



The Whataboutry of Letter

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Abstract

The exponential rise of technology has made the letter inutile and obsolete, now adorning the curate of some avid philatelist. The telegram, its cousin, is also fated to meet the same end. Owing to the rampant manipulation of widgets, new jargons have come up to be canonised compelling their incorporation in the realms of semantics. The writing of these e-mails and Whats Apps is perforce functional, topic-prone and self-terminal; in tune with or perhaps totally out of it - with the times. It is not longitudinal though latitudinal. And therefore, the value of a letter cannot be gainsaid. It is extremely crucial therefore, to decode a letter in order to view its historic signification. The researcher has given here certain definitions by contexting them against revealing specimens of letter and its relevance questioned at times. Again he has endeavoured to show how a letter also is primarily a form of expression by integrating it with some other genres of literature like autobiography, history etc.

Key-words

Missive, Coeval, Epistle, Indurate, Dear John.

The origin of a letter is almost as old as *the civilized history of mankind*. Even in the Mahabharata, there is an illustration of Rukmini writing a letter to effect her abduction which has a wilful connivance of Sri Krishna.

The art of communication, veering round a pantomime and certain illegible scrawls on the walls of caves; the only crude attempts of a primitive man to express his wants; became more articulate with the development of language. The transition, embellished further with the help of a quill on lambskin or a bark, gathered volume and fillip since the invention of ink and the paper.

To-day, the form has become superannuated. And with it, the practice of writing it. The world has ushered into the 21st century and outlandish changes are sweeping past us. Under the technological onrush, a bare second is split into femto seconds; while with the blink of an eye, the trans-podes are shrunk into the hollow of a palm. God may or may not, but internet is a ubiquitous phenomenon. Google, with its umpteenth websites, with a bewilderingly confounding vocabulary like, instagram, Whatsapp, tweeter, facebook, dropbox, voot etc. have decommissioned the letter.

If one were to go by the social logistics, when the sanctity of relations threatens to become brittle and out of joints, and only netizens and their netiquette count, it requires a very fertile stretch of imagination to conceive the importance a letter once occupied in warping the families.

In Hindustan{the erstwhile connotation}, the Post was established in 1854 by the British, where mails were collected, sorted and delivered to the addressee through an extensively devised channel by the men employed for the job. There was a system called 'Halkara', in the Raj. And only an hundred years back, one could see a figure with a spear and a bunch of rattles looped to it, going along a dusty trek. An ingenuity, designed to ward off dangers in the path with the one and to beat time with the other.

The respect and affection a post-man commanded was the envy of many; esp. with the simple unlettered village folks. One could construct a figure with haggard looks, shelving the eyes with shrivelled hands and peering intently into the direction whence a long awaited letter did not arrive. With it come, the relations would cluster around the bearer, urging him to read it. And as he limped along the lines, the sundry emotions of joy, sorrow, anxiety, agony, alternately swept across their faces chasing each other. All their lives were interspersed in the tiny world of letters. It was the herald of good tidings as well as ominous. The death of

a kindred, the birth of an infant in the family, the losing of a job or passing the Matriculate! In it were packed the sweet little homilies of parents to their son abroad. The letter was the only mainstay of a green widow whose face simultaneously blushed and winced at the words of endearment during her ordeal of separation.

Even Nehru refers to the tense moments of excitement he experienced when lodged in Dehradun gaol, where he would not open the envelop but play about it for days on as an assured treasure.

The extent of a letter in people's lives is testified by its place in literature which is a mirror of society. The 'dear John' of Kusum to Saraswatichandra, is just the illustration which actually unfolds the subsequent plots in the novel. 'Post Office' by Dhumketu of the nom de plume of Gaurishankar Joshi, is rated among the 100 best short stories of the world, where coachman Ali haunts the post office daily for the letter of his only daughter Mariam and at last the Post Master delivers it on his grave. Whereas Indulal Gandhi's 'A Blind Mother's Letter to her Son'; does not have its equal in other lore! It so poignantly evokes the plight of an infirm mother that, frankly, it requires plenty of guts to hide your emotions. The attempt to translate would be a pale rendering.

After trying to establish its value as a vital organ of social intercourse, necessitated by its oblivion, an attempt is made here to explore the various definitions and its close affinity with other forms of literature i.e. autobiography and history.

Definitions

A letter besides communicating ideas and matters, also conveys sentiments and feelings. The linguistic exchange between two persons of ideas, feelings, information etc, with a fixed pattern eg. address at the outset and ending with a signature, is called a letter.

The *Oxford Advanced Dictionary* defines it as, 'A written message, request, account of events, etc sent by one person to another.' (492)

Again, *The Encyclopedia of Britannica* gives the definition; "The letter is essentially a spontaneous, non-literary, personal and private, a substitute – for spoken conversation." (ASV: 60)

This definition is not acceptable as certain letters have a strong literary turn.

One may pick up the following from Nehru to reinforce, "In the early morning I lay bare-bodied in the open and the gentle-eyed sun of the mountains took me in his warm embrace... Sometimes I would lie under the pine trees and listen to the voice of the wandering wind, whispering many strange things into my ears, and lulling my senses, and cooling the fever in my brain. Finding me unguarded and open to attack, it would cunningly point out the folly of men's ways in the world." (Chibber: 22)

And this two liner, written to Bernard Shaw, is poetry in prose.

"If I have the privilege to meet you for a while, it will be to treasure a memory which will make me a little richer than I am." (Chibber: 30)

Letter and Autobiography

A letter preserves *tete-a-tete* emotions, thoughts of a steady or transitory nature; - this confidential tone makes them at once personal and betrays the writer. And this latter function relates it to autobiography. The feelings and aspirations of an individual are enmeshed in it, becoming an emblem of his personality.

While wading through Napoleon's letters, quite a number of them wear an unmistakable complexion of autobiography and therefore are the first to merit attention. Many of them have been of the species of passionate love letters, written by him to Josephine. They sum up his life and are integral to his 'self'. In one of them, he confides, till his alliance with her, he had seldom known the fear of death and rather jested at the cares which drive man to security and providence. Such he regarded with supreme disdain, having an unconquerable faith in his powers to accomplish. But now she has enslaved him. Her gracious fidelity, her ennobling sacrifice, agitate him, and thought of death, snapping the tie assails the mind with such riot of emotions against which he is not proof. A strange and compelling confession-that reveals the man from behind the escutcheon of a little corporal. This one is hurriedly penned on a war drum serving as a writing pad,

I know not what fate awaits me but if it keep me much longer from you, it will be insupportable. There was a time when I was proud of my courage; when, contemplating the various evils to which we are exposed, I could fix my eyes steadfastly upon every conceivable calamity without alarm or dread. But now the idea that Josephine may be ill, and the cruel thought that she may love me the less, withers my soul, and leaves me not even the courage of despair. Formerly I said to myself, Man cannot hurt him who can die without regret. But now to die... is a torment. (Abbott: 62)

Second, Swami Vivekanand's letters must be made a mention of; written during his meteoric career. They illustrate his message and philosophy. Some of them are as luminous as the writer's own self. But the one in point, is peculiar and is hoped, less heard of. Here we find a man cloaked under the ochre robe of a sanyasin. The tone is categorically autobiographical and has an oriental bearing. It has certain docility about it that makes one resent. This tongue-in-cheek humility did not become him. This stern ascetic, indomitable and fiercely independent, at the zenith of vedantic glory, whom the kings lionized and in common with the masses, hastened to draw his chariot for his colossal work, looks a shorn lamb here. His stature is never sought to be blasphemed or denigrated by this phrase. Be it far from traducement. It only enhances respect. Here is a son begging for his mother. He dwells on the accolades conferred on him by the world and his mother's thought makes him sore.

Strictly Private. I appeal to your Highness's word, generosity and friendship. I have one great sin rankling in my breast and that is to do a service to the world I have sadly neglected my mother. Again since my second brother [Mahendranath] has gone away she has become awfully worn out with grief. Now my last desire is to make seva and serve my mother for some years at least. I want to live with my mother and get my younger brother married to prevent extinction of the family. This will certainly smoothen my last days as well as that of my mother. She lives in a hotel. I want to build a little decent home for her and make some provision for the youngest as there is very little hope of his being a good earning man. Is it too much for a royal descendent of Ramchandra to do for one he loves and calls his friend? I do not know whom-else to appeal to. The money I got from Europe was for the 'work' and every penny almost has been given over to that work. Nor can I go and beg of others for help for my own self. About my own family affairs I have exposed myself to your Highness and none else shall know of it. I am tired, heart-sick and dying-do, I pray, this last great work of kindness to me. (Burke: 461-462)

...One thing more will I beg of you-if possible the 100 Rs. a month for my mother be made permanent. So that even after my death it may regularly reach her, or even if your Highness ever gets reasons to stop your love and kindness for me, my poor old mother may be provided for, remembering the love you once had for a poor *Sadhu*. (462)

The beliefs or thoughts of an altogether different shade which are partially covered or inarticulately voiced in a person's autobiography liberate into the reading of his missives. We may turn to the Nehru siblings who fell for each other in order to exemplify our view.

From Krishna Hutheesing about Vijaya Laxmi Pandit to Natwarsingh on 11th August, 1960, "Your letter-my sister has played yet another foul trick on me and stabbed me behind my back. I am coming to Delhi on 13th and am going to have it out for once and all with the P.M."(212) Certainly the piece is bereft of that 'we are seven' spirit!

Historicity

Often, mighty histories are wrapped up in a letter, seminally responsible for raising or even razing empires. Napoleon, painted as a monster and a blood-thirsty war monger, ambitious only to usurp the crown, embroiled by the war's savageness, his letter explodes the myth and shows how he endeavoured to spare the bloodshed. Here is a letter directed to the King of England to sheath hostilities.

Sir, my Brother, - Called to the throne by Providence, by the suffrages of the Senate, of the people, and of the army, my first desire is peace. France and England abusing their prosperity, may contend for ages. But do they fulfill their most sacred duties in causing so much blood to be vainly shed...? I do not conceive that it can be deemed dishonourable in me to make the first advances. I think that it has been sufficiently proved to the world that I dread not of the Chances of war. Though peace is the wish of my heart, yet war has never been adverse to my glory. I conjure your Majesty, not to refuse the happiness of giving peace to the world...that it may be legacy for your children; for never has arisen such propitious moment...for displaying the best feelings of humanity and reason...At all events, I have discharged a sacred duty, and one dear to my heart. Your Majesty may rely upon the sincerity of the sentiments expressed, and on my desire to afford you every proof of that sincerity. (Abott: 219)

One would do well to know that this letter is the very first act after his installation to the throne. It might help to disabuse one's mind, indurated by prejudice.

Napoleon once wrote down 250 letters in 48 hours with the force and fury of a hurricane. It may sound a grand bluff, but Victor Hugo wrote over fifty thousand letters to his beloved Juliet, the famous actress of her times. And Lord Curzon wrote a 100 page letter to his wife when a Viceroy of India. A 400 page long letter is preserved in the British Museum. Whereas Pope the XII's encyclicals are regarded monumental for their breadth of learning. We Indians are regrettably accused of wanting in hindsight. One needn't however, be

much cynical about this neglect. Fortunately, a few letters have survived to date to make good the loss and improve one's understanding of the zeitgeist.

Gandhi's letters are embodied in the selected works of mahatma from the broad spectrum of his writings. As to their value, it is apt to recall what K.M.Munshi has to say,

When Mahatma Gandhi's letters come to be published, they will fill volumes of valuable literature. Every letter is a perfect gem, well and appropriately worded, with a ringing note of candour. They are models of conciseness. Many are playful; some loving. Many administer rebuke; some, with indescribable restraint, hit, and hit well; a few are intimate; scarcely any throbs with the impulse of an unguarded moment. The author adjusts the tone, the language and the perspective of every letter with uncanny precision so as to have the desired effect on the addressee. The letters have provided him with his greatest instrument of controlling the conscience and conduct of his friends and adherents. No man has wielded so great an influence through his letters; and few literary men have written theirs with such art. (M: 316)

K.Natwarsingh, author and our foreign envoy, has also published his '*Treasured Epistles*'. But it is of a much cry less wool order!

It is pertinent to recall here *Nehru's Letters to His Sister*, a collection of 93 letters over a period of 25 years. They reveal the protean aspects of his character that could hardly be trapped elsewhere.

Again, *A Bunch of Old Letters* is an assorted anthology written by and addressed to Nehru by distinguished persons like, Cripps, Rolland, Tagore, Bernard Shaw etc. The letters verge on autobiography. Some of them speak of his ideals and principles and manifest his spiritual isolation especially in talks with Gandhi. Among them are the marathon-letters between Subhash and Nehru. '*The Bunch*' gives access besides Nehru's own, to the lives and personalities of several others.

Conclusion

Certain questions are apt to remain unanswered and the chances one has of finding them are long lain in the graves along-side their subjects, perplexing the mind. But man is by habit and nature inquisitive and would soon try to badger out their replies shrouded in suspense. When there is no conclusive proof to support a theory, one has to go by speculation to proximate to truth, honouring a self-evident proverb, यत्र यत्र धूम तत्र तत्र वह्नि विराजेत् । A wisp of smoke presupposes a fire somewhere!

In the instance of Kalapi that is Sursinhji Gohil, the then ruler of Lathi in Kathiawar, monogamy was never a strictly practised virtue among the royal families in keeping with the customs in vogue. But a muletto alliance\marriage in Indian parlance, i.e. miscegenation by the rulers would be resented and taken a strong objection to, as it set up a bad precedent. No woman would forgive the master and lord of the house marrying servant girl and her claim and status forfeited by her groom esp. when that was sired by herself. Conspiracies and intrigues have always been the sinister chapter in the annals of princely states. The poet Mast Fakir' originally Tribhuvan Vyas, proud and untamable, had challenged the circumstances of Kalapi's death and demanded an angry explanation whereof, was turned away imperiously by the queen for interfering into the private life of the royal family. The shadows of this inner clash and agony of the impending end would have surely cast in his letters. Two of them uphold the supposition. (Shukla: no.4 and 6). But a doubt always nags the mind. Kalapi's letters have been censored in order to spare him infamy. The expletive "पाणीथीजे पातरां"(॥) – thinner than water, by Balvantraai Thakore who edited Kavi Kant's letters, may also be applied here, hazarding no recantation in future. If one endeavours to evaluate them afresh, not with a cheap pleasure to inculcate or defame the persons involved, but with the honest attempt to bring the facts to the open light of the sun, the labour would be rewarding. The chief bane is the leg of time, which proves more a hamper than help. One has to step back to have a correct perspective of an image. The reason is the curse of contemporaneity. The coevals of one are not able to judge the worth and estimate of a person yielded him by future, which, with the passage of time acquires larger than life dimensions. Another bane is, a very genuine desire which precluded them from slandering and maintain respect and decorum of the deceased's memory—de mortuis nil nisi bonum—say nothing but good about the dead! But the future researcher would not have to contend against these two drawbacks. He can gain an access to what then was withheld in secret and not published.

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