

CHANDRA SHEKHAR

Marching To Discovery

IN THE coolness of the early morning there is little traffic on National Highway 3. Outward bound from Nasik, the tar stretches infinitely in mottled grey, punctuated by the whoosh and blare of passing trucks. Through the sounds of the stir-

ring countryside come the choral slaps of the marchers' feet.

It is a curious cavalcade—at least 250 men and a few women, a car decked out in loudspeakers and the 'Great Leader's' cut-out darting ahead to warn villages of his

coming, and other vehicles carrying the camp followers' paraphernalia.

The leading walker, the ghost of morality past, sets a scorching pace. As the sun climbs to its zenith, turning the Sahyadris purple in the haze, he shows no signs of flag-



ging. Chandra Shekhar will turn 56 a week after his scheduled touch-down at Delhi in June, but he clocks a steady speed of 5 km every hour. The younger marchers often have to jog to keep pace with him; after four months on the road, Shekhar's face shows little trace of strain. Soon he gets into the swing of the day's march—an average of 25 km from dawn to dusk with a long siesta in the afternoon—and the marchers string out in straggly knots along the road.

Significant March: This is the year of *Gandhi* the film; this is also the age of politics

as spectacle, of gesture and imitative response. The very longevity of Shekhar's Long March has begun to erase its patina of gimmickry. Seventy years ago Gandhi the man led an army of 5,000 coal miners into the Transvaal in South Africa on the first of his many epic marches. The Dandi March in 1930 produced another foot-soldier of peace, Vinoba Bhave. But there seems to be little logic in Shekhar's 'Bharat Yatra'. Three years after the rag-tag party he led crashed to political oblivion, he began marching from Kanyakumari, significantly on the very

day in January when the election results in Karnataka revived the Janata's wavering strength. "I have not come as a Messiah," says Shekhar, "but I want to discover India, to see first-hand the problems that the unknown Indian faces. I am not a phenomenon—15 crore people in our country are perennial padayatris."

Gandhi's padayatras revolved around specific issues, and served as much to arouse public opinion as did his numerous fasts.

The padayatris set a blistering pace



Shekhar's peregrination, on the other hand, is not so spontaneous, or bereft of organisational trappings. Gandhi would have journeyed on foot through Assam's torn landscape, taking healing words to the doorsteps of shattered families. Shekhar's only obeisance to the Mahatma will come on June 25—the eighth anniversary of the declaration of Emergency—when he will pay homage at Rajghat in Delhi. "I thought of trekking through Assam," he says somewhat disingenuously, "but if I went it would break up the momentum of the march here."

Momentum has become all-important, and the march has generated its own organisational sophistication. A jeep attached to a trailer carries a sleek Yamaha generator that drinks 10 litres of kerosene every day, powering two klieg lights that illuminate Shekhar's evening meetings. A truck carries 12,000 litres of water, but the marchers have opted for the Madhya Pradesh route in preference to the Gujarat-Rajasthan route because Rajasthan is stricken by acute famine. Once every week doctors examine every marcher for fatigue or footsores; on their advice, there is a halt every 5 km for rest, water, and puffed rice. One follower is video-taping the march for posterity; another is compiling a directory of 'activists' *en route*, and a third conducts study circles on alternate days where the marchers exchange opinions and discuss the lessons they have learnt.

At every halt Shekhar trots out a well-worn speech. "Gandhi's dreams and Jayaprakash Narayan's sentiments have been let down," he tells the curious villagers, "and Assam is burning. India's Harijans and minorities are being oppressed. Help us to shape a new destiny for the nation." And, at the end, "We cannot realise our objectives without your help. Please contribute money." The money has been steadily pouring in; Shekhar himself estimates a collection so far of Rs 7 lakh, but this is off the cuff, and could be much higher. At every stage-post there are enough people willing to donate money in exchange for their names being announced over a rickety public-address system.

Resting Time: "The first week was hell," says Sudhindra Bhadoria, 30, general secretary of the All India Yuva Janata who has been walking with Shekhar from Kanyakumari. "Our feet developed terrible blisters. But now we are used to the pace." Still, many of the marchers sport postage-stamp sized blisters on their toes, and atop a van rides a bag full of spare footwear. Shekhar is armed with an array of lotions and creams—all of foreign manufacture—donated by "well-wishers". At Pimpalgaon, 31 km from Nasik, he stops marching before noon. A sumptuous meal is served to the marchers, and Shekhar retires to the rest-house, arranged

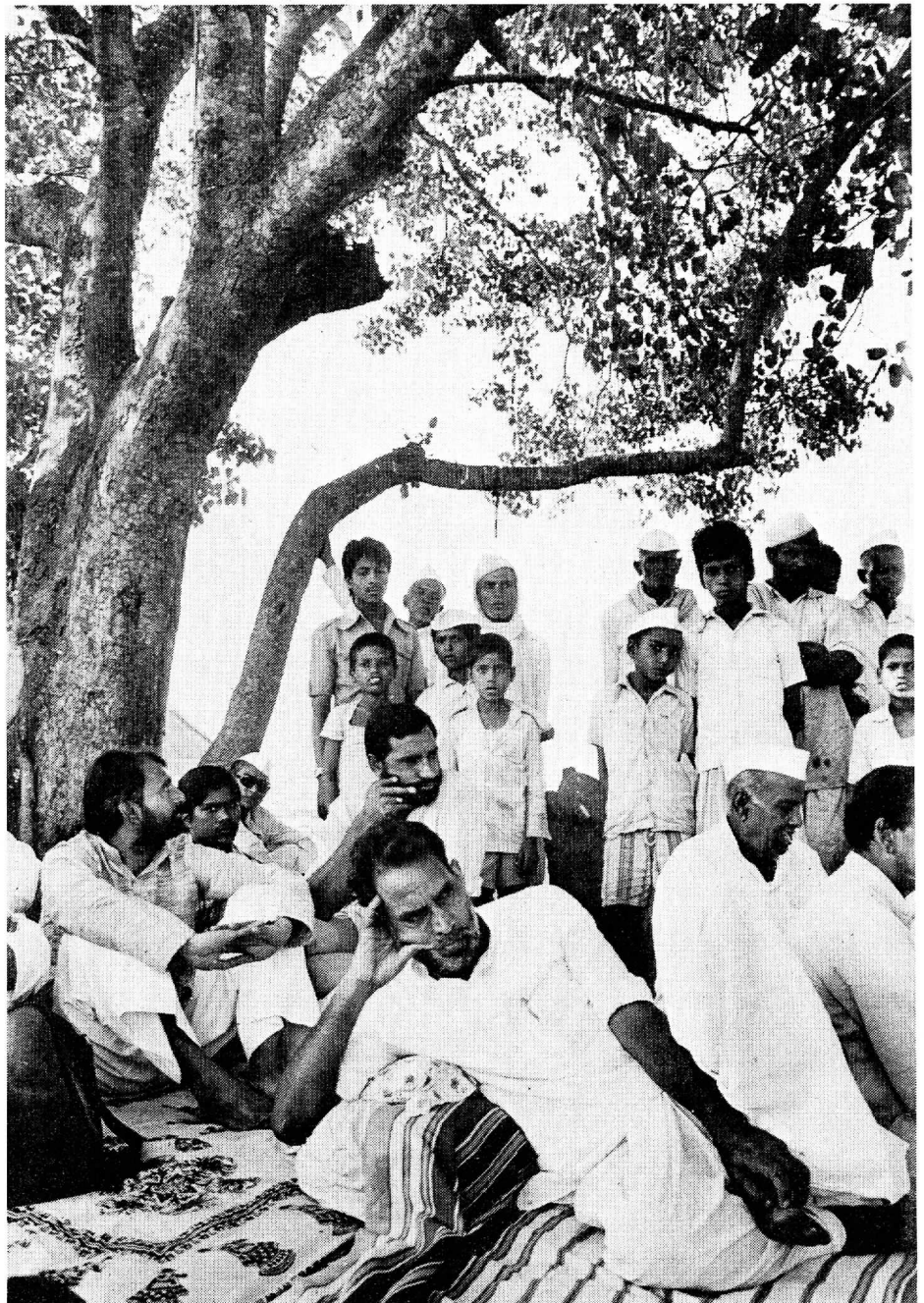
by Maharashtra party chief Rajaram 'Bapu' Patil. Before he resumes walking at 5 p.m. Bhadoria dutifully massages his feet.

The Messianic role is inescapable, and Shekhar allows villagers to touch his feet reverently. "I tried to stop them," he says in weak self-defence, "but a slipped disc I suffered in jail during the Emergency prevents me from bending." At Mangrool, the local Sikhs arrange a reception in their gurudwara, and Shekhar strikes his rest-period pose, reclining against a bolster, while a group of cymbal-wielding singers belt out a repertoire of Marathi bhajans. On the road, while Shekhar walks silently, a vanguard of young men

shouts lusty slogans and joins in atonal renderings of revolutionary songs.

"I am not ushering in any revolution," says Shekhar, "but it is clear that India is ripe for revolution. I believe now that all Indians are basically the same—deep down they think alike. India will go on because of her people, and her people will endure in spite of politicians like me." The self-deprecatory tone sounds sincere enough. "People are sick of the present state of party politics," he goes on, "but that does not mean that I am veering away from party politics. I think I would like to help fashion a new style of politics, of people politics."

Chandra Shekhar takes a much-needed break: "India is ripe for revolution"



Regional movements like the ones in Assam, or Jharkhand in Bihar, are symbols of growing disenchantment with existing politics, says Shekhar. "What is needed is a common thread to bind such movements together, to transform the social, economic and moral dimensions within which we operate. Otherwise such movements remain localised and eventually peter out."

Larger Motive: With the money he is collecting, Shekhar intends to set up an institute for research in Delhi. Clearly, however, many of the young men accompanying him see the padayatra as a means of leaping into larger political areas. Bashisht Narain Rai comes from Shekhar's home district of Ballia in Uttar Pradesh. "Where I come from," he says candidly, "people are so backward that they do not even record their children's birth dates. My official birthday is July 1, 1960, the day I joined school. There



A dutiful Bhadoria massages his leader's feet

was no hope of getting work in Ballia, so I thought this padayatra would be a good way to see the country and to join hands with Chandra Shekhar."

There are other marchers who have been convinced by Shekhar's arguments. Kunji Raman, 32, was an active Youth

Congress(I) leader in Bombay. After Sanjay Gandhi's death he set up a Sanjay Sena. Now he has quietly joined the 'Bharat Yatra'. "I realised that the Congress(I) operated purely on the basis of money," he says, "Chandra Shekhar had answers for the doubts plaguing me."

The march has caused disquiet in other parties, and within the Janata Party itself, Shekhar's position has become stronger. For people on the 4,000-km route, however, Shekhar's progress represents more a curious spectacle than the promise of a different future. The Young Turk has now aged into a parody of dissent and fire, of

determination and forthrightness. Deep down, he lacks in essential warmth, empathy for the people whose lives he touches, and whenever he raises his palms to salute the throngs that mill around him, there is a look in his eyes that speaks of the futility of this formula. —CHAITANYA KALBAG in Nasik

An enthusiastic welcome by the wayside: a curious spectacle

