

The Adventure  
Jayant Narlikar

Date: July 19, 1986. Time: 7.36 p.m. That was when it happened.

At that precise moment of time, Professor Gangadharpant Gaitonde collided with a truck and apparently vanished into thin air. But let us begin the story at the beginning.

Professor Gaitonde was an eminent historian and a leading public figure of Pune. This introduction is for those who never read his massive tomes on Indian history, or who somehow missed attending a public function chaired by him. For, Gangadharpant was much in demand for presiding over public functions. Indeed, at the time the story begins, he had just completed presiding over a seminar and with his meticulous records he knew that this was his 999th occasion for presiding at a function.

Lest the figure 999 at the age of 55 appears large, the arithmetic behind it is simple. If you preside over a public meeting once a week, it will take you less than two decades to cross the 999-mark. Gangadharpant, of course, knew this.

In his mid 30s, he was already well-established in Pune, that citadel of orators, as a top public speaker. He was showered with invitations to preside. First he was hesitant and choosy, but soon he began to relish the job. Whether it was to release a book or to speak at a college day or to celebrate some jubilee of some organisation or to felicitate a person on his sixtieth birthday, or to preside over a seminar not necessarily connected with history, Professor Gaitonde was readily available. However, he had long decided that his thousandth appearance on the platform would be for history, his favourite subject. That occasion was to come two weeks hence at a seminar devoted to the Third Battle of Panipat.

But it is the 999th appearance that concerns us here. This occasion was a seminar in the mathematics department of Poona University – a seminar on Catastrophe Theory. How is it, you may ask, that a professor of history should be presiding at a mathematics seminar?

It came about this way. The professor of mathematics, an eminent person in his own field, was a man of mercurial temperament. “Catastrophe is not mathematics; I will have nothing to do with it,” he declared when the idea of a seminar was mooted. “Get Gangadharpant to preside over your jamboree; he will jump at the chance,” he advised in jest.

His mathematics colleagues, for reasons best known to them (or was it departmental politics?) took up the advice: Gangadharpant accepted their invitation, but only after, finding out from them what the catastrophe theory was all about.

“You have heard of Newton, of course?” asked young Rajendra Deshpande, a research fellow who was an expert on the catastrophe theory.

“Who hasn’t?” Gangadharpant said cautiously.

“Newton introduced the laws of motion. You need to apply force to change the state of motion of a body. If you apply less force the change is less: if you apply more, the change is greater,” Rajendra explained.

“I understand that.”

“Newton started a new way of thinking in science – the relationship between causes and effects. The mathematical machinery he set up was geared to describing this relationship – provided ...

“Provided, what?” asked Gangadharpant.

“Provided causes and effects act in a continuous manner. But not all phenomena that we observe are continuous. There can be sudden abrupt changes in a situation.”

“Like what?”

“Well, take a dogfight. Two dogs are at it for a while and then, suddenly, one decides that enough is enough and runs away. There is a battle in his mind between aggressive tendencies and fear: the latter suddenly becomes overwhelming. How do you describe this situation mathematically?” Rajendra posed a counter-question.

“I did not think maths handled such situations,” Gangadharpant answered meekly.

“Newtonian maths doesn’t. That is where catastrophe theory comes in. It models real life situations involving sudden, dramatic changes. Like: a cricket side collapses all of a sudden, a mob gets out of control and runs amuck, share prices crash down unexpectedly, something happens to turn the tide in a battle...”

“Battles! Now you interest me. It has always been a hobby of mine to speculate what would have happened if some crucial battles had ended differently.” Professor Gaitonde’s eyes lit up. He now wanted to know more about catastrophe theory.

Rajendra gave him some articles to read. He had enjoyed the seminar and as he made his way back home he was thinking about how history is shaped, how it experiences turns. Having finished his 999th function he was already looking forward to the thousandth occasion, when he would be chairing the Panipat seminar. The Third Battle of Panipat, what if ...

“Baju, hatu! – can’t you see where you are going?”

The warning from the cleaner was drowned in the still louder noise of the truck's horn. But it was too late. The truck driver attempted a last-minute swerve but could not avoid a glancing blow.

The truck screeched to a halt. The driver and the cleaner jumped out. They had a momentary glimpse of the professor before the collision – enough to tell them the victim was a man of some importance. For, Professor Gaitonde always made it a practice to wear jodhpurs on the occasions when he had to chair a meeting. The driver and the cleaner searched thoroughly. But they could not locate the professor either below the truck or on the sides. He had simply vanished into thin air.

The road was empty. The driver and the cleaner had but one thought in mind – to make themselves scarce from this weird scene.

Sixty hours after this event, Professor Gaitonde reappeared in Bombay's Azad Maidan. Passers-by had gathered around him, wondering what a man of distinguished appearance was doing, lying on the grass with torn clothes and empty pockets. As the noise woke him up, Gangadharpant found a police constable facing him.

"Sir, who are you? How come you have been sleeping here in the open? Did someone attack you?" The constable asked politely.

"Eh? Yes, of course! I am Professor Gaitonde from Pune. But where am I? How did I get here? I can't remember a thing, constable," Gangadharpant replied.

"I know, havaldar sahib! This gentleman is the history professor who suddenly disappeared three days back," someone in the crowd volunteered the information.

Three days! What had he done in those three days? As he made his way to the police station, Professor Gaitonde racked his brains to find the answer that kept eluding him. But he managed to remember that his son Vinay worked in a Bombay firm.

Vinay Gaitonde was contacted. He duly came and identified his father and took him home. A doctor examined him and found him essentially unharmed, except for a few bruises whose cause the professor could not remember. A famous Bombay psychiatrist probed his mind and found it blank for those 60 hours.

Professor Gaitonde, who prided himself on his extraordinary memory – he could rattle off historic dates and details at will – found this extremely disconcerting. How could he forget everything that happened to him in those 60 hours? He must somehow find the answer. Was it to be found here in Bombay?

But Pune was beckoning him. No, he had not forgotten the next seminar he had to preside over – his thousandth. Against Vinay's entreaties to stay on in Bombay. Gangadharpant booked a seat on the Deccan Queen the next afternoon.

As the train stopped at Karjat, he could not resist the famous batata vadas: to pay the hawker he put his hand in the inner pocket of his jodhpurs, now mended by his daughter-in-law, and took out his wallet. As he put it back in the pocket, his hand felt a piece of paper behind the lining ... yes, there was a hole there. Gently, he extracted the paper. It was the torn page of an old book.

Gangadharpant found the page strangely familiar. Where had he seen it last? As he read the Marathi text on it, his eyes lit up. In a flash he had regained his memory.

"Nobody will believe my story" he muttered to himself, "but what about this paper that brought my memory back? Will they believe it? Is it factual history or fiction?"

As the train neared the Shivajinagar station, Professor Gaitonde made two resolutions. The first was to see Rajendra Deshpande. Only Rajendra, he felt, could elucidate this mystery.

Professor Gaitonde's second resolution was even more momentous. He decided that henceforth he would not chair any function ever, including Panipat seminar. What lay behind this historic decision?

It is better to give a third person account of what Gangadharpant told Rajendra Deshpande – for the professor was apt to digress a lot in tangential directions while telling a story.

X X X

Gangadharpant had lost consciousness when the truck struck him a glancing blow. When he came to, he found himself on a comfortable hospital bed. Beside him stood a nurse clad in a white sari and a doctor with a stethoscope around his neck. The latter spoke, with a smile, in Marathi.

“Sir, I waited since you showed signs of regaining consciousness. You seem okay now. But have some rest: I will return in a couple of hours with a few questions.”

“Doctor, I am feeling fine, if a bit shaken. But go ahead with your questions right now. Rather, I will ask you some, if I may. Where am I?”

“A question straight from Hindi fillums: ‘Mai kahan hun?’ the doctor said mischievously. “You are in Pune, in the Vishwasrao Peshve Hospital.”

Gangadharpant was puzzled. He knew all the leading hospitals in Pune; indeed he had presided over the foundation stone-laying or inauguration ceremonies of quite a few of the recent ones. But this name was new to him.

“Where is this hospital?” he asked.

“Why, on the Vishwasrao Peshve Marg. Both the road and the hospital are at least a hundred years old. It is hard to say whether the road got its name from the hospital or vice versa. It is the classic chicken and egg problem. Ha, ha, ha!” the doctor said jokingly.

Professor Gaitonde had never heard of this road either. Seeing his puzzled face, the doctor continued, “Let me ask a question. You were found in the Ganeshkhind forest. How on earth did you manage to get there? Had it not been for some passing hikers who saw you...”

“Forest? I had not been to any forest! I now recall that I was walking along the Senapati Bapat Marg...” Gangadharpant was recovering his memory now.

“Bapat Marg? Never heard of it!” the nurse exclaimed, surprised. But the doctor signalled her to be quiet and continued with his questions. “Sir, your name, address and occupation, please?”

“I am Gangadharpant Gaitonde, historian and professor – may I ask if you are new to Pune?” The fact that the doctor had not recognised him, a leading public figure of the city, had led Gangadharpant to ask this question. The reply disconcerted him.

“Of course not! I am a real Puneman. I belong to Sadashiv Peth and have lived there all my life except for five years when I had gone abroad, to the UK. But enough about me. Where do you stay, sir?”

“Varun Housing Society, behind Fergusson College,” Professor Gaitonde replied.

“Then you are really from Bombay.”

“How come? You should know that Fergusson College is in Pune – it is a landmark of Pune.” The professor was getting impatient.

The nurse wanted to say something but was again signalled to be silent. The doctor drew her to the side. They had a whispered conversation, obviously not meant for the patient’s ears. Still, Gangadharpant heard suggestive words like ‘don’t argue’, ‘mental relapse’, etc. Finally, the nurse left and the doctor came back.

“Let me confess, professor, I found your subject – history – rather tedious. I was overwhelmed by those minute details in the regimes of those 17 Peshwas and 20 Mughal emperors. I could never remember dates of battle and terms of treaties.”

Seventeen peshwas? Twenty Mughal emperors? This fellow is really weak in his history, thought Gangadharpant. Still, he thought it wise not to argue. Nevertheless, he simply had to get clarification on one point. He posed his question.

“Would you please tell me today’s date?”

“Today is Ashadh shukla chaturdashi, Shaka 1908. If you need the date in Bombay, it is July 20, 1986.

Again, the reply was puzzling. Why two calendars, one for Pune and another for Bombay? Was the doctor pulling a fast one on him by quoting a date from the Hindu calendar because he was a historian? But his face appeared quite natural, with no trace of mischief.



And the date was correct. One night had elapsed since his accident.

Next morning, the doctor turned up at seven. He had forbidden Professor Gaitonde any reading. So he had no alternative but to relax and contemplate. But no amount of thinking could make any sense of the statements the doctor had made. Whatever had happened to the Pune he knew so well?

The doctor was in a jovial mood and rattled off half-a-dozen jokes as he conducted a thorough medical examination of the professor. Finally, he gave the verdict: “You are fine now, professor. But you should be thankful that you were discovered not long after your accident. Or you would have become a part of history yourself! Ha, ha ha!”

Professor Gaitonde was relieved and was contemplating his next move when the doctor remarked, “I am now going home after night-duty – can I drop you somewhere?”

Gangadharipant thanked him. As he changed from the hospital uniform to his suit he prepared himself mentally to face a few more jokes.

On his way out of the hospital he looked around. Things did not look quite right. The different medical sections, nurses and ward boys, operation theatre, were all there but seemed somewhat different from what he had seen of hospitals elsewhere. The notices were in Hindustani, Marathi and English. Yes, Hindustani, with a fair mixture of Urdu and not the sanskritised Hindi that had evolved since Independence.

Professor Gaitonde was wondering about it all when the doctor pulled up in his car in the porch. The car model looked roomy but different.

“What is this model called?”

“Chakravarti. Why, this is the most common model to be had.” The doctor seemed surprised at the question; and then continued, “Now that we are no longer doctor and patient, let me introduce myself; I am Arvind Modak. I stay near Swargate.”

Swargate! Gangadharpant was relieved to hear of a landmark of the city he thought he knew so well. He felt confident to carry the conversation further.

“Does the ST stand bother you?” he asked. “What is an ST stand?” Dr Modak obviously had not heard of it. The momentary surge of confidence left Gangadharpant. He was totally unsure of Modak’s response as he clarified, “ST stands for state transport buses. The buses run by the state of Maharashtra – don’t they ply out of the terminus of Swargate?”

“There are long-distance buses; but they are run by private companies, not by the government and they run from the railway station.” Dr Modak had by now reconciled himself to some mental aberrations in his distinguished senior companion. Making a mental note to recommend him to see a psychiatrist, he decided to humour him for a while. So he continued, “Swargate is one of the main gates of the old city and by tradition it still has a mounted guard. But Professor Gaitonde, where can I drop you?”

The vague thought circulating in the professor’s mind suddenly focused themselves. By some strange quirk of fate his accident had apparently changed the environment around him. The date and place had not changed but the city of Pune and its inhabitants had. Perhaps the change extended beyond Pune to the whole of India – he had to find out. The researcher in him took over. If Swargate had survived from the old historic days of the peshwas, what about other landmarks of the old city? As it was, he could not identify his present location.

“Dr Modak, I am still confused about where we are. But I can guide you to my house from Shanivar-Wada. Can you take me there please?”

He half feared a question: "What is Shanivar-Wada?" But Dr Modak apparently knew where it was, for he turned the car right at the next traffic junction. Gangadharpant was relieved that at least some things had not changed.

"You know, Professor Gaitonde, I think I owe you an apology for my flippant remarks yesterday, on your subject," the doctor said. "But let me give you the background. In high school we had to face the series of history books written by your name-sake. I think we had four volumes of intricate detail to go through and were genuinely relieved that the author's untimely death spared us the fifth and final volume."

Dr Gaitonde suppressed a start. He himself had written a five-volume Concise History of India. But the author of the books Dr Modak mentioned, was dead. Still, to make sure he asked, "Do you recall the name of the series?"

"That is the only thing I still remember from that history course. It was called Concise History of India. Apparently, the author had also written an 'extended' history and we boys used to shudder at the thought of what it might contain."

There was no doubt anymore! Gangadharpant himself had written the extended version. But, apparently, he was dead -

"I am sorry if I have been tactless again. I hope the author was no relation of yours," the doctor continued.

"No. No relation," replied Gangadharpant, satisfying himself about the veracity of his answer on the grounds that he could not claim to be his own relation. Had he misheard the date by any chance? Had he travelled 25 to 30 years in the future? He asked Dr Modak for the date.

Dr Modak looked at his watch and replied, "Ashadh purnima, Shaka 1908."

So, he was in the present and still nothing made sense.

Suddenly the streets seemed familiar. Professor Gaitonde realised that they were approaching Shanivar Wada from the north, from the Delhi Darwajah.

“Why, there are guardsmen at the gate in old uniform! Are they rehearsing a play?”

Gangadharpant spoke out.

“No. These are the usual daily guard. They are changed at regular intervals, just like the guard at Buckingham Palace.”

In spite of his resolve not to be shocked at anything he would see, Professor Gaitonde was not prepared for the sight facing him as Dr Modak turned into a well-kept car-park.

As he faced the Delhi Gate, he saw not just the ramparts of the palace but also the buildings inside. The Shanivar-Wada stood before him in all its glory, reminiscent of the times of Bajirao I, who built it.

Dr Modak waited patiently, seeing that his companion was evidently under great mental stress. Still, we must record, to the credit of Professor Gaitonde, that within a couple of minutes he was back to normal as he read the notice at the main gate, again in Marathi, Hindustani and English:

This historic palace of the peshwas is open to the general public from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Entry Rupee 1. Children under 12 free.

- Vyankoji Naik

Kotwal, Pune City

Shanivar-Wada! The centre from where the peshwas once controlled practically the whole of India. Gangadharpant had read a lot about this palace and from its ruins he had mentally reconstructed its appearance as it might have been at the height of its grandeur. But here he faced that monument as it was in reality. How would it match up to his imagination? He was dying to find out.

Unfortunately, it was still morning and the entry was barred. Reluctantly, he returned to the car and in response to the doctor's query – "Where to next?" – began to guide him towards the Erandvane area.

But, alas! He soon lost the familiar landscape and where Fergusson College Road should have been, there was nothing but a jungle. Apparently whatever urban expansion of Pune had taken place, it had not come this way. Was the famous Fergusson College really not here but in Bombay? What happened to all those shops and housing colonies? The hills behind Fergusson College and Law College (the colleges were absent, of course) were devoid of any signs of habitation. More important, what happened to his house? Where should he go to now? It was no use enquiring. Wasn't he himself dead officially?

Dr Modak was quietly watching the mental anguish of his companion. Whatever mental aberration had brought the professor to this god-forsaken area would give food for thought to a student of the mind. As a student of the body he was at a loss as to how to guide the bewildered professor.

But, soon, he found decisiveness replacing uncertainty on the face of his companion. Professor Gaitonde had recovered his poise. "Dr Modak, you may consider me absent-minded or mentally unsound. I don't blame you. But the facts are otherwise." The professor continued, "I don't know if I am dreaming now or I was dreaming two days ago when I saw this area as a developed middle class suburb. My house was not too far from here. My friends lived here. They are all

gone- apparently, they never existed... But I won't gain anything by standing here speculating. I will go to Bombay. My son works there with a firm called Forbes & Campbell Company. Does that company exist?"

"It does. Its headquarters are in the Bombay Fort." Dr Modak replied. "After the East India Company it is the oldest British firm in the subcontinent."

"Then I will go to Bombay, to my son and start my probes there. I must get to the bottom of this mystery. How can I go to Bombay?"

"A good decision. Let me take you to the railway station. The fast Jijamata Express leaves in about an hour for Bombay. Do you have any money with you?"

Professor Gaitonde produced his wallet from which he took out fifteen 10-rupee notes.

"Where did you get these? They may be good for playing monopoly. Let us exchange them for real ones." Dr Modak produced a wad of 10-rupee notes from his wallet.

These notes were quite different. They carried the picture of Kutub Minar and the inscription, 'As treasurer of the Shahenshah of India I promise to pay the bearer of this note the sum of 10 rupees.' The main inscription was not in English but in Hindustani.

X X X

At the railway station, Dr Modak took him first to an office which was simply labelled 'Permits for Bombay'.

“You need a permit to go to that British outpost,” Dr Modak explained, seeing that his companion was puzzled. “They will give you one straightway if you don’t have one. The fee is Rs.10. Please fill up this form.”

Gangadharpant filled the form, giving his name, address (care of his son) and nationality as Indian. A photograph was quickly taken with a polaroid-type camera. A card containing his picture was handed to him: the photo was in colour and the card carried the particulars he had filled out. It was all done swiftly and efficiently, with the minimum of bureaucracy.

“Now for the ticket,” said Dr Modak, leading him to a special window for Bombay. The notice at the window read: Tickets issued only on production of permit’.

By the time Professor Gaitonde was seated in a first class compartment, only 10 minutes were left for the departure of the train. He thanked Dr Modak profusely for all his help and bade him goodbye.

The carriages of the Jijamata Express were saffron coloured from outside. The decor inside his carriage was far superior to that of the Deccan Queen chair car of modern times and reminded him more of the first class of the pre-Independence days. His fellow passengers included two whites and one bearded Muslim gentleman. The whites had buried their heads in newspapers.

The Muslim gentleman was preparing paan and offered one to Gangadharpant. Accepting it, he asked in Hindi, “Sir, where are you going?”

“To Peshawar, via Bombay,” Khan Sahib replied, producing the card. He ran an import-export business from Peshawar.

Gangadhar introduced himself and then asked somewhat diffidently, “How difficult is it to get a passport to go to Peshawar?”

Khan Sahib laughed, "That is a good one! Why should one need a passport to travel in one's own country? I need the permit for Bombay."

So Peshawar was in India but Bombay belonged to the British. And who was this Shahenshah of India? Why was Pune so changed? Was this an epoch in the past because the Shanivar-Wada was still in its full glory and the British had not left the subcontinent? Or did it belong to the future, considering the photograph contraption and this more modern train? But the date clearly pointed to the present. To make doubly sure, Gangadharant glanced at the Bombay Times held up by the white man facing him.

The date on it confirmed that it was July 21, 1986.

X X X

Meanwhile, the Jijamata Express sped along the Pune-Bombay route considerably faster than the Deccan Queen. There were no industrial townships outside Pune. The first stop, Lonavala, came in 40 minutes. The ghat section that followed was no different from what he knew. The train stopped at Karjat only briefly and went on at even greater speed. It roared through Kalyan.

Meanwhile, the racing mind of Professor Gaitonde had arrived at a plan of action in Bombay. Indeed, as a historian he felt he should have thought of it sooner. He would go to a big library and browse through history books. That was the surest way of finding out how the present state of affairs was reached. He also planned eventually to return to Pune and have a long talk with Rajendra Deshpande, who would surely help him understand what had happened.

That is, assuming that in this world there existed someone called Rajendra Deshpande!



The train stopped beyond the long tunnel. It was a small station called Sarhad. An Anglo-Indian in uniform went through the train checking permits.

“This is where the British Raj begins. You are going for the first time, I presume?” Khan Sahib asked.

“Yes.” The reply was factually correct. Gangadharant had not been to this Bombay before. He ventured a question. “And, Khan Sahib, how will you go to Peshawar?”

“This train goes to the Victoria Terminus. I will take the Frontier Mail tonight out of Bombay Central.”

“How far does it go? By what route?”

“Bombay to Delhi, then to Lahore and then Peshawar. A long journey. I will reach Peshawar the day after tomorrow.”

Thereafter, Khan Sahib spoke a lot about his business and Gangadharant was a willing listener. For, in that way, he was able to get some flavour of life in this India that was so different.

The train now passed through the suburban rail traffic. The blue carriages carried the letters, GBMR, on the side.

“Greater Bombay Metropolitan Railway,” explained Khan Sahib. “See the tiny Union Jack painted on each carriage? A gentle reminder that we are in British territory.”

The train began to slow down beyond Dadar and stopped only at its destination, VT. The station looked remarkably neat and clean. The staff was mostly made up of Anglo Indians and Parsees along with a handful of British officers.

As he emerged from the station, Gangadharpant found himself facing an imposing building. The letters on it proclaimed its identity to those who did not know this Bombay landmark:

EAST INDIA HOUSE  
HEADQUARTERS OF THE  
EAST INDIA COMPANY

Prepared as he was for many shocks, Professor Gaitonde had not expected this. The East India Company had been wound up shortly after the events of 1857 – at least, that is what history books said. So, history had taken a different turn, perhaps before 1857. How and when had it happened? He had to find out.

As he walked along Hornby Road, as it was called, he found a different set of shops and office buildings. The tower of OCS building did not peep above the shorter Victorian buildings. There was no Handloom House building either. Instead, there were Boots and Woolworth department stores, imposing offices of Lloyds, Barclays and other British banks, as in a typical high street of a town in England.

He turned right along Home Street and entered the Forbes building.

“I wish to meet Mr Vinay Gaitonde, please.” He said to the English receptionist.

She searched through the telephone list, the staff list and then through the directory of employees of all the branches of the firm. She shook her head and said, “I am afraid I can’t find anyone of that name either here or in any of our branches. Are you sure he works here?”

This was a blow, not totally unexpected. If he himself were dead in this world, what guarantee had he that his son would be alive? Indeed, he may not even have been born!

He thanked the girl politely and made his way out. It was characteristic of him not to worry about where he would stay. His main concern was to make his way to the library of the Asiatic Society to solve the riddle of history. Grabbing a quick lunch at a restaurant, he made his way to the Town Hall.

Yes, to his relief, the Town Hall was there, and it did house the library. He entered the reading room and asked for a list of history books including his own.

His five volumes duly arrived on his table. He started from the beginning. Volume one took the history upto the period of Ashoka, volume two upto Samudragupta, volume three upto Mohammad Ghori and volume four upto the death of Aurangzeb. Upto this period history was as he knew it. The change evidently had occurred in the last volume.

Reading volume five from both ends inwards, Gangadharant finally converged on the precise moment where history had taken a different turn.

That page in the book described the battle of Panipat, and it mentioned that the Marathas won it handsomely. Abdali was routed and he was chased back to Kabul by the triumphant Maratha army led by Sadashivrao Bhau and his nephew, the young Vishwasrao.

The book did not go into a blow by blow account of the battle itself. Rather, it elaborated in detail its consequences for the power struggle in India. Gangadharant read through the account avidly. The style of writing was unmistakably his, yet he was reading the account for the first time!

Their victory in the battle was not only a great morale booster to the Marathas but it also established their supremacy in northern India. The East India Company, which had been

watching these developments from the sidelines, got the message and temporarily shelved its expansionist programme.

For the peshwas the immediate result was an increase in the influence of Bhausaheb and Vishwasrao who eventually succeeded his father in 1780 AD. The trouble-maker, Dadasaheb, was relegated to the background and he eventually retired from state politics.

To its dismay, the East India Company met its match in the new Maratha ruler, Vishwasrao. He and his brother, Madhavrao, combined political acumen with valour and systematically expanded their influence all over India. The Company was reduced to pockets of influence near Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, just like its European rivals, the Portuguese and the French.

For political reasons, the peshwas kept the puppet Mughal regime alive in Delhi. In the nineteenth century these de facto rulers from Pune were astute enough to recognize the importance of the technological age dawning in Europe. They set up their own centres for science and technology. Here, the East India Company saw another opportunity to extend its influence. It offered aid and experts. They were accepted only to make the local centres self-reliant.

The twentieth century brought about further changes inspired by the West. India moved towards a democracy. By then, the peshwas had lost their enterprise and they were gradually replaced by democratically elected bodies. The sultanate at Delhi survived even this transition, largely because it wielded no real influence. The Shahenshah of Delhi was no more than a figurehead to rubber-stamp the 'recommendations' made by the central parliament.

As he read on, Gangadharpant began to appreciate the India he had seen. It was a country that had not been subjected to slavery to the white man; it had learnt to stand on its feet and knew what self-respect was. From a position of strength and for purely commercial reasons, it had

allowed the British to retain Bombay as the sole outpost on the subcontinent. That lease was to expire in the year 2001, according to a treaty of 1908.

Gangadharpant could not help comparing the country he knew with what he was witnessing around him.

But, at the same time, he felt that his investigations were incomplete. How did the Marathas win the battle? To find the answer he must look for accounts of the battle itself.

He went through the books and journals before him. At last, among the books he found one that gave the clue. It was Bahusahebanchi Bakhar. Although he seldom relied on the Bakhars for historical evidence, he found them entertaining to read. Sometimes, buried in the graphic but doctored accounts, he could spot the germ of truth. He found one now in a three-line account of how close Vishwasrao had come to being killed:

“- And then Vishwasrao guided his horse to the melee where the elite troops were fighting, and he attacked. And God was merciful. A shot brushed past his ear. Even the difference of a til (sesame) would have led to his death.”

At eight o'clock the British librarian politely reminded the professor that the library was closing for the night. Gangadharpant emerged from his thoughts. Looking around he noticed that he was the only reader left in that magnificent hall.

“I beg your pardon, sir! May I request you to keep these books here for my use tomorrow morning? By the way, when do you open?”

“At eight o'clock, sir.” Then librarian smiled. Here was a user and researcher right after his heart.

As the professor left the table he shoved some notes into his right pocket. Absent-mindedly, he also shoved the Bakhar into his left pocket.

He found a guest house to stay in and had a frugal meal. He then set out for a stroll towards the Azad Maidan.

In the maidan he found a throng moving towards a pandal. So, a lecture was to take place. Force of habit took Professor Gaitonde towards the pandal.

The lecture was in progress although the audience kept coming and going. But Professor Gaitonde was not looking at the audience. He was staring at the platform as if mesmerised. There was a table and a chair but the latter was unoccupied.

The presidential chair unoccupied! The sight stirred him to the depths. Like a piece of iron attracted to a magnet, he swiftly moved towards the chair.

The speaker stopped in mid-sentence, too shocked to continue. But the audience soon found voice.

“Vacate the chair!”

“This lecture series has no chairperson...”

“Away from the platform, mister!”

“The chair is symbolic, don’t you know?”

What nonsense! Who ever heard of a public lecture without a presiding dignitary? Professor Gaitonde went to the mike and gave vent to his views. "Ladies and gentlemen, an unchaired lecture is like Shakespeare's Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark. Let me tell you..."

But the audience was in no mood to listen. "Tell us nothing. We are sick of remarks from the chair, of the vote of thanks, of long introductions."

"We only want to listen to the speaker..."

"We abolished the old customs long ago..."

"Keep the platform empty, please..."

But Gangadharpant had the experience of speaking at 999 meetings and had faced the Pune audience at its most hostile. He kept on talking.

He soon became a target for a shower of tomatoes, eggs and other objects. But he kept on trying valiantly to correct this sacrilege. Finally, the audience swarmed to the stage to eject him bodily.

And amidst that mob, Gangadharpant was nowhere to be seen.

X X X

"That is all I have to tell, Rajendra. All I know is that I was found in the Azad Maidan in the morning. But I was back in the world I am familiar with. Now, where exactly did I spend those two days when I was absent from here?"

Rajendra was dumfounded by the narrative. It took him a while to reply.

“Professor, before, just prior to your collision with the truck, what were you doing?” Rajendra asked.

“I was thinking of the catastrophe theory and its implications for history.”

“Right! I thought so!” Rajendra smiled.

“Don’t smile smugly. In case you think that it was just my mind playing tricks and my imagination running amok, look at this.”

And, triumphantly, Professor Gaitonde produced his vital piece of evidence: a page torn out from a book.

Rajendra read the text on that printed page and his face underwent a change. Gone was the smile and in its place came a grave expression. He was visibly moved.

Gangadharant pressed home his advantage. “I had inadvertently slipped the Bakhar in my pocket as I left the library. I discovered my error when I was paying for my meal. I had intended to return it the next morning. But it seems that in the melee of Azad Maidan, the book was lost; only this torn-off page remained. And luckily for me, the page contains vital evidence.”

Rajendra again read the page. It described how Vishwasrao narrowly missed the bullet; and how that event, taken as an omen by the Maratha army, turned the tide in their favour.

“Now look at this.” Gangadharant produced his own copy of Bhausahabanchi Bakhar, opened at the relevant page. The account ran thus:



'And then Vishwasrao guided his horse to the melee where the elite troops were fighting and he attacked. And God expressed His displeasure. He was hit by the bullet'.

"Professor Gaitonde, you have given me food for thought. Until I saw this material evidence, I had simply put your experience down to fantasy. But facts can be stranger than fantasies, as I am beginning to realise."

"Facts? What are the facts? I am dying to know!" Professor Gaitonde said.

Rajendra motioned him to silence and started pacing the room, obviously under great mental strain. Finally, he turned around and said:

"Professor Gaitonde, I will try to rationalise your experience on the basis of two scientific theories as known today. Whether I succeed or not in convincing you of the facts, only you can judge – for you have indeed passed through a fantastic experience or, more correctly, a catastrophic experience!"

"Please continue, Rajendra! I am all ears," Professor Gaitonde replied. Rajendra continued pacing as he talked.

"You have heard a lot about the catastrophe theory at that seminar. Let us apply it to the battle of Panipat. Wars fought face to face on open grounds offer excellent examples of this theory. The Maratha army was facing Abdali's troops on the field of Panipat. There was no great disparity between the latter's troops and the opposing forces. Their armour was comparable. So, a lot depended on the leadership and the morale of the troops. The juncture at which Vishwasrao, the son of and heir to the Peshwa, was killed proved to be the turning point. As history has it, his uncle, Bhausahab, rushed into the melee and was never seen again. Whether he was killed in battle or survived is not known. But for the troops at that particular moment,

that blow of losing their leaders was crucial. They lost their morale and fighting spirit. There followed an utter rout.”

“That was the turning point”, said Gangadharpant.

“Exactly, Professor! And what you have shown me on that torn page is the course taken by the battle when the bullet missed Vishwasrao. A crucial event gone the other way. And its effect on the troops was also the opposite. It boosted their morale and provided just that extra impetus that made all the difference.” Rajendra replied.

“Maybe so. Similar statements are made about the battle of Waterloo, which Napoleon could have won. But we live in a unique world which has a unique history. This idea of ‘it might have been’ is okay for the sake of speculation but not for reality.” Gangadharpant firmly replied.

“I join issue with you there. In fact, that brings me to my second point which you may find strange but please hear me out,” Rajendra replied.

Gangadharpant listened expectantly as Rajendra continued.

“What do you mean by reality? We experience it directly with our senses or indirectly via instruments. But is it limited to what we see? Does it have other manifestations?

“That reality may not be unique has been found from experiments on very small systems – of atoms and their constituent particles. When dealing with such systems the physicists discovered something startling. The behaviour of these systems cannot be predicted definitively even if all the physical laws governing those systems are known.

“Take an example. I fire an electron from a source. Where will it go? If I fire a bullet from a gun in a given direction at a given speed, I know where it will be at a later time. But I cannot make

such an assertion for the electron. It may be here, there, anywhere. I can at best quote odds for it being found in a specified location at a specified time.”

“The lack of determinism in quantum theory! Even an ignoramus historian like me has heard of it,” Professor Gaitonde said.

“So, imagine the so-called many world pictures. In one world the electron is found here, in another it is over there. In yet another it is in a still different location. Once the observer finds where it is, we know which world we are talking about. But all those alternative worlds could exist just the same.” Rajendra paused to marshall his thoughts,

“But is there any contact between those many worlds?” Professor Gaitonde asked.

“Yes and no! Imagine two worlds, for example. In both an electron is orbiting the nucleus of an atom...”

“Like planets around the sun...” Gangadharpant interjected.

“Not quite. We know the precise trajectory of the planet. The electron could be orbiting in any of a large number of specified states. These states may be used to identify the world. In state no.1, we have the electron in a state of higher energy. In state no. 2 it is in a state of lower energy. It can make a jump from high to low energy and send out a pulse of radiation. Or a pulse of radiation can knock it out of state no.2 into state no.1. Such transitions are common in microscopic systems. What if it happened on a macroscopic level?” Rajendra asked.

“I get you! You are suggesting that I made a transition from one world to another and back again?” Gangadharpant asked.

“Fantastic though it seems, this is the only explanation I can offer. My theory is that catastrophic situations offer radically different alternatives for the world to proceed. It seems that so far as reality is concerned all alternatives are viable but the observer can experience only one of them at a time.”

“By making a transition, you were able to experience two worlds although one at a time. The one you live in now and the one where you spent two days. One has the history we know, the other a different history. The separation or bifurcation took place at the battle of Panipat. You neither travelled to the past nor to the future. You were in the present but experiencing a different world. Of course, by the same token there must be many more different worlds arising out of bifurcations at different points of time.”

As Rajendra concluded, Gangadharant asked the question that was beginning to bother him most. “But why did I make the transition?”

“If I knew the answer I would have solved a great problem. Unfortunately, there are many unsolved questions in science and this is one of them. But that does not stop me from guessing.” Rajendra smiled and proceeded. “You need some interaction to cause a transition. Perhaps, at the time of the collision you were thinking about the catastrophe theory and its role in wars. Maybe you were wondering about the battle of Panipat. Perhaps, the neurons in your brain acted as a trigger.”

“A good guess. I was indeed wondering what course history would have taken if the result of the battle had gone the other way.” Professor Gaitonde was musing. “That was going to be the topic of my thousandth presidential address.”

“Now you are in the happy position of recounting your real life experience rather than just speculating.” Rajendra laughed at the idea. But Gangadharant was grave.

“No, Rajendra, my thousandth address was made on the Azad Maidan when I was so rudely interrupted. No. The Professor Gaitonde who disappeared while defending his chair on the platform will now never be seen presiding at another meeting – I have conveyed my regrets to the organisers of the Panipant seminar.”