

DIALOGUE - '72

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POLITICS—A WHOLETIME OCCUPATION

DILIP CHITRE, a writer, confronts PILLOO MODY, Swatantra Party's President—an architect-turned-politician.

DEAR Editor," one would have written, "your idea of arranging a dialogue between Mr. Pilloo Mody and myself was absurd. What can I discuss with a member of Her Majesty's not-so-loyal Opposition, one of the last few champions of our fundamental freedoms, President of Swatantra Party, overweight aristocrat, architect with one of the most lucrative practices in the country?"

Instead, I write the promised account of an unevenly matched encounter.

I had once met Mr. Mody earlier, before the last elections, on a purely professional assignment. I was working then for an advertising agency which was trying to win the Swatantra Party's account—their election campaign. We got it and perhaps share a fraction of the blame for the Party's sad debacle. At the Gates of Heaven or Socialism, I fear, I will be asked searching questions about that sinful episode.

It was different this time. Mr. Mody was not exactly my client. We were on equal terms. Moreover, this was going to be a dialogue or a confrontation between two Indians. One, a prominent politician. The other—a mere writer. Incidentally, Mr. Mody did not know what sort of a writer I was. For that matter, he seemed to have been mildly bewildered when I told him, defensively, that I was a poet and a short story writer of sorts.

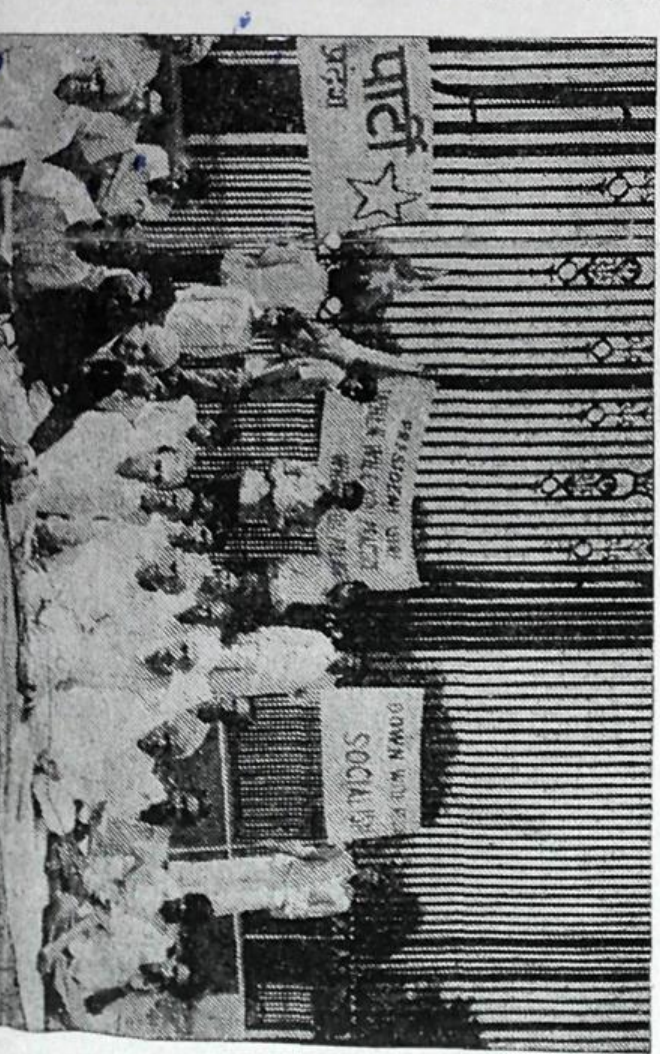
Something seemed to have gone wrong with Mr. Mody's executive diary. My appointment was arranged for eleven in the morning in his office. However, people whom he expected to meet a day earlier or later at the same time kept dropping in. His two telephones (one of which is red despite his anti-communist) kept ringing every second minute. Mercifully, after an hour of such unrelenting punctuation, Mr. Mody told his secretary to take care of the telephone

short cuts to a social and cultural renaissance anywhere. Mr. Mody was not exactly on my wave-length and there was a subtle, mutually irritating breakdown of communication between us at this point.

Mr. Mody then ordered coffee and I repeated my opening question which asked him the reason why he entered politics. Mr. Mody was lost in concentrated thought for a while. Then he began to reminisce. Some of his best observations of the hour belonged to these few minutes of autobiographical musing.

Mr. Mody said that as a professional architect, very early in his career in India, he had an opportunity to observe corruption and malpractices. Municipalities, contractors and even some of his clients accepted the rules of this game which was not to Mr. Mody's taste. He soon realised that this was widespread and it was related profoundly to the political situation. At this time, in 1956 or '57, Mr. Mody read an article by Mamasani which he considers a retrospect a crucial revelation. He wrote a very enthusiastic letter to Mamasani and eventually offered some of his time every week for political work.

At first, Pilloo Mody could hardly



people to go to the remotest villages with a political message any propaganda through the sophisticated, state-controlled mass-media could be effectively countered. At this point, he again advised me to become a carrier of such simple political messages. I told him frankly that my writing was of a different kind and, in any case, I could not be effective among villagers in Maharashtra who would not trust my kind of vocabulary. Actually, I was dodging a discussion in which Mr. Mody was promising to sound like some of the orthodox Marxists, who are otherwise his arch political enemies. Perhaps, all political minds think alike. I would hate to be anybody's propagandist. I believe in education by trial and error instead.

I started off by asking Mr. Mody to lead, into politics. Mr. Mody's pink



face became pensive. He told me that architecture was still his first love and that, as a second choice, he would have liked to become a pianist or an operatic singer. The last seemed an appropriate idea, for Pilo Mody does have a rich, musical voice. "But in India," Mr. Mody continued "There is no alternative for anybody but to be in politics." After another reflective pause and cigarette puff he suddenly shot a question at me, "Why aren't people like you in politics?" He answered his rhetorical question, himself. "You should be in politics!"

I told him quietly that whatever I was doing was perhaps swayed and culturally more purposive than power politics which had a narrower frame. After this, for the next five minutes or so, Mr. Mody tried to persuade me to almost join his party. He was full of passion, conviction and I was less alarmed than embarrassed. I told him that I did share some of his liberal convictions but, unlike him, I was perhaps a radical liberal. "That is impossible!" Mr. Mody growled deeply. "That is a contradiction in terms!" I tried to tell Mr. Mody that I believed in the necessity of deeper social and cultural changes which alone would make politics meaningful in India. What I meant was that there were no political

work. At that time, probably the number one architectural practice in India. He had, at that time, something like 67 assignments. He began to reduce the part of his work to his juniors; number of jobs on hand, reduced his visits to the sites. Soon he was able to create for himself the time he needed. "Time is a very flexible commodity," he said, "you can make it expand or contract almost at will. Anyhow, today I have only six or seven professional assignments on hand. I devote most of my time to politics. It is a full-time occupation."

"What do you think the country needs in this manner?" I asked him rather abruptly and he replied that I was and he would like to ask him such a question. Pilo Mody's eyes twinkled mischievously. "To borrow a famous slogan," he said, *Garibi Hatao*! "Do you wish you had originally said that, really?" I tried to needle him. "I mean it," he said. "Only my methods would be different." I told him that I did not think any ideology was capable of achieving such a feat in a short time in India, though the slogan made marvellous sense by itself. Having been familiar with his party's alternative to the present Ruling Party's economic policies I quickly avoided a detailed answer by him by asking him my next question.

My next question was in fact a series of questions on the future of opposition parties in India and about the future of our Constitution after the last couple of drastic amendments. Mr. Mody was not exactly cheerful but he did not sound pessimistic either. He said he had his faith in the people and that he believed that Mrs. Gandhi would find it increasingly difficult to sustain power. I was a little confused by this utterance because earlier, in the course of conversation, he had described the last election as "mass-scale cheating." I told him that Mrs. Gandhi's victory could be considered quite genuine since she led the kind of omnibus national party reflecting the most

ABOVE: Last year the Swatantra Party staged a 'sit-in' outside Rashtrapati Bhavan to protest against the import of an air-conditioned Mercedes Benz for Rashtrapati Bhavan. According to Mr. Mody, those disillusioned with the new Congress will drift to his party.

LEFT: Asked what the country needs at the moment Mr. Mody says "To borrow a slogan, *Garibi Hatao*. Only my methods would be different."



diverse interests of a variety of interest-groups which alone could come to power at the Centre in a country like India.

"Our alliance at the last elections was also such an omnibus party," Mr. Mody said. "Why did we lose then?" I suggested that by choosing bankrupt and discredited partners, his party had ruined its potential image as an alternative to the New Congress. I also reminded him of a fact which must be one of his more painful political memories: many members of his party and

the other opposition parties had suddenly defected to the New Congress on the eve of the 1971 elections and a few of his prominent colleagues had followed suit soon after Mrs. Gandhi came to power with an overwhelming majority. Rather reluctantly, I told him that Professor Ranga, the prominent ex-Swatantra, was reported to have described Mrs. Gandhi's victory as "the March Revolution." Mr. Mody seemed to have been painfully embarrassed. Quietly, but with conviction, he told me that his Party's style and work would now be different. He did not believe that opportunists would any more be attracted towards his party. Only the faithful ones had remained with it. On the other hand, he hoped that many people who would soon be disillusioned with the New Congress and the various other socialist parties would join Swatantra.

I told him that I did not believe so. I said that by and large the Indian elite consisted of opportunists and that people were rapidly becoming suspicious of the politician—whatever his ideological brand. Unless an entirely new breed of leadership emerged in every other walk of life, and in particular in spheres of social and cultural activity which were still comparatively less tainted with political and economic opportunism, we were heading for an eventual chaos and towards further political regression. He said that his party hoped to attract such a new breed because it had the most sensible programme for the future.

I asked Mr. Mody whether he was as much worried about the future of the mass-media as I was. Broadcasting and television were already directly controlled by the State, compulsorily screened films the cinema and the Press was being gradually strangled. To my surprise, Mr. Mody believed in the greater efficacy in India of personal contact and innovated media like traditional storytelling and folk theatre. He said that if he could get a sufficient number of trained

We were both in time-trouble now, he more than me. He was to participate in a Swatantra Party march-cum-demonstration at Brady House, near Horniman Circle. The demonstration was unlike what one usually associates with the Swatantra Party. It was to protest against Mr. G. D. Morarka's handling of the finances of The Belapur Sugar and Companies, in which apart from himself, the L.T.C., the Central Bank of India, and the Unit Trust of India are major shareholders. The audited accounts of the company had shown serious irregularities, according to the Swatantra Party. Yet, despite considerable agitation among the shareholders, The three public undertakings had abstained from voting on the resolution passing the accounts.

I went along with Mr. Mody to witness the demonstration which promised to be a new element in the Swatantra Party's style and its image as the rich man's party. When we got out of the car and reached the venue, Mr. Mody was wildly cheered by the demonstrators. Somebody requested Mr. Mody to join the demonstrators and make a speech. "Not my style! Not my style!" — he muttered. The sun was harsh and there was no breeze. Mr. Mody and I stood in the shade of Brady House along with a bunch of curious bystanders. In the meantime, Mr. Madhu Mehta delivered a fiery speech denouncing the multi-millionaire Mr. Morarka and the three public undertakings which had remained silent about the financial irregularities in the company, in which they had major shares. Mr. Mody cheerfully smiled at the passer by who recognised him and waved. I bid him goodbye and left. If my encounter with Mr. Mody had failed to produce any fireworks, the fireworks were here, to be sure. The architect was learning the nation-builders' lines—using for a change, the pavement as his pulpit.

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