

THE use of "Letters" for the exchange of messages was introduced perhaps from the day the Egyptians invented the hieroglyphics and the Babylonians invented the cuneiform alphabets. The material used for writing letters upon was the papyrus and stone tablet respectively by the said two ancient peoples. Another great civilisation of the East, which can truly boast of the use of paper as the medium of writing is China.

Secret lovers, I think were first users of letters. Their hearts, desiccated by the separating distance between them, reached out to one another through 'love-letters,' which were carried by trustworthy maids for short distances and by pigeons (precursor to air mails?) for large distances. Centuries ago, Kings and Emperors, too employed pigeons to exchange messages between States and Kingdoms exploiting their uncanny homing instinct and prodigious power to fly over long distances. For more than five millennia letters proved to be the most acceptable means of communication for the civilised world. In our country, Emperor Sher Shah introduced the epoch making postal service using horses for letter delivery. Prior to this, letter carrying and its delivery used to be done by foot messengers, called runners. In modern times the letter became the chief mode for all kinds of communications, personal, official, commercial etc. The entire world came under the letter exchange network provided both by national and international (IPU) postal system. But meanwhile, the emergence of telephony and radio communication in early nineteenth century began to have a curbing influence upon surface communication. Beginning with the good old telegram of our grandfather's time the pace of electric (both wired and wireless) communication and later on the electronic or the so-called 'e-communication' (like the telephone, fax, radiogram, teleprinter, and all sorts of e-mail etc) galloped at a dizzyingly fast rate, precipitating marginalisation of letters. Today, communication through letters is threatened to extinction. Instantly available global telephone connection (through the ISD) and the ubiquitous mobile phone in the hands of all and sundry have rendered the writing of letters redundant.

But can we really abandon our letters? Consider how difficult it was just two decades ago before the advent of communications satellites to get an intercontinental telephone connection using short wave radio. It was as unreli-

Are the Days of Letters Over?

SD KHAN

A letter can be read and re-read at will. Arrival of an anxiously awaited letter brings solace from heaven. Imagine the tide of happiness that is brought by a letter from the mother or the wife, to a soldier in the war front. A three-minute talk over phone does not compare with it.

able as short-lived. In the allotted three minutes' talk time often interrupted by static and fading, one could hardly hear the other end or make him heard by that end. So, whatever was to be said by a caller often remained unsaid. With the coming of satellite age and digital technology this circuit unreliability has been eliminated almost entirely. One can now talk with anyone in any corner of the globe free from any kind of circuit hiccups. But can this ultimate improvement in telecommunication do away with our letters? I think not. Letters are physical materials lending our statements the permanency of record. On the contrary verbal talks are immaterial and volatile. A letter can be read and re-read at will. Arrival of an anxiously awaited letter brings solace from heaven. Imagine the tide of happiness that is brought by a letter from the mother or the wife, to a soldier in the war front. A three-minute talk over phone does not compare with it. The letter by itself is a companion incarnate to the homesick soldier. He never loses it from his pocket. In the thickest of action it is in his pocket. In major human crisis like divided families on the two sides of warring nations, letters carried by the Red Cross/Crescent provide the only means of contact between near and dear ones. Classically for lovers, the blue covered 'love-letters' are treasures for all time. In contrast, talks on mobile phone evaporate with the utterance of goodbye. Besides, one cannot express all things nicely and systematically in telephonic conversation. Letters are the most appropriate medium of pouring out one's feelings. Letters can be works of art as well. There are famous letters by famous people in the world. Pundit Nehru's letters to his daughter and Samuel Johnson's letter to Disraeli are famous. Letters provide means to make friendship between the people of different nations. In our school days the hobby of 'pen-friendship' was very popular among students which is now lamentably lost.

In these days of "e-communication", I do not see any possibility of our good old letter dying out from this world for the simple reason that for permanency of record of any statement, agreement and transaction in our life it must be in the form of a written letter or document. And this may be done, in addition to manual writing, by any of the present day electronic means (Computers, Fax etc). But it yet remains essentially a "letter". There is no alternative to letters. The romance and the need of letters will therefore be always there! ■