

“A passion for the community”

Hitting out at his critics Bombay Parsi Punchayet trustee Dinshaw Mehta defends his record and outlines his plans for the future

“You may have read about me, you may have heard about me from others. ... Now come meet the REAL ME,” read the colorful flyer inviting voters to the “Candidate Probing Meeting of Dinshaw Rusi Mehta for a man-to-man frank discussion regarding what has been done and what still needs to be done by your BPP (Bombay Parsi Punchayet).” Just as well the meeting at Godrej Baug was organized on Sunday, September 14, 2008, the same day that *Jam-e-Jamshed Weekly* had carried provocative articles against Mehta and his close friend Maneck Davar, for they got a ready podium to refute the charges before a sizeable gathering.

The derogatory article, “Who is Dinshaw Rusi Mehta?” primarily faults him for favoring family and friends in the allotment of Punchayet housing; and the one titled “Who is Maneck Davar?” castigates the millionaire Davar for benefiting from a sprawling Khareghat Colony flat and for supporting Mehta who had purportedly aided him in acquiring this flat.

Declaring himself “the last person to bow down to cheap

blackmail like this,” Davar started his speech on a humorous note, saying the morning’s publicity had earned for him a matrimonial enquiry over the phone! After dispelling the misconceptions raised by the *Jamé* article Davar clarified that he was referring to a fictitious phone call. “People now don’t believe in *Jamé*. Every single decision concerning housing is jointly made by all the seven trustees in the Punchayet. If trustees say they don’t know, they don’t deserve to be trustees,” he insisted. He further proceeded to read a clarification from his solicitors that Davar’s tenancy in Wadia Building was secured after paying the full consideration (his offer being 50 percent higher than the next bid) and after paying the outgoing tenant’s demand of Rs 40 lakhs that would not have been affordable to any poor Zoroastrian.

Without any qualms an emotional

Davar stated that he was born and raised at Balaram Street; that he had memories of social worker Rati Desai

heading for the kitchen to check whether the family was able to afford chicken or meat; that his father had lost his father when he was only one year old and his maternal aunt Jer Dhondy was among those who looked after him; that his mother was an orphan at the age of 10; that his father, his erstwhile boss Russy Karanjia for whom he had worked at the *Blitz* and *The Daily*, and the late Khushrooh Byramjee were the three major influences in his life from whom he had learnt the values of loyalty and gratitude; that he had started Spenta Multimedia with a staff of five at Sassoon Dock and today the Spenta team comprises 250 people. “You measure success against where you started...”

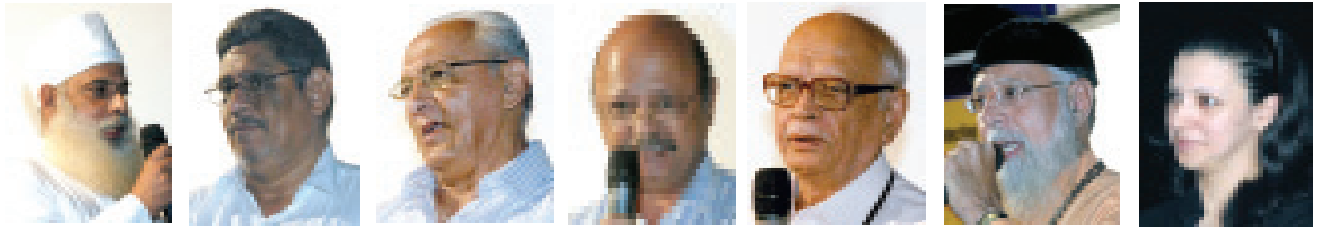
Describing himself as an “extremely proud Zoroastrian and a believer in Zoroastrian values,” he expressed his pride in having learnt the “value of loyalty, the need to stand by an honest man who has worked for the community for 14 years especially when he feels isolated and victimized... During his first seven years as trustee he went around on a motorbike... I know he works quietly for what he believes in.” Earlier there was “charity without dignity... democratization of



Dinshaw Mehta (inset and right) addressing the crowd at Panthaky Baug: “Trustees have to listen to the poor and needy”

Below: Maneck Davar



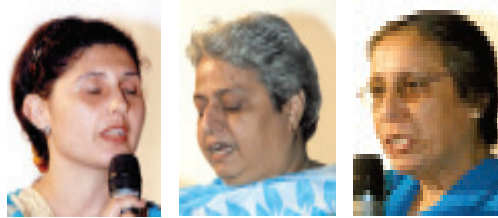


charity has set in with Dinshaw Mehta. He is probably the most educated of the trustees on board. It is important to move away from the feudal/sethia mindset of a trustee...

"The community today is at a crucial and delicate crossroad... To bring in a whole panel who believe in one thing would be very dangerous for the community because there may not be balance. The one man whom I hold responsible for this mess... with overvaulting ambition... is none other than Berjis Desai... He got all the trustees to resign... He's like an election commissioner... He now has the gall to put up his own candidates, quite a few of whom have never done anything for the community, on the rationale 'We need to professionalize the Panchayet. We must get a strong CEO.' That's all nonsense. As a trustee you have to go before the community. You are no different from a representative of the municipality or state legislature or central legislature. You are a servant of the people. You have to make yourself available 24x7."

Recalling the "irresponsible attitude of the present trustees" and the resignation fiasco that could have led to the appointment of an administrator from Mantralaya had not the trustees come back "with their tails between their legs" on the understanding that they would continue so long as Mehta as the seniormost trustee does not officiate as chairman after the tenure of Minoos Shroff, Davar appreciated Mehta's "sacrifice... He said the interest of the community is paramount and more important than being chairman." He reminded the gathering: "You have a great community, great religion, great values... This community does not lack loyalty, this community is not ungrateful," he noted, urging them to keep these attributes in mind when casting their votes.

Commending his father's "passion and vision," Mehta's eldest son Viraf was upset that he was being "slandered" even though they can't prove anything. "Should I put the family through all this?" Mehta had asked them before seeking



Speakers at Panthaky Baug: Ervad Dinyar Vajifdar, Pervez Driver, Noshir Karanjia, Cyrus Davierwalla, Khurshedji Bharda, Marzban Wadia and compere Aniza Patel. Second row: members of the audience

reelection for his third term. But the family unanimously supported his decision to stand with second son Hormuz quitting his job in Dubai and youngest son Darius postponing his studies to assist him. Referring to his father spending 14 hours at the police station when the khandhias were arrested, walking through deep waters when the floods in Bombay were ravaging one of the community properties, Viraf noted, "I get emotional when talking about my father... We will support him from the bottom of our hearts and we hope so will you."

Others who spoke in Mehta's support were former president of the Godrej Baug Association Maneck Dastur who commented how "secure and relaxed" he felt knowing that "things are going to happen when Dinshaw Mehta is around..." He was approached when there were water problems in Godrej Baug, cable problems... "He seems to have a solution in his subtle smile." He had also learnt from Mehta that there was "no need to be disagreeable when you do not agree." Retired assistant commissioner of police Homi Irani presented Mehta with a shawl, garland and coconut and reminded the audience, "He's a man who will work for you."

Since Mehta is a man who is known to oblige friends, health guru Mickey Mehta sought to clarify how his mother, suffering from tertiary cancer, was given a flat by the BPP in Godrej Baug in exchange for her premises at Gilder Lane; how he was supposed to get a flat in Captain Colony for Rs 37 lakhs with Rs 28 lakhs being set off against the surrender of his mother-in-law's flat at Mahim. However, when she decided against surrendering her flat Mickey was asked to pay Rs 28 lakhs plus an additional Rs 43 lakhs (re-

vised thrice after the initially agreed sum of Rs 37 lakhs as each time the Panchayet claimed it had received a higher offer). "For 20 consecutive Tuesdays my wife went to the BPP" until the transaction was finalized and each time the trustees would turn to Dinshaw Mehta for a solution to the deal. "Experiential knowledge is the finest knowledge," acknowledged Mickey urging the audience not to be misled "by the smear campaign... Kings, princes, principals... each has a different style of functioning. Decide with your heart and not only your mind."

"I have a passion for the community... for social work. Is it a crime?" enquired Dinshaw Mehta upset that Team Jame had tried to "demean my father as coming from Foras Road... that I have no other business except the BPP" when in actuality he has to look after a business and family property comprising 800 tenements. Davar and Fali Poncha had been allotted flats because they were the highest bidders, he maintained. Whenever there has been exchange of flats he has always ensured that the interest of the charitable trust is paramount, he insisted, citing the instance of his business associate and friend Capt Jimmy Sarbh whose financial offer in one property transaction was not accepted by the Panchayet because it did not benefit the trust.

Some of the same allegations against Mehta had been made during the 2001 trusteeship elections. But his friendship with Desai had then helped him issue clarifications in *Jamé*, Mehta declared. Since the two have now fallen out and with Desai, as per Mehta's allegation, being the financier of the three community media, he controls the content of these publications.

With *Jamé* resurrecting the issue of

Bucky Bhesania's daughter being favored with flats in Godrej Baug, Mehta maintained that this was on the understanding that she will move into the upcoming ownership building. In the meanwhile the BPP has earned money. "Every occupant has a right to share/encash tenancy," notes Mehta who would prefer that both the owners and the tenants benefit rather than see property locked up in litigation. Wary of candidates who say we should evict all unauthorized occupants, Mehta announced, "You cannot throw a Zarathoshti on the road." How can we know the kind of tension/compulsions an inductee might have encountered? Leave and licence agreements were being issued from the time of B. K. Boman-Behram in 1975 but with the amendment in the Stamp Duty Act since 2002 the fees keep rising, he noted. "I'm firmly of the view that all leave and licence agreements be converted to tenancy so that all get equality before the law," he recommended. With pugrees being declared legal, "why should Parsi beneficiaries be deprived?" he asks. "The WAPIZ candidates are no longer against the tenancy concept. They have had a change of mind," Mehta spoke on their behalf, endorsing their candidature.

"The capital of the BPP has increased from Rs 16 crores when I became a trustee to over Rs 120 crores today," claims his manifesto. From the funds generated, the BPP has been able to liberally donate. As against spending one lakh rupees a month on welfare activities in the past, today the BPP expends 55 lakhs, he adds.

Advocating firm belief in dakhmenashini, Mehta insisted the system had not failed for the sun continues to exist and so do the rays, even in the monsoons. Only the vultures are absent. "What is needed is unity and slight orthodoxy" to continue with the system.

Although originally envisaged as an 18-storey tower, the upcoming ownership building in Godrej Baug may be restricted to 12 storeys so that no view of the dakhma is accorded from any height, it emerged during interaction time.

The possibility of constructing a second approach road to Godrej Baug from Napeansea Road was to be probed. "If it is feasible you will have our full support," assured Mehta, reluctant to intrude on co-trustee Maneck Engineer's domain. Could the pathway from Ambawadi to Godrej Baug (that was sealed after the murder) be reopened? Could parking ar-

eas be standardized with markers? With parking lots being free of FSI, Mehta suggested that a plot be identified in Godrej Baug for the construction of a Parking Tower. Most of the buildings in Godrej Baug don't have a completion certificate, declared Mehta.

One of the projects that Mehta would like to pursue, if reelected, is to get the new Bandra-Worli sealink named after Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw as "a

"As a trustee you...are a servant of the people"

shining example of Parsi valor." This prompted Ervad Yezdi Panthaki to promote his dream of getting the road leading up from Hyderabad Estate to Godrej Baug named after S. P. Godrej. Yet another suggestion from the audience recommended the BPP follow up with the necessary authorities so that the Bharat Ratna could be posthumously awarded to Dr Homi Bhabha.

When a resident suggested that Mehta be annually available for a question-answer session he was told, "I'm available any time, any day."

Commending Mehta's intimate knowledge of issues concerning different baugs, Davar wondered, "How many trustees would be knowledgeable on every single problem?" When he was labeled as "an encyclopedia on housing," Mehta feared being maligned by the *Jamé* again. This prompted Dastur to clarify, "He is an encyclopedia on everything about the Panchayet and not only housing." PARINAZ M. GANDHI

A friend in need

"We knew his car, we knew his chauffeur. Before coming to Panthaky Baug (everytime) he visits Dhunbaiwadi." Khurshedji Bharda, a resident of Dhunbaiwadi narrated at an election campaign meet at Panthaky Baug on September 6, 2008 regarding Bombay Parsi Panchayet (BPP) trustee Dinshaw Mehta's devotion to his small colony in the suburbs. "He (Mehta) looks after Doongerwadi. *Sundar séva karéch* (does good social work)," he mentioned from a makeshift podium under a blue plastic covered shamiana to a sizable gathering of Parsis/Iranis from

Panthaky Baug, Malcolm Baug, Dhunbaiwadi, Cama Park and elsewhere who had been bused in.

"He comes whenever we want," said Noshir Karanjia, chairman of the Panthaky Baug Association.

Retired assistant commissioner of police Cyrus Davierwala said that "only Dinshaw Mehta comes to the police station" when there is a problem. He recommended that the voters should "not only make him a trustee again but chairman" of the BPP.

As the senior most trustee, after the present chairman Minoos Shroff, Mehta would by seniority be entitled to be chairman unless all the other six trustees objected. There would then be an election for the post.

"During the (July 26, 2006) deluge, Dinshaw Mehta was the only trustee who visited" our colony, recalled Jasmine Cassad. "He was the only trustee safeguarding our trusts when all others resigned en masse," stated Meher Bhiwandiwala.

Marazban Wadia, president of the Davier Parsi Anjuman recalled when a builder threatened him and others, Mehta gave his visiting card to Wadia and told him to pass it on to the builder with a request "to meet me." The builder backed down. Wadia credited Mehta with raising the BPP corpus from 10 to 120 crore rupees by a pragmatic approach to housing and transfer of flats.

Longtime Mehta friend, publisher Maneck Davar noted, "All housing decisions are taken by all the trustees. All must say yes. All other decisions are by majority." He was countering allegations that Mehta acts independently, to oblige his friends and relatives.

Regarding the chairmanship of the BPP, Davar alleged that BPP trustee Maneck Engineer agreed to "give up his claims to chairmanship to get a seat in the Adult Franchise for Progress (AFP) panel. This is a shame," said Davar. If Engineer were the only sitting trustee to be re-elected he would by seniority occupy the chair.

Addressing the gathering accompanied by a power point presentation, Mehta noted he spends four to five hours a day Monday to Friday on community matters. "My office is full of Parsis who come" for solace. "Trustees have to listen to the poor and needy... The poor need to be looked after. I started giving money to 100 Parsis (initially) from Grant

Road. Now the number is 550. The amount is around Rs 300 to Rs 400 a month. It will gradually go up to Rs 1,000."

Referring to the video clip "How long will the Hansotias wait?" being shown by the AFP panel, Mehta clarified the Hansotias had a one-room-kitchen flat near Contractor Baug and were subsequently given a one-room-kitchen apartment in the Baug. "They are very poor... hand to mouth... They needed money. They already had a house."

Noting that a Petit trust was building 300 flats for Parsis/Iranis at Borivli, Mehta counseled "not sending Parsis

beyond Andheri." He said he was surprised to learn that 50 percent of the community lived outside of colonies, some as far away as Nallasopara.

"Sell your ownership flats and come and live in the baugs," he urged. The redevelopment of baugs could create 1,960 additional flats as against the 1,279 current flats at the Mancherji Joshi Parsi Colony at Dadar, Nowroze Baug, Contractor Baug, Bharucha Baug and Panthaky Baug, declared Mehta.

"We had 1,00,000 sq ft FSI in Dadar. Three hundred flats could have been built. But the NOC (no objection certificate issued by the government) was returned to MHADA (Maharashtra Hous-

ing and Development Authority)."

Mehta said he was not in favor of "alienating or disposing of" the Parsi Lying-in Hospital premises in the Fort area. "I was born there. It's completely dilapidated. It's capable of being redeveloped." He envisioned Parsi doctors having clinics there.

Noting that the system of "pugree" (amount paid to a sitting tenant and landlord for transferring tenancy to a new party) was now legal, he said accepting a security deposit was "not commercializing charity."

He noted the leave and license agreements were introduced by the BPP to counter the government's legislation that enabled tenants to buy over old, cessed properties from the landlord by paying 100 times the monthly rent. Seventy percent of the tenants have to agree to the proposal. The legality of the bill is being challenged in the Supreme Court.

Mehta favored converting leave and licence agreements into tenancy. "We can save stamp duty," by stopping leave and licence agreements. It's a sword over (the tenants') heads. Tenancy would "protect (tenants) from the trustees," he stated.

Regarding the controversy over the double hoarding at Doongerwadi, Mehta chronicled the events that led up to the contract being given to Lewis Advertisers. "How can I give (the contract) alone? All trustees agreed." The final signing was done by the CEO (chief executive officer) of the BPP, he added.

Launching an offensive against his erstwhile friend and business partner lawyer Berjis Desai, Mehta alleged he (Desai) wanted to construct a crematorium at Doongerwadi. Desai is the founder of the AFP which has put up a panel of seven candidates for the seven trusteeship seats of the BPP. He termed Desai "the greatest reformer. He wants to open agiaries to all and convert everyone."

In contrast the World Alliance of Parsi Irani Zarthoshtis (WAPIZ) panel "are all orthodox. If you want to save the community support the WAPIZ panel along with me... keep the reformists out." ❁

Zoroastrians Abroad has had to be held out of this issue for exigencies of space because of extended electoral coverage. *Parsiana* regrets the inconvenience to readers.

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