

## A tale of eight letters

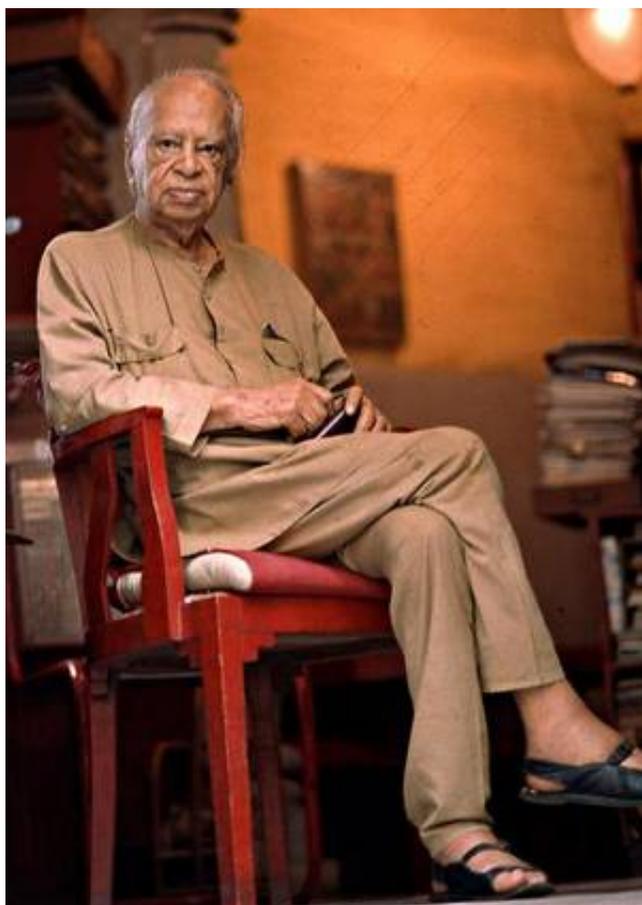


March 02, 2018 00:00 IST

Updated: March 02, 2018 05:25 IST

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### **Inscribed Heritage, edited by Dhanwanti Nayak and Sundar Sarukkai, documents interesting correspondence of Vijayanath Shenoy. Here's one**

In the Foreword to the book, 'Inscribed Heritage: Select correspondence of Vijayanath Shenoy' (Ruvani, Abhinava Imprint / 2015), editors Dhanwanti Nayak and Sundar Sarukkai write: "When we read the letters of Vijayanath Shenoy, we marvelled at the rich content, tone and the evocative space within them... His

letters document his passion for the arts and built-heritage but they also reflect the stellar qualities of the man: his spirit and willingness to help others, his eye for detail and flawless execution, his formidable knowledge base and great generosity in sharing his ideas with others. As his letters reveal, Shenoy is truly a man of many layers – a rarity even in his time, an anomaly in our own.”

This tale of eight letters involves Shenoy, the legendary heritage conservationist, interacting three eminent men of letters - Mulk Raj Anand (1905 –2004), Purushottama Lal (1929 –2010) and Adil Jehangir Jussawalla (born 1940). Interestingly, the tale also has an inanimate object (let’s call it DD, for the time being) playing a pivotal role in the drama.

In focus is an ailing poet Nissim Ezekiel (1924 –2004), who has lost his memory, cannot recognise anyone, and is lying helplessly in a clinic. The exchange of letters takes place within a short span of 31 days: between September 15 and October 15, 1999.

### **Letter no. 1 dated Sept. 15, 1999 | Shenoy to Anand**

Shenoy, the indefatigable letter-writer, fires the first salvo, as it were. “Respected Dr. Mulk Raj Anandji,” he writes. “Just two days ago I read in a news journal about the serious ill-health and hospitalisation of the poet Sri Nissim Ezekiel. The report indicates that he has long been in a Mumbai hospital without being cared for by his earlier associates. I do not know the financial position of Sri Ezekiel...A poet of the standing and calibre of Sri Ezekiel should not undergo the suffering that he now does.”

The thrust of his lengthy letter is that Anand should take the lead; issue an appeal in Mumbai-based periodicals, and raise contributions towards the hospital expenses of Ezekiel. Going further, he wants Anand to take the initiative of forming a committee to be eventually formalised into a charitable trust “to collect donations/contributions not only from artists/es and writers but from all other sources as well – not merely for the treatment expenses of Sri Ezekiel but for that of other writers/poets of Mumbai (or of India) who cannot afford such expenses.”

Urging the celebrated novelist ‘to champion this cause to save our writers from humiliation at the fag end of their lives,’ he even proposes that Anand should become the chairman of the committee and bring in ‘possibly Sri Adil Jussawalla as the secretary’.

Shenoy then assumes personal responsibility ‘as one who has put forward this suggestion’ and offers a ‘humble’ contribution of Rs.1000 ‘which I am remitting to you by a Demand Draft (sent enclosed)’. In the event of Anand’s inability to take on the responsibility of forming a committee, Shenoy says: ‘you may please encash the enclosed bank draft for Rs.1000 and send this amount through Sri Adil Jussawalla to the caretakers of Sri Nissim Ezekiel. I care for the life of this important poet of my country.’

Shenoy ends with a plea: “So, please discuss with Sri Adil Jussawalla, who I think, still lives across the road where you live in Cuffe Parade...I believe that both of you can institutionalise the collective wish of the intelligentsia of our country.”

**Letter no. 2 dated Sept. 15, 1999 | Shenoy to Jussawalla**

Shenoy forwards a copy of his letter to Anand, to Adil Jussawalla writing in detail and urging him to join the efforts.

“Please treat my letter written to Dr. Anand as also addressed to you. Since he is a senior person in the literary world of our country, I have chosen to write to him...I am certain that you two-the noted writers of Cuffe Parade-will do something positive in the matter.”

**Letter no. 3 dated Sept.20, 1999 | Anand to Shenoy**

Anand responds warmly to Shenoy’s letter, expressing how moved he is ‘by your concern for Nissim Ezekiel.’ He adds that through Jussawalla he had learnt that Ezekiel had lost his memory and could not recognise anyone, but is in a rest-house near Dadar; and that his own efforts to meet Ezekiel had not borne fruit but he would still try ‘through a Jewish lady I know to see if I can get to see him.’

“I will hold the cheque and give it to Jussawalla in cash, hoping he can convey the money to Ezekiel or to those who are looking after him...I will write to you in case I get any more news about Ezekiel. Meanwhile I appreciate your concern.”

Concluding the letter, he writes rather sharply, “the Committee you suggest may not be possible because of the cynical way in which Ezekiel’s colleagues and friends behave.”

**Letter no. 4 dated Sept.27, 1999 | Shenoy to P Lal**

It is apparent that Shenoy is disappointed but not dispirited. He now directs his attention to P Lal, Director, Writers Workshop, Calcutta, writing a lengthy letter once again explaining the matter about Ezekiel’s illness; his suggestion to Anand to form a suitable committee; and Anand’s response to it. He then urges that “a writer-publisher-organiser of your eminence and calibre alone can think of expanding the functional base of your Writers Workshop to embrace matters relating to the welfare of the creative writers in financial distress. Should you decide on taking up this cause, and I beg you that you must kindly take it up, I shall remit to you my humble contribution soon on hearing from you.”

**Letter no. 5 dated Oct. 07, 1999 | Lal to Shenoy**

Lal’s beautifully handwritten response is cordial. “Dear Shri Shenoy,” he writes. “If there were more people in the world as caring and compassionate as you, what a wonderful place it would be! I would love to be able to organise the kind of trust-fund you have suggested in order to help Nissim and others in similar distressing conditions.

The enclosed leaflet will give you an idea of the constraints I have to work in.”

**Letter no. 6 dated October 07, 1999 | Anand to Shenoy**

Anand’s short letter to Shenoy explains about his efforts to see Ezekiel. “I was told by a dear friend, Carmel Berkson, that Nissim is in no condition to be seen. He can’t recognise anyone, and is just lying helpless in the clinic. So, as she is in touch with the person who is looking after Nissim, I am going to give

her the money, by cashing the cheque so that she can transmit the money to the person who is looking after Nissim.” Once again, his concluding lines are sharp and revealing. “I am moved by your concern and I regret that none of his immediate coterie has shown sympathetic interest in their former leader.”

#### **Letter no. 7 dated October 10, 1999 | Shenoy to Jussawalla**

Shenoy’s letter to Jussawalla reminds him of his earlier letter, and updates him about the later developments which includes Anand’s refusal to take up the initiative to form the committee. “Could you please take up this cause?” Shenoy beseeches Jussawalla, before making another offer. “Let me assure you that if you decide on taking the initiative in forming a Trust ... I shall remit to your Trust a sum of Rs.1000 every month initially for 12 months. Will you kindly accept this small offer and consider forming a Trust?”

Then in a mildly angry tone, Shenoy lands a punch. “You must please tell me if or not you plan to constitute a Writers Aid Trust. If you do not plan to do one, I feel compelled to divert my attention to Calcutta where, I think, I can have a purposeful dialogue with Sri P Lal ....”

#### **Letter no. 8 dated October 15, 1999| Jussawalla to Shenoy**

Jussawalla’s letter to Shenoy is a short, sharp retort. “Your concern for Nissim is indeed commendable “but I can assure you that neither he nor his family needs financial assistance. He is being looked after in a nursing home in Bandra and his son Elkana is taking care of the expenses.”

Mincing no words, he adds: “I will ask Mulk to return to you your cheque of Rs. 1000 which you so kindly sent him as your contribution towards Nissim’s welfare. I have no idea what he means by ‘the cynicism of Nissim’s friends’. I suggest you write and ask him.”

He forthrightly refuses to start the Trust or be its secretary. “Since you find your friends in Calcutta more responsive to your offer, please try them. I wish you the best of luck.” In conclusion, Jussawalla tells Shenoy that “there’s been a great deal of misinformation about Nissim. If you’d been in Mumbai you’d have visited him and found out the truth for yourself.”

#### **POST SCRIPT**

That brings us to the end of the story. The letters, in some ways, reveal layers of human spirit as well as fragility. Four out of five main protagonists have since passed away. Ezekiel was the first one to go - on January 9, 2004. Anand followed him several months later - on September 28, 2004. P Lal breathed his last on November 3, 2010.

A man of many talents, moods and temper, Shenoy continued to bond with a wide variety of artists, musicians, authors, and architects throughout his life. The Udupi-based conservationist who once proudly proclaimed himself to be ‘the lengthiest letter-writer in the country’ departed last year - on Mar 9, 2017, aged 83.

How the DD met its end is unclear; presumably, it remained uncashed, much to the disappointment of its

issuer, and got tucked into one of his many thick but meticulously maintained files.

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