

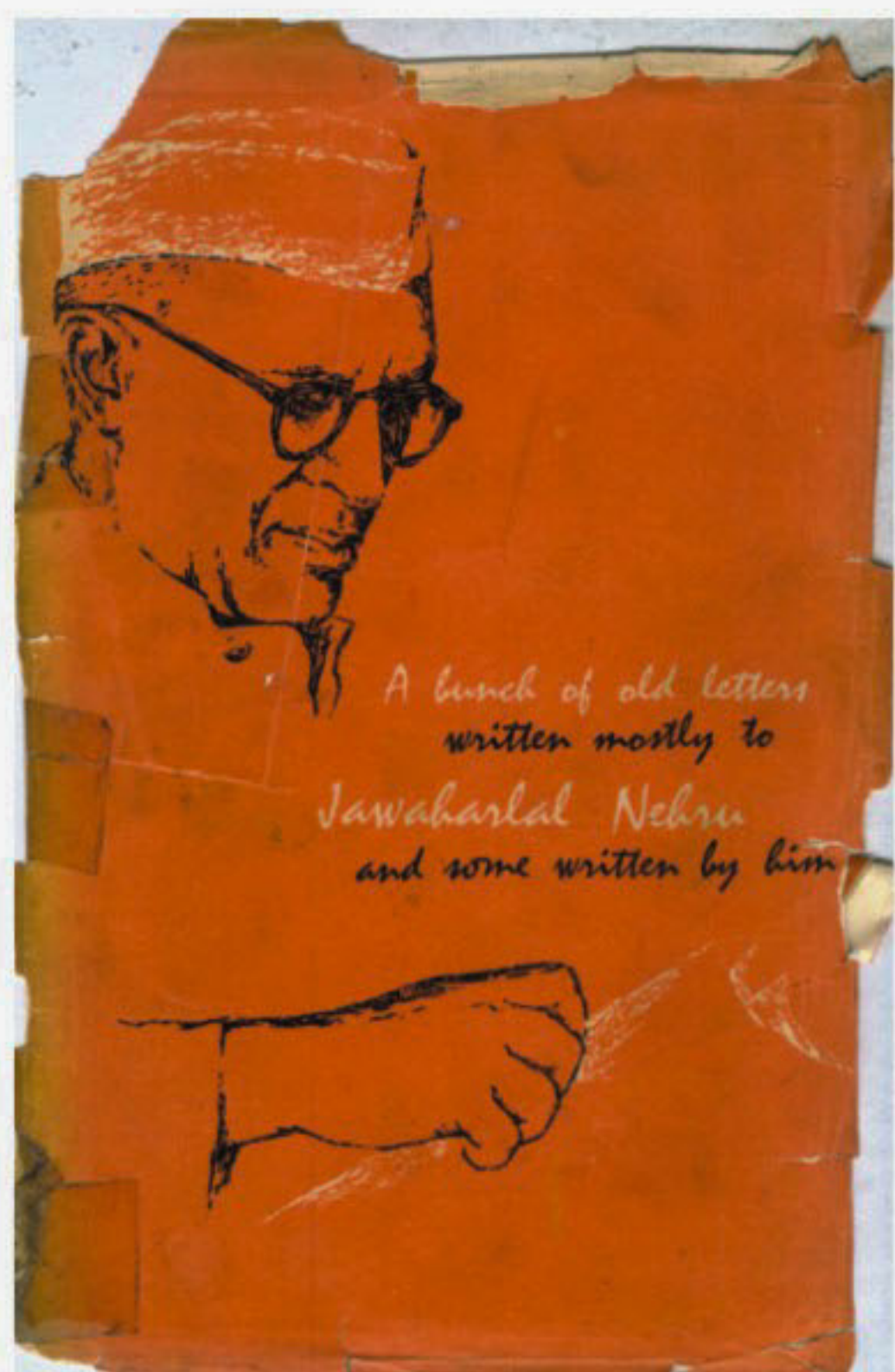
READING OLD BOOKS

'She has your strength of character ...'

Syed Badrul Ahsan rummages through a past trapped in epistles

THE age of epistolary conversations is over. There is something about technology, about post-modern developments, that often comes in the way of your understanding of life and the bigger meanings which punctuate it at regular intervals. When that is the perception, you try travelling back in time, the objective being a comprehension of the world as it was in the days when ideas took shape in letters, which again came in longhand. And when these letters involve men and women who have passed into history as its defining voices, the pleasure derived from a reading of them becomes all the greater. Deep poignance underlines such missives, or an exchange of them. And it does so through a recreation of the varied processes that once went into a shaping of historical perspectives, into a moulding of perceptions about the place of nations on a global platform.

Which brings us to this rich collection of letters. Published in 1958 by Asia Publishing House, New York, it has the rather arresting title of *A Bunch of Old Letters: Written mostly to Jawaharlal Nehru and some written by him*. Those who have studied Indian history will also have had occasion to know of Nehru's vast erudition and his eclectic reading even as he struggled, with Gandhi, Maulana Azad and others, for India's freedom. Through these let-



are too sophisticated and have too many privileges in our democracy. I should like to send you and Congress my very heartiest congratulations on the splendid victories that you have won and we shall all await with the most profound interest the decision of your Convention and the attitude you propose to take as regards the operation of the Indian Act.

A hint of intellectual disagreement comes through Edward Thompson's 1 November 1936 letter from Sudder Street, Calcutta:

Dear Nehru,
I am very glad to have these books.
But you did not put my name in them!
I asked you if you would care to have anything of mine. You said, No. A pity, perhaps for my Mesopotamian War novel, if nothing else, is quite readable.

I will say no more about Gandhi, except that, unless he can discover some new message --- Civil Disobedience having nearly succeeded but nevertheless having failed --- he runs the risk, from now on, of being merely a powerful Ganapati, one able to rouse the ganas but with no objective to which to direct them.

Thompson's ire has been roused and will not die down before some more missives are exchanged. But in Rabindranath Tagore it is the softly human which comes alive when he writes to Nehru from Santiniketan on 21 December 1936:

My dear Jawaharlal,



Sarojini Naidu

ters, Nehru comes across as the modern man he always was, a fact that was earlier revealed through his missives to his daughter Indira. Beyond and above the clear light that falls on the Nehru persona comes the scholarly exchange of ideas that other individuals have with the man destined to be free India's first prime minister. The letters, in brief, bring forth an era of political and academic personalities whose profound influence on the making of history remains beyond question.

Note the spontaneity with which Sarojini Naidu writes to Nehru on 13 June 1923:

Dear Jawahar,
Cheerio! We shall weather the storm bravely and fulfill the advice to let our work be a battle and our peace a victory. . . let us go on churning the ocean till we do evolve some supreme gift of Harmony --- but first let us tide over Bakr Id which, Inshallah, we shall do.

Unmistakable is Naidu's sense of optimism. She speaks of politics and yet manages to bring an element of the poetic into it. But note the way she ends the letter with an Islamic invocation, *Inshallah*, particularly when neither she nor Nehru happens to be a follower of the religion of Muslims.

That is Naidu. But, as the editors point out, her letters were difficult to decipher. That is probably a reason why there is not much of her in this work. And yet the intellectual dimensions of the compilation are a potent presence from



Nehru with Jinnah

beginning to end. On 3 March 1937, Sir Stafford Cripps writes to Nehru from London:

Your magnificent enthusiasm amongst the Indian people makes me jealous. I wish we could get such a movement going here, but perhaps we

Partition. The epistolary exchange between them only reinforces the image of Jinnah as a belligerent politician unwilling to be accommodative. Nehru comes across as one quite at a loss as to how to deal with the Muslim League leader. Here is what Nehru writes to Jinnah from Allahabad on 9 December 1939:

My dear Jinnah,

... Yesterday morning I read in the newspapers your statement fixing December 22nd as a day of deliverance and thanksgiving as a mark of relief that the Congress Governments have at last ceased to function. I have read this statement very carefully more than once and have given twenty four hours thought to the matter. It is not for me, in this letter, to enter into any controversy about facts or impressions or conclusions....

But what has oppressed me terribly since yesterday is the realization that our sense of values and objective in life as well as in politics differs so very greatly. I had hoped, after our conversations, that this was not so great, but now the gulf appears to be wider than ever.

Jinnah replies to the letter from Bombay on 13 December 1939:

I quite agree with you 'that there must be some common ground for discussion, some common objective aimed at, for that discussion to yield fruit.' That is the very reason why I made it clear in our conversation at Delhi in October last to Mr. Gandhi and yourself: First that so long as the



Amrita Sher Gil

Congress is not prepared to treat the Muslim League as the authoritative and representative organization of the Mussulmans of India it was not possible to carry on talks regarding the Hindu-Muslim settlement as that was the basis laid down by the working committee of the All India Muslim League and second that we cannot endorse the Congress demand for the declaration as laid down in the resolution of the Working Committee confirmed by the All India Congress Committee of the 10th October 1939, apart from the nebulous and impracticable character of it till we reach an agreement with regard to the minority problem.

Nehru responds, on 14 December 1939:

You have rightly pointed out on many occasions that the Congress does not represent everybody in India. Of course not. It does not represent those who disagree with it, whether they are Muslims or Hindus. In the ultimate analysis it represents its members and sympathizers. So also the Muslim League, as any other organization, represents its own members and sympathizers. But there is this vital difference that while the Congress by its constitution has its membership open to all who subscribe to its objective and methods, the Muslim League is only open to Muslims. Thus the Congress constitutionally has a national basis and it cannot give that up without putting an end to its existence.

And so the debate goes on. And it would turn into a raging fire over the next seven years, compelling the squabbling parties to eventually agree to the division of the country.

Nehru's contacts with men around the world remain. On 5 January 1940, he commiserates with Edward Thompson on the death of his younger brother. And then he moves on:

Yesterday's mail brought me two of your books, John Arnison and your Collected Poems. I am so glad you have sent these, especially the Poems. You are obviously the poet in spite of your wanderings in other fields.

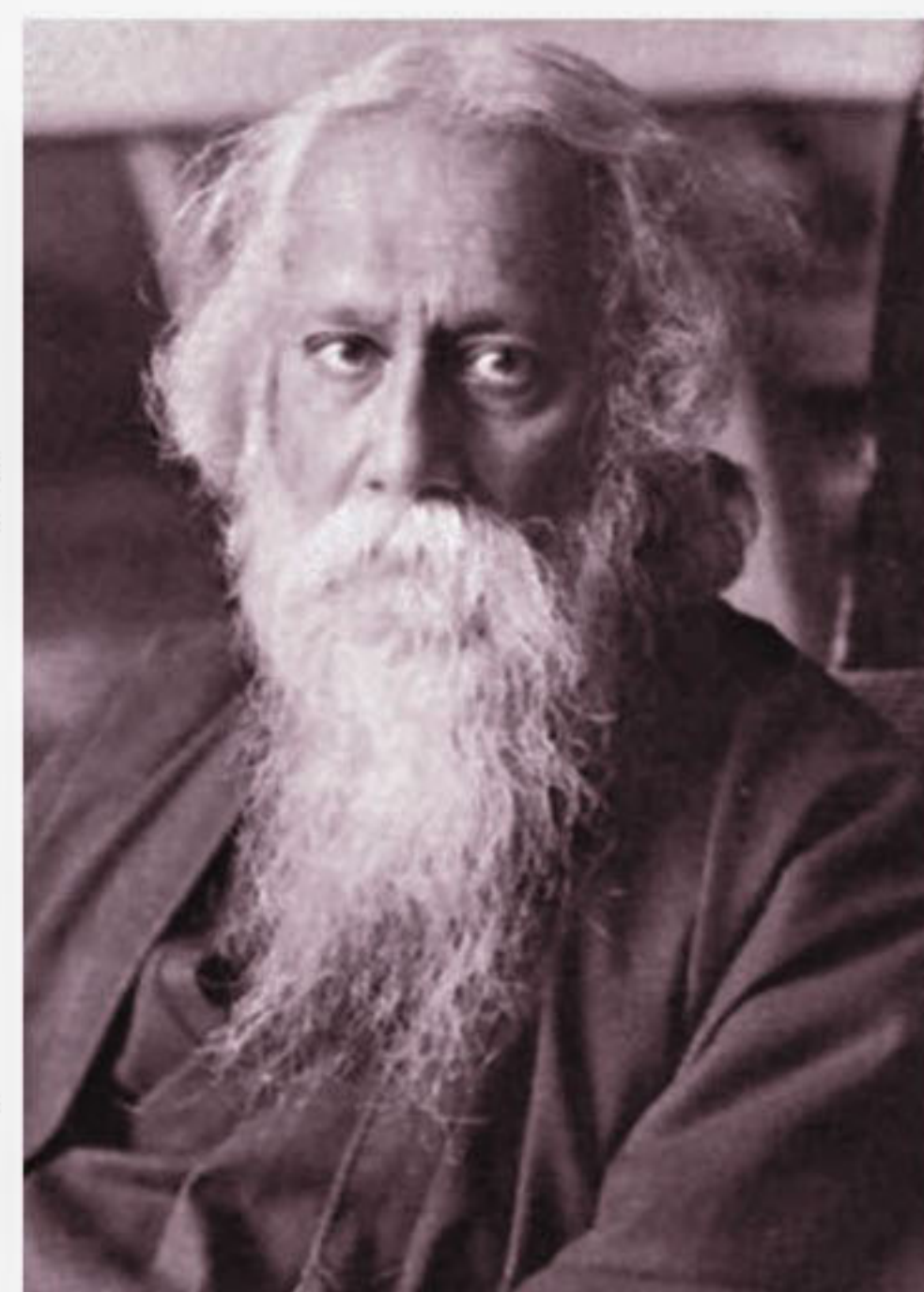
... You must have heard of Jinnah's 'Day of Deliverance'. He has made it impossible for any kind of a reasonable approach to him. But he has somewhat overshot his mark this time and there has been considerable resentment among Muslim circles.

Any reflection on Indian history will be pointless if Subhas Chandra Bose does not come into the picture. Relations between Bose and Gandhi, between Bose and Nehru, remained fraught, particularly in the years prior to the Bengali politician's disappearance in the mid-1940s. There was the revolutionary in Bose, with a good dose of the temperamental. Read what he writes to Nehru from Bihar on 28 March 1939:

My dear Jawahar,

I find that for some time past you have developed tremendous dislike for me. I say this because I find that you take up enthusiastically every possible point against me; what could be said in my favour you ignore. What my political opponents urge against me you concede, while you are almost blind to what could be said against them.

And then follows a long enumeration of griev-



Rabindranath Tagore

ances from Bose, somewhere in the middle of which he pointedly tells Nehru:

You have an idea that you are extremely logical and consistent in what you say or do. But other people are often puzzled and perplexed at the stand you take on different occasions.

And then comes this:

To sum up, I fail to understand what policy you have with regard to our internal politics. I remember to have read in one of your statements that in your view, Rajkot and Jaipur would overshadow every other political issue. I was astounded to read such a remark from such an eminent leader as yourself. How any other issue could eclipse the main issue of Swaraj passes my comprehension.

Nehru responds with an equally long letter in which he explains his position on the issues. Part of the beginning makes interesting reading:

It is not an easy matter to answer a letter which runs into 27 typed sheets and is full of references to numerous incidents as well as to various policies and programmes...

Your letter is essentially an indictment of my conduct and an investigation into my failings. It is, as you will well realise, a difficult and embarrassing task to have to reply to such an indictment. But so far as the failings are concerned, or many of them at any rate, I have little to say. I plead guilty to them, well realizing that I have the misfortune to possess them.

Nehru's exchange of missives with the scholarly Abul Kalam Azad deal, as they must, with the growing political concerns of the times. And yet there are the moments when aesthetics gets the better of politics in their conversation. Referring to Nehru's translation into English an



Subhas Chandra Bose

Urdu address of his, Azad writes in gratitude thus:

Only a person with equal command over both



Nehru with Indira

the languages could have attempted such a task. What particularly strikes me in your translation is the fact that no feature of the original has suf-

fered through it, and you have conveyed my Urdu literary style so successfully in English that I should not be surprised if it occurs to the reader that the original was English and not Urdu!

A few lines on, Azad writes:

Commenting on the Viceregal declaration I wrote as follows:

'Safhon par safhay parjanay kay baad bhi ba-mushkil isqadar batanay par musta-ed hota hai. ...'

... While maintaining the background of my metaphor, you have conveyed it as follows:

'After reading page after page the curtain is at last lifted with hesitation. We have a glimpse ...'

What I wanted to convey through 'ba-mushkil' your expanded phrase brings out the meaning with greater emphasis, and I must confess that your version is more apt than mine. This is just to mention one among many such embellishments.

Tagore and Charles Trevelyan both write to Nehru on his Autobiography. The Nobel laureate notes on 31 May 1936:

Dear Jawaharlal,

I have just finished reading your great book and I feel intensely impressed and proud of your achievement. Through all its details there runs a deep current of humanity which overpasses the tangles of facts and leads us to the person who is greater than his deeds and truer than his surroundings.

Trevelyan speaks to the Bard thus on 12 June 1936:



Maulana Abul Kalam Azad

Dear Mr. Nehru,

I have read your book. I should like to meet the man whom it reveals. You and I both began at Harrow where we were not taught to be champions of the underdog. But the oppression and the poverty of your people taught you and the war and the slums taught me. We think pretty much alike.

Few letters can match the wit and poise of the one Amrita Sher Gil writes to the future prime minister of India on 6 November 1937:

A little while ago somebody said to me, 'You know Jawaharlal Nehru is ill.' I hadn't known it. I never read the papers.

I have been thinking of you a great deal but somehow, perhaps for that very reason, I hadn't felt like writing.

Your letter came as a surprise, I hardly need add an extremely pleasant one.

Thanks for the book.

As a rule I dislike biographies and autobiographies. They ring false. Pomposity or exhibitionism. But I think I will like yours. You are able to discard your halo occasionally. You are capable of saying 'When I saw the sea for the first time' when others would say 'When the sea saw me for the first time'.

I should like to have known you better. I am always attracted to people who are integral enough to be inconsistent without discordancy and who don't trail viscous threads of regret behind them.

But nothing, absolutely nothing, can beat the words that flow from George Bernard Shaw to Nehru on 18 September 1948:

Dear Mr. Nehru,

I was greatly gratified to learn that you were acquainted with my political writings; and I need hardly add that I should be honoured by a visit from you, though I cannot pretend that it will be worth your while to spend an afternoon of your precious time making the journey to this remote village, where there is nothing left of Bernard Shaw but a doddering old skeleton who should have died years ago.

The playwright goes on:

I once spent a week in Bombay, another in Ceylon; and that is all I know at first hand about India. I was convinced that Ceylon is the cradle of the human race because everybody there looks an original. All other nations are obviously mass products.

And then comes this final piece of wickedness:

I am wondering whether the death of Jinner will prevent you from coming to England. If he has no competent successor you will have to govern the whole Peninsula.

Jinner is Jinnah, who has been dead a week.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is all. Sit back and reflect on the beauty of lost times, on the charm of old books.

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