

A Letter to India: in Manto's Spirit

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Uncle Sam:

At the height of the cold war when America was about to sign a deal by which in return for military assistance Pakistan would commit itself to combating communism in South East Asia and the Middle East, the great Urdu short-story writer, Saadat Hasan Manto, who lived in Lahore, wrote a series of facetious letters to 'Uncle Sam'. In one of these letters written on February 21, 1954, Manto wrote: 'Regardless of the storm India is kicking up, you must sign a military agreement with Pakistan since you are seriously concerned about the stability of the world's largest Islamic state. And why not. Our mullah is the best counter to Russian communism. Once military aid starts flowing, these mullahs are the first people you should arm. They would need American-made rosaries and prayer-mats....Cutthroat razors and scissors should be at the top of the list, and also American hair colouring formulas. That will keep these chaps happily in toe. I think the only purpose of military aid is to arm these mullahs. I am your Pakistani nephew and can see through all your moves. Anyone can now become too clever by half, thanks to your style of politics'. 'Once these mullahs are armed with American weapons', Manto predicted, 'the Soviet Union with its communist propaganda will have to close shop in this country'. He could visualize the situation clearly: 'Mullahs, their hair trimmed with American scissors, wearing pajamas stitched with American machines in conformity with the

Sharia...and possessing American made prayer mats too. Everyone would then quickly fall into line and read only your name on their rosaries'.¹

In a previous letter, the nephew had asked his respected uncle for a tiny atom bomb so that he could emulate America's 'good work' in Hiroshima by hurling it on the mullahs and having the pleasure of seeing them go up in smoke. Since such a gift might raise suspicions in India, Manto took care to suggest that America should sign a military pact with New Delhi as well. They could then dump all the discarded arms and ammunition from World War II on the two countries. That would keep the American defense industries in productive business. Like Jawaharlal Nehru, he too was a Kashmiri. But thought Nehru should be sent the proverbial Kashmiri gun which would go off by itself in the sun while he, being a Kashmiri Muslim, deserved an atom bomb.²

When despite assurances about no first use against India, the gift failed to arrive, the disappointed nephew noted that his American uncle was unlike uncles in Pakistan who loved their nephews more than their own fathers. But that was not the only difference between America and Pakistan where exciting things happened all the time. Ministers were changed on a daily basis in Pakistan. Someone claimed to be a new prophet and his follower became foreign minister; disturbances against such strange happenings came to nothing. Even enquiry commissions set up to determine the cause of the troubles were directed by higher authorities.

¹Saadat Hasan Manto, 'Chacha Sam ke Nam Chutha Khat' (fourth letter to Uncle Sam) *Manto Rama*, Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 1990, pp.393-4. All nine letters written by Manto in this vein have now been translated; see Khalid Hasan, *Letters to Uncle Sam*, Lahore; Alhamra, 2000.

²Manto, *Manto Rama*, 'Chacha Sam ke Nam Teesra Khat'(third letter to Uncle Sam), pp.386-7.

Nothing remotely as interesting as all this ever occurred in America. As for military aid to Pakistan, he hoped Washington would not change its mind in view of Jawaharlal Nehru's criticisms in an effort to win India over to the anti-communist camp. By courting both India and Pakistan, America no doubt wanted to keep the lamp of freedom and democracy burning in the two countries. It could do so, not by blowing on it but by pouring lots of oil over it so that there was never any lack of that all too scarce commodity in the subcontinent. America wanted Pakistan to stay independent only because it loved the Khyber pass from where the subcontinent had been repeatedly invaded for centuries. The Khyber pass was very beautiful but then what else did Pakistan have? He had also heard that the United States had made a hydrogen bomb so there could be lasting peace in the world. Manto had complete faith in his uncle since he had eaten American wheat. Yet he wondered 'how many countries will need to be removed from the face of the earth' for 'this lasting peace to be established'. His niece had asked him to draw a map of the world for her. He had told her that he would draw the map after consulting with his uncle to 'find out the names of the countries that were going to survive'.³

Survival was a real issue for a man who was slowly committing suicide by drinking the dreadful local liquor sold in Pakistan - the only kind he could afford. Hard up for funds, he was unable to pay his house rent nor buy postage stamps for some of the letters he had so diligently written. When despite repeated requests for an atom bomb, good quality whisky, American pinups if not Elizabeth Taylor herself or, at the very least, a healthy stipend, his American uncle failed to respond, Manto did not lose heart. In his ninth and final letter to Uncle Sam, Manto

³Manto, 'Chacha Sam ke Nam Panchwan Khat' (fifth letter to Uncle Sam), *Manto Rama*, pp.401-405.

promised never again to ask for American whisky. He was content to continue drinking the poisoned local brew which was available despite the government's prohibition. This was ostensibly in response to the hue and cry raised by the mullahs. In fact, many mullahs had a weakness for alcohol. That was insurance enough that alcohol, however deadly the indigenous variety, would continue to sell in Pakistan. Anyone could obtain a permit if he could pay a doctor to verify that he would die if deprived of alcohol. Putting the survival of the country before his own, which he realised was coming to an untimely end, Manto maintained that so long as American military assistance continued to flow to Pakistan, he would be happy and so too would his God.

Mant and Nehr:

In August 1954, Manto wrote yet another facetious letter, this time to the Indian prime minister which he turned into the preface of a book of short stories called *Untitled*. He introduced himself to Nehru as a fellow Kashmiri even though he never had had the privilege of seeing the whole of Kashmir. There were other differences between the Indian prime minister and Pakistan's leading Urdu short-story writer. Nehru's family name implied that they had originated in a place near a *nehr* or river. By contrast, Manto's name came from the Kashmiri word *mant* which means a stone weighing one and a half seer - or roughly three pounds. He admired the Indian prime minister and, given their common ancestry, took pride in his style of politics which involved saying something one day and contradicting it the next. 'No one can beat us Kashmiris in wrestling', Manto opined, 'and who could get the better of us in poetry'. Nehru's writing and oratorical skills showed that he was a true Kashmiri. Yet the only time Manto heard Nehru on the radio, he had been taken aback when the prime minister switched from English to

Urdu. It seemed as if a Mahasabhte had drafted the script; Nehru was retching as he spoke and, now Manto had learnt, Urdu was being done away with in India altogether! But amazingly enough, publishers in India were continuing to publish Manto's Urdu short stories illegally. How could Nehru let such unethical things happen under his rule?

As far as Manto was concerned, India could keep Kashmir if it solved the problem of rampant poverty there. However, he doubted very much whether Nehru had any time for such things. He was too busy helping useless men like Bakshi Ghulam Muhammad to lord it over the hapless valley and its downtrodden people. And Manto knew only too well that Nehru was so emotionally attached to Kashmir that he was thoroughly preoccupied with fanning Indo-Pakistan tensions. But what had come to him as a complete surprise, because it was so uncharacteristic of Kashmiris, was that Nehru was thinking of closing down Pakistan's share of river water. This was plainly unfair. India's control over Kashmir did not entitle it to stop the flow of the river water to Pakistan. Manto often yearned for the fruits of Kashmir, especially its delicious pears. But he was happy to let a scoundrel like Bakshi keep them all. Water was another matter. If he had weighed a few hundred tons, he would throw himself into the river, forcing Nehru to spend considerable time consulting with his chief engineers to find a way of getting him out. Given the discrepancy in their relative power, how could Manto willingly drown himself into the Nehruvian river. The best course for Nehru to take was one of sweet reasonableness since both of them were chips of the same regional brick.⁴

As early as the fifties, Manto in his inimitable way was able to convey to both Uncle Sam

⁴Saadat Hasan Manto, preface to *Untitled in Baqiyaat*, Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 1998, pp.411-414.

and Pandit Nehru what Pakistan's many uniformed masters and mostly disgraced elected leaders have tried in vain for more than five decades to get across. Fully aware of the importance of his communication skills in a country where the people have no real voice, he never ceased keeping an eye on Pakistan even after his tragic death in January 1956 at the age of forty-three. Gifted with a profound imagination in life, Manto after death spent much of his time refining the art of putting the supernatural to good use. In the following letter, mysteriously communicated, he offers a spirited assessment of the most recent standoff between India and Pakistan, peppered with rare insights that have always been his hallmark.

Mant and Atal:

Addressed to the Indian prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, it reads: 'Dear Uncle Vajpayee, while I would have been much older than you had I lived, it is best that I call you 'uncle' because that is how everyone thinks of you in the subcontinent. You are an elderly statesman, a reputed poet and a paragon of moderation, though I am sorry to see that of late you have been sidelined by your top party hawk, Lal Krishna Advani. Maybe that is why you are beginning to sound more and more like an American eagle and less and less like your good old former self. In any case, dear uncle, I am sending you this missive from on high - with no return address for you to bother sending a response - because the situation in the subcontinent has slipped out of control and we up here are not so sure whether anyone in your great secular democratic country knows who is running the show - you, Advani or the Sangh Parivar. In Pakistan, there is always the controlling hand of Almighty Allah, the would-be mighty Army and, since September 11, 2001, the not-nearly-so-mighty America, which is just as well because Uncle Sam let me be poisoned to death through sheer heartlessness.'

But dear uncle, do you have a heart or did you lose it in the Pokhran blast? Or was it the Bombay blast? What I wanted to say is that there have been far too many blasts in the subcontinent of late, and a lot of blustering too. What possessed you to conduct a nuclear explosion in 1998? It only strengthened your old foes in Pakistan who have now become too big for their boots. They will very soon have to cut off their feet and stand on stilts instead, though I am not sure what will cost poor Pakistan more, new boots or stilts. I know you would prefer for it to have no legs to stand on at all. But that may cost your dearly because then those *jihadis* you hate and fear so much will spread like locusts into India and there may not be anyone left to blame in Pakistan.

I have heard all the long mantras about your efforts to improve relations with Pakistan. It was cavalier of you to go on a bus all the way to Lahore, my home town, and a very hospitable place too. Lahoris love Indian visitors you know; it gives them a real sense of satisfaction to hear first hand just how immense a loss the city has been for Indians, especially Punjabi Hindus. But your coming to Lahore was special, even though the Jamat-I-Islami goons tried to spoil your show. You so kindly visited the Minar-I-Pakistan, said you were reconciled to partition and wished Pakistan well and even shook hands with the military top brass who were none too happy to see you there. All very creditable. But why are you shying away from discussing Kashmir which, its an open secret everywhere except in your country, is the source of all the problems between India and Pakistan. The Kashmir issue, and then American military assistance and all the strings that came attached with it, gave Pakistan's army the space it needed to dig its heels deeply into the country's fragile body politic. Now the heels move the country. Small wonder that Pakistan has barely moved in over fifty years, except of course in a downward direction. By

forcing the Pakistan army to expose its heels on Kashmir, you might actually give a much needed breathing space to the country's frustrated democrats. I am telling you all this because I know that being the prime minister of the world's largest democracy, you really care about democracy in Pakistan. Hasn't anyone told you that there can be no democracy in Pakistan until you neutralize its army on the Kashmir issue? And the only way to do that is to open the Kashmir issue to full fledged public discussion, both in Pakistan and also in India where such debates are supposed to take place because it is not only great but also democratic.

Instead you are letting the Pakistani army keep its Kashmir cards close to its chest. Don't you remember what happened when the Indian National Congress let Quaid-I-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah get away with that tactic? Your government will need to do your homework before you can outwit the Pakistan army on Kashmir and help pave the way for democracy there. Take Kargil for instance. You and your government have been harping on Pakistani duplicity and pointing your fingers at General Pervez Musharraf. But it is well known in Pakistan that the plan to infiltrate was no brainchild of Musharraf's. It had been there since at least the mid-1980s. Even the symbol of Pakistani democracy-gone-wrong, Benazir Bhutto, has publicly said that the plan was placed before her twice but she refused to give her consent. All that Musharraf did was to exploit the opening you provided by conducting the nuclear tests. Securing Nawaz Sharif's approval was easy. As Musharraf briefed him, Sharif nodded his head off and was dreaming about ways to make a killing on all the deals he could strike with India when the general saluted him and walked away. It was just your luck that Pakistan had a prime minister like Sharif. He was so delighted at becoming the leader of a nuclear country that his attention span dropped from fifteen to five minutes. Is that why the two of you got on so famously?

Dear uncle, I don't want to be disrespectful, but your intelligence agencies did botch things up. If Kargil brought Pakistan disgrace, India's military machine was caught napping along a line of control where nibbling of territory by both sides is a routine affair. That gave those ranting and raving mullahs - all *jihadis* by vocation - their moment in the sun. You did well to whip up hysteria in India and in the world against Pakistan. Isolating Pakistan internationally serves you well domestically. But it does not win you extra points in the political battle for Kashmir. And it certainly does not help you achieve the goal that is so dear to your heart - a democratic and peace loving Pakistan. As I told Panditji several years ago, winning the hearts of Kashmiris requires tackling widespread poverty and creating conditions for the emergence of a popular leadership that is not alienated and hostile to your wonderful country. Everyone's uncle, these are hard truths, but truths nonetheless. I think you've become too complacent, much as American eagles are prone to become, with the manufacturing of consent by your very free and very fair press on your government's tough stance on Kashmir and Pakistan. Could it be that democracy dulls the mind?

Pakistani minds are far too restive to become dull and its army thrives on tensions with India. I know you are very gracious. But what was the point of giving General Pervez Musharraf a royal welcome at Agra and that too when he was under fire in Pakistan for assuming the office of president unconstitutionally? India was the first country to recognize the commando's self-elevation as legitimate. So many Pakistanis have been banging their heads at your consulates for years, trying to get visas to see the Taj Mahal in Agra just once in their life. Do you know what a risk a Pakistani takes in applying for an India visa? They are interrogated by members of the various intelligent spying institutions that flourish in Pakistan without let or hindrance, files are

opened against them and they are forever doomed. To add insult to injury, they are denied visas by your consulate while their dictator is given a suite at the Amar Singh palace so that he can get a million dollar view of that exquisite monument to love from his bath tub. How can that help democracy in Pakistan? Several young men rushed to volunteer for recruitment to the Pakistan army, seeing it as the only way to realise their dream of seeing the Taj Mahal.

As long ago as 1954, I had wanted to send the mullahs up in smoke. But my American uncle, who is now your bosom pal, refused to gift me an atom bomb. Now you have gifted Pakistan an atom bomb! I mean why else did Pakistan build it, if not for the Kashmir dispute and its congenital rivalry with your democratic and peace loving country? I would have kept mine hidden for use at the right time against our common enemy. Now you have forced it out of the Pakistani closet and no one can say when, where and how it might be used, except that its sole target is your country. The subcontinent is in danger of getting vaporized and I fear the Taj Mahal may vanish. What with you and your Agnis and Trishuls and Musharraf with his Ghaznavis and Ghouris just waiting to set everything alight. It will be the most spectacular fireworks ever in the world, only there will be nobody applauding.

Dear uncle, matters have come to such a pass that I appeal to your uncommon sense to save the subcontinent from going to further wrack and ruin. Please solve the Kashmir problem, whatever it takes. Those Pakistani *jihadis*, created by its premier intelligent spying institute, are determined to force their innocent compatriots to commit collective suicide - they call it *shahadat* but no one up here can identify the verses in the Quran which equate suicide - far less murder - with martyrdom. Rest assured, God is great in His infinite mercy and justice but even God is fed up with India and Pakistan for failing to solve their problems. He allowed the attack

against your august parliament to take place to show that playing with fire does come back to haunt. But you took the easy way out and pointed the finger at Musharraf, who is hated by all the *jihadis* because for them he ceased being a Muslim the moment he hitched his wagons to America in the war against terrorism. They now call him Bush-arraf! These *jihadis* are plotting several other attacks on your country so that you are forced to fight a war with Pakistan, thereby creating a situation that would allow them to get rid of Musharraf and seize power in Islamabad. You ought to have seen through this subterfuge. Instead you upped the ante by sending your forces to the Pakistani border. Worse still, you played straight into the hands of the *jihadis* by suspending all forms of communication, air, rail or otherwise with Pakistan. Even more than the government, the *jihadis* want the people of Pakistan to have no contact whatsoever with Indian infidels. Your misguided decision so rattled Musharraf that he in turn banned all Indian television channels in Pakistan, heightening the misery of an already depressed nation for whom the ridiculous fantasies that are the trademark of your Hindi film industry is the only form of cheap entertainment available. (When I wrote good film scripts, there was only Hollywood and no imitation called Bollywood.) There has been a dramatic increase in the suicide rate in several Pakistani cities, and you are contributing to this by keeping tensions with Pakistan at fever pitch. A full-scale military mobilization, now in its eighth month, is bleeding Pakistan financially when it desperately needs to revive its economy so that its youth are gainfully employed, not uselessly dead. This is grist to the *jihadi* mill!

Dear uncle, Pakistan is internally so troubled that your fire and fury only ends up aiding and abetting your main enemies there. Surely you cannot be in league with them, otherwise you would not be chanting so loudly about the need for a democratic Pakistan? Or are you doing the

American number in Pakistan as well - talking democracy but assisting autocracy! The tougher India gets with Pakistan, the tougher the army gets with its people and the less prospect there is of democracy. It's an old chain reaction, only now its on the verge of exploding. With no sign of a cessation of hostilities with India in sight, the military regime is tightening the reins of control. There has been a monsoon of (un)constitutional amendments in Pakistan, thanks to India's playing weather wane. And we now hear that the general may postpone the promised elections for another six months. If he does that, such protests as do take place will eventually die out with the proverbial whimper. With the enemy ogling at the border, and Americans crawling all over the place in search of Al-Qaeda and its associates, I fear that an emergency in the national interest may be invoked and dissent put down with an iron fist, reviving memories of the darkest days of General Zia-ul-Haq's rule.

I trust that you will take serious note of all that I have said and cool-headedly plan your next moves. The situation is so precarious that one false move on your side will bring a flash of lightning on the other, completing the downward spiral that has been the fate of the subcontinent - and Pakistan in particular - ever since independence. I expect to see you up here before very long. But please don't come too soon. There is an overflow of dead people here - victims of the September 11 attack and violence in the West Bank and, closer to the subcontinent, thousands of angry Afghans killed by American bombs, petrified victims of the Gujarat pogrom and any number of defiant Kashmiris, including many terrorists who perished at the hands of your security forces. As they await their turn to go to heaven or hell, they are holding street corner meetings on the subject of terrorism. These often degenerate into scuffles between those who call themselves *jihadis* and others who accuse them of causing their pre-mature death by taking up

cudgels against state terrorism. Your presence here will create total mayhem. Take good care of yourself, especially your knees. Which reminds me - you of all people should be able to empathize with those who have no real legs to stand on! So do recall your forces from the border and flush out the Pakistani dictator on Kashmir. He is getting so bogged down under the combined weight of pressure from you, America and his own homegrown *ihadis* - now in league with several dissident political parties - that he may need an express stretcher from up here. That will not serve the cause of democracy in Pakistan, I am afraid. What will help is if he is provided a democratically-oiled Pakistani wheel chair so that he can drive himself out of the corner into which he has painted himself with the connivance, I am sorry to say, of my own dear uncles.

Signed: Your very sincerely concerned nephew, Saadat Hasan Manto'.