

Comet by the tail

DOOMSDAY COMET

Swift-Tuttle is, we learn, now visible in Bombay. In fact, N. V. Nayada, A. Talwar, M. Panjwani, A. Kesai and S. Nagarajan, members of the Amateur Astronomers' Association, have kept the comet in sight from their observation site at Vangani (near Neral), as also from the city.

The photo reproduced herewith, in fact, was from Vangani on the evening of the 12th with a high speed film, using a 300 mm zoom lens mounted atop a special tracking platform. The comet that would, a generation or two ahead in time, be the death of us all appeared as a bright cotton ball as seen through the telescope. While the coma and nucleus were well defined, the tail was barely seen. The word on the object of everyone's speculation — the comet was discovered in 1862 independently by Lewis Swift and H. P. Tuttle. Orbital calculations at that time indicated that the comet would appear after 120 years.

Therefore, astronomers established that it was the parent comet of the Perseid meteor stream. It was expected back in 1982, but did not appear.

At the time, it was thought the comet had gone unseen, or had disintegrated in space. On the morning of August 31, around 3 am in the morning of September 27 this year, Japanese astronomer Tsuruhiko Kiuchi discovered a comet glowing feebly at the far end of the universe as he peered through his telescope. Kiuchi suspected he had discovered a new comet, but calculations



DOOMSDAY LOOMS: The comet Swift-Tuttle

confirmed that it was indeed the Swift-Tuttle comet, come a little later than its due date.

For now — if the comet moves to earthy calculations, that is — it seems unlikely that it will collide with the Earth on its next orbit. But some time in the future, we are headed for the crash. And if you want to know what the thing looks like, take a gander at the western sky from sunset till around 8.30 pm — you can spot the thing in the constellation of Hercules just below the Summer Triangle.

Take a tip, look for the thing between now and the 24th — after that date, the waxing moon is likely to hide the comet from your gaze.

And just to make it easy, the Astronomers Association has organised a comet-watch programme from Vangani. Interested? Meet up near the A. H. Wheeler book stall at VT at 3.15 pm, Saturday the 21st. Or contact Nilesh Vayada at telephone number 513 3012. Happy star-gazing.