

NELSON MANDELA WRITES TO ICCR SECRETARY

New Delhi; August 26, 1981

Following is the text of the letter addressed to the Secretary, Indian Council of Cultural Relations by Mr. Nelson Mandela, South African National leader who was awarded Jawaharlal Nehru Award for 1979 (the letter was smuggled out of Robbon Island Prison by the South African Congress):

Text Begins:

Robbon Island, 7400
Republic of South Africa

3rd August 1980

Dear Mrs. Bhalla,

I am writing to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to the Indian Council for Cultural Relations for honouring me with the 1979 'Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding'. Although I have been singled out for this award and I am mindful that I am the mere medium for an honour that rightly belongs to the people of our country.

Our people cannot but feel humble, at the same time proud that one of their number has been selected to join the distinguished men and women who have been similarly honoured in the past.

I recall these names because to my mind they symbolise not only the scope and nature of the award, but they in turn constitute a fitting tribute to the great man after whom it has been named - Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. The lives and varied contribution of each one of them reflect in some measure, the rich and many-sided life of Panditji: selfless humanitarian Mother Teresa, international statesman Josip Broz Tito, notable political leaders Julius Nyerere and Kenneth Kaunda, medical benefactor Jonas Salk and civil rights leader Martin Luther King.

Truly Jawaharlal Nehru was an outstanding man. A combination of many men into one: freedom fighter, politician, world statesman, prison graduate, master of the English language, lawyer and historian. As one of the pioneers of the non-aligned movement he has made a lasting contribution to world peace and the brotherhood of man.

In the upsurge of anti-colonial and freedom struggles that swept through Asia and Africa in the post-war period there would hardly be a liberation movement or national leader who was not influenced in one way or another by the thoughts, activities and example of Pandit Nehru and the All India Congress. If I may presume to look back on my own political education and upbringing I find that my own ideas were influenced by his experience.

While at university and engrossed in student politics I first became familiar with the name of this famous man. In the forties for the first time read one of his books, 'The Unity of India'. It made an indelible impression on my mind and ever since then I procured, read and treasured any one of his works that became available.

When reading his autobiography or 'Glimpses of World History's one is left with the overwhelming impact of the immense scope of his ideas and breadth of his vision. Even in prison he refused to succumb to a disproportionate concern with mundane matters or the material hardships of his environment. Instead he devoted himself to creative activity and produced writings which will remain a legacy to generations of freedom lovers.

'Walls are dangerous companions', he wrote, 'They may occasionally protect from outside evil and keep out an unwelcome intruder. But they also make you a prisoner and a slave, and you purchase your so-called purity and immunity at the cost of freedom. And the most terrible of walls are the walls that grow up in the mind which prevent you from discarding an evil tradition simply because it is old, and from accepting a new thought because it is novel'.

Like most young men in circumstances similar to ours, the politically inclined youth of my generation too were drawn together by feelings of an intense, but narrow form of nationalism. However, with experience, coupled with the unfurling of events at home and abroad we acquired new perspectives and, as the horizon broadened, we began to appreciate the inadequacy of some youthful ideas. Time was to teach us, as Panditji says, that;

'... Nationalism is good in its place, but is an unreliable friend and an unsafe historian. It blinds us to many happenings and sometimes ~~xx~~ distorts the truth, especially when it concerns us and our country....'

In a world in which breathtaking advances in technology and communication have shortened the space between the erstwhile prohibitively distant lands; where outdated beliefs and imaginary differences among the people were being rapidly eradicated, where exclusiveness was giving way to cooperation and interdependence, we too found ourselves obliged to shed our narrow outlook and adjust to fresh realities.

Like the All-India Congress, ~~one~~ of the premier national liberation movements of the colonial world, we too began to assess our situation in a global context. We quickly learned the admonition of a great political thinker and teacher that no people in one part of the world could really be free while their brothers in other parts were still under foreign rule.

Our people admired the solidarity the All-India Congress displayed with the people of Ethiopia whose country was being ravaged by Fascist Italy. We observed that undeterred by labels, the All-India Congress courageously expressed its sympathy with Republican Spain. We were inspired when we learnt of the Congress Medical Mission to China in 1938. We noted that while the imperialist powers were hoping and even actively conniving to thrust the barbaric forces of Nazism against the Soviet Union, Panditji publicly spurned a pressing invitation to visit Mussolini, and two years later he again refused an invitation to Nazi Germany. Instead he chose to go to Czechoslovakia, a country betrayed and dismembered at the infamous Munich deal.

In noting the internationalism of the All-India Congress and its leadership we recalled the profound explanation of Mahatma Gandhi when he said:

'There is no limit to extending our services to our neighbours across state made frontiers. God never made these frontiers.'

It would be a grave omission on our part if we failed to mention the close bonds that have existed between our people and the people of India, and to acknowledge the encouragement, the inspiration and the practical assistance we have received as a result of the international outlook of the All-India Congress.

The oldest existing political organisation in South Africa, the Natal Indian Congress, was founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1894. He became its first secretary and 21 years of his stay in South Africa we were to witness the birth of ideas and methods of struggle that have exerted an incalculable influence on the history of the peoples of India and South Africa. Indeed it was on South African soil that Mahatmajī founded and embraced the philosophy of Satyagraha.

After his return to India Mahatmajī's South African endeavours were to become the cause of the All-India Congress and the people of India as a whole. On the eve of India's independence Pandit Nehru said:

"Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny and now the time comes when we should redeem our pledge... At the stroke of the midnight hour when the world sleeps India will awaken to life and freedom... It is fitting that at this solemn moment we take a pledge of dedication to the service of India and her people, and to the still larger cause of humanity."

Our people did not have to wait long to witness how uppermost our cause was on Panditji's mind when he made this pledge. The determination with which his gifted sister Mrs Vijayalakshmi Pandit as free India's Ambassador to the United Nations, won universal solidarity with our plight, made her the beloved spokesman of the voiceless masses not only of our country and Namibia but of people like ours throughout the world. We were gratified to see that the pronouncements and efforts of the Congress during the independence struggle were now being actively pursued as the policy of the Government of India.

At the Asian People's Conference in Bombay in 1947 at Bandung in 1955, at the Commonwealth deliberations, in the non-aligned movement, everywhere and at all times, Panditji and free India espoused our cause consistently.

Today we are deeply inspired to witness his equally illustrious daughter Mrs Indira Gandhi, continue along the same path with undiminished vitality and determination. Her activities, her interest, her pronouncements, remain for us a constant source of hope and encouragement.

India's championing of our cause assumes all the more significance when we consider that ours is but one of the 153 countries which constitute the family of nations and our over 21 million people a mere fraction of the world's population. Moreover our hardships, though great become small in the context of a turbulent world enveloped by conflict, wars, famine, malnutrition, disease, poverty, illiteracy and hatred.

However it is precisely India's exemplary role in world affairs that also serves to remind us that our problems, acute as they are, are part of humanity's problems and no part of the world can dare consider itself free of them unless and until they lay the last vestige of man-made suffering is eradicated from every corner of the world.

This knowledge of shared suffering, though formidable in dimension, at the same time keeps alive in us our oneness with mankind and our own global responsibilities that accrue therefrom. It also helps to strengthen our faith and belief in our future. To once more invoke the words of Panditji:

'In a world which is full of conflict and hatred and violence, it becomes more necessary than at any other time to have faith in human destiny. If the future we work for is full of hope for humanity, then the ills of the present do not matter much and we have justification for working for that future.'

In this knowledge we forge ahead firm in our beliefs, strengthened by the devotion and solidarity of our friends; above all by an undying faith in our own resources and determination and in the invincibility of our cause. We join with you, the people of India, and with people all over the world in our striving towards a new tomorrow, tomorrow making a reality for all mankind the sort of universe that the great Rabindranath Tagore dreamed of in 'Gitanjali' :

"Where the mind is without fear and the head
is held high,
where knowledge is free;
where the world has not been broken into
fragments by narrow domestic walls;
where words came out from the depths of truth;
where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
where the clear stream of reason has not lost
its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
where the mind is led forward by these into
ever widening thought and action
into that haven of Freedom, My Father, let my
country awake."

Yours sincerely,
Sd/-
(Nelson Mandela)

Mrs. Manorama Bhalla
Secretary
Indian Council for Cultural Relations
Indraprasta Estate, New Delhi
Republic of India

P.S. As will be seen from the above date, letter was given to the Officer Commanding Robben Island on the 3rd August 1980 for despatch to you by airmail. I added that the matter should be treated urgently. Since then I have repeatedly enquired from the Department of Prisons as to whether the letter had been forwarded to you. Only during the last week in December was I told that I 'could thank the Indian Council for Cultural Relations but not in the words used in the letter'. For this reason I decided to use my own channels of reaching you.

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