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 An exclusive tête-à-tête with BJP leader L.K.Advani

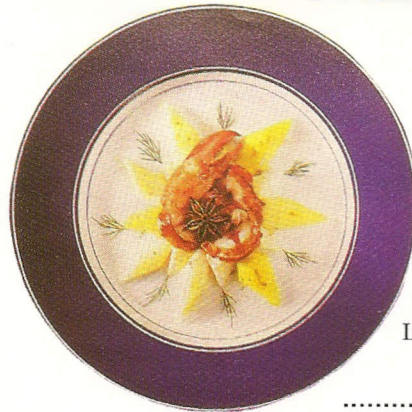
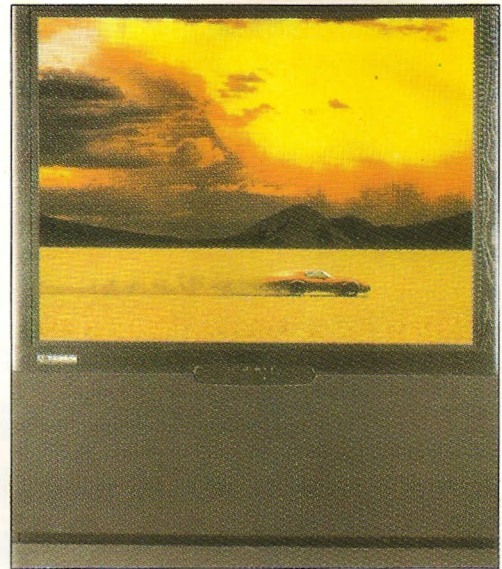
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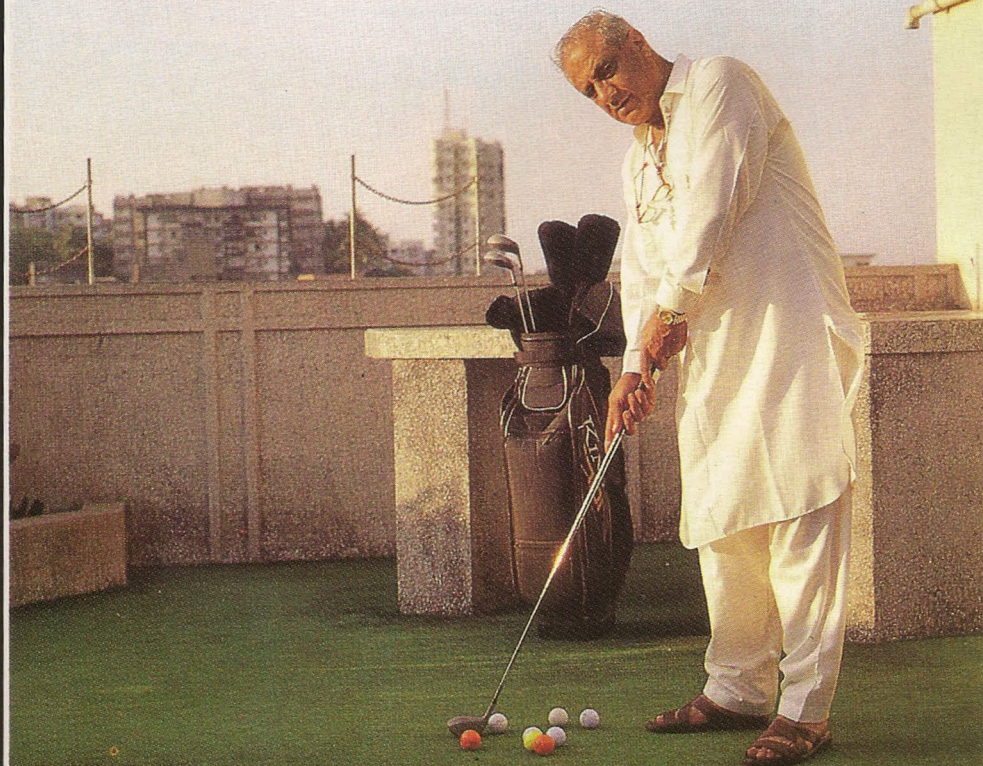


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The Road From Nowhere



He may be a busy transport baron but Asghar Patel would rather be teeing off on a golf course somewhere

Five hundred crore and a bad tooth. That was our first impression of Asghar Patel as he walked out of his cabin and into the opulent lobby where we were skulking with the guilt of being five minutes late. We were prepared with a carefully worded apology but the millionaire changed the rules. He smiled apologetically and told us that he had to dash to the dentist but would be back in a few minutes. We prayed the dentist would pick the

right tooth. We had an interview to do.

Patel is one of those men whose success has gone to the head of his public relations team. While one can't grudge him his official sidekicks, he is certainly more accessible and a few degrees kinder than his retinue. Strangely, his surroundings seem to be so harsh in comparison with his own equanimity that he comes across as a serene ascetic whose path to salvation is essentially the golf course. The grim security guards at his massive house

in a Mumbai suburb, the impassive servants and other cold accessories of his domesticity, especially the surly Dobermann at the gate which eyes the blessed haunches of every visitor, are a misleading prelude to the man himself. As they say, he is warmer than his toaster.

Anyone who plays golf, some old hands at the turf often say, ought to be a nice man who appreciates the best things in life. Usually, the 'best things in life', don't include 'the wife' but Patel obviously has the best interests of his dear Betsy in mind — he has laid out an astro turf on his terrace to help him putt when he feels like it!

However, he does get his legitimate hours on the golf course. On week days he spends about two and a half hours playing. "The tee off is between 6:30 am and 7:45 am. We play for nine holes on week days but on Saturdays and Sun-

days it's 18. We play from 7 to 11 in the morning." On week days he is at his office at about 9:45 am and works till eight in the evening. "I work on Saturdays at home from 4 pm to 8 pm and on Sundays from 5 pm to 8 pm." That is a lot of labour for a man of his wealth, if not age. But ask why he chooses to toil and he will say, "Habit".

In his own right, he came up the hard way. He was born to the golden cradle, no doubt, but unlike most big-family-scions he didn't borrow his



Photographs: Dharmendra Mistry

■ *With some of the best things in life*

father's mind. When he was 18, he drove a truck from Mumbai to Delhi to make a few rupees that he could call his own. He was a queer truck driver. Obviously. As a rule, not many people in India take to driving trucks after returning from a fruitful education in Scotland. But Patel had a familiar choice to make — join his father's business, bask in readymade wealth and be unhappy, or plough his own field. "My father's company was called Patel Brothers Topiwallah and it dealt with umbrellas, shoes, caps etc. That didn't excite me much," says Patel. His heart was in the art of

making money though.

He worked as a clerk for a company called Fairdeal Motors, causing some heartache to his father. There, under the guidance of a shrewd businessman named R.N. Swathy, Patel slowly learned the intricacies of the trucking business. "Those were the days of the Nehru era. The days of socialism. There was a shortage of everything. So transporting goods from place to place was a good business."

In Fairdeal Motors he used his good English accent which was very

valuable in the late '50s to be in the good books of some financiers. Soon, when he gained enough confidence in the market, he bought a truck. "My father didn't like the idea. He thought people from respectable families did not do such business. That's why he didn't finance me and I had to get the help of a financier."

His first loading, from Mumbai to Delhi was commissioned by Glaxo. "That was the only loading offer. Since I was just 18 they thought they would check me out first." To save money he drove the truck himself. And when he reached Delhi, he off-

loaded the goods all by himself to save Rs. 8 which might have been a big amount then but certainly not to his father.

In no time he got many more assignments from Glaxo. Soon his base expanded, "Those days the regional heads of big companies like Colgate and Glaxo were all expatriates, so I was very comfortable with them." In the middle of talking about English weather and kilts, Patel managed to strike a few deals with them. During the Pakistan war, he drove 40 trucks to Calcutta all by himself partly to save money, chiefly to know the trade better.

"Once I was stopped by some bandits on a highway. They asked me to show the goods. When they found out that it was only milk powder and that I myself had not much money, they gave me a few slaps and asked me to proceed!" Did he ask himself then if he should have been selling umbrellas and caps along with his father who, like all fathers, was wise? Not really. Patel was in the business after a lot of research. Sheer mathematics had shown him that his kitty would be filled in no time. "Father used to work on instinct. His gut feeling was that there was no money in the trucking business." When it comes to choosing between mathematics and father's instincts, most sons know what to do.

Patel is not the biggest fan of intuitive decision-making. He is an analytical man who wants figures and

estimates and precedents. He is a true democrat who believes in coming to a decision after consulting his managers and there seems to be a special place in his vocabulary for the word 'dissent'. "When everybody says yes in one breath to a particular project I know I should shelve it." At his home,

cozily in the pouch — is highly metaphorical. The marsupial has been chosen to symbolise speed, energy, survival and care. These qualities mirror the personality of Patel as much as they explain his group of companies. Now his joey is Arif, his youngest son who "...is perhaps the



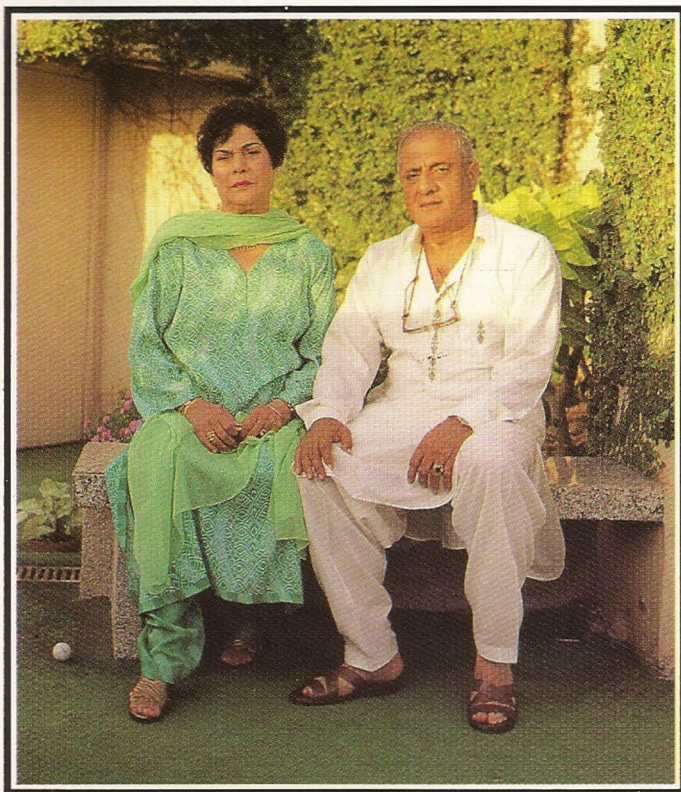
■ His tasteful bar — for there is life after golf

in the midst of eye-catching trinkets, is a small paper board which says, 'If U & I always agree, one of us is unnecessary.'

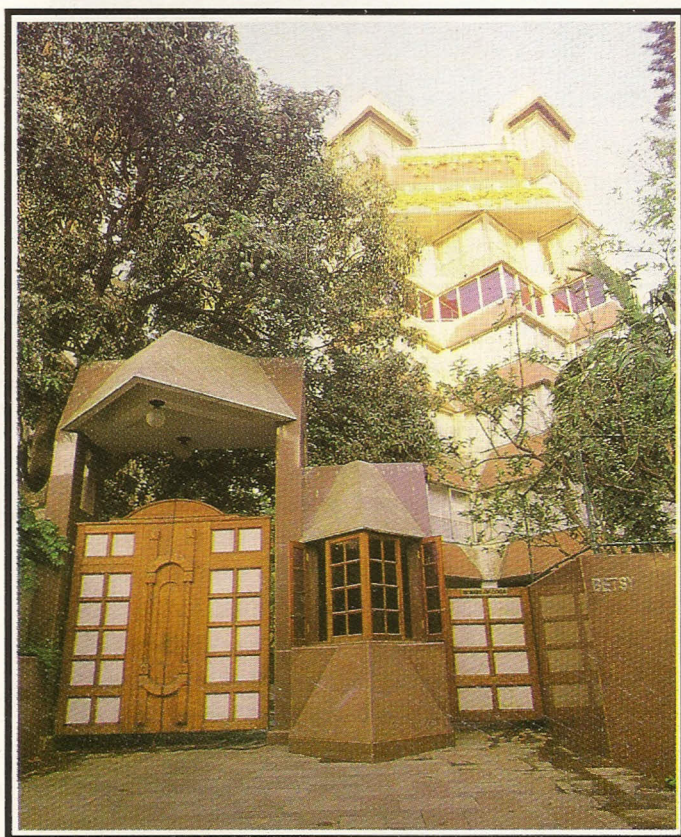
During the Pakistan war he prospered, like a true businessman and he didn't let the momentum wane when the war ended. Now Patel Roadways has over 1,000 trucks all over the country and is said to be one of the most well-organised service groups in India. The 500-crore House of Patels has diversified into finance and construction too. Its symbol — the leaping kangaroo with a joey nestling

most eligible bachelor in Bandra."

Patel is clinically pragmatic as a person of his vocation should be but he has a quaint sort of patriotism that often boils down to utter disenchantment with the way things are run in the country. It also explains his NRI status. "I think we are a country of hypocrites. You tell a poor man that a rich man is rich because he makes a poor man poorer. And you get votes." Though it was Nehru's socialism that created the "shortage of everything" which in turn made trucking a good business, he is utterly



■ With his wife Betsy



■ His home — all seven floors

unimpressed with the days of ideological politics.

“Let me tell you that nothing much has changed now. Bureaucracy is very much there. And we have to wait for eternity for some clearance or the other. I can’t go to Delhi and buy friends there. I don’t want to. Here making money seems to be a crime. If they come to know you have money to invest the first thing they will do is conduct a raid. We have a long way to go.”

He admires the spirit of the latest budget but there is distinct disinterest in the hustle-bustle of Parliament. Not surprisingly the name I.K. Gujral doesn’t enthuse him much. Looking intently at the floor he says, running his hand carefully through his hair, “... perhaps at seventy you think of going not growing.”

Understandably Indian politics doesn’t interest the NRI. He might have loved it if the lushness of Parliament House were used entirely for golf instead of trading horses for donkeys.

Apart from play-

ing golf, keeping his homes beautiful is his self professed ‘part-time’ job. One of those given to moments of poetry, he loves to create an ambience at home and experience the freedom of good life. “I like sitting here in the living room on some afternoons, looking at the fish, listening to gazals and quietly falling asleep.” In what he calls the living room in his seven-floor-high home is a ground level aquarium. The living room also leads to a fashionable cellar where a rich variety of wines stand stately on wooden shelves.

Patel’s interests stretch outdoors too. Cars, in particular the Mercedes, obviously appeal. There is a ‘64 model parked on one side of the house, in ornamentation if not disuse. We want to shoot the car with him. He asks the driver to take the car out to where we want it. The driver tries his best but the old Merc has the attitude of a second hand Ambi. It doesn’t budge. One or two minions try pushing the car. Patel walks up to the Merc and lends his support to the frail shoulders of his attendants. We feel a bit uncomfortable chiefly because we were the authors of this mischief. So we hurry up to the car and push it along with Patel. “You can leave it,” one of us says graciously. Patel doesn’t hear that or he doesn’t want to.

There is a lot of character in him. The tough looking NRI has an unmistakably western lifestyle but the Indian tilt cannot be missed. Someone had once said about NRIs that they were not Non Resident Indians but Non Indian Residents. Ask him about it and he will tell you after a short diatribe on the bureaucracy, “I will die for my country but ask me to live in my country, I won’t.”

— MANU JOSEPH