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HOSPITALITY FORUMS

The Come-To-Tea Committees

EARLIER this year, those who followed the activities of Rajiv Gandhi when he came to the city, noticed that while for most of the time he remained in the shadow of his mother, he made one deviation. He agreed to attend a tea-party hosted in his honour by an organisation—hitherto unheard of—called the Economic Forum. The inquisitive, who ventured to find out who was present, speculated on the nature of this forum, which included people as disparate as the ageing politician S.K. Patil, textile magnate Nusli Wadia and film producer B.R. Chopra. The more uncharitable concluded that the forum was an instant concoction put up so that a bunch of influential people could meet the potential politician.

The Economic Forum, convened by Y.P. Trivedi which has since been engaged in diverse activity, arranged a discussion with S.S. Mahopatra, and belongs to a class of committees numerous in the city that specialise in such 'meetings'. Countless aspiring politicians have raised organisations phoenix-like from their dusty shelves, to fulfil the need of the hour. Whenever, for instance, an important person visits the city, their apparatus swings into action. Banners are unfurled and dusted. Reservations are made—preferably in a five-star hotel, whose managements, paying tribute to the prolific welcomes that these committees can organise, offer them reasonable rates at a discount. Then invitations are sent to a selected few in the city to attend the function. More often than not, the invitees are the cronies of the organisers.

Routine Programme: The programme arranged in honour of the visitor or 'dignitary' which is the impartial adjective applied to every guest of honour, is standard. There is a time allotted for the mingling with the dis-

tinguished guests, followed by 'light refreshments and tea'. Then there is a special 'cultural' programme organised for the entertainment of the invitees. "More often than not," as a prominent public figure wickedly puts it, "the



Ismail: the art of social hospitality

same old artistes perform at each function." According to rumours every organisation has its own artistes on tap which it produces with boring regularity. After this display of indigenous culture, a welcome speech is preferred and the ubiquitous symbol of hospitable sycophancy—the garland, is hung around the unsuspecting visitor's neck. Then of course the dignitary is asked to 'say a few words'. A note of thanks follows his 'gracious speech' and finally

comes the 'departure' as the invitation card sometimes puts it when the VIP leaves, hopefully with a benevolent image of the city's 'elite'. The organisers then, flushed with their sudden activity, retire into the woodwork—until the next occasion arrives for a display of their talents.

Ruling the roost among the city committees is the Bombay Hospitality Committee (BHC) which has been in active existence for at least 17 years. The committee is presided over by H.H. Ismail, ex-sheriff of Bombay and honorary consul general of the Dominican Republic, an affable gentleman with little or no political ambition, who seems to have turned social hospitality into a fine art. It is mainly on the strength of Ismail's many contacts that the committee flourishes. There are some 28 'hosts', selected by Ismail, who are collectively responsible for contributing towards the cost of the functions. Many of them belong to the business community—A.C. Padamsee of Eagle Flasks, Y.A. Fazalbhoy of Fotofone, R.R. Kamani of the Kamani group and A.A. Premji of Premji tyres. Although the organisation is left to the president, some of the hosts are regular attenders of the various functions. Says Shadilal Jain of Lion Pencils, also an ex-sheriff, "I go to as many functions as I can," and adds "I am a very active member of the committee." Some of the hosts however, have only a passing interest in the organisation and as Fazalbhoy puts it—his own interest is that of a "silent spectator".

Winning Goodwill: The BHC does not restrict itself to welcoming visitors. Whether it is the election of a new mayor or a delegation being sent to the Middle East in search of petro-dollars for government projects, the occasion merits a little get-together. "The purpose of the BHC," says Ismail expansively, "is to win the goodwill of people in

India and abroad". The term 'goodwill' seems to be the quintessence of the committee, and is generated in good measure by every invitee and host.

Strangely enough, although the BHC is a private, unregistered organisation, the Government seems to look upon it favourably and patronises it to a great extent. In the last four months there have been two occasions when Chief Minister Antulay has agreed to preside over its functions—once when Charanjit Chanana, Union minister of state for industry was invited as the chief guest and the other time when Ghani Khan Chaudhuri, Union minister for energy was in town. Last month, a special reception was held for Ramrao Adik, minister of urban development and finance, Government of Maharashtra. "It's strange," says a disgruntled public figure, who has taken up the cause of the consumer years ago, "how politicians have the time to attend such functions, when our requests for an audience go unheeded for long stretches of time."

Probably because of this patronage, the importance of the BHC among a certain section of society has been growing over the years. Often invitees who mock the committee in their spare time, attend its function nevertheless, because as one ex-mayor jokingly puts it: "No one wants to refuse hospitality." Whatever the reasons, the BHC gathers 250 to 500 people everytime and has come to regard itself as a gracious institution that "creates a good impression of the city in the mind of the guest" as Premji puts it. "Only the elite are invited and it brings goodwill (that term again) to Bombay," he explains, adding "there are hardly any committees which are that active." Says Fazalbhoy, "The idea is to make the visitor aware that such a group of people exist who are interested in people from outside Bombay." While Fazalbhoy thinks that the idea is very successful, he agrees that the BHC could become a more dynamic organisation. Prof Merchant, another host, refers to the committee as a "purely non-political social organisation of people

with status and standing." This 'elitism'—a point of view which all the hosts interviewed uphold, appears to be the mainstay of the BHC—Membership of it fosters a sense of self-esteem, and add to that the opportunity of meeting the right people in the right surroundings and it explains why such organisations flourish and burgeon.

Common Platform: The BHC is not alone in this esoterism. A number



Reception for the consul general of Japan: boring niceties at the Supper Club

of organisations, in political or social guise provide a platform for certain Bombaywallas to meet important people and build contacts. Sometimes they provide an excuse for ex-office holders to remain in public life. The All India Khilafat Committee, the Political and Economic Forum, the Economic Forum, and the Progressive Group have all at one or another time been used for such purposes. There are others which are accused of existing

solely on paper. The 'World Federation of World Federalists', the 'Society of Goodwill and Culture', the 'Bureau of Information and Cultural Affairs', the 'Maharashtra Friendship Association', many of which are concerns spawned by Ismail, are in his own words, "dormant, but made active when needed."

To outward appearances, these committees are more or less harmless. After all, what is wrong when a group of people with common interests come together on a common platform? Especially if they appear to carry on the oft touted Indian tradition of hospitality and offer samples of their affability and erudition to a visiting VIP? However, as Nana Chudasama, whose 'Common Man's Forum' tries to voice citizen grievances, puts it, "One must question the purpose of such organisations. Every such institution must have definite aims and objectives—to say that they 'want to spread goodwill' is too vague a definition. After all, Bombay has enough problems and projects and opportunities to do something constructive. Such organisations can use their platform for providing rapport between the guest and the public which needs to meet him."

If these committees are only a prop for a bit of social climbing, they can be dismissed easily. If however, they promote certain sectarian interests under a social guise then their activities become questionable. In a country where acumen comprises as much of the contacts you have as anything else and where business deals often hinge on government consent, the business-politics nexus is often all-important. Such functions then, where businessmen from all over the world can intermingle with politicians, are bound to have profitable spin-offs for the participants. And in some cases, when these bodies become semi-official appendages of the Government, they can also be turned into a socially acceptable, superficially innocuous platform for some very serious and specific goal-directed lobbying.

—Rohini Nilekani