

MRS THATCHER'S CALL ON THE INDIAN MINISTER OF DEFENCE

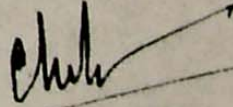
I accompanied Mrs Thatcher on her call on Mr Banshi Lal on the afternoon of 23 September. The Defence Minister was accompanied by the Foreign Secretary, Mr S K Misra and one other official.

2. This was not a very rewarding meeting as the one thing which emerged quite clearly was that Mr Banshi Lal was determined not to talk about Indian defence problems in any substantive way. Mrs Thatcher made successive attempts to focus him on matters of interest but he was equally adroit in evading the issue on each occasion.

3. Much of the discussion was taken up by an exposition by Mr Banshi Lal of the development of Haryana during the time when he had been Chief Minister there. As compared with this his work as Defence Minister was relatively easy. His main task was to ensure that the frontier defence of India was properly maintained and this was not too difficult as, fortunately, the armed forces were adequate for the purpose and were well supplied with the necessary arms and equipment. In any case, questions of defence held a relatively low priority in the Indian scheme of things. The main emphasis was rightly laid on development, on the improvement of the condition of the poor people, and on the fulfilment of Mrs Gandhi's 20-point programme. Only 3.5 per cent of Indian GNP was spent in the defence field.

4. In answer to a question by Mrs Thatcher, the Defence Minister said that normally no difficulties arose over the procurement of equipment needed from Britain. Such difficulties that might occur were usually sorted out without too much trouble; Mr Gadgil had recently paid a useful visit to Britain and on his return had told the Minister that he had successfully resolved any outstanding matters.

5. Altogether the whole meeting was a complete waste of time. Certainly nothing was learned from what Mr Banshi Lal said, and I doubt whether Mrs Thatcher found what he said to her in any way useful. I think it has been suggested that Mr Banshi Lal's rather taciturn method of dealing with his visitors arises from an inadequate command of English. There was absolutely no sign at all of any such deficiency on this occasion. Indeed, Mr Banshi Lal spoke almost without stopping throughout the 40 minutes of the interview. His English may not be particularly polished but it is certainly fluent and entirely adequate for normal conversational purposes.


Michael Walker

24 September 1976

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