

is 'a young man's dream of untold riches' and how 'the story of artificial cold began with a more urgent and humanitarian need: a doctor trying to keep his patients alive' (62); and how gradually decreasing the size of initially huge refrigeration systems, ultimately, small refrigerators for home were born. Here the author adds: 'But the smaller footprint of artificial cold would, ironically, end up triggering changes in human society that were so massive you could see them from space' (68).

Here it is wonderfully pointed out how original inventors of many important technologies made silly mistakes, that notwithstanding, eventually things came out right. For example, the inventor of the 'phonograph' (92), the self-writing sound, had invented the first sound recording device in history. But the idea to include 'play-back' never occurred to him. So what is the use of a sound recorded but without the ability to hear it again? Of course, his idea must have been an impetus for later inventors of sound recorders. This and many such amusing tales, this book is replete with.

Many innovations, like ultrasound devices, had to wait for their time to come. The device that was originally intended for detecting U-boats during World War I was finally proven more useful sometime after World War II in determining the health of a baby early in a pregnancy and many other diagnostic purposes. In this context, the author importantly adds:

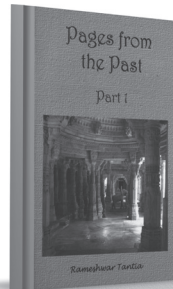
No technological advance is purely positive in its effects: for every ship saved from an iceberg, there are countless pregnancies terminated because of missing Y chromosome. The march of technology has its own internal logic, but the moral application of that technology is up to us. We can decide to use ultrasound to save lives or terminate them. (Even more challenging, we can use ultrasound to blur the very boundaries of life, detecting a heartbeat in a fetus that is only weeks old.) (123).

Tracking the history of incandescent lights, we have Edison, who was just one of those inventors struggling throughout the last century developing the filament lights in very much the same way as Edison did. But the credit went to Edison as he knew how to market his invention. The author here explains the remarkable organising abilities of

Edison and how his technique of 'cross-disciplinary research-and-development lab' was later adopted by Bell Labs and Xerox-PARC. He says: 'Edison didn't just invent technology; he invented an entire system for inventing, a system that would come to dominate twentieth-century industry' (211).

A video documentary based on this book was broadcast on PBS television, presented by the author himself. Though the context of this book is limited to the history of selected innovations only from Europe and America, we should first get to this book for knowing how we got to now.

Associate Editor
Prabuddha Bharata



Pages from the Past:

Part 1

Rameshwar Tantia

Ramakrishna Sarada Mission,
Dakshineswar, Kolkata 700 076.
Website: www.srismath.org. 2014.
104 pp. ₹ 5. PB.

Ordinary people and ordinary places often leave extraordinarily indelible marks on our minds. These daily-life accounts from our neighbourhood remain untold. Rameshwar Tantia has through this book, originally in Hindi, tried to set right this lacuna by recounting incidents and people, some from the ancient times and some from his life, who by their acts of kindness and grace, increase our faith in humanity.

This slim yet elegant volume begins with accounts of Cicero and Alexander, and continues with the story of a millionaire who wanted to save for the next six generations, a rich man who broke caste barriers through a meal, a farmer who protected his cows transcending religious boundaries, a widow who lived frugally to save for digging a well in her village, dacoits who were more conscious of their reputation than others, a simpleton but generous person who gave up his family share to avoid disputes, and a boy who is compelled to steal to feed his ailing mother; and ends with legendary accounts of Dronacharya and Tansen. Easily readable and highly inexpensive, this book is a thought-provoking pleasure.

Editor
Prabuddha Bharata