

The Comet II

James's Doubt

Sir John Macpherson and James Forsyth had finished their discussions. It was 1 a.m. when Sir John dropped James at his hotel. There was hardly any crowd on the street. The sky was covered with stars. James started thinking of Comet Dutta. It was heading for a collision with the earth. Looking at the peaceful sky, no one could believe this would happen. So James wondered if he had made his calculations right.

The Conference

Sir John had organised a conference of scientists. James found all the experts listed by him were there. Besides, Sir John's special invitee, Manoj Dutta, was also present. The conference lasted one week. It continued in total secrecy. First the experts checked again and again James's calculation. Latest observations of Comet Dutta were made. The scientists came to the conclusion that there was no escape from the comet's direct hit at the earth. There was a small chance that the comet may only graze the atmosphere of the earth. In that case, loss of life and property won't be total.

The Course of Action

The scientists rejected defensive measures. They decided to take offensive action. The comet could be deflected from its path by giving it a push. This can be done with the help of nuclear power. But a huge amount of nuclear power would be needed for this purpose. The nuclear payload placed in a spacecraft should be taken near the comet. There it should be exploded by a remote control. Finally a time-table was drawn up for operation.

Sir John's Doubt

Duttada asked Sir John if he thought the project would be successful. He (Sir John) was in doubt. So he replied by saying that he would buy Christmas presents after December 15 only. By that time it would have been known whether the calamity had been averted.

Duttada's Return

Duttada paid a visit to British Isles for two weeks after the conference. He visited observatories and exchanged views with astronomers. Thus he had a pleasant time. Then he returned to Calcutta. He was greeted by a large crowd of friends, social leaders, students and hangers-on. He was garlanded and the press asked him many questions.

Duttada's Arriving Home

There was another crowd waiting for him under a pandal when he reached home. Indrani Debi, his wife, had arranged a yajna. She had called the priests to bless him. Duttada asked her if she had done so because he had come from a foreign country. But going abroad was no longer a taboo. He told her she knew that he didn't believe in these meaningless rituals. His younger brother said that they were very disturbed since he had discovered the comet. They were all waiting for him to perform the yajna. Duttada found no advantage in such a religious ceremony.

Duttada's Views on the Comet

Sibaji said that the comet will not cause any bad effects on the earth because of the yajna. At this Duttada lost his temper. He told his brother that it was superstition. Such a belief could be forgiven in the olden times. This is because people did not know what comets were. But it is not so in modern times. The movements of comets are forecast exactly. It has also been proved that their visits have no connection with disasters on the earth.

Duttada's Relation with Sir John

Duttada had regular correspondence with Sir John after his return from London. They appreciated each other's qualities. So they became good friends. Sir John admired Duttada's scientific outlook. The latter admired Sir John's discipline and efficiency. They never mentioned the Project Light Brigade in their letters. However, Sir John gave sufficient hints about it for Duttada to understand.

Project Light Brigade

Comet Dutta was heading for the earth. It had neither broken up nor evaporated. The scientists of the Light Brigade knew that threat of collision was real. In the middle of October, Duttada got a letter from Sir John. Among other things, Sir John had said that the charge of the Light Brigade had begun. But there were many unanswered questions.

Duttada's Anxiety

Duttada could not share his anxiety about the comet with anybody. He had to take part in puja ceremonies. He had to celebrate Diwali and other festivals. His only relaxation was in the company of his grandson, Khoka. He spent his nights looking at the stars through 'Dibya'. He was regularly following the course of the comet. It was now clearly visible even to the naked eye.

Sir John's Messenger

On November 18, a special messenger came from the British Council. He had

brought a message from Sir John. When Duttada read it he lost all his laziness. He rushed to his favourite rasgoolla shop. Sir John's message was "I am confident now of buying my Christmas presents on December 15." On December 15, Comet Dutta came nearest the earth. It was 80,000 kilometres away. Many people saw and admired it. But only a few knew that they had been quite close to total destruction.

Duttada's and Indrani Debi's Different Attitudes

Duttada told his wife that the comet had come and gone. But there was no disaster on the earth because of this. She replied that she agreed with this. But he should know how it was averted. Duttada was surprised as to how she could know it. He had never mentioned Project Light Brigade to her. On being asked, she said that there was no disaster because of the yajna in their house. Duttada remarked that he never performed the yajna. Indrani Debi told him that she had found a way out. Khoka, their grandson, became his representative at the yajna. Indrani Debi was feeling very happy.

The Contemporary Society

Duttada thought of Khoka performing the yajna uttering mantras. Then he thought of the scientists at the conference. It seemed difficult to believe that both pictures were different aspects of contemporary society. There is a gulf that separates the rich from the poor ; the educated from the illiterate. But the gap between the rational and the superstitious seemed to him far wider.