

CHAPTER IV

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU : THE EPISTOLARIAN

'Letters' have been recognized as a genre of literature and 'letter writing' is also considered as an art where communication is done between two persons. It has been seen that Jawaharlal has established himself as a prolific communicator using the medium of letter writing. In this chapter an attempt has been made to situate Jawaharlal as an epistolarian as it is presumed that he has illumined various aspects of the human society in his letters that entail a creative interaction between him and the reader.

The letters addressed by Jawaharlal to various persons close to him are revealing of his art of expression, while they ensure the inherent current of patriotism in them. Thus, apart from the literary value, the letters, are significant also as social documents. It is seen that Jawaharlal's letters, too, as his other creative works, narrate the same experiences in the wake of the momentous changes in Indian history, and have, thus, become invaluable works of literature. Indeed, they help the reader formulate an opinion while they speak of some events related with the Nationalist Movement.

It has been noticed that Jawaharlal's times away from home made him write the letters which he began during his school days at Harrow Public School, London. The letters he wrote at that time reflect the joyous expression of a growing boy and there was no significant literary expression in them. Later, when he again started letter- writing during his tenures inside the jail,

his consummation as an epistolarian received the attention of the reader for the content and style of narrating his passionate thoughts in engaging language. It is well to state here that as an epistolarian Jawaharlal has focused not only on the issues of 'personal' interest, but also on the questions of the Nationalist Movement. As such, the letters, dealing with Indian history chronicle an important facet of national life. It has also been seen that his life has merged into a mission for attaining freedom while he has been viewed as an epistolarian. His letters are expressive of the same consciousness related to the activities of the milieu. Nayantara Sahgal has identified the theme of "hundred odd years of European expansion, consequent colonization and empire"¹ in the letters of Jawaharlal. This view of Sahgal enlists the direct bearing of 'politics' on those letters which deserve close attention.

Jawaharlal seems to have regarded letter- writing as either a conscious art or a vehicle to carry on any urgent impulse. *Letters From a Father to His Daughter*, and the *Glimpses of World History* are of the first kind while some other letters incorporated into *Nehru's Letters to His Sisters, Before Freedom: Nehru's Letters to His Sister*, are believed to be of the second category. Further, the letters addressed to the Chief Ministers reveal his political insight and far-sighted vision. He invariably speaks of his mind and is for the most part quite candid in offering his opinions on any issue – 'personal' or 'political'. So far as conscious art is concerned in his letters, it is recognizably akin to the art of Jawaharlal's prose. It has been observed that on the basis of the theme and structure of the letters, he may be posited as a fine and celebrated writer of prose.

As an epistolarian Jawaharlal used to employ similar 'techniques' of prose so well that although the medium of expression is notably different, yet the voice with its disciplined spontaneity is the same. As Sahgal has corroborated :

...[Jawaharlal's] might have been a story of seamless assimilation had the times he lived in not placed his cultures in conflict, involving him in an ongoing reckoning with himself and making him the man he was, sensitive to nuance, open to growth and personality, willing to grope his way to understanding, and always the opposite of didactic, dogmatic or fanatic. It is this fine-grained multifaceted personality, both as public and private person that gives his letters a human interest beyond this time.²

The above observation has enabled us to appreciate some uncommon traits of the letters written by Jawaharlal. Jawaharlal is 'sensitive' to nuance; 'open' to growth and possibility and he is never a man of didactic outlook. All these merits of his personality mirrored in the letters provide them a 'humane interest beyond their time'. So, it might be argued that as an epistolarian Jawaharlal has cut his way across time making an appeal, which is of enduring nature for a considerably longer time.

Jawaharlal's letters aptly reveal 'family relationship' and the 'warm embracing texture' of family life at 'Anand Bhawan'. He addressed the letters to different persons placing Anand Bhawan at the heart of them during the political developments of the 1930s and 40s. The 'theme' and 'texture' of the letters provide an insight into the family of the Nehru's who were caught up in the vortex of Indian politics. "Letters", in the words of M.

K. Naik and S. Narayan, “are a good source of biographical information. In some cases, such as *Nehru’s Letters From a Father to His Daughter*, they are literary works...”³ Appreciating Jawaharlal’s letters the critics have thrown light on their importance as either biographical information or as creative works. For having contained the life of the writer, they are of tremendous value indicating the creative involvement of Jawaharlal. However, he is believed to be a letter- writer who may opt to speak volumes about the ‘saga’ of a nation that completely merged into the whirlpool of the Nationalist Movement. Truly, then, they undeniably offer elements of it that help one to reconstruct the past. Thus, in a sense, they are significant for carrying ‘historical’ and ‘political’ bearing directly on them.

It is needless to state that the letters addressed by Jawaharlal to his siblings and parents during his formative period abroad are devoid of the intense ‘patriotic feelings’, instead, the expressions are revealing of the mind of a growing boy. The following excerpt from a letter to Vijayalaxmi proves this argument :

... I am sending you a little teddy bear and a few other things. The teddy is meant for the baby. I love teddy bears, you will also get a paint box ...⁴

Despite the lack of specific beauty in literary expression, the above letter speaks of Jawaharlal, the epistolarian’s love for the ‘small things’ like the ‘teddy bears’ and ‘a paint box’. Further, it has been seen how Jawaharlal has ascended the ladder of ‘politics’ without any self-interest in it except his aspiration for the liberty of his motherland. It is relevant to notice here that the

'echo' of the voice of that growing boy 're-echoes' later as the voice of the people, reflecting their hope and urge for freedom. Narasimhaiah has aptly commented on Jawaharlal's skill as an epistolarian in the following lines :

... It is said in letters artists unlock their hearts and readers have through them an insight into the minds and hearts of writers who while moving others themselves appear unmoved ...they do help us in understanding one important quality, indeed the guiding principle of his life, which is that he aspired to and succeeded more than many others in living an integrated life ...⁵

Narasimhaiah by this remark has directed our attention to Jawaharlal, the epistolarian, in manifold ways : at first, it enables us to explore the 'role' the letters play, 'bringing out' his personality that focuses our attention on his 'heart' and 'mind'; secondly, as creative works, they, epitomize the 'principle' followed by Jawaharlal to live an 'integrated life'. It is true that the urge for writing the letters came to Jawaharlal owing to the frequent separations from the family. The impulse for writing letters, at the beginning, came to him naturally during his study in England, while, later, it became a habit for him to put his emotions in writing during his frequent 'jail-goings'. Adopting this specific genre of literature to release his tension, Jawaharlal has certainly enriched Indian English literature. As D. Anjaneyelu has commented,

... During the long stretches of [Jawaharlal's] imprisonment which were, for him periods of enforced leisure, this was about the only outlet for his human emotions, apart from the books he wrote ...⁶

Truly, then, most of the letters written by Jawaharlal refer to his period in jail. In the *Preface* to the second edition of *Letters From a Father to his Daughter*, Jawaharlal thus declared his decision to take up letter- writing to use his time in a useful manner :

...Last year when I went to Naini prison, the thought came back to me and time was not lacking. But prison letters are not frequent and a prison does not provide books of reference. And, above all, my mind was too full of the making of history, as it was being made from day today in India, for me to think of the dead past ...(6).

Later, he wrote to his daughter Indira in one of the letters included in the *Glimpses of World History* :

I cannot say if you will like these letters when you see them. But I have decided to write them for my own pleasure. They bring you very near to me, and I feel almost that I have had a talk with you...(7).

Thus, Jawaharlal has told us about the need for recording his thoughts in the letters as they are the only media of expression which he could use extensively during his solitary days.

Meanwhile, it has been seen that knowledge of various kinds apart, the letters, as included in *Letters From a Father to His Daughter* and *Glimpses of World History*, bear ample evidence of Jawaharlal's 'wit'. The following excerpt puts it frankly :

...And read these chosen volumes and out of them construct a magic city full of dream castles and flowering gardens and running brooks

where beauty and happiness dwell and the ills that this sorry world of ours suffers from can gain no admittance. And life will then become one long and happy endeavour, a ceaseless adventure, to build this city of magic and to drive away all the ugliness and misery around us...⁸

Here, a suggestion has been given by Jawaharlal to his sister Krishna to read books and construct an imaginary place with 'dream castles' and 'flowering gardens'. His own imagination is at its peak here, while he speaks of the world full of happiness and devoid of all the plagues of human lives. Jawaharlal has been appreciated by Iyenger as the 'phoenix' as he "holds the promise of future advance"⁹ without giving way to "defeatism, cynicism or despair"¹⁰. The 'avoidance of improvising' his own ideals on others in a remarkably 'intimate tone' in the letters makes Jawaharlal an appealing letter-writer. The opinion of Sahgal that "Letters, above all, illuminate the personality and the attitude of the writer"¹¹ comes closer to our exploration of the ideologies of Jawaharlal as revealed in the letters. The interpretation of subjects diverse in nature from the Marxist point of view dominates some of his letters. The letters which have a direct bearing on history – and they have been included in the first two of the trilogy on history—come under this category. According to Krishna Nehru Hutheesingh, Jawaharlal is always "full of concern..., but always full of cheer, affection and optimism"¹². Indeed, his letters may be considered as "source of great comfort during the long weary months...when sight of loved ones was denied ..."¹³

These are clear affirmations of the strength of Jawaharlal as a letter-writer, while they sufficiently provide reflection of his thoughts resulting from

a particular situation. Needless to state that the situation was full of agony yet there was optimism. The clear affirmation of Jawaharlal's standing as an epistolarian may be attributed to his concern for the nation indeed.

As works of literary art, the letters have depicted Jawaharlal's love for "Nature", while an attempt has been made here to analyse his 'treatment of Nature'. It is to be recalled that discussion on 'Nature' forms an essential part of these letters. As in the *Autobiography*, and *The Discovery of India*, picturesque descriptions of land, sea, forest and the like in the letters, too, capture the mind of the readers :

...I write the shores of the island recede in the distance and the coconut trees become little specks on the horizon. It has been a strenuous holiday, specially the last part of it...Lanka is an enchanted place, beautiful till the eyes get satiated with its beauty and nature's prodigality. It is ever afternoon there and the summer breezes blow and rustle through the graceful palm trees. And the great blue sea kisses lightly its pleasant green shores and sings a lullaby which soothes and intoxicates. One forgets almost the struggle and misery of the world of action.¹⁴

Nature's beauty has been caught in its myriad forms suggesting Jawaharlal's apt descriptive power. Although it is a part of a letter, it reads like a beautiful nature poem that gratifies one's yearning for beauty. The 'pleasing lullaby' sung by 'the summer breeze' intoxicates the reader who at once forgets the harsh realities enveloping his life. As such, the poetic expressions of Jawaharlal as an epistolarian who narrates the beauty of Sri Lanka in an invigorating style truly evoke an image of the land surrounded

by the sea. The sensuous pleasure the description offers is quite catching, as, in the midst of harsh realities, it can sometimes soothe an weary mind. The picturesque description, further, reveals Jawaharlal's poetic bent of mind focusing on his meticulous treatment of "Nature" as a vast subject. It may be further added that this kind of natural description reminds us of an 'eulogy' that praises myriad forms of 'Nature'. Unfolding her beauty and mystery Jawaharlal records in the *Letters From a Father to His Daughter* :

Every little stone that you see lying in the road or the mountain side may be a little page in nature's book and may be able to tell you something if you only knew how to read it...If the river had carried it on, it would have become smaller and smaller till at last it became a grain of sand and joined its brothers at the sea-side to make a beautiful beach where little children can play and make castles out of the sand (2-4).

The passage is stimulating with the writer's keen power of observation that undo Nature's mystery accomplishing how a 'pebble' turns into 'sand', and it is to Jawaharlal's credit that he can do it in an engagingly conversational tone.

A dramatic effect of the letters provided by Jawaharlal, the epistolarian, shows his skill in this medium of communication which has been noted by Narasimhaiah pertinently in the following language :

One has reasons to believe that Nehru might well have been a successful novelist if he had taken to fiction writing, for what comes out here is his capacity to enact not only the working of his mind but even their hidden recesses, the motive springs of thought...¹⁵

From the above observation it may be argued that Jawaharlal as a letter-writer puts elements of the novel in his letters: love, passion, emotion, inspiration, social realism and the like. And in this context, the vision of him as the letter-writer may be equalized with that of a novelist. The following passage is a case in point :

Personal shocks somehow bring reality nearer to us than even world disasters. Yet, how insignificant is individual tragedy today in the face of millions of personal tragedies, which go to make up in their totality of the world tragedy...¹⁶

This letter addressed to Indira offers an insight into the concept of 'tragedy' as such. Jawaharlal seems to place the 'tragedy' of the millions over the tragedy of the individuals. He maintains, "We have to think in terms of new standards and values..."¹⁷ expressing his concern for humanity at large. A pervasive awareness of the need to modernize the nation is another relevant issue which his letters deal with earnestly. This has been echoed in the following words :

We can, I believe, make a work of art out of our lives, a song or a beautiful melody, ever though that song may clutch at the throat and bring tears to the eyes...¹⁸

It is really to Jawaharlal's credit that he could arrest the humane interest in this specific genre of literature. As D. Anjaneyelu has rightly opined,

...The basic integrity of his personality and his constant habit of introspection could be seen to have spread across [the letters] ...¹⁹

The same critic has also noticed that Jawaharlal's "letters are like that of a catalogue of books-No worthwhile titles in history and philosophy, literature and the arts seem to have escaped his notice"²⁰. In tune with this critic it may be maintained that the books Jawaharlal has gone through are classics that show his taste in reading. Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, Meghdoot, Leve's *Le Theatre Indian*, C. Sivaramamurti's *Sculpture Impaired by Kalidasa*, Louisa Alcot's *Little Women*, Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and the like have been included in the list suggesting the letters as catalogues of books. However, it exhibits his erudition resulting from the vast reading of books on diverse subjects. In fact, referring to his frequent treatment of Nature in the works including the letters, it may be explained that nature exacts the joyous rhythm of human life and the opposite as well. As such, in enacting the 'self' the letters reveal a poetic sensibility of the writer as his inherent passion. Jawaharlal's desire to transcend the 'self consciousness' into the 'social' one, however, is the impelling force of his letters. As Narasimhaiah has viewed,

...For his impassioned self analysis, the letters could be read as an excellent adjunct to Nehru's *Autobiography*. There are few drab things and even the very few references to the ill-health of Motilal and others are more redeemed by flashes of singular beauty and profound insight...²¹

The above view of Narasimhaiah, in fact, emphasizes the appealing role played by the letters that help one to understand Jawaharlal's life better.

Apart from these personal letters, *Letters to the Chief Ministers* are always exemplary in nature. In October, 1947, Jawaharlal started writing a fortnightly letter to the Chief Ministers with a mission to 'inform', 'educate', 'exhort' and 'warn' the heads of provincial governments. It may be said that as a modern thinker, he turned those letters into an additional link in the Indian political system, setting in perspective events in India and abroad, and drawing their attention to urgent and important issues. There are in all three hundred and seventy eight letters in five volumes in the *Letters to the Chief Ministers*. He used them, as once he put it, for 'thinking aloud about important developments and possibilities'. His strategy to encourage the Chief Ministers to promote economic development of the provinces was a regular feature in the letters. In his correspondence with the Chief Ministers, Jawaharlal shows awareness of the critical role of clean, constructive and co-operative politics in a federal and democratic system. As B. R. Nanda has remarked, the letters to Chief Ministers are media of communication wherein Jawaharlal has maintained "the flow of information, advice, and admonition from the Prime Minister to the heads of the State Governments", while "every aspect of politics and administration, land reforms, village panchayats, village co-operatives, elementary and higher education... nepotism and inefficiency and so on"²² have been closely observed. To quote from a letter addressed to the Chief Ministers :

...How can we yoke this popular enthusiasm to the cause of building up a new India? How can we make this cause a living adventure of our people? That is the problem before us...²³

The content rightly expresses Jawaharlal, the letter-writer, who at that time held the post of Prime Minister of India, and his concern for the development of the country. He enacts an 'enthusiasm' to build up a new India. It must be stated here that as official letters, the *Letters to the Chief Ministers* are having a quality of the political pamphlets which are apparently devoid of artistic expression and literary worth. Still, the epistolarian's democratic spirit strengthened with leadership permeates them. These fortnightly addresses may be, hence, considered as a basic text that renders lessons of building up a new nation. Indeed, Jawaharlal, the man behind these visions, may be understood well only from the inherent content of these letters. So, despite the bearing of the pamphlets, political in nature, they should always be studied to appreciate his growth as a modern thinker. In this regard, Narasimhaiah's comment is worth quoting :

...Apart from the letters discussed so far, ...these were largely political pamphlets, or treatises...they are not particularly known for their literary merit...²⁴

Thus, Narasimhaiah categorizes those letters to the Chief Ministers as 'political pamphlets' or 'treatises' as there is no noticeable literary expression. But, the letters written to either the members of the family or to some of the friends have a certain kind of literature in them requiring the need to go through them closely.

In conclusion, it may be explained that every letter figures as an association of the writer with the person addressed to. In that sense,

Jawaharlal as an epistolarian has elevated his association with the person to whom he wrote the letters. However, after all these observations, it should be maintained that Jawaharlal's letters are not mere expressions of 'personal' emotion, but of a tradition that elucidates the 'pluralities' of Indian culture enabling one to envisage the 'joint family system' and the like, as noted in them. As the art of intelligent expression of an Indian mind, the letters of Jawaharlal embody the highest wisdom of a 'race' that is Indian and further, by assimilating the 'experience' of other 'cultures' and 'epochs' that look forward to attaining a 'synthesis' in future. To Jawaharlal, letter-writing was not only a means of personal expression, but a medium born out of understanding and love. And his understanding of man and society has been necessarily found total, and integral. Above all, the same egalitarian view has been set forth in the language of the letters, thus communicating the totality of the vision Jawaharlal holds as an epistolarian.

All the above insights into the letters of Jawaharlal have shown that he was a prolific epistolarian from his childhood till death. The letters of Jawaharlal provide the fullest, and the most continuous epistolary record of his life. He was a writer who exercised the art of letter-writing, and doing so, he just not only encouraged others to write letters but also showed an exemplar to preserve them. Besides, as an epistolarian, Jawaharlal shows himself as a person with open and compassionate attitudes aptly putting his surroundings in proper verbal frames.

Notes and references

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