

James Gray Went Missing

Not many in India, except the hardcore computer it in research on databases, transaction processing systems with



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into the annals of history as the largest and most tech-savvy concerted operations, where the intellectual powers of the most coveted computer technologists were combined with the efforts of the rough and tough Coast Guards to trace the uncertain whereabouts of a scientist. Many in the US concur that not many parallels are there for this search, perhaps excepting the mission commissioned for James Kim, Editor for Cnet.com, who also went missing under mysterious circumstances.

Let me explain the magnitude of searches that have been carried out. Aircraft and boats were pressed into service to scour through 132,000 sq. miles of the ocean. A veritable group of computer scientists drawn from Google, Amazon, Microsoft, NASA and universities across the US spent hours together creating ad hoc software, creating a blog and reconfiguring satellite images so that volunteers could scan the large expanse of geographies to locate the missing man. The Google Earth Imaging expertise has also offered to trace the missing scientist. In the meantime, newspaper columns were agog with chirpy stories. Some of them claimed that Gray might have limped into a cove and yet others spun innuendos to make it a suicidal attempt.

And yet, the purpose of my treating this story is not creating an awareness of Gray's contributions to the computer world. It hinges on two factors that are not remotely linked up. First things first, are we witnessing a convergence of scientific minds? It is often said that bonhomie or comradeship surfaces only when the like-minded people are confronted with a crisis or common problem. That emotional binding is there among cricket fans, pushers of party or sectarian politics, or among warring nations. The scientific community in the US, cutting across their perceptual cleavages, rallied around their fellow scientists in his moment of crisis. They pulled all buttons to rescue him and lent support to him, wherever they are and how conflicting their scientific tempers are. That marks the beginning of a new brotherhood and emotional ties, much stronger and vibrant than

a mere professional relationship that exist among exclusive groups like professional managers, chartered accountants, lawyers, etc. Could such concerns for fellow beings lead to greater contributions to the society? Days are not far off when the scientific community will put together their resources – cerebral and other – to break a molecule or virus that creates HIV or diabetes to help a fellow scientist. Can there be a 100-per cent intelligent computer invented by a scientist, whose child is spastics? Imagination can go haywire. And yet, the inventions come at the time of crisis.

Before explaining my second precept, let me mention an anecdote. Once a Sheikh, who had become overtly rich by new findings of oil in his sheikhdom, went on a shopping spree. He bought missiles, new rifles, state-of-the-art jeeps and vehicles and called his caretaker to explain to him the worth of the priceless possession that he had bought for him to safeguard the desert land which he had to do. The Sheikh, who became curious by the lack of excitement in the caretaker despite the stockpiling of his armoury with modern gadgets, asked him what more he wants to beef up the safety of the desert. The caretaker said,

“Your Majesty, I require a few more camels to traverse the difficult terrains of the desert, where vehicles, however modern they are, do not have any use.” Sheikh was astonished, but got the lesson.

We have gone ahead with the technology. We can map the Mars and Saturn and discern the complex phenomena that are taking place there while sitting in Earth by the use of powerful satellites. That is the scientific world. Every passing year or decade or century, we will have new scientific nuances. And yet, the whereabouts of missing Gray might come only from an illiterate fisherman or from a weather-beaten sailor of the ship passing by or by physically inspecting an inhabited island, where he is finding solace in a rocky cove. That is life. Maybe, that paradigm can be explained as the anachronistic coexistence of the most modern and primitive. But the essence is coexistence. Old has to exist, however primitive they are. Maybe, they can traverse some areas where the bold and beautiful dare to go. ■

buffs and professionals, would be aware of James Gray, Principal Researcher at Microsoft, whose groundbreaking contribution to the scientific world is System R, which he pioneered while working for IBM, has redefined many conventional computer operations. What makes news is that the world-renowned scientist, aged 63, is missing. A skilled amateur sailor, Gray set out on his 40-foot long private yacht recently to the Farallon Islands to scatter his mother's ashes. Till the time this piece is written, nothing is known about Gray nor a shard of aluminum hull or a swatch of sail of the yacht he was sailing is traced, despite the mammoth rescue operations being conducted by the Coast Guards in the US or the scientific community, which he belonged to.

My interest grew in this incident because of varied reasons. I cannot claim that I know Gray to call him by the first name. But I am a shade better than a common man in fathoming the significant contributions he has made to various disciplines in computer be

particular focus on making computers more scientifically productive or his seminal contributions to astronomy, geography, hydrology, oceanography, biology, etc. There is also another reason for my curiosity in this incident – I was in the US for a longer stretch of time than I normally stay – and was scouring through the juicy newspaper reports every day.

The real reason for my treating this matter in this column is not the fact that Gray is missing (I wish and pray that he should be traced and found hale and hearty for I believe that the scientific community can naturally expect many more path-breaking inventions from that cerebral mind). Ever since, his wife Donna Carnes reported that he was missing, the scientific community the world over, particularly the Silicon Valley's best and brightest, went on a searching spree. His colleagues, friends and former students banded up together to support the Coast Guards' efforts, putting to use the tool they best know – computer technology. The search operations which will an