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DIALOGUE

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A man of near seventy looking out of the door of an ante-room into the corridor sees after a few minutes a lady coming up the corridor and says, "Ah, I was right. I thought if I waited here, perhaps we could have a little informal talk. The arranged meetings are all right for official business, but who knows how many others listen in to them?"

"I agree, we're badly bugged," said the lady. "The Bear always seems to know every point we've discussed. But I've given up caring. After all, my interest and his are common in almost all matters."

"Well, come in and sit down. This little room should be safe enough, and we've got some time before the function. We both did our stints, I last night, you this morning. Rather boring, I would say, if I were looking at them independently, but I suppose they served our, i.e. your, purpose."

L : Yes, they did. Your references to the need to work together, to the consequences of the continuing division between the affluent and the rest, to the duty of the Opposition, to my patience about Assam, were just right.

M : And you stressed all the proper points, anarchy, deep-seated conspiracy to oppose the Government, country-wide disorder, communal rioting, love for Assamese, obduracy of a small section (thus preparing for a likely failure of the talks), danger from within and outside, yourself standing alone above the raging storms, trying your best to control them. Your object remains the same as ever doesn't it? There is no modification due to misfortune or any other cause?

L : I'm surprised you ask, I thought you knew me better. Well since you do ask, I will set it out again, as I did to you on the day you swore me in. I am for full and absolute personal power. All obstacles to that I shall overcome, by guile, force or whatever means are available to me. It may take a year, it may take more, there may be occasional setbacks, but my persistence will not fail. I can enjoy power only thus. Though I don't think, between you and me, the people come into this very much, my being absolute will be good for them too. If I am happy, they will also be happy, and as things are, one has of course to talk all the time in terms of their interest, their good. One lives only for them, of course. You are tied to me, because not only do you share my views about the proper position of us, the elite, in society, but because I can guarantee you another term at the end of this one, and can give you and yours any

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facilities you want or may want. Also, I believe because we are compatible by temperament. In domestic matters we are on almost all points agreed; in foreign affairs we are very largely with the Bear. I hope I have put the case clearly and fairly. Rarely am I so frank. Your question made me feel you had perhaps developed some doubts about where I stood exactly, and your consequent position.

M : Thanks for your complete and wholly satisfactory exposition. No, I expected nothing else, no real change in your position, but I'm glad to be reassured. After all in a kind of way you are my protege, if I may say so in this moment of frankness. I made your accession to power, your great success in the January election possible to some extent. Had I let the leader of the Janata Party form a government in 1977, as he had a right to do on merits, had I not then installed the minority Charansingh government in power and kept it there for about nine months, exposing its utter ineptness to the country, you might not have succeeded in the elections, or at least not have secured so large a majority. I don't mention this in any spirit of vainglory, but merely in agreement with your remark about our compatibility of temperament. I am a simple plough-driving peasant (at least so I like people to believe) and you are an aristocratic, refined lady, but there is an instinctive affinity of spirit between us. So we stand together. Whatever I can do to further your aims, of course I shall do. Now what is your plan of action, or is it still being evolved behind that noble brow of yours ?

L : My plan is simple like all great plans, I would like to think. Create an impression throughout the land (further riots, etc.) that it is ungovernable under the present laws, that I must have far greater powers to cope, then at the right moments, the necessary ordinances from you, and hey, presto, I am as powerful as I was at the height of 1975 to 1977, the Emergency which some disapprove of, and quite a number regard as very desirable. Follow, the detentions (not very many will be necessary), the curbing of the press (very much at heel already), etc., etc.

You might urge, the Supreme Court may not be as amenable as in the past. Have you seen the letters some of the judges have written to me, and the result of the Sanjay-Shukla appeal ? In any case, there are about seven vacancies to it to be filled between now and March, and shall I sit with folded hands during that time ? No, I do not think we need have much anxiety on that score. All the Judiciary will, I think, enjoy being 'Lions under the Throne,' to the extent that they are not so already. Then we shall have the recent judgment about the amendments in the Constitution upset and place beyond doubt our original position.

No, our instruments will give no trouble. The bureaucracy is subservient. I talk against corruption and threaten action, but shall the ox that treadeth out the corn be muzzled ? So, I let them graze, and they are not unhappy. The police and its armed sections, I follow the same policy with, and they co-operate readily. Think, could a riot like Moradabad have occurred, if they thought I really disapproved ? No we understand one another. The Defence people are with me, or at least, not against me. They want and like 'strong' government. They know I am

always ready to listen to their complaints, cure any real grievance, individual or group. The Press, bah, a snap of the fingers for them. They have no persistence, even the most independent of them. A paper writes one article exposing a real scandal. And what? Forgets all about it; no follow-up, no writing about it at least once a week, no hitting the hammer on the nail again and again. This even in ordinary times, so what under censorship, complete or in the air?

So too the Opposition. No guts, no bottom. Raise a very valid point, raise it twice, nothing is done. Well, the MP feels he's done his duty, is satisfied, and content to join in the next uproar. No, I've taken the measure of all these groups, and there's nothing to apprehend from any of them, so far as my aim and plan are concerned. Nor from businessmen, big or small. I have let them also graze widely and well, in fact opened up new pastures for them. The consumer will be satisfied if prices are somewhat reduced, and I'm taking steps about that. Be extortionate, be extortionate, be not too extortionate, is my advice to all, sellers, buyers, bribe-takers, bribe-givers. This is quite in accord with our national temperament, neither too much, nor too little, moderation in all things. As to Assam, very probably some hitches will arise in the talks, or after the talks. They'll have to come to heel; can't be allowed to have everything their own way, however good their case. They must realise their proper position, too. Be Ahom Lions, but Lions under the Delhi Throne. Well, that's enough of an exposition. Do you agree?

M: I can see nothing wrong, there are no errors either of fact or of judgment. What could upset it however, might be war. What about that?

L: If Pakistan attacked, it would on the contrary bring all the waverers in on my side. Of course, we can deal with Pakistan easily, or with any other local trouble. From the super powers, whatever I say in public, there's nothing to fear. One is actively friendly, the second not antagonistic. There remains China, with nuclear capacity quite enough to destroy us utterly. I don't think it'll use it though; it has quite enough problems already on its plate. It made a reasonably good offer for settlement of borders recently. I was almost inclined to accept it, but two things held me back; Brezhnev would not have liked it at all in the present state of Sino-Soviet relations, and the uproar the Opposition would have made about giving up Indian territory (in Aksaichin, of all places). Had my plan already reached fruition, had I already been in supreme and full power, I would I think have accepted it, with slight modifications perhaps to satisfy everybody we had bargained hard. As it was, I thought it best not to and made a temporising reply. Anything else?

M: What about elections in 1985?

L: I shall decide on holding them or not. If I do, the Election Commission will be my creature, and make sure I win handsomely.

M: What about the tiny band of fanatics for liberty, the Dunbar 'A! Freedom is a noble thing' etc., adherents? Won't they continue to be a considerable nuisance, at the least?

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L: You've used the right word 'nuisance'. They won't be anything beyond that. Any publications of theirs will be closed down, immediately the ordinance issues. This time, I won't be anxious to preserve a facade of democratic behaviour as I was last time. To the British and others who say they believe in freedom of the Press my reply will be 'You may, so what? This is my country, not yours'. And they'll soon retire, snarling or smiling.

One allows the legend of freedom to have too much influence on one's mind. In reality, two-thirds of the world's countries are under authoritarian rule, whatever the outward form, and many of them don't seem to do at all badly. It will be the same with us. In fact, I shouldn't be surprised if our progress did not double its rate under my fostering, authoritarian eye.

So if the fanatic freedom lovers, with all modes of public expression denied, just grumbled to themselves, I'd let them be. If they did anything else, circulated clandestine literature, for instance, I'd whisk them off to jail or rather to psychiatric clinics of the Soviet type. (Must send some sadistic doctors to learn from Brezhnev's pets in good time. Some of them might rebel? Nothing of the kind. A good guard with a quick-firing pistol would settle all that.) And so the end of their concept of freedom; the beginning of my concept of freedom under which the whole country can feel truly free. Oh, what a lovely thing it will be, full freedom for me, freedom according to me for you.

M: And you think you can make this last?

L: Make no mistake, good sir, you will die of old age in your post, 'otium cum dignitate'. And I might then perhaps retire to a beautiful place in the hills, having handed over to a suitable, carefully-selected successor. The country will have flourished like the green bay-tree under my freedom. Though from on high, there will still be calls for stamping out corruption, they will all be regarded as ritual, for everybody will be corrupt, and be happy, both benefiting and suffering from it. Come, it is time for your reception.

8918. Miss Kani Burra,
18 Ganga Vihar, 4th Floor,
Marine Drive, Bombay -400 020.

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