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CONVERSATION PIECE

(A room in the Kremlin, with Brezhnev lolling back in a comfortably cushioned chair. His eyes are closed and there's a frown upon his brow. Suddenly, he sits up at the sound of a door closing and tries to scramble to his feet as Indira advances towards him.)

Indira : No, no, dear Leonid, please don't try to get up. I'll sit here on the next chair, comfortably near you. In any case we've known one another long enough and well enough to be able to dispense with formalities. Besides, this is a very private meeting, isn't it ?

Brezhnev : Yes, it is. I had the room specially vetted by an expert I trust to make sure there was no chance of our being overhead despite all the newest technical devices of these days.

I. : (with a smile) That's good. I'm glad to see you looking so well. I had heard otherwise so my pleasure is all the greater.

B. : (with a sigh) Alas, dear lady, it's all appearance, I'm afraid. Foreign tailors and boot-makers, you know, hours of excellent massage, and all kinds of injections and tablets, to say nothing of psycho-therapy. In reality, I still remain a very feeble old man, carrying on, carrying on, you know, because why, I can't quite tell. Fear of the future, for me, for my country ? Well I suppose it will end one day, normally or with a bullet, what does it matter ? But enough of myself, I am delighted to see you so elegant, so poised. Wonderful, I said to myself, she must be in her middle sixties but I would not put her at more than fifty-four. Dear friend long may you continue so !

I. : Since the prior condition of our conversation is complete frankness, I must confess that my elegant appearance is also in large part due to adventitious aids. True I carry myself well and have judgment in the selection and application of unguents and lotions, but underneath them all, I remain a woman of my proper age whom if you met as she was, you wouldn't spare a second glance for.

B. : I don't believe that; you are a personality and that would show through whatever your appearance. My real purpose in asking for this private meeting was to unburden myself to you, and to let you unburden yourself to me if you wanted to. In our positions, we necessarily have to be lonely people, and as Pushkin says meeting a genuine sympathiser to whom you can tell all things, is like taking a step on the road to heaven.

I. : I am grateful to you for thinking of me so. I also am in the same position as yourself. To what understanding mind and unreproachable heart can I tell all ? To you, I think I can disclose myself as I am

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for as Ghalib, the greatest of our poets of the last hundred and fifty years has it, better by far meeting a sympathetic confidant of long ago than a visit from saint Christopher or even Jesus Christ.

B.: Well then, this is between you and me, the real persons Priyadarshani and Leonid, and not our official prototypes. We've talked a lot about peace recently, haven't we? You'll agree that most of it is just blah? You look enquiring? Well, surely you know that in my dictionary peace means not what the ordinary people think it does but a continuation of war by other means, with the same objective as war, winning the struggle. You agree you know that? Yes. And you join me in long statements and declarations about peace, so that you are not opposed to my view of peace, in fact you would be pleased if I attained my objective, caused the world to adopt my pattern?

I. (nodding): The larger part of the world has always been under dictatorships. I don't see any harm in that. In my own country, I have to time-serve ideas like democracy, fundamental freedoms, papers criticising, allowing meetings etc. You get on quite well without all that houp-la. I want to cut all that out too. The ruler rules, the people obey; unity and discipline, I always commend. I think in all these matters, yours are the right ideas. The people, the people, bah are the people capable of governing? Of course not. By spreading lies, they took over from me in 1977, (I have a bone to pick with you about that; you, my dear friends, congratulated them and worked with them!) —and what happened? Within a short time they fell to bits and were kicked out. I managed it, in ways which you know and approve. And now I rule. Badly, say some; weakly say others, she's lost her elan, she's indecisive, in the hands of rich, unscrupulous industrialists etc., etc. They're so foolish that they don't understand I want discontent to rise to a crescendo, so that they themselves will urge me to govern by myself, fully, dictatorially, and away with all their restraints and freedoms. The choice for them will be anarchy or me, sole ruler, using all the regulatory forces of the state as I will. I see a doubt in your eyes; you feel, why all this, just use enough terror and that'll do the trick. Well, perhaps it's because I am a woman, but I don't like wholesale terror. A few nasty people, here and there, yes, I can say to my special men, well deal with them, deal with them, but terror on anything like your scale or the South American scale, no, no, not for me. Besides I'm sure I'll get results and all their cherished institutions working for me, often without even knowing they are. A new kind of dictatorship it'll be, a dictatorship in democratic guise.

B.: Well, I'm glad we are agreed on essentials. Any help you need will of course be freely forthcoming from us. We are, as you know, already well-established in your land, and with our new agreements of yesterday will be in a still better position to serve you. To turn to another point. All this fuss we're making about tension in the Indian Ocean increasing, is also of course, all blah. If there's tension it's just as much of my making as of the Americans. Why don't I give up my Aden colony? Why don't I march out of Afghanistan? If I did both

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these, tension would be greatly reduced. But would it suit me to do either? Of course not. And you, like the true friend you are, don't even suggest either. Aden, you don't touch at all. Afghanistan, you say, leave sometime when it suits you, when the Afghans you've driven out of the country, cease their guerilla tactics and desperate attacks from outside. Well, I won't, even then. You approve, I see. You know, never in history have I and my predecessors gone out of any country we've seized. We are there, we remain there. That's why the Chinese are so frightened of us. That's why you too would need to be frightened of us, if of course you were not you, real sympathiser and true friend. From the Khyber into India would be easy. Pakistan, bah, a mouthful! But I see not even a quiver on your cheek. Nerves of steel and real trust in me. No, you're quite safe; after all, you'll be serving the same cause, the extermination of freedom. And you support me in a thousand ways. Take this non-aligned business of yours. More blah, yes. It's no more non-aligned than the Friends of the Soviet Union Societies or any other fellow-travelling organisation of ours. Cuba, its chief, lives on my subsidies and places its soldiers at my disposal for use anywhere in the world, and there's you, always ready with some face-saving excuse for us and our associates. East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and now Poland, never a word of condemnation from your father or you. Truly, dear friend, I kiss your hands. Tell me are you and I natural born liars or have we acquired the difficult art later?

I. (smiling): How does that arise? Oh I see, all the lies we've been telling about all these matters and many others. I think we acquired the art. I'm aware even now when I'm telling a lie that it is a lie. That's why I tell it with such aplomb. I convince the listeners I mean exactly what I say. Isn't it the same with you?

B.: Yes, I think it is, but I'm not quite sure always. You see, from one's childhood in our holy Communist Russia, one is so accustomed to 'double-think' that one sometimes gets quite mixed-up. Your career, your life, may all depend on it, so you sometimes tell the lie and then forget even subconsciously that it was a lie. In fact, it may be dangerous to remember it. They might dredge it out of you in certain circumstances.

I.: Yes, that makes it much more difficult. In my present position, I find it expedient when told I said something different three days ago to blandly say 'I may have if you say so. But I say this today. Well?' Generally it serves very well and there's hardly ever a come-back. In any case peoples' memories are so short that I find it good policy to lie as expedient and sometimes just to lie straight off instead of carefully considering the facts. Quickly said, matter ended.

B.: Thank God for that! I see you look surprised at my mentioning God. I don't believe in God, of course, but thanking him is an old Russian expression. And as one of my predecessors is supposed to have said 'well, if there's no God, there's no harm in thanking him; and if there is, we may have acquired some merit by thanking him.' Are you troubled sometimes by thoughts of God? I used not to be. But now

that my natural dissolution comes nearer, I cannot escape them altogether.

I.: I shouldn't let them worry you. If there is a God who created the world and its creatures, He is responsible for them. And if He let you and me go the way we did, and He considers it blame-worthy, why didn't He stop us in time and guide us as He wished and could have. If He didn't, the responsibility is His. There is also, of course, the other escape in a country like mine, which I don't think would be open to you. I go to every shrine and every holy man and woman, and perform my ritual devotions and I think with so much influence behind me, if there is a God, he is bound to consider my case not too unfavourably.

B.: I see your point about the responsibility. But isn't there also the theory that God provided the stage and set the actors upon it, but gave no script to the actors and left it to them to speak and act as they thought fit. Anyhow, why are we talking about these problems at all? I take it for granted that in the conventional set-up, we would both be held to have sinned greatly and sent straight to hell to burn for eons there. Do you disagree?

I.: No, since we are being quite frank with one another, in such a set-up I don't see any other end for a sinner like me, though all my visits to shrines, sages and godmen may perhaps reduce the period by a quarter or half an eon. Anyhow, I take some consolation in the thought that there will be no lack there of rulers like us, since the world has from the beginning been under the sway of scoundrels and hypocrites like us mostly, who talked about the public interest or the welfare of the people when they meant all the time their own interest or self-aggrandisement. Tell me, do you consider bribery, giving or taking, a serious crime against the State? In my country, I've made it the way of life. Stupid moralists, men of little experience of affairs, fulminate against it. It is an offence under our penal code, so I can't publicly defend it. But people ought to realise that it is a great lubricator in getting things done, and surely that is better than having things held up interminably.

B.: There is graft with us too, and for one who gets caught, fifty escape. Officially, it is frowned upon, but quite often condoned, especially if the culprit is important or connected with important people. I am sometimes inclined to believe in the doctrine of original sin. Man turns naturally to wrong-doing in the usual sense. For us though there is nothing right or wrong by itself. That is wrong that hinders the party's, i.e. our progress; that right that promotes the party's, i.e. our progress. Wash out conscience and you lead a happy, hedonistic life. A good rule that I found quite early in life. Are you still troubled by conscience sometimes yourself?

I.: Not now, though until I became Prime Minister, it used even to make me lose half a night's sleep on occasion. After about a year and a half of Prime Ministership, I suddenly realised that I had fallen deeply in love with Power and nothing else mattered. My love-affair has progressed steadily since then, until now I am wholly obsessed by it. There's no room for conscience now or indeed anything else. I am

a happy woman really, a fortunate woman too. I love power and beloved power loves me. All my efforts are to make this condition last and strengthen it. But I see you're beginning to look tired, so I'll leave you now. Dear Leonid, it's been so good to have seen you thus and talked together so freely and frankly. May your health continue to improve and many years be yours, full of good fortune and success. (And she took his hand in hers, which he drew to his lips and kissed in homage and good-will, saying good fortune attend you always.)

MRS. GANDHI, MOSCOW AND CPI

A. G. NOORANI

THOUGH Mrs. Indira Gandhi had long treated the State as virtually a fief of the family, one expected that this possessive attitude would be confined to domestic policies. But it has been a marked feature of her foreign policy since her return to power in January 1980 to view India's relations with other States also from the standpoint of purely personal considerations and prejudices. This was particularly evident in her foreign policy towards the smaller neighbours. President Jayawardene was slighted when he was in New Delhi to show her preference for Mrs. Bandaranaike, a sister in authoritarianism. The same held good for Mrs. Wazed vis a vis the late President Ziaur Rehman, who was, if anything, a moderate who kept forces inimical to India's interests at bay.

Now, it seems the pursuit of personal interests, as distinct from the national interest, is to be carried further, still. India's Prime Minister will be asking President Brezhnev, not so much to refrain from exerting influence on an Indian political party, the CPI, as Nehru asked Khruschev in 1955, but very much to exert the influence on her behalf and ask it to support her against other political parties. In contrast, during his talks with Khruschev and Bulganin, on December 12, 1955 in New Delhi, Nehru taxed them for supporting the CPI financially and otherwise. On his "word of honour", Khruschev denied it.

The well informed Mr. G. K. Reddy reported in *The Hindu* of September 9, 1982 from New Delhi that "Mrs. Gandhi has been making no secret of her disappointment with the Soviet leadership for not exerting its influence on Indian communists to desist from adopting a hostile attitude towards her Government. During the recent parliamentary debate on the no-confidence motion, she referred to the two communist parties and their 'mentors' which caused quite a flutter among Soviet bloc diplomats here."

Come to think of it, on December 6, 1980, Mrs. Gandhi so far lost her sense of propriety as to complain at the civic reception to President Brezhnev, "understandably we face onslaught from the 'right' and not so understandably from the so called 'left' as well." Apparently,

Mrs. Gandhi is going to renew her plaint during her return visit to Moscow. Strange things have begun to happen there in preparation of the visit. **The Statesman** reported on September 13 that "Mr. N. K. Krishnan, a leading Central Secretariat member of the CPI, representing a pro-Mrs. Gandhi faction in the party, is expected to be in Moscow at the time of the Prime Minister's visit."

"Knowledgeable Communist sources also confirmed here that a large number of members of the CPI's Central Executive Committee and the National Council, the latter being the highest policy-making body of the party, are already in the Soviet Capital."

According to the correspondent, Mrs. Gandhi "does not mind, does not worry about" the unity of the two Communist parties in India, the CPI & the CPM. What she minds is the CPI co-operating with the others, particularly the BJP.

Some strange things are also happening in the councils of the CPI and its friends. Mr. Nikhil Chakravarti, Editor of **Mainstream**, has written a series of three articles in the journal in praise of his brain-child "Concept of a Patriotic Front." It is not "a gimmick to provide fresh support for Indira Gandhi", he explains. He attacks the CPI for joining hands with the others, especially with the BJP, during the presidential election and even during the campaign against the fraud in Haryana.

His thesis is simple. "The Congress Raj, as it is constituted today, can no longer last beyond Indira Gandhi. With most of the other parties in shambles, that crucial moment will demand the emergence of a powerful force if the nation is to be kept together. . . . Despite a narrow social base, the Right will make a bid for power claiming to be a national force. To prepare for such an eventuality—rather to prompt it—is the supreme task of the left, to build along with all forward-looking forces a Patriotic Front which alone can bar the Right's bid for power."

The Front must be forged now if it is to succeed then. It must necessarily include the "following of Indira Gandhi." But, will they join the Front unless she gives the green signal? And will she be attracted by calculations based on her departure? The CPI has been just too clever by half and not clever enough at all for Mrs. Gandhi. She used them all through 1969-1977. They could not use her. When Sanjay Gandhi began attacking them she counselled them simply to relax and enjoy the experience.

But, what will be Moscow's line? Mr. K. R. Ganesh, General Secretary of the Friends of Soviet Union, was in the USSR recently. He poured out his thoughts and feelings to **New Wave** (Sept. 5). He was most disappointed by the India experts. "My own impression is that some academics have become victims of western sociology, system analysis etc., and are as off the mark in their reading of India as their western counterparts. . . .

"With some intellectuals the latest fad is to divide Indians political

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parties in four broad categories. 1. Communist parties revolutionary. 2. Congress-bourgeois reformist. 2. Non-Congress parties bourgeois conservative. 4. Regional forces.

"To put the communist parties in one category is like putting Pol Pot, Heng Semarin, Mao and Le Duan into one category. To put Congress into a general category of bourgeois reformist is to miss the revolutionary essence of the changes it has brought about in the Indian Society."

Even **Mainstream** published (August 7) an article by E. N. Komarov on political systems in developing countries in which he mentioned the "persecution of the opposition" during the emergency. He describes the Congress(I) as "moderately-reformist". As for the presidential system, "by itself" it will not spell authoritarianism. But, he pointedly remarks, "although given definite circumstances, this would encourage authoritarian tendencies." Having bought the CPI's acquiescence once again, Mrs. Gandhi can be trusted to use them as she did during 1975-1977.

On July 27, 1982, Mr. C. Rajeswara Rao, the General Secretary of the CPI, declared at a press conference in New Delhi that the CPI neither sought nor received any guidance from the CPSU on the internal policies followed by it. There was no centre of world communist movement, not even Moscow, he said.

Mr. Rao and his colleagues have subsisted for long on a diet of eaten words. One wonders if this boast will also end up in their stomachs.

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