

ALCHEMIST

*Durlabh Singh**

The night has been oppressive and Sharat has been dreaming, feverish dreams. He has been dreaming of alchemical ingredients. Mercury has been taking horrendous shapes and these shapes have been attacking him fiercely but whenever he took courage and tried to grab these shapes as a matter of defiance, they just melted into his hands & then took even fiercer shapes.

He remembered his past exploits when he was young man and full of enthusiasm. It was along time ago that he realized that in order to comprehend the alchemical processes, he had to delve into the secrets of natural laws and thus became engrossed in natural processes around him. He observed that the stones littering across the landscapes had a deeper reality of their own and the books had told him that like the human body the earth had a heart, liver and spleen. He realized that in metaphysical sense stones were like heart circulating the lifeblood of the earth and so had to be an ingredient of the alchemical process.

He had seen how the different seasons of the year affected him, bringing in something unknown which we are too reluctant to accept at their face values and the trouble was that our ordinary thinking man always takes over from our feelings and instincts pointing to something new and life enhancing. Soon the robotic element of our logic takes over stating 'I know the best, leave everything to me' and then we go into a sort of comfortable limbo and leave everything to the robot. He also noticed that we always seek the unknown through the windows of known and hence we never find it. We may build superstructures of logic to justify us but it is always in vain. You need a different approach to search for the unknown and perhaps an element of chance was involved in it.

He knew that alchemy was an art of not only making gold but of the transformation of the human consciousness as a sort of spiritual purification and development, an insight into human psyche. One had to wrestle within oneself to understand the connection between the inner and outer realities and it seemed to be something parallel between the two. Furthermore one had to seek the guidance through the dreams, aspirations and sort poetical visions to decipher the signs in nature.

Sulphur was the 'stone that burns' and when it burnt its pungent smell was as necessary as that of mercury with its silvery fluidity the 'water that shines'. Other candidate for this transformation was Arsenic 'the poison that kills'. These were the strange combinations which one had to understand the many sided dimensions of the nature and that of being.

* *Contemporary artist and author, 68 Raynham Avenue Edmonton, London N18 2BS, UK,
e-mail :durlabhsingh@hotmail.com*

Mercury became a shining naked sword, which plunged through the air, aiming straight at his heart. He woke up in a scream, the perspiration bathing his whole body in hot sweat. He felt relieved even through his madly palpitating heart.

*

Pale morning light was peeping through the chinks of his door & trying to dispel the darkness within the room. He wanted to find some relief from his ordeals and memories of night and decided to get up.

He went out. Against the soft blue skies, tufts of cotton wool clouds were chasing each other in a playful mood. Skylark was doing an energetic morning dance with its zigzagging movements.

A cool breeze touched his feverish face & Sharat let out a sigh.

Since long his ambition has been to become an alchemist. This weird ambition could not be traced back to the reveries of his childhood as no one in his family was ever familiar with the notion of alchemy.

He went from village to village trying to find a teacher. It was not easy an easy matter as the science of alchemy was vouched in a secret language of SandhyaBhasya or the twilight language. A teacher will not disclose his knowledge until he tested the pupil to the limits of his suitability, through hard & degrading trials. He spent considerable amount of time, travel and money to search for such a teacher.

In the end, with someone's help he found such a teacher and for number of years carried out laborious learning exercises as the first steps in acquiring the secret knowledge of that coded language.

*

Suddenly a wave of despair came over him and the universe dissolved into a fog. A coldness entered his soul and slowly crept into all the corners of his brain. A suffocating breath began to choke him turning him into a sort of a standing stone amidst an indifferent landscape. Slowly this rock began to enlarge till it filled the whole universe. A huge rock- uniform, dark without an edge and he realized that there was no escape. The whole universe became a massive stone, which aimed to crush his mind and body.

He felt dizzy and fell to the ground but slowly picked himself up and took the road to the river, which flowed outside the boundaries of his village. He was unconscious of his surroundings. He paid no attention to the cows grazing in the fields or to the chattering monkeys jumping overhead in the canopies of the green trees.

Eventually he reached the river and stood on its banks. The muddy river invited him to come in. Vapours of moisture arose, hit his face, and hit the rock within his brain. He just wanted to remove that crushing burden. He will end his existence and may be the existence of the damned rock within his brain. He stepped into the inviting river.

The water came over his feet, to his knees, to his neck. His eyes could see the murky darkness within the river. Water forced its way into his nostrils and bubbles of his breath escaped drawing out his life force. The water entered his brain crushing the rock into dark coolness. It was so soothing and a nice oblivion to embrace. And then there was nothing.

Through misty eyes he saw that he was lying on the bank of the river with wet sand plastered all over his face. A strong hand was pressing his back and then there were few loud thumps and he vomited, a lot of water. 'Spit it out you foolish man' – a strong female voice instructed him. He tried to turn up but the hand pressing him down was too strong for him to struggle and he surrendered to its force.

He vomited again. The sun was strong and he felt empty. He turned on his back and looked up. A tall woman in green sari was bending over him and cursing him for his foolish ways, of trying to kill himself. He felt like a stupid infant being instructed by the teacher in the classroom. He was just a coward to end his life in such a way.

The woman picked him up and put him over her shoulders, with his head dangling over her back. All the time he was coughing and spitting water and phlegm. After about ten minutes walk, she entered a small cottage and then a room, which was in, total darkness. He was dumped on a cot. Exhausted he fell asleep.

It was evening when he awoke. The last rays of the sun were trying to paint the room with orange and red colours. The sky was ablaze with the rage of the dying day.

Through the corner of his eyes he saw the woman cooking something. A copper vessel was gargling above the fire and she was dropping some herbs into it. A pleasant smell arose. His encroaching loneliness was pushed back momentarily by the presence of another human being. He began to shiver in his wet clothes.

The woman noticed his shivering and began to take off his wet clothes. He protested but to no avail. She wiped his body with a piece of rough cloth and then vigorously massaged his feet, his palm and then his whole body. A little warmth began to run through his body. She covered him with a blanket.

Warm herbal broth was brought to him with few pieces of bread floating in it, which he ate and enjoyed. All that kindness was new to him and so overwhelming and he began to cry. He extended his arm to touch the woman and pulled her gently towards him.

The woman lay beside him and enclosed him within her warm strong arms. He felt like a child and hungered for even a closer contact and began to kiss her hands, her face and then his legs entwined her. He felt at peace and surrendered himself to sleep and warmth.

*

Another morning arrived. He looked around and there was no sign of the woman. He conjectured she must have gone out to work. He had noticed her tools of trade. She was a stonebreaker doing a hard dusty job. Suddenly he wanted to escape, as he felt disgusted with himself. He has slept with a woman of low cast, below his social status.

But that was ridiculous, she was the only person that has shown any kind of concern for him, perhaps closer to love. She had saved a total stranger from jaws of death. Anyway who was he to judge people like that? He was a man who could not even manage his own life.

Suddenly he felt that he did not belong to any caste or creed anymore. He was just an outsider. A wretched man without a name, without a caste; rejected by the world, and even by the death. He felt that has lost an infinite world. He will go out and loose himself into the vastness of India, Unnamed and unknown.