Personal Letter Writing – An evolving Art in the Digital Age

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Abstract

In the digital age, many conventional forms are evolving, changing and adapting. With the extent of outreach of the mobile phone to every nook and corner, the millennials are enjoying the fruits of technical advancements. To label them as indifferent or oblivious to the traditional form s would lead to skepticism. This paper envisages to focus on one traditional art that is not lost altogether but is on a threshold of merging with other forms of expressions; the art of letter writing, be it general or personal. It is an ancient art when manuscripts were the only means of communication which later on evolved into a systematic system of writing letters and then posting it to send to some other person. For a few decades, the post man and the post box assumed importance of significant proportion and a whole generation grew up in a world which was dotted with sky blue, lemon yellow and many other colours of envelops or inland letters which carried the messages and thoughts from one person to the other.

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1. Introduction - Personal Letter Writing : A Distinct Art

With the advent of written communication, letter writing took the centrestage to forge bonds, cement relationships and exchange new ideas. Then fast and more convenient forms of communication developed and the humble art of letter writing was relegated to a few occasions and activities. However, it is imperative to note that this art is still struggling to keep itself alive despite the onslaught of many new and advanced means of communication.

"Personal letter writing has been heavily eroded by other forms of communication, but it still remains the most intimate and can be far more reflective than any other. A telephone call, although it provides spontaneity, does not give the same opportunity for considered thought." [David, 15]

It is important to distinguish letter writing from telegram services or any other form of means of conveying messages. The latter were means of passing on information which have been replaced by newer and more efficient modes of conveying messages. Letter writing for the subject of this paper includes the pouring out of one's thoughts, feelings and in many cases simply sharing information. At times, personal letter which rose from superficial issues to delve into national issues

effortlessly ushered the new political era or formed base for social reform. A letter generally is for use by another person. The tone may also be personal or professional. And when the chain of thoughts continued with the receiver replying after ruminating over the written matter, many a times great ideas were born. The papers were the fertile land on which the seeds of many new ideas were sown. Letter after letter, they grew, matured and culminated. The relaxed pace of the letters also ensured that enough thought process nurtured the ideas and the anticipation of receiving the replies also gave the sender and receiver enough time to ruminate. Many political ideologies took shape in the serenity of the expanse of white papers with handwritten matter. The beauty of communication via letters is that the replies is that they are not sudden outburst of emotions as the thoughts run faster than the pen and therefore using such a tool for writing brings a sort of stability in the thoughts on both the sides. The gestation period added the much needed substance to the idea which started as an embryo in the first letter. Business/official/commercial letters or pamphlets or means of mass communication fall outside the purview of this paper.

The joy of opening a letter and the way it was opened also reflects greatly on the state of mind of the person. The shivering of hands denoted the anxiety and the eagerness in some cases while in other cases, it reflected a maturity when a paper cutter glided through the sealed edges to 'unfold' a new world of thoughts. The haphazard and hurried opening of the letter signified the impatient mindset of the receiver while a more neatly opened letter showed the dignified demeanour of the person who opened it.

In many cases, these letters assumed utmost importance and gave birth to epistolary novels; real and fictional. The letters can be an exchange of ideas between a father and a daughter like in case of Pandit Nehru to his daughter Mrs. Indira Gandhi or an emotional outflow from a daughter to her mother as in case of the American poet, Sylvia Plath who wrote letters to her mother. They may also involve sharing of opinions on a particular event like the letters from Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel to Lord Mountbatten.

Then there are stalwarts who 'specialise' in writing different kinds of letters be it Dylan Thomas, who is considered to be a past master of begging letters.[David, 17]

Then there were others like Asaddulla Mirza Ghalib who was a master in writing letters which felt 'alive' and also bore testimony to what went on in the capital.

"The letters of Ghalib, describing what happened when the British took back Delhi, are of historic importance. They give an insight into happenings which none of the other documentary evidence can match. Even Munshi Jiwan Lal's Diary is not as authentic as Ghalib's letters. Ghalib was no enemy of the British. Ghalib was no enemny of the British. In fact he spent many years of his

life seeking pension from the East India Company. But he could not reconcile himself to the killing of scores of his relatives and friends who were all innocent. His pen pictures are unmatched in describing what Delhi suffered in 1858-59."[David, 17]

There was a time when the postman had a special place in our day to day life. The tinkle of his bicycle bell sounded excitement for a young man waiting for his appointment letter, sparkle in the eyes of a new bride who waited impatiently for her husband's letter, hope in the hearts of old parents who waited for a news of well-being of their son who shifted to the city in search of greener pastures or even an aggrieved resident who writes to the editor of a newspaper to bring about a change.

Ali waited till his last breath for the news of his daughter Miriam which comes, albeit after he perishes after an endless wait in the story 'The Letter' by Dhumketu.[Dhumketu]

2. Letter Writing as it culminates into Message Writing

Some might feel that Letter writing is a dying art, but it only giving way to a new form of conveying messages, ideas and thoughts; bulk printing in case of invites and chatting on cellphones where the reply is just a beep away.

Ironically, the limitation of using social networking sites for the purpose of communication is posted on these very sites only. This remains a subject matter of another paper. In an age of instant gratification, one message after the other popping on the screen provides instant answers to instant questions and a notification beep if sounds after a gap of ten seconds is a long wait.

3. Expression takes on new garb

With the advent of technology and especially the mobile phone, the letters which depended on the post office system to be 'mobile' gradually started losing ground.

However, to say that the days or letter writing are numbered would lead to skepticism. Many forms of letters are still in practice. However, letter writing is no longer an art rather a necessity or a mere courtesy; sending 'rakhis' to brothers around the festival of 'Raksha Bandhan' by post is generally accompanied by a hand written letter. In many parts of the country, wedding cards are still accompanied by handwritten cards for the close relations in order to make them feel special. In schools, this forms of communication is taught although the students may never put it to proper use. However, some lines which still reverberate in all letters include "hope you are sailing in the same boat" or "please convey my regards to…" which would bring a nostalgic smile on all faces. The tradition of post box number for matrimonial purpose and communication thereafter by way of letters will make many couples reflect on the letters that were exchanged along with the pictures of the prospective brides and grooms. Nevertheless, the number of personal letters as expressions of one's

emotions is diminishing. This generation, or rather all the generations seem to be hooked on to the messaging system in mobile phones. Chatting is one form of expression in such cases. However, there are two major differences; Chatting or instant messaging does not give time for rumination. Secondly, the emotions are not expressly expressed as use of emojis takes over where the person typing the message just wants to make it brief. A major limitation, and ironically the advantage of letter writing is the planning that goes behind it. A person takes his time to write down as he is not in a position to delete too many words to go back and forth to fix things. Also, he is careful not to misspell a word whereas in messaging, the pop up help menus or the short forms render the spelling ability of the person redundant. At the same time, he is cautious enough not to write something in an impulse which is not the case while writing messages in a cellphone. A common factor is the unchanging plethora of emotions which are overwhelming in both the cases. Here is an excerpt from a letter from Mrs. Indira Gandhi to her father Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru when she was a young girl.

"Now, after a meal of oeufs a la poussiere (dusty meal of eggs), which I do not recommend to anyone, I am sitting down to write. Peace reigns again in our barracks. As I sit by the dim lantern, the kitten Parvati curled up in a snowy ball at my feet, a soft cool breeze is blowing in with incredible caressing messages from the lightning and thunder and rain, and the beauty of the storm-tossed night outside- the night which my complexion was supposed to resemble."[Sharma, 353]

This young lady grew up to handle the reigns of the country and the rest is history.

"Her devotion to her father was to lead her later to move into Nehru's house in New Delhi, and care for him through the agonies of partition and the establishment of independent India's first government."[Surjit, 141-142]

Although it is a simple yet heart warming narrative of a girl to her father about her day to day affairs, yet the language slowly culminates into something more literary. Also, with the exchange of a few more letters, the dialogue moves from the concrete to the abstract leading to the churning of new ideas which is not the case in instant messaging.

Through letters, one not only kept in touch or conveyed emotions but also kept also kept alive the warm glow of love. Also, new techniques in letter writing were developed to make them more interesting or appealing. An example is when Sheraton Hotel in Chicago decided to promote a new cocktail lounge with a letter which was written in shorthand.[N.H. and S.K.Mager]

A crucial factor to be pointed here is a limitation of personalized letter writing as compared to mass media in print. The former is a personal exchange of ideas while the latter can be used to reach out to masses to elicit powerful responses. However, it is too simplistic to conclude that mass media and the dispersal of ideas are direct and uniform. [Daniel,Stephen,Fredrick]

4. **Initiatives to keep the art alive**

Some efforts consciously or unconsciously still retain the essence of this art; be it the activities in many academic institutions when students are required to write to soldiers as expressions of gratitude or writing as a class activity. Also, personal letters invariably accompany the 'Rakhis' and many such occasions. Lovers also contribute greatly to this form of expression by writing to their beloved or lovers, as the case may be when they use it as a medium of exchanging thoughts in a more authentic way. No matter how long we have come from the pen and paper medium for exchanging personal views and expressions, the charm of a letter and the anticipation that the envelope represents is still a unique experience. It is a challenge for the academia to retain and preserve this art in its true form not just to mark special occasions but to encourage and engage in consistent efforts to retain this art albeit with modifications to allure the new generation to find ways to engage in letter writing. Further scope of this paper is to find these new ways to keep the art of letter writing as a means of personal expression alive.

5. Conclusion

The germination of Ideas finds more conducive environment in the pages of letters, expressions become more vibrant and real, feelings become more lucid and the lapse of time between one letter and the other gives birth to new ideas.

Posterity cannot be deprived of this wonderful tradition and conscious efforts in the right direction are needed to continue this legacy.

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