

THE LETTER

Background

Bhaskara Rao opened a new pad. He wanted to write something afresh. He was not sure what he wanted to write. What does one mean by writing something afresh? Is it one's old story, an autobiography, the memoirs of the good times one had in life, just the diary of the past day, a letter or the fate of somebody? All such questions might not have come up in Bhaskara Rao's mind. At the age of Seventy, what would he write with a shaky hand? What effect would it have, even if he wrote something now? Could he wipe out history? Possibly not; would it change the course of things to come - the future? He was not sure. Could he just write something to show how things were different during his times? If Bhaskara Rao had written something during his younger days, he would possibly have had the opportunity to see its impact now. But what would be the impact of the exercise he was about to undertake? He might or might not live to see the impact. Who would read his writing? Perhaps just himself and.....? So, should he write at all? When he came up with such a question, the face of the only person who would read what he wrote appeared in his mind. Now, when he picked his pen up, there seemed to be an unknown force which prompted him to write and he naturally wrote.

8th Street

For Kumuda, who was standing by the doorstep of house number 16, on the 8th Street, there was no doubt about the profile that was approaching her house. In fact, Kumuda was expecting her. Lalita, who had promised to come at Nine in the morning, had still not come and Kumuda was eagerly waiting for her at the door. As soon as Lallu approached, she heaved a sigh and muttered "So ultimately you've come". She got into the house and collapsed on a chair in the sitting room. Lallu, closely followed her and started talking as they entered the house.

"Sorry yaar, I was late.." Lallu said.

"Come, come in. I was quite tired of waiting for you. But tell me, why are you so late? What were you doing all morning?" Kumuda asked.

Lallu blushed.

"Sorry yaar, you know, Aniruddha had come.... so..."

"Oh! I understand, I understand."

When Kumuda said this with a good sprinkling of sarcasm, Lallu sheepishly put her head down. She then pulled out a few printed cards from her bag.

"What's your dad's name ya, Kumu?"

"So, you mean to say that you're inviting only my parents and not me, eh?"

"Oh! No ya, it isn't that" Lallu continued to talk as she wrote down the name of Kumuda's father on one version of the card where the hosts were her own parents. She handed it over to Kumuda - "Give this to your dad ya" she said, as she wrote Kumuda's name on a card where the hosts were herself and Aniruddha. So it was parents inviting parents and children inviting children. After the formality of handing over the cards was over, both of them continued their conversation for a while. They talked about everything in general and nothing in particular. Then suddenly Lallu talked about Kumuda's wedding.

Kumuda suddenly became nervous and stopped the conversation short.

"Let's go to the terrace and talk about it... it's b'cos I've not told my people about Siddhartha yet... you're not supposed to create a scene 'ere okay?"

Both went up to the open terrace and stretched themselves. The breeze was really cold and they enjoyed the sunshine, as Kumuda narrated her story.

Kumuda's Narration

I am really surprised at the way I came about meeting Siddhartha. That day, he was giving a seminar. It was actually a public defence of his Thesis. I had gone to the Senate Hall, especially to ask some uncomfortable questions. But, the way he presented his work was so impressive, that I was just bowled over. I really did not know what to ask. That was the first time we were formally introduced to each other. We had a brief exchange of pleasantries. After that, we met several times - mostly when I had some problems with my own research. His suggestions were always simple and seem to flow out naturally. Once when I told him that I do not like people smoke, he just threw away the cigarette in his hand and has never smoked again! Possibly that was the day I fell in love with him (though I know it is stupid to fix a time point for such a gradual thing as love). But you would be surprised that we have still not talked about this. So, the wedding does not seem to be anywhere in the offing. This may be because love seems to be an expression of deed than word! I as myself: When he occupies the entire mind-space, is it really necessary to have a medium of

language for expression? But you know that all abstraction has to, ultimately get translated into language and into a social necessity of a wedding. And therefore, I should talk. Possibly I have not got the right context yet. It may possibly get expressed on the day either his parents or mine pick up the issue of marriage.

Though I speak about this with great conviction, I am still not sure. The reason for this is that I feel he is not fully involved; that the conversation never reaches the level of emotions it always remains at an intellectual plane. It is also why Siddhartha has never crossed his limits in all his interactions with me.

Does he also think the same way as I think? of being my partner? Or is it just plain friendship for him, without any overtones of a sexual relationship? I sometimes feel that all relationships, which may involve sex, can be pure only at the physical level. How many people would I have embraced in my thought! And where does Siddhartha stand in this long list of people who have embraced me in my mind. Would he at least be the last one? I wish it could be so.. But I am certain about one thing: I would like to be absolutely clear about the nature of my relation with Siddhartha. I will not think of marrying anybody else, before this is articulated well. The last I saw him was when he visited me in the hospital, when I was convalescing from a surgery for appendicitis. The very day, he left for Mangalore. From then on, I have been waiting for his communication. I will continue to wait. The feelings I have and he might be having is something that cannot be easily captured in words. It might take time before it is put in alphabet. The belief that he would write gives me some satisfaction. Everything would be clear when his letter arrives. Will it come today? Don't we feel that we are always waiting for some clarity or the other, throughout our life? I wonder whether this clarity would be attained at all. And even if it is attained, it might just be a momentary perception and not a clear solution for the quest!

The Entry of The Postman And His Exit

The postman walked along the road, opened the gate, entered the premises, dropped an envelope, shouted "post", opened the gate again, closed it behind him and proceeded to the next house.

The Soliloquy of Vishwas' Mother

Would my letter have reached him by now? It seems Vishwas had written him a letter around four days ago in which he seems to have written that I suffered from an acute stomachache. I am afraid that he would be worried. I started writing a letter just to tell him that everything is fine and he should not be anxious. But ultimately, where did the letter end up? Was there a necessity for me to

write such a letter, which was almost like a response to his letters written about forty five years ago? I could've just written about my stomachache. Anybody who gets to know this might think that I have gone senile. When he had written that letter four and a half decades ago, I was in my parents' house, carrying this very fellow in my womb. I had then just shifted to my parents' place and possibly did not realise the loneliness he must have been experiencing. And then, I could just not gather myself to respond to my husband's letter! No. I did not have the nerve to do so. Those were the times when you were even afraid to look at your husband in his face - forget about eye contact. If I had written a letter then, everybody would have teased me to death. Possibly father would have also given me a few words of advice. This day when I am writing a letter to him, possibly I am internalising the loneliness he had then and it could be mine too, now.

I am surprised at how I am transgressing time, by thinking about something that happened forty-five years ago, instead of the letter that was sent yesterday. This gives me a queer feeling. It is like a mouse scampering all around my body. Possibly I would have blushed. Thankfully, there is no mirror around. How would I have addressed him, had I written a letter then? My Darling? My Almighty? To my husband who is the dearest of all in this Universe? Or as the formal letters that used to come to him - Dear Mr.Bhaskara Rao? It is surprising that this problem did not occur yesterday. Have we become such close friends in these five decades? Why should I still feel shy even after I have become a grandmother. The letter, which I wrote yesterday, was possibly a bit on the extreme.... I just addressed him as Dear Bhaskara! Would he be wild with me for addressing him so? Or would he tease me - saying that I had was becoming more mischievous as I grew older? Why have I been oozing this new found warmth on him, while I was nervous, even to look straight in his eyes till just the other day? Possibly I would have felt that we needed each other much more than any other time in the past. Would he, have also had similar feelings? Incidentally, I ultimately forgot to write about my stomachache yesterday. It totally slipped off my mind.

The Complete Text of the Letter

"When I sit at the table to write something, you fill my thoughts. And, as I think of you, the feeling of loneliness hurts. I am here while you are far away there. How long do we live apart? I think we should soon be living together. Is that not a nice feeling?

That apart, can you not come over for a few days? When you are here, we could together think about the days to come. I will also feel relieved. I now realise how, and in what circumstances, loneliness could be killing. I suddenly feel that we have never had a heart to heart chat when you were around. Possibly the need for each other is felt all the more when we are far apart. I now feel the need to be near you more than any other time in the past.

And then, do not ignore your health in your enthusiasm to react to my request. Taking care of your health is much more important. If you cannot come, just drop in a letter and I may try to come there myself. Your letter itself would be a relief for me. I continue in your fond memory..."

Kumuda's Reaction

Kumuda felt nervous when she picked up the envelope dropped by the postman. Was Siddhartha a fast one by addressing the letter to "Kumuda Bai?" He always thought that I was a *Dodda Bai* (a loudmouth). Or was it his way of trying to avoid the embarrassment if a wrong person picked up the letter? His handwriting appeared quite shaky for his age. Kumuda thought that he was getting more and more mischievous of late. She muttered "Naughty Boy" as she pressed the letter on her chest. Lallu thought that this was not the right time for her to stay on. She left.

Kumuda opened the envelope, when nobody was around. She blushed. The contents of the letter seemed to be vague. But for her, everything seemed to be clear. So, now should she go to Siddhartha? How would she go all the way and what would she tell her people? Should she, on the contrary, just write letters to him and be done with it? Or go to her father and tell him the whole story - "Well this is how it is, there are things that have happened, now Siddhartha has called me over, and I want to go..." Or weave a new story to go to Mangalore.. But the damned place is far away. It is an overnight journey. If it was just Mysore, one could have made a day's trip and come back immediately.

She did not know that the excitement of 'love' would lead to such adventures. Suppose she told the facts to father and he put his foot down and asked her to stay back, then? It would be an axe on all her plans - *ab initio*. It might be better to go there, clarify everything with Siddhartha and then come back and inform father. He might then agree. Suppose she said "I am now going to Mangalore to fix my marriage with the man I love.." then no father would allow her to proceed. She could fib around - this time - go to consult the University library at Mangalore for her thesis.

As she was thinking about him, she was also preparing herself mentally for the journey, the next day.

Bhaskara Rao's Reaction

Bhaskara Rao felt happy when he picked up the envelope addressed to him. He had received a letter from his wife after a very long time. He did not know how to react to this event. He took some time

to recover from the joy of receiving a letter. What should one say to these kids who divide and share their parents like they share the property? What they were doing was probably right from their point of view. It was difficult in these days - especially when both of them lived by consuming tablets and tonics, for only one to take care of both. But he should look for an opportunity and tell Maheshchandra - that both of us would stay in one house - when we have lived together for a lifetime, would it not be difficult to live apart now? Bhaskara Rao opened the letter. He was pleasantly surprised at the courage she had gathered to address him the way she had. He was also surprised at the way she had inquired about his own health rather than talk about hers. There was no need for them to be formal at this age. He now really felt that she was a perfect match for him. It was as if he had fallen in love, afresh. He had a strong urge to give a tight hug to his wife. At the age of Seventy, there would be nobody else that would come into his embrace! He decided that he should somehow convince his son and go over to Bangalore as soon as possible.

As he was thinking about her, he was also preparing himself mentally, for the journey the next day.

A Newspaper Report

Hassan, April 1.

A State Transport bus going from Bangalore to Mangalore, met with an accident today. It has been reported that the bus fell into a huge valley 25 kilometers from Hassan. It has also been reported that several people have been injured in the accident. A woman was found dead. The police have arrested the driver of the bus. Investigation into the cause of the accident is on.

18th Street

Bhaskara Rao entered the house number 16 on the 18th Street, with a newfound enthusiasm. He joined his wife Kumuda Bai there. They have now decided to stay together. They might have also decided to stay four months each in each of their sons' homes. Bhaskara Rao has also made calculations to find out whether they could live off his pension, in a separate house. Even that possibility cannot be ruled out. They might have thought that it was better to stay together in solitude - rather than be lonely in a crowd.

And then, Some Notes

I am now ending this write up with these small pictures. Does the story end here? Did everybody live happily everafter? Answers to these questions are yet to be found. I realise it is difficult to end

such a writing. Where do you put a stop in a continuum of events? Or is it ever possible to understand the humankind in totality? In such a case, it is also difficult to show a specific end and judge events. Instead, it may be better to state the events and the questions. Repeating the questions may help us understand the events better. But, amidst all this dilemma and questions, one question assumes a gigantic form in my mind. The question is:

Ultimately what did Bhaskara Rao write that day?