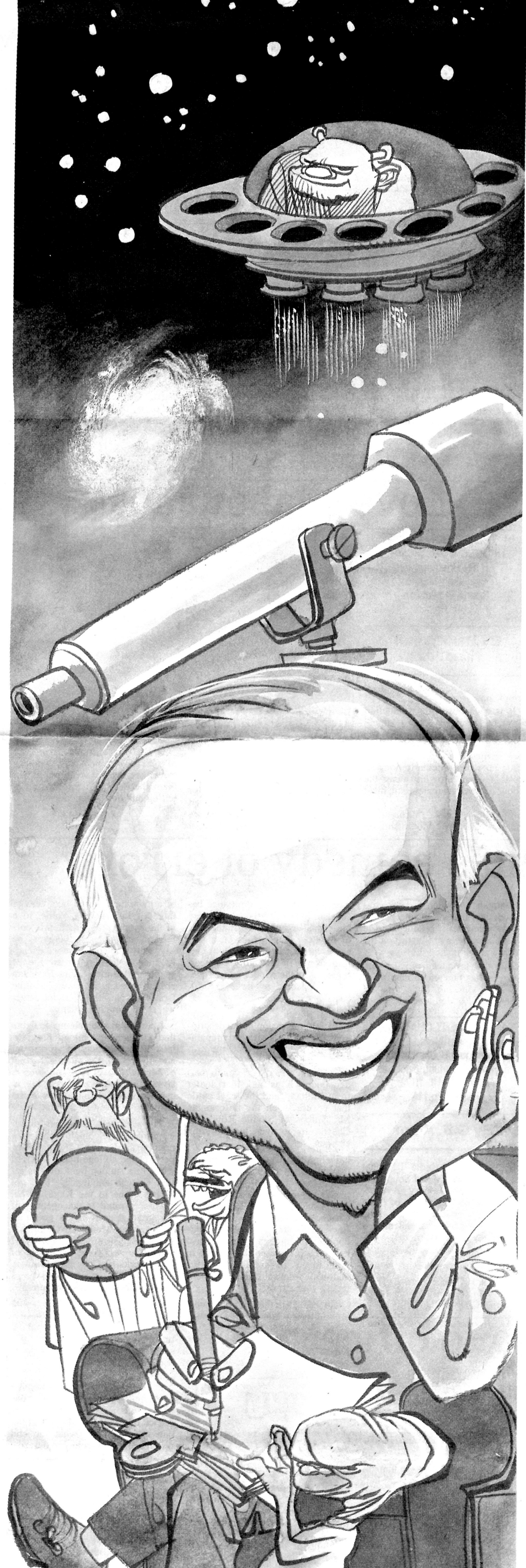


SCIFI AND I



I can recall the precise moment when I took the plunge. It was the opening talk at a symposium held at a leading scientific institute in Ahmedabad. The year was 1974. The speaker was doing his best to put the audience to sleep. A few hardy ones had managed to keep up with him, but I had given up long since.

It was then that the idea flashed through my mind: why not begin *now*? So, I pulled out the writing pad so thoughtfully provided by the symposium organisers and started...

That was how *Krishnavivara* (The Black Hole) saw the light of day. It was my first attempt at writing a science fiction story. The attempt was in Marathi because I was vaguely thinking of writing something for the science fiction story writing competition announced by the Marathi Vidnyan Parishad of Bombay.

The story fitted well into the prescribed word-length of the competition. In a half serious way, I submitted the entry under the name of Narayan Vinayak Jagtap, with initials in reverse order to mine. And, just in case the Parishad people were familiar with my handwriting, I asked my wife to write it out and send it.

The story won the first prize, to my delightful surprise. The matter would probably have rested there. Having convinced myself that I could write sci-fi, I might have taken it easy. Also, after recovering from their delightful surprise that their award had gone to a scientist, the Parishad might have gone on with its modest mission to encourage others to get into the field. But that was not to be.

An unexpected accolade for my maiden attempt came from no less a person than Durgabai Bhagawat, when she mentioned it in her presidential address in the Marathi Sahitya Sammelan.

And in this country of ours, statements by important personages made on important occasions are sufficient to launch new waves...of practically anything. Sci-fi was no exception.

Overnight, science fiction became a respectable part of Marathi literature, and I was credited with having opened a new gallery in its hall of fame. Magazines came to realise that their Diwali numbers would not be complete without a sci-fi story...and I began receiving requests to write for all of them!

Let us set the record straight. Science fiction has been written in Marathi well before my humble contribution. As far back as 1915, one can point to the story by Shreedhar Balakrishna Ranade in the monthly *Manoranjan*. In the 1950s and 1960s, there were several writers, of original and translated science fiction; to name a few, D.C. Soman, D.P. Khambete, B.R. Bhagawat, Narayan Dharap, etc. The list is incomplete but, I think, I have made the point.

What made me write science fiction? As a student of astronomy and astrophysics, one is constantly reminded of the cliché that truth is stranger than fiction. Our sheltered existence on this planet, which itself is so minuscule compared to the vast universe all around it, does not prepare us to even properly conceive the cosmic reality. Wrote J.B.S. Haldane: "The universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but it is queerer than what we can suppose."

Against this background, there is no dearth of ideas for science fiction. The (difficult) trick lies in portraying them in a readable story format. The balancing act requires on the one hand avoiding the science part degenerating into a classroom discourse and on the other hand preventing the fiction part from transforming the "queerness" of the universe into a horror story or a fairy tale. I have seen several sci-fi, including some of mine, fall flat on losing the balance.

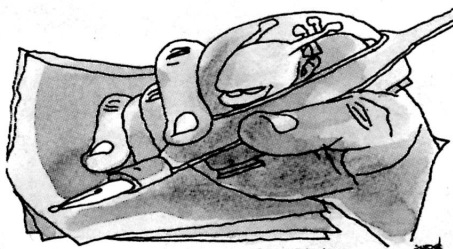
But, in the rarer case of a practising scientist, there is an incentive. He may speculate more boldly in a science fiction story than he can in a paper submitted to a research journal.

What if he is subsequently vindicated? When Fred Hoyle, not only my guru in research but also my inspiration for writing sci-fi, wrote his classic *The Black Cloud*, he proposed the idea of a giant interstellar cloud made of molecules. In the Fifties, when the book was written, scientists were not willing to contemplate molecules existing in space. Finding it difficult to get his ideas published in a research journal, Hoyle wrote it in the form of a novel instead. In the Sixties,

Noted astrophysicist **JAYANT NARLIKAR** shares the secrets of his success as a science-fiction writer:

"Why do I write sci-fi? More as a relaxation from serious science and partly from the desire to share the excitement of scientific ideas with the lay reader, and also partly to stress the growing importance of science and the scientific temper for society..."

"Nobody is perfect and I think I know my limitations as a writer. Whether in Marathi, Hindi or English, the three languages I write in, I am below the median...so I am willing to accept criticism that my writings are dull..."



molecular astronomy began to reveal the existence of such molecular clouds.

On a more modest level, I must confess to a (perverted?) satisfaction on reading that there is a likelihood of the Comet Swift-Tuttle hitting the earth on its next approach to the sun. To set the lay mind at rest, let me hasten to add that it is too early to make this doomsday prediction and that the calculations of the comet's orbit would become more reliable with time, of which we still have plenty!

But my satisfaction springs from the fact that I had written a science fiction story on precisely this theme back in the Seventies and, I believe, the method of preventing the catastrophe advocated now is the one adopted in the story. No doubt, our descendents of the 22nd century will improve upon the techniques of today, should the danger arise...but I hope the archives of the *Deccan Herald* would be available then for a reference to this article.

So, why do I write sci-fi? More as a relaxation from serious science and partly from the desire to share the excitement of scientific ideas with the lay reader, and also partly to stress the growing importance of science and the scientific temper for society.

Some of my purist literary friends tell me that writings with such ulterior motives do not constitute literature. I tell them to go

fly their literary kites elsewhere. If writings with a missionary motive are to be disqualified, then I don't know how the purists look at the *Ramcharitamanas* of Tulsi Das or the Sant literature of Maharashtra.

I cannot end this article without a dig at the critics. Nobody is perfect, and I think I know my limitations as a writer. Whether in Marathi, Hindi or English, the three languages I write in, I am below what the scientists call the median, which means that at least half the total number of writers are above me. So, I am willing to accept criticism that my writings are dull, that the characters are weak, that the framework lacks a structure...or whatever it is that critics like to say in a much more pedantic way.

But I do draw the line at a certain level. The following examples illustrate to what ridiculously low levels literary criticism in Marathi can sink, so far as science fiction is concerned.

Some critics have complained that my characters use too many English words. My reply to these critics is that they should spend one day without uttering a single English word in the Marathi they speak. They will discover how certain words have become part of our day-to-day conversation. A language acquires strength through mutation, through evolution by assimilating new words. In any case, the words considered pure today were also at one time "immi-

grants" to the language.

In any case, considering that English is now being used worldwide as the language of science, it is only natural if there were a few technical English words as part of the text in a science fiction story. Words like *radio*, *radar*, *TV*, *telephone*, *fax*, *rocket*, etc. may have translations in native languages prepared artificially by committees of experts; but the man in the street is happier with the originals. Why ban their usage in a work of fiction?

But the nadir of the level of criticism was reached when a critic claimed that my comet story was a copy of Fred Hoyle's novel, entitled *October the First is Too Late*. Surprised at this claim, I took a careful look at the latter to see if there was any similarity of plot or even of the basic scientific idea. The only common thing was the date: October the First!

I happened to meet the critic and asked him if he had read Hoyle's novel and, if so, could he elaborate on his claim. He confessed that he had not read the book, but had only gone by the title.

The comedy of errors continued further when an academic got his Ph.D. in science fiction in one of the universities and his thesis also included elaborate references to the above critic. He too did not bother to check the veracity of the claim by reading the book, but simply came to the momentous conclusion that the Indian sci-fi com-

munity lives on plagiarising the works of its western counterpart. There is another story about this academic, which is hilarious to recall.

I am a fan of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. As an amusing exercise, I decided once to write a Holmes-Watson story in a science fiction format, using a Marathi style as if it was a translation of a real Conan Doyle story, taking care to copy the original style of the author. Several readers felt that it was a real translation and asked where the original was published.

Our researcher above, however, went one step further and announced that the story was a copy of Conan Doyle's story, *Opal Tiara*, when no such story by that author exists. Moreover, my story drew heavily upon the special theory of relativity and time travel, on which Conan Doyle could not have written in his times!

Being a Wodehouse fan also, I recently repeated the prank by writing what purported to be a translation of a Bertie-Jeeves story. Again, the style fooled several Wodehouse enthusiasts, who wrote to ask where the original was, and on being told that Wodehouse never wrote one, expressed appreciation of the exercise.

Cynics ask: "When do you get the time to write science fiction?" Very often, the implication is that I am writing this when I should be doing real science. I try to explain that it is my spare-time activity.

Ultimately, it all boils down to time management. Given that we have no more, no less, than 24 hours per day, of which a part must go to work, sustenance and sleep, there are several gaps in the daily routine which usually go unutilized in a productive way.

Then, there are other occasions, too. What do you do when the airline announces a delay of two hours in the departure of your flight? Well, don't spend all of it getting mad. Follow my advice. Take out a writing pad and...maybe you can also write a science fiction story.