

The Rare Idol of Ganesha

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

14 August 2005

Dear John,

I sincerely request you to watch my performance in what is going to be my final test appearance. Hope you can make it!

Regards,

Sincerely yours,

Pramod Rangnekar

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

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

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

Pramod was greeted with great applause which had an element of sympathy about it. For, as all followers of the game knew, this was his last test. Indeed, during this series his performance had been indifferent. The old fire

and magic had gone from his bowling, which could now be easily ‘read’ by the England batsmen. There had been an increasing demand that Pramod be dropped from the team. Nevertheless, the selectors once again plumped for experience, rather than quality and gave him this last chance. Would he live up to their expectations?

The first hint of the unusual came when Pramod prepared to bowl, “Right arm, over the wicket?” asked umpire Coates, who was familiar with his style of bowling. “No,” said Pramod to the umpire’s surprise. “Left arm over the wicket.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“John, it’s for you. The caller won’t identify himself but says it’s important,” Ann said. I cursed inwardly—I would certainly be late for my appointment now.

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

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

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

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

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

Ann was only too happy to try her hand at a curry. She also decided to experiment with some Indian sweets. I left her with her cookery cards and

hastened for the train. But throughout the day my thoughts were on Ajit and on our forthcoming encounter. What was he going to tell me?

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

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

Was he going to tell me something of it tonight?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I subjected the piece to the many visual tests of authenticity that I knew. Yes, so far as I could tell this piece was made by the same craftsman who had

made the idol I had in the museum. Then suddenly, I noticed one glaring difference: how could I miss it in the first place?

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Can you swear to it?”

“Of course!”

Ajit opened out both his hands in front of me. Yes, one thumb was shorter than the other. But I realised with a shock that it was the right thumb that was short.

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

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

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

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

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

I went to the desk to feel it. It was as solid and real as Ajit grinning in front of me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the jargon of relativity, we say that the geometry of spacetime is ‘curved’ instead of ‘flat’ when gravitation is present. A two-dimensional flat creature

moving on the surface of a sphere is conscious of the curvature of the surface. Imagine a similar curvature in higher dimensions—it is difficult conceptually, but easy mathematically!

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

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

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

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

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

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

My first experiment was with my wrist watch. Apart from a mirror reflection I wanted to see whether its mechanism would survive the transformation.

It did. This was important because my next step involved live objects. I experimented on insects, butterflies, guinea pigs, etc. When I found that even living objects survive the experiments, I decided to take the final step.

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

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

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

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

My brain retained no memory of my reflected state!

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

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

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

“Is this *Ganesha* also a reflection?”

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

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

The cabinet was empty!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes. And it was I who telephoned to give the message to the newspaper. I had kept him in my flat for a couple of days. When he recovered sufficiently I transformed him back to normal and delivered him at Bow Street. Of course he had totally forgotten all his traumatic experiences. “I felt it unwise to tell him the truth.”

As a good scientific theory can explain many phenomena so were all my mysteries resolved by this remarkable discovery of Ajit. I could also see why he did not want to eat with knife and fork. Ann and I would have detected his awkwardness. As it was, we did comment on his difficulty in eating with

fingers but he had a reasonable explanation for it. What really caught him by surprise was Ken's request for an autograph. Even signing one's name can be very difficult if your brain insists on projecting all letters the wrong way round!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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