

'Lost' love letters stir up trouble for the Gandhis

India

Amrit Dhillon Delhi

She was a glamorous English heiress who had accompanied her husband, the last viceroy, to oversee the dying days of the British Empire in India.

He was a charismatic independence leader fighting to remove the British, who would go on to become independent India's first prime minister.

In 1947, however, despite their ideological differences, and with partition driving a line through the country, it was love at first sight for Countess Mountbatten of Burma and Jawaharlal Nehru.

From the start, it was a peculiar affair. The countess represented the English aristocracy and everything that Nehru reviled. Unsurprisingly, their relationship is one that continues to fascinate Indians.

It is being deployed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party of Narendra Modi, the prime minister, as a political weapon against the Congress Party, which is run by Rahul Gandhi, the great-grandson of Nehru, in the lower house of parliament.

The BJP claims that the Gandhis clan and, in particular, Sonia, the former Congress president and mother of Rahul, is keeping 51 boxes of correspondence between the couple. These "missing" letters have not been seen and could be embarrassing for the Gandhis as they seek a return to power, the BJP said.

Rizwan Kadri, a historian who heads Modi's museum and library, has written to Rahul Gandhi asking for the boxes to be handed over as part of "India's historical legacy". Kadri said that in 2008, when the Congress Party was in power, the letters were removed at Sonia's behest and have been kept privately since.

Kadri said: "We understand that these documents may hold personal significance for the Nehru family.



Lord and Lady Mountbatten with Jawaharlal Nehru in Delhi in 1948

However, the library believes that making these historical materials more widely accessible would greatly benefit scholars and researchers."

Analysts suggest, however, that the BJP is more interested in possible scandalous exchanges in the letters that could harm the image of Nehru, a secular politician for whom Modi's Hindu-nationalist party professes contempt.

Amit Malviya, a senior BJP official, asked: "What's intriguing is: what could Nehru have written to Edwina Mountbatten [the countess] that warranted such secrecy?" Sambit Patra, a party spokesman, asked at a press conference: "What could Nehru have written to Edwina Mountbatten that needed censoring?"

Countess photographs and correspondence between the two testify to their love. The photos show them laughing and at ease with each other, particularly as Earl Mountbatten accepted their relationship.

The Mountbattens were known to look for love in other partners but

without ever wishing to end their marriage. Parsa Venkateshwar Rao, an Indian political commentator, said: "This is a fishing expedition to find some mud they can throw at Nehru. In the BJP's parochial mindset, such an intimate relationship between a married woman and a widower is unthinkable."

The countess's daughter, Lady Hicks, confirmed the love affair in her 2012 book, *Daughter of Empire: Life as a Mountbatten*, though she said it was not a physical relationship. Rather, she wrote, her mother found in Nehru the "companionship and equality of spirit and intellect that she craved. Each helped overcome loneliness in the other."

Hicks described the day that Mahatma Gandhi came to the viceroy's palatial residence to meet her parents as the empire was being wound up. She said: "He was so frail after years of fasting for the cause, he automatically put his hand on my mother's shoulder to steady himself."

When photos of the meeting appeared in the British press, there was outrage. Hicks wrote: "The consensus seemed to be that his 'black' Indian hand should not have been allowed to rest upon the 'white' shoulder of the vicereine. I was shocked by such out-and-out racism, since my parents had brought me up to be without prejudice."

After India's independence, Nehru and the countess exchanged letters and gifts over many years. Nehru used to meet her when he visited London.

The countess left a large collection of letters that she exchanged with Nehru before her death in 1960, aged 58. She was buried at sea off Portsmouth from HMS Wakeful.

In a final gesture of love, Nehru ordered an Indian navy frigate that was already stationed in Portsmouth to escort the Wakeful and cast a wreath of marigolds.