

Silence With The Storm

By Rattan Mann

Epilogue

One day in July 1975 I was sitting in the library of the physics department of Chalmers University in Gothenburg. Suddenly a man came to me and introduced himself. He was an Indian-born American professor from Texas. I told him I was looking for some suitable problem in particle physics to work on. He said that he would be in Gothenburg for about a month and he might have something for me. And he asked me to do something in the phenomenology of particles obeying $SU(4)$ symmetry.

The problem gave me no intellectual satisfaction. It was like making a table to keep track of indexes and symbols - something you are taught in eighth grade or even earlier.

I told him the problem didn't make much sense or gave any perspective or insight into the symmetry of particles. It was just a boring and tedious calculation signifying nothing.

He smiled, and without showing any signs of irritation, said, "You are not mature enough."

I told him I was perfectly mature enough to work on anything.

Still remaining very calm, he smiled again and told me,

"You are like a man who says he is an expert mathematician but cannot multiply."

That did something to me, something permanent - something which cannot be described in words. At one stroke I decided to change the course of my life. Instead of knocking again and again at the doors of the Brahmins, I would take a by-pass to Knowledge. I would make the people, not the Brahmins, the gateway to Truth. Instead of trying to be a mathematician and banging on the closed doors of privileged elite, I would become a writer and do something that the people can understand. Surely, much was lost. I was 30. The best years of my life were behind me. But what is 30 years before Eternity? So I wiped the slate clean, and at 30, began all over again.

Instead of one, now I faced two problems - what to write and what to read.

The first problem was somewhat easier. I am not an evangelist by nature. I don't believe in giving a new system, a new world order, a new hope to mankind. I don't like to be a Guru. I want to remain a bum. I prefer to be a learner all my life. To learn something new every day, something I never knew before is the solace of my life. So instead of presenting a new whatever to save the world, I decided to write about myself - just tell everybody what a bum I am. That was all.

The second problem was a little more tricky. Since leaving high school I hadn't touched literature. But

now I had to study it deeply if I was to become a writer. But the problem was where to begin. So much has been written, good, bad, and worthless, that I had to be discriminate, and choose wisely.

After some thought, I hit on a plan. I went to the public library, opened the encyclopedia, and started looking for the list of people who had got a Nobel Prize in literature. Surely, they must be, by definition, people worth reading. And for the first time in my life I heard (read) names like Patrick White, Sholokhov, Camus, T.S. Eliot etc etc. Then one day, after almost ten years, I picked up Shakespeare and started reading him again.

Once more what started as a very unpleasant experience turned into a very pleasant one. Once more I was transported into a new universe. But it was a very different universe than that of mathematics. Instead of abstractions, there were always real people, concrete characters, dancing around my thoughts.

And one day Erna asked me why I did not go to the mathematics library any more. Had I not told her the day I was not there I was not really alive?

"Yes. But these days I am working on literature. And when I study mathematics and literature together, I get confused. The combination disorients me completely." I replied.

This was only half the truth. The other half, that a part of me lay dead and buried there among eternal abstractions, and I did not have the courage to stand before my own grave, I kept to myself.

"Very sensitive," she smiled and then without suspecting anything more to it, changed the subject to themes closer to a woman's heart.

That was about the last time I spoke to Erna.

Our lives had degenerated into a very uninspired existence - uninspired walks, uninspired talks, silly arguments, and no flares of imagination reaching out for the sky. This was not what I meant by living. So we separated.

But before separating, Erna flared up like a meteor into a magnanimous glow of love and tenderness. She told me she was willing to marry me just for the visa, just so that I could stay in Sweden, knowing fully well that things were not working between us.

Since then many people have told me that I should have said yes. But the eternal bum that I am, I said no. It too somehow did not fit into my definitions of love and life.

So Margrette was gone. Erna was gone. My dream to be a leading mathematician and thinker of our times was gone. As if that was not enough, I got a phone-call from my lawyer. He told me he understood and appreciated my decision to separate from Erna. But the immigration police did not. They have decided to deport me immediately. If I did not leave Sweden within ten days, I would be arrested and flown back to

India under armed escort.

It was a total defeat on all fronts. Within a short span of time, everything that mattered to me was gone with the wind. But history has shown that great debacles can be turned into even greater victories by a bold and orderly retreat - a retreat back to Moscow, a retreat back to Mongolia. So I packed everything I had in two suitcases, went to the high-way, and started hitch-hiking back to India - back to the rain-forest. There I would ask my forefathers, the apes, what went wrong.

As I stood on the highway, in full retreat, the whispers of my forefathers, the apes, were already reaching my ears across a distance of thousands of miles and millions of years. They were telling me their story, their life, and their wisdom just as I had been telling you my story, my life, and my follies.

All I had to do was listen, and try to understand their whimpers in the storm.

To be continued someday as Whimpers With The Storm.

But for now it is.....

The End

© 2011 Rattan Mann