



Grade VIII - English

Lesson 10. The Comet - II

Supplementary Reader

Soul of the Chapter

The Secret Meeting

As the meeting between James and Sir John gets over, James looks up to the star-studded sky and meditates upon the fact that somewhere among these stars would be Comet Dutta, heading for a collision with the Earth.

On the day of the meeting, as James reached the venue, all his doubts about Sir John's efficiency and their decisions about the secret meeting were dispelled. He saw that all the experts whom Sir John had thought of inviting were there for the conference. Among astronomers, computer scientists, nuclear physicists, space technologists and biologists, Sir John's special invitee, Mr Manoj Dutta was also present.

The committee rechecked James' calculations with the latest data available on Comet Dutta. There were no doubts left about the collision as predicted by - James. The slight possibility that the comet may not collide was very bleak. The experts decided that any defensive actions like living in underground bunkers would not help much.

The Conclusion

The experts agreed that an offensive action was necessary. They decided that there was a need to deflect the comet from its usual path by giving it a push. The experts decided that a huge amount of nuclear power was required to achieve this task. Besides this, the suitability of time and the placement of the nuclear explosion and other such decisions were crucial to achieve success. So, the committee created a timetable, called the 'Project Light Brigade' towards achieving this attend. It was decided that if by 10th October, the comet was not destroyed by natural causes, the experiment would have to be taken forward.



Duttada and Sir John's Increasing Affinity

During the one week that Duttada spent in the company of experts, a close affinity grew between Duttada and Sir John. Duttada sought for Sir John's opinion about the experiment and Sir John humorously informed him about the unpredictability of the entire venture. Duttada toured the British Isles for the next two weeks. On his return, he was bombarded with questions from the press. But, keeping the details of the conference confidential was the need of the hour.

The Yajna

On returning home, Duttada saw a crowd gathered at his home. Duttada chided his wife thinking that she had arranged the yajna because in the past going overseas was considered a taboo. Sibaji Babu, Duttada's younger brother informed him that the yajna was being conducted to pacify the evil spirit behind the comet. So, the Guruji had suggested conducting a 'shanti yajna.' Duttada was not happy with the flow of these events as he understood that the movement of comets was firmly rooted in scientific and mathematical calculations.

Duttada and Sir John's Mutual Admiration for Each Other

Ever since Duttada's return from London, both Duttada and Sir John had been in regular contact. Sir John admired Duttada's scientific outlook, whereas, Duttada appreciated Sir John's discipline and efficiency. In a subtle way, Sir John would allude to Comet Dutta, but in a way that Duttada would easily understand.

The Progress of Project Light Brigade and its Success

Comet Dutta followed its predicted path and therefore the threat of collision was now quite real. Sir John wrote Duttada a letter mentioning the commencement of the project. There were just too many questions about the success of the experiment, that it caused a lot of anxiety to Duttada and perhaps to all who were involved in some way with the experiment. Amid the puja and Diwali celebrations, Duttada used to regularly monitor the comet through his Dibya the comet was now clearly visible to the naked eye.

The success of project Light Brigade was communicated to Duttada through a telex message that Sir John sent to Calcutta on 18th November. 15th December was the day when Comet



Dutta came closest to the Earth and millions could admire it, not knowing the threat it had caused. Duttada now revealed to his wife that the comet didn't cause any harm to anybody and therefore she was wrong with her superstitious assumptions about the comet.

Khoka, Duttada's Grandson

Hearing her husband talk like this, Indrani Debi reveals the reasons why the comet was not successful in harming anyone. Duttada gets surprised as he had never said anything about the project Light Brigade to her. She tells her husband that Khoka, their grandson was responsible for saving all of them. On Duttada's refusal to perform the yajna, Khoka was deputed to offer prayers, as a result of which the evil spirit of the comet was pacified. Duttada, in his mind, tried to correlate the two different pictures: One, in which Khoka performed the puja. The other, in which, the scientists made their calculations. Of course, he could not bring them together and found the wide gap that separated the rational beings from the superstitious ones.

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Comprehension Check- 1

1. **"For a moment James wondered if he had done his sums right." Why was James doubtful about his sums and calculations?**

Seeing the star studded peaceful night, it was difficult for James to imagine that a calamity was awaited in the future. Therefore, he wondered if he had done his sums right.

2. **What did the scientists at the conference say about James's 'sums'?**

The scientists confirmed that James' sums' were right.

3. **Immediate action was needed, the scientists decided. Give one example each of 'defensive' and 'offensive' action mentioned in the text.**

The defensive action would be to live in underground bunkers. However, offensive action was decided to be more appropriate. Offensive action would be to deflect Comet Dutta from its path.



4. "I am not buying Christmas presents till 15th December." What did Sir John mean by that?

Sir John was not sure about the success of the experiment. He was not sure if the threat that the Comet Dutta posed could be warded off. Therefore, Sir John wanted to wait till 15th December, which was the date by when the final results of the experiment would become clear.

Comprehension Check- 2

1. What is Duttada expected to do on his return from London?

Duttada is expected to perform a 'santi yajna' on his return from London.

2. What is his reaction to the proposal?

Duttada gets irritated by such superstitious and irrational rituals and refuses to perform the yajna.

3. (i) What does 'Project Light Brigade' refer to?

Project Light Brigade was the code name given to the experiment that the experts decided to conduct in order to prevent Comet Dutta from colliding with the Earth.

(ii) What does Sir John say about the Project in his letter to Duttada in October?

In his letter to Duttada that Sir John sent in October, he informed Duttada that the project had begun and he was hoping for its success.

4. Did Sir John buy Christmas presents on 15th December? How did Duttada get to know about it?

John Macpherson wrote a letter to Duttada on 18th November telling him about the success of the operation, Light Brigade, and telling him that now he would be buying Christmas presents on 15th December. On 15th December, the comet came closest to the Earth; it could be seen with the naked eye.

5. Why, according to Indrani Debi, had the comet not been disastrous? Do you agree with her?

According to Indrani Debi, the 'shanti yajna' that was performed in her house was responsible for warding off the evil spirit behind the comet. Therefore, the comet proved not to be disastrous. No, the comet was not disastrous because of the measures taken by the expert committee.



6. Is Duttada's general outlook

(i) rational?

(ii) moral?

(iii) traditional?

Choose the right word. Say why you think it right.

Duttada's outlook is surely rational. He doesn't invest any faith in anything that cannot be proved by reason.

Exercise

Exercise (Page 88) Discuss the following topics in small groups. Write your answers afterwards.

1. Should a scientist's findings be suppressed if they seem disturbing? Give reasons for and against the topic.

No. A scientist's findings should never be suppressed no matter how disturbing it is. The masses have the right to know the truth. Also, there is a possibility that the truth opens up new vistas of knowledge and exploration. Hiding it is never a solution.

2. Do you think ours is a traditional society? What are some of the things we do to be called traditional? Do you find these things useless or useful?

Ours is definitely a traditional society. We blindly believe in rituals simply because they have been followed from generations.

To me, superstitions are nothing but obsolete truths of an age long over. Despite that, we continue to have belief in them because our forefathers did that or said that. These things are of course useless. They are a complete wastage of time and bind us by the element of fear and put a check on our free thinking.

3. Give two or three examples to show how science has been useful to us.

Science is responsible for our movement from the Stone Age to the present. Science could be used in reducing time that is needed to complete a work and we could do it efficiently too. For instance, the boon that we find in various appliances and gadgets. Science also helps in treating several diseases and thereby increases the longevity of life.

4. Give one example to show how science has been misused and has as a result been harmful to us.

A knife could be used to cut vegetables or to kill another person. It is entirely on the user how he uses a certain product. Similarly, some people have misused science too to torment mankind. For example, the use of weapons, nuclear power and deadly massacres like Hiroshima



and Nagasaki show us the flip side of science.

Chapter Practice

Very Short Answer Type Questions

1. What did James do as Sir John dropped him at the Regent Street?

James looked up in the star studded sky to observe the Comet Dutta among those stars. It was difficult for him to imagine the calamity on such a peaceful night.

2 Who all attended the conference arranged by Sir John?

Renowned experts like astronomers, computer scientists, nuclear physicists, space technologists and biologists attended Sir John's conference. Man of Dutta was also present to attend the same.

3. How long did the conference last?

The conference went on for a week.

4. How long was Duttada away from home, in the foreign land?

For about three weeks. He spent a week in London to attend the conference and two weeks to tour the British Isles.

5. On receiving the telex message from John Macpherson, what did Duttada do?

On reading the telex message from Sir John which informed him about the success of the operation, Duttada ran to his favourite rasagolla shop.

Short Answer Type Questions

1. In whom did Duttada find a good friend?

During the conference, Duttada developed close affinity with the Defence Advisor, John Macpherson. Both admired each other. Duttada admired Sir John's discipline and efficiency. Sir John admired Duttada's scientific outlook. Both remained in contact even after Duttada came back from London.

2. What was the progress of Comet Dutta in the first half of October?

Comet Dutta was following its predicted path. Till the middle of October, it had already developed a tail. It was also circling around the sun and it neither broke apart nor did it



evaporate. The experts had, therefore, become sure that the threat of collision was quite real.

3. What kind of welcome did Duttada enjoy on his return from London?

On his return from London, Duttada was greeted by a vast crowd of friends, social leaders, students and the usual mob. He was loaded with questions and bombarded with questions from the press. At home he had a very different reception. His wife had arranged a yajna and had called the priests to bless him.

Long Answer Type Questions

1. Why did Duttada not succeed in explaining the science behind the comets to his wife?

No. Duttada doesn't manage to explain to his wife the science behind the comets because his wife was steeped neck deep in superstitions. His wife asked the priest to perform a yajna, a shanti yajna, to ward off the evil associated with the comet. Duttada was inwardly very upset about all this. He would have liked to explain to his wife and younger brother the truth but the details of the conference had to be kept secret. In the end, he tries to tell the truth, but his wife believed that the yajna saved everyone from the comet. Duttada understood the wide gulf that existed between his and his wife's outlook.

Value Based Question

Comment on the outlook of Indrani Debi and Sibaji babu.

Indrani Debi and Sibaji babu, Duttada's wife and younger brother, respectively had regressive outlooks. They were superstitious in their thinking and failed to view matters rationally and logically. Their way of thinking should be strongly condemned.

For if all people begin to think in this manner and decide to perform pujas and yajnas without taking any concrete and constructive action, disaster is bound to happen. Such thinking can save nobody.
