

N D Dani

The Launching of Agni V

“Congratulations! Khatriji.” I was enthusing at the news and since Khatriji was the first person I saw on entering the Arts Faculty building at 7.30 in the morning, I couldn't resist the emotion. Khatriji gave me a quizzical look. I explained. “India has successfully tested Agni V missile. We have now entered the envied club of the ICBM nations.” Khatriji gave me a look which anyone who knows how to decode human facial gestures would have interpreted as one of extreme pity. “Are you not happy Professor Khatri?” I asked the professor of Indian Philosophy at our college. DrKhatri opened his paan-filled mouth to spurt red juice on the College verandah wall and having created some space in his oral cavity by achieving this artistic act proceeded in the following way, “Dev, you are innocent. (I knew Khatriji used the word 'innocent' rather than 'ignorant' to make his tone tolerable as I was his colleague.) I wish you knew your ancient Indian history. Western education ruins and I can see a sure sign of that ruin in you.” I was rather at a loss as I didn't know as to which ruin DrKhatri was referring to. I was in perfect physical and emotional health. The house in which I and my family lived will take at least a hundred years to become a ruin. We had built it very strong on a plot of land in Shaktinagar and had to take a heavy loan from the College Co-operative Society. It was, therefore, my turn to give DrKhatri a quizzical look. DrKhatri didn't wait long to enlighten me out of my 'innocence'. “Dev, our scientists had made missiles five thousand years ago. And those missiles were far more *pavarful* than the one you are mentioning. Haven't you heard of Lord Krishna's SudarshanChakra. Haven't you heard of the *agnibaan* of Lord Rama? What do you think they were? They were *pavarful* missiles. We were a *superpavar* long before *Amrica* and *Rasia* came into *egjistence*.” I scratched my head. “That is the problem with you youngsters of today. They do not know the glorious past of their country,” Khatriji continued to admonish me for my 'innocence'. “But do you really believe that Sudarshan Chakra and *agnibaan* existed?” I couldn't suppress my usual cynicism. “Venerable Khatriji, they are just myths,” I continued in the same tone of cynicism. This flared up the nostrils of Khatriji in the manner in which a freewheeling uncastrated bull roaming the streets of our cities has his nostrils flared up if an urchin throws a stone at him. Khatriji charged at me with full violence, “You ignorant ass-lickers of the West. You people have no self-respect. You are traitors. You call Sudarshan Chakra a myth? You call Lord Rama's *agnibaan* a myth? Then you will also call the Vimaan in the Manas just a myth. This is plain blasphemy. How can people like you be allowed to live in this country?” I knew the adage: discretion is the better part of valour and therefore decided not to take the gauntlet thrown by Khatriji. After a few minutes

Khatriji was done with his venom-spitting on the ass-lickers of the West. He opened his small box of paan and put a fresh betel leaf filled with nuts, cardamom and having a paste of lime and catechu into his mouth. I knew once the paan went in, you could depend on the silence of Khatriji for a few minutes. Khatriji was very economical with money and believed in masticating and squeezing the paan to its maximum. This was my opportunity. And I decided to make the best of it. "Venerable Khatriji, myth is myth and facts are facts. Why do you mix up the two?" "If, as you say, Indians had a Vimaan or aeroplane in the times to which the story of Lord Rama belongs then certainly we were far advanced than the West by thousands of years in aeronautical know-how." I continued as Khatriji chewed his precious betel leaf, "Why do we import our passenger planes and fighter aircrafts from Europe and the USA? Why don't we manufacture them here in India? That would reduce the cost. As it is, our defence budget is very large. We could divert some of that money to building of infrastructure for civilians. For building roads and for feeding hungry mouths." I was in no mood to stop as this was my pet subject. Khatriji could not put up with this assault on ancient Indian knowledge, not one wee bit more. He opened his mouth and squirted a rather thick jet of red juice on the College verandah wall and proceeded to illuminate me, "Darkness. This is actually total darkness. You people are benighted people. Do you know how the Vimaan in Lord Rama's time was created?" I nodded my head from side to side to show my 'innocence'. "I shall tell you my boy," promised Khatriji. And he was true to his word. "Dev, this Vimaan in the time of Manas to which SantTulsidas has made mention was a real aeroplane. Do you know how it was created." I didn't think it necessary to nod my head again to show my 'innocence' as just half a minute back I had already done so. Khatriji went on, "It was a spiritual Vimaan. It was created by a rishi by closing his eyes and by meditating hard." "Don't ever say now that this Vimaan was a myth," Khatriji admonished me. But I being Dev could not resist asking a question, "Khatriji, in that case somebody can close his eyes toady, too and meditate and produce a similar Vimaan. No?" "Yes, you are right." For once Khatriji had shown agreement with me. "But first one will have to find out from the ancient books the things on which the ancient rishis concentrated and meditated to create a Vimaan. This requires research." I was beginning to look impressed. At least this was the impression Khatriji seemed to have gained from my silence and there was a slowly radiating smile of victory that now expanded from one corner of his mouth to the other. "This is not all, Dev. Indians knew much more. I shall tell you. Indians not only had knowledge of atomic bombs five thousand years ago, they used them in warfare. You don't seem to have watched the Ramayana and Mahabharata serials on Doordarshan. ShriRamanandSagarji and ShriBN Chopra ji did a great service to India by showing those missiles tipped with atomic *pavar* to us Indians. I believe that ShriSagarji and Shri Chopra ji should be conferred with Bharatratna jointly for bringing the glorious atomic achievements of

ancient India to the knowledge of the 'innocents' like you." Inwardly, I thought, "So it is the Doordarshan Ramayana and Mahabharata upon which Khatriji bases his understanding of ancient Indians' knowledge of missiles and atomic power!" I contested the claim made by DrKhatri, Associate professor in the dept of Indian Philosophy at our College. I tried to remain as calm and unemotional as I could. "Khatriji, if Indians had knowledge of atomic power five thousand years ago, then why we did not use this power to frighten China in 1962. I am sure you know that India lost not only several thousand square kilometers of land to China but also several thousand soldiers and army officers in the Indo-China war." Khatriji didn't answer my question immediately. Probably, he was secretly wondering what a nincompoop I was. In a few minutes he delivered himself of this gem of wisdom, "Dev, you are too simple. We didn't want to dabble in atomic weapons. We had before us the example of *Amrica*. Are you not aware of the damage that the dropping of the atomic bomb by *Amricaon* Hiroshima and Nagasaki did?" I butted in, "But Respected Khatriji, we could use our atomic power as a deterrent against China." "No," Khatriji pontificated. "In war you cannot take a chance. Deterrence may turn into active use. We didn't want to repeat Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

By now we had moved towards my department and I requested Khatriji to make himself comfortable in my departmental room. I asked Ram Prakash, our department orderly to get us some tea and samosas, the favourite snack of Khatriji. I didn't want to be guilty of gaining so much knowledge about my country's ancient past from the Indian Philosophy professor without compensating him in some small form. I know anything had for free is a sin. We had hardly seated ourselves in our chairs when DrGyanPrakash of the Sanskrit department joined us. DrPrakash was a not too infrequent visitor to my room and I welcomed his arrival looking forward to a truly scholarly barrage of knowledge steeped in wisdom. "Pranam, Khatriji, how are you Sir?" DrPrakash offered his greetings to the Indian Philosophy scholar. "Come, come, Gyan, we are talking about the wonder that was India. Do join us," Khatriji invited the Sanskrit scholar to the room and to a discussion about the 'wonder that was India'. Khatriji told DrGyanPrakash about my *agyaan* – ignorance, that is – about the scientific achievements that India had made 5,000 years ago, much much before Europe and America had even been born. I was sitting shame-faceted at my stupendous ignorance about my own country's glorious past. Ram Prakash entered the room with the tea kettle and the packet of samosas not a minute too soon. The arrival of tea and snacks gave me a breather from Khatriji's shower of enlightenment about 'the wonder that was India.' As we made ourselves busy in crunching hot samosas, DrGyanPrakash brought up another topic. "Khatriji, DrDev has this bad habit of downgrading ancient Indian achievements. A few years back he told me that Denmark had created a lamb from the thigh of a male sheep. They called it cloning. What was the

name they gave to the animal Dev,” asked DrPrakash. “Dolly,” said I as I am always willing to be of help to anyone who is engaged in the quest for knowledge. “Yes, Dolly. Now, Khatriji what was surprising about this? You are a scholar of Indian philosophy. (DrGyan put maximum possible stress on the word 'scholar'.) You know we had our *Raktabeej* many many years ago. Many years before this Dolly-Sholly came into existence,” DrPrakash, the Sanskrit scholar, seemed to be in a mood of take revenge against me today for having spoken highly of the creation of the clone Dolly several years ago. “You are right, Gyan. I, too, read about this piece of news about, what-is-its-name, Dolly, yes, Dolly,” Professor Khatri spoke slowly. “We knew about cloning 5,000 years back. *Raktabeej* was nothing but a clone. I remember the Indian newspapers went gaga over this news about the birth of Dolly. Ignorant fools. They do not have any inkling of the heights of scientific Everests that India climbed 5,000 years ago. And as far as creating Dolly asexually is concerned, what is remarkable about it? In the Mahabharata and other sacred scriptures many warriors were born to their mothers asexually. You are a scholar of Sanskrit. (It was Professor Khatri's turn to return the compliment to Professor GyanPrakash.) You know more about them than I do. This poor Dev needs some instruction into the sacred scriptures of India,” Khatriji's throat was dry with this long speech and he asked Ram Prakash to get him some water. He put down the glass on the table and turning to me gave me a piece of advice, “Dev, why don't you invite Gyan and me over lunch some day? Together we will fill you with knowledge, real knowledge from head to foot. You will stand cleansed of your silly notions about scientific progress in the West today.” Suddenly, a wave of terror swept over me. What if they invited themselves to my house at lunch time some day? I folded my hands to these two 'scholars', these two *truly learned professors and genuine patriots* as, luckily, I had a class at 9am.

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