

*excellent*

Special Report

RAJNEESH ASHRAM

# Saint Goes Marching Out

**K**OREGAON Park, the usual scene: crowds of orange-robed men and women, many foreigners from both East and West, thronged the huge gates to enter the ashram. Within the compound the saffron horde moved more leisurely, its individuals stopping to hug and kiss their fellow devotees, freely spreading the message of universal love. Slowly the mass of humanity trickled into the ashram's Buddha Hall, a large, open, circular shed. Gradually the hall filled with sanyasis until finally the flow halted, the assembly grew silent, and all eyes were trained on the pedestal-mounted photograph of Rajneesh. The "silent discourse" was on: chanted mantras praised the master, exquisite music filled the air and a sense of beatitude filled the followers of the godman.

But something was amiss at Pune's Shree Rajneesh Ashram because the day before on May 31, Rajneesh Chandra Mohan, 50, better known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, had left the ashram for Bombay and thence for New York. The much-publicised "silent" satsang, attended by over 3,000 Rajneesh



Rajneesh: abrupt disappearance

disciples, was a satsang sans guru, an hour of singing, dancing and praying to the photograph of their Buddha. In itself this was not extraordinary; Rajneesh has occasionally absented himself from morning satsangs in the period immediately before the recently announced "last phase" of his teachings, the "silent phase". But for the citizens of Pune, for the disciples and initiates, for the sceptics and cynics, for the lakhs who have come to accept the presence of the saffron band in the Deccan city, it marked the end of an era, the end of seven years of a colonisation that has become an intrinsic part of the city's culture, for this may be the Bhagwan's final departure from the city, though nobody is willing to say so officially.

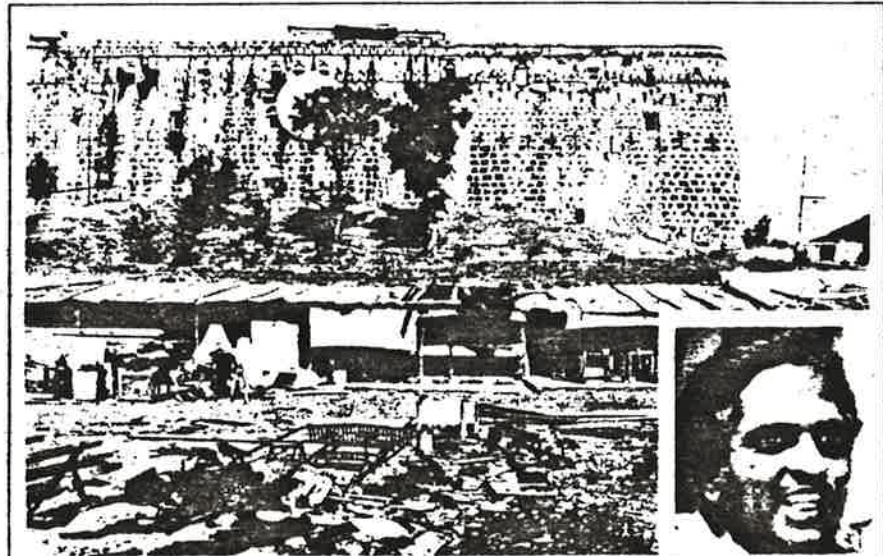
**Missing Master:** Despite the dense veil of secrecy shrouding ashram activities, many people suspected a change was in the offing even before Rajneesh's abrupt disappearance. While nobody, not even the majority of

## LAND DISPUTE

### Blown-Up Case

**M**UCH of what happened last month at the Shree Rajneesh Ashram might have gone unnoticed but for a pair of petrol bombs which exploded, 20 km apart, around three in the morning on May 28. One of the identical incendiary devices fitted with alarm clocks exploded harmlessly outside the gates of 70, Koregaon Park, a bungalow which serves as a medical centre and subsidiary work area to the main ashram. The other, going off inside a warehouse hired by the Rajneesh Foundation to store books, caused a fire which took almost three hours to put out. "This is a clear case of fanatics trying to suppress a minority religion..." said a Foundation spokesman. "This is not the first time that fanatics have tried to destroy us". A criminal case of arson was promptly filed against Amarsingh Jadhavrao, an agriculturist who lives in Pune, and his brother, Sursingh.

Only four days earlier, ashram officials had moved the police in another case against Amarsingh Jadhavrao, for sexually assaulting a foreign sanyasin. Press releases were sent to newspapers around



After-effects of the fire and (inset) Amarsingh: case of arson

the country, and Amarsingh, described as a "prominent Poona advocate and businessman", was accused of, "misusing political power to assault and exploit the sanyasin". But a fact which went unmentioned in the releases was that the Jadhavrao brothers are in fact landlords of the Foundation, and that a civil dispute over water rights was in progress before the alleged sexual assault. Said Amarsingh, a tall, mild-mannered man who, in addition to his farming activities, runs a small Marathi newspaper in the

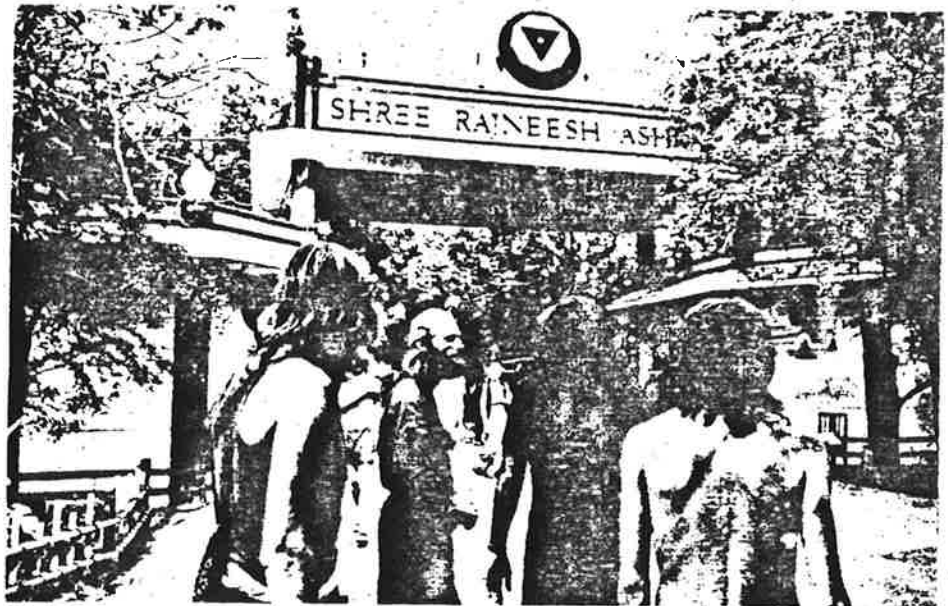
city: "I have known these people for over three years, and they have been my tenants for 15 months now. Why would I choose a time when we have a civil dispute with them to assault a woman and stick my neck in a noose?"

**Bid:** In 1978, with the Koregaon Park Ashram already bursting at the seams, the Rajneesh Foundation made a bid to buy a small valley near Amarsingh's fort at Saswed, 45 minutes away from Pune. Although this plan was effectively scuttled by the Janata Govern-

ashramites, is sure of exactly what is going on, the first inklings of a change came almost two months ago, when the Bhagwan failed to show up for his morning discourse on March 24. During the months that followed, the rumours spread swiftly and speculations multiplied. Among the more popular diagnoses: cancer of the larynx, leukaemia, sciatica, slipped disc and even venereal disease. Possibly worried about the almost violent reaction, ashram officials and the Rajneesh press office announced on April 11 that the master was about to enter the ultimate stage of his work; he would be stopping all discourses and private darshan and begin a period of silent communion.

On May 1, fears of his ill-health were neatly dispelled. The Bhagwan, radiating apparent vitality, reappeared at the morning satsang, though the discourses were a thing of the past. Said a regular visitor to the ashram: "We were certain that this time our Bhagwan's fragile strength would cave in, but he is well. He has always warned us that he is both tremendously powerful and at the same time very fragile and that he could be lost to us forever."

Even after Rajneesh's reappearance, however, a feeling of insecurity continued to plague the ashram. The move to set up a "Rajneesh Land" in larger and more



Devotees outside the ashram: an uncertain future

congenial surroundings, scuttled by Morarji Desai's government, was reportedly again being pursued. The exact location and the timing of the shift were known to only a select few in the ashram, most of them in the Gujarati caucus which controls its finances and administration. Applicants asking to join the ashram meanwhile, were

sent polite letters telling them to hold their horses until after the shift. Western sanyasis already resident in Pune, too, were uncertain about their fate in the event of a sudden shift. Said a young West German sanyasin, "I came here only to do a course in oriental medicine and acupuncture, but now that we're moving I'll go and study it in one

ment, the Foundation hired his fortress Jadhavwadi 15 months ago. The fort is a huge structure measuring 40,000 square feet on the ground floor alone. Although it lay largely disused for many months, eventually about 300 sanyasis from the cramped Pune centres were sent there to set up a soap and shampoo factory, handlooms, and a mala-manufacturing unit (the demand for Rajneesh malas, which are given to initiates at over 250 centres around the world, runs into many hundreds every day).

Last month the ashram encroached on Amarsingh's agricultural land and seized one of his wells on the grounds that he had misrepresented the water problem while making the lease deed. Saffron-clad guards armed with lathis and knives were posted to prevent Amarsingh from having access to the well and the parties moved the civil court for a solution. On May 24, claim ashram spokesmen, a foreign sanyasin went to deliver a letter to Amarsingh at his residence. In their complaint to the Bund Garden Police Station, they have alleged that Amarsingh then offered her a lift back to the ashram and, when he arrived at Koregaon Park, attempted to sexually assault her. Photographs supplied as evidence by the ashram include one of the girl with bared breasts displaying bruises on her skin.

Amarsingh meanwhile also filed a complaint stating that Ma Anand Sheela and others in the ashram had used the girl, Ma Prem Gatha, to frame him for the purpose of forcing him into signing over water rights to the Foundation. Claiming that the girl was sent by Sheela ostensibly to call him to a reconciliatory conference, he states in his complaint, that as soon as he arrived at Koregaon Park he was surrounded by about 25 armed guards and "informed" that he had molested her. Said Amarsingh: "Even presuming that I did want to molest a sanyasin, I would have to be demented to take her to Koregaon Park, which is packed tight with these fanatic Rajneesh guards, when she has come all the way to my home to deliver a letter."

**Attempted Arson:** Three days later a heap of old furniture outside Jadhavwadi fort was set alight during the night and a criminal complaint implicating Amarsingh was filed with the Saswad Police. Early the next morning the petrol bombs exploded, and once more Amarsingh was named the culprit. While investigations are in progress in all three cases, certain preliminary facts are already known. The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in its investigation at the Pimpri warehouse, has found that ashram officials grossly overstated the extent of

damage to the books. While Prem Leela, of the ashram press office, claimed that the loss of books was in the region of Rs 150 lakh, CID valuers place this figure below Rs 5 lakh. The two petrol bombs, too, have been revealed to be fairly simple incendiary devices capable of burning but not exploding. While bomb demolition experts and the forensic department are still trying to work out the precise method of detonation, they have so far been unable to find a connection between the alarm clocks mounted on the devices and the actual detonation. Experts admit the possibility that the alarm clocks may have been placed there to mislead investigators, and the actual lighting of the petrol was done manually.

Furthermore, eyewitness accounts reveal that an all-night guard was mounted at the Pimpri warehouse only a few days before the blaze. At 70, Koregaon Park too policemen are puzzled how the bomb could have been planted unnoticed by the all-night guard posted at the gate. While the police are unwilling to comment at this stage, the investigations are likely to end soon. Meanwhile, as the ashram makes preparations to shift out of Pune, it seems unlikely that the sanyasis will be concerned with the findings. By all indications, the ashram will be deserted by the time the story is out.