

THE SCINDIAS

The Battle Royal

IT BEGAN as a small tiff, as all battles do. The two antagonists' identities lent it a delicious irony: Vijaya Raje Scindia, the ex-Rajmata of Gwalior, and her only son, ex-Maharaja Madhavrao. Over the years, this essentially political fight spilt out of the Gwalior palace into national attention. Today, it includes all the ingredients of a box-office block buster: a stubborn queen-mother guided by a scheming courtier, an equally determined son fighting back grimly a clutch of avaricious, unscrupulous relatives, and an occasional guru egging his particular disciple on.

Note by note, this atonal orchestra has built up towards a noisy crescendo. The opening bars rang out on April 4, when Vijaya Raje, who is vice-president of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and a member of the Rajya Sabha, told newsmen in Gwalior that her son, a Congress(I) Lok Sabha member, had committed a most unpri-ncely

Vidya Bharati, which is a thinly-veiled front for the Rashtriya Swyamsewak Sangh (RSS).

Influential Aide: Reports about the fracas omitted mentioning the man who holds centre-stage in this unfolding story—the Rajmata's personal secretary, Sardar Sambhaji Chandroji Angre. A publicity-shy recluse, Angre has come to exert a powerful—and, insists Madhavrao—malign influence over the Rajmata ever since he insinuated himself into her life soon after the death of her husband, Maharaja Jiwaji Rao Scindia, in 1960.

In February, Angre master-minded a coup that hit directly at another ruling family—the Gandhis. Soon after he became the major owner in a take-over of *Surya* magazine, the Indira-Maneka feud erupted into open revolt by Sanjay Gandhi's widow. On March 31, three days after the Lucknow convention that launched Maneka's "political career", Madhavrao lashed out at Angre in a public statement. Not only had Angre



Madhavrao and his mother Vijaya Raje Scindia: escalating family feud

act. That afternoon, his personal secretary Mahendra Pratap Singh had put lock and seal on all doors leading to the *pièce de résistance* of the ornate, 900-room Italianate Jai Vilas Palace—the opulent Durbar Hall, the Banquet Hall, and the Council Room.

Singh defended his action by saying that he apprehended the seizure of these palace rooms by the Rajmata and her pet organisation—an educational body called

embarrassed Mrs Gandhi, his supreme leader, by purchasing *Surya*, said Madhavrao, but he had left "no stones unturned to cause a deep cleavage between me and my mother and sister in an effort to destroy my family." Angre refuses to enter the controversy which has taken on all the trappings of a political battle between the Congress(I) and the BJP. In a plainly motivated move the Income Tax Depart-



Jai Vilas Palace in Gwalior

ment has asked Angre to explain the financial aspects of the *Surya* deal.

Gwalior still rings with the echoes of the days when the Scindias ruled this fiefdom, one of the four most powerful princely states in pre-Independent India. On April 8, at Gwalior's Maharajpura airport, it seemed as though princely privileges had never been abolished. Vijaya Raje, still referred to as Rajmataji, was seen off by an obsequious knot of people. Among them was her stepbrother Dhyanaendra Singh, and Bhalkhandra Prahlad Deshmukh, secretary of the 15 trusts that were formed in 1971 to administer the vast Scindia properties.

Continuing Struggle: The Rajmata had flown into Gwalior two hours earlier to meet her lawyers. Clad in her trade mark white sari, carrying her *puja* paraphernalia in a Gucci tote bag, the Rajmata told INDIA TODAY on the bumpy flight to Delhi that she had instructed her lawyers to file a suit in the Gwalior Civil Court against her son. "The Durbar Hall is not his personal property," she said. "It belongs to a trust."

The battle for the Durbar Hall was a mere skirmish compared to the two-year-old struggle for control of the Scindia trusts. The Rajmata is the chairperson of the 15 trusts, which control the Scindia properties. Six of these administer various parts of the Jai Vilas Palace. Until May 1980, these trusts were managed by a common group of trustees: the Rajmata, Madhavrao, his wife



Pictures by Bhawan Singh

Madhavi Raje, Angre, and Colonel Eknath Trimbak Patil who was once the private secretary to Madhavrao's father Jiwaji. That month, the Rajmata quietly added two new trustees—her stepsister Sushma Devi Singh, and Narain Krishnarao Shejwalkar, BJP member of Parliament from Gwalior.

The induction of these two trustees tilted the scales in favour of the Rajmata-Angre camp, which flies BJP colours. Madhavrao's supporters charge that the Rajmata had, by illegally altering the minutes of a trustees' meeting, brought in Sushma and Shejwalkar under the catch-all agenda item that reads: "Any other matter that may be brought up by the Chair." This renders the two recent trustees illegal, say sources close to Madhavrao, because the appointment of new trustees is an important item requiring separate listing on an agenda. Sushma and her brother Dhyendra say this is untrue. "Madhavrao is only damaging himself," says the cockily confident Dhyendra. "After his secretary got the Durbar Hall sealed, he not only asked for police guards, but put 40 hooligans armed with lathis and guns, on patrolling duty."

Principal Players: The Rajmata's step-siblings and Deshmukh are some of the principal players in this murky drama. The others include Angre's daughter Chitralekha Gaekwad, the Rajmata's younger daughter Vasundhara Raje, and followers in the palace's army of employees.

A day before the Rajmata's airdash to Gwalior to launch proceedings against her son, the Madhavrao faction struck another blow when Patil obtained an injunction from Senior Sub-Judge S.L. Tandon in Delhi. The stay order said that Sushma and Shejwalkar could not function as trustees, and that no trustee could sell, donate or dispose of any of the trusts' possessions. Tandon posted the case for further hearing on April 19. The affair also came up for noisy debate in the Madhya Pradesh Assembly on April 8, when

supporters of the mother and the son clashed.

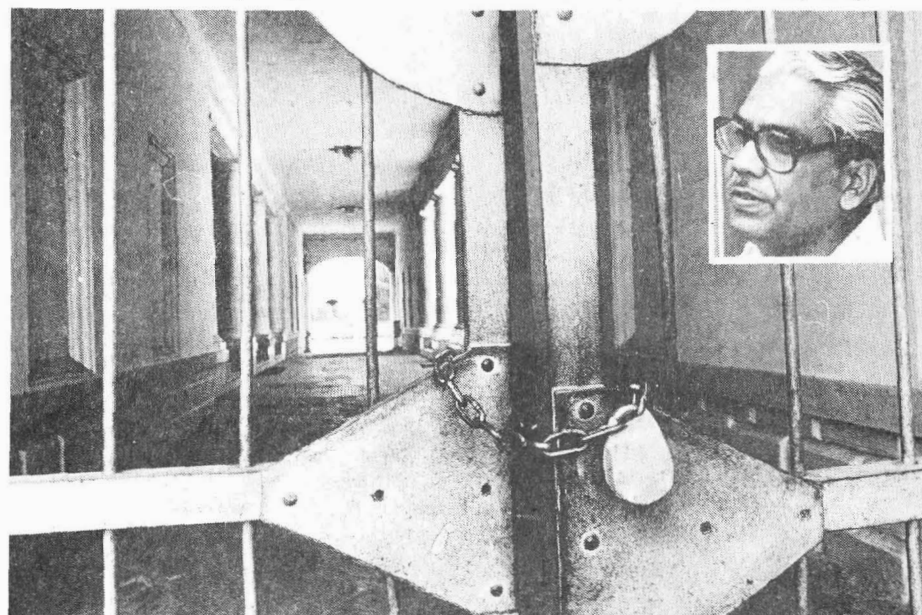
The credentials of the people in the Rajmata's camp appear to corroborate Madhavrao Scindia's followers' apprehension that the BJP and its RSS back-bone eventually want the Gwalior palace, which they say is part of the national heritage.

Sushma aside from occasionally broadcasting classical music from the Bhopal AIR station, is also the vice-president of the Madhya Pradesh BJP unit, an MLA from Karera, and the 'caretaker' of the Jiwaji Rao Scindia museum housed in the palace's west wing. Dhyendra is the president of the state unit of the Janata Yuva Morcha (JYM), the BJP's youth wing. He is also the 'security officer' of the museum. Deshmukh was formerly the managing director of Rewa Publications, owners of one of the state's largest newspapers, *Swadesh*, which is an avowed BJP-RSS mouthpiece. Vasundhara Raje was instrumental in using her close friendship with Maneka Gandhi to bring off the sale of *Surya* to Angre.

THE latest palace conflict has come as no surprise. Trouble began in late 1980 when, with the Rajmata's blessings, the RSS conducted a *Shibir* (camp) in the palace. Last month, with the Rajmata as the president of the reception committee, the Vidya Bharati held a training camp for 200 'educationists' in the palace, having last December shifted its national headquarters from Delhi to a wing of the Jai Vilas Palace for which it pays a token monthly rent of one rupee.

Madhavrao was particularly alarmed by the Rajmata's bombshell at the March convention that she would eventually hand over the entire palace to Vidya Bharati in order to set up a "truly Indian public

The sealed-off passage of the Durbar Hall and (inset) Mahindra Pratap Singh



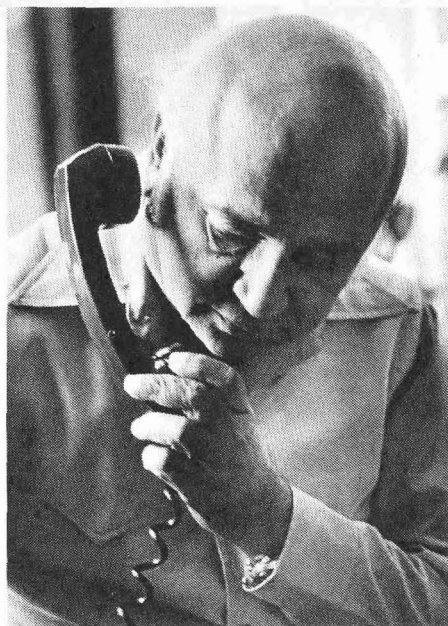
school". Two other developments appear to have precipitated the sealing of the Durbar Hall. On April 2, Mahendra Pratap Singh received notice from Deshmukh that the next meeting of the boards of the Scindia Devasthan and Rani Usha Raje Charitable Trusts would be held in the Council Room on April 4 instead of the Rajmata's quarters as usual. Through Deshmukh, Vidya Bharati also told Pratap of a plan to conduct two three-week training camps in the Council Room. Certain that these requests were a precursor to a take-over by Vidya Bharati, Pratap ordered the doors sealed.

The Rajmata believes that her son was badly advised but Pratap recalls that a month earlier he had resisted attempts by some of the Rajmata's men to "look over" the Durbar Hall. "I am a Rajput," avers the suave Pratap. "I belong to the Karauli royal family in Rajasthan. When they threatened me, I took out my pistol and warned them not to go any further. When they asked me what I would do if the Rajmata herself tried to get in, I replied that I would shoot myself."

Large Organisation: Vidya Bharati controls, through state committees affiliated to it, a total of 1,300 schools and 50 colleges throughout the country. It aims at moving away from "Macaulian" concepts of "alien" education. Says the editor of its journal, Chandrapal Singh Thakur: "We want to teach our students Indian tradition, culture, philosophy, yoga, and Sanskrit."

An outer wing of the palace also houses the Saraswati Shishu Mandir which the Rajmata founded soon after her link-up with the Jana Sangh in the late '60s. At the time, Madhavrao, who was in the Jana Sangh till just after the Emergency was party to this decision. "Now," says the Rajmata, "we want to start an ideal public school here, which will get the best students from all the Shishu Mandirs in India. It will become some sort of a nucleus for an alternative educational system."

Tempestuous as the rift has become, the question of the trusts' take-over by the Rajmata's camp was almost resolved last year. At one of her extremely rare meetings with her son, the Rajmata reportedly agreed to drop Sushma and Shejwalkar and permit the appointment of two neutral trustees. In return, she asked for one of the keys to the palace strong-room containing the fabled Scindia jewels, both of which were with Madhavrao. Later, however, she changed her mind about dropping Sushma and Shejwalkar. Today, neither she nor



Angre: eminence grise

Madhavrao can open the jewel strong-room—the two keys have to be used together.

The man who planned and executed both the Rajmata's entry into the Jana Sangh, and the formation of the Scindia trusts, was none other than Sardar Sambhaji Angre who lives with an impressive pipe collection, four dogs, his wife and daughter in a quaint mini-palace called Hiran Ban in



Sushma Devi and Dhyandendra: principal players

one corner of the Jai Vilas grounds. Strangely enough, his son Tulaji has kept his distance from his father, and works quietly on a tea estate in Assam.

Palace Intrigues: Not that the elder Angre is acting out of tradition. The Angres accompanied Mahadaji Scindia when he established the Gwalior kingdom in 1761, and the family, which grew to be one of the most powerful of the Scindias' Sardars (ministers) has been at the centre of palace intrigues for generations.

Sambhaji Angre's father Chandroji

tried to get the then Viceroy in 1936 to divest the young king Jiwaji Rao (Madhavrao's father) of his powers and set up a regency council. Chandroji was punished by having his *jagir* (estate) confiscated, and put on a pension.

Immediately after Jiwaji's death in 1960, say palace insiders, Chandroji introduced his son Sambhaji into the palace. By virtue of being a cousin by marriage of the late Maharaja, Sambhaji quickly gained the confidence of the Rajmata, but not without arousing jealousy and criticism. A delegation of Sardars even called on the Rajmata to warn her against Angre's influence.

Widening Gulf: The advice was ignored, and Angre gradually came to acquire influence over the Rajmata, advising her on every move. At the same time, the gulf between the Rajmata and Madhavrao was proportionately widening.

Although Angre is an invitee to the BJP's national executive, his spiritual mentor is a man called Omkarnath Thakur, who has a small ashram at Durgapuri, near Mehrauli in Delhi. Interestingly the Thakur has another powerful disciple—B.N. Mullik, who was director of Intelligence and once the most important policeman in the country. Angre and Mullik are reportedly good friends and *guru-bhais*.

When he is not shuttling between Bombay, Pune, Delhi, and Gwalior, where the Scindia trusts control extensive property,

Angre looks after his personal property, which includes farmland in Guna district. His daughter Chitralkha is his closest aide; she also runs a bolt factory in Gwalior's industrial area.

Gwalior's Sardars also point out that Angre's wife Rajarajeshwari, too, is a Thakur. It so happens that Angre's brother-in-law is BJP Rajya Sabha MP Jaswant Singh, who is reported to be the party's biggest fund-raiser. Curiously, Rajarajeshwari has another important relative—her cousin Narendra Singh Bhati, one of Rajasthan's most powerful Congress(I) politicians and an associate of Rajiv Gandhi.

As Angre's role in two struggles—between the Rajmata and Madhavrao on the one hand, and between Indira and Maneka on the other—acquires larger dimensions with each passing day, this complex power play's two acts go on simultaneously, on parallel stage. Echoing through the tussles are the loud rattles set up by skeletons in the Scindia and Gandhi cupboards.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG in Gwalior