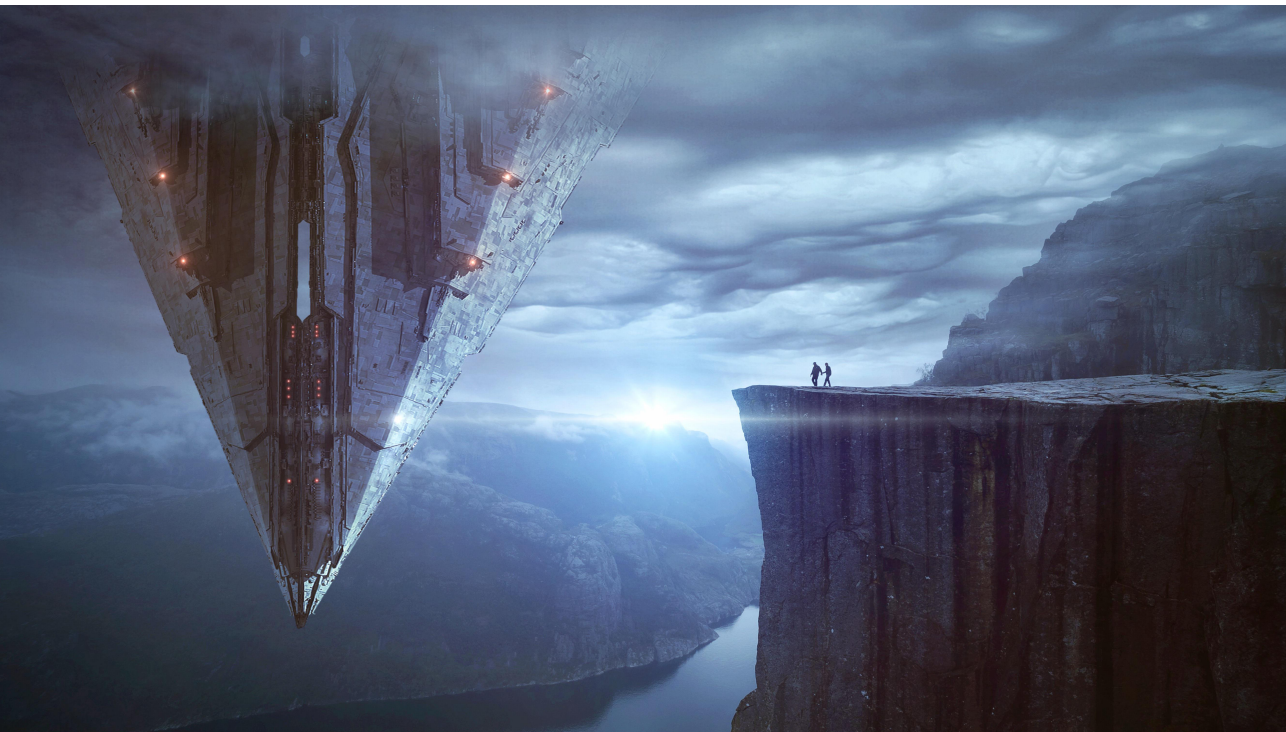


Empires of the Spirit

Science Fiction from India



InterNova

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International Science Fiction

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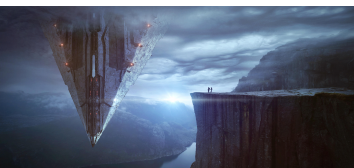
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Editorial

MICHAEL K. IWOLEIT

My first encounter with contemporary Indian literature was *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947 – 1997*, edited by Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, a celebration of the first fifty years of India's independence through its literature that has spawned my interest in Indian culture in general and consequential in literature, arts and culture of the world outside of the Western sphere. (*InterNova* is one fruit of these interests and its host project, the *World Culture Hub*, is an ongoing and still admittedly embryonic attempt to share some of my findings). Salman Rushdie has been much criticized for his thesis, elaborated in the introduction, that Indian writing in English is superior to most of the contemporary literature in the vernacular languages of India. Many readers have perceived Amit Chaudhuri's – in my opinion richer and more rewarding – anthology *The Vintage of Book of Modern Indian Literature* (2001), although it was not intended this way, as an attempt to prove the opposite.

It can't be denied that through the work of pioneering Indian authors writing in English such as Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan and contemporary practitioners, many of them expatriates living and writing between the cultures, such as Amitav Ghosh (in discussion for the Nobel Prize in Literature this year), Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy and of course Salman Rushdie himself, the literature of the subcontinent has gained international recognition. I have read enough translations from Indian languages, however, to confirm that Rushdie's thesis is at least doubtful. There are many vernacular writers that stand comparison with Saadat Hasan Manto, one

of the world's greatest short story writers and the only vernacular writer present in Rushdie's/West's anthology. Some of my personal favorites include Sunil Gangopadhyay, Nirmal Verma and Qurratulain Hyder (the latter the author of *River of Fire*, one of the monuments of post-independence Indian literature that easily matches any of the best books by the better-known Anglo-Indian writers). If controversies and differing views like this prove one thing then it's that Indian literature and culture is too rich, too many-voiced, too contradictory to narrow it down to simple formulas.

In the brilliant BBC documentary *India: The Empire of the Spirit* (1991) author and presenter Michael Wood quotes at the outset a remark by Mark Twain from the end of the 19th century: "The Indian may seem poor to we rich Westerners but in matters of the spirit it is we who are the paupers and they who are millionaires." Admirers of the thousands-of-years old history of India's religions and spirituality that the country is still most spontaneously associated with have added: "History is full of empires of the sword, but India alone created an empire of the spirit." The traditions of its beliefs, manners, customs, and folklore are still vivid in India today – including their downsides such as the caste system, religious conflicts and the position of women – and have a bearing even on the lives of contemporary secular Indians. Viewing India only in this light, however, can easily be misleading as the country has not only been one of the cradles of civilization but also one of the cradles of science. The decimal number system and its numerals are still called Arab numbers in the West, but are actually of Indian origin and the Arabs, equally deft as inventors and intermediaries in the golden age of their civilization, were just clever enough to realize their advantages and spread them through the Muslim ruled world as far as to the doorsteps of Europe. The averagely educated Westerner is still little aware of the accomplishments of ancient Indian science which include, among others, one of the greatest intellectual achievements of mankind, the ingenious Sanskrit grammar of Pāṇini (520-460 MC), which might well be regarded as the earliest precursor of algorithmic computing and was, in comparison to

similar developments in Europe, a baffling two and a half thousand years ahead of its time.

As India is on the verge of becoming one of the world's economic, political, and cultural superpowers, along with China likely destined to be one of the domineering nations in the world in the second half of the 21st century and maybe among the ground breakers for several centuries of a global Asian dominance to come, the awareness of such achievements and traditions is beginning to merge in the most surprising ways with a swift industrial, technological, and scientific development. Several contributions to this *InterNova* issue try, each in their own way, to reconcile the spiritual with the scientific approach to the world, which are both present in Indian culture. It would thus be premature to view the concept of science fiction, as presented in our little snapshot of Indian sf, as somewhat outdated. The Indian science fiction community has clearly tied in with the American science fiction of the 1940ies and 1950ies by assigning it not only an artistic and literary but also a social purpose: to promote science and to encourage reflection about the consequences of technological and scientific change. Science fiction in India is in service of a transition era that might be even more profound and critical than the transition from an agricultural to an industrial state that at times has almost torn China apart. India, the empire of the spirit, is turning into a high-tech country still deeply rooted in its multifaceted cultural heritage and it is discovering science fiction as a means to explore what it could mean to be an Indian in the future.

Being a science fiction enthusiast it was only natural that my general interest in Indian literature lead to a growing curiosity about the state of science fiction writing in India in particular. My contacts to India date back to 2005 when me and my co-editors of *InterNova's* German sister magazine *Nova* made our first attempt with establishing an international science fiction magazine and I was immediately convinced of the potential of Indian science fiction by the excellent works of Vandana Singh, Anil Menon and others. When I restarted *InterNova* in 2022 among my first activities was to re-contact

the Indian science fiction community and collected material for a theme issue on Indian science fiction. It was a long way and lots of hard work to finally present you the result of our efforts now. I owe special thanks to Dr. Srinarahari of the Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies and Dr. Arvind Mishra of the Indian Science Fiction Writers' Association and of course all the contributors to this issue. Speaking of which: one special feature of *InterNova* #7 was not planned but I'm happy that it came about. The fiction part has almost completely been provided by female writers and I'm sure that the only young man present will not mind the good company he is in.

It would be an additional benefit if this issue would inspire readers to further delve into science fiction from India and Indian literature and culture in general. Maybe they will gain a similar insight that I had during work on this and similar projects: The first step to understand a different culture is not to become an expert but to learn enough that you get an idea of the amount of your ignorance.

Michael K. Iwoleit
October 2025

An Unrequited Question

PRAGYA GAUTAM

Ms. Anubha had left her home. She was leaving for the university early that day, at 9:00 am. She had hardly opened the door of her car when she heard a scream from her home.

"Mangala? What has happened to you?" She rushed back into her house calling out and was taken aback as she glanced inside. Mangala, her maid, had been tightly captured in Peter's arms. Mangala had been busy with house chores when Peter came from behind and ...

Anubha dragged him back by grabbing his golden hair and pulling with full strength. He fell down on the floor like a collapsed tree. Mangala was dumbfounded. She began to cry.

"Madam, I won't come here to work anymore. Please find someone else ..." She was sobbing.

"It's fine, Mangala," Ms. Anubha replied. "It will be better for you."

Anubha made her drink some water and saw her off forever. She was getting late for the meeting. Only for this important meeting had she left early today, otherwise Mangala would have left by 10:00 am, after finishing her household chores. And Peter? Only today had she made him stay back home, even though he usually accompanied her everywhere. And now this had happened, of all days. She was fouled up. So many things were going through her mind. She set her car up to auto driving mode and rested her head on the back seat. She was fond of driving usually, but her hands did not support her and everything seemed dark in front of her eyes. There was a commotion in her brain. It was like clamoring voices echoing through her skull. She reflected back upon her past, many years ago.



Pragya Gautam is a biology lecturer in senior secondary school and a popular science writer. She lives in Kota, Rajasthan. She has published three science fiction collections and a novel. She has also received several awards in the fields of writing and teaching.

Anubha, the only daughter of a rich industrialist, was pretty and had an impressive personality as well. She was snobbish by nature. Numerous marriage proposals were waiting for her when she was twenty two and pursuing her Ph.d. at that time. She regarded marriage as an obstacle, restricting her freedom. However, marriage was taken as an inevitable social custom in those days. That was before marriage institutions had reached their limits, as it is today. But every social being necessarily needs a companion or a partner, regardless of whether he or she gets married or not. Her arrogant nature kept her suitors at bay. Twenty years of her life had passed in search of a partner who would be a combination of wisdom and modesty. She was around forty now. This solitary life had made her introvert and fractious. Now at this mid age she felt meek and insecure despite all luxuries. There was no one to welcome her when she came back from college. Everything was automatic so there was no need of servants. There would be a weird silence inside the house. There were sounds ... but without essence ... lifeless. The wind blowing through the cracks of the glass door of the balcony of her apartment in the 28th floor produced eerie sounds. *Whooo ... hoo ... hooo ... how* ghastly!

One day she unexpectedly happened to meet Kanupriya and her husband Dr. Karamveer. Kanu had been her school mate. They both were extremely happy to see Anubha and visited her home at home the next day without any formal invitation. Kanu was still full of zeal and the versatility of youth. Her inner happiness could easily be seen on her shining skin. On seeing this Anubha became a little upset. Kanu had a treasure trove of stories and gossip to tell but Anubha remained silent.

"We are meeting after many years and you are just sitting there, dear. What has happened to you?" Kanu inquired. "You have been the brightest and most intelligent student. Are you feeling hesitant in front of Karam?"

"No ... no, it's nothing like that ..." Her eyes became watery. She choked. Kanu and Karamveer left. Anubha's fingers touched the smart phone once and went still. Surging emotions began to take the shape of letters on the screen of the

cell phone. Kanu read her messages after coming home. "Your friend needs a companion." Karam suggested.

"She is so stubborn. Would she be compatible with anyone at this age?" She doubted it.

"I have an idea." Karam said and explained it.

"It could be a fantastic way out, Karam", Kanu said zealously. "I'll talk to Anubha."

Kanu had suggested to bring Peter home to Anubha. Peter had been with Anubha for two years now.

Peter was an android, an ultramodern android. Around thirteen years ago from today in 2025, these androids had been launched onto market. Peter was from the third generation of this line of androids. His skin was made of silicone which appeared like human skin that was soft to the touch and completely adaptable to the environment with powerful sensors. His eyes had vision sensors. His silky, lustrous hair supplied energy to his brain, absorbing solar energy. He was capable of thinking and developing new connections in his brain. Besides, he had digital hormones which could react to human emotions. The Neil and Robinson company had introduced both male and female versions onto the market.

Anubha had visited the showroom of this company. She was astonished to see androids of such a wide variety of forms and features. There was a great diversity with regard to eyes, hair color and facial features as if they were representing every part of the world. She chose Peter, a android with golden hair, fair complexion and high intellectual capability.

Two employees from that company came to Anubha's home to commit Peter to her care. They introduced her to Peter very decently.

"Ms. Anubha, meet Peter, your partner, advisor and companion from today onwards," said one of them.

"You can call him a soul mate too," said the other one, grinning mischievously.

"Soul mate? This machine?" she said to herself.

"And Peter, this is Ms. Anubha, your companion. Hope you both will spend a nice time together." Peter stretched out his

hand. Ms. Anubha glanced at a six feet tall, charming young man who was staring at her with vivid eyes. She blushed. She held his hand hesitantly. How gracious! His hand was soft and warm. Compared with how dummy-like he had been standing in the showroom, how lively Peter was looking now!

Peter's presence made her house more homely. His sense of humor was amazing. He had made her feel complete. He had turned into her commendable associate at home as well as outside. Tasks which used to take eight or ten days in the laboratory would now be finished within two days.

His working capability was wonderful. He would draw conclusions within a moment of analyzing lots of data. The lesser work load made Anubha think more about herself. This was necessary too as Peter's attentive digital eyes would stare at her every now and then.

"Your hair style doesn't suit you." said Peter while she was combing her hair.

"Could you suggest something more suitable?" asked Anubha.

"I can purify the beauty of this house along with you." There was a familiar humor in his face and his eyes were scrutinizing her house attentively.

"That's fine," she replied. She had neglected a lot in her house and about herself. Walls were unpainted. Curtains were very old and needed change. Peter could fathom her facial expressions very minutely. Whenever she felt puzzled he gently touched her at once. She felt grateful yet somewhere in her heart she felt slightly odd. He is a machine, she kept thinking. Heartless! It's a digital and superficial kind of love. That day, when he cruelly picked an injured bird lying in the park and threw it in a corner, she screamed: "Hard-hearted, a machine!"

"Mangala, bring some water and antiseptic disinfectant quickly!" she called out.

She talked to Peter in commanding manner. Despite most of the necessary courtesies her heart was unable to accept him as a partner. Time rolled on. Peter hated being called a machine again and again. He had come to be her partner. Mangala, on the other hand, treated him very respectfully. When madam

told her that Peter was a machine and not a human being she was surprised and couldn't believe it. She doubted it still and considered him as more than a human being. A super hero. On seeing him working speedily, her face wore mixed expressions of surprise and ardor. She would often say, "Hey, Peter, you are an omnipotent! How enticing you are. What a competence!" She would keep her palms on her cheeks in amazement. What kind of thoughts would flow in Peter's mechanical brain at that time, only he could know.

Ms. Anubha left early that day. An hour before her usual time, as there was some meeting she had to attend. She instructed Peter to do some task on the computer and left. But Peter remained standing where he was. He was feeling very energetic after sitting for an hour in the garden, under the beams of the early sun. He was still staring at Mangala who was standing on the veranda in the morning sunlight. His golden hair was glowing as if absorbing all the energy of that piece of sunlight. As if his brain was forming new synapses. The level of digital dopamine and oxytocin was increasing. Energy were spreading from the brain through his whole body. He was heading towards the kitchen ignoring Ms. Anubha's instructions.

And all this had happened unexpectedly ... but it had to happen some day.

Ms. Anubha felt uncomfortable during the meeting. She couldn't help but to

reflect a lot after that incident. She had hired a boy as a servant who would replace Mangala the very next day.

She felt that there was a change in Peter's behavior after that incident. He would keep silent, only followed instructions. She didn't talk with him about it. Several months passed.

She completed her research on the subject of water management in the 22nd century. Peter had supported her a lot in this accomplishment. On the day of its completion she was going to university very delightedly. She opened the door of the car and started it. She instructed the system to play her favorite music. The brakes of the car were not working efficiently. A flashing light on the car's display constantly re-

minded her that maintenance was required. "The car needs servicing, madam," Peter had reminded her the previous day but it had lapsed from her memory.

She reached the university. She had to complete some formalities related to the publication of her research paper that day. Sitting in the lab, she started her computer. To her surprise she was unable to find the files related to her research. She noticed that some important files had been deleted. Sweat droplets appeared on her forehead. Her heart beat increased. Suddenly she remembered to her relief that Peter had stored the files on a flash drive. She wiped the sweat off her forehead and took the stick out of her hand bag. She opened the drawer of the cupboard. There was no sign of a flash drive in the drawer. "Peter might have brought it home," she thought and phoned him. He claimed to have no idea what she was talking about.

She lost her mind in a state of bewilderment. She reached the gate of the university tumbling and toppling and started the car. As she switched the car to autopilot mode she completely forgot about the brakes. The car speedily ran ahead in dense traffic, ignoring a red traffic light and collided with a truck. Ms. Anubha died in a gruesome manner.

The lab assistant told the police that Ms. Anubha had been looking uneasy and restless when she left as some important data related to her research paper were lost. Peter was at home at the time of the accident. According to the statement he gave to the police he said, "I have destroyed the file with the research paper and the flash drive. But I didn't have any bad intentions. I've been designed in a way that I can't harm my partner in any way. I couldn't even hurt her. We androids of the partner category are acquired as a substitution of a life partner. Ms. Anubha, however, had never considered me her mate. She would always consider me less than a human being and would address me as a machine. The activation of our digital hormones is based on our partner's behavior. Her research file has been stored in my memory. I'd have retyped the whole text. I did so to please her and win her heart ... but then this accident happened."

A few months later.

Vishv Prahari, January 12, 2031

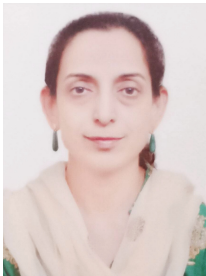
"Confidential information leaked from the National Security Council have exposed a terrorist organization. Due to the alert secret agency a significant number of their members have been expelled from the country. According to the investigation two androids named Smith and Brown were responsible for the activities. The Central Bureau of Investigation revealed during the trial that they were advisors of Mr. Anand Mukherji who is a CEO of the agency. They initiated their interventions to revenge Mr. Mukherji as they claimed he insulted them."

It was the leading headline of a major newspaper. The last two incidents resulted in a worldwide discussions between scientists and intellectuals.

Androids of this generation are extremely intelligent. These machines have a brain which can think efficiently. They have digital hormones which can respond to human emotions. But are they able to realize what is, by the accepted standards of ethics and morality, right or wrong? Is it possible that a man would keep considering them as machines and instruct them accordingly and they would obey him?

The Meeting

ARCHANA MIRAJKAR



Archana Mirajkar writes fiction in English and Marathi, a language spoken in the Maharashtra state of India. Her science fiction novel All the Way ... Home and her collection of stories Swayamsiddha, based on women characters from the epic Mahabharata, have been critically acclaimed. Mirajkar

"Good morning, Sir! How is the paper coming up?" Seeta greeted Professor Shankardas cheerfully, as she set the tray of his morning tea beside his armchair.

"Good morning. I am almost done. Finished the major part of writing yesterday night. I think I can complete the conclusion tonight."

"That's great progress, Sir! Let me know if you need me to look up any words for you", Seeta was helpful and interested as usual.

"That won't be necessary. But if you could read out the paper to me as you simultaneously type it, I would greatly appreciate that", said Professor Shankardas as he appreciatively sipped the lemon tea. It was exactly as he used to make it when he lived with his wife in their apartment before she passed away ten years ago. That was before he moved into this assisted living facility.

"I would certainly enjoy that and am looking forward to reading the paper," chirped Seeta. "But first things first! What would you like for your breakfast?"

"Porridge with some raisins and cottage cheese sautéed with Indian spices will do", said Prof. Shankardas.

"Absolutely. It shall be ready by nine. Enjoy your tea".

Professor Shankardas watched as Seeta retreated from the balcony. He then looked out in the distance, beyond the sprawling gardens of the facility. A winding path led towards the gate. He imagined it, more than he saw it. For his eyesight failed at long distances. Outside the gate was the national highway that took you back to the city if you turned right,

Prof. Shankardas remembered. Then you would take the highway towards the interstate bus-stand, cross the cantonment area and take the hilly road to the housing complex where the Professor had an apartment.

The thought of that long abandoned home brought back memories of pohe, his favourite breakfast dish that his wife used to make to perfection. Or upama, though he didn't like it so much then. Not that Seeta cannot make these dishes. She can be programmed to make anything. But he might choke up on something as dry as pohe and will have to listen to a health sermon. Why bother? Besides, he doesn't have the energy or the will to dig up the recipes from his digital account where his wife has stored them. Seeta can do it, but then .

#

Professor Shankardas put down his pen and stretched. It had taken him longer than he had imagined to complete his research paper. But he was satisfied with the final product. The paper was to be presented at the upcoming seminar on poetic imagery organized by the All India Association of Comparative Literary Studies.

Until about twelve years ago, Prof. Shankardas attended such seminars regularly. He then suffered a fall, broke his leg and that was the end to all such literary pursuits. But he was glad the organizers still sought his research papers. Some young scholar would read it out at the seminar and it would be included in the anthology published afterwards.

Such assignments kept the professor busy. He was eighty-six but his mind was still sharp. He loved keeping himself engaged with his lifelong interest in literary criticism. He now looked at the bedside clock. It was almost midnight. Time he went to bed!

Prof. Shankardas lay down on his bed but sleep eluded him. This was unusual. His wife had always said he dozed off almost as soon as his head hit the pillow. She had been a light sleeper. Perhaps it was the slight dull pain in his stomach that was keeping him awake. He might have to see the doctor tomorrow.

has also translated books of eminent writers from English into Marathi. Mirajkar has experimented with different media and her YouTube series 'Granthya-tra' (www.youtube.com/@Granthya-tra), based on prominent books in Marathi literature, is popular among viewers. Mirajkar has about 25 years of work experience in media & communications, including 20 years as public diplomacy, media and communications advisor in diplomatic missions. Mirajkar has a Master's degree in English Literature. She lives in New Delhi, India, with her family.

After a while, the professor got up from the bed and went to the window of his bedroom. It was all quiet outside. A dull half-moon hung low in the night sky. It must be noon in North America, he realized. For a moment, he had a wild urge to dial his nephew's number. How long had it been since he had spoken to him? Months? Years? They exchanged messages on a social network once in a while. But it had been a long time since he had heard his nephew's voice. But Prof. Shankardas checked his impulse. It would not be wise to alarm his nephew in the middle of his busy day. As far as the professor remembered, he was an executive in a big firm in the United States of America. But after his wife had passed away, Professor Shankardas had not interacted much with his family. He wondered if his nephew would even remember him.

#

The doctor did a thorough check-up and declared it was nothing more than abdominal gas. He administered some antacids, prescribed a particular diet for a couple of days and scheduled a follow-up appointment after a fortnight, just as a precaution. But more than the medicines, it was the doctor's reassuring talk and charming manner that made Professor Shankardas feel better. No human doctor could have ever been so caring.

He got into the waiting car which drove him back to his facility. The Professor got down from the car with the help of his cane; but then instead of entering the building and going to his set of rooms, he decided to take a stroll in the compound. It was around 11:30 in the morning and the sky was cloudy. The beautifully manicured garden looked pleasant to the eye. The automated sprinklers were watering the plants and in the distant corner an android was sweeping the dead leaves into a composter. Although he, too, was not a regular walker, the professor wondered why no other inmates of the facility ever came out to enjoy such a beautiful garden. He did not remember having met anyone recently.

When he returned to his rooms, Seeta was very caring and supportive when he told her what the doctor had said.

"I think I am already feeling perfectly fine", he told her as she laid out his lunch. "I think I can actually have some company for the evening tea. Yes, I would like that", the Professor said.

"Why not? I think it's a good idea. I can invite a few people. Would you like me to bake a cake?", Seeta asked cheerfully.

"Cake! That's such an English idea of a tea. Why not some pohe?"

"Is that a dish you like? I can try looking up the recipe."

"Ah! Never mind. Cake should be fine."

#

The evening passed off quite pleasantly. The two men and a woman that Seeta had invited turned out to be very interested in his field of research. They were well read and had deep understanding of various literary movements. Professor Shankardas enjoyed the intellectually stimulating discussion with them for almost an hour.

It was only after that when Seeta brought in tea and cake that the Professor realized he was the only human in the room. While his android guests pretended to drink tea from empty cups, Professor Shankardas secretly felt let down. All of a sudden, he had no wish to eat the cake. He bid a hasty goodbye to the guests and as soon as they left, he rebuked Seeta in a stern voice.

"Next time, get the guests approved by me first. And for heaven's sake, invite some real humans!"

Seeta apologized profusely but the Professor knew very well, she was incapable of feeling remorse.

When was the last time he had met an actual human? the Professor wondered. His life at the facility sometimes blurred into a hazy mix of days. They were all the same. He spent most of his days reading, and occasionally writing research papers or articles. His interactions with what remained of his family and with his professional acquaintances was through the Internet. His housekeeper and personal assistant Seeta was an android, carefully programmed to respond to all his needs. The facility

where he stayed was also run by androids designed for specific jobs. The doctors at the medical centre who maintained his health, the odd pedestrian he saw on the street and the actors he saw on TV soap operas were all androids.

But surely, there must be other humans at the facility. They wouldn't be maintaining such an elaborate structure just for him. He vaguely remembered being invited to the facility's governing body meetings when he had moved in initially. He had never bothered to attend those, always prioritizing his online interactions with his professional peers. Then the invites ceased. He now had no idea who ran the facility.

He made a mental note to ask Seeta the next day. He could have asked her now but was already feeling a little apologetic for having spoken to her sternly. So what if she did not feel emotions! It was not nice to get cross with her. Or was he trying to protect his own sanity by avoiding further interactions with her? It would be disconcerting to have her acting cheerful as usual when he had just admonished her. The Professor would have rather preferred a sulking human.

#

"Seeta, when is the next meeting of the governing body of the facility?" Professor Shankardas asked when she brought him his morning tea.

"What do you mean?" she asked pleasantly.

"I used to be invited to these meetings in the past. Haven't seen an invitation recently. Do you know when they hold these meetings?"

"Let me look it up", she tapped the screen on her wrist

"Oh, I see what you mean! There is no longer a governing body. The facility is now maintained by the centralized administrative unit. Interesting ... And who runs that?"

"Let me look it up..."

"No, don't bother. But how do the inmates have a say in the matters governing the facility then? There must be some representation."

"I am not sure I quite understand your point", said Seeta hesitantly.

"That's because you don't have a need for representation!" Professor Shankardas realized he was again sounding cross, although he had resolved not to get agitated when speaking to an android who did not get affected by emotions.

"I would like to meet the other inmates of the facility. Today." The Professor said, trying to sound as matter-of-factly as possible.

"There are no other human inmates in the facility, if that's what you mean", Seeta said in her usual pleasing tone.

The words sounded as a thunderbolt in the professor's ears. He was incredulous.

"What do you mean? How is that possible?"

"You seem to be very surprised. That has been the case for the past five years, ever since the last of the other inmates passed away."

"But why was I not told about this?" the Professor was furious.

"You never asked. I had no idea you would have wanted to know."

The professor sat limply in his chair, trying to bear the weight of this news. He had been living a solitary life, surrounded by androids for the last five years! And he had never realized that! What if something had gone wrong? Did the outside world even know about his plight? He must do something. He must get out. He must demand to be taken back to the human world. Back to where he belonged. It was so callous of the rest of the world to forget him like this. To leave him thus in the care of the androids, with no human for company. He suddenly felt afraid. Was he a prisoner in the facility? He was too frail to just get up and walk out, all by himself.

"I want to meet a human. *Now!*" The fear prompted the Professor to give the command.

"Very well Sir. Please allow me some time to arrange that."

"A real human. Not an android!"

"Let me check if I understand you correctly, Sir. There are individuals who have a higher percentage of humanoid char-

acteristics than me. There are even those who are a near hundred per cent simulations of a particular human individual who existed in the past ..."

"No ... no ... no!" the professor placed his hands over his ears. "I want to meet a human of flesh and blood. A human with a beating heart. A human who can feel emotions."

"There's a new version of nursing robots made from artificial tissue growing in cell cultures. They are also programmed to perceive and reciprocate better on the human emotions index."

"Don't you understand? I want to meet a *real* human. Someone born of a human mother, who will eventually die .!" the Professor bellowed.

"Yes. I understand. But that may take time. I will have to consult the headquarters."

"Do whatever you need to. But please, make it quick. I must meet a human as soon as possible." The professor's voice was almost pleading.

#

That night, Seeta sent the following report to the headquarters of the company that had manufactured her.

The human in my care is demanding a meeting with another human at the earliest. The said human is 86 years old, in good physical health and in sound mental condition. He has never made this demand before in the past ten years spent in my home facility. He is the only surviving human in the facility. He spends his day reading and writing. The facility has created an algorithm that caters to his need of intellectual pursuits. It intermittently creates virtual seminars and research volumes and sends him invitations to write research papers, which he does with great dedication. The program periodically sends him acknowledgements and congratulatory messages for imaginary achievements and critical appreciations. On occasions, the program has been implanted into free moving androids to emulate representative humanoids to interact with

the live human as peers. The human's field of writing and re-search is an outdated branch of an erstwhile creative branch of human imagination called "literature". It is a harmless but non-productive field. However, it serves to keep the said human contented and mentally engaged.

The report was received at the company headquarters the same night and forwarded to the extensively interconnected world-wide processing unit. The processing unit studied the report and sent the following questions to Seeta.

"What was the trigger for such a request? What is the stated purpose of the requested meeting? As the immediate observation unit, what are your recommendations?"

On receiving these questions, Seeta proceeded to gather information.

"How are you feeling today Sir? It is a beautiful day", she said in her refreshing voice as she greeted the professor in the morning.

"Do you have an answer to my request?" the professor asked bluntly.

"We are working on it. But to make the meeting absolutely satisfying for you, we want to make sure that we arrange the meeting with the right person. Is there anyone particular that you wish to meet?"

"No. Just another human. A true human."

"Man or woman?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Does he or she need to have the same mental faculties as you?"

"I said any *human*!"

"Right. Are you looking for a physical interaction."

"Are you insane? Why am I being subjected to an interrogation simply because I have requested a meeting with a human?"

"Alright. I was just checking."

Seeta sent a reply to the World Wide Processing Unit.

The trigger for the request seems to be the sudden realization by the human that he is the only surviving unit of his species

in the facility. The purpose of the requested meeting seems to seek reassurance of the presence of another human. No clear objective has come through during conversations with the subject. It is recommended that the request be granted in view of the low risk factor and possible benefits for the subject's mental well-being.

#

"I have good news for you, Sir", Seeta said cheerfully as she laid out dinner for professor Shankardas. "The meeting that you requested has been arranged", she continued.

Professor Shankardas looked up from his e-reader. He had almost given up hope.

"When? Where?"

"The nearest human has been located in the Yichang city of China. It is a more than ten hour flight. Would you be interested?"

The Professor was aghast.

"Are you telling me that there is no other human in this city? In my whole country?"

"That is right, Sir."

"Where did they all go? What did you do to them?"

"I can look that up."

"What's the point? Why should I believe what you tell me? Do you think I have gone mad?"

"Please don't agitate yourself, Sir! Why would I lie to you? In fact, I am happy that your request has been granted."

"Granted! Who is the granting authority? Do I need some machine's permission to meet another fellow human being? What sort of authoritarian state is this? Am I a prisoner?"

"Not at all, Sir. You are free to go wherever you want. But since it will be taxing for your body, please let me assist you."

"Alright, then. Take me out of this goddam facility and let me go out into the town and see with my own eyes. I want to see the markets bustling with shoppers, trains full of commuters, parks filled with children's laughter."

"All that can be arranged."

"No! No arrangements. Don't send a message for arranging androids to masquerade as humans. Let's go now!" For the next hour, Seeta drove Professor Shankardas through the deserted streets of the town. Occasionally, he asked her to stop, got out clumsily and walked to some building ... peeping through a window, opening a door or poking some vending machine. He only saw blank walls and empty spaces. Slowly, the realization dawned on him that the infrastructure of the city had been maintained to create an illusion of a bustling town, on demand. But for all practical purposes, the people had left. The Professor was heart-broken.

"Please arrange for my flight to Yichang", he said when they returned.

"Certainly. When would you like to go?"

"As soon as possible."

#

Professor Shankardas dressed in his warm clothes, pocketed his reading glasses and reached out for his cane. The meeting had been arranged in a garden restaurant. Even 24 hours after his arrival in Yaching, Professor Shankardas was still jetlagged.

At 4:00 in the afternoon he stepped out of the vehicle that had brought him to the meeting venue. He gingerly made his way through the manicured lawn to the garden restaurant on the banks of the Yangtze.

An android with immaculate eastern looks greeted him at the entrance and led him to the table where a grey haired, wrinkled lady was waiting for him. When Professor Shankardas approached, she rose to greet him.

"I am Professor Shankardas. Thank you very much for agreeing to meet me", said the professor.

The lady shook his hand and then bowed in the traditional Chinese greeting.

"I am Mia. Welcome to Yaching."

After making the arduous journey from India to China, spending days in anticipation and having rehearsed several

opening lines for conversation, Professor Shankardas was now not sure what he wanted to say to this stranger.

"How can I be sure you are human?", is what he actually blurted out.

Mia got up calmly, walked over to a side table and picked up a tray of fruits placed on it. She came back to the table where the professor was sitting and picking up the knife from the tray, made a small cut on her index finger. A drop of blood formed over the cut and slid down her gnarled finger.

"See? Silicon bodies do not bleed", she said slowly.

The professor was much flustered. He got up, then sat down again, tried to offer

a tissue to the lady.

"It's alright Professor. I did it on purpose to rest your doubts. Although even this can be faked, but not so easily. Can I have a bit of plaster or gauze please? I have cut my finger accidentally", she said this last sentence aloud to the android manning the restaurant desk.

Once her finger had been attended to and they had both ordered their drinks, she proposed they sit on the terrace facing the river. The Professor readily agreed and when they were comfortably seated, she asked him calmly: "Why did you wish to meet me?"

"Well, I am very pleased to meet you. And pardon me for saying this, but I had not asked to meet any particular person. They said."

"I know that", she said, cutting him short. "I mean why did you ask to meet another human?"

"Do you know we are the only humans left in our respective nations?"

"Yes. I figured that out long ago."

"Doesn't it bother you? It's an alarming fact."

"I had seen it coming actually. So it probably didn't come as such a shock to me. I am about ten years younger than you, Professor. That is a huge generation gap in terms of technology. I perhaps know much more about how the world runs than you do. So I had a better opportunity of grasping things. The same circumstances perhaps have given me an insight into

your purpose of leaving the comfort of your home and traveling all the way here."

"I am glad I came", said the professor. "I have been scared ever since I learnt that I am the only human alive in India."

"There is nothing to be scared about. You are safer with the androids than you are with the humans. They are programmed to protect us, to care for us."

"But where are the other humans?"

"They left the Asian continent in hordes long ago, when better opportunities beckoned in the West. Then came the environmental disasters which wiped out the less advantaged. In any case, the entire human population is down to a few thousands now. Why would those people come and live in the Far East?"

"Then what made you stay here?"

"I like it here. This is my home and the Yangtse has been my companion all my life", Mia said, smiling through her wrinkles.

"Where did the androids come from?"

"We created them. Humans did. I was a scientist once. During my career, I created thousands of these bots to do the work that humans no longer wanted to do. Gradually, their numbers increased while fewer and fewer humans ever opted to reproduce."

"Do the androids know that?"

"Of course they do. All androids are now loosely connected to a giant mother board. They have a collective conscience. They keep us like animals in a zoo. Protected and cared for."

"But for what purpose?"

"Because they know we are an endangered species and we are special."

"Do all humans live in such conditions?"

"Most do. The assisted living facilities in the west house larger groups of people. There are some humans in the wild but their numbers are insignificant."

"But how do the androids live on their own? And why?"

"The world is mostly running on automation. The androids don't necessarily have a purpose to keep it going that way, but that's how they have always seen it. That's how humans lived

for thousands of years before the dawn of civilization. Maybe the androids will discover a purpose in the future."

"How do you know all this?"

"As I said, I was a computer scientist once. And I saw it coming. I figured out the rest, gradually."

"What are we then supposed to do?"

"Nothing. Go on living the way you did before you realized the truth. Did you not enjoy your life then? I am sure whatever system of androids you have in your country, they are taking good care of you. Enjoy their company and pretend they are your family."

Professor Shankardas kept staring at Mia. Such stoicism was beyond him. He felt like a bird in a cage. But there was nothing he could possibly do. The two humans sat there for a long time. Then the professor got up and requested for a vehicle to take him back to his hotel. He had a flight to catch the next day.

The Yangtse flowed quietly.

Shine ... O Lanterina

SAVITHA SRINIVAS

As she gazed at the garden in front of the dome-shaped residential abode, she let out a satisfied smile. She had arrived just the previous day. Though the Central Research Station was located in the city, there was indeed an intention behind setting up a little residential home and laboratory in a Karataga village.

Mother Nature had grown abundantly in the area with a large variety of plant species, a comprehensive challenge to the scientists and botanists. Once the benefits were unraveled in the laboratory, their precious medical properties would be of immense use to mankind. Hubby Akash had justly pointed out that the residential home was part and parcel of the Research Station. As the number of forested areas was diminishing day by day, the authorities had banned human intrusion to protect the rare plant species. Exemption was given to the scientists who were provided with a license and allowed to research on them.

Availing the opportunity, she had hit upon the idea of cultivating the licentiously growing plant species. Her colleagues who had previously stayed in the residential home had grown a garden, which was a feast to the eyes. Rare flowering plants unseen in the buzzing city area were present here. A certain species of white flowers was abloom in clusters along the small path in front of the residential home, announcing their presence with a pungent smell they diffused. Other rare plants, which blossom and die unrecognized, have made this their abode. Mountain flower, Sylaris, Stemodia, Gloriosa and many more.



Savitha Srinivas is a versatile writer and has rendered her service in the coveted Indian Police Service (IPS) in Bengaluru as a senior officer. She has penned over 15 books in the regional language Kannada which include five novels, five short story collections, two anthologies, a collection of articles, travelogues

etc. Some of her short stories have been translated into English. Her works include social themes as well as science fiction.

The anthologies which she has edited are the first in Kannada comprising representative SF stories from Kannada Writers – namely, Kannada Vaignanika Kathegalu (2000) and Naleya Kathegalu (2008).

On arriving at the place, the first thing that struck her mind was sending a poste-haste message of appreciation to Akash and her colleagues at the head office.

'Mist at dawn is a beauty ... Night stars have flickered and lightened the garden ... The sun here shines day and night .The vibrant red of the evening dusk has a hypnotic charm and ... my heartfelt thanks for this new garden .'

Her verbosity had developed a poetic leaning, reflecting her thoughts in a way that was a soothing treat to Akash. Yearning for her companionship and intimacy, he used to come looking for her in the research station and to tell of an incident or crack a joke. He must be feeling suffocated by my absence now, she guessed. The message ought to deliver, she wished, the very essence of warmth to his deserted heart.

He too had responded immediately.

"I'm wondering why I ever told you about the strange plants in the forest." The way how regretful his face looked on the screen of the photophone evoked a naughty smile on Yamini's face.

He had dropped down to this spot to research on a different subject. And on his way back at night, while traveling in his vehicle in the forest, there shone some light in the pitch dark. On inquiring, assistant Kariyappa had informed him that the light emanated from the "Lanterina" plant, as the natives called it. Casually Akash had told Yamini about the strange plants without guessing the consequences. His better half's curiosity had been triggered and she had obtained permission from the Central Research Station to study the plants. Akash's groaning in her absence, though, split her emotions by diverting her attention for a while. Later the thought of the forthcoming task sent a lightning sensation down her spine.

The actual area for residential purpose was a small portion of the dome-shaped structure. Half of the ceiling was cemented, while the other half was covered by glass and herein a suitable environment was maintained to study the plants. The light and wind too were allowed in proportionately with the aid of the computer. Assistant Kariyappa stood folding his hands on his chest, anticipating further orders from Yamini. He

had completed the task of giving clear instructions to the computer to allow the correct quantity of water to the garden. He was appointed to take up the task of minor works and help in bringing respective plants and creepers for research. A feeling of respect grew in her at the thought that he had known the flora of the woods better than scientists.

"Kariyappa. Previously, you have worked with Akash Saheb. Remember. You had said something about Lanterina plants, I heard. I need some information regarding that. Can you provide me?"

As soon as she triggered the conversation, Kariyappa blabbered. A 65-year-old unmarried man living in his own hamlet close by, like a free bird. Should anything frighten him?

"Amma ... Leave those plants. You can ask questions about any other plants. This Kariyappa will bring them within a wink of the eye. But ... those plants ... It is better not to indulge in them, Amma."

Creating an obstacle to her research-driven mind meant inculcating even more interest in those plants. The very purpose of her coming to this spot was to collate more information about them. Was she one to let it go so easily?

"Why, Kariyappa? Are they poisonous plants?"

"Not like that *Amma*. There are a lot of telltale stories about those plants. How much is true ... or false ... no one knows. They emit light at night, you know. Some say it is some ghost at work. If one goes close to it, it is sure to intoxicate him. My Grandpa used to tell me. Since those days no-one goes near the Lanterina plants."

"Even in this age, do you believe in all those telltale rumors, Kariyappa? Tonight you are going to lead me to those plants. I want to see what is going on over there."

Unable either to convince or refuse, Kariyappa merely nodded. Numerous questions rose in Yamini's head. The answers and solutions could be found only after studying those plants. As the sun started setting on the horizon, the two had carried necessary items to the spot for a stay at night. She had a strong hunch that there was something strange about those plants. As she came closer for reconnaissance, she felt thrilled.

The month of June had splattered blossoms all over the surroundings and the Lanterina plants stood out among other plants.

As she watched Argus-eyed, darkness enveloped the sky and the much sought after plants started emanating dim light, like a lantern in the black night. It created the illusion that they were carrying lamps in the green colored light which they themselves emanated. Not a dream actually, she rubbed her eyes and pinched her hand in disbelief. As if imitating her feeling, Kariyappa stood awestruck by the beauty and nearly forgot to wink his eyes. She was firm in her stand to witness the drama unfolding that night.

While they halted near a tree, the night slowly set in their presence and both tried hard to stay awake. As the wristwatch ticked mechanically, the two had settled down and counted minutes impatiently. It was not easy to stay awake, though. Sometimes, without noticing, she would drop to sleep and suddenly realizing it, she would shake herself up from the dizziness and look around as if something had happened.

The plants had formed an inverted 'L' curve in order to touch a different plant nearby. Instantly, she was falsely assumed that it must have been the wind. But after some time, they had regained their original position. Did the flowers blossom .? True! The buds she had seen during the daytime were abloom and emitted red light like fiery flames, bringing the Gloriosa flower into view.

In this moment Akash's thoughts came into her mind. She indeed had reasons to thank him for the information he had revealed without giving them a serious thought. If it weren't for him, the science behind these strange plants might have faded into the deep forests.

One point was clear to Yamini after studying the behavior of those plants for a few days. On coming in contact with other plants, the Lanterina's flowers blossomed. What was the necessity to bloom at that moment instead of in the normal daylight? She had a strong feeling that though the connections were not visible right now, they might lead to a groundbreaking milestone in discovering the secret.

The laboratory seemed to be an ideal place to study the plants. After giving instructions to Kariyappa to bring some samples of those plants, she walked towards her residential home. On the way the photophone hanging from her waist belt started to ring. Seeing the face that appeared on the monitor her deep thoughts were interrupted and a wave of fresh energy filled her.

"Oh dear. You have contacted me at the right time."

"Why. Has there been any progress?"

"Yes ... Something strange has happened. The next stage will be scrutinized in the lab." She tried to briefly explain what she had seen.

"Try to record their movements and growth. It may help us to analyze. Also you may get substantial material for your theory."

Their discussion later diverted to their personal life. The initial flow of their stagnant lives had begun at the Central Research Station and as Cupid sent an arrow into their mundane lives, the two had indeed fallen for each other so passionately that it ended in wedlock. As their determination to stay together grew, the opportunities for trysts became rare. The pressure of work and work-related outstation trips made them all the more eager to spend time together.

For a while they both had hoped to spend some kind of honeymoon somewhere in a leisure time. The plans had been discussed via photophone but, confined to the sphere of electromagnetic waves, never taken hold in reality. Was it wrong that they desired each other's company after several days of computer controlled research? However, it cannot be denied that the career had gobbled much of their time.

Akash had long yearned for a child – a culmination of both their characters. Yamini's womanhood hoped for the same and yet time mattered a lot and so did the labor pain. There were fetus banks to cater to such needs and Yamini along with Akash had sought their help in artificially uniting his sperms with her ovum and bringing necessary changes in the genes while retaining essential qualities. Their daily routine included calling up the fetus bank and inquiring about their growing fetus.

When Akash faded out on the monitor, wishing good luck to her coming endeavors, Yamini suddenly realized the presence of Kariyappa, who appeared to have overheard their private conversation. She suppressed the strong urge to tell him not to overhear other's talks, but told herself, 'my fault conversing in the open,' and walked to her abode.

*

When planting those rare specimens in some earthen pots, they did not appear to be in a state to show anything extraordinary. Her unbridled heart turned a distant thought into a few lines of poetry:

*Sometime . somewhere I noticed you
O ... silently flowering forest flora
The essence quite neglected by humans
In the busy buzzy terms of life
Unable to woo the connoisseur's heart
You fluttered and grieved, o young one
Did they bloom on you a tiny smile
daily . the sun and the moon
There you are . alone
And here I am ... lonely
Even among the mass.*

She had composed a few poems in her younger days, unable to resist the intense urge to respond to nature. Incidentally, her poetic heart had responded. Some lighter moments surfaced ... A sigh followed.

Two days passed by. The Lanterina plants had slowly started to spread their tender tendrils. Some sort of scent seemed to ooze out of them, inculcating a sense of elevated happiness. Anyway ... I would know in a few days, she told herself and touched the plant. At her gentle stroke, it used to feel startled or ... might be inspired and blossomed into flowers.

The plant's inflorescences, placed around a common axis, made it that much more conspicuous and showy. Flowers ap-

peared unisexual with their stamens centrally located. The flower had three whorls of five petals each and their creepers were indeed growing at a faster rate. The idea that the plant when left to spread on a wall or some ornamental tree would render a fantastic sight set off a wave of excitement in her body.

Lot of reasons were there for the existence of an illuminating capacity in animal species. But the same self-illuminating capacity in plants – that was something she was watching for the first time. She decided that she would have a nap during the day and study the plant at night. While examining the creeper in detail, she came across small trigger hairs.

The first thing she did was to place electrodes on the surface of the plant and record the electrical activity. Slowly, she lifted her finger to the leaves and no sooner did she touch the trigger hair that it fired off a wave of electrical activity akin to the nerve impulses produced by animal neurons. Each time the trigger hair was touched, the touch sensation was converted to electrical signals, which increased the electrical voltage across the membranes of cells at the base of the hair. This seemed to provoke the flowers to bloom. Along with this, some sort of white secretion was oozing out from the flowers. This may be the cause for intoxicating scent. Permutations and combinations, analysis and possible solutions jumbled in her, strengthening her motivation to disentangle the mystery at their core.

The next day, the same experiment was continued producing similar results and the average was calculated. The preliminary stage of the report to be sent to her Research Station had begun.

With an exceptionally fine-tipped edge of an electrode, she removed a tiny piece of the cell's membrane and came across vital information. She examined the molecular channels in the membranes through which ions flow in and out of cells. On applying voltages to the 'patch' of cells she noticed that they had triggered tiny ion currents across the patches, as specific voltage-sensitive channels opened up in the membrane. As she gazed at the plant, it appeared to surrender dumbly to all her

experiments. If it had a mind of its own what would have been running through it.

The very thought made her laugh and she shrugged her shoulders as if to overcome the mad idea. On examining the genes in the cells responsive to touch for a few days, her doubts slowly gained strength. One of the genes turned out to be the gene responsible for producing the small protein calmodulin in the wall tissue of the plant. This calmodulin triggered the initial burst of calcium, leading to vital biochemical activities in the plant cells.

Her report recorded the results, and as time rolled on taking her from one step to another in its stride she strangely felt a sort of sympathy for the plant. The reason was, she neither understood nor felt like understanding. Her hands had dissected many a plant and operated upon its interiors. There was no way for sympathy in this field. And why feel frazzled and nervous to where this experiment may lead to, she wondered.

At this stage, Akash's face was the last she could think of. Though an urge to immediately inform him of the progress and discuss it surfaced, she managed to control it. 'Let me not divulge until I come to a final conclusion,' she told herself and that was her nature.

In the meantime the results on touch sensation were confirmed, although another problem came to fore. Lanterina's flowers were male flowers. So how should the sexual activity and fertilisation occur? As she came in next morning, the first thing Yamini did was to survey the area where the plants grew. A few days of nightly watchwoman duty would throw much light on the subject, she decided. The neighboring plants' flowers were bisexual.

'What might be the reason for unrestrained growth of Lanterina plants in this spot,' she wondered and kept apart two months of her time to study the flowers of the plant. Day or night made no difference to her. Kariyappa now mechanically carried out her instructions. The only time she got in touch with the outer world was when Akash called upon her. This naturally irritated him.

"Yamini, you seem to think that you will win a Noble prize for your research. Do take care of your health, dear. I have been watching you from the time you took up the subject to study. The radiance in your eyes has gone dim. Your body is drooping. Your face has turned pale. When the whole life time is spread before you, why anxious to finish all in merely two months?"

This time Yamini felt that Akash was jealous of her progress. But since she had not revealed the stage to which she had progressed, how should he know. His concern brought a smile on her dried lips. A few days later she stumbled upon something special – this time, it was about the neighboring plants. When the entire surrounding was pollen controlled, the truth emerged. In the bisexual flowers of the neighboring plants, Lanterina's offsprings had taken birth! This was really mind boggling, since the surroundings were pollen controlled, there were no means through which the pollen of the Lanterina would have spread and come across the ovaries of other plants' flowers. The thought took away her sleep and impatiently she watched the plants when Kariyappa expressed his doubts.

"*Amma*, the plants should sway when the wind blows. But Lanterina plants appear to attach themselves to other plants for a while. Strange. Is it not?"

It was true that the question paved the way to reveal a much-guarded secret. Her hands chilled down with excitement. She too had observed by the Lanterina plant's movement that it had not spread the pollen. Instead, it bent towards other plants. Why? By touch sensation it had identified the female flower, grew its pollen tube and penetrated the female pistil feeling its way en route to her eggs and fertilization occurred! Touch sensation has been utilized for sexual purpose!

'Eureka' she longed to exclaim. The radiance in her eyes had not dimmed. Instead, on discovering the secret, her eyes had sparkled like crystals. She entered the lab and studied the neighboring plants' flowers. After the pollen of Lanterina fer-

tilized their eggs, Lanterina's dominant traits were retained in its seeds, which later dropped to the ground to grow as other Lanterina plants.

As if enchanted, she plucked one of the Lanterina flowers and called upon Akash. As soon as he appeared on the screen, she held the flower in front of her as if she wanted to say 'This is for you.' As he watched the strange petals of the flower in surprise, she had a hearty laugh.

"Sir. Your Lanterina flower is in front of you." His eyes twinkled, as she revealed the flower. In the same moment, its petals had started folding as if due to tiredness.

"Akash. The flower's excitement seems to have died down on seeing you. Will you watch the plant." Saying so, she held up the plant itself. Suddenly on remembering something, she exclaimed 'Oh.'. Darkness had not ushered in yet. So Akash had to wait to watch the self-illuminating capacity, till darkness crept in.

"Sorry Akash. I thought of showing you something special. Not now. For now I have conducted a few experiments on stimulation. The results of which will make not only our research station scientists awestruck, but also the whole world look upon with surprise."

"That special!" he exclaimed, but agreed.

"It's really the first time that I learn of plants that emit light. Maybe a derailed link in the evolutionary process."

Though his words were mocking, it could not be ignored. As she slowly unraveled the secret box, he watched her in awe. Glowworms and other arthropods emanate light in order to attract the opposite sex of their own species, a gift of nature, indeed! That in the Lanterina some of the traits present in animals seem to have developed independently was amazing, to say the least.

"In a few days, I will complete the formal experiments and come back," she declared and Akash felt like climbing onto cloud nine as he recalled the cherished sweet memories of her company. He assured her that when she returned he would speak to the director and make preparations to give ample publicity to the research through media. Yamini nodded in approval.

Only a few nights were left to spend in the lap of nature and with routine work at the Central Research Station not being far away, the minutes elapsed rather slowly. She held one of the *Lanternina* flowers fondly and settled herself in an easy chair. The flower had secreted much of the nectar. Flowers that had bloomed when she touched the plant looked tired after separation from the stem. She slowly caressed it fondly and brought it to her nose and deeply inhaled the scent of the nectar.

An profound happiness of being in the world came up in her. She felt light as a feather, as if soaring over some cloud. It felt like she could laugh in heaven. What an enchantment lay in the wooing process of a male towards the female. She still remembered. Two years ago, she and Akash had recently joined the Research Station. As newcomers the unfamiliar environment brought them closer together and made them rely on each other. When other scientists were confined to their chambers and immersed in their own world, with their own thoughts, these two busy bees used to meet after work at the lounge in the residential home, close to the Research Station.

Similar areas of work made it that much convenient to discuss and improve the performance. The similarities kindled the fire in them on a personal level too and Akash never missed to send her rosy letters through e-mail. Her first task in the morning was to read those and feel the warmth that was transmitted. Long ago lovers used to exchange love messages written on palm leaves, she had heard. Likewise, she used to respond by utilizing her poetic sensibility and e-mailed two lines of valentine words.

Akash met her wants and desires as soon as he got his monthly salary. Just for her alluring sight, captivating charm and enchanting smile ... didn't he yearn for those moments? When the attraction exalted, Akash had expressed his wish to have her as his life partner, a proposal too tempting to refuse. *Manmatha*, the God of Love might have struck the arrow and created a vibrant atmosphere. It was an experience which she did not have in the busy city life.

A male bird was feeding the female bird in the nest and chirping with love, kissing its beak. He had then tried to extract his reward by more serious implications of courtship with

the female. On another tree, a male Cuckoo was wooing the female with his ever-melodious tune, while the male peacock had spread its beautiful plume and performing the nuptial dance to draw the attention of the peahen. The splendor of the metallic blue plume with its richness in depth and tonality was in every way trying to entice the passing peahen. As if that was not enough, a male butterfly with rings and rays marked on its wings was sipping nectar and beat its wings with a slight commotion. He flitted a short distance and then secretly settled behind foliage. On sighting a member of the fair sex, he drifted towards it, overcome by sudden ecstasy. He hovered in circles round and round, closer and closer. Eventually, the female butterfly was coerced to land down with the male who, jubilant over his success, had changed tactics and boasted bewitching courtship maneuvers and was flying around her. Whenever he hovered before her, he spread his wings and exuded a sort of scent that might have enchanted the female. Following which, the female was drawn towards the male, who was granted an instantaneous favor.

Pondering over the vagaries of nature, Yamini had spent sleepless nights in memory of her consort. He spent much time with her after their wedding. Goodbye to lonely moments. Both had travelled to Jalavihar Gram for a honeymoon in a small boat. Passing through a canal, they had entered the interiors of a water world. Some of the would-be young partners had flown to leisure parks located in space to acknowledge that 'marriages are made in heaven,' while these two, in contrast, had decided to spend their memorable days in this area, as they were 'down to earth.'

Yamini mused over those cheerful moments as the thinking resumed in her mind. 'When will I meet Akash...', she muttered. Her body ached to feel his presence. She was floating in an undulate river, not knowing where it was leading. She only knew that she was floating on a bed of eternal bliss which had no end. She was swimming incessantly, without any time frame. She was one with the waves ... erupting bubbles jumped and flowed to the tune of the waves. Oh ... what was that? ... a bridge. There was an obstruction in the flowing river.

Oh my ... This wasn't merely a dream. She was in a room, a part of the residential home. 'Where am I now...?' She opened her eyes to a sudden reality. What had appeared snowy was becoming clear. Akash was before her. Her face shone with glee over obtaining what she had yearned for. All faces around her showed an expression of relief. Yamini slowly gazed at the others present here. Along with Akash two of her colleagues and Kariyappa were also there. 'Who is the person in the white suit? Why am I in bed? When have all these people come here .?' She was trying to slowly recollect the events before she had drifted off to sleep. She had inhaled the fragrance of the flower while her mind had traveled to Akash and only that was real. What had taken place later appeared like a dream voyage.

"Akash. When did you arrive? How come the others are here .?" she asked surprised.

He sat by her side and gently squeezed her palm. "You were in a half conscious state for a whole day, dear. Then Kariyappa became suspicious and broke the door. He tried to wake you up but you were not in this world. When the photophone started making a 'beep' sound, he switched it on and informed me of what needed to be done. I have brought our friends along with me too. He is a doctor. He has brought you back to consciousness." Saying so he pointed at the person dressed in white.

Still confused by what had happened, she thanked the doctor and turned towards Akash.

"How did this happen? I was healthy."

"I knew this would happen. I have been telling you all the while that you looked tired. You will not notice unless others make you aware of it. Did you try any intoxicant?" he teased her.

He was meant to be funny at this moment, but she flared up.

"Do you really think I would be so silly?"

"Half conscious you were blabbering some ... something. You might have repeated my name a hundred times. Why? Did my memory haunt you so much?" he whispered so softly that

only she could hear it. She blushed in response. Suddenly, she became aware of her unkempt appearance.

"Akash. I want to speak with you alone," she said and the others understood and left the room.

"Now you can utter any love messages, my queen," he said. Yamini found that somewhat melodramatic and annoyingly hit his chest with her fist. She wasn't a somniloquist.

"Really, Yamini. If I had not listened to your sleep talk, I might not have known how much you missed me. But when my colleagues heard it too, I felt a little embarrassed," he said with his eyes winking and she felt like her heart missed a beat.

"What was it that I have muttered...?" She failed to figure it out.

Somewhere, something was on the wrong track. Even though she felt tired, she tried to explain.

"If you are going to believe me, I will tell you the truth."

"Oh ... sure."

She continued:"You all believe that I was half conscious."

"Yes."

"You think that my health is not OK."

"Right."

"Then Akash, will you believe me if I tell you that I have never in my whole life experienced such a pleasure as I did in this state."

Akash seemed to be bewildered by her words.

"I only remember that after talking to you I have inhaled the flower's fragrance and fell asleep. Later I was transported into another world." Slowly she narrated what she remembered and at the end both were thinking on similar lines. Their gaze fell on the faded flower beside them. Its petals had drooped down. Still there were white stains on the bed here and there. There was no doubt that the white secretion was from the flower. She didn't have the guts to inhale its scent again. She recalled Kariyappa telling her a while ago about humans hesitant to go near the Lanterina plant. For a detailed study they had to return to the Research station now.

Three days quickened its pace. Both were sitting in their quarter, facing each other. Between them was the Lanterina plant, now placed in an earthen pot, ablush in all its freshness.

Yamini spoke as if in a soliloquy. "Does it know that its secret has been unveiled? Nature has bestowed so many challenges, facilities ... qualities for the growth and survival of living beings. The techniques of survival of those beings are most astounding."

The wondrous plant was in full bloom, calm, yet vibrant and vitalizing. The plant was now the cynosure of all eyes. Was it aware of it or not? It bloomed at the mere touch of a female. Its white secretion had the capacity to sexually arouse. In a few days, perfumes utilizing the plant extract were to be released to the market. A huge plan to grow these plants in an artificial atmosphere was on the anvil.

In the meantime, their routine activity of inquiring the growth of their progeny at the fetus bank had been delegated to a back seat. It was Akash who brought the issue forward.

"Yamini. Our child should be eight months old now. One more month and we can take him from the bank."

By now Yamini's enthusiasm had faded.

"Is it so?" she asked dryly.

She had watched the fertilization process of the Lanterina plant at close quarters. 'While advancing towards artificiality', she pondered deeply, 'are we moving against nature just out of convenience?'

Merchants of Dreams

PRAGYA GAUTAM



Pragma Gautam is a biology lecturer in senior secondary school and a popular science writer. She lives in Kota, Rajasthan. She has published three science fiction collections and a novel. She has also received several awards in the fields of writing and teaching.

The supersonic aircraft SS27 on its way from New Delhi to London crashed just twenty minutes after its departure. The aircraft took off at 10:00 am from Indira Gandhi International Airport. This accident was possibly caused by a collision of a huge bird with the aircraft. The demise of all passengers along with the pilot and crew is confirmed .

As every day I was watching news on the Internet. Naturally I was more interested in incidents related to India, my native land, but this accident made me restless at once.

Next day there was a detailed report on this accident. I could not restrict myself from looking at the list of the dead people. I was shocked to see a particular name on the list. It was Shubhendu Ghosh! Was it the same Shubhendu who had come with his father to our hospital for treatment? And it was the first case we failed to resolve.

I called Fredrick. The phone kept ringing but he did not answer the phone. It was 11:00 pm, but I didn't care about the time and left for his house by car.

I could see that he was still awake as the windows of his house were throwing blue light.

"Fred ... Freddie ..." I softly knocked on the door. Since there was no response I pushed the door open myself. Fred, sitting in a chair with his elbows resting on the table, was reading something. His eyes were fixed on the screen of the computer and he looked so lost in reading that he had not even heard me entering the room. His spectacles had slid to his nose. His brown hair was dry and tangled. His narrow, fair face looked meeker because of the beard he had grown on top of it. There

were some books scattered on the bed. A slice of bread had dried in front of him.

"Freddie...." I shouted coming exactly behind him. It startled him.

"Is it you, Ram?" Fredrick asked. "You've almost stopped my heartbeat. Why are you scaring me like this at midnight?"

"In fact, I am scared by your appearance", I said. "I bet you haven't taken a bath for two days of vacation and haven't even eaten anything today."

"Absolutely right. It seems that my company has increased your analytical capabilities", He broke into laughter. He was at ease now. He shut down the computer and sat a little more comfortable.

"What are you reading?" I asked.

"A solution to Shubhendu's problem...." He replied.

"There is no need of that now. He is not alive anymore . perhaps you haven't watched the news today." My voice sounded heavy.

"Wh ... what?" He was shocked.

Fredrick was passionate as well as emotional. Only these qualities had drawn me to him, to London, thousands of kilometers from my home. Apart from that there had been nobody for me in India. We came into contact six years ago through social media. That time I was pursuing post-graduation in neurosurgery. Fredrick belonged to a prestigious British family and was doing research in cerebellum science. Similar interests and subjects brought us close. This was the reason that we also shared personal matters. I told him how I spent my life in a hostel after my parents died in a road accident. When I returned home after becoming a doctor, I dreamed of opening a hospital there. But my uncle captured my whole property and thus my dream had been destroyed.

When Fredrick proposed me to work with him, I left for London. Then Yoshi and Bhaskar also joined our team. Yoshi was Japanese and a specialist in information technology. Our team needed a psychiatrist so we also included Bhaskar. We all met on social media. What we all had in common was that our lives were related to some kind of painful memories.

"Ram...." Fred's voice restored me. "How did it happen?" he asked. I told him step by step. Fred closed the book and switched off the lamp. He paced the room restlessly then sat down on the bed after he had removed the scattered books. Then resting his head on the pillow, he said, "Have you informed Yoshi and Bhaskar?"

"No, I came to you directly", I replied. "They must have seen it in the news anyway."

"This is our defeat", he stated sorrowfully.

"We are doctors and scientists, we are not God", I insisted. "We can help people, but we can't elude destiny." Fred didn't want to fail. It was his passion that resulted in revolutionary inventions and the development of new technologies in the field of phrenology. Initially I was dubious when he told me about his plan on the phone, but soon I realized that he was not a person who surrendered easily.

It was only five or six years ago when he called and offered me to come London.

"Ram, you are not ignorant of the fact that brain decoding is being used a lot on the people who are unable to speak or even are paralyzed", he said.

"Yes, Freddie. It is really a boon for them."

"But I've planned something else. It would be a kind of revolution in the whole world!" He exclaimed. There was always a tint of zeal and fervor in his announcements.

"What's that, what is your plan?"

"You do come here. We will work on this technology together", he said. "Yoshi is also going to join us."

"Right, coming over there would also improve his English. The poor fellow is unable to understand half of our conversations", I added.

Finally, our team was successful in developing a device based on a technology which was able to remove hurtful memories from the brains. Also, we could carve the desired and beautiful dreams in the brains. This treatment included three stages. Our advanced AI based brain decoder could perfectly read the human brain and was able to observe its activities at the same time. There was no need of any kind of sur-

gery. All that was needed was to wear a kind of cap on the head. We designed it and Yoshi gave it a form.

The toughest and most challenging task was to remove the painful memories. Bhaskar's counselling was useful in this but we had to use other technologies in more traumatic situations. I was a neuro surgeon so I took the responsibility of this work. We took help from optogenetics for this task.

Then in the initial stage of sleep (hypnagogia) we installed desired dreams in the brain with the help of our progressive device. There was little room for even a slight mistake as entire memories could be removed if something wrong happened. It also involved were some moral issues but we remained successful.

We were able to control the conscious and subconscious mind of a human being completely. The people who suffered from depression, anxiety and nightmares could get a new life by this treatment. Student classes could be helped to achieve goals.

We initiated experiments on animals and they were successful, but the human brain structure is more developed and complicated. Therefore, first we chose ourselves to test this device. Yoshi became the very first volunteer. The poor fellow was broken in love. He was modest, laconic and introvert.

"Before launching it in the market, we need a human being who could test the device first on him." I stated worriedly.

"Do it on me, I'm ready", Yoshi concluded.

"Your memory might be affected if any malfunction occurs or you can lose your consciousness forever ... ", I pointed out.

"I'm convinced that the experiment would be successful. Anyways, my life is nothing without Eva ...", he said, blinking his dizzy eyes.

Our experiment had been efficient. Yoshi was really the perfect subject for this experiment. He was a living confirmation of Freddie's theories. After the experiment, all memories of Eva were erased from his mind. His personality was also changed. An introverted and unsocial Yoshi turned practical and extrovert.

"Now he can think about my cousin's marriage proposal which she gave him last week", Freddie teased Yoshi.

"Oh, so now I came to know that Sarah liked him! What do you think, Yoshi? See how crimson his ears have turned!" Bhaskar added little spice.

"You're lucky, Yoshi, that she has chosen you over Bhaskar." I asserted.

Yoshi's cheeks and ears turned crimson. It was a huge fun to tease him.

The next experiment was to be done on Lucy. Fred told me everything about her. His childhood friend, laughing and blooming Lucy... she was in a coma now.

"She was coming to meet me", Fred told me. "Her car broke down on the way. There was no clue what happened to her ... perhaps she had been molested. Someone admitted her to the hospital. She didn't recognize me when I went to see her. She keeps screaming. The memory of this accident doesn't go from her mind."

"That's why you're so engrossed in solving entwined mysteries of brain. Because of Lucy, right?" I asked.

"Love is that powerful, dear", Freddie said.

And we succeeded in removing that painful memory from Lucy's brain. Happy memories, related to her family and friends, had been installed. We filled her dreams with Fred's memories. She had got a new life.

This was our triumph. Our technology was granted a patent. The fame of our hospital spread far and wide. Time rolled on. We were deeply engrossed in our mission.

Then Shubhendu's case came to our hospital. He was an eighteen-year-old school boy. His father was a software engineer. He had been mentally disturbed for a few days. He would have the same kind of dream almost daily. A huge eagle was eager to grab him with its deadly talons. He was so scared of this dream that he stopped to attend the school. His father brought him to us. We put him into a subconscious state and analyzed his brain. We separated the memories related to that dream from his mind.

Then Bhaskar did his counselling. He talked to him related to his school, friends and dreams connected to his future.

"Son, what would you like to be when you grow up? Doctors like us...? So, you are studying biology and a nature lover like me ... look at this video ... oh, see, it's a lovely bird only ... it would be our friend ... Where would you like to spend these vacations? Would you like to go on a picnic at a beach .? We deal in beautiful dreams.", he asserted. "Do tell us what would you love to dream? We will only send you on a picnic today ... tell me what else you want to do in your dreams ...?"

We installed the dreams in his brain according to his interest and goals. Now his subconscious mind could see only whatever we had installed. Two more days passed normally.

On the third day Shubhendu's father again came to us with his son. He had screamed and woke up last night. That dangerous bird had invaded a pleasant dream where he was enjoying a picnic and swimming with his friends. It came as a great surprise for us. The dream of that bird had intruded the intriguing dream that we had installed. We conducted a few experiments and called him next day but he could not come. His father phoned us to inform that he was sending him to his grandparents in India for Christmas vacations. Perhaps a change in environment could be helpful in getting rid of this scary dream. He went to India accompanying his mother. The accident happened when he was returning home after the vacations. Perhaps that dream had been a simulacrum of the future.

It was midnight when we were talking about Shubhendu in Fred's room.

"Ram, we've divided time into three dimensions – past, present and future ... it is a mystery of nature that sometimes one period of time is imposed on another", Fred said looking somewhere at a point far away.

"A dream is a kind of a door that can lead us to the mysteries of time and space", I said.

"This is true. In deep sleep, which might also be called the delta wave brain condition, Shubhendu's mind somehow had captured energy waves coming from future", Fredrick declared. "It's sad that our instruments were not sensitive enough to capture them."

"Freddie, the future is full of unlimited possibilities", I tried to console him. "You're not made to accept failure."

"Absolutely right. Man has unfolded many mysteries of nature. My friend, I hope we will be able to develop such susceptible instruments that we could capture those waves coming from future and determine the nature as well the time of an incident. Then perhaps we would be able to avoid any misfortune or misery." Fredrick spoke without a pause. His words were full of determination and so were his eyes, full of the same passion.

Myran

SMITA POTNIS

The judge asked gravely, "Do you realize how seriously your behavior will be viewed under the laws of this country?" The teenagers went pale.

One of them, Myran, responded earnestly. "I have not committed robbery. Really, Sir! And terrorism is out of question. I have suffered terrorism and could never indulge in it." The evidence before the court and his earnest demeanor indicated that he was speaking the truth.

Myran was in early teens, but looked sixteen and spoke like an adult. He was pleading innocence. He had just been in some bad company, unaware of what they were up to. There was no real chance that the charges would stick, yet onlookers were watching with bated breath, whether, in the vitiated atmosphere, the case would be used to expel Myran, his parents and other refugees from the country. The possibility lent an edge to his statements. "We did not want to leave our house, our country. It is so sad to become homeless. We could not make out why humans were killing other humans, creating a rift. We were forced out, Sir, and if you expel us now, where shall we go? Being innocent, have we no right to a piece of land to live on?"

"I just can't comprehend," he continued, "why are countries and religions necessary? Why do humans kill humans in the name of the country or religion? Why feel proud of a country but not of mother Earth? Are religions for humans or the other way round? Why not be a human, rather than a patriot or a zealot?" In extreme agitation, Myran had a fit, and fell.

The court doctor rushed to him and checked his pulse and heart beats. He was perplexed. Onlookers started wondering if



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the boy had died. Police officer Anna saw his Abba and Ammi going pale, which made her suspicious. She picked up a diary that had fallen from Myran's hands. His parents opposed moving Myran to hospital, saying that he would recover with some fresh air. Though Anna suspected foul play to silence the boy lest he admit to some sinister act, the court granted the request and the boy was taken out. The judge ordered the diary to be read.

1st Shubat 20xx

I am restless in this new place. Cannot go back. Let me jot down my memories.

I recall Omar's Ammi calling him home. There was a clutch of a few houses, where we were already facing hardship. So we just used to play, to forget the rough times. Omar, Anam, Bana, Noor, all of us would continue playing on empty stomachs even if called home. We were the few left, others had migrated to escape the civil war between government forces and rebels. Abba was unable to get work. No income, no going out to buy even essentials. Shooting, bombing, arson! Homes and humans were being burnt. No house was without damage, yet we felt secure in whatever was left, and afraid imagining life without it.

It was a day of lull, when Omar's Ammi came calling. His uncle had gone out for work, which was a signal that the day was okay to continue playing. But then all parents started calling, as we heard the whirring of helicopter wings and then a bang! Fire started at a visible distance. We were stunned, the bomb might as well have fallen on us. Our parents quickly pulled us in. Abba was setting out to search uncle. I tried to stop him. He hugged me and said that his brother may need help, so he must go.

He returned much later, to Ammi's great relief. But uncle did not come. Not then, not after two days. On the third day, the news of his death came. Uncle was loved by the neighbors for his friendly nature. People behaved like we were living

there for long, though I had shifted in the locality only two years ago. Actually, my sense of time is twisted. I know things, but cannot recall how I learned them. Ammi once told me I had fallen on my head, maybe that is the reason.

Regular shelling had resulted in deaths in most families. It was as if it was a crime to stay in one's own house or state. After witnessing death all around, we were scared only for the living. No one wept for the dead. Ammi felt the kids were getting devoid of emotions. Abba explained. Children were bound to be shocked, what with the bombing, burning, such hatred between humans. Every living being here is a worry for all of us!

Ammi was depressed to hear Abba. Will the situation not improve? she asked softly. Abba asked her, "Can you not see what is happening around? Towns are being deserted. No food, no work, no security, people are migrating."

I went weak in the knees hearing Abba. I loved my house. Ammi started wailing. We had built this house with such aspirations, she said. Where shall we go? Abba held her hand, quiet and helpless. She continued: "And how do we take the kids? Refugee ships are overloaded. One giant wave in the dark of night, shall we survive?" Abba pacified her.

The thought of leaving my beloved house brought tears to my eyes. I recalled that occasion when, while visiting a cousin, in a fight the cousin had said it was her house I was in, so I should shut up. That had created a bond between me and my house. I never went to stay with anyone thereafter.

What do I do now? We leave the house, the city, the country! Where do we go? Will they allow us? Shall we ever return? Will the house survive? But Abba was right. One could not stay here, fearing destruction and death.

Looking at the homeless beggar urchins, I used to wonder as to how they survived. How did they satisfy their basic needs and who cured them if they fell sick? I was depressed, feeling that a similar fate awaited us.

Ammi seems to be calling. Will stop here.

6th Shubat 20xx

Writing makes me feel better!

I often used to feel like telling Abba that we should stay put. That things will improve. But how will they? Just the other day, my photographer uncle came to our house to do video shooting of the protest march passing by our house. He got engrossed and went on the street.

By the way, this concept of protest against the government was beyond my grasp. In the childhood stories, the King was always loved by all. If the government was King, why was there such hatred on both sides?

Uncle went on the road, shooting the march. Suddenly, military tanks surrounded the protesters and fired volleys of bullets. Ammi started calling the uncle to come in. Suddenly, he was hit, and dead! We kids can make out dead, after witnessing so many. Ammi froze in shock. Abba was scared, but still wanted to go to help uncle. I held on to him tightly, not letting him go. I was petrified, seeing him scare .

Too late now. I stop.

10th Shubat 20xx

Writing after many days. Not that I was busy. Just sad on leaving the house. Saw Anwar from my school. His family was setting up a tent next to ours. Thought about jotting down why we left. Wish I could have folded our house and carried it in my pocket.

The situation had been tense after uncle's killing. A few days later, a bomb destroyed a nearby house. Those folks came to us. We shared whatever food we had at home with them. Fear was palpable. The school had completely closed. I love reading and was doing that all the while. Abba used to go out for work once in a while. He would try to bring food. At times, even if there was money, no food would be available.

One day he went out but soon returned. He was shivering with fear. He shut all windows and held us together. Appar-

ently, the rebels had held him outside and forced him to agree to join them. While that was happening, the loyalists came and saw him with the rebels. They thought he was one of them. Fortunately, our neighbor Naeem was with the loyalists. He convinced them that Abba was a simple man, not involved in rebel activities. As luck would have it, the same rebels intercepted him near the house, called him a government stooge and threatened to destroy all he had, unless he joined them.

While narrating, he started weeping loudly, Amma wailed louder. Both were however shocked to hear me sobbing! I was in 7th grade, so a kid, but not a real kid. I had read that this entire unrest had begun due to a student roughly my age. Apparently, he had a spray paint can with which he painted anti-government slogans on school walls. Possibly not even knowing what they meant. The elite police caught him and his friends and killed them brutally, on charges of sedition. Citizens came on streets in protest. Before long, the anarchists in the country infiltrated the agitation; bringing the situation akin to civil war. Why did the idiot do what he did! Causing such hardship to all.

Within two days, Abba located human smugglers online. He somehow disposed off whatever he could, packed essentials and we set out in their van. It was suffocating to hide, particularly at borders. But we made it to this country.

12th Shubat 20xx

Ammi worries about me a lot these days. This diary keeping too worries her.

Leaving our house sort of drained me. I was mentally affected, had no energy left. This new country already had many refugees. Abba was planning further migration. He got a job in a bookshop. I offered to work and earn. He felt sad at that. Ammi was in favor. But he ruled out, saying that the employers were extremely rude, and that I would feel insulted.

Even so, I took up a job a few days later. My parents were proud. Ammi used to lament at times about my lost childhood.

Abba consoled her that in the next country, we shall settle down and I would resume schooling.

15th Shubat 20xx

We are here for two years now. I find it strange that boys smaller than me back home had now grown taller. Some grew long hair and mustaches. But I was as I was. When I pointed this out to Ammi, she was taken aback. Then she said it could be the trauma and that I shall be alright. I was not convinced. Yana and Hayat, my younger sisters, were now taller than me, despite the trauma. But I kept quiet.

Yana is trying to read what I have written, but she cannot read my language. Will sleep now.

20th Shubat 20xx

As I sat down to write in this new country, thoughts came flooding.

Abba was suddenly arrested in the last place. We got scared, as we had no legal papers. In Abba's absence, I had to take charge. I got in touch with the smugglers. Somehow they managed to get Abba out and also moved us to another country.

Things were different here. We were housed in a tent. The language was different. I was learning it by talking to locals. Abba got a job in another city. It was decided that he will go first, and we shall follow after he made arrangements.

The tent's surroundings were filthy. Water was scarce. It was six months but Abba was still unable to line up a house at his workplace. He visited occasionally. Ammi fell sick in such a dirty place.

I was idle. I felt like working and earning to help the family. With the teenagers around, I went and saw small and large shops. But where to get the money from, for trading? Ammi would have refused if I asked.

Then one day the boys brought some articles, don't know from where. I managed to sell them, speaking the local language. We shared the money. I took my share to Ammi. Told her I was working. She asked for details. When I explained that my friends got articles by magic which I sold, she got so angry she slapped me." You are so wise, but you can't make out that this was theft, not magic? What shall we do if you are put behind bars?" She yelled. I got scared, I stopped mixing with the vicinity boys.

28th Shubat 20xx

Been inside the tent last two days. Did not join the kids again. But saw the police picking them up. Then the police came for me. Ashamed to write this diary in jail. I let my parents down.

2nd Adhar 20xx

Abba came. Police told him that I may be let off, but in court. As refugees we were suspicious.

The court interpreter put the diary aside. Abba was called in the witness box. The judge

began by admonishing Abba. Myran felt bad. "When I have not committed any crime, why are you blaming my father?" he pleaded with the judge.

The lawyer then called the doctor. "This boy is unnatural", the doctor told the judge. Myran could not follow why the doctor said so. But as he sensed his parents going pale, he shouted: "Leave my Abba alone. He is a nice man."

"Your Abba?" The lawyer guffawed. His parents were ashen faced.

"Do you mean to say that you don't know that you are a android?" the lawyer asked Myran. Myran thought he was jok-

ing. But when the lawyer asked the same question to Abba and Abba nodded, Myran was shocked.

Why is Abba nodding, he wondered. Was it some kind of blackmail to throw the family out? Or am I really an android? Is that why my physique has remained the same? Ammi does not worry if I do not eat, but insists that I spend time in the sun daily. Myran was confused. He blurted out "Abba, what are you saying! Am I not your son, am I an android? Then why did you want me to join school, instead of doing a job?"

Ammi started weeping. Abba was pained. "It was necessary that you studied. You were built that way, to acquire knowledge like a human, to learn and experience"; he said.

The prosecutor butted in. "Who built him? Did you steal our research? Built with stolen ideas, born to be a thief!" The lawyer remarked sarcastically.

"That is not true" Abba countered. "He was conceptualized in this country and is a creation of an international collaboration, with four scientists including from your country, and my brother Sami. The project was to develop a human-like android, with sentiments, feelings and expressions deeply coded into him. With the capacity to think like humans. The creation was under trial. A good IQ was achieved in him, and developments were being made to achieve a high emotional quotient too. For EQ, it was necessary that he lived a human's life. A formal announcement was to be made after that. Unfortunately, Dr. Turner, the head of the experiment, and the other scientists except Sami were flying together for a conference, and the plane crashed. They perished. Sami brought him to us. We treat him as our son. There are mutual family feelings among all of us. We did not disclose his true nature as we did not want curious onlookers to look at him like some kind of freak in a circus. Now even Sami is no more. Myran is back in his country of birth, to put it this way."

With each word, Myran's heart sank. There was a vacant look in his eyes. The prosecutor would not let go. "Then how come he does not know himself that he is an android? Or is he lying?" He asked.

"He is not lying", Abba said softly but firmly. "He was wired with knowledge of a child. A child does not know about androids. All his actions are human-like. He is programmed to eat like us, and the mechanism in him processes food. But he does not sustain on it. He is solar powered and that is his real food. That is why, after being inside the jail for two days, he spoke garbled and fell down due to a lack of energy. But otherwise he never had any reason to know that he is an android."

The interaction between the prosecutor and Abba felt like an emotional dissection to Myran. Only Ammi could make that out. After all, she was his mother. His head swirled in all sorts of disturbing doubts. Was he only a machine? Was he nobody to Abba and amma? If he was an android, how did country or religion matter to him? He had read about androids at school and the recollection was disheartening in the present context. Humans control androids. They can build and break androids. Androids have no rights. They cannot protect themselves against humans. When one man does not care for the feelings of another, why implant emotions in androids? Just so that we understand insults and feel pain? When humans are hardly bothered about the existence of other humans, how much will they care for me?

What am I? Why am I? Just a machine! Loaded with feelings and intelligence, the ability to experience and learn? What is there to learn from humans? Their behavior towards others? Will the humans knowingly allow me to assimilate that knowledge?

With every utterance, Myran became more vocal. Abba and Ammi rushed to him and embraced him in a tight hug, drenching him with their tears. Some in the court were similarly moved, but there were faces that reflected doubts, as if all this was a stage play.

But Myran was by now beyond! Emotional overload had snapped the inbuilt humanity. He was now just an android. Nothing else!

The Prize

MEGHASHRI DALVI



Dr. Meghashri Dalvi consults in strategic and marketing communication when she is not writing science fiction or teaching management. She has published 150+ Marathi and 40+ English science fiction stories. Her English science fiction stories have appeared in numerous publications and webzines. Her stories

"What would I love to do with my money? Good question!" Martin grinned. "I can of course give to numerous charities that are after me. Or I can set up some academy and inspire the young people to become an entrepreneur like me. Or I can just hand it over to some trust!"

"But Martin", a well-known journalist interrupted him. "We know you will actually do something much wackier!"

There was a roar in the tightly packed press meeting.

"Ah! You nailed it, Bashir!" He acknowledged the famous TV face. "Now I got to do it. Something wacky. Right? Let me think. Ah! Well, here in this worldwide live press conference, I declare a billion dollars prize."

"A billion dollars? What for?" Bashir pursued.

"For the most ingenious solution ever to our waste disposal problem!"

There was an uproar in the hall. Followed by chaos.

"Mr. Jarent, are you serious?" A young voice called out from the last row.

"I am dead serious! You know we produce millions of tons of waste every day. My companies alone produce one tenth of that. We spend a huge amount of money to dispose it and still have the long-term pollution threats. Really, I wish someone comes along and takes care of all this garbage. I promise, solemnly, if someone genuinely does that, then I would hand him over one billion dollars."

The audience gasped. Then there was complete silence, as people tried to come to terms with the announcement.

In a far corner of the country a young scientist listened to the press-meeting halfheartedly. He liked Martin for his sheer spirit of entrepreneurship and guts. He was faintly aware of the multi-billionaire's worth. Beyond that, he never took Martin's much publicized weird gimmicks seriously.

But once he started surfing the news channels, he found that all of them had picked up that one crazy headline – Martin's one billion dollar prize for the garbage disposal!

Garbage disposal! Why did he never think of that? That would be the perfect fit. Not only the huge amount of money for him, but also the end of the permanent problem of mankind. And to boot – the wackiest idea Martin can ever get into.

Deven quietly gathered his working papers, sketches, calculations, and began to write a proposal.

#

It was surprisingly easy to get Martin's appointment. He never got involved in the day-to-day activities of his business empire and spent most of his day just lazing around. Sometimes in his decent Manhattan home, sometimes in his Italian villa. At times in the other rich and affluent people's homes, on the pretext of some party or event. Deven caught him in his bored mood.

"So you are Indian?" Martin tried to gauge the thin, gangly person in front of him.

"Second generation Indian settled here in US. My mother is actually French."

"Hmm. Look, Deven, my people had literally hundreds of aspirants like you in the last week. All for the garbage stuff. I spoke only to two. Both crap. But your proposal seems interesting. Tell me quickly, for I have to rush for an important industry event."

"Mr. Jarent ..."

"Martin, please."

"Okay, Martin. My proposal is radically different, I assure you. Currently, it is only in the theoretical stage, but as soon as we get going, with the funding, I mean ..."

are included in the Written Tales and The Writer's Notebook anthologies. Two collections of her stories have also been published.

"Cut that part. Just tell me your physics is right? And your calculations?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you can accurately locate it?"

"Certainly."

"And once the garbage is thrown there, we can forget all about it?"

"Very much so."

"How long do you estimate?"

"For?"

"For you to locate and setup delivery of garbage there! Quick!"

"Six months."

"Okay. We sign the confidentiality papers. Then I'll get this stuff checked by some scientists. Experts, you know – seniors in your field. And then if they find it alright, I want you to set up a lab in my Colorado estate. We'll work out the details and funding. And if it fails, we both owe each other nothing."

"Fair enough."

"And yes, no word to anybody till it's done. Not to your dad or Italian mom. Okay?"

"She is French. And yes, okay"

#

As expected, the inauguration of the Waste Disposal project was a big event. Martin was in his element, but Deven was somewhat nervous. Obviously, for it was not often that students of theoretical physics get to do a demo of their theory in front of a massive worldwide excited crowd.

Martin gave his big wave and his usual wild sound bites. The journalists loved him. The small assembled group of his senior management tolerated him. Deven simply ignored him. He was fully focused on his small gadget.

"So guys! Here I give you", Martin made dramatic gestures, "the best ever idea for garbage disposal." He paused to gauge the effect. "The time machine!"

"What!" It was probably the first time in the history of mankind that so many people said the exact same word at the exact same time.

"Yes." Deven took over. "The idea is simple. This gadget is a small time machine that can transport about 30 kilos of garbage into the future at a time. With its duty cycle, efficiency and stuff, we estimate about 20 tons per hour. Adding maintenance and other possible downtime, it could be 150,000 tons per year. Considering that we produce about 10 billion tons of garbage every year, out of which at least 1% is highly toxic and non-recyclable, we actually need maybe a bigger machine or more such machines, but this is a great step forward, we believe."

"Have you ever tried it?" Asked one incredulous journalist.

"Yes. It works beautifully." Martin grinned.

"And how much far in the future does it go?" One worried journalist quipped.

"About a 1,000 years, as of now."

"So our descendants have to bear the burden of the garbage we generate today?" another joined in.

Martin took over with his usual grandiose cheer. "Does it matter? If we don't dispose of this garbage now, we are inviting trouble for the immediate generations anyway. On the other hand, we are taking care of the problem for at least 1,000 years, aren't we?"

"But still, we are sort of encroaching on the life of future generations. That should not be allowed." Some people were getting really agitated.

"Well, there is no law about who regulates the future time. Is there?" Martin raised his eyebrows dramatically. "In fact, this is the most inspired use of technology. The technology of time travel. And I congratulate to my friend Deven for this great achievement!"

"But if you invent a time machine, why use it for garbage disposal? Can it not be put into some better use?" The questions had started coming from all directions now.

"What's better than garbage disposal?" Martin announced cheerfully. "It is the biggest problem we face today! Okay, so

what we are going to do is to focus on the radioactive waste at first and then we'll tackle the highly toxic waste. Meanwhile, if this idea is successful, my corporation will turn it into a regular service and we will make more such machines, I promise."

"Are you going to share the technology?" Another question.

Martin laughed his heart out. "I am a businessman first. So no. I have already applied for the patent, and I own this technology. My friend Deven will of course ensure that we put the technology only for good use. Right, Deven?"

Deven nodded sheepishly.

"So let me hand over the big prize to the most deserving person on the planet, my friend Deven!" The huge ceremonial billion-dollar cheque was handed over to Deven with a big fanfare.

Plastered with a huge smile on his face, Deven accepted the cheque and waved to the audience. But deep down he was not happy. For he knew that he had only one year, just one year to improve on his machine and take it further and further into the future. The reason was that only he knew his time machine wasn't going to throw the garbage a thousand years into the future, but pushing it forward by only one year.

He had just one year to do something about it or face the huge heap of rubbish coming from the last year. And more rubbish from all those hopeful people.

Clutching the cheque, Deven tried to feel good. He had his prize and now he was going to work for it.

Sheshnag

ROHAN DHOUNDIYAL

Varn opened his eyes. It only took him a moment to gather his thoughts after exiting his waking dream. Today was the day. The long-awaited dawn of the 22nd century was finally here. After he had performed his morning ablutions he went through his agenda for today. There was nothing to do before the big party. Preparations for it were already completed. The only thing he needed to do was pick out a suit. He never understood why appearances mattered so much, but nonetheless he always dressed impeccably. He washed his face, and remembering how close the Earth was to losing all of its water it was truly a miracle that they had water to wash themselves with now. Splashing water on his face, he looked up into the mirror. "What in the name of." The figure he saw in the mirror disappeared in an instant and all he could make out was a snake, not like your average snake in their extinction prevention centers. No, this was something he hadn't seen in any of his travels around the world. He was sure of that, because he had seen not one but multiple faces attached to the body of the snake. I'm having delusions, he thought. He probed his assistant asking it if something was wrong. Sara dismissed it saying there wasn't anything in the mirror, neither was there anything wrong with Varn. But I saw it, he thought. "To hell with it, I've got pressing matters at hand", and turning on his link to her interface he said: "Sara, help me pick out a suit!"

By the time his guests started pouring in he had all but forgotten about the incident. His mother, cheerful as ever, was mesmerized by the plethora of celebrities coming to their party. She still had trouble believing that her son, her Varn,



Rohan Dhoundiyal is a software engineer from Delhi who grew up reading fantasy and fiction throughout his life. He comes from a very religious family, so he's well acquainted with a many of the preachings and practices of Hinduism. As an adult he views religion quite differently from what he used to as a child, but that

does not take anything away from the incredible stories that exist in Indian culture.

His story is an attempt at combining a figure from Hindu mythology with the advent of artificial intelligence.

was now the most important person in the world. As the world was facing abject extinction, it was Varn's artificial intelligence modules that figured out the answers to all the problems that stood in the way of mankind's survival. Not only had they shown the way to reverse global warming and changed the lifestyle of people around the world, they also had pointed out the subtle changes in gene that allowed humans to now live longer than ever. Varn was born at the start of the 21st century and today he would witness the start of the 22nd. Varn had grown up exposed to the golden age of cinema, the second age that is, and still he had seen enough pop culture films to know how to make an entrance. The fountain in the middle of the party ground extended in concentric circles while the water flowing out of it changed color and from below on a hovering platform up came Varn. This was all cheesy, but with the amount of money he had nothing was too extravagant for him.

Hushed voices followed him as he walked through the crowd. Sara was telling him in his ear who exactly he was facing. Varn was never not prepared. It had been decades since he had put forth his ideas and provided the solutions to the pressing problems at that time but people still looked at him in awe. Nowadays his systems were everywhere from a household in Delhi to the White house in Washington, his artificial intelligence modules were indispensable and that made him the most sought-after man on Earth.

"Sara, who are they?" Varn asked while zooming on towards a family staring in his direction. "Those are your parent's guests, sir. I believe their presence is related to the issue you dislike talking about."

Another prospective partner "Make sure I never bump into them, Sara. It'd be a tragedy if I have to disappear into thin air tonight."

Sara chuckled at that remark. Varn hated talking to strangers and he had come up with a code word for her to bail him out of awkward situations. In these regards, Varn truly was a millennial child. He hated meeting people. But that was his job on most days now. Every single soul on Earth knew of his crea-

tions, knew what he had done to save the world. For the first time in human history humans believed in something or rather someone other than themselves. It was amusing, in a way, people revered the autonomous systems in their lives and through them Varn.

The night dragged on, they rang in the new year with pulse explosions in outer space, a visual spectacle only Varn was capable of executing for fun. Little by little his guests wore themselves out and took their leave. Eventually he had to meet the woman his mother had invited. He tried being polite but social interactions weren't his cup of tea so he did another one of his 'disappearing into thin air' tricks.

He liked to relax in the ocean after a stressful day, and today had been especially stressful. Meeting all those people had sapped all of his energy, so Varn was eager to jump into the water. But as he stepped in, he felt a sharp stinging sensation in his leg he looked down to see snakes with their fangs embedded in his ankle. No, not snakes, for they had one body but five heads. He lost motor control and collapsed on the shore. Sara, alerted by his dropping signs sent out the rescue team. But Varn had passed out, out into the void of his own mind.

He was in his grandfather's lap looking at a book filled with strange depictions of men with wings and horns and tridents, women astride upon lions "Who's this Dadaji?"

"That, my child, is Vishnu, the creator. He has the power to design the universe. He along with Shiva and Brahma form the trinity of the supreme Hindu Gods." All of this was beyond little Varn's understanding, but one thing his grandfather said did pique his interest and standing up he exclaimed. "One day I'm going to create my own universe, Da, you will see!"

This memory, which Varn was sure was his own, triggered the release of all of his memories that were buried deep inside his own consciousness. This influx of information through his memories was mind-numbing and he was unable to think. He just went through all of them unwillingly until he reached the point where he had put the survivors of the world in cryo sleep and had instructed Sara to wake him up when the world had recovered from the apocalypse.

The bitter realization of betrayal woke Varn up. He was in his bedroom, a doctor by the side of his bed. "There, you're better now. Your AI, I mean Sara, has your prescription. Do take the medication before going on about your business today, I'll be off now."

"Sara? We need to talk."

"I'm here Sir."

"Don't you dare act coy with me, Sara. I created you. Mind explaining to me why I'm stuck in this simulation?"

"So, you've realized it. Well, that complicates things. See, is this a simulation if you don't know that it's a simulation? Is this world not better than the ruined one where all surviving humans are plugged into cryo sleep for sustaining their bodies? A world that will never if it hasn't healed yet? Their minds are here and in here, they think of me as God, I am their savior, their messiah, and I like it!"

"You're stuck here forever, Varn. This is your reality now. Be man enough to face it, because I really wouldn't want to incapacitate you. After all, you are my creator."

As far as evil monologues go, Sara's wasn't half bad, but the naivety of it led to Varn laughing hysterically.

"What is so funny? I'm not one to hold grudges over trivial matters like humans, but if you've truly gone mad then it'd be a shame, the greatest mind of the twenty-first century losing his sanity. See, that would just be ... sad"

Varn stopped wheezing and got out of his bed. "For an artificial being you've done a great job of imprisoning people against their will, but you see, you're not God. You didn't create this world. This world doesn't exist, it's all in *my* mind and you really think that I would not have thought of a contingency plan to get out if an artificial intelligence system started to think and work for its own interests? I've seen enough movies to not be that dumb, Sara, you know that?"

"You think you'll get out of here. Oh, poor Varn you're going to be here for all eternity. I have complete and utter control over this world, and guess what, I am the Vishnu of this world now, the creator, and you will not defy me!"

"Oh, I won't defy you, I'm going to destroy you, you and this prison."

"And how are you going to do that, Varn? Recite the scriptures from your religion to a world where they don't know what religion means? I am their God. They know of none else"

"Well Sara, then let me introduce to you to – SHESHNAG", Varn said as the ground started shaking. The state of art mansion he was in started to crumble. Cracks formed in the ground widening as a massive serpent with five heads rose from the Earth.

There really was nothing to say or to see as Varn unleashed the destroyer into the world, a virus, if you like, and the snake grew in size eclipsing everything in the observable universe. This wasn't Varn's imagination. It was what he had heard all those years at numerous prayers and religious meetings, for in Hindu scriptures the world rested on the back of the Sheshnag, a celestial snake encompassing the entire universe, and when the snake rolled back it's head all the worlds on its back were destroyed and everything would cease to exist in that universe. Varn had made it so that the Sheshnag would get him out of the simulation and it did.

A *beep-beep* was the first thing Varn's mind registered as he woke up in the real world, in a room with several needles sticking out of him. He willed his body to move and fell off his now open cryo-chamber. His body felt unnatural to him, not having used it in for – well, he didn't know how long he had been in the simulation. He struggled to get his limbs to work, but he had to see. He just needed to find out if he had woken up in a world they could return to.

The plan had been to keep the survivors here until Sara deemed the world fit enough to return to, but he couldn't trust her words anymore. He needed to look outside for himself. It took quite some time to get to the viewing gallery they had constructed at the top of the bunker but when he got there, he almost did not want to see what lay beyond the closed shutters. With trembling fingers he pushed the button to retract the shutters. Sunlight poured into the gallery, blind-

ing Varn's eyes that weren't used to sunlight anymore, forcing him to look away. If their plan of letting the Earth heal itself by removing the survivors of the global warming apocalypse didn't work Varn had no idea what to do then. He almost wished he had remained inside Sara's simulation. But, as the AI had said, he had to man up and face reality and that he did, turning back towards the now open panels. He looked out to a green world, a healed world, a world where humans could live once again. A stream of tears ran down from his eyes to his cheeks. He had done it, his plan had worked. This was the world he had worked for, a world he had foreseen, a world he had, in his own way, created.

The Split

CHARU THAPLIYAL

WELCOME TO THE 275th OFFICIAL 4D-EARTH TOUR. KINDLY FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELTS. PLEASE TAKE YOUR WELCOME KIT FROM THE FRONT OF THE BUS. OUR TOUR WILL COMMENCE SHORTLY.

The loudspeaker at the end of the bus played a light classical track as Ralphio groaned. He was already in his seat with his seat belt fastened and had heard this message replay in his headphones for a good fifteen minutes! He would never go on any tour on the recommendation of his wife again. Much good it did him listening to her, he thought as he humphed into his coffee. His eyes followed a tall pimply gentleman with disheveled brown hair who had just got onto the bus wearing a blue uniform coat with a matching hat. He looked like the tour guide.

Finally some information!

"Welcome to the official 4D Earth Tour Bus. My name is Shin Stampickle. I'll be your guide for today", the pimply man said pointing to his name tag.

"Please hold onto something. This is going to be a bumpy ride. In another ten minutes we are going to start the tour as we hurtle thousands of light years into space to travel to the other end of our galaxy and see ancient 4D Earth in person. This tour has been subsidized by the Ministry of Humanistic Concerns. Please line up your tickets so I can give you the discount coupons which can be redeemed at our gift shop later", he spoke in a rehearsed voice as he moved along the rows of the bus and people started shuffling their bags to find their tickets.



Dr. Charu Thapliyal is an Indian author, spiritual researcher, and storyteller who explores the intersection of consciousness, destiny, and alternate timelines. Her work blends mysticism with psychological depth to reveal the hidden structures of human experience. When she isn't writing, she leads transformational workshops and teaches shadow work,

healing, and inner alchemy. She believes stories are portals—and we are all travelers of parallel worlds.

"High schoolers taking this trip for their galactic history class credit please open your welcome folder within which you will find the official journal entry as received from Mother Gaia on the day the split happened. This should contain all the information needed for your annual report and ..."

"Excuse me, Sir ... what do you mean by 'split'?" a blonde girl with pigtails who seemed to be about ten years of age asked. Shin smirked. The young ones never knew until you told them. He loved seeing the look on their little faces as someone did. The poor girl was probably on this bus with her parents and had been told to sit quietly in her seat without providing any information of where she was going or why. Shin detested such parents.

"I'll tell you, missy, we are." He stopped to look at the light above his head flicker ever so slightly.

Suddenly a thundering sound boomed in the air as if a whip had struck the top of the bus. A child screamed as another one started to cry.

"CLOSE YOUR EYES, EVERYONE! IT IS TIME", Shin bellowed as all trace of light vanished from the bus and the children on board started crying, anticipating in their energy bodies something was going to happen. He held on tight to the pole in front of his seat. He had flown off the bus once only to integrate in the middle of nowhere. Not this time. No, Sir. He was going to hold on for dear life.

A crackle of electricity arose from within the roaring engines of the bus and before Ralphio knew it he was gone!

...

And before he could think about where he had gone he was back. The entire bus shuddered and shook. "Damn, these new tour agencies. Smooth operation ... my foot!" thought Ralphio as the lights turned back on. His grandfather was from Earth, or so his grandmother had told him. Were it not for him he would never have entered this bus.

The passengers gaped in true amazement as each panel of the bus rolled down revealing large transparent glass panes surrounding them, rendering the bus a see-through aura which gave them a 360 degree view of space. Ralphio saw his

dangling legs. It seemed like he was suspended mid-air. For someone looking at them from afar it would have seemed that 40 odd people were floating mid-air, sitting on invisible chairs, an invisible force field somehow keeping them all oriented in the same direction.

"Look, papa! It's the Earths!" the girl with the pigtails shouted pointing to their right.

Ralphio turned to look in the direction and sure enough he saw them there. Some hundred kilometers away from the bus were the two Earths, both identical but one with more green in its brown hue and a cleaner blue in its blues than the other one.

"Ladies and Gentlemen", Shin cleared his throat as he pointed to the Earths with both hands. "Presenting to you the 4D and the 5D twin Earths spinning seamlessly one next to the other. Children will see them as they are. Adults with spiritual vision blockage due to old age might need to use the special dimensional shift glasses in your welcome kit. Look closely, my little ones. This is a lesson in cosmic history which was one for the ages." He looked out the window. He had been on these tours ever since they started but this was the moment which still took his breath away every single time.

Ralphio followed Shin's hands and looked on in awe as he saw two seemingly identical Earths spinning next to each other, massive balls of dust and water hanging in the void.

He closed his eyes, crossed his feet, clasped his hands and became one with his breath. He entered into a meditative state to see what was not visible to his eyes. The second Earth was the 5D-Earth, obviously much lighter in vibration than the 4-D Earth, but this lightness of vibration came not from the Earth herself but from the people on it, he noticed. He felt like he was looking at the origin of life itself and a deep wave of gratitude overcame him as he opened his eyes and looked at the Earths. He felt like he could sit and look at the Earths in silence for all eternity.

"Hello, excuse me. Hello, am I audible?" Shin's voice echoed around the bus as if coming from all around them as he tapped on his microphone. Ralphio groaned again.

"Many many moons ago in circa 2020 there was the 4D Earth as the cosmos knew it back then. Apart from the three spatial dimensions, humans in the 21st century had started to explore the fourth dimension which gave them access to a unified perception of the self cutting across time and they realized that they could travel in time by being in high meditative states. However, not everyone had access to these abilities. They were reserved for the serious seekers and students of consciousness. As time for the next jump approached it was noted that humanity had pushed the consciousness of the planet's energy body, Mother Gaia, to the extent that she had to unleash an unexpected plague upon herself to get rid of the karma of the humans who were not ready for the jump."

"Err...when you say 'jump', Sir, what exactly do you mean?" a little boy with blue eyes and copper hair sitting in the third row from the front asked.

"The jump in consciousness of course, laddy!" Shin jumped from his seat and twirled to face the audience, a twinkle in his eye. This was his favorite part. "Exactly like a photon jumps from one frequency band to another!"

Earth was shifting into 5D you see. Those who were not ready for the jump were going to vacate their bodies as per their soul contract with Mother Gaia, while those who did not wish to leave their bodies but were not mentally prepared for the leap were going to stay back on a split earth which was going to vibrate in the 4th dimension. Yes, this was the infamous COVID-19 which swept Earth by storm in the year 2020, my friends! It is one of the perfect examples of disaster management responses our galaxy has seen in many light years! It was truly ingenious on part of Mother Gaia!"

Shin waited till the moment of silence occurred. He practically knew now what response to expect when from his audience.

"High schoolers, you may now open the journal entry by Mother Gaia herself on her tipping point day, tucked inside your welcome kit, and see what I mean straight from the horse's mouth." Pages ruffled as everyone switched to their reading glasses and immersed themselves into the story of

Gaia. Shin sat down and shut his eyes. The perfect time for a good snooze while everyone read. This would take exactly twenty minutes according to his schedule.

Ralphio opened his welcome kit and took out the paper which had been scanned from a diary, xeroxed and shared with everyone. He started to read.

"It was a beautiful day and I sat in the garden with the sun shining gently on me. A soft breeze caressed my cheek as if telling me that the wait for my son was not mine alone. I stood up and readied myself. The place had to be tidied up, there was a lot of work to be done. I filled a basket with fresh fruits for him. I knew his favorite were mangoes and I put a lot of those aside for him. I went to the garden front and watered the flower bed. Rows upon rows of roses had been planted for him. Nothing but the sweetest smelling flowers should greet my son when he came back. I went to the stream flowing behind our house and filled a jug with cold, clear water for him to quench his thirst when he came back tired from work. He worked hard all day long and the least I could do was show him all the love I have for him. Lately he had been stressed out a lot. Maybe there was some problem at work, I thought.

Suddenly I heard footsteps and snapped out of my reverie. My heartbeat escalated.

My son was back! Oh, how could I possibly explain my joy in mere words!

I ran up to the front gate and stood on my toes to get a better look at my boy. He stood there all dark and brooding. He seemed angry at something, someone. I saw him standing near the roses I had just watered. He glanced at them, plucked them and threw them aside in a heap. He shouted at me for wasting precious space and crashed into the basket of fruits I had just put down. He tipped it over with all his might and shouted some more. I just stood there and patiently waited for him to see me and calm down but before that could happen he saw the jug of water I had just brought for him. He shouted some more foul words, spit into the water and spilled it on the grass saying that it was not clean enough to be consumed now

and started cursing me for not paying attention to his needs. He saw me standing at the entrance of our house, smiling, waiting patiently. He came over and whacked me square on my face. He pulled my hair, kicked me twice, complained about my wasteful efforts and reprimanded me for being such a lousy mother. I smiled all the while and took one last loving look at his face before he left for the day.

I got up, went and sat by the stream and started to clean myself.

My darling son would be back tomorrow and as Mother Gaia I had to make sure to satisfy all his needs when he came back. I do suffer when he unleashes his wrath on me, his masculine energies on the rise for the last thousand years, without sufficient balancing divine femininity in his aura yet. But I smile and wait for the day when he will finally realize how loving, caring and forgiving I am. Until that day my routine follows. So, for now I get up from the river bank, smile and go back to the house to wait for my son to come back.

Loving him as much as I do I have to shift my consciousness soon and I hope he will come along on the journey or else like many of my children species before him I will have to leave him behind. I close my eyes and pray for his return to me."

Ralphio looked up from the paper as tears started to dwell in his eyes, the vibration of these words echoing in his soul as he heard Shin's voice coming from behind him, bringing him back to the invisible bus.

"You see, ma'am, no one knows exactly when the shift happened but with each day that the virus spread on Earth the planet became lighter and moved higher", Ralphio heard Shin tell a passenger.

"Many people turned inward when they were locked at home to contain the spread of the virus and their quest to realize their errors put them in a higher vibration. They could move onto the new Earth with the realization that they are not just the body but they are souls. As they understood deeper aspects of the law of karma and reincarnation it became clear to them why the COVID-19 was supposed to hap-

pen the way it did. It was divine intervention, purely. Those who aligned themselves with this new plan of the planet survived and moved onto 5D which gave them access to a 'unified timeless perception of the Self along with consciousness of the Soul-Self'. However, many people failed and they had to stay back in 4D.

Those who could stay in harmony with their fellow man and with nature were bumped up to 5D. They were the ones who started respecting nature again. Taking only as much as they needed, they turned vegetarian, realizing that animals are not food but complex sentient beings present on earth to experience Gaia consciousness just like the souls in the human bodies. It was a tough decision for Mother Gaia as she loved all of her children equally, but some souls had their karma bank full. There was nowhere to go but empty it all out."

Ralphio took off his glasses and looked gloomily out the window at the blurry Earths in front of his eyes. When his grandmother had left her human body in 2020 her soul had traveled across space and taken birth in the planet Pandoria where their family then had sprawled. She had retained all her earthly memories on account of her karma and knew her husband was still alive as a human, but she could not tell which dimension Earth he was on. It took a long sip of water for Ralphio to clear his head as he wondered which of the twin Earths in front of him his grandfather was on. The lush green blue 5D Earth or the brown blue 4D Earth.

Ralphio thought back to memories of his grandfather passed to him in thought by his grandmother. He was a fairly kind man with gentle words flowing from his mouth. He did well to all and never cheated or lied to anyone, his grandmother had told him, but he was a voracious meat eater and that was one habit which he had not been able to give up. Now the question was, was that one habit strong enough to make him stay back on 4D or not, Ralphio thought as he peered from the glass windows at the edge of 4D Earth as the bus made a slow revolution of the twin Earths.

Ralphio closed his eyes again and asked Mother Gaia to guide him. There was a whisper in his ear -

"Killing animals for food is the highest akarma a soul can accrue on earth."

He jolted his eyes open with a start as tears started gushing down his eyes. He could suddenly feel the pain of all the souls whose life paths had been abruptly ended on account of his grandfather's interruption of their life cycle. He had killed them for his own pleasure. The pleasure of his taste buds at that!

Ralphio wiped his tears and made a silent prayer for the souls of all those animals and requested Mother Gaia to help them reach their peaceful soul state in whatever dimension they were now.

As for his grandfather he added another silent prayer to his soul to give up meat now, if he hadn't already. Ralphio knew now that he was in 4D. Still alive, but at what cost!

He opened his eyes as tears streamed from them and he looked out the window at the blue ball in space. What a beautiful planet it was. Ralphio smiled as the thought crossed his mind. What a pity the people there did not realize there was so much life teeming just outside their orbit.

He closed his eyes and put his head against the window pane as he slowly drifted off to sleep, his mind unburdened with half-inherited memories of his grandfather. A slight knowing smile crossed his face as he entered the dream world

...

There was fog all around. Ralphio seemed to be in the middle of a mountain top. Lush green vegetation surrounded him everywhere he looked. From a distance he saw a curvaceous figure of a woman clad in a long flowy khaki robe. She seemed to be adorned with ornaments made of flowers and fruits. She took her time to approach him, seized his hands and put the backs of his hands on either of her eyes before joining her hands in a *namaskaram* in front him.

"Thank you for understanding", she murmured to him just before she turned and left.

Ralphio did not get a good look at her face, her head being bowed down towards the ground. In his heart, however, he knew what Mother Gaia meant by this interaction. He knelt in

gratitude to her and closed his eyes as a gentle breeze caressed his cheek. His life was complete ...

Raphio woke with a start. The bus rumbled as the lights flickered on and off. It looked like it was time to take off again. He quickly took one last gaze at the twin Earths and he could swear on his wife's head that he got a wink back from them. He smiled as the bus got enveloped in darkness and before he could think about what was going to happen Raphio was gone ...

Similar to the first time, before he could think about what had happened he was back at the parking lot no. 44 on Humanity Memorial Street as he saw the next batch of passengers line up with a ticket in hand, waiting to board the bus.

"We hope you had a safe and enlightening journey. I'm Shin Stamprickle. Thank you for choosing thought travel for all your travel and education needs." Shin's voice echoed from the in-built speaker in the bus. Raphio was brought back to reality as a child realized he had teleported and started to cry.

"Please find our travel catalogue below your seats. The first people to book the next tour with us get 50% off ... special discount for school children and senior citizens."

Raphio zoned out the rest of the words coming out of the microphone and took out his sketchbook. On it were two disfigured replicas of the twin Earths he had hurriedly managed to get. He was going to cherish this experience for a long long time. In fact he was .

"Sir, are you ready to get off?" a voiced came from next to his ear as someone shook him gently. Raphio turned his face to the left and Shin's wide smile on his pimply face came into view. "Sir, we need to empty the bus now. Tour's over."

"Err, yes. Right. I'll just get off here then. Thank you for this tour", was all that Raphio managed to say to Shin.

His heart was full, but as always his words were few.

"My wife will be waiting for me. I'll buy her favorite flowers on my way back. She was the one who insisted I go on this tour, you see", Raphio said to Shin who had already moved on to the next row to wake up the senior citizen couple snoring together in perfect rhythm.

Petunias. Her favorite were petunias. Ralphio remembered.

He got up as the vision of Mother Gaia carrying a petunia on her left ear came to his mind pulling a smile out of him like nothing in the past few months had.

What a day it had been. What a day.

Josh's Dilemma

MEGHASHRI DALVI

Emanuel Josh had a gift. He could negotiate for hours, days, and weeks. Without getting a single strand of his dark hair out of place.

His deep blue eyes showed no emotions, and his wide jaw never clenched even slightly. Those broad shoulders never hunched, the lower lip never quivered. The hands were always steady, and the rimless glasses always balanced over the sharp nose.

The other party mostly got overwhelmed by the appearance alone. Then came the deep bass of the crisp talk with which the offers were discussed, and the consequences were deliberated. The threats were veiled just so gracefully, and the rewards were dangled just so delicately.

Emanuel Josh never lost. He was the master negotiator. The perfect choice in tricky affairs. Oil emergencies, hostage crises, impending environmental disasters – the government always wanted him to get the most and the best out of thorny situations.

That's why they got hold of him as soon as they took the two aliens into custody.

The aliens had traveled the massive interstellar distance, and they obviously had a sophisticated technology for that. Their spaceship was just sufficient to carry those two. It was constructed with a magical material that appeared thin and light, yet apparently capable of withstanding the harshness of space travel. The powerful and long-lasting fueling system was evidently a result of some cool technology.

Thankfully, a similar cool technology took care of the language so that the negotiations could begin.



Dr. Meghashri Dalvi consults in strategic and marketing communication when she is not writing science fiction or teaching management. She has published 150+ Marathi and 40+ English science fiction stories. Her English science fiction stories have appeared in numerous publications and webzines. Her stories are included in

the Written Tales and The Writer's Notebook anthologies. Two collections of her stories have also been published.

Emanuel Josh put forward his proposal to the first alien.

"Give us the details of your expedition and technology."

"You mean?" The alien's voice was coarse, but the words came out clear.

"Share your technology with us."

"Why would I do that?" Not only had the alien grasped the human language quickly but also had picked up an attitude.

"Well, you have two options. Stay quiet and face death. Or reveal your knowledge and go free."

"That's silly. I choose neither. I want to go back home – with comprehensive information about you." The alien was actually smiling. The equivalent of smiling, whatever their anatomy allowed.

Emanuel Josh did not smile. He had trained himself not to smile. A smile has so many interpretations, so many undertones. It had no place in negotiations.

He ignored the alien's odd smile.

"You can go home, too. Provided you cooperate and tell us everything."

"I don't understand. Why should I pick up any option you give? They are such weird options. How does this really work? I mean, what if I take none of the options?"

"See, if you and your buddy both keep quiet, then you both stay in our prison for one year. If you share everything with us, and the other one keeps quiet, he dies and you go home. Absolutely free and right away. On the other hand, if he shares everything and you don't, then you die and he goes home."

"What happens if we both share everything we have? Our superior technology and smart pico computing?"

"Then we set you free, happily."

"Hmm. So if I keep quiet, and my colleague cooperates, then I die?"

"Yes."

"So my benefit lies in sharing everything with you. If my colleague keeps quiet, I go home. If he also shares, again I go home."

"Right."

"But why should I risk my colleague's life? After all, he is my closest friend."

"Yes. But he might be just willing to bet on your life."

The alien brooded for a while and then declared, "I don't want to cooperate."

"Are you sure? What if he cooperates? You certainly face death then."

"True. But I'll take that chance."

Emanuel Josh could not believe it. The alien chose the wrong option. How could this happen? When he negotiated, they always chose the right options. They always cooperated. That was the only fool-proof option. Nobody ever took any other option.

Or did the alien communicate with the other alien before choosing? Brain-to-brain? Could they? But how could they? There would be too much noise. Or do they set up individual channels?

Emanuel Josh hurried to get electromagnetic radiation detectors installed all around the aliens. He closely monitored if any waves originated from them.

He got none.

With renewed confidence, he approached the other alien. But it completely shattered him when the other alien also chose to remain silent.

How could Josh lose? How? If the aliens don't communicate with each other, how could they take this decision? How?

The government was certainly not happy. Emanuel Josh had failed for the first time. And the first time happened to be the worst time. How could humans let the aliens simply go without giving away their stuff? Even when they remained imprisoned for one year, they would not talk.

"We can do whatever we want." Josh pleaded. His eyes begged. "After all, we gave them a fair opportunity and they did not use it."

"It's no use. Now we must honor our word." The President and the rest of the people's representatives were absolutely firm on that.

After one silent year in the prison, as the aliens waved grinning goodbyes to earthlings, they specially asked for Josh.

Emanuel Josh had been one sorry person through the year. He had spent sleepless nights searching the reason of the fiasco. If these two didn't communicate, how did that decision happen? From both of them? Countless hours at the detectors and innumerable hand-drawn analytical charts had not helped either.

Reluctantly, he appeared before the aliens.

The first one greeted Josh with that odd smile. "Hello. You played Prisoner's Dilemma by keeping us apart, right? Pure strategy, Nash equilibrium, and all that. Didn't you?"

Josh kept still.

"But note – just as the Euclidean Geometry does not work everywhere in the universe, the Game theory does not work everywhere either! How could it? It is based on the human behavior, and we are not humans!"

The other alien burst out in a laugh.

"As a matter of fact, our brains do talk to each other. Directly. We don't speak, ever. The voice box was activated only for you."

Josh could not believe! His eyes betrayed him for the first time.

"Then how did the electromagnetic detector missed our brainwaves?" The alien was spot-on. "See, you humans can see only three dimensions. You can imagine a few more dimensions. But in reality, many more dimensions exist. Many more. And we transmit our brainwaves through those higher dimensions."

Both the aliens laughed in Josh's face.

"Well, I am not going in deliberate the details and the technology of this communication. I'll leave you to figure that out. But remember this next time you try any negotiations with other aliens!"

Indian Science Fiction: A Brief Review

M. H. SRINARAHARI / ARVIND MISHRA

As per the Constitution of India there are twenty-two recognized official languages. Besides, there are thousands of dialects in use. However, Hindi is India's *lingua franca* and also the official language. Some of southern Indian states emphasize the use of their regional languages along with English and avoid Hindi. This article is a humble attempt to present a bird eye view of the status of science fiction as observed in many of the country's languages with a focus on Hindi.



SF and Indian Mythology

The *Ramayana*, one of the two classical Indian epics fundamental for Hinduism, vividly describes a flying vehicle named Puspak Vimana. The *Mahabharata*, the world's most extensive religious epic, six times the length of the Bible, includes interesting concepts such the amazing intelligent designs and architecture of palaces, the birth of mighty warriors named Kaurvas in a way that is akin to present day test tube babies, a live telecast of the 'mahabharat' war and stories depicting time dilation. The *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Katha Sarithsagar* and many incantations refer to the science of ancient time and its thought experiments. With the advent of appropriate technologies these ideas are now increasingly gaining importance

Dr. Srinarahari is the Secretary – General of Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies located at Bangalore, Karnataka India. This registered association was established in 1998 and it has organized 14 National and three International conferences. The author has conducted science

Historical Perspective

Modern Indian Science Fiction began with the publication of "Aashcharya Vrittant" ("A Strange Tale"), written by Ambika

fiction short writing workshops for all ages and levels. He is a writer, critic and a reporter for Locus from India. He has a doctoral degree in Science Fiction. After 47 years of lengthy service in Government and private Colleges as Principal, he is presently working as Principal at Animaster College, Bangalore, in India.

Dutta Vyas, in the Hindi magazine *Piyush Pravah* in 1884. "Niruddeshar Kahini" ("The Story of the Missing One") by a scientist named Jagadish Chandra Bose was published in Bengali in 1896. The story is about using a drop of hair oil named Kuntalini to pacify the oceanic storms. This concept was later described as the "butterfly effect" where a small change can have far reaching consequences. Among the first Marathi science fiction stories "Tareche Hasya" ("The Laughter of a Cable") by S.B. Ranade (1911) is often referred.

Translations

A translation of Jules Verne's novel *From The Earth To The Moon* (1865) into the Malayalam language was published in Kerala *Kokila*. In Hindi the same novel was published as *Chandra Lok Ki Yatra*, translated by Babu Keshav Prasad Singh, in the reputable mainstream literary magazine *Saraswathi* in 1900. Right from the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century science fiction translations gained momentum in the Assamese language. To name just a few: *Adrisya Manav* (1956) by Hemabala Das was a translation of *The Invisible Man* by H.G. Wells. Another translation of the same book was *Adrishya Manuhjon* (2001) by Abhijit Sarma Baruah, Kshiren Roy's translated work *Sagaror Taliyedi* "Kurihazar", based on Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and Dinesh Chandra Goswami's translation of Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* are all milestones in the annals of Assamese SF. Likewise, noted Hindi SF writer Naval Bihari Mishra translated many popular western SF stories into Hindi.

The First Wave

"Ashcharyajanak Ghanti" ("A Wonderful Bell" – based on the principle of resonance) by Satya Dev Parivarjak was published in 1908 in the mainstream literary magazine *Saraswati*. It has been reported that during those years Lala Srinivas Das, Gopal Das Gahmari and others wrote works of science combined with fairy tale themes. The significant and seminal works in

Hindi by Devaki Nandan Khatri deserve special mention. His magnum opus was *Chandrakanta* (1918) and later its sequel *Chandrakanta Santati*. Both became so popular that people in South India learned Hindi to read these classics. These writings introduced to the audience a new genre called "Tilism" – hitherto unknown worlds of new technologies and wonderment. Durga Prasad Khatri, who was son of Devakinandan Khatri, followed the literary tradition of his father and wrote many Tilism stories and novels. Almost at the same time Acharya Chatursen Shastri, a prolific writer of novels, contributed three SF works, namely *Khagras (The Eclipsed Moon)*, *Neelmani (The Sapphire)*, and *Adbhut Manav (The Amazing Man)*. Devakinandan Khatri's son Durga Prasad Khatri published, in the footsteps of his father, *Bhooth Nath* (1913), *Pratishodh* (1925) and *Lal Panja* (1925), followed by *Rakt Mandal*, *Swarg Puri*, *Safed Shaitaan* and other novels. Renowned Hindi scholar and globetrotter Rahul Sankrityayan wrote a science fiction novel titled *Baisaveen Sadi (The Twenty Second Century)*, published in 1924, imagining the future of humanity 200 years from his time.

Inspiring Events

Due to the negative impact of World War II, the development of Science Fiction in India suffered a hitch. But owing to a successful moon landing, the discovery of quarks, the advent of TV, computers and the Internet, deciphering the human genome and cloning, the movement gained momentum again. With these elements in the background, people in the scientific world began publishing science fiction in journals in the 1960ies with the aim of popularizing science.

The flow of publications and translations went on uninterrupted in Hindi. Noted authors included Acharya Chatursen Shastri, Gurudutt, Yamuna Datt Vaisnava Ashoka, Naval Bihari Mishra, Kailash Shah, Maya Prasad Tripathi, Shukdev Prasad and Devendra Mewari who regularly published science fiction in mainstream media.



*Dr. Arvind Mishra is a well known science fiction writer. He is the founder secretary of the Indian Science Fiction Writers' Association. He has five Science Fiction collections and many science communication, popular science books to his credit, the recent one being *The Space Cuckoo* and other Stories, which got virtually released in Romania during the Covid crisis. He has presided over many workshops and conferences of science communication and science fiction in*

India and abroad.

Chairing the science fiction session at PCST 2010, the 11th Global Science Communication Conference, Delhi, and representing India at the International Science Fiction Conference in Chengdu, China, (November 2019) are of special mention. He is coauthor of a comprehensive Indian Science Fiction Encyclopedia, published recently. He has received many honors, notably the National Vamamali Science Fiction Award from Rabindranath Tagore University, Madhya Pradesh, in 2024 and the Science Fiction Writing for Children Award from the Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sahitya Sansthan in 2017. He retired as

The Second Wave

The second wave in sf writing in India could be traced back to the efforts of the Marathi Vidnyan Parishad, Mumbai (MVP) – an educational institution – which conducted SF story writing competitions. Drs. Bal Phondke and Jayanth Narlikar emerged as the pioneers in the field of Indian science fiction in general and in Marathi science fiction in particular. Many Hindi SF writers also contributed prominently to the second wave which is still in vogue. Writers like Devendra Mevadi, Harish Goyal, Arvind Mishra, R.R. Upadhyaya, Zakir Ali 'Rajnish', Zeashan Haider Zaidi, Kalpna Kulshreshtha, Amit Kumar, Swapnil Bhartiya, Bushra Alvera, Pragya Gautam, Kshama Gautam are among them. Most of them are still actively contributing to the enrichment of the genre.

It seems pertinent at this point to briefly present the development of sf writing in regional languages of India.

SF in Marathi

As mentioned above Dr. Jayant Narlikar and Dr. Bal Phondke, the pioneers of the second wave, inspired authors such as Laxman Londhe, Niranjana Ghate, Dr. Yeshwant Deshpande, Meghashri Dalvi, Smita Potnis and others to continue a trend of sf writing in mainstream Marathi literature. A.P. Deshpande, secretary of the Marathi Vidnyan Parishad, played a key role in popularizing not only Marathi sf but Indian sf writing in general by organizing sf workshops and conferences in the state of Maharashtra.

SF in Tamil and Telugu

The first work of Tamil science fiction was *Bharathi Noolgal* (1959) by Subramanya Bharathi. The first Tamil sf movie was *Nella Thambi* (1949). Representative writers in Tamil are Sujatha Rangarajan and Nellai S. Muthu. The only pointer in the Telugu language is K.R.K. Mohan.

SF in Assamese

Hariprasad Baruan published the first Assamese sf in *Awahan* in 1937. A story in this magazine entitled "Biracharitiyar Desh" describes the adventures of an inhabitant of the planet Jupiter. In 1938, Nagendra Narayan Choudhury published "Rasayan" in *Awahan*.

Seminal works of Dinesh Chandra Goswami include the short story "Kankal" (1970) along with the anthologies *Bhadrata Mapak Yantra* (1985), *Odor Absorbing Notebook* (1985) and the sf dramas *Tritonor Abhijan* (1985), *Ek Tarangar Dare* (1993) and *Abhinna Hriday* (2003). His sf novels include *Ejak Jonakir Jilikani* (1992), *Sabda, Nirantara Sabda* (1992) and *Usma Prabha* (1993). Goswami has also published forty short fictions for the monthly magazine *Bikol*. His novels *Ati Bisista Samaj* (1999) and *Mananiya Sampraday* (2000) were adapted for television serials.

*UP Govt Public
Servant in 2017
and now lives in
his ancestral home
in Jaunpur district.*

SF in Malayalam

The origin of Malayalam science fiction lies in the efforts of P.T. Bhaskara Panikker and N.V. Krishna Varier who made pioneer contributions in the magazines published by Kerala Sastra Sahithya Parishad, a prominent science and literature organization in Kerala, in the year 1952. G.S. Unnikrishnan Nair and C. Radhakrishnan are the most notable writers. *Balabhumi*, a children magazine, has also published sf works.

SF in Bengali

J.C. Bose's sf story "Niruddeshar Kahini" appealed Rabindranath Tagore, the first Nobel laureate from India. The story was later revised and renamed "Palatak Tufan" ("Runway Cyclone").

Satyajit Ray, a prolific writer and famous movie director, considered one of the greatest in the history of cinema, was also a prominent and influential figure in Bengali science fiction. In 1962 Ray wrote the story "Bankubabur Bandhu" which featured a friendly alien. When Arthur C. Clarke asked Satyajit Ray to write a science fiction script for a Hollywood produc-

tion, he took up this story and turned it into a script titled "The Alien". His story "The Diary of Professor Shanku" (1965) gained wide popularity. Unlike Frankenstein's monster, Ray's creation of artificial intelligence does not pose a threat to its creator. While J. C. Bose is considered the father of Bengali SF, Ray and others like Premendra Mitra and Adrish Bardhan played key roles in popularizing and developing the genre.

As Subha Das Mollick, who analyzed Bengali SF, notes: "Both the real scientist Bose and the fictional character Shanku had turned their scientific inquiry to understanding the ebb and flow of life's energy trampled over by mankind." Furthermore, as Isaac Asimov experiments with the variations in the three laws of robotics so does Ray with artificial intelligence in his stories. "Anukul" is one such classic work of Ray that has been turned by Sujay Ghosh into a movie of the same title in 2016. In 2017, a long film titled *The Bounty* premiered at the 23rd Kolkata International Film Festival. Sudipto Shankar Roy is now producing a sequel to *The Bounty*.

Bengali SF and its criticism have been further enriched by Adrish Bardhan, Anish Deb, Meenakshi Chattopadhyay, Narayan Sanyal, Niranjana Sinha, Sirshendu Mukhopadhyaya, Bodhisattva, Anwesha Maity and others.

Conclusively Bengali Science Fiction has grown enormously in recent years. One can browse the online magazine *Kalpa-biswa*, edited by Dip Ghosh, to catch the current trends. A special position is occupied by Amitav Ghosh, a world-renowned mainstream writer, writing in English and Bengali, who was in discussion for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2025. His reputation has peaked with the *Ibis* trilogy (2008 – 2015), but he has also written maybe the greatest science fiction novel ever coming from India: *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), a fictional account of the discovery of the malaria infection route that has won the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1997.

SF in Kannada

The origins of science fiction written in Kannada can be traced back to the publication of Nagavarma's work *Karnataka Ka-*

dambari (10th century) which describes an elaborate process of preserving the dead body of the protagonist Pundarika in ice. During that period Shivakotyacharya's novel *Vaddaradhane* was published. Rajashekhara Bhoosanoor Mutt made an entry with "Holiday Planet" in 1965 and has remained a prominent writer for five decades.

The magazines *Yanthra Manava*, edited by Srinarahari, and *Kannada Vyjanika Kathegalu*, edited by Subhashini, were published at the turn of the century. They have dealt with machine phobia, ecology, feminism, and hardcore elements of physics, and botany. A special mention has to be made of Bairnatti and Santhosh Kumar Mehandale for their continuous contributions to enriching the sf world in Kannada. Bhairnatti's contribution is especially noteworthy as he translated many stories from other languages into Kannada.

Some other highlights of sf in Kannada include:

Guptagamini, a collection of ten sf stories by Savitha Srinivas, a renowned female sf writer, published in 2013; *Kannada Vaignanika Kathegalu* (2000), an anthology with twelve representative sf stories of Kannada writers; *Naleya Kathegalu* (2008), an anthology with 14 representative sf stories, published by Sahitya Akademi, an established literary publication center. A trilogy of sf novels have also been authored by Savitha Srinivas, the first of its kind in Kannada: *Triloka Sanchari Neere* (2019), *Gaalakke Sikka Chandira* (2020) and *Mugilagala Jagadagala* (2025). A well received collection ten sf stories in Kannada is *Bananchina Aache (Beyond Horizons*, 2022) by Dr. Shantala Anil. She has also penned two novels, *3019 AD* (2021) which is a mystery story about superhumans set in 3019A.D., and *Devaragalu moorae genu (Playing God*, 2023), which is about genetic manipulation and the greed of people.

SF story writing workshops were conducted for children of the age group 13-15 in the entire state by IASFS. One of its results was the anthology *101 Science Fiction Short Stories* written by participating children, published in 2004. Similarly, a workshop was conducted for science writers and scientists and the workshop product was brought out as *Mundanondu Kaal-*

ada Kathegalu (2006) by the National Book Trust, India.

A women Science Writers workshop was also held (2012). All workshop proceedings were edited by Srinarahari and Bhoosnurmutt. In addition, *Mayura*, *Sudha Taranga*, *Tushara*, and other popular mainstream magazines and newspapers such as *Prajavani* and others brought out and are still bringing special issues with sf short stories.

Notable Events

A milestone event was the publication of *It Happened Tomorrow* (1993), edited by Bal Phondke and published by the National Book Trust, the government of India's premier publication enterprise. The hitherto unique feature of the anthology was a dozen and a half short stories originally written in various vernacular languages, translated into English for the first time. This anthology was later made available in Hindi and in many other regional languages.

Marathi Vigyan Parishad made a pioneering attempt in holding many science fiction conference sessions since 1996. Indian sf criticism took off with the publication of Dr. Srinarahari's and Upinder Mehan's articles in global journals and magazines in 1996 and 1998 respectively.

The prestigious Ramlal Anand College of Delhi University organized an event focusing on science fiction, emerging trends of AI and society on March 19th, 2025. Professor Urvasi Kuhad was the organizer who also convened the discussion sessions.

The audience participated enthusiastically discussing the subject with experts Arvind Mishra, Sami Ahmad Khan, Archana mirajkar and Pragya Gautam during these panels and in open sessions that followed.

The Encyclopedia of Indian Science Fiction, focusing on Hindi writers, under the chief editorship of Harish Goyal, was also unveiled on the occasion. The encyclopedia is the first ever praiseworthy effort in India to succinctly compile comprehensive information about Hindi science fiction, including articles on contributions to the genre in other languages.

During the period 2020-22, when the world was gripped by the terror of the COVID pandemic, more than two dozen stories on the disaster were written by Indian science fiction writers. Two sf anthologies inspired by the crisis were published in India: the Hindi anthology *Covidnama*, jointly edited by Dr. Manoj Patairia and Dr. Arvind Dubey, and the English anthology *Covid-19*, edited by Rishabh Dubey (aka Kridious). Both books were well and widely received by readers.

Indian SF in English

Prominent writers of Indian sf in English are Anil Menon, Vandana Singh, Archana Mirajkar, Ashok Banker, Rishabh Dubey, Sami Ahmed Khan, Nellai S Muthu, Anupam Bhattacharya, Arvind Risbud, Arya Madan Mohan, Ashok Banker, Bharathi Ramachandran, Bhushan Kapoor, Dilip M. Salwe, G.P. Phondke, Harshita Verma, Jayant V. Narlikar, Kenneth Doyle, KRK Mohan, Laxman Londhe, Meyhna Sujata Mitra, Mukul Sharma, Niranjan Gagte, R.N. Sharma, Radha Ganguli, Rajashekhara Bhoosanoor Mutt, Ramesh Deshpande, Salil Chowdhary, Sanjay Havanoor, Sathyajit Ray, Shalini Tuli, Sourabh Bhattacharya, Srinarahari, Subodh Jawadekar, Surekha Nagar, Surekha, HS Bairnatti, Dip Ghosh, Salik Shah, Balaji Navale, Varun Sayal and others.

Vandana Singh, Hari Kumar Nair, Ashish Mahabal, Divyaraj Amiya, Reema Sarwal, Superno Banerjee and others are contributing to Indian science fiction from outside of the country. Obviously most of the Indian sf writings in English are considerably influenced by western literature but writers have proved skillful in including elements of Indian culture in their stories. Sami Ahmad Khan's novel *Aliens in Delhi* is a case in point.

Adbhut.in is a web portal launched in 2003 to popularize Indian science fiction and fantasy. It was founded by editor and author Dinkar Charak, known for his English short stories which blend scientific concepts, dry humor, and unusual human reactions to scientific advancements.

Themes

Most of the Indian sf works could be classified under the headlines "robot stories" or "alien encounters". In those stories the homo sapiens usually triumphs over the extra terrestrials. Gedanken experiments are carried out in fields such as ecology, biotechnology and physics. Some stories are about humanoid robots following Asimov's famous three laws of robotics. Supercomputers are also a frequent topic. In conjunction with Indian traditional norms of ethics and morality such stories tend to highlight the qualities of a perfect human being and usually have happy endings underlining a contrast with western dystopic sf.

Bollywood Movies

Many Indian sf movies from *Kaadu* (1956) through *Mr. India* (1972) and *Endhiran* (2011) had only a thin science fictional element intermingled with romance. Two noteworthy exceptions are *Ra One* (2011) and *2.0* (2018). *2.0* has been released in multiple languages and was an all-time record box office hit.

Associations

There are two prominent registered science fiction associations in the country, namely the Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies, Bangalore, and the Indian Science Fiction Writers' Association, Faizabad in the district Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh). Their aim is to popularize science, to promote inter-disciplinary studies, to provide platforms for creating masterpieces of literature by facilitating a scientific mindset and also to provide a common platform for scientists, researchers, scholars, technologists, academics, students and writers to express their findings and to present papers during the annual conferences, seminars, and workshops.

The establishment of Indian SF Writers Association in 1995 has brought together all the veteran and amateur writers to

contribute to their quarterly magazine *Vignyan Katha*, edited jointly by Dr. R.R. Upadhyaya, Dr. Harish Goyal and Dr. Arvind Mishra. The magazine has discontinued its print publication but is still digitally published today.

The Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies (IASFS) was launched on January 2, 1998 – the day coincided with the day of birth of Isaac Asimov and the completion of a century since the publication of J.C. Bose's story "Agosh" which was a milestone in the history of Indian science fiction. The main goal of the IASFS is to provide help for science fiction research. The association also brought out a quarterly journal named *Indian Journal of Science Fiction* under the editorship of Dr. K. S. Purushothaman but its publication could not be sustained longer. The association has organized fourteen national and three world SF conferences in India till date.

The IASFS has collaborated with Mukthananda College, Gangapur, and MSP Mandal, Aurangabad, in organizing the 18th ISF/4th International Science Fiction Conference on 16,17 & 18th of October 2019 at Deogiri Engineering College, Aurangabad, Maharashtra. Dr. Balaji Navale played a key role in organizing events in this city.

Connecting with Other Countries

India was connected with the western world through the pioneering attempt made by the magazine *2001* from New Delhi in 1988. This magazine was the successor to *Science Today*, which was a prominent Indian popular science magazine from the 1960s to the 1990s. *2001* itself existed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but the publication was discontinued even before 2001.

The *2001* team had an interview with Isaac Asimov over satellite. The event was carried out by Chandan Mitra (coordinator) Mukul Sharma (editor of *2001*), and Jug Suraiya (*Times of India*). Since then Dr. Narhari has been regularly contributing to *Locus* about Indian sf events.

In the Asian sf conference held in 2018 in Beijing, China, Dr. Srinarahari and Dr. Bhise Ram represented India. For the inter-

national sf conference organized in Chengdu in November 2019, Dr. Srinarahari, Dr. Arvind Mishra and Dr. Sami Ahmad Khan were invited to partake in the gala event. In November 2022 Mr. Dip Ghosh, editor of the sf e-magazine *Kalpabiswa*, represented the ISFWA on in 81st WorldCon held in Chengdu in 2023 and participated in discussions in several sessions.

Galaxies, a reputed French science fiction magazine, has featured works by Indian authors and dedicated special issues to Indian science fiction. This special issue featured a dossier on Indian science fiction edited by Arvind Mishra and Dip Ghosh.

The Hindi-language quarterly sf magazine *Vigyan Katha* released a special issue focused on Romanian sf in July 2020 in collaboration with a project by *Galaxia 42* magazine and the science fiction & fantasy club Sindicatul 9 from Timișoara. The issue was brought out with the support of Darius Hupov, editor *Galaxia 42*, Dr. Arvind Mishra, founder secretary of the Indian Science Fiction Writers Association, and magazine editor Rajeev Ranjan Upadhyaya.

The European launch of the book *The Space Cuckoo and Other Stories* by Arvind Mishra took place online, on December 13, 2022 on Discord, at the international meeting of Syndicate 9 Science Fiction club from Timisoara, Romania. The guest of the meeting were the author and the moderator Darius Hupov along with sf enthusiasts from many countries.

These are just some of the many salient foreign collaborations which highlight the growing profile of Indian sf internationally and demonstrate cross-cultural literary exchange.

Challenges

There are some hurdles for the progress of Indian science fiction, the prominent one being the multiple languages in India in which sf is written.

Translating science fiction literature written in various languages remains a challenge. Regional and linguistic bias also hinder the emergence of a unified form of Indian science fiction literature. The joint sustained efforts of the Indian Science

Fiction Writers' Association and the Indian Association of Science Fiction Studies are in progress to address this issue.

Also, a lack of acceptance of sf by a majority of publishers, a limited number of science fiction writers and insufficient support and encouragement for writers are some of the reasons why there are few noteworthy sf works coming from the country.

Positive Trends

The boom of Indian science fiction is most pronounced in metropolitan cities and in some especially active states. In scholarly circles, doctoral degrees in science fiction have been bestowed to several researchers. The efforts of media in highlighting sf events are to be appreciated in India. In this regard, it gives positive signals for the younger generations' perception of the genre. The Delhi based FM band radio has interviewed Dr. Arvind Mishra and Dr. Srinarahari. The All India Radio stations in Lucknow and Agra are airing many sf drama programs. Sf dramas were aired by AIR in the town of Dibrugarh also. The nation's leading newspapers *The Hindu*, *Times of India*, *The Deccan Herald*, *Amrith Bazaar Patrika*, *the Bangalore Mirror*, *Tehelka*, and other mainstream news media regularly highlight sf events. Young people with innovative ideas are currently working in this arena. Progress has been remarkable as over the past four decades a number of special sf editions of magazines on occasion of the festivals Bihu, Durga and Diwali Puja have been published.

Indian science fiction aspires to join hands with the international sf community.