but I am happy to see you so surprised. Let me now ask you another question, John. You know me well. What do you think is a distinguishing mark of my body?” I was surprised by this sudden change of subject. But of course I knew the answer.

“Your left thumb is about half an inch smaller than your right thumb.”

“Can you swear to it?”

“Of course!”

Ajit opened out both his hands in front of me. Yes, one thumb was shorter than the other. But I

realised with a shock that it was the right thumb that was short.

~~I must have passed out with the shock, for when I came to I found Ajit gazing anxiously at me with a glass of brandy in hand. "Are you OK?" he asked.~~

"Just who the devil are you?" I asked aggressively. I was conscious of a chagrin at having displayed a weakness earlier and was trying to compensate for it.

"I am Ajit and none other—only I am slightly changed." Ajit picked up my right hand and held it to his chest. His heart was beating on the right.

A crazy but connected picture began to form in my mind. I made Ajit stand in front of a mirror in my study, and I got the answer to a nagging thought which had been with me all evening since Ajit's arrival. In some subtle way he had appeared different. Now I could see that the image staring at me from the mirror was more familiar to me than the live figure I was holding by his shoulders. Had Ajit somehow managed to convert himself into his mirror image?

I recalled the fantastic left-handed bowling of Pramod. Was it real Pramod or was it his image? Surely it was no illusion, because I had not been the only person to watch him perform. Even instruments like cameras and TV had conveyed the same effect. Was the *Ganesha* idol also an image of the real one? I went to the desk to feel it. It was as solid and real as Ajit grinning in front of me.

"I am sorry to have shocked you—but there was no other way of convincing you of the fantastic discovery I have made. I will begin, as they say in books, at the beginning ..."

"Before you do that, please tell me one thing. Am I right in supposing that you are behind Pramod's mysterious performance?"

"Of course!" said Ajit and he began his story which I give below in his own words as far as possible.

You might recall that about five years ago I had left Cambridge to take up some classified research work in a government lab. I had brought with me expertise in fundamental physics and electronics along with an innocent enthusiasm for work. The latter I quickly shed aside as I found that, instead of research, the main emphasis was on desk work, sycophancy and politicking.

With growing disillusionment I began to cut myself off from my colleagues who seemed only interested in idle gossip. I made sure that I did the work assigned to me promptly. As this was very little, I found myself with a lot of spare time to do my own thinking and research. Knowing my introvert nature, my colleagues and superiors also left me alone.

I had long been toying with a curious concept which came to my mind when I studied Einstein's general theory of relativity at Cambridge. As you may be unfamiliar with this theory, let me describe its salient points which were of use to me.

Einstein introduced the idea that gravitation modifies the geometry of space and time. We are familiar with the geometry of Euclid which seems to serve us well in our daily life. Yet, nearly a century and a half ago mathematicians had begun to realise that Euclid's geometry need not be the only logically consistent geometry. Non-Euclidean geometries based on rules different from Euclid's axioms could be thought of. However, Einstein in 1915 was the first scientist to employ these abstract ideas in a physical theory. He argued that massive gravitating objects have non-Euclidean geometries around them—and he gave equations to describe these. Some of his predictions were verified in the second half of the last century.

Take, for instance, light rays which are supposed to travel in straight lines. The meaning and criterion of a straight line are different in different geometries. Near the Sun, its strong gravity will modify the geometry significantly so that, if a light ray passes close to the solar limb, its track will be different from what it would have been in the absence of the Sun. Such differences, although small, were measured and they confirmed the predictions of general relativity.

In the jargon of relativity, we say that the geometry of spacetime is 'curved' instead of 'flat' when

gravitation is present. A two-dimensional flat creature moving on the surface of a sphere is conscious of the curvature of the surface. Imagine a similar curvature in higher dimensions—it is difficult conceptually, but easy mathematically!

Now I will introduce another concept into the picture—that of twist. Have you heard of the Möbius strip? If you wear your belt with one twist you will get this strip. It has many peculiarities. For example, unlike the original belt which had two surfaces, this has only one. If you cut an ordinarily tied belt along a line at half width, you will get two separate belts. Try doing the same with the Möbius strip and you will be in for a surprise.

Now imagine our flat creature crawling in this single surface of the Möbius strip. Suppose he has only one hand say, the left hand. However, if he makes one round of the strip he will find that the one hand he has is his right hand! If you do not believe it try it on a paper strip. To us, observing from the vantage point in a three-dimensional space the creature has undergone a half rotation round an axis passing through his body from head to foot. But the creature is not conscious of this. To him, in his limited two-dimensional perception, this appears as a reflection.

Now imagine a similar twist in our four-dimensional spacetime. Like the creature, we will not be conscious of it, except through similar effects. By going through it, we will appear as our mirror reflections, whereas in fact we are being turned round in high dimensions and showing our 'other side'.

Can we produce such twists in spacetime? It is here that I departed from Einstein's theory and had my own conjecture. I expected that the property of spin found in subatomic elementary particles could generate twists in space. I had the mathematical ideas fully worked out in Cambridge. To put these into practice became possible in my present establishment.

To generate a substantial twist I had to make a beam of elementary particles with spins not randomly oriented but well-coordinated. This is sooner said than done and I will not bore you with the intellectual convulsions I went through. I will only say that I succeeded for the first time about six months ago.

Thanks to the prevailing atmosphere in my lab I was able to construct equipment with almost no interference from anyone. I had erected a small cabin around it and put notices 'top secret', 'dangerous' and 'do not enter' on it. Nobody bothered to ask what I was doing, so long as I kept within my funds. In a highly bureaucratic system it is possible to wangle things if one is clever enough. The alternative was to submit a proposal, then have it evaluated and most likely rejected by a committee which would rely on so-called expert opinion from people long past the stage of active research.

My first experiment was with my wrist watch. Apart from a mirror reflection I wanted to see whether its mechanism would survive the transformation. It did. This was important because my next step involved live objects. I experimented on insects, butterflies, guinea pigs, etc. When I found that even living objects survive the experiments, I decided to take the final step.

Knowing the many possible outcomes of such a step I wrote all the details and kept them in a safe place. I set up video and tape equipment to 'observe' and 'hear' the outcome as I submitted myself to the reflecting machine.

My experience as I went through the beam produced by the machine was surprisingly normal. Never was I conscious of being twisted or contorted. There was no discomfort as I walked round the beam. I spoke out whatever I felt and this was duly taped.

As I came out I found that I had indeed been transformed. Not only that, my dress, wristwatch, pen, everything on me went through that change. My brain had also been transformed so that I found it difficult to read normal writing. All operations which distinguished between left and right were confusing. I had to think which way to turn the screwed top of a bottle in order to open it—for my new instinct dictated the wrong way. But physically I was fit and felt my left hand to be much stronger and

versatile than my right hand.

~~Then, to complete my experiment I went through the beam again. As expected I regained my usual form as I emerged, but with one important fact which I had anticipated.~~

My brain retained no memory of my reflected state!

It was only through the evidence recorded during my transformation by the various instruments that I could convince myself that it had in fact happened. I looked at notes made by me in the reflected state. I could not read them until I saw them reflected in a mirror!

This erasing of memory of what happened in the reflected state is an unsatisfactory feature of my experiment which I have not so far been able to rectify. When I change myself back to my usual form I will have totally lost all memory of my encounter with you tonight!

As I listened to Ajit's weird tale I had the feeling that all this was not real—but a mixture of Lewis Carroll, H.G. Wells, and the Arabian Nights. But I was looking at the living proof quietly sipping porridge in front of me. To set any remaining doubts to rest, I asked Ajit the question which had been bothering me:

“Is this *Ganesha* also a reflection?”

“Why don't you verify it yourself? You live right above the museum.” Ajit's suggestion was a practical one.

I took a bunch of keys and we both went down to the British India Section. By the time I reached for the cabinet where the *Ganesha* was supposed to be locked in, I knew what I would see.

The cabinet was empty!

“So I was not such a generous donor after all!” quipped Ajit, as I returned to my study after placing Ajit's ‘gift’ in the empty cabinet. He must have somehow pinched the original and subjected it to his infernal experiment.

“What about Pramod's performance?” I asked. Surely, all that I had learnt so far shed considerable light on the mystery.

“Pramod came to see me on the eve of the test match. He was very depressed. He knew that he was past his prime as a test match bowler and that his inclusion in the final test was not purely on merit. I was something he then said that gave me a daring idea. ‘There are no surprises left in my bowling,’ was what he moaned about.

“Suppose I turned him into his reflection? I thought he would bowl as a left-hander but not as an ordinary left-handed bowler would. All his actions would be that of a right-hander reflected in the mirror. In any case, none of the batsmen expected him to bowl like that.

“I drugged his coffee, and while he was unconscious, subjected him to my experiment. Taking him to the lab in spite of the tight security was no problem. I had discovered the loopholes in the security system long before. After the experiment I left him on his hotel bed.

“Early next morning, I had a frantic phone call from him. He was hysterical—he felt weak, could not read, found letters inside out ... He wanted to know if he had eaten something at my place last night that caused this trouble. He was scared to call the doctor lest he was declared unfit for the match.”

“I rushed to his room to reassure him. His right hand had gone weak and he could not bowl. What about his left hand? Surprisingly it was in good condition and I suggested he bowled with it. He found the idea ludicrous—but the more he swung his hand the more reasonable it appeared to him. He suggested that he should have net practice. As his team-mates were still in their beds, I offered to take him to the practice enclosure. This turned out much better since his new-found prowess could be kept secret from everybody until the crucial moment. You know the rest,” Ajit concluded.

“Was it you who spirited him away after the match?” I asked.

“Yes. And it was I who telephoned to give the message to the newspaper. I had kept him in my flat for a couple of days. When he recovered sufficiently I transformed him back to normal and delivered

him at Bow Street. Of course he had totally forgotten all his traumatic experiences. "I felt it unwise to tell him the truth."

As a good scientific theory can explain many phenomena so were all my mysteries resolved by this remarkable discovery of Ajit. I could also see why he did not want to eat with knife and fork. An and I would have detected his awkwardness. As it was, we did comment on his difficulty in eating with fingers but he had a reasonable explanation for it. What really caught him by surprise was Ken's request for an autograph. Even signing one's name can be very difficult if your brain insists on projecting all letters the wrong way round!

"Ajit, you must publish all your findings at once. You are sure to get the Nobel Prize." This was my advice as a layman.

"No, not yet, John," Ajit replied. "You know I am a perfectionist and I find the loss of memory a grave defect in my work. Until I remove this defect I am not prepared to announce my discovery to the world."

"But Ajit, let me offer you some practical advice. You are playing with unknown laws of nature. That you have achieved success so far does not guarantee that you will succeed again. Wouldn't it be wise to keep a clear record of all you have done in a safe place?"

"Of course, I have done that. After reading my account any scientifically competent group can repeat my experiment. As regards your statement about future success, I do not deny it. But I am in the process of modifying my experiment which I feel will soon remove the final blemish. Indeed I would not have revealed to you my progress so far, but for my impish desire to surprise the only real friend I have."

I tried to argue with him; but as I had feared, once Ajit's mind was made up it was impossible to change it.

A few months later I received a phone call from Ajit's lab. I was hurriedly summoned to see the Director.

With ill forebodings, I knocked on the door. In his office were sitting the Director, a doctor in a white coat, a non-descript man and Ajit. I breathed a sigh of relief—I had feared to see him dead.

But my relief was only short-lived. Ajit did not recognize me. Indeed, as the doctor explained, Ajit was suffering from a totally irreversible amnesia. It was only because they had found my name and telephone number in his office that his lab could contact me.

"Has he left any written records of what he was doing?" I asked cautiously. I remembered with chagrin that I had forgotten to ask Ajit in what 'safe place' he had kept his records.

"If he did, we have unfortunately no means of knowing," sighed the Director. "You see, whatever experiment he was doing blew up and shattered everything in his room."

"He is lucky to be alive," commented the doctor. What an ironical choice of words! For a genius like Ajit this loss of memory was worse than death.

"What about his house?" I asked, hoping that there might be something there.

"A typical bachelor's mess," commented the non-descript man. "We searched his flat with a fine-toothcomb. There is nothing there. Indeed we called you here to ask whether you could throw any light on the matter."

"Sorry, I can't help you there. I am afraid Ajit, though a good friend of mine, never considered me educated enough to share his scientific confidences."

As I drove home, I wondered whether truth would have been more convincing than lie. I decided the negative. After all, my unscientific description would have sounded too fantastic to be credible.

Even today I find it fantastic but not incredible! For, you see, I have a concrete proof lying in my museum. It is the rare idol of *Ganesha*.

Part II

The Novel: The Return of Vaman (1986)

The Container

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1 The Transfer

‘The seat belt sign has been switched off ... but it is advisable to keep the seat belts fastened during flight ...’

The announcement was hardly over before the passenger in seat 59A sprang up and rushed to the front of the plane. The stewardess was startled by this burst of activity ... but soon ceased worrying. The passenger entered the toilet.

‘Took him for a highjacker, did you, Sheela?’ smiled Jamshed twirling a moustache that would have done justice to Air India’s Maharajah.

‘Well, one never can tell these days, can one?’ observed Sheela pointing to 60A. ‘Look over there. That one is up to no good.’

Without turning his head Jamshed managed to look.

‘You are nervous these days, Sheela. Won’t be surprised if you start doubting our captain’s intentions next! ... 60A has had one too many, that’s all.’

60A was a burly European. When all the announcements were over he too rose and made his way to the toilet. Unbuttoned shirt and denims ... his hefty, masculine body seemed to burst out of his clothes. But at that moment all of it was shaking and tottering.

By now *Emperor Vikramaditya* was well set on its flight path at 30,000 feet. That the flight was steady could be seen from the unruffled levels of drink in the glasses resting on the passengers’ table. But 60A was nevertheless finding his progress towards the toilet difficult.

He finally reached his destination and began struggling with the door handle. Jamshed tapped him gently.

‘Sir, this toilet is occupied. There are more toilets on the lower deck in case you wish ...’

‘*Danke! Nein!* ... Thank you ... Will wait here.’

Looking down at the narrow, winding staircase to the lower deck, Jamshed could appreciate 60A’s point of view. He was on the point of offering his steward’s seat to the passenger when the toilet door opened. 59A emerged and, casting a look of disapproval at 60A, made his way back to the seat. 60A rushed in.

‘Come, time to serve the snacks’, Jamshed activated Sheela.

When 60A came out, both Jamshed and Sheela were preoccupied with arranging trays for Executive Class passengers: they did not notice the bulging pockets of the emerging passenger. And,

of course, thanks to the fuss created by 60A, they had failed to notice another detail. The brown travel pouch that 59A had taken into the toilet was no longer with him when he came out.

The London-bound jumbo reached Delhi on time. The passenger who had boarded the plane at Bombay and occupied 59A deplaned, but by now the occupant of 60A was snoring in contented fashion. He knew that many a collector would happily part with a fortune to acquire that brown travel pouch now resting safe in his briefcase.

2 The Find

The sudden and unexpected ringing of the telephone shook Arul.

Who could be calling at this unearthly hour? It was 6 a.m. For the last hour and a half Arul had been busy debugging his computer programme. Despite several attempts, the monitor of his terminal kept telling him that his instructions could not be carried out. Painstakingly, he had examined the logic of his subroutines, the numerical codes for solving his equations, the data points ... all seemed correct. Yet this idiotic computer refused to accept his programme.

Yes. Idiotic! That is what a computer is, despite its advanced technology. Arul had always said so to the computer buffs in the Institute. No doubt the computer did millions of operations per second and stored billions of information bits for instant retrieval; and granted also that, but for its help, many of today's outstanding problems (including his own) would remain unsolved. But still, the computer was basically an idiot that did only what it was told to do. A fast and efficient, but unthinking assistant. That, in the last analysis, was what a computer was designed to be Otherwise it would not have stopped at some trivial error of programming. It should have pointed out where the error was ... the obstinate moron. But who on earth was ringing at this hour? The Institute's telephone exchange did not start functioning before 8 a.m. and to avoid the bother of outside disturbances Arul preferred to work in the early hours of the morning. Whoever was ringing must be in the Institute, and using the internal line. Arul picked up the receiver. He was right.

'Dr Arul?' a crisp voice called.

'Yes, speaking.'

'Duty officer Shirke speaking, Sir! Trunk call for you from Bangalore ... would you come down please?'

'Coming, Shirke! Hold on.' Arul rushed out.

Arul was uneasy in his mind as the lift descended to the ground floor. His father, now in his seventy-third year, was in frail health, but he insisted on living alone in his sprawling house in Malleswaram, surrounded by his rose garden. The old man would never give it up for a box-like flat on the tenth floor of a Bombay skyscraper.

Shirke, in his khaki uniform, was standing near the reception, holding the receiver of a green phone. This is where all outside calls to the Institute were directed after office hours. The other phone, blue in colour, was for internal communication only, which Shirke had used to call Arul.

'Hallo! Hallo! This is Arul ... Dr Arul speaking.' He could hear the operator's voice clearly as she said, 'PP call to you sir! Hallo Bangalore ... go ahead please.'

'Speak up please,' Arul shouted impatiently as he heard some indistinct tones at the other end.

'Raghavan, here, Dr Arul.' The line was now clear ... and Arul was relieved to hear those words too. Raghavan! Then the call was official and had nothing to do with his father. For Raghavan was the manager of his project at Gauribidnur, where he was planning some highly sensitive experiments to test the law of gravity. In the past, too, Raghavan had telephoned from Bangalore to report on the progress of the project—but never so early in the morning. Why? He was given the answer straightaway.

‘I phoned because a totally unforeseen development has taken place. We have just discovered ...’

Raghavan kept on talking and Arul listened incredulously. Even the stoic Shirke could sense his rising excitement.

‘Is Mr Jagdale in?’

‘May I know who is calling sir?’

This counter-question always amused Arul. It clearly implied that the answer to the original question depended on the caller’s identity. Why should it? But that is the way the Secretariat functions. He knew that logic and commonsense, so essential to science, need not hold sway in the corridors of power. He thus avoided treading those corridors—unless forced to do so, as on that particular day.

Raghavan’s message made it imperative for Arul to leave for Gauribidnur immediately—which meant taking the afternoon flight to Bangalore. A trip to the airline counter had given him the disturbing news that, as Mister Ordinary Citizen, he was seventy-fourth on the waiting list, unless, of course, he could somehow get the VIP quota. VIPs, of course, being those with professed dedication to serving ordinary citizens like himself.

Vilas Jagdale, the Revenue Secretary and one-time classmate, was a close friend of Arul. It was to him that Arul turned in desperation for a confirmed seat from the VIP quota.

‘Sir, Mr Jagdale is not in his room right now. He has gone for a meeting with C.S.’

Arul knew well from experience that this reply was one of the five stock replies. Although he knew the question to be useless, he nevertheless asked, ‘And when do you expect him back?’

‘Can’t say! But he was to leave on a tour of Baramati with the Minister at 3 p.m.’

This was important news. He must get hold of Vilas before he took off for Baramati. Arul left his number for Vilas to call back. But he knew that, with a few exceptions, the bureaucrat does not believe in returning calls, just as he does not believe in replying to letters. So he kept calling Jagdale’s number every fifteen minutes. Finally, he succeeded at one o’clock. Thanks to Jagdale’s intercession Arul was given a confirmed seat at last. To give the bureaucrat his due, Jagdale had a high regard for Arul as a scientist.

It was three-thirty in the afternoon when Arul finally packed his bag and set off for the airport. The plane was scheduled to depart at six and he was to report seventy-five minutes before departure. As he entered the terminal at four forty-five on the dot, he heard the announcement, ‘We regret to announce a delay in our flight 107 to Bangalore. This flight is now estimated to depart at eight-thirty p.m., twenty-thirty hours.’

There was, of course, no trace of regret in the announcer’s voice. For her this was merely a routine announcement. In any case, a monopolistic airline can afford to be callous towards passengers.

There was a time when Arul would get upset by this callousness. He had even gone as far as the General Manager on a couple of occasions to register his protests. But experience had taught him that it served no purpose, and only resulted in a waste of his time and energy. So Arul had grown not only philosophical about these delays, but had also learnt to put them to practical use. Selecting a corner chair he fished out a few papers from his briefcase and was soon engrossed in calculations.

The estimated time of departure of flight 107 as usual turned out to be optimistic. The airbus finally took off at ten o’clock and, by the time Arul entered the arrivals terminal in Bangalore, the clock was showing eleven-thirty. The faithful Raghavan was waiting outside.

Arul’s suppressed excitement finally found expression as their jeep sped eastwards on the highway.

‘Let’s hear about your treasure chest, Raghavan. Begin at the beginning—your voice was not very distinct over the phone.’

At Arul’s bidding Raghavan began in his rapid fire English, intensified all the more by the

momentous news he wished to convey.

~~‘Dr Arul, I called you because during last night’s digging we encountered an unexpected obstacle ... You are aware of how we are working round the clock to catch up with our schedule ... last night we were down to twenty-eight metres and were planning to finish off the remaining four metres by dawn. But at about thirty metres’ depth we found a layer of metal ... metal so tough that our drill simply bounced off it.’~~

Arul whistled, but did not interrupt Raghavan’s narrative which had further accelerated.

‘This metallic layer turned out to be square-shaped, about three metres in size. Since the well we are digging is of a wider cross section I decided on the spot to keep digging round the obstacle ... for that was possible.’

‘Well done!’ Arul knew that he could rely on Raghavan’s initiative, which is why he had selected him to oversee this project over a host of qualified graduates.

‘As we went further down, we discovered that this metallic obstacle was not a natural one. It extended uniformly down to about three metres ... in fact it turned out to be a perfect cube ... and appears to be made of some unknown alloy.’

‘Cubical shape?’ Arul had heard Raghavan mention this over the phone in the morning. But somehow the significance of it had not registered with him then. No natural rock could be exactly cubical in shape.

‘Exactly a cube, Dr Arul,’ emphasized Raghavan, who had obviously thought about this aspect. ‘I have had it measured very accurately ... it is slightly less than three metres in size. Judging from the sound it makes when tapped, it appears to be hollow. But perhaps it is a container for something valuable. You know, if this box were in Bombay, an entire family could live in it.’

‘It is all very well for you to criticize Bombay’s overcrowding. But remember that Bangalore, as the fastest growing city in India, is heading the same way ... But seriously, Raghavan, have you opened the container, or at least had it lifted? You have the big crane still with you.’

Raghavan had suddenly gone quiet. Finally, he managed to blurt out, ‘No, Arul, I have done nothing ... this whole business seems to me too queer to handle on my own.’

‘But why?’

‘Well, to begin with, there is no lid to this box! Moreover there are strange letters and figures all over its sides.’

‘Could you identify the script?’

‘No! Today I spent several hours in Bangalore’s libraries. I showed the script, which I had copied on my writing pad, to some experts. But apparently no one had seen it before. And in the meantime fresh trouble is brewing on the site, which is why I am glad you are here.’

‘What’s the problem?’ Arul had a feeling that Raghavan had throughout been working his way to this point. He waited for the punch line.

‘One of the technicians on the site had seen an English film about a box found during an excavation in Egypt. When the box was opened ... so the story goes ... a live mummy emerged.’

‘Hollywood nonsense’, muttered Arul. ‘Surely you don’t accept such fantasy?’

‘I don’t, but this silly ass talked about it at tea, and now no labourer is willing to come near our pit. The work is at a standstill.’

Arul gave vent to an expletive. But he still had a feeling that Raghavan had more to say, something that he was hesitating to air. To draw him out he asked, ‘How do you react to this development?’

Raghavan was quiet for a while. Then he mumbled, ‘I don’t buy this mummy nonsense, of course. But you should see the drawings on this container.’

‘What about them?’

‘I wouldn’t call them exactly pleasant. In fact ... all of us at the site agree that they look ... well

... positively sinister.'

3 The Archaeologist

The lights had barely changed when the red car in the right lane raced away, making a smooth turn of ninety degrees. It was well past the intersection before the rest of the traffic recovered from this demonstration of boom and speed. Then the normal traffic lumbered along Aurobindo Marg.

'That is what I call a car ... what we drive here is a bullock cart,' muttered the Sardarji in the Punjabi Hindi of Delhi taxi drivers.

'Must belong to some foreign diplomat,' suggested his passenger in envious tones.

'No sir! The car is foreign, but the owner is a Delhiwalla ... all of us in Delhi know this car. It has been on the streets for the last five months.' As if inspired by the performance of the foreign car, the taxi driver stepped on the accelerator, but this hardly changed the speed of his dilapidated Ambassador.

The red Jaguar had meanwhile turned off the ring road towards Vasant Vihar. Navin Chandra Pande was justifiably proud of this acquisition of his. Ever since his school days Navin had been fascinated by speed—from racing motorcycles to fast trains, fast aeroplanes and fast cars. It had always been his ambition to own a car—not a Rolls or a Mercedes which are merely status symbols—but a really smart, fast car. During his extensive travels abroad Navin had inspected many models and studied several motoring magazines. And finally he was captivated by this bright red Jaguar. He willingly paid the heavy import duties and brought his toy home, a toy that soon became famous in the capital.

Having crossed two lanes of the smart Vasant Vihar residential area, Navin turned his car into the driveway of an elegant house and came to a halt a few metres from the garage. He took out a small box-like instrument from his pocket. It had two buttons; Navin pressed the one on the left. The garage door went up smoothly, making room for Navin to drive in.

A well equipped home in Vasant Vihar, an imported sports car, foreign trips ... one would have thought that Navin was a film star or a successful industrialist. But the reality was otherwise. For despite his liking for modern conveniences, Navin was basically interested in old things—the older the better. He was an expert and highly successful consultant to the Archaeology Department. As he always pointed out, the latest devices of modern science are indispensable for research into ancient relics. The secret of Navin's achievements lay in his appreciation of the latest techniques in archaeology which he used with great flair. The numerous additions to the museums run by the Archaeological Survey bore ample testimony to his efforts.

However, even an internationally recognized expert in archaeology like Navin would have found hard to explain how he had acquired all his wealth. Had he been married, he could have pointed to a wealthy father-in-law as the source of his material welfare. But Navin regarded himself as one of nature's bachelors, one who went as far as acquiring a bevy of girlfriends, but not a wife. So he had to explain it all as inherited income and ensure adequately that the Income Tax Department would not probe the matter too deeply.

'Well, Ram Sevak, what's new?' Navin asked his usual question as he threw himself down on his favourite couch. Ram Sevak, his trusted servant, was already setting up the decanter on the low table by the side. He knew that his master enjoyed a 'scotch on the rocks' after returning from work.

'Miss Runa called, sir. She has invited you for dinner. So I have not bothered to cook anything here.' Ram Sevak was correct in his assessment, for Runa happened to be the current favourite amongst Navin's friends.

'And, sir, a peon delivered this letter for you', Ram Sevak added, pointing to an envelope on the

drinks tray.

‘Fine, Ram Sevak ... go and enjoy yourself for the evening.’ Navin’s face was benign in anticipation of his own enjoyment later in the day.

‘Thank you, sir.’ Ram Sevak had already telephoned a friend to get tickets for a film in a cinema house in Connaught Place.

As Ram Sevak withdrew, Navin idly reached for the decanter—when he saw the envelope. The sender’s name was not on it, but a look at the monogram embossed on the back brought a frown to the benign face. Reluctantly, he opened the envelope. It contained a typed but unsigned two-line message

It’s been a long time since we met. Must rectify the omission. See you in Sheesh Mahal, Hotel Akbar, 8 p.m.—without fail.

Without fail! Those were the operative words. The summons had come—he had to obey. Navin dialled the phone.

‘Runa? ... Navin here. Yes, I got your message. But ... listen Runa, I just cannot make it tonight. ... Don’t misunderstand Runa, it’s not like that ... Oh, what’s the use!’ he muttered to himself as he heard the abrupt click at the other end.

The Swiss cuckoo clock reminded Navin that it was seven-fifty. He got up to leave, his drink untasted.

At eight on the dot Navin entered the Sheesh Mahal restaurant. The dining room was only sparsely occupied as it was too early for the regular clientele to finish their pre-dinner drinking at the bar. It was thus easy for Navin to locate the person he had come to meet—a short, stout man in a blue safari suit.

‘Welcome, Navinbhai ... punctual as usual! So what will be the order of the day—drinks, dinner, or discussion? What comes first?’ The man was smiling, but Navin knew what lay beneath that urban exterior.

‘Dinner, discussion—but no drinks’, he replied in an even tone.

‘Well, you *have* changed! But we shall see about the last part later.’

Navin quietly moved to the buffet table. He was ravenously hungry. His companion, who had to follow a strict diet, watched enviously as Navin tucked into the food. It was half an hour before Navin felt the need to talk. Looking up from a plate containing four different sweet delicacies, he turned to the business of the day.

‘Pyarelalji, how is your electronics business?’

‘Pyarelal was moodlily stirring his black coffee. ‘It is so-so ... but I came to ask you how things are at your end. What is new? ... Or rather, what is old? That would be more correct in your case.’

‘Nothing exceptional’, was Navin’s non-committal reply.

‘But surely, you are understating, Navin? You know how great the demand is. I need hardly remind you of the rewards ... how about an AC and a stereo system for that red car of yours?’

Pyarelal knew Navin’s weaknesses. In fact, he knew the weaknesses of all his contacts, which was why he had been so successful in life.

‘I have to be careful, Pyarelalji’, Navin replied, dealing with an *eclair*. ‘You know how I was nearly nabbed after that incident on *Vikramaditya*. Somebody followed me from Palam to my home—I am sure of it.’

‘Nonsense! You are becoming nervous without reason. These CBI fellows are absolute fools—otherwise they would have got us long ago. No, my clients abroad have long waited for some really major stuff from you. Not since those Madhya Pradesh relics ...’

‘I will try. Perhaps something from the Gupta period will turn up in Bihar. But I don’t think that

would fetch much', Navin broke in.

'You need not worry about prices—that's my concern. Look at this list now.'

Pyarelal produced a typed list and the two were soon engrossed in deep discussion.

At about ten o'clock Navin got up. 'Well I'll see what I can do. Meanwhile, goodbye.'

'What! No drinks? Come on, let's have one to seal our agreement.'

'Not now, I am driving.' Navin turned round and moved towards the exit.

'The fellow *has* changed!' muttered Pyarelal as he, too, followed Navin.

Neither of them saw the man with a military bearing get up from a neighbouring table.

4 The News Hounds

'Raghavan, this takes the whole matter beyond our jurisdiction, damn it.' Arul was naturally peeved at this further interruption in his project. Raghavan nodded and looked at his watch.

It was three-thirty in the morning. Though it was dark, arrangements had been made to continue digging under floodlights. Round the clock work was necessary to catch up with the schedule of the gravity experiment, but tonight no work had been done. The floodlights nevertheless operated to keep the mysterious cube under scrutiny.

'Neither you nor I can claim to be an archaeologist', Arul continued, 'but even we can see that this is not from recent times. The script is totally alien. What is more, the alloy—it probably contains iron—is unknown to our technology. Look how brightly it reflects light even after heaven knows how many centuries.'

'How many, do you reckon?' Raghavan was gradually leading to an issue that he did not want to mention directly. He hoped Arul would come round to it himself.

'Can't say! But I think—no, I am pretty sure, this alloy does not belong to our post-industrial revolution times. In fact, I can safely bet that the people who made it were technologically advanced, even well beyond our level. Isn't it intriguing that the exterior of this box is so smooth that we cannot detect its lid?'

'Indeed it is! But then, these people must belong to an era well before our relics of Harappa or Egypt.' Raghavan scratched his tousled head.

'Well said! This civilization must ante-date them by several thousand years. Somehow, I imagine all its relics were wiped out and we lost contact with it—except for this container here. Wonder what is in it.'

As Arul carefully inspected the walls of the container, Raghavan was reminded of his favourite sleuth in fiction. Sherlock Holmes would have similarly examined the surroundings of a place where crime had been committed.

Arul suddenly burst out laughing. As Raghavan looked anxiously, he continued, 'So much for your demons! These are not of flesh and blood.' Arul was pointing to the sinister figures inscribed on the cube. This was where Raghavan had wanted to channel their line of inquiry. What were the figures?

'Of course they are mechanical monsters—robots', Arul seemed quite sure.

'But they look sinister, don't they?' Raghavan was not sure how Arul would react to this remark.

Surprisingly, Arul took it seriously. 'I agree with you, Raghavan. They do look sinister. But then, we may be influenced by our ideas of what a benign robot should look like. On the other hand, I suspect that the "artist" who drew these figures shared our reaction. Did he dislike them too, I wonder?'

Emboldened by this sympathetic response, Raghavan advanced his own conjecture.

'One normally does not associate feelings with robots—but somehow these robots don't appear to be the benevolent kind, do they?'

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