

Parzianā

Indira Gandhi 'One of us'

"I have a soft spot in my heart for Parsis; otherwise I would not have gone to the extent of marrying one," said chief guest Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, amidst laughter, at the Jamshedi Navroz evening function hosted by the Delhi Parsi Anjuman on March 21.

Accompanied by her son Rajiv and daughter-in-law Sonia, Ms Gandhi reminisced about her first meeting and subsequent marriage to the late Feroze Gandhi. "He was a good representative of your community—nay, my community. He was a man of high ideals, had independence of spirit, standing on his own feet, a man of great courage and conviction. He would always do what he thought was right."

In his welcome address Delhi Parsi Anjuman President Shiavax D Nargolwala noted "It is a red letter day in the history of the Delhi Parsi Anjuman that our revered Prime Minister, I should say, our beloved Prime Minister, has kindly found time to be amongst us...to celebrate our New Year day and the spring festival of Navroz." Citing the community's achievements and drawbacks, Nargolwala requested the Prime Minister "to say a few words of guidance and advice."



Ms Gandhi being received by Ms Bagli. Rajiv Gandhi is on left.

Ms Gandhi replied: "I am the last person to give any advice as I have come here to share the moments of joy with you on this auspicious day... Long before I met my husband-to-be, I had met eminent Parsis who were coming to our family home of my grandfather and my grand mother, like the Guzders. At that time, we had not known the Gandhi family. The story how we came to know the Gandhi family is quite romantic... (laughter). It happened in early 1930 when I was a fairly small girl—right in

the midst of our freedom struggle. There was going to be a flag hoisting at the Union College—a Christian College—and somebody said to me to go there. Without telling our parents, we went there.

"A boy of about 17 years was going to do the flag hoisting. He tried to hoist the flag but he was beaten up and dragged before being arrested for the day. I went forward to hold the flag but I must confess that I was afraid of being disgraced as the flag was very heavy and I had my fears if I would be able to hold it aloft. Somehow, I managed to raise the pole for some time and then I received a stick blow on my shoulder; the gathering dispersed and we all came back. I went to my school and long after, when I came back on holidays, I found a new face in the family and I was told it was Feroze Gandhi.

"This is how I got to know him. I was at school at Shantiniketan and while there, I got a letter one day from Feroze Gandhi who said that he had witnessed the whole flag hoisting episode perched on a wall and it was at that time, he decided—on seeing me holding up the national flag—to marry me (laughter). I knew nothing about it. He worked his



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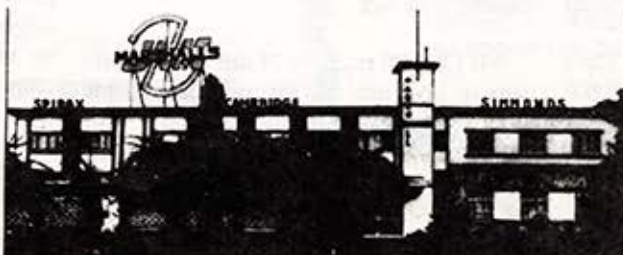
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way into my parents' family and was given all affection and respect. The proposal came forward and none could say anything. This is a memory of the past—both happy as well as sad...

"Why I have had a soft spot for the Parsis? It was not only because of my marriage with a Parsi, but it was for some of the things you have mentioned. Our community is a very small one, but from the beginning, it has shown pluck and guts. Sheer merit, hard work and their qualities of head and heart brought the Parsis to an (enviable) position. I do not think Government can lend a helping hand to the people who have been used to standing high on their own and to helping themselves. The Parsis have risen to the various positions on their own and they have done this in a nice way. Since the transfer of power in India, they have



Ms Gandhi with Nargolwala at her right, "...upto us to keep up the high ideals..."

"I do not think government can lend a helping hand to the people who have been used to ... helping themselves."

shown moral courage and a calibre of high order.

"The Parsis came here for their religion and traditions, to uphold them, and I am glad there were people who allowed them to come and settle here. People here had no illwill towards minorities; we have tolerance and we are a mixture of good and bad. We have to see that evil is kept down, and that we have intelligence and earnestness and are against hatred. Akbar, the Great, thought about the common religion, it was his greatness. Much before him, Ashoka also worked for harmony.

"Although it is a matter of the past, some of that spirit always remains with the people. It is up to us to keep up the high ideals, the higher values and have self-confidence and self-reliance. It is for the younger people to develop a spirit of tolerance and mutual co-operation in order to keep the country strong and united—which qualities are reflected in the history of the country through and through. In the country today, we are faced with several problems; the youth have to rise to the occasion and develop

good qualities for the benefit of the country as a whole. Peace and harmony are the prime needs of the moment and we should all strive for them.

"I just want to give you my very warm and sincere greetings and wish all of you a happy New Year; I hope all the troubles will be a thing of the past, and there will be a brighter future for our country and thereby for the young people and the very sweet children who have just sung before us."

At the start of the function Ms Gandhi was received at the Bhiwandiwalla Hall with the performance of the *Achu Michu* ceremony. The children of the Anjuman sang *Chaiye Hame Zarhosti* after which Nargolwala welcomed Ms Gandhi noting, "We regard you as one of us because we know we are very near to your heart and your affection for our community is well-known to us all..."

"In this city of Delhi, exactly 400 years ago, the Great King Akbar pronounced his Din-E-Elahi, and said that all religions were one and he invited Dastur Meherji Rana of Navsari for consultations to form one common religion for the universe, and our association with Delhi and the Emperor in Delhi started from this time onwards. Madam Prime Minister, the Delhi Parsi Anjuman is a very old institution and came into being more than 150 years ago, but the present form of the Anjuman as you see it today, is almost 50 years old. This Hall, our Fire Temple and our Dharamshala which you see opposite, all these institutions have been created over the last 50 years and this is all due to the help we have received from your Government,

Madam Prime Minister. Whenever we have asked for any help, we have got more than what we wanted. We are most grateful to you.

"Madam Prime Minister, ours is a very small community in Delhi—about 1000 Parsis—but we have held, and are holding, the highest positions—thanks to the fair manner in which we have been treated by the Government of India..."

"But I would be failing in my duty if I did not mention some of the burning problems of our community. These in short are the dwindling population amongst Parsis, migrations abroad, housing shortage, late marriages and fewer children, our priestly class in disarray, and mixed marriages. We are trying to solve these issues through the Delhi Parsi Anjuman and through our Federation which is the combination of various Anjumans of India, stretching from North to South and East to West, about 60 Anjumans, big and small, are the members of this Federation. There are, of course, other legal problems like Succession amongst Parsis, Marriage and Divorce laws, etc. Our Act in 1936 was the most advanced legislation then. The laws of other communities have now overtaken our laws. Your father, Madam Prime Minister, brought forth advanced and enlightened legislation on this subject, our legal panel is now looking into all this. As you know, you have appointed a High Powered Minorities Panel which has our Mrs Aloo Chhibber as its member. They have submitted a very good report to the Central Government, and we are sure, your Government will consider this report in right earnest,

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Ms Gandhi lighting the diya as Nargolwala and members of the Anjuman look on.

and in proper perspective...

"Incidentally, the Saka Calendar of the Indian Government also begins its first day today. It is not a matter of coincidence that the Government of India calendar and the Parsi calendar start from the same day. According to astrologers this is the year of the white rat which is stated to be very auspicious!"

The Navroz function was televised on the national English news program that same night and the next day photographs of the occasion appeared on the front pages of the national Press.

According to a report in the Bombay based newspaper *The Daily* of April 2, the inveterate traveler Ms Meher Heroyce Moos, who as the paper noted "usually gets... what she wants," was primarily responsible for Ms Gandhi attending the Anjuman gathering. "Meher approached Sharda Prasad at the PM's office," noted the report, "and apprised him of the programme. Prasad rang back almost on the eve of Navroze to the President, Shiavax Nargolwala of the Delhi Anjuman to inform him of the Prime Minister's acceptance and the preparations touched fever pitch.

"In the morning the ladies went to 1, Safdarjung Road with their *shesh sopara* to greet the PM who was being photographed by a BBC team for a film on a day in her life. Impromptu invitations were also extended to Rajiv and Sonia to attend the evening festivities.

"Mrs. Gandhi arrived on the dot of 7.30 p.m. wearing a cream saree with a *kor* draped the Parsi way. The ladies performed *acchoomichoo*, a ritual to ward off evil, and a group of children sang *Chaiye Hame Zarthosti*. The PM, who is

considered as the 'daughter-in-law' to the whole Parsi community, literally had the audience swooning when she arose to speak. She always had a soft corner for Parsis, she claimed, and what better way to express this love than by marrying one. She then spoke of the glorious achievements of 'our' community. This identification made all the Parsi bosoms further swell with pride.

"No such function would have been complete without the traditional *laganoo bhonu* prepared by Dhun Darius Bagli, the manageress of the dharamshala where the celebrations were held. There was mouth-watering *patra machi* with *sali ma marghi*, *gosht no pulao dar*, *laganoo* stew and custard.

"And after the meal all the Parsis clustered around *aapri* Indira for photographs, pushing poor Sonia and Rajiv in the background."

Another report in the Bombay based evening daily *MID-DAY* of April 3, gave the following account of the function: "There are two versions of the Jamshedi Navroz celebrations that Prime Minister Gandhi joined in with the Delhi Parsis.

"The second version is that the prime minister was scheduled to arrive at the Parsi Dharamshala in New Delhi at 7 p.m. on the auspicious day. The other guests were instructed to be in their seats by 6.45 p.m. A rehearsal was held on how each guest would pass in front of the prime minister, hands folded, and wish her navroz mubarak.

"The prime minister, accompanied by Mr and Mrs Rajiv Gandhi, arrived at 8.15 p.m.

"There was a film show on the community, welcome speeches for Mrs Gan-

dhi, the prime minister's much-publicised reply, then the dinner.

"These dinners are held every year and the menu is normally a simple pulao and dal, the philosophy among Parsis being that at least on an auspicious day the rich and poor should eat alike, and since the poor would never be able to afford the food of the rich, the rich should eat the food of the poor.

"But there was an exception this year. As some of the more enterprising guests found out, the menu included *Patra ni Macchi*, *Sali ma Marghi*, *Lagan noo Stew*, plus the *pulao-dal* and custard. This was had by the prime minister and her party and the office-bearers of the Delhi Parsi association in a separate shamiana. White wine was served. After the chief guests had left, the rest of the guests had their pulao-dal (no white wine or red wine).

"If such treatment was meted out to Bombay Parsis, there would have been a riot. All of which goes to prove that Delhi Parsis are different from Bombay Parsis.

"And there is a small post-script. After the film on the Parsis (*Happiness Unto Others*, a documentary by Homi Sethna) had been shown, one old Parsi lady commented: 'I am glad Rajiv saw the film. I don't think his mother has told him anything about the Parsis'."

Nargolwala, in a letter to *MID-DAY* published on April 20, stated, "The prime minister arrived with her son and daughter-in-law punctually at 7 p.m. and not at 8.15 p.m. She was with the Anjuman for almost three hours and greeted each one individually. There was no rehearsal on how each guest would greet her.

"No white wine was served as this would have been contrary to law.

"For security reasons, all the 500 members and other guests could not be accommodated in one shamiana. In the shamiana were seated distinguished guests and eminent Parsis.

"Each member paid a very small sum for the dinner which was done by the Anjuman itself through the manageress of the dharamshala. Special hospitality was extended to distinguished guests at modest cost."

The Ranina Challenge

A new candidate enters the BPP trusteeship election

Arnavaz S Mama

"If existing properties are not maintained, it will be a great tragedy; if we do not become better-informed Zoroastrians, it will be very sad for the community; if there are not enough priests, it will be the death-knell of the community. For this reason I've decided to contribute whatever I can," says taxation expert and Supreme Court lawyer Homi P. Ranina who will be contesting the election to the Board of Trustees of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet as an independent candidate against Fali Poncha of the CER (Committee for Electoral Rights) on June 23.

Besppectated, somewhat heavy set, Ranina is, at the age of 37, an authority on finance, taxation and management and sits on the board of 21 companies, including three multinationals; he is also the director and vice-president of the All India Investors' Association and the Bombay Shareholders' Association respectively and trustee of seven institutions of Zoroastrian lineage.

"Housing is undoubtedly the need of the hour" but, Ranina questions, "If my existing properties are crumbling, would it be right of me as a trustee to divert every single rupee of new earnings for new constructions? Do I have a choice? ...Almost 250 structures (under the BPP umbrella)—residential buildings, hospitals, fire temples, schools—are in a terrible state."

Spelling out the quality of maintenance that the Anjuman's properties require, Ranina says "the life of a pipe is 25 to 30 years. Then water begins to seep out and decay begins...there should be no neglect of existing properties—the buildings must not be allowed to decay. Every time we talk of repairs there are not sufficient funds, even when tenants want to contribute 50%....the Parsi General Hospital building will have to be replaced by a new one in the next 10 years. That must be the first

maintenance project. A new building will cost six to seven crores of rupees... All you need is the money. You can't have a single house if you don't have the funds... It is possible to multiply the income."

Reverting to his manifesto, Ranina emphasizes "Paucity of funds is the main problem. If the Punchayet has the money it can have houses. So I feel that

'The community looks to the trustee as a leader, so his views should be known to the public.'

in view of my experience—I'm sitting on the board of 21 companies as an expert in finance and management and not as a lawyer—I would be able to contribute in mobilizing resources for the Punchayet. That is why I offer my services (to the Parsi community)."

Ranina quotes his opponents as saying that he "is a professional man and to a professional man time is money." But Ranina counters "I'm fully aware of the fact that we'd require considerable time being devoted (to the Parsis). I'm prepared to sacrifice my time and money for the good of the community. Everybody has criticised the Punchayet but no one has been prepared to do anything himself. A professional man who is not concerned about privilege leave and the 9 to 6 routine can serve the Parsis better. He can easily fit in appointments and meetings for the Parsis in the course of the day. He has greater flexibility."

Referring to JRD's controversial advice to the community (an exhortation to Parsi men to marry outside the community to halt its degeneration) which Ranina had rebutted in both its aspects, he says "With great difficulty I persuaded them (the newspapers) to publish my articles. Only an independent self-employed person can say what is right. Poncha could not have criticized Tata, nor (BPP trustee and CER President Jamsheed) Kanga, if the need arose the government."

On the question of his religious outlook Ranina says "I'm also liberal... I have an open mind...(but) once convinced, one is more committed. I want to see a generation of Zoroastrians who are convinced of the wealth of their traditions." Going into the etymology of the word "orthodox" as 'right thinking' he adds "If orthodox means upholding ones traditions and customs, then that's what I am. If change is only for the sake of change, I'm not for it." He then quotes Will Durant (from *Lessons of History*) to substantiate his point: "No man, however brilliant or well-informed he may be can, within a lifetime, reach such fulness of understanding as to pass judgement on the customs and traditions of his people, because these are the wisdom of generations after centuries of experiment in the laboratory of history."

On the subject of conversion Ranina, whose views have been widely publicized, says "Conversion is wrong because it runs counter to God's will: you didn't have a choice when you were born." More rationally, he considers conversion a two-way traffic: "If you accept conversion in principle, conversion would be right even when a Zoroastrian converts to Christianity;" and that danger is greater today when "so many of our own people are settled abroad." Many, says Ranina have commented upon the grandeur of the Christian cathedrals

which dwarf our spartan fire temples.

Noting that our fire temples are "sustained by the poor and the middle class—you rarely find the rich coming in or contributing any amount," Ranina contrasts this aspect of community behaviour with that of the Jews: "It's a great tragedy for our community that when a person becomes rich he thinks he doesn't need religion. Most Jews are very staunchly religious."

And this aspect is reflected in mixed marriages which, according to Ranina, is "extremely sad for it shows lack of faith, lack of commitment when the religion is fighting for survival." Despite these personal leanings, however, Ranina does not feel that Parsi women who have married outside the fold should be denied their rights so long as they remain committed to their religion.

Attributing the menace of drug addiction, said to be on the rise among the community's youngsters, to the currently fashionable "modern outlook" of "liberal broadmindedness," Ranina responds very simply. "Explain to children, convince them, make them aware of the tremendous responsibility that they have; tell them they're living in this highly competitive age; that they must compete and prove their mettle...today I'm the youngest member on the board of every single company where I am a director..."

Reminded of his Palkhivala connection Ranina says "Though Nani is my uncle, I've never used his influence and he's never pushed me. I'm glad I don't have the Palkhivala name."

Ranina considers "the shortage of priests really frightening." With the age of the present priests averaging 55 years and few young men joining the priesthood, "in 20 years from now we'll be without priests. According to some scholars, no mobeds, no Parsis. We need them for navjotes, weddings, death ceremonies. It is difficult to find priests to perform the *nirangdin* ceremony (for the consecration of *taro*). Most priests today are not fit to perform the *nirangdin*. They have to know 72 chapters by heart. It costs seven to eight thousand rupees (to compensate for loss of income over the 18 days it takes to complete the *nirangdin* plus all other expenses) but there are none forthcoming."

Ranina got involved with community problems two years ago. "It started with the Karani Agiary (in Bombay's Cusrow Baug). I don't stay in Cusrow Baug but in May '82 while I was passing by the

Agiary I felt the urge to enter. It was in utter disrepair. After that I went there often and was witness to several short circuits. When I questioned the panthaky why it should be so when there are so many affluent people in the baug he answered, 'People are indifferent to the needs of the fire temple.' " An estimate of the cost of repairs pegged the figure at about one lakh rupees noted Ranina. There are 559 flats in Cusrow Baug housing about 2500 people. An appeal was sent out. We thought if 100 well-to-do families contributed a thousand rupees

The Parsi General Hospital building will have to be replaced by a new one in the next ten years.'

each, the required sum would be easily made up. We received only Rs.26,000. Very few of the affluent contributed.

"How do you meet the shortfall? I started out on my own with electrical wiring which cost Rs.35,000 to replace. Waterproofing and plastering was done next which cost me another Rs 75,000." When the trustees of the Agiary realised that he had been personally paying the bills, "they made me a trustee!" laughs

Ranina.

At the B D Petit Parsi General Hospital where Ranina has been made a trustee recently, he has had a similar experience. "Bills of the very poor were pending for three to four years and the management was contemplating filing suits for recovery but were barred by time limitations. I settled all the bills because if there is a deficit, the hospital suffers..."

"Why do I do this? For no reason except that one has to be useful to one's community. Whatever money I earn has to be usefully employed."

Referring to his decision to contest the present election Ranina says "The first person to put the idea into my mind was S R Vakil (former BPP trustee and legal advisor to the House of Tatas), who suggested my name in a public statement at a function of the Youths Own Union in May '83..."

"This particular election I decided to throw my hat into the ring for various issues. Some of the things happening are not right. I was a great supporter of the CER when Jamsheed Kanga stood for election in 1981. I donated Rs.5,000 and became a member of the 'F Register' so that I could vote for him. Somehow in the last few months I find that they are doing exactly what they had criticized e.g. high-handedness and group politics."

Referring to the trusteeship term of 10 years Ranina says "I wouldn't even mind

Ranina: 'once convinced, one is more committed.'



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five years." He admits that he expects the support of the 'F Register' but he also admits that this system of tying votes to donations "is wrong" and further states that "voting is only an incidental right." Going along with the moratorium on the 'F Register' membership suggested by the CER, Ranina, nonetheless has his reservations: "How do you enforce it? And where a new donor feels strongly about the election, on what grounds do you withhold his right to vote?"

Ranina is very keen on the public debate with Poncha wherein the subject be "everything related to the elections—including religious matters. The community looks to the trustee as a

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leader, so his views should be known to the public."

Ranina expects he'll "be able to carry the other Punchayet trustees with him in implementing the objectives of his manifesto. "They (all the non-CER trustees) have made it known that they'd prefer to work with me, though they'd prefer to remain non-committal publicly. When personally approached, they have expressed the desire to remain neutral."

Ranina reads Iranian history, listens to music and tries to understand the meaning of various prayers, writes for the *Financial Express* and answers tax queries in *Signature* magazine among other publications. His wife Aban is a receptionist in Air India while nine year old Statira, their only child, attends the J B Petit School.

"I believe that the paucity of funds is at the root of most of our problems in the Parsi Punchayet," says Ranina. "The time has come when all of us must contribute at least one percent of net income. There must be more active participation. How much you are going to contribute personally, that's your first test..."

Manifesto of Homi Phiroze Ranina

The community appears to be at a very critical juncture in its history, judging from all that I have read and heard in the last few years. Parsi stalwarts are a phenomena of the past as the community ship drifts rudderless across a sea of financial, social and religious problems.

The key to these issues appears to be an under-utilisation of resources coupled with a lack of goodwill to contribute to institutions meant for the welfare of our poor and needy. Therefore, the ability to mobilise our resources, is clearly the crying need of the hour. With adequate finance and the right approach to manage it, we can improve the overall quality of life amongst our Zoroastrian brethren in Bombay.

Why do I want to stand?

Being both an accountant and a lawyer by education and experience, with a strong background in corporate finance and management, I have decided to contest the forthcoming elections so that, if elected, I could join the BPP team of trustees and contribute my expertise in finance and management for the good of my community, which I am unashamedly proud of.

My Platform

- I believe that the paucity of funds is at the root of most of our problems in the Parsi Punchayet. If adequate liquid funds were at our disposal, we would be able to fulfil all our needs in the fields of housing, medicare, upliftment of our priestly class, and repairing and maintaining our residential, medical, educational and religious institutions.

- I believe that the primary duty, both legal and moral, of trustees is to safeguard and maintain the existing assets and properties of which they are the custodians. Neglecting the repair and maintenance of these properties would

tantamount to dereliction of duty by the trustees. I believe, therefore, that every effort should first be made to ensure the adequate maintenance of existing BPP properties, with the financial co-operation of the tenants concerned.

- I believe that new buildings should be constructed whenever it is possible for the project to be financially self-supporting. I am, therefore, all in favour of new construction. However, it would be a short-sighted policy to divert the funds of the BPP for constructing new flats while neglecting the old structures which are under the control of the trustees. After all what is the point of building a thousand new flats if within the next decade, thrice as many existing BPP properties become unsafe for occupation as a result of neglect?

- I believe that existing hospitals, educational institutes, firetemples, Doongerwadi properties, homes for the aged and other assets under the control of the Punchayet should be better maintained and even better run. Additional revenues for these projects can be generated through a better utilisation of resources.

- I believe that it is imperative to induct professional management practices in the working of the Punchayet and streamline its administration. With hundreds of trusts under its aegis, a well-paid qualified staff is necessary for exercising effective control.

- I believe that the BPP should take the lead in starting schemes for self-employment of our young people. Therefore, apart from providing vocational guidance and training, it would be necessary to provide opportunities for self-employment and revivify the spirit of entrepreneurship for which our forefathers were recognised and respected in the not too distant past throughout India.

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- I believe that the Punchayet should launch a long-term plan to economically uplift our noble priests, who have for generations been looked down upon and financially neglected. An important survey in this area has already been conducted and, therefore, speedy action should be taken on the basis of its findings.

- I believe that every encouragement should be given, financially and otherwise, by the Punchayet to dedicated members and bonafide organisations within our community, to take up professional studies in the fields of religion, sociology and community welfare, so that we may have a new generation of more committed and "better informed" Zoroastrians.

- I believe that the Punchayet has to reach out much more to our people whose funds they are the custodians of. Therefore, a new position of a Punchayet Ombudsman should be considered. Through better delegation within the Punchayet, grievances of those in need will be better channeled, resulting in quicker solutions thereof.

- I believe that a committee comprising of senior priests, scholars and qualified experts should be formed to guide the BPP trustees as a "think tank" to bring about overall community unity.

My Action-Plan

If I am elected as a trustee, I propose to initiate action in the following areas:

- Have a survey conducted by Civil Engineers in respect of all the properties of the Parsi Punchayet, namely, residential houses, Doongerwadi bunglis, medical and educational institutions, fire temples, etc., and obtain their report on the condition of these properties, the likely expenditure on repairing them, including the cost of structural repairs, replacement of pipes, electrical fittings in common areas, and gunnitting, plastering and painting, wherever necessary.

- Scrutinize the investment portfolio of the various trusts under the control of the Parsi Punchayet and find ways and means of maximising the return on such investments, so that maximum possible income is available for the benefit of the community.

- Build a team of professional managers who would be able to streamline the administration and revamp the management of Punchayet properties.

- Formulate schemes for self-financing of new constructions in such a way that the persons residing in the new flats

could contribute some part of the expenditure on construction. I would also assist such persons in obtaining finance from various financial institutions which have been set up for assisting self-financed housing projects.

- Formulate schemes for promoting self-employment opportunities for our youth. Courses could be started for imparting vocational skills to enable our people to be self-employed. Schemes could also be formulated for providing finance, whether from banks or leasing companies, to enable our people to set up their own businesses.

- Set up a fund for the benefit of our Athornan families in order to ensure them a minimum commercial wage for their services, together with adequate retirement benefits, so that more young people would have the right incentive to take to priesthood as a lifelong vocation. Programmes would also have to be conceived to better educate our priests, so that they in turn could impart religious education to our people and, thereby, assist in having a new generation of "better informed" Zoroastrians.

- Set up a committee of dedicated social workers who could act as Ombudsmen to hear the grievances of our people and to act as a deterrent against arbitrary action on the part of any trustee or official of the Punchayet.

- Appoint a committee comprising of our high priests, scholars and experts to guide our trustees with a view to forge unity in our community which is, at present, divided on several issues.

In Conclusion

I believe that a well-balanced and far-sighted policy is called for. A trustee of the BPP has to look after the needs of every section of the community, keeping in mind always that his first duty is to effectively manage and maintain the properties which are already under his control. The trustees of the BPP have always been criticized for their inaction. It is, therefore, necessary to blaze a new trail, keeping in mind the needs and requirements of every section of our community.

I believe that the trustees should represent the community as a whole and the trusteeship should never be monopolised by ONE party or group. I, therefore, stand as an INDEPENDENT candidate, regardless of any party or group affiliations so that I may be able to discharge my duties without any fear or favour or without being swayed by party pulls and pressures.

I am already involved in my own small way in the social upliftment of our community. Apart from helping the poor and needy, I have personally contributed substantial amounts for the repairs of old and dilapidated fire temples and houses.

I pledge to dedicate my efforts towards the furtherance of what I believe in, and ask you for your support and goodwill to elect me on merit, as YOUR trustee.

April 30, 1984.

Bio-data

Professional Qualifications

B.Com. (Hons.), LL.B., F.C.A.
Advocate Supreme Court of India

Age

37 years

Professional Activities

Independent practice in the field of taxation, finance and management, tax adviser and consultant to more than 300 companies.

Chairman of Mazda Leasing Limited, director of 21 companies including Citibank N.A., Parke Davis (India) Limited, Hindustan Ciba-Geigy Limited, Max India Limited, Gujarat Alkalies & Chemicals Limited, etc.

Director of All-India Investors' Association, vice-president of Bombay Shareholders' Association, member of the Taxation Committee of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce, member of the Visiting Faculty at the Jamnalal Bajaj Institute of Management.

Professional Attainments

Author of *Taxation of Non-Residents in India* published by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India, *Selective Avenues for Corporate Tax Planning*, *Corporate Taxation—A Handbook*, *What Every Income-Tax Payer Should Know* and *Study of the Report of the Direct Tax Laws Committee*. Author of more than 600 articles published in *The Financial Express*, and several articles on *Taxation in Business World*, *The Daily*, *Director Digest*, *Signature*, etc.

Trustee of

B. D. Petit Parsee General Hospital, Framjee Cawasjee Institute, Maneckji Cooper Education Trust, Nusserwanji Hirji Karani Agiary Trust, Dasturji Kookadaru Memorial Agiary Trust, The Zoroastrian Co-operative Credit Bank Limited (Director) and Bai Avabai Framji Petit Girls High School.

Manifesto of Fali Ardeshir Poncha

In accordance with the Scheme of Election, the term of one of the trustees, Dr (Ms) N Noble, expires in July 1984 and therefore, an election for trusteeship will be held in June 1984.

I have the privilege of having been unanimously nominated by the Executive Committee of the CER (Committee for Electoral Rights) and therefore I will be contesting the elections.

Vast resources, in terms of lands, are vested in the BPP and yet in the last decade there has been no significant achievement in the area of housing. The BPP under Mr. Boman-Behram's leadership had projected to the public its inability to undertake a massive housing programme for lack of funds, specifically earmarked for housing. It had therefore adopted a policy that housing could be undertaken only through donations. The CER which was born in 1980, and which became a live force through its success in the elections to the Anjuman Committee in 1981, directed its Housing Committee, of which I have the privilege to be chairman, to formulate a plan for mobilising financial resources to support the construction of flats on all BPP lands.

When my Committee addressed itself to the task we were astounded at discovering that, the BPP had lands sufficient to erect thereon approximately 1000 flats of the two rooms and kitchen category. The funds requirement for this was placed by us at nearly Rs 10 crores, but with a judicious mix of some flats to be built and sold to Parsi families we demonstrated that sufficient funds could be generated to build the rest for rental to the middle class and the poor. In order to inform and give hope to the community, we presented in mid 1981, this plan at a public meeting at C.J. Hall.

When the BPP constituted a new

panel to serve on the Committee for the Economic Uplift of the Parsi Zoroastrian Community, Jamsheed Kanga, Dady Engineer, Minoo Shroff and I were invited to serve on this Committee, under the Chairmanship of Mr Jamshed Guzder. With 3,000 families registered on the "Accommodation Wanted" list of the BPP, the Economic Uplift Committee identified that absolute priority must be given to Housing as the prime need of the community. The CER plan for Housing was the model on which the Economic Uplift Committee worked and with some modifications this plan has been adopted by the BPP for implementation.

The BPP is now committed to the construction of about 1,000 flats over the next decade and I trust you may feel as I do that the community needs to have a trustee conversant with housing developments.

One of my functions as an executive with Tatas is the development of housing on a large scale and furthermore for the last two years I have been serving the community's interests by making my experience in this area available to the BPP in my capacity as a member of the Committee for the Economic Uplift of Parsi Zoroastrians, which committee presented the Master Plan for Housing for Parsis to the Trustees of the Panchayet; and as a member of the Task Force Panel whose functions are to bring the plan to fruition in the minimum time at minimum cost.

Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly obvious to all that if the underprivileged of our community are to be really helped, an entirely new approach to the management of the community's funds, resources and talents is necessary. If this is to be achieved, it can only be done by running the BPP on sound businesslike



lines. To do this you need proven business managers, and it is also as a proven manager that I am offering my services.

My manifesto is simple

It is a sincere undertaking. "To serve not myself or my ego but to serve the Parsi Zoroastrian community with all humility and dedication and help it in its endeavour to reach new heights of economic prosperity strength of character and sincerity of purpose." In order to do this I can do no better than to dedicate myself to the CER's manifesto published in 1981, of which I am one of the authors; and which in the main is committed to:

- Speedy development of housing on the large unutilised land resources of the BPP thereby making the single largest and most effective contribution to the economic uplift of the community;
- To revive, uphold and strengthen the belief in the Zoroastrian faith and religion;
- To bring about in the BPP and the Anjuman Committee an attitude of greater accountability to the community;
- To improve the medicare available to the community;
- To bring about meaningful electoral reforms.

I am confident of fulfilling my undertaking to you for I can count on the active help and support of the CER workers. For those of you who are not familiar with the CER's activities I would mention that the CER has already gone a long way towards realising its promises.

On Housing

Is responsible for the novel concept of subsidising low-cost housing by rolling in the profits from the sale of ownership flats as briefly outlined earlier.

Has spearheaded a campaign for fair allotment of accommodation.

The idea of "Norms for Allotment" and "Merit Rating System" for ranking of applications for accommodation is our brain-child.

Applications for housing can now be ranked on a rational and fair basis provided that the system is applied fairly. To ensure this, we have tried and are still trying to persuade the BPP to nominate an independent Parsi of integrity on the "Scrutiny Cell" whose function is to apply the Merit Rating System to each application in order to rank it. The trustees have unfortunately so far rejected this proposal but we have not given up and hope that wiser counsel will still prevail.

Has set up a Committee of the representatives of the various baugs to formulate and to suggest a common policy for "House Repairs," in which financial contribution from tenants is a must. Sadly, to date, no policy on house repairs exists and many of the properties are facing the danger of partial collapse. At the request of the tenants of Navroz Baug, we played an active role in guiding them in the matter of vital repairs in 1981 which were finally undertaken on the basis of joint financial responsibility.

Has also been looking into problems faced by tenants of trusts not coming under the umbrella of the BPP. For instance, we have successfully taken up the case of the tenants of one of the buildings of the Zoroastrian Building Fund right up to the level of the Secretary for Housing, Government of Maharashtra and the Chairman of the Housing Repairs Board to prevent demolition of the building and displacement of the tenants.

On Religion

Has organized classes for youngsters aimed at a better understanding of the Zoroastrian faith and religion.

On Public Accountability

Has achieved for the first time in persuading the BPP trustees to invite the Anjuman Committee members to a meeting where the trustees informed the members of the immediate and long term plans for the community.

Has set up a Vigilance Cell investigating complaints about wrongful or unfair allotment of accommodation by the BPP to which the BPP has begun to respond.

On medicare and amelioration

Through our Youth Wing we have compiled the first Parsee Zoroastrian Blood Donors Directory and presented it to the Parsee General Hospital.

We distribute old clothes and food parcels on festival days to widows and other economically weaker sections of the community and organize gambars.

On electoral reforms

During the 1981 elections several necessary improvements were brought about. The CER has now finalized a scheme of Electoral Reforms which whilst aiming at a more democratic and pragmatic election of trustees, ensures at the same time protection of the interests of the existing donors.

Our Chairman, Mr. Jamsheed Kanga, has for the last three years been doing his best for the community in his capacity as a trustee. With all the constraints on time that he has as a highly placed official in the Government of Maharashtra (currently as Secretary for Industries) he is able to devote a lot of time and energy to the welfare of the community. In the last year he has been more or less solely responsible for saving a valuable piece of land which our com-

munity, but for his efforts, would have lost.

Our policy has been to serve the community in all the ways we can without seeking publicity for our actions and therefore much of the foregoing may not have come to your notice. I am bringing it to your notice in order to help you to realize that a large body of dedicated Parsis are there to help me to do my best for the community.

February 7, 1984.

Bio-data

Age

49 years. Married with 2 sons.

Qualification

B.A., B.Com, F.C.A.

Work Experience

Spent 20 years in the General Insurance Industry, the last year as Manager Technical of the General Insurance Corporation and previous four years as Manager of the Western Regional Office of the United India Insurance Co. Ltd. holding charge of Accounts, Internal Audit, General Administration and Personnel.

From 1978 as General Manager—Tata Sons Limited Insurance & Risk Management Division.

From 1980 also as Director—Tata Housing Development Co.

Member of the following Committees
Chairman, Insurance Sub-Committee of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce & Industry.

Member, Commission on Insurance—International Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Committee for the Economic Uplift of Parsi Zoroastrians, Task Force Panel for Housing Development approved by the Bombay Parsi Panchayat.



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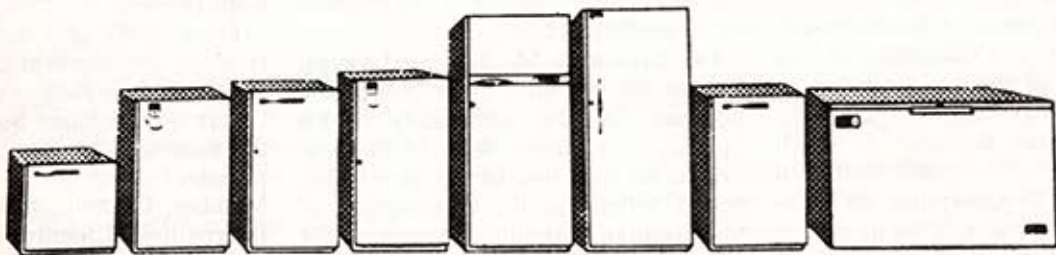
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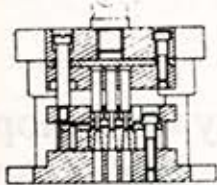
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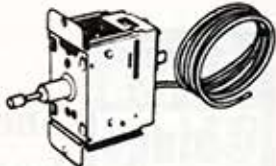
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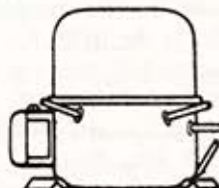
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The Debate

The crowd was not disappointed. For two and a half hours, Fali Poncha and Homi Ranina, both aspirants for the Bombay Parsi Punchayet trusteeship seat to be vacated in June by Dr Nelie Noble, verbally slogged it out like two seasoned fighters. The debate on June 13 at Bombay's Birla Matushri Hall was punctuated with wit, quick repartees, humour, theatrics and a filled-to-capacity crowd that never failed to voice its approval or disapproval.

Poncha dressed in a dark blue safari suit proved adept at talking to the crowd, occasionally referring to a prepared text, notes and files. Ranina, in a bluish grey suit and tie, spoke extempore with the polished manner of a lawyer conducting a cross-examination. Ranina appeared to do most of the questioning, largely on the track record of the Committee for Electoral Rights (CER) of which Poncha is the official candidate. Poncha questioned Ranina on a few points but for the main appeared more concerned with placing his point of view before the audience.

Shiavax Vakil, the noted lawyer and former BPP trustee who noted he was serving as "a moderator and not umpire," introduced the "two contestants to the throne of thorns" and outlined the format of the debate.

Both speakers were to make 'solo' speeches for 25 minutes after which there would be 'duets' followed by 'solo' summings-up.

"I must request you to remain restrained and use language that befits Akabars," said Vakil.

Ranina spoke first, noting that his expertise on finance was required on the BPP board as many of the ills facing the community could be tackled with adequate funds. "You don't need a housing expert to build a house. You have to be a wealthy man ... mobilization of funds is the key."

Noting that his critics have alleged that as he is a professional man he will not have time to devote to the Punchayet, Ranina stated, "true for me time is money but there is a limit to the value of money....I took a decision that if I were elected I would earn less so I could devote more time to the community."

As to the charge that he was not really an independent candidate and

was supported by the erstwhile Committee of United Zoroastrians (CUZ) that disbanded after losing the last anjuman committee elections in 1981, Ranina stated his supporters were from all walks of life and even included some members of the CER. "I do not fear or favour anybody," he said, noting that he had criticized the Government of India in his professional capacity and in community matters taken up cudgels against people like J R D Tata on the subject of intercommunity marriages.

Referring to the allegation that he has packed the 'F Register' whose members are permitted to vote for a trustee if they make a donation of Rs. 5,000 or over to certain charities, Ranina said he had told his supporters "not to do anything that makes money power critical... the elections have generated interest" which in turn had encouraged people to enroll on the 'F Register' so they could participate meaningfully. "The CER should not shy of the consequences of public awareness." He told the crowd that of the new entrants on the donors' register, less than 20 percent were personally known to him. He castigated the CER for not acting on electoral reforms earlier even though they commanded the (275 or so of the 303 people on the) 'E Register' which, along with the 'F' (619), elects trustees to the BPP.

He noted that when he associated himself with any trust, he believed in 'total commitment.' "When I am fit to be on the board of the largest bank in the world, am I not fit to be on the board of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet?" Poncha began by noting a trustee is one who serves the community. "He must be a servitor, not a master." Referring to Ranina's frequent use of the personal pronoun 'I,' Poncha said, "A man must not speak of himself...if he aspires to be a trustee he must speak the truth."

He noted that from 1910 when the BPP election scheme framed by the Bombay High Court came into effect, not more than 20 donors a year were registered on the 'F Register.' "In the last three years the figure has not crossed 40." But in the last three weeks over 170 donors were enrolled.

Poncha said as in the 1981 elections, "The same dirty scandalous rumours"

were being circulated. "If the time spent alleging and denying the lies spread, could be devoted to genuine social work, lots could have been achieved."

Speaking on housing, Poncha said money could be generated through the Robin Hood concept whereby flats are built for the well-to-do who are charged a higher rate and from the excess, housing is constructed for the lower income groups.

Ranina alleged that the Robin Hood concept would generate only around three to four crore rupees as freehold property with the BPP was limited. The community's financial requirements to build 1,000 flats were around 13 crore rupees. Ranina said he arrived at this figure by taking Poncha's figures of 1,000 flats to be constructed, of an average size of 550 square feet, at an average cost of Rs. 250 per square foot, $(550 \times 250 \times 1000 = \text{Rs. } 13.75 \text{ crores})$. From where was Poncha going to generate the balance nine to ten crores? A technical discussion on the subject followed with figures being thrown back and forth with Poncha at one stage stating that Ranina was applying 'simple arithmetic' to a complex problem. "Let us not argue about figures," said Poncha. The remark brought a roar of disapproval from Ranina's supporters who felt Poncha's answers were not sufficiently convincing.

Whilst on housing, another dispute arose over Poncha's role in the Gibbs Road housing scheme which is to generate funds for low income housing elsewhere. Poncha termed Ranina's allegation "another falsehood...I think you are not being honest." As the debate became more charged, Vakil intervened, noting, "You both have built enough houses in the air."

The next subject was repairs. Poncha alleged that Ranina had stated at a joint meeting at *The Bombay Samachar* office that the (privately owned) building Ranina was residing in was 30 years old and required five lakhs worth of repairs. Therefore, Poncha said, according to Ranina's 'simple arithmetic' the cost of repairs would be five lakhs multiplied by say 200 buildings, equals to Rs. 10 crores. According to Poncha, the cost for repairs was more in the vicinity of Rs. three crores.

Ranina said he only cited his building as an example and had arrived at his figure on the basis of architect, Rohinton Chiniwalla's report. Noting that

Chiniwalla, a member of the CER, was a "reputed architect" Ranina added "you cannot doubt his estimate" which put the cost at almost Rs. 12 crores. Chiniwalla's report showed the cost of repairs for Ness Baug, where Poncha resides, as Rs. 30 lakhs whilst the estimate arrived at by the trust and the residents of Ness Baug was six to seven lakh rupees, according to Poncha. Since the figure was inflated by four, Poncha once again alleged that Ranina had applied 'simple arithmetic' and multiplied Poncha's estimate of three crores to arrive at the figure of 12. The architect was appointed in May and submitted his report in June which was not sufficient time to survey all the buildings, Poncha stated.

Ranina added that Chiniwalla was not alone but worked with a team of professionals. "You are doubting the integrity of a professional man," charged Ranina.

"I am not," replied Poncha.

"You are," countered Ranina.

"I don't remember any Mr Chiniwalla coming to Ness Baug," said Poncha. He then turned to the audience and asked those staying in the various colonies if they had seen Chiniwalla there to which a part of the audience replied with a resounding 'no.' Poncha then tore up a copy of Chiniwalla's report and flung it to the foot of the stage. Immediately Ranina's supporters sitting in the audience tore up copies of Poncha's Robin Hood plan, circulated earlier, and threw the pieces of paper at the foot of the stage.

As the attention turned back on repairs, Poncha commented that if Ranina were to be elected to the BPP, he would require the 10 years of his term to learn about the subject of housing and repairs.

"Don't worry, you'll be on the task force (for housing)," countered Ranina.

The remark was followed by much laughter and the two candidates laughed and shook hands.

Vakil: "Now that you've identified each other, let's get on with the subject."

Poncha: "Let's get on with the show"

Ranina: "I am sure you are enjoying it, ladies and gentlemen."

In regard to the sale of a property referred to as Jyoti Studios, both candidates felt they should go jointly to the Charity Commissioner's office and expedite the matter as clearance for the

sale was not forthcoming from that office.

"Our main problem is divisibility," said Poncha. "We don't get together." The next item was electoral reform, which as Vakil noted, he would not have minded devoting half an hour to, but because of the constraints of time, the subject was restricted to 10 minutes.

Ranina inquired why the CER had delayed taking up reforms for three years. Poncha said the first reform was to bring dignity to the elections.

"I hope your supporters will bear this in mind," retorted Ranina.

Poncha said the CER had a scheme but as the trustees of the BPP said they were also in favour of reforms, the CER waited for the trustees to act. Poncha admitted that was a "wrong decision. If we had done that (gone ahead with reforms), we wouldn't be debating today because I would be a certainty."

Ranina: "Don't be too sure."

Vakil: "I didn't know you were an astrologer, Mr. Poncha."

Poncha noted that there should be a 'parity' between the 'E and F Registers' and that the CER was taking legal action to ensure that the donors would not nullify the mandate given by the voters in 1981 to the CER. The CER had swept the 'E Register' poll in 1981 except for 30 or so seats.

"We are not going to let you voted people down," said Poncha.

"Don't make this a political meeting," cautioned Vakil.

The subject of priestly amelioration was discussed with Vakil noting that it cost eight rupees to wash a *jama*. Both candidates agreed that something needed to be done with Ranina talking of setting up a fund of 50 lakh rupees ("You are a man who deals only in millions," countered Poncha) whilst Poncha advocated study of the Scheme at Bombay's Malcolm Baug initiated by CER member, Edul Bharucha. "If instead of 50 lakhs you can achieve the same results with 30 lakhs you can put the 20 lakhs to other use," said Poncha.

Vakil advocated selling of the M F Cama Athornan Institute in Andheri as it housed only eight to nine students (some sources say four or five — *Editor*). Vakil said the property on an as-is-where-is basis could fetch 60 lakhs. The trust deed permitted a sale,

On the management of the BPP, Ranina stated the Punchayet "needs

somebody on a day-to-day basis." He suggested that Poncha should consider resigning from his job and joining the BPP as a full-time managing trustee.

Vakil: "What is the offer?"

Ranina: "A decent salary, 'tax free.'"

Poncha: "Ranina is an expert on how to make taxable items tax free...If given a free hand to deliver the goods, I would do it."

Vakil: "I would also like to apply for the post."

Poncha began his summing-up statement noting that elections should be conducted with dignity as was the present debate. "As a family, we have been seriously hurt," he said referring to the numerous telephone calls and letters received by him stating he and his family did not wear a *sudreh-kusti*, went to church, were Catholics and so on. One caller, Poncha said, asked over the phone: "Did you say your *kusti* today?"

Poncha added that he was willing to give an advance letter of resignation, stating that if elected he would resign from the BPP in five years.

Ranina stated that the rumours began "before I announced my candidature." He claimed that Poncha was trying to win sympathy for himself. "Even if he stood unopposed, the rumours would be there...he must learn to distinguish between the opponents of the CER and my supporters."

Ranina stated it was not for "the CER to deliver the goods but for the Bombay Parsi Punchayet. Trustees will come and go but the Punchayet will go on forever." He reiterated that as a self-employed person he had an edge over Poncha as far as serving the community went as he could come and go as he chose. Poncha, on the other hand, he alleged, would find it hard to conduct Punchayet work in between commuting from the various construction sites the company he works for, Tatas, was developing. As the crowd voiced its disapproval of Ranina's allegation, Poncha announced, "I've already done it for three years" (served the community and his company).

Thus ended the first ever debate between contestants for the BPP trusteeship. Whilst the audience reaction was mixed, some claiming Ranina came out better, some Poncha, the underlying impression was that it was a shame that with two such fine, able candidates contesting, only one could be elected at this time.

Fort offices

There is a certain pleasure in visiting the old Parsi offices in the Fort. Suddenly you enter a world of courtesy and business ethics.

There are many such offices surviving in the old Fort area, the original business district of Bombay. The peon at the entrance receives you like one of those old family servants (all the old family servants once used to work for aristocratic—as against rich—Parsi homes, now they work at the residences of European and American consulate staff).

Inside, the clerks (not necessarily all Parsis and, most times, none of them Parsis) would be quietly, though perhaps not particularly efficiently, going about their work. Everybody very helpful, no

passing from desk to desk.

And the decor—no chrome-and-plastic, neon lights, photographs of the managing director receiving an export award from the prime minister. Instead, there would be photographs of the founders of the company, the pioneering businessmen and industrialists in their velvet caps and phetas.

And the furniture would probably be the one the office started with in the horsetram days: Solid teak, rosewood, heavy tables and chairs, everything dignified. No executive desk-and-chair set and a plastic pen-stand, sent with the compliments of some company doing business with the firm.

There would also be the standard equipment of old Parsi offices. A matka for the water, the water filled in every

morning from the well at Churchgate; tea being brewed in a corner and served on the tables in fine china cups, a few Surat biscuits on the side. A calendar on the wall from the vinegar merchant of Navsari.

The tone of the office is set from the top, the proprietor himself. Courteous, he would come out of his cabin to meet you, come out again to leave you. Money would not be discussed much, only the essentials, and no guarantee of service or goods required, the reputation of the firm being a guarantee in itself.

Only the Fort has these offices of old Parsi concerns left. Nariman Point has none. That is why Nariman Point has no class.

Round and About column by Behram 'Busybee' Contractor reprinted from *Mid-day* October 28, 1983.

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