

Strange Camera

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Prof Prashanta Bose threw a news magazine on the centre table in his drawing room and picked up his cup of tea. I took up the magazine and casually flipped through a few pages when an advertisement of an herbal medicine, actually the photograph used in it, attracted my attention.

The photo showed a god like figure with a colored halo around his head handing over the herbal medicine to a sage.

"Why do gods have halos, Prashanta Babu?" I asked.

"Who knows?" he said and ordered Narahari to bring the snacks and another round of tea. "Narahari prepared prawn pakora today," Prashanta Babu, a bachelor, informed me and went back to the book which I had seen him reading last evening when I visited him. The book appeared to be on photography.

Narahari served prawn pakora and tea and I thought it best to focus my attention on them.

It was Sunday morning and I am on my usual visit to Prashanta Babu's home, a few minute's walk from my mess. Some of you might have heard of this 40-something scientist. He has a PhD in Physics but I think he knows almost everything of almost every subject known to us. A very low profile person he is and only a handful of scientists know about his vast knowledge and his versatility.

I, Kamalesh Mitra, am a clerk in a small merchant firm. You may wonder how a small fry like me is in such friendly terms with a person like Prashanta Babu. The credit for this goes to the scientist as he somehow prefers me. But I do have one good quality: I am a very good listener and never divulge his scientific knowledge to anybody. So we co-exist well, and we are both having a good time.

"Kamalesh Babu, have you heard of Kirlian photography?" asked Prashanta Babu.

"Keralian photography?" I asked. "No, I haven't. What's that?"

My knowledge in photography is quite limited. My uncle had a box camera when I was very young and he would take snaps of us, on special occasions like birthday. That's all about photography and me.

"No, not Keralian, I am talking about Kirlian photography." Prashanta Babu smiled the trademark smile of his, typically bending his big head towards the right. His sharp facial features became sharper, when he did that.

"In the 1930s, Semyon Kirlian, a Russian electrician, discovered, by accident, that if an object on a photographic plate is subjected to a high-voltage electric field, an image is created on the plate. The image

looks like a colored halo or coronal discharge. This is called Kirlian Photograph in popular terms. It could produce the same kind of halo which is there in that photo of yours."

Recently, I was seeing him reading a huge number of books on various areas of photography and paranormal science, quite unconnected to the uninitiated mind. But he thrives on this type of thinking.

"Are you working on something to do with photography?" I did not want to ask, but the question came out spontaneously from my mouth.

I seldom initiate talks like this with Prashanta Babu. I knew that making scientific gadgets was his passion. Though he is a Theoretical Physicist, he is always thinking of how to make new things, to make the world a better place, and by his sheer out-of-the-world brilliance, he has developed machines which could have won him the Noble Prize, but he would never part with the details of these. This low profile scientist was very shy in this respect. Money or fame, nothing attracted him. He already has enough inherited money.

Prashanta Babu lowered the book on his lap unmindfully and looked straight through the open window. He was thinking something deeply.

Normally when he was in such deep thoughts, he stopped talking, except some occasional murmur to himself or some unconnected questions to me, if I happened to be present.

Expecting a reply, I was watching him. Attired in his usual white half shirt and trousers, his look belies his genius. He is of average height, has slightly fair complexion. You can make out that the person has some extraordinary intelligence by looking at his deep shining eyes.

A couple of minutes passed and I understood he was too deep in his thoughts to answer my question and again picked up the magazine and found an article on a mysterious murder in New Delhi which had puzzled even the CBI sleuths. They were able neither to find any clue nor motive. I started reading the article. After sometime when I cast a glance to the scientist, his vision was then fixed on the wall clock.

I have seen in my life, that when some event has to occur, some higher force of life does create the right ambience and also the right set of events.

The detective chief of Kolkata Police, Tanmoy Mukherjee, turned up at the very moment. He was one of the few who knew about the extra-ordinary capability of my scientist friend. I came to know him through Prashanta Babu who had helped him earlier in solving some cases.

Tanmoy-da looked quite perturbed and did not start talking till he finished two cups of tea and a plate of prawn pakora. Then he said: "Prashanta, I think you know the Bajaj families of Ballygunge. They are a big industrial house and very rich."

I had read something about the family in the newspaper. "There was a murder in the family recently, wasn't it?" I asked and Tanmoy-da nodded.

Prashanta Babu kept silent as he is not very knowledgeable, socially. He asked the detective chief what was the problem with them.

Tanmoy-da narrated the problem: Two months back, Mr. Bajaj's youngest son, Sunil, got married to Sushila, and within one week, she was found dead in a room adjacent to her bed-room. Due to the short span between the wedding and the murder, the police had arrested Sunil but could not prove anything. He was out on bail. After investigation, the police virtually ruled out any wrong-doing by Sunil or his family. The rich and influential family of Sushila was exerting pressure on the police to solve the case fast. But the detective department had nothing in their hands to proceed.

Tanmoy-da finished his story and asked for another cup of tea.

"Hum," said Prashanta Babu, "So what is the theory which your detective force has come up with?"

Tanmoy-da said, "The postmortem and viscera tests failed to provide us any concrete evidence of how she died. It appeared she had a glass of soft drink, shortly before she died. We had pinned our hopes on the remains of soft drink in the glass. We examined it and found nothing in it. Her finger prints were there on the glass. But we are sure she did not die of natural causes. Oh, we have photos of the body and the room, and everyone present in the house at the time of her death. That's all."

"What do you want me to do, Tanmoy-da?" asked Prashanta Babu. "I am a man of science and solving crime-mystery is not exactly my cup of tea."

"I am aware of your genius, Prashanta. We desperately need your help to get this case solved. Otherwise the career of some of us will be affected," said the detective chief.

The scientist sat silently for a couple of minutes before opening his mouth. "Okay, Tanmoy-da, please send me all the papers and photographs related to this case, and let me go through these. Then only I will be able to say something."

"Fair enough, you will get all the papers by this afternoon." Tanmoy-da left.

We had Sunday lunch together, me and Prashanta Babu. He took a fat scientific book and went to his studies, requesting me to stay so that he had company when the papers reach him. I gladly agreed and

took a nap in his sitting room sofa where I slept many a day. I came out of the siesta by a sharp ringing of the calling bell.

Two burly looking constables were asking Narahari where to keep the two locked trunks holding all the materials related to Sushila murder case. They insisted to pass the keys only to Prof Prashanta Bose and took his signature on a ledger.

For the next few days, Prashanta Babu was not available; he was very busy studying the contents of those trunks. While waiting for a call from him, I tried to pass my time, doing some writing. I do write about our adventures in my diary.

The call came after around 5-6 days. Prashanta Babu asked me to reach his home quickly. When I reached there; he was excited, his eyes were shining. I realized he had done something to solve the Sushila murder case. I have learned to wait patiently. Allowed sufficient time, Prashanta Bose always came up with the solution.

"Do you remember Kamalesh Babu, before Tanmoy-da came that day, you were reading an article in the magazine on a murder mystery in Delhi?" he asked and I nodded. "A teen-aged girl was stabbed to death at her room when her parents were present at home. But it appeared they did not know anything. Now, if there were a camera – be it still or video – recording the murder, there would have been no mystery. Unfortunately, there was no camera there. Now, suppose if we had a camera to photograph past incidents...."

"You mean," I almost stammered, "a camera which will take photos not in real time, but of the past...?"

"That's precisely what I mean. And if we have such a camera, Prashanta-da's problem will be solved too."

"But... but..."

"I have done it," Muttered Prashanta Bose and I clearly saw his eyes lit up.

Flabbergasted, I knew it was best to keep quiet and allow him to speak.

"Lots of claim had been made about some paranormal connectivity of Kirlian photography and Auras and other related issues," he continued, "But I have nothing to do with Kirlian photography. I had taken a cue from this to lift photography to another dimension where photographing the past could be possible and these cases could be solved."

No doubt I had misgivings about such a possibility, though our long association has taught me to never underestimate the genius of Prof. Prashanta Bose. I had seen and sometimes used his inventions like teleporting machine and telescope (which actually looked like a simple binocular) to watch objects many light-years away.

"Have I ever told you anything about Negative Time, Kamalesh Babu," he asked.

"No." I kept my reply short to hear his extraordinary theory quicker.

Prashanta Babu explained that his theory relied on the fact, that if we could capture a photograph in time which is 'NOW', it should be possible to take some photographs of the same entity a little earlier in time. And this could be continued going gradually back in time.

"That means, if one takes photographic shots of an entity and keeps taking similar shots in the past, let us say, for an hour, then one can see a series of shots of that entity, for the last one hour.

"I've extended this theory. Suppose I have a photograph of a person which was taken two months ago. Now I can go back clicking photos of that person for every second backwards for many hours from the moment when the original photo was taken," the scientist paused to take a glass of water.

I started getting the drift of his thought. "How would you look at a picture which is two month old and keep taking photos backwards?"

He smiled. "I was expecting this question. I have not been sitting idle for a week. Do you see this instrument?" he said and pointed to a small machine on a table.

A PC type monitor with a keyboard. At its one side was another thing which looked like a scanner. It was attached to the machine. On the other side of the monitor was a camera which was also wired to the machine.

It looked pretty ordinary. And I was not impressed, though I knew all his extra-ordinary instruments looked pretty ordinary. "What is this?" I asked.

"This is the machine to take photos of the past," he said. "Narahari, please bring me that photo from my study. Come; let's have a chair in front of the machine. Sorry, I have not yet given it a name."

We took our seats in front of the table with the unnamed machine. Prof Bose's fingers played on the keyboard and a photo of mine appeared on the screen. He had taken this photo by his digital camera about a month back in his drawing room after we had dinner.

Prashanta Babu said, "We will have to know the exact time when this photo was taken. Now all digital photos have EXIF data embedded in the image which could be read by various softwares. EXIF data gives you, among many other details, the time when the photo was taken. In this case, your photo was taken on Monday, December 14, 2009, 9:57:36 PM. You are reclining on the sofa. Now Kamalesh Babu, can you tell me what you were doing three minutes before this time?"

"No. Can you show me?" My interest had gone up manifolds after seeing my own photo in the machine.

Prashanta Babu smiled and brought out another photo on the screen. I was stunned to see myself putting down a cup of coffee. This photo was not taken by anybody. I can remember now that at that time Prashanta Babu had gone to his study to bring the camera.

"B-u-t how?"

"I used your photo to check whether the machine was working correctly. It was. See, we will feed the machine with all the coordinates of the photo, time as well as three-dimensional positional ones. It is somewhat akin to how GPS or Global Positioning System works."

He keyed in some figures in several boxes that appeared in the screen. "Now, we need a photo of you three minutes behind the moment your photo was taken by me with a camera. Here I give 180 seconds... and click the camera."

He clicked the camera and the photo of me lowering the cup reappeared. I lost the capacity to speak.

"We can also use a printed photograph like this one." He picked up a 6"X4" print of the digital image of me sitting on the sofa. Narahari had brought it from the study.

"We have to use this scanner type machine for printed photographs. See, I place this photo on this and..." he keyed in something and the photo appeared on the monitor.

"You have to put a photograph here, the one which you want to track, back in time. And through this computer you have to feed in the Time Coordinates. That means, you have to feed in the exact time when the photograph was taken and you have also to feed the machine with the three-dimensional coordinate of the place, where the photo was taken. The more accurate the time given, the more accurate the past photos would be."

"Then..."

"That is the next interesting part," Prashanta Bose added. "You see this camera, this is very special. I have invented it. What you do is to take photographic shots with this special camera, but you can take shots in negative time; meaning you can take photographs of events related to this photograph in the past."

"Supposing we agree that we can take photographs of past events, related to a particular time. But what do we do with those frames?"

"You see, once we feed in a photograph's all coordinates, time as well as three-dimensional positional ones, I can keep taking photographs of the past. I can go back one month, minute by minute,

second by second and then build up a photo-history of that person's immediate past for one month."

I finally saw light and stood stupefied. That means Tanmoy-da could solve the mystery of the Sushila murder case and the CBI the Delhi girl's murder mystery.

"Can a video be made this way?" I asked.

"Why not? Series of still photos taken in a short interval, say five seconds, could be easily converted to a video. It would not be very smooth flowing, but would be workable," he said.

I would like to skip the details of the murder-mystery solving. It did get solved the next day. Tanmoy-da and another person from the law department were called.

All details of the last photograph of Sushila were fed in and then Prashanta Babu started taking photographs of the past events at one minute interval and during some specific moments at shorter intervals.

It became clear that Sushila was murdered by a very senior ex-employee of the Bajajs. He was very close to this family and was a regular visitor to the Bajaj home. He was earlier working with Sunil's father and was holding a high position in the accounts division. Later he left Bajaj to start his own business. He was good in doing work for others but was very bad in doing things on his own. So he started sinking rapidly and to stave off the disaster, he needed huge amount of money. This man knew Sushila's parents also. He thought he would squeeze Sushila, an easy target, and get a good amount of money. He had failed miserably as Sushila did not give in and threatened to expose him. So he laced Sushila's soft drink with some poison which did not keep any trace, when nobody was around.

Prashanta Babu made Tanmoy-da and his assistant take oath so that they would not reveal any detail of his invention. This film document was produced in the court as evidence and was declared as output of a surveillance camera. The court accepted that and the killer was awarded life imprisonment.

As a token of gesture, the detective department presented Prashanta Babu a very good quality camera.

Prashanta Bose separated the parts of his camera and associated "Negative Time Device" as it could pose danger if it fell in wrong hands. He also encrypted his documents on the "Negative Time" for the same reason.

After everything was settled and I was with my scientist friend, I asked him what I had been thinking for sometime. "Prashanta Babu, can photos of the future be taken?"

Prashanta Babu smiled. "I am thinking of the same thing."