

Parsiana

BPP trusteeship elections: Desai Vs Mehta

Two independent candidates vie for the November elections.

After the excitement of the last Bombay Parsi Punchayet trusteeship elections, the forthcoming November elections appears to be a tamer affair. BPP trustee Eruch Desai, whose 10-year term expires in December, is seeking reelection and his only declared opposition candidate to date is businessman Hector Mehta.

Both Desai and Mehta are middle-of-the-road in their political, social and religious outlook. Desai as a trustee has often espoused the orthodox line but preserves his independence. He was, for example, the only trustee on the Board to dissent from the BPP's decision to leave the Federation of Parsi Zoroastrian Anjumans of India in January 1978, two weeks after the successful hosting of the Third World Zoroastrian Congress. At that time the then BPP chairman, B.K. Boman-Behram had painted the Federation as a reformist, trouble-making body.

Mehta has been active in several community trusts as well as at the various elections of trustees of the BPP

and the Anjuman Committee (The Anjuman Committee elections are held once every seven years to elect members to the E register, who along with the F register or donors, elect the BPP trustees as and when their terms expire). He was closely associated with Ranina's campaign and claims he was one of the key persons who influenced Ranina to stand against the odds-on Committee for Electoral Rights (CER) favourite. That bold gamble paid off and now Mehta is attempting to repeat the feat.

But it does not appear as though the characteristically indecisive CER will be putting up any candidate. The most likely candidates, management consultant Minoo Shroff, social worker Silloo Kavarana and lawyer Dadi Engineer do not wish to stand. Shroff's reasons for refusing to stand are not known while Kavarana feels that with the swelling of the donors' register once again (at the time of Ranina's election the list had swelled by 176. It was frozen at the time Naoroji Godrej

stood but has once again increased by 91 as on September 2) the CER may not have a chance. Engineer is averse to standing against Desai.

Should the CER not put up a candidate, it will find itself in a quandary as to whom to support. As Desai is seeking a second term and as the CER is opposed to trustees serving for 20 years at a stretch, the body cannot support Desai (In Godrej's election the CER similarly could not officially support their old friend and ally, Jamshed Guzder, who initially wanted to seek a second term). On the other hand as Mehta is viewed as a Ranina supporter the CER would find it difficult to support the group that trounced their candidate.

In the absence of polls or debates, it is hard to gauge whose chances of victory are greater. At the moment it looks like a toss-up.

Parsiana's Managing Editor, Arnavaz S. Mama interviewed both the candidates to ascertain their views on the trusteeship and the community.

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"A link in the chain"

Businessman Hector Mehta says self-employed individuals are preferable to professionals for the work of the Panchayet.

Arnavaz S. Mama

"If we don't volunteer our service when we think we're worthy or competent, we have no right to criticize people already giving voluntary service," says Hector Mehta, the Bombay businessman who is contesting Eruch Desai's seat on the board of trustees of the Bombay Parsi Panchayet (BPP), in November 1985, even as Desai seeks reelection at the end of a 10-year term.

The spry, sparsely built Mehta is utterly convinced that "Our religion is a cut above others." It has higher principles, its philosophy is of better quality, it makes better people out of us, with better values. It has taught me to look at problems from the position of the opposition party." The 49-year-old, April born activist is a daily visitor to the Dadysett Agiary where, it is said, he was instrumental in sorting out an awkward controversy among the mod-beds, to everyone's satisfaction.

A touch of understated elegance pervades Mehta's spacious Empress Court residence where he personally answered the doorbell on September 2, 1985. Settled across the large, hospitable dining table, Mehta noted that his priority in the BPP will be "to inculcate in the younger generation a desire for self-employment." Towards that end Mehta hopes to persuade the industrial giants still under Parsi control to give capable youngsters "a start, by encouraging them with orders for ancillaries." Mehta's frank, prominent eyes are unblinking as he affirms that though "the spirit of enterprise is lacking," the community is "by no means qualitatively poor."

Mehta believes that "the BPP requires men of integrity, competence, resources, faith in our established religious customs and practices, and above all, the will, the desire and the time to serve the community." Noting dispassionately that "only one candidate wins," Mehta notes that the Panchayet requires a few trustees "who are businessmen and self-employed..." and in his manifesto declares, "The experience I have gained in my own businesses will also enable me to assist the Bombay Parsi Panchayet to deal with labor problems which have started cropping up in its various departments." Mehta feels that "a man who has his own established organization and is his own boss can devote far more time for Panchayet affairs than a professional. For a professional, every hour he spends at the Panchayet, he is losing his income... The services of a professional can always be hired," notes Mehta.

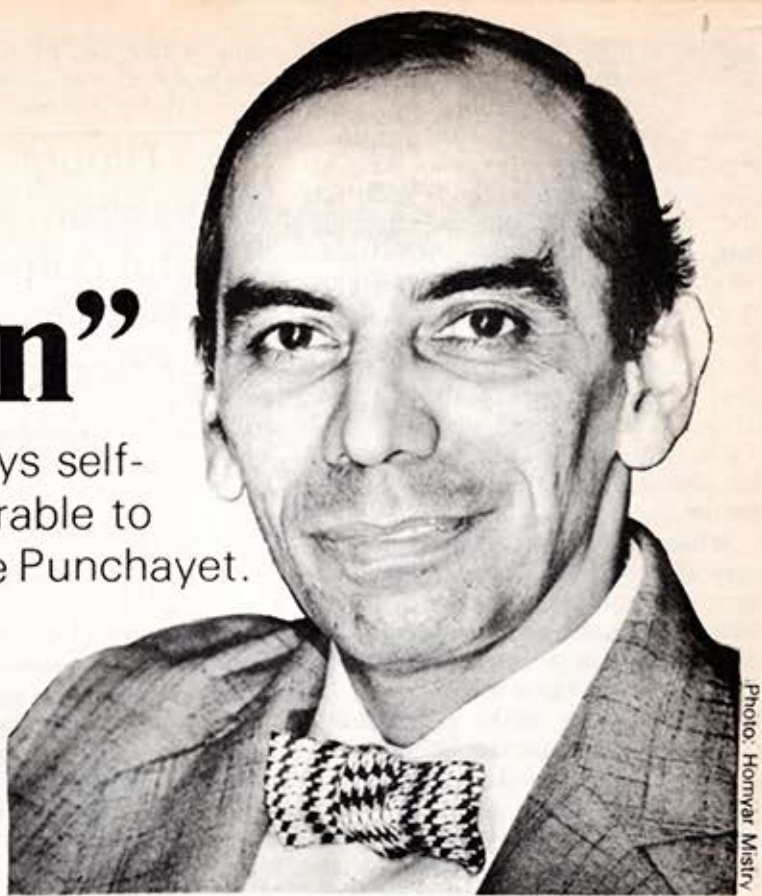
Standing committed to two promises, Mehta says he will render a regular account of his work in the BPP to the community. But, "I never talk in the first person singular. I believe we are a link in a chain." Stating that the BPP's board of trustees effects its work by common consent, Mehta says he will see "that the majority of my colleagues

(share) a common platform with me" when facing the community.

Mehta's second promise relates to the tenure of office. Noting that even "the President of the United States gets only eight years" to fulfil his promises to the nation, Mehta says he will not seek reelection. As Mehta notes in his manifesto, after a 10-year tenure, one "should make way for fresh thoughts and fresh minds, so that the Panchayet is constantly rejuvenated and made a dynamic body.

"So far nobody has been able to overpower me with his ideology," says the dapper, bow-tied Mehta, who claims to be an independent person, "a man who has his own convictions." Being related to BPP chairman Dr Aspi Golwalla (his daughter is married to Golwalla's son), Mehta was asked if the relationship would cram his style of functioning. "I don't think so — why should it?" he counters.

On the question of withstanding pressure from various groups, Mehta says his approach will be pragmatic. For example, the clause in the CER's (Committee for Electoral Rights now renamed Committee for Economic Revival) electoral reform affidavit, seeking an upper age limit of 70 years for BPP trustees, meets with Mehta's ap-



proval, as does the CER's aim to help young entrepreneurs. On the other hand, Mehta strokes Homi Ranina, the controversial young BPP trustee, whom he has known for many years, as "a man of integrity... he is good for the community," while disclaiming any association with the Athra-van Educational Trust to which Ranina is committed. Says Mehta, "I don't want to be branded (by any of these connections). If people are convinced that I deserve their vote, that I'd look after the community's interests, fine. I'd be happy at the faith they repose in me. But I don't want to talk of any parties."

While Mehta says he would be agreeable to a public debate, should his opponent desire it, his campaign will consist of public addresses as well as direct contact with voters — meet "as many as I can," says Mehta.

Though Mehta thinks "the Federation of Parsi Zoroastrian Anjumans of India (FPZAI) serves a useful purpose by discussion of common problems of the community," he says that the ideas that have emerged from that forum "were already existing though dor-

mant" within the BPP. (The FPZAI has been regarded with disfavor by certain sections of the orthodoxy who allege it

"Though the Federation serves a useful purpose by discussion of community problems, (the ideas that have emerged) were already existing though dormant within the BPP."

to be a reformist body. Both Ranina and BPP trustee Naoroji Godrej, a liberal, have not opted to serve on the Federation so far although the BPP holds four seats on the Federation's executive council.)

A stern conservative who does not favor conversion or intermarriage, Mehta believes in social justice and

equity between the sexes. He is also in favor of a rational acceptance of the fact that "the problems, needs and wants" of Zoroastrians settled abroad would be different from those of ours, here in India. "So long as both sides don't recognize this particular concept, the fusion is difficult... Their approach has to be different. We who live here cannot pronounce judgment on them and vice versa."

Mehta says the present system (of election of BPP trustees), though 70 years old, is basically correct except that it requires certain adjustments due to lapse of time. "In any public charity trust, the basis is donation. Therefore the donor is the key person. He must have a say in the management."

In 1984, after Ranina's election, when Ms Mani Dalal and Minoo Shroff of the CER had petitioned the High Court for an amendment of the electoral scheme, Mehta says he "intervened to safeguard the rights of the F register (donors)." (The E and F registers together comprise the Anjuman Committee which votes for trustees. The F register members are donors of Rs 5000 and more to the BPP while the

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E register members are elected, once in seven years.) The matter however did not proceed further, says Mehta, as consent terms were reached whereby the voting rights of the F register members were temporarily frozen between August '84 and January '85, when Jamshed Gunder's term of office drew to a close.

Mehta fully agrees that the E and F registers, that is the elected members and the donors, should be equal in number. He is also emphatic that "the F register must be frozen six months before the trusteeship election." Also, to bring the scheme in tune with present values, Mehta advocates that the quantum of donation qualifying for F register membership should be raised to about 15 to 20 thousand rupees.

A commerce graduate who has made good in the film exhibition and film processing trade, Mehta's business plans include a diversification into commercial post production facilities for video. He is, however, sanguine about the time he will be able to spare for Punchayet work: "The business must run, whether the bosses are there or not," he says.

A member of the BPP's committee

"In any public charity trust, the basis is donation. Therefore the donor must have a say in the management."

for economic uplift of the community, five other community trusts and two professional organizations, Rotarian Mehta notes, "I've always been service minded... firmly believe that those to whom the Lord has been kinder should spare their time, not only their worldly benefits, with their less fortunate brethren... Win or lose, it's not going to mar my enthusiasm for serving the community."

Referring to wife Daisy's work on several committees of the BPP, notably the Parukh Dharamshalla, Mehta says, "If I'm elected, I'd have the unique distinction of a family commitment to the service of the BPP."

Mehta's manifesto

A vacancy will be created on the Board of Trustees of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet (BPP) when Eruch Desai completes his 10-year term as trustee on December 4, 1985.

I have great pleasure in offering myself as a candidate to fill the above vacancy as I am confident that with the support of my friends and well-wishers, I will be able to help this prestigious institution in discharging its onerous duties and in solving the many problems which beset our community.

Born in April 1936, I completed my Bachelor of Commerce degree in 1957 and decided to become a Chartered Accountant. However, destiny had ordained something different for me. My father's sudden failing health in early 1959 forced me to give up my C.A. Articleship in order to look after our then family business of mining and export of iron-ore from Port Redi in Ratnagiri District. I am the chairman of Modern Sixteen Cine Lab Pvt Ltd, Dharti Cine Enterprises Pvt Ltd, and of Dharti Chitrapat Sahas Pvt Ltd.

Thrown into the world of business at the young age of 23 years, I have been looking after our various family businesses on my own with a fair measure of success. This has given me good practical insight into finance, management and administration which will stand me in good stead in assisting the BPP in the task of more effective utilization of their resources and in the work of running institutions like the Godrej Memorial Printing Press and the Industrial Institute for Men which it owns. The experience I have gained in my own businesses will also enable me to assist the BPP to deal with labor problems which have started cropping up in its various departments.

My late parents had always instilled in me the idea of charity towards the less fortunate people around me. Later in life, I felt that I must not only give in charity, but must also place my own time and energy at the service of the poor. I was invited to join the Rotary Club of Bombay North in 1974 and have served there in various capacities

including that of president in 1983-84. I am the president of the Cine Laboratories Association and the vice-president of the Raw Film Steering Committee. As far as service to our own community is concerned, the following may be mentioned:

- Trustee of Bai Dhunmai Cawasji High School at Khandala

- Trustee of Byramji Furdoonji Kooka and Bai Rattanbai Byramji Kooka Charity Trust in Bombay

- Trustee of Bai Bhicaijee Jehangir Mody Parsi Sanatorium Trust in Lona-vala

- Member of the managing committee of the Parsi Lying-in Hospital

- Member of the Committee for the Economic Uplift of the Parsi Community set up by the BPP

- Member of the managing committee of the M.F. Cama Athornan Institute at Andheri in Bombay

- Member of the executive committee of the Fourth World Zoroastrian Congress held in Bombay in January, 1985.

I now look forward to better opportunities and a larger scope for serving our community through a prestigious institution like the BPP.

In 1978, my wife had felt the same sort of urge to serve the poor of our community. With that end in view, she has been an active member of the Parukh Dharamshalla Advisory Committee, the Doongerwadi Advisory Committee and recently the Matrimonial Bureau, all set up by the BPP. Both of us earnestly desire to serve in the best interests of our community.

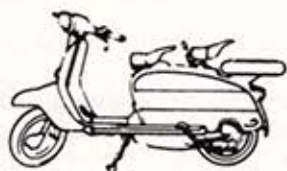
The existing problems facing our community have been there since long and are known to all of us. However, I would like to mention in particular, the following problems that now confront it:

- The BPP is perhaps the largest property owner and the biggest municipal tax-payer in Bombay. One of the major problems facing persons occupying the BPP properties is that house repairs are either not carried out, or it takes months to carry them out. The BPP staff are no doubt doing their best to cope with these problems but they have their constraints of time and finance. Steps must be taken to see that legitimate grievances are dealt with in a speedy and effective manner. Financial co-operation of tenants must be sought, as it is in the interest of tenants to see that the houses they are staying in do not collapse and render them

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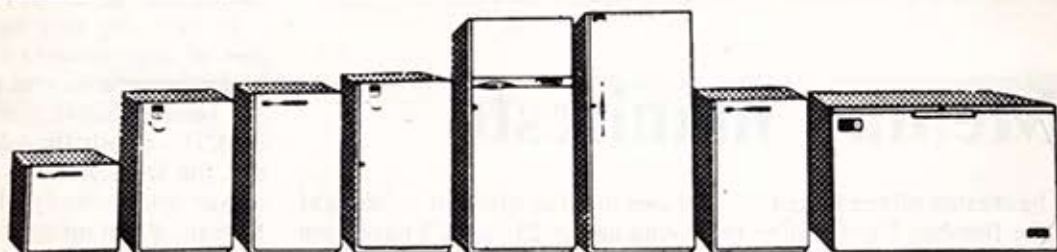
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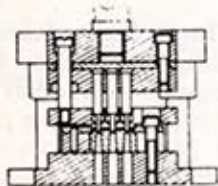
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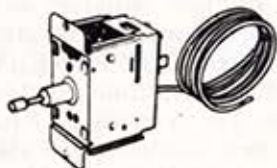
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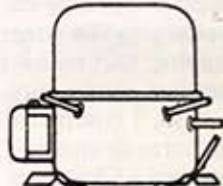
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homeless. Since tenants are constantly dissatisfied with the repairs executed by the BPP, they can be asked to send in their estimates of the repairs and after approval of the said estimates, the tenants should be allowed to undertake repairs on their own. The trustees should hand over to them 50 percent of the total cost, as their contribution, after satisfying themselves that the work has been properly done. This way the grievances of the tenants will be considerably lessened and work will be of a better quality as it will be done under the personal supervision of the tenants.

•The crying need of the middle and lower middle class Parsis today is housing. The Committee for the Economic Uplift of the Parsi community of which I am a member, has set up norms for allotment and a merit rating system for short-listing of and selecting applications for allotment. Allotment of flats is being done in a more systematic manner. But our community is still in great need for many more flats for the poor and middle-income groups. New housing must be constructed as speedily as possible on all

the unutilized land resources of the BPP.

•I would like the community to build up an economically strong middle class by encouraging middle class Parsis to set up their own small-scale industries and businesses. Leading Parsi business houses like the Tatas, the Wadias and the Godrejs should be approached with a request to encourage these small entrepreneurs by placing orders for ancillaries and/or components and parts for their giant concerns.

•Schemes can be initiated to impart vocational and technical skills to deserving youngsters to enable them to be self-employed.

•I firmly believe in upholding the good and established customs and traditions of our Zoroastrian religion. Adequate housing, medical and educational facilities as well as a decent wage must be offered to our mobeds to infuse in them a desire to take up priesthood as a full-time career. A strong athornan, full-time practising mobed class, will help to uphold our religious rites and further strengthen our belief in the Zoroastrian faith and religion.

I also believe in the principle of accountability and if elected, will appear before the community at regular intervals to give an account of the activities of the BPP as well as to answer any questions raised.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize that I would like to serve the community, of which I am proud to belong, with dedication and determination, in a devoted manner. I firmly believe that people who have the time, the will and the energy must help in the social upliftment of their less fortunate brethren.

I should however, like to state that if I am given this opportunity to serve as a trustee of the BPP, I shall not seek reelection after my term of office is over, as I feel that the present tenure of office of 10 years is sufficient for any individual to give his best to his community, and he should make way for fresh thoughts and fresh minds, so that the Punchayet is constantly rejuvenated and made a dynamic body.

I do hope and pray that the electoral college which has the right to vote, will give me that opportunity.

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Desai's decade

BPP trustee Eruch
Desai talks of his term in office and
why he is seeking reelection.

Arnavaz S. Mama

"What do you expect of a trustee? He must have integrity, honesty, average intelligence. He must be able to manage the Trust properties to the best of his ability and in the interest of the community. If he's in a position to do this at the end of 10 years, he's in a better position (to do so) at the beginning of the eleventh year — so long as he's fit, not infirm or too old... Experience counts a lot in managing trust affairs."

Eruch Desai, whose 10 years of BPP trusteeship are running out at a time when the community has begun to look askance at a second term, was justifying his decision to seek reelection in

November 1985 (His opponent is businessman Hector Mehta). "The community will support (me). All contending parties in electoral reforms (have opted) for two terms of seven years each. That's the pulse to judge by," he argues. Analyzing the costs and rewards of trusteeship in his Mulla and Mulla Craigie Blunt and Caroe office at Flora Fountain on September 2, 1985 Desai says, "The more you are involved the more you enjoy doing something for the community — despite sacrifice of time, energy and income."

The 54-year old solicitor is a member of 18 subcommittees of the BPP (there are 36 in all) dealing with the various

jobs of the Punchayet. Among these are the J.J. College of Commerce, foreign education, vocational guidance bureau, kusti wool, Alpawalla museum etc. Normally constituted by the BPP chairman, each subcommittee consists of two or three trustees, Parsi social workers and BPP staff. Noting that "the chairman of a subcommittee is the moving force, giving direction, thrust," Desai says, "For the first time in nine years I became chairman of (eight) committees... Committees should be so constituted that the chance (to become) chairman should come after a lapse of four to five years and not after nine years."

Desai was catapulted onto the BPP board by the late Nadirshah Mulla, Desai's professional mentor and ex-chairman of the BPP, at a time when the community was prejudiced against the institution that seemed impervious to its requirements. The orthodox young lawyer was appointed by the then chairperson, Lady Hirabai Jehangir to the Federation's executive council where Desai says, "I was able to do something about the Adoption Bill and the Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act. I was the first to draw the attention of the community to the clause (in the Adoption Bill) which provides for the child being brought up in the religion of the adoptive parents. I drafted amendments to the Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act (with the help of) my friend Phiroze Vakil who is conversant with divorce cases. (Former BPP chairman, the late) Erach Nadirshaw and I signed separate representations to the government regarding the Adoption Bill on behalf of the Federation and the Punchayet." However, when BPP chairman B.K. Boman Behram's personality clash with Delhi Parsi Anjuman president Shrivastav Nargolwala led to the BPP's withdrawal from the Federation, shortly after the Third World Zoroastrian Congress in 1978, the fair bespectacled Desai dared to cast the only dissenting vote — "I am always a fighter," he says — and found himself "relegated to the background (while) others were asked to lead in the matter."

Desai's opponents question his performance on the BPP board. "Talking

The legal documents have been "in limbo" because of the controversies.

The government
would take heed if
the community
"spoke with one
voice."

about non-performance, people should know what is performance," counters Desai. He speaks of the Adarbad building scheme at Hughes Road which had begun and the documents executed before he "came on the scene." Desai says he came "to know that the prospective allottees were to be charged higher amounts which the builders were not justified in charging. Mine were the lone dissenting notes."

When Desai "took up cudgels on behalf of the prospective allottees," the matter was referred for (a senior legal counsel's opinion who upheld that nearly 50 percent of the amount that the builders were charging was suspect. At this time Desai said he was just recovering from typhoid and defied his doctor's orders to keep the date with the counsel. "My wife didn't speak to me for days," he recalls. Ultimately, says Desai, the builders managed to get only 50 percent of the claimed amount. Later, the builders registered their annoyance with Desai by pressurizing the institution which had invited him to preside over their function into withdrawing that invitation, Desai noted.

Desai, who prides himself on the independence of his decisions while working as the member of a team, says, "with all humility... my performance is no less than that of any colleague in the last 10 years. What is it that I have not done that somebody else has done?" he asks. Then, referring to the work of redrafting the constitution of the World Zoroastrian Organization (WZO) at the behest of the Federation, he notes, "The implementation stage has to be done by somebody and that's me." (The WZO's constitution assigns equal weight to individual and anjuman members, so that the BPP, for example, would be entitled to the same one vote as any individual. In 1984, when there seemed to be some chance of the Federation joining the WZO, Desai had been assigned the task of drafting amendments to the WZO constitution to bring it in line with Federation and BPP ideas).

Another task which took "a heavy toll of time and energy" was the association with the Souvenir Committee and collection of advertisements for

the souvenirs published for the Third and Fourth World Zoroastrian Congresses. Desai says he has been "instrumental in getting the highest contributions to the congresses" and more than Rs 50,000 in donation at each of the two congresses and for the Rayomand Committee consisting of Parsi ladies and others who have been collecting funds for the BPP's housing schemes. ("My wife rings up my clients and gets the advertisements.")

"It is alleged," says Desai, "that I don't go to the baugs regularly. But apart from the fact that this is not fully correct, I'm not on the committee relating to the baugs. No trustee interferes with affairs relating to other committees. The matter is taken care of by colleagues who are on the committee. We go when we receive calls from people who know us and I've been to the baugs with (BPP trustee Maneck) Hodiwala who is on one such committee. Normally maintenance and repairs is looked after by the joint secretary in charge who is assisted by the engineer and the supervisors of the concerned baug. So, apart from giving the usual directions, there's very little that a trustee has to do in the matter. Besides, all matters of expenditure come up before the board, so every trustee is aware (of what is going on). All trustees contribute to the discussions and take an active part in the deliberations and decisions. To say that any particular trustee is managing the whole show about repairs is not true."

In reference to the management of trust funds, Desai says "We are trying to get as much return for the community as we can. I was on the investment committee with (former BPP trustee) Jamshed Guzder... (and) am associated with many companies as director... it does not require any great expertise

to manage these sort of affairs. We have limitations in law; we cannot invest in shares or debentures of public limited companies and earn higher returns."

Other instances of Desai using his individual discretion related in one case to a close relative living in one of the baugs who sought to shift to an identical vacant flat above his own. Desai refused to espouse his case because of the relationship and the flat was allotted to someone else. Similarly, when a senior BPP employee was being allotted a flat that was too large for the size of his family, Desai objected. He recalls that the present BPP chairman, Dr Aspi Golwalla, had supported his line of thought but was overruled.

Indeed, Desai admits that his wife Coomi is not very happy at the idea of his offering himself for appointment, to the Punchayet a second time around, even though she herself "takes a lot of interest and is full of ideas and discussions... Apart from regular fortnightly meetings one or the other committee meeting is always there." The foreign students committee of which he is now chairman, required him to spend over four hours each on two or three days, interviewing candidates. Initially, Desai says he used to spend two to three hours a day on Punchayet work. "Now the grasp is quicker and the turnout faster — experience and training counts a lot" notes Desai, adding, "A solicitor is a must on the board, whether I'm elected or not," as in his estimate "90 percent of Punchayet work is legal work."

"By convention, files come to the senior legal trustee on the board who has to ascertain the facts, apply the law, give decisions. Thereafter it goes to the other trustees. I am senior to (ex-judge Jal) Vimadlal on the board," says Desai, adding, "I would refuse to concede the proposition that any one trustee can take credit. It is all collective work. You can't single out a trustee for praise or blame... Any single trustee who thinks he is achieving everything is living in a fool's paradise."

Desai claims that a solicitor like himself with a qualified staff and office amenities at his beck and call is

capable of absorbing a substantial load of work on the Punchayet's behalf. "I am in a better position to deliver the goods," he says, "And if large industrial houses and clients take advantage of my advice and guidance, it should be to the interest of the community

"You can't single out a trustee for praise or blame... Any single trustee who thinks he is achieving everything is living in a fool's paradise."

that it can avail of this advantage without fees. I've tried to see that costs are kept less than what we charge to the others and though this is a partnership firm, I do not share in the profits from Punchayet work."

The small railway platform at Ud-vada has been the source of much discomfort to Parsis going to the Iranshah as it fails to accommodate all the rakes of the long trains and there have been cases of accident as people, unused to such acrobatics, are required to jump to the ground. Representations to the railway ministry had hitherto failed to yield result, but at the last Federation meeting in Madras, Desai had announced that thanks to his efforts, the railway ministry had now agreed to the extension of the platform. Desai now added that the expenditure had been sanctioned by the ministry from this year's budget and that the work is under way.

Desai's two main priorities today are housing and mobed amelioration. He says that "425 flats have been constructed in the past 10 years and notes that "the idea of building a Godrej Baug was mooted in Erach Nadirshaw's time or perhaps Lady Jehangir's. On the question of delays in the Punchayet's housing schemes, Desai says, "We are not in the position of private builders. We have to stand in queue. The government has great regard for our institution. The natural process of time is taken but they consider our requests and schemes and proposals sympathetically."

Desai says that "the Gibbs Road scheme (where 57 ownership flats are being constructed for affluent Parsis) has been on the anvil since around 1977." Explaining its two main angles as the Income tax and the Rent Act points of view, Desai recounted that there were two alternatives: "We sell the property outright and utilize the proceeds for building for the poor or give it on long term lease to a developer for which there might be complications under the Rent Act." Tax expert Soli Dastur had opined that there would be no complications to leasing the property "because of certain decisions of the Bombay High Court." It was considered better to lease than to sell as thereby there would be no tax complications at all, said Desai.

When legal counsel Nani Palkhivala was consulted, he advised that there was no objection to leasing the Gibbs Road property as "part of a composite scheme. (The sale proceeds of the ownership flats at Gibbs Road will provide the capital that the BPP requires to construct rental housing for middle class and underprivileged Parsis in Bharucha Baug, Panthaky Baug and Godrej Baug. Under the composite scheme, these various constructions are considered as sections of one scheme)."

Then, in answer to recent allegations made by BPP trustee Homi Ranina that the Gibbs Road scheme, as originally conceived would have led to a variety of disasters including confiscation of the land by the government and/or the imprisonment of the trustees, Desai retorted, "Apart from our own opinion neither counsel (Dastur or Palkhivala) advised that we'd have offended the provisions of the Bombay Rent Act."

On his part Desai discounts the commonly heard allegations that dissension on the BPP board has increased since Ranina's election. "I wouldn't say dissension has increased," notes Desai, "but things could be better. We are able to take care. The atmosphere is as cordial and cooperative as before, but there are some reservations. Things could be better if all the trustees work as a team."

Referring to the Athravan Educational Trust which has been set up by Ranina, Desai comments, "The objectives are laudable...it is possible to implement the objectives...(it) depends how they are implemented."

Desai feels that the Trust has tried to incorporate the "maximum benefits, considering the legal complexities." But, says Desai, "If I was asked to join the AET, I would be very wary to join such a board...I would like to do it as a member of the board of trustees of the Parsi Punchayet. The Punchayet still has a very great name. A large majority of the community — and outsiders — hold it in high esteem. Not a finger is pointed (at us)...they look at us with respect. The public outside Bombay hold us in great esteem. That is why there are four BPP trustees on the executive council of the Federation."

Indeed, Desai's prescription to end priestly woes is to "marry the Parsi Punchayet scheme (for the amelioration of mobeds) and the AET — have a composite, united front after having proper discussion with a cross section of the community. A united approach is the only salvation. As a divided house we cannot succeed."

Despite the Government of India census figures published in July '85 Desai says, "Our community's figures, if you count world wide, are not on a decrease. In Bombay they may be going down, but people are going outside Bombay and we want people to go outside. Despite building a lot of housing for the last 10 years, we still have so

"All trustees take an active part in the decisions. To say that any particular trustee is managing the whole show about repairs is not true."

many applicants on our waiting list. There are limitations to the accommodation we can provide..."

Comparing the Federation of Parsi Zoroastrian Anjumans of India which is a meeting ground for the discussion of community interest to the Indian National Congress when it began in 1885, Desai calls it "one of the most useful bodies for the community." He concedes that there is a "fear in some

quarters that it's a radical body. (But) it remains a fear, not a fact. Even since the Federation started we've continued with our traditions of custom and religion... (there is) no perceptible danger of inroads at all. If there is an attempt, we are there to take care of it," assures

"Even since the Federation started, we've continued with the traditions of custom and religion... there is no perceptible danger of inroads."

the orthodox Desai. Describing it as a representative body of "all-India dimensions," Desai says the "government authorities would pay more heed to the Federation than to one punchayet which has a sway within its own jurisdiction."

However, Desai feels that the Federation should ensure delegation of duties and responsibilities and a more efficient implementation of certain spheres of activity like the properties of defunct anjumans, the problems faced by other anjumans and matters of all-India importance such as the Adoption Bill, the Marriage and Divorce Act etc." The legal documents have been "in limbo" says Desai, because of the controversies in the community. It is Desai's opinion that the government would take heed, if the community "spoke with one voice, but a divided house (must) face the consequences."

Regarding the recent unanimous decision of the Federation to seek limited reservations in educational institutions founded by community charity, Desai says he was "once of the view that we should fall in line with the mainstream. But now we should do something for our community. We are being left out for more reasons than one. The government has always taken a very sympathetic view to any approach by the Parsi community. It would lend a sympathetic ear," he adds.

Questioned about his opinion on conversion, Desai noted that though he is personally against it, "in some cases

the head must rule the heart." When the matter of the navjote of American engineer Joseph Peterson, had come up before the BPP board, Desai recalls that there was "a move to condemn it in the strongest possible terms." Desai notes that "we have followed the tradition of not converting anybody in this country (but) the legal position is quite clear (In the celebrated Parsi Punchayet case of 1908 the judges had held that while the Zoroastrian religion enjoins conversion, the Parsis, on their advent to India, had adopted the policy of not converting anyone)." As trustees "we can deny such converts the benefits under the Punchayet," says the middle-of-the-road lawyer, who drafted the resolution adopted by the BPP board.

Of the B.D. Petit Parsee General Hospital Desai says, "It is an independent body — we are only the custodians. The actual problems are not because of the inactivity of the BPP but because of tax laws. Donations are not freely given because there is no tax exemption. We as a body do not interfere with the management." Noting that "they are doing their job as best they can in the circumstances," Desai had a special word of approbation for the hospital's honorary secretary Dr Homi Mehta and treasurer Noshir Dubash, who are "doing wonderful work." There is nothing that has "very strikingly gone wrong which can necessitate the interference of the BPP."

At the doongerwadi, Desai does not consider the depleting numbers of nassessalars to be alarming. Says Desai, "We are continuing to receive workers for the job. The question (of a critical shortage of nassessalars) will not arise in the next 25 years or more in my view," adds Desai.

Calling the BPP the "de facto representative of world Zoroastrians," Desai refers to its activities in the fields of housing, education, care of the aged and the infirm, rural boys' homes, medical and financial assistance etc and asks, "Which institution of any other community does so much?"

Desai notes several "pluses and minuses" in the state of the community as a whole. "In the professions, Parsis are as active and prosperous as ever. There are lots of young businessmen coming up, starting with some industry or the other." According to Desai, "The younger generation is turning out to be smarter and smarter and the mid-

dle classes more alert and conscious of progress and that is a happy sign." Quoting the "enthusiasm for religious knowledge among the younger generation" and the frequency of young boys and girls visiting the agiaries, Desai says, "You have to stand in queue to go into Aslaji's (the agiary near Shapoor Baug at Grant Road) on Meher roj, Meher mah." He foresees "no particular adversity for the community in the next 25 to 30 years."

"What I'm unhappy about," says Desai, "is the inertia of the affluent and of the intellectuals. They are ever willing to help when asked, but the initiative to do something for the community on their own is lacking." However, Desai notes that "all the different sections are proud to be Parsis and they are always ready to help."

Though "not fighting shy of a (public) debate," Desai argues that a "debate does not add to the dignity of the office... does not befit the high status that the Trust enjoys," which is also the impression of his non-Parsi friends. Desai, whose own mode of campaigning is to approach voters individually, says he had acquainted Ranina of his views in '84 and adds, "I will not view a proposal for a debate with favour... I may agree to a debate when I am no longer a trustee."

"The affluent and the intellectuals are ever willing to help when asked, but the initiative to do something for the community on their own is lacking."

Desai says he sees no threat from any quarter to his desire to continue in the trusteeship, although he concedes that the "race has been started so early to preempt me away... Hector Mehta is a good friend of mine, but I personally think he could have waited for some more months. The fact that he has not, shows that somebody is after my scalp. My work and experience will tell with the electorate. If others outside the

community can use my time and experience, why not the community?" Although Desai admits that "certain forces are acting against me," he expects fairly good support from both the E and F register voters. "I have received many phone calls," he says, "that they are behind me and that I should go on fighting — the response is very encouraging."

Desai admits to "second thoughts" about the electoral reforms scheme that has been presented by the BPP to the Bombay High Court, specifically the raising of the amount of donation qualifying for F register membership (which votes for trustees) from the Rs 5,000 stipulated by the High Court, in 1910, to the presently suggested Rs 7,500. There has been an "unusual rush in the past one year to enrol in the F register and capture voting power," acknowledges Desai who says he had initially accepted the idea that increasing the amount to more than Rs 7,500 would freeze donations. To counter what he calls this "very pernicious tendency (to acquire) control over voting rights," Desai is now of the opinion that the amount be hiked to between 10 and 15 thousand rupees. Despite the fact that such purchase of voting power may dim Desai's chances of reelection, he bravely notes that he is "indirectly glad because the community is getting the money, even if I lose."

Director of nearly 23 companies, Rotarian Desai has been a lecturer at various legal seminars and has appeared before the Parliamentary Select Committee for amendments to the Companies Act and the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act.

"Committees should be so constituted that the chance (to become) chairman should come after a lapse of four to five years and not after nine years."

Having succeeded in helping to establish the women and children's fund for the Federation, with the assistance of his office and the connections of Delhi's Shiavax Nargolwala who is a retired Indian Civil Service man, Desai has now mooted a women and children's fund for the BPP as such trusts can be communal but still avail of tax benefits. A table tennis, cricket and photography buff, Desai says he has "suspended his hobbies." Even reading for pleasure has "reduced to a trickle" for there is his three-year-old son, Hormuzdyar, who has a stake on his time.

Desai, who claims to judge each "proposal on its merits, not who is behind it," says that he belongs to "no group and no party. My only party is the community and my only interest is the interest of the community... I have sometimes given my views against particular groups and sometimes in favour, depending on the merits of the proposal. No matter which group supports me, it does not mean that there's a quid pro quo..."

experience. Having acquired first hand knowledge of the working of, the various facets of the Trust activities, my main object in seeking reelection is to put myself in a better position to be used for the purposes of our community's welfare and happiness, and I urge, for the support of all.

Entering the age of 55, I have not become too old to call it a day. The primary role of a trustee of such a large trust as the Bombay Parsi Punchayet, is to best manage the Trust affairs as a man of ordinary prudence would manage his own, with integrity, honesty and independence, and I can claim to my credit, that this I have done adequately. With added experience, I am now in a better position than a decade ago. Although if the court upholds the suggestion for two terms of seven years each, I shall step down at the end of the fourth year of my renewed term as a trustee, in deference to the court decision and the verdict of the community, in spite of the fact that I would be entitled to have a full term of 10 years.

I repeat my representations, that I am a firm believer in our Zoroastrian faith, traditions, customs and practices, and in the preservation of our tenets, heritage and culture. But at the same time, I have an open mind. It shall always be my endeavor that the efforts of our illustrious ancestors to retain our identity and prominence as a community in this changing world, shall not have been in vain. I have been true to these representations in letter and in spirit, and I shall continue to do so till death do us part. My active role with the Federation of Parsi Zoroastrian Anjumans of India, has created some misgivings in the minds of a few misunderstood but well meaning members of our community, quite a few of whom are my friends, but I can say with legitimate pride, that not a single tradition, custom, or precept of our religion that we have followed up to now for the last several hundreds of years, has been affected even in a remotest possible manner, and I shall continue to strive that the same position prevails so long as my association with the Federation lasts. In fact, none of us trustees presently on the Board, has that much expertise to tinker with the same. These matters should best be left to our Dasturs and scholars.

It has been the shouting from the housetops that housing has been the need of the hour for the community,

Desai's Manifesto

It was nearly 10 years ago that I had approached you for your support and encouragement, and the same were readily extended to me in the fond hope, that I would justify your confidence reposed in me. Towards the end of my term, I now approach you once again for similar response with a sense of satisfaction, not only to my conscience, but I truly believe, also to a large majority of our intelligent well-meaning voters of having done something for the betterment of our community

and for the benefit of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet Trust institutions.

When I approached you on the last occasion, I did not have the first hand impression of the gigantic task then looming large before my horizon. Although it started with a position of uncertainty, it is ending happily of having contributed my mite for achieving a better tomorrow for the community. I am now offering myself for reelection, to be used once again, according to my capacity which has grown richer with

and I had joined the chorus and promised to do something in this direction. I refuse to believe that any single trustee can claim the sole credit for any achievement in this connection, and I would most frankly say, that without the collective effort on the part of all of us, including the experts and some institutions of our community, we would not have been able to achieve what we have achieved in the last 10 years, in spite of the present day difficult times and herculean task involved in undertaking such activities, in these days of complexities of modern legislation, and the fact that the trustees cannot be equated to private builders. Not only that a single residential building of ours has not collapsed at any time because of timely repairs, but we have been able to construct through such collective efforts during the last decade, nearly 425 flats for the community, thus providing a shelter over the heads of quite a few needy who were so far homeless and shelterless. The buck does not stop here. But it shall soon reach the end of the journey.

Even when I undertook the onerous task, I was fully conscious that considering the manifold activities that I was already engaged in, in the course of my profession, and as a director of more than 20 companies of repute such as those inter alia managed by the Birla and the Tata Groups, I should spare enough time for the purpose of attending to the Trust affairs. I am glad to say that in this respect, my position in the well-known firm of solicitors of M/s Mulla and Mulla & Craigie Blunt and Caroe, having a large office and a staff paraphernalia, has helped me considerably in acquitting myself creditably.

I can say without fear of contradiction, that I have been regularly attending the meetings of the Trust, and to cite only an example, out of a total of 111 regular meetings of the trustees held during the last more than three and a half years, I have attended in all 94 meetings (only sickness or some unavoidable engagement kept me away from those which I did not attend) and in quite a few cases, even at the cost of cutting short my journeys outside Bombay in the course of professional engagements. In this respect my record compares favorably with most of my colleagues on the Board. The above, apart from the hundreds of non-scheduled and committee meetings held

during my term of office.

Apart from attending regularly to the trust affairs in the manner explained above, a trustee has also to fill in the role of an Akabar to some extent. He has to guide those who need guidance, and help those who need assistance. It has been my privilege not only to keep my doors open every working Saturday afternoon, besides other days also in case of urgency, to meet the members of the community for the purpose, but I have also extended my helping hand in whatever way I can, to the various anjumans of India including Surat, Pune, Baroda and Srinagar, for solving any of their problems, including advice and guidance both orally and in writing, in relation to the management of their respective trust affairs. This, apart from the role that I have played as a Trustee with a legal background in the course of the administration of the Bombay Punchayet Trust affairs when various individuals, associations, anjumans and organizations approach us for their matters on hand.

A trustee is accountable in law for his acts of omission and commission, if it goes counter to the interest of the Trust. I can be no exception. Apart from accountability under law, I would also like to be accountable, not only to my dear voters, but also to any member of our community who wishes an explanation. But I would not like to specifically convene a meeting "to explain my accountability," with a view to wrongly steal a march over others, but would like to participate in a meeting organized and convened by the Punchayet as a collective body, which we have done in the past and where I also participated. As and when such meetings are convened by the Punchayet I would gladly face the audience and answer any question.

I do not want to build up a collision of dreams with the realities on ground. Nor do I want to build castles in the air as is the theme song of most of such manifestoes. The liquid funds of the Punchayet in 1976 when I entered the scene were of the order of Rs 4.5 crores and have now increased to nearly Rs 6.5 crores. The interest income has increased from about Rs 6,200,000 in 1976 to Rs 1.2 crores in 1985 by judicious investment, (and I was a member of the Investments Committee for quite some time). There is still a gigantic task ahead, to consolidate, apart from putting to the best use, the exist-

ing assets and continue to manage in a prudent way, the existing affairs. To achieve once again the position of yore for our community we have still to pass through the bad and the good, through thick and thin, through water and fire. We have yet so much to build, so much to shed, so much to restore, in housing, in employment, in relief of poverty, in better education, better medical relief, better infirmary facilities, to lead to a better Parsi Zoroastrian, and a better priestly class. True, this is a collective effort, and I have contributed thereto in my own humble way, but at the same time, it also requires thrust, leadership and direction. With the experience that I have gained of the community's needs and the Trust affairs, with contacts that I have established in the course of my career, both in profession and in public life, I can say with all humility, that it will be far easier for me to be equal to the task.

Human nature tends to make one focus more on the trilogy "I, me, and myself" other than the rational "who." I prefer the latter to the former. I do not belong to any group or party, and conscience is the only judge of my actions, reason my only monitor. Fear and hatred do not exist in my heart. My motto is to work without any expectation of any word of praise or credit. Success does not elate me, failure does not depress me. I have neither the desire, nor the ambition to seek self-glorification. I have up to now, accepted and shouldered every office in my life in the name of Ahura Mazda, and if I am asked to shoulder this responsibility again, I will gladly do so. If not, I shall have no disappointment. My service will still be at the disposal of the members of the community in any capacity that they want. But I feel that I will be able to discharge the same better if I were to continue to be a part of the august institution of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet.

Will you not, my dear voter, assist me in achieving the above?

September 10, 1985.

CORRECTION

In "The Parsi Priesthood of India: Dasturs of distinction" by Arnavaz Chubb, the last paragraph of the first column (*Parsiana*, August 1985 page 40) should read: "Dastur Darabji Peshotanji Sanjana succeeded his father as High Priest of the Wadia Atash Bahram in 1898."

AET: a matter of trust?

Seldom has the formation of a community trust raised as much controversy or antagonism as has the Athravan Educational Trust (AET). Every aspect of the Trust, formed on February 21 this year, has been a subject of heated debate, starting with the inaugural function and continuing consistently thereafter. The trust deed, the trust address and even the trustees themselves have become a focal point of attack by nearly all sections of the community.

Two High Priests have alleged that the Trust, "has taken the community at large and the athravans in particular for a ride." An editorial in *The Bombay Samachar* states, "People want to start grandiose schemes in the name of mobeds, but such schemes do not stand the scrutiny of reason and logic." And the *Jam-e-Jamshed*, a one time ally of the people behind the Trust, carried editorials on the front page of the paper on three different days, criticizing the Trust, stating, "the trust deed in its present form... provides considerable scope for misuse."

Angered by the unexpected backlash, trustees Homi Ranina, a noted tax consultant and trustee of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet, Dastur Firoze Kotwal, High Priest of the Wadia Atash Bahram, and Khojeste Mistree, founder of Zoroastrian Studies, held a public meeting in Dadar on August 10, under the auspices of the Mancherji Edalji Joshi Memorial Trust where, in addition to offering an "explanation and clarification" on the Trust, as announced, they blasted their critics. Kotwal, the most restrained of the three speakers noted that the Press had a "partisan attitude" and alleged that "vested interests" were working against the Trust. He stated that the trustees would issue a White Paper at a suitable time to counter the allegations made against the Trust and to better

explain the organization's objectives. Ranina noted that much of the attack on the Trust was "clouded by misinterpretation," and by "lay people trying to understand a legal document." Ranina then attacked *The Bombay Samachar* saying that 95 percent of its 1,50,000 subscribers were non-Parsis who "gleefully" read the two columns devoted to Parsi affairs every Wednesday and Sunday.

"Why is a particular community singled out?... (surely there are) better things to write about on Sundays — better subjects, better interests... it does not look nice to face non-Parsis (who read the columns)... the *Samachar's* policy is to publish only one point of view... the letters of support (for the Trust)... are not published."

Turning on the two High Priests, Dasturs Hormazdyar Mirza of Ud-wada and Kaikhusroo JamaspAsa of the Anjuman Atash Bahram, who attacked the Trust in a jointly written article published in the Parsi Press, Ranina said the two priests were not asked to join the Trust because they were "pessimistic... when you set up a trust you need people who will encourage you. We don't need people who are pessimistic." He alleged that JamaspAsa had resigned from the Cama Baug Charity Trust because the trustees wanted to offer bonus, gratuity and other benefits to the priests employed by the Trust. (JamaspAsa denied the allegation.) "We want persons who are positive. (JamaspAsa) would be a misfit in our organization." Ranina claimed that when Mirza was approached in regard to the Trust he retorted, "You are one generation too late." In an indirect reference to Mirza, Ranina noted, "One high priest's two sons have not taken to the priesthood... Where is the dedication (that they speak of)? Ask the people who are

criticizing, what they have done."

He noted that the AET trustees were working for the Trust at "great personal sacrifice." As to why prominent people were not made the trustees and some of the present trustees not kept as employees of the Trust, Ranina said, "a worker never functions with the same dedication as a trustee... a worker has no responsibility... but an unpaid trustee has tremendous responsibility."

Ranina stated that "a lot of the criticism (against the Trust) is fuelled by the presence of Khojeste Mistree." Noting that Mistree was a chartered accountant by profession, Ranina queried, "Can you think of any other Parsi Zoroastrian who has sacrificed his career for religious education?... Do not malign the Trust because of personal prejudices... if somebody is doing something wrong, you do something right."

In an emotionally charged speech, Mistree stated he was "defending something we feel strongly about... the Athravan Educational Trust has been singled out... I am saddened by the scurrilous attacks (on the Trust) not only in *The Bombay Samachar* but also in the *Jam-e-Jamshed* and other liberal, orthodox and ultra orthodox publications and newsletters... senior priests have begun to cast aspersions... today there is a bankruptcy of ideas from the clergy... suddenly the Press have become watchdogs of the community." He alleged that the critics of the Trust had "a dog in the manger attitude... it is no use saying we are all crooks... prove that we are crooks... What is it that Zoroastrian Studies has done to frighten vested interests? We are not going to teach the mobeds about Zoroaster's three wives... only sexually frustrated people think about that... we are going to teach the

mobeds to think... Ours is the only religion which doesn't have an intellectual clergy... for seven years *The Bombay Samachar* has attacked me and I have not replied... that burns them up... the Press wants sensationalism... the High Priests, the Editors, have become lords."

Clouded with emotion

There is no doubt the Athravan Educational Trust controversy has generated as much heat as light. The attacks from both sides appear to be clouded by emotion. Ranina alleged that lay people had misunderstood the Trust but even a legal luminary and former Bombay Parsi Punchayet trustee, Shiavax R. Vakil, who is also legal adviser to the House of Tatas, criticized several aspects of the Trust noting that "no Trust of this character with such draconian powers given to the managing trustee can survive for long, nor attract nor evoke sympathy or trust of the community. Rumors are agog that one of the trustees is likely to go abroad for collection of funds for this Trust — at whose expense?" (Ranina later retorted that the trustee in question was an invitee to the Fifth North American Zoroastrian Congress and his fare had been paid by an association there.)

Ranina's allegation pertaining to JamaspAsa's resignation from the Cama Trust was denied by the High Priest as well as his co-trustee, Shiavax Vakil. Ranina's claim, that *Samachar's* pages were closed to the AET's point of view drew a reply from the paper's Editor Jehan Daruwala asking him to cite if any piece of his or his co-trustees had been turned down for publication. The *Samachar* also carries columns pertaining to other communities on different days of the week. The purpose of these columns is to provide news and analysis of community events for readers of those communities.

Ranina contended that a trust must be of like-minded positive people. Yet in his election campaign he approached and sought support from a cross section of the community. The danger of like-minded people is that they tend to think alike and leave or ignore opposing but valid points of view. And when Ranina alleges a paid worker does not have the same dedication as an honorary trustee, he should cast another glance at some of the BPP staff who certainly have inspired more confidence than certain trustees, especially in

the past. The myth that a paid person is somewhat less committed than the person who pays him, went out with the nineteenth century. The attack on the High Priests brought rebuke from all quarters and further added to the store of bitterness and enmity that the Trust has aroused.

What went wrong? How did a shrewd and perceptive individual like Ranina, who orchestrated such a successful electoral campaign barely a year ago, find himself in such a predicament?

In the election Ranina tread slowly, sought support, sensed the public mood of disenchantment with the Committee for Electoral Rights (subsequently renamed Committee for Economic Revival), helped swell the donor register of voters and went from place to place campaigning. In the AET he presented the community with a fait accompli and then went out seeking support. He did not correctly sense or perceive the mood of the athornans.

For years the priesthood has been seething at the low esteem the community has accorded them. Now, when the demand for priests is greater than the supply, it is the turn of the priests to dictate terms, not vice versa. Ranina and his co-trustees also irked the priests by viewing their problems mainly from an economic point of view. Time and again the priests have stressed that priesthood is a calling and not a commercial proposition. Even if Ranina disagreed with their outlook he could have been more tactful in his approach. Instead he and his co-trustees pushed ahead on the basis of an M.A. thesis which, however worthwhile, must still be classified as the work of an amateur — as unfortunately most of the research on the community is.

Ranina also did not fully realize the extent of resentment Khojeste Mistree's name would arouse in the community. Mistree, over the years, has demonstrated a knack for becoming embroiled in controversies — tact and diplomacy not being one of his strengths — so that his association with the Trust has probably proven more of a liability than an asset at this stage.

Perhaps when all the anger and heat over the AET has simmered, the community will review this odd chapter in a more objective light. They will perhaps hail the controversy as a milestone in the re-emergence of the Parsi priesthood as a force to be reckoned with, not merely the object of behdin charity. After spending years in seclusion and turning their backs on the day-to-day problems in the community, the priests have grappled with contemporary issues. They have suddenly become the focus of attention of the community. Every organization or trust wants to be associated with them in one manner or the other. The Federation of Parsi Zoroastrian Anjumans of India devotes time to the priesthood at every session. Every anjuman or punchayet is hesitant to do anything without their sanction. Newspaper articles, editorials and even advertisements (for filling vacancies) focus on them. As Mistree himself ironically, though unfairly observed, "they have become lords." What the trust did was to cast them as uneducated, impoverished mercenaries.

Perhaps the AET has unwittingly restored the priests to a position of power. Now the question is whether the priests will unite and work for their and the community's betterment, or whether they will once again let the opportunity slip away.



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Ranina's repeat perfo

Homi Ranina's second six-monthly address to the community focuses

Arnavaz S. Mama

"Today the Punchayet is at a cross-road. (There are) currents and cross-currents working inside... some people asked me if I'm going to resign because of not seeing eye-to-eye with others," began BPP trustee Homi Ranina and described such friction on the board of trustees of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet as "legitimate differences of opinion."

In pursuit of his electoral commitment to hold six-monthly meetings to inform the community in general and the Anjuman Committee — which directly elects the trustees — in particular, Ranina had convened a public meeting at the Indian Merchants' Chamber hall on July 24, 1985 — the second after his election to the BPP.

The audience had turned up in strength, wondering whether Ranina, who is also a trustee of the Athravan Educational Trust (AET), would speak in defence of the AET's trust deed which was the focus of criticism in the communal press. Indeed, almost half of Ranina's speech was devoted to the topic of the AET which is one of the two recent schemes for the amelioration of priests, the other being an official BPP scheme.

Another topic of avid interest to the gathering was the forthcoming election to the board of trustees of the BPP, scheduled for November 1985, as sitting trustee Eruch Desai's 10-year term of office draws to a close. While Desai seeks reelection, Bombay businessman Hector Mehta, the evening's chairman, has publicly affirmed his decision to contest Desai's seat.

The first half of Ranina's speech dealt with the usual topics of the BPP — the accounts, new housing construction, repairs, allotment of flats, etc — some of it a repetition of his earlier statements made in February.

Noting that the total annual income of the BPP is about 70 to 75 lakhs of rupees of which "Rs 30 lakhs is absorbed by administration... (and though) 30 percent of the income is consumed by wages," Ranina stated, "our staff is underpaid... (There is)

overstaffing in certain departments... (We are) in the process of terminating the employment of those over 65 years and there will be no fresh recruitment in those areas... by (doing) this we will be able to absorb the increase in labor costs (as) wages and other benefits have increased... (BPP trustee) Naoroji Godrej has spent much time in negotiating these benefits... hope the staff performance will increase in a commensurate way."

On the positive side, Ranina noted, "In the next few years, income will go up sizably because of housing. The rental income from flats will double."

Acknowledging the "slight delay in the implementation of the Gibbs Road Scheme (where the Punchayet is building 57 ownership flats and expecting a surplus of six crores to plough into housing schemes elsewhere)," Ranina noted, "Naoroji Godrej devoted a lot of time to the selection of the best tender — the most reasonable and with best quality... In the next couple of months we hope to complete the foun-

dation and begin construction." Ranina expects the project to be completed by June '87.

Noting that Bharucha Baug, Godrej Baug, and Panthaky Baug denote the sum total of land available to the BPP for new construction, Ranina spoke of the need to tap the land resources of other Parsi charitable trusts. Many such lands have been encroached upon, noted Ranina, eg the land owned by the Parsi Vegetarian Society and the Parsi Radi Society which is capable of sustaining 300 flats; while the Bhiwandiwala Trust's plot, across the sea in Uran, is large enough for 600 more flats. Uran will be a mere 20-minute hovercraft ride away from the Gateway of India in the next 10 years, Ranina noted.

On the subject of flat allotment Ranina reiterated that "merit rating is scrupulously followed," and added, "Though people may be disappointed, they must be told honestly" what chance they have of getting a Punchayet flat. Referring to the unauthorized



Photo: Homiyar Mistry

rmance

on a defense of the controversial Athravan Educational Trust.

occupation of BPP flats, Ranina stated, "We are going to fight these intruders. Even after 15 years we will throw them out... people are trying to make money out of charity."

Ranina described the BPP's new policy on repairs where instead of the Punchayet conducting repairs and recovering 50 percent of the cost from the tenants, "we are telling the tenants to go ahead with their contractor and we give them 50 percent according to our estimate... The tenants can more effectively supervise and be responsible for the quality of work (instead of the) BPP staff which cannot cope."

Approaching the problem of the priests, Ranina noted that even though he had spoken of it in his manifesto he "was not really aware until Huzan Kharas' research paper (was published) that 58 percent of mobeds discourage their children from taking to mobedi..."

"Was the AET necessary? Couldn't the madressas do the same job?" asked Ranina and went on to explain how the madressas' job is to train young boys until they complete their navar and maratab initiation ceremonies. "Only seven boys took to the priesthood in five years," Ranina emphasized. "All the money spent at the madressas was wasted. Madressa trustees cannot be responsible for the boys after their training is completed. There is no trust to encourage the boys to make use of the training received at the madressa."

Noting that there is no trust for the amelioration of Parsi priests — "total funds (for the purpose) are no more than seven lakhs in the BPP" — Ranina stated that the question of merging the madressas also had to be abandoned. Though the Cama Madressa has a total annual income of three lakhs of rupees, Ranina quoted the trustees as saying that "all the income is being used fully." While four lakhs will be received from Tata Housing for the structural repairs of the Cama Madressa buildings, no more than two to three lakhs will be available for mobed welfare, Ranina added.

Referring to the Parsi Punchayet's scheme for mobed amelioration, Ranina noted that the objectives differed. "We believe Rs 600 (the BPP intends to subsidize mobeds whose income is less than Rs 600) is not the answer to the problem. We are not in conflict with each other. They have a limited goal, we have a wider goal. (Later, in answer to a question Ranina said, "I am also part of the BPP scheme. I am part of both schemes. I want both schemes to succeed — they complement each other.") The BPP cannot get the benefit of 80G (exemption to donor and trust from income and gift tax) because of the way its trust deed is worded. Exemption from the gift tax requires (that the trust not be) for any caste, creed or community. We also have certain clauses for women and children. Even if you spend money on women and children of one community, it is deemed to be a secular trust. (We got) the same exemption for the Parsi General Hospital," said Ranina.

Ranina noted that the AET sought to educate the priests in the meaning of the prayers so that "if they know what they are praying, they will not *gapcha maro* (omit sections)." A comparative study of religions is another subject sought to be inculcated because, says Ranina, "Parsis go to *pirs* and *babas* because Parsis believe all religions are the same, which is absurd." The aim, according to Ranina is to create "a new generation of educated mobeds of the twenty-first century (who will) fulfil the special needs of our young people."

The AET was avowedly set up by Ranina together with Dastur Firoze Kotwal, High Priest of the Wadia Atash Bahram, Khojeste Mistree, founder of Zoroastrian Studies (ZS), and others in furtherance of the electoral promise in his manifesto to ameliorate the plight of Zoroastrian priests. An illustrated brochure distributed at the inauguration appealed to the community for funds. The credentials of the Trust, which has a targetted corpus of one crore of rupees, were questioned in a

letter to the liberal daily *The Bombay Samachar* by a Dinshaw Dumasia, quoting extensively from the trust deed which was thereafter published in toto by the conservative *Jam-e-Jamshed*. It is the contention of both these dailies that the trust deed and the brochure are at cross purposes.

Noting that "Naoroji Godrej and my family have given a lot of money to this Trust," Ranina said, "All our trustees are men of integrity." Then to refute what he called the "malicious propaganda in the Press against certain trustees for purely personal reasons," Ranina noted, "Our trustee is going abroad to collect funds... at the invitation of the Fifth North American Zoroastrian Congress (which) will pay for his ticket and all expenses."

Then, taking the bull by the horns, Ranina confronted the critics of the trust deed: "Dinshaw Dumasia's copy of the trust deed was a wrong copy. The amended trust deed, now with the charity commissioner, has no clauses for any benefit to any trustee. I do not know where *Jam-e-Jamshed* got its trust deed from."

"Managing trustee Huzan Kharas is responsible for this Trust being conceived. She wanted Naoroji Godrej to be the managing trustee; but Naoroji said he did not even want to be a trustee if Huzan is in charge because 'I have full faith and confidence in her.'"

"Ours is the only trust deed providing for rotational retirement of trustees. Normally trustees are appointed for life... very good scheme because we have incorporated the corporate concept... the charity commissioner was delighted... The managing trustee cannot remove a trustee; a trustee can be removed only by a majority vote... to speak of untrammelled powers is all wrong."

Using the analogy of Rajiv Gandhi who "has no experience of politics or administration, yet is a leader of 700 million people," Ranina spoke of Kharas' "missionary zeal... has dedicated her life to this project. We feel if things are going to happen, it will be because

of the young people — older people have let us down... Only one BPP trustee wanted to do something for the mobeds and that was the late Maneck Mistry.

"Why (only) employ the young people? We want them to be responsible — only trustees carry responsibility." Ranina noted that the AET's board of trustees is a balanced one, with old, middle-aged and young people.

In the course of the question-answer session which followed, one question pertained to Ranina's earlier statement, made in February, that if the CER (Committee for Economic Revival) fields Minoo Shroff as a candidate for BPP trusteeship, "we shall not oppose him." Asked whether he would now abide by the statement, Ranina noted that this commitment had been made in the context of BPP trustee and Bombay's municipal commissioner Jamshed Kanga resigning from the trusteeship. "If a CER candidate resigns, let the CER put up its candidate. The commitment does not (now) arise. This vacancy is not a CER vacancy," said Ranina.

In the context of the repeated amendments to the Gibbs Road scheme

because of legal implications, someone referred to the lawyers on the BPP's board of trustees and enquired, "Was Eruch Desai not doing any legal advising?" While refraining from comment on the specific question, Ranina noted, "Justice Vimadlal has been of tremendous help to us in regard to rent control."

Another questioner wanted to know why the trustees as a board did not convene the Anjuman Committee and Ranina replied he had "no comments to offer. I am here in fulfilment of my promise."

Questioned on the possibility of converting tenancy flats in the baugs into ownership, Ranina replied, "Charity trusts will not be able to convert (their flats) to ownership because of the trust deeds. And even if the deeds are amended, 60 percent of the tenants will not accept."

In answer to a query, Ranina commented on the undesirable state of some of the agiaries and noted that the solution is to "shift the agiaries into the baugs where the population resides, where the fires would be well looked after," and noted that the BPP had unanimously decided to shift the Godavra

Agiary to Godrej Baug.

Naoroji Godrej, who arrived while Ranina was speaking, accepted the latter's invitation to share the podium with him. Mehta began the evening's proceedings by citing an amusing analogy between the administration of US President Calvin Coolidge and the tight lipped BPP, prior to 1981. Mehta related how, at a White House press conference, various reporters were vainly firing their questions at President Coolidge who when repeatedly asked if he had anything to say on various issues replied each time with the word "no." Then as the reporters filed out of the room, the President called after them, "And don't quote me!"

"Nobody is bound by any obligation unless it has first been freely accepted," noted Mehta. "Our youngest trustee, Mr Homi Ranina has freely accepted the obligation to reach out to our people and to come back to the community with the report of his involvements and achievements in community affairs." He also disclosed that Ranina's family trust had donated Rs 34 lakhs to the BPP for the construction of 20 flats in Godrej Baug.

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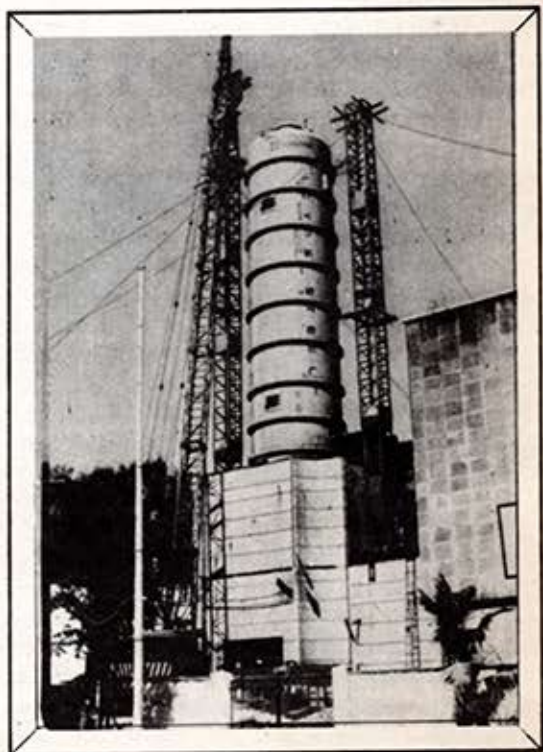


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