

MADHYA PRADESH

Making Of A Martyr



RAGHU RAI

WHILE it lasted, last fortnight's nine-hour hostage hold-up in Congress(I) Member of Parliament Dalbir Singh's Delhi apartment generated wild images of urban terrorism on the loose. It was the first time ever that the problems of distant, rural India had been so dramatised and Ram Narayan Kumar, the improbable attacker, appeared to signal a new and violent trend of bringing such problems to the cities. By the time the drama ended, however, there was only a multitude of question marks hanging over the motive for the bizarre incident and Kumar showed through as a charlatan and an opportunist, an eccentric and emotional individual who had cleverly used the allegedly "inhuman" plight of coal miners in the Jhagrakhand coalfields in Madhya Pradesh to publicise the main issue—himself.

There were other elements of parody—the manner in which Dalbir Singh, the prime target of Kumar and his accomplice Kumaraswamy, made

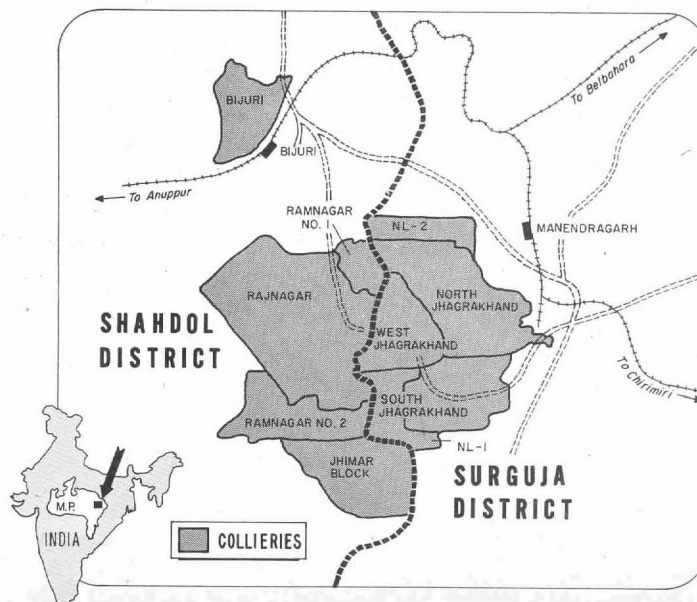
Miners at the Jhagrakhand coalfields

his inglorious escape via bathroom and rear fire-escape, the attackers' descent from belligerence into geniality and finally contemplations of suicide, and their five frightened hostages' testimonials later on to Kumar's "basic decency and sincerity".

No blood was spilt on that thoroughfare of politicians' homes—South Aven-

ue—that anticlimactic afternoon. When Kumar and Kumaraswamy were captured at 4 p.m. by policemen posing as journalists—Kumar himself had gained ingress by posing as one—all that was left was a .38 Smith and Wesson revolver, three soul-stirring written statements about the miners' conditions, and broad hints from the Government about Kumar's "foreign backers" and the inevitable theory of an awesome conspiracy.

Violent Views: Slight, dark and suave, Kumar, 25, hardly looks a fire-breathing revolutionary. But in a neat, handwritten pamphlet titled 'Violence is a historical necessity', he sets forth the Marxist-Leninist view that "No serious student of history will deny that certain historical situations render violence ineluctable." He goes on to declare darkly: "We intend to execute influential individuals who have misused their official position and power to commit heinous (sic) crimes—crimes which are a matter of public knowledge and revulsion and which, in any



society with effective moral standards, would at once be rewarded by a death sentence or public lynching."

For a moment, it looked as though Kumar was the harbinger of India's own version of Italy's Red Brigades or West Germany's Baader Meinhoff—fanatical ideologues holding the urban elite to ransom in order to ram through their own prescriptions for social change.

Kumar sought to reinforce his picture of Jhagrakhand's 20,000 miners' cruel degradation by claiming that 60 per cent of them suffer from diseases like cancer, tuberculosis, bronchitis and leprosy; that drinking water was unavailable in pure form; that medical facilities were so inadequate that injured or sick miners died in their hundreds; and that transportation to and from the remotely situated mines was non-existent.

Mining Conditions: The situation, as INDIA TODAY discovered on a tour of the 300 sq km mines area, is certainly better than in the Dhanbad-Jharia coalfields in Bihar, where violence, squalor and corruption have become part of the miners' everyday misery. (see box). Nor was Kumar's target Dalbir Singh stating the truth when he protested that he had nothing to do with the Jhagrakhand mines, as they did not fall within his constituency. The Jhagrakhand coalfields are divided into 15 mines; 10 of these fall within Dalbir Singh's Shahdol district, and the other five in adjoining Surguja district. Dalbir Singh has been involved in coalfield politics, although peripherally, and has often visited the mines.

But Kumar has never been involved actively with Jhagrakhand workers or with the thriving unions there. He visited the mines only twice—on February 11 and 12 and on March 19 and 20. His first visit occurred soon after a strike notice was issued by the Surguja Coal Workers' Union (scwu), affiliated to the All India Trade Unions Congress (AITUC), and the Madhya Pradesh Koyla Mazdoor Sabha (MPKMS), affiliated to the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS).

The scwu withdrew its strike notice on February 12 after talks with the management, but the MPKMS renewed its strike call five days later—and put out a charter of 62 demands. With his glib articulations and his fluency in Hindi, English, Tamil, Sanskrit and his mother tongue, Telugu, Kumar easily convinced MPKMS leaders that he could devise their protest strategy. He drafted a pamphlet listing the 62 demands—and coolly inserted his own name, describing himself as a "writer and journalist", after that of Yamuna Prasad Shastri, the union's president, and before the names of Nathu Lal Pandey, the general secretary, and Madhu Sudan Tiwari, the vice-president.

A week-long strike did take place from



Kumar with revolver, snapped during the hostages' crisis

April 2, and the terms of settlement between the MPKMS and the management on April 8 are couched in vague officialese. The only highlight was some violence in the Bijuri mine, and a fast by professional hunger-striker Nandlal Gautam, a burly, hyperbolic individual. Moreover, most of the 62 demands related to past agreements and their alleged non-implementation.

Improvement: Jhagrakhand's miners have experienced considerable improvement in their standards of living since nationalisation in 1972. But there are still many problems that need to be solved, and they relate chiefly to the miners' living conditions. Clearly, therefore, Kumar seized upon this not-too-grave situation and decided to capitalise on it.

Ratanlal Malaviya, 75, the founder-president of the Madhya Pradesh Colliery Workers' Federation (MPCWF), which is affiliated to the Congress(I)'s labour wing, the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), charges Kumar and his friends in the MPKMS with "exaggeration and self-aggrandisement". This is echoed by mine officials, who are eager to point out every little measure they have taken—measures

that have still to bridge the gap between ideal plans for the miners and the reality today. "We cannot do everything overnight," says R.P. Tiwari, deputy general manager of the coalfields, which fall under the jurisdiction of the Western Coalfields Limited (WCL).

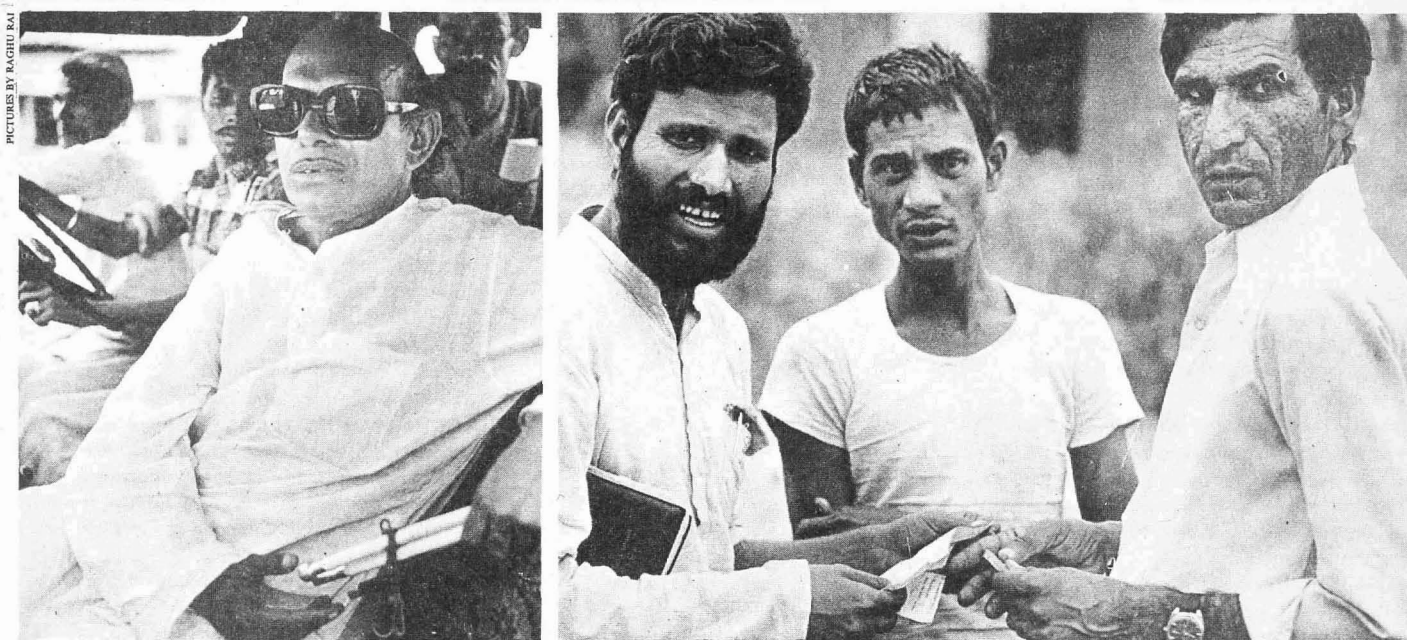
MPKMS leaders are anxious to emphasise that Kumar is not a union leader, has never worked among the workers, and did not have their sanction for his New Delhi adventure. But Kumar's roots, a tangled mass of loose idealism, and his links with the MPKMS president Shastri, indicate that his action was not entirely spontaneous. By vastly exaggerating the miners' problems, Kumar may actually have damaged their cause. One cynical observer in Jhagrakhand even thinks that the hostage episode may very well have been pre-arranged between Dalbir Singh and Kumar. Both have obtained nation-wide attention, and been lifted from anonymity into prototypes of the lucky victim and the terrorist with the golden heart.

ONLY 5 feet 2 inches tall, Kumar did his schooling at Hardwar and Ayodhya, where his father Iyenger Swamy, also known as Ram Prem, ran an ashram. An 'ascetic' who knew how to garner a following, Ram Prem nevertheless fathered four children and had enough means to set his family up comfortably before he died in 1973.

Kumar dropped out of studies at the Maharani Laxmibai College in Gwalior in 1974, and planned to shift his father's ashram to Delhi, where he bought a plot of land. It was after his father's death that Kumar came close to one of Ram Prem's disciples, an Austrian called George Sebeirer, who had settled in the ashram since 1963. Sebeirer and Kumar started a magazine called *Rightist Action Movement* (RAM), which fizzled out after three issues.

Sebeirer returned to Austria in 1975, and Kumar followed him there just before the Emergency, taking in Kabul, Istanbul, Paris and Venice en route before joining Sebeirer in Vienna. There, the two organised protest rallies against the Emergency that attracted the Government of India's attention. When he returned to India, Kumar was arrested by the Gwalior police and interned until after the 1977 elections.

Activism: The Janata government restored Kumar's impounded passport, enabling him to visit Vienna again. By then, Kumar had begun to benefit from his friendship with Shastri, who was Janata MP from Rewa. Back from Vienna, Kumar helped Shastri gather support for his private bill proposing to include the right to work in the fundamental rights chapter of the Constitution. Recalls Shastri: "Kumar seemed to be influenced by the speeches of Jayaprakash Narayan." A diehard Socialist,



Blind union leader Shastri and (right) Pandey and miner with Tiwari (extreme right): upstaged by an imposter

Shastri says Kumar organised meetings, seminars, and a march on foot from Gwalior to Delhi to support the bill.

In 1979, Kumar started a magazine called *Muktighosh* with the help of Meera Srivastav, an elderly disciple of his father's, who also worked as a warden at the Aurobindo Ashram in Delhi. Sebeirer returned to India in 1977—he had visited the country clandestinely during the Emergency—and married Kumar's sister.

As editor of *Muktighosh*, Kumar toured Madhya Pradesh extensively and heard about Jhagrahand from Shastri, who had organised two long strikes in the coalfields in 1968 and 1972. An Indian called Adhesh Kumar, a resident of Austria, helped Kumar buy a revolver in Saharanpur in 1980. The same year, Kumar became very friendly with an associate professor of economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi, called Satish Kumar Jain, and formed a body called the Samata Sanghatan. The Lohia Vichar Manch, a Socialist think-tank, also helped Kumar in his pursuits.

Bank Accounts: Last year, Kumar purchased an Ambassador car for Rs 70,000. Recently, his bank accounts show two large cash payments, one for Rs 40,000 and one for Rs 60,000. Kumar claims that he has earned money by writing for foreign journals, royalty from a book he and Sebeirer co-authored, and a film on the right to work for which he wrote the script.

But he has strange benefactors, not all of whom have been traced by the police. One is a professor of mathematics at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in Bombay, who regularly sends Kumar Rs 1,000 a month. Police officials from Delhi

have gone to Shillong, where the mathematician currently stays, in order to check his antecedents. Currently, says Kumar, he is half-way through a book written jointly with Sebeirer and titled 'Dialogue On Revolutionary Ethics'.

Although Kumar was staying with Jain at the JNU campus, his mother lives in a rented house that contains, apart from Srivastav and Kumar's younger brother Gopal, the younger participant in the hostage episode, Kumaraswamy, and his father Swami Jyotir Tirtha. Gopal, who is also currently under arrest—Jain obtained anticipatory bail on April 23—is an M.Sc. student at Hindu College, and, apart from taking expensive flying lessons, helped Kumar and Srivastav in preparing pamphlets that propagated Kumar's philosophy of violence.

Commanding Obedience: Both Gopal and Srivastav, when asked who is really behind Kumar, say that he is not the sort of man to listen to anybody, but a "born leader" who commands obedience best illustrated by Kumaraswamy's blind and awe-struck veneration.

What precisely drove Kumar to his April 14 action remains a mystery. Allegations are rife in the coalfields that Kumar drove all the way there in his car in March and toured the area with Shastri to exhort workers to strike. Mine officials also charge that Kumar flaunted a briefcase bulging with cash and promised workers monetary aid in case they had to go on prolonged strike.

Police sources say that Kumar had assured Shastri of "alternative methods" if the strike failed. As it happened, Shastri was

in Delhi on the day Kumar invaded Dalbir Singh's flat; but he says he had no inkling that Kumar would do such a "foolish and drastic thing", and insists that he was merely on his way to Chandigarh to attend the joint convention of the Janata, the Congress(S).

Community bathing at the colliery



JHAGRAKHAND

Classic Paradox

THE JHAGRAKHAND coalfields situated 125 km east of Shahdol in Madhya Pradesh, were nationalised in 1972, and the miners' conditions since then have gradually improved a lot over those that existed under private ownership. The miners' biggest jump in wages came in 1979 when the National Coal Wage Awards II set out salary formulae that are due to be renewed in January next year by the Joint Bipartite Committee for the Coal Industry, which has representatives from all the miners' unions and the management.

Against an average man-shift wage of Rs 19 before nationalisation, today's average man-shift costs Western Coalfields Limited (WCL) which administers the Jhagrakhand collieries, Rs 55.50. The minimum basic wage for the lowest paid worker stands today at Rs 512 per month. Average salaries hover around the Rs 1,500 mark, and many piece-rated coal loaders, who shovel mined coal into the cars that trundle it to the surface, earn as much as Rs 3,000 a month if they put in some extra work. Production in the mines has leapt from 70,000 tonnes per month in 1972 to 2.5 lakh tonnes per month now.

But the coalfields are sprawled around a 300 sq km area that is hilly and forested. Getting to Jhagrakhand from the outside world is difficult—the easiest mode is a desultory train service that often gets dislocated and is subject to the whims of travellers.

Paradoxes: The miners' lives are full of classic contradictions—the majority of them are tax payers, and yet live in rough hovels. A large number of the miners are in debt to moneylenders who charge monthly interest rates of 25 per cent—because the miners, who are predominantly tribal, squander their earnings on liquor and gambling. Yet, as a union leader says: "Hundreds of graduates and post-graduates queue up to ask for jobs. Everybody wants to go underground."

The rush has also led to unchecked corruption. Miners complain that they have to bribe the management—and the unions—in order to get things done and even to obtain employment. There is also a lot of illegal contractual labour—although mine officials claim

that contractual labourers are not permitted in most of the underground jobs.

Officially, the mines' rosters show a total employee strength of 12,470 miners, and only 2,656 of these have been provided with housing—a small improvement on pre-nationalisation days, when there were 1,150 houses for 7,362 workers. As a result, most miners live in squalid colonies of *kuccha* huts, and have to contend with dirty, overflowing gutters running between their houses. Sanitation and toilet facilities are deplorable, and as many as 30 families often share one bathroom.

Inadequate Care: These unhygienic conditions are exacerbated by inadequate medical facilities. Miners claim that only

led the April strike, claim that miners have to trek or cycle long distances every day to get to their places of work. Matters are worsened because 14 of the 15 mines are "incline" digs where miners have to walk three or four kilometres in order to reach the coal-seam from the mine's mouth.

National Attention: Water supply, too, is sporadic and polluted. Mining officials say the six filter plants are in operation, but the miners report that their drinking water is often clouded with deadly coal dust. Investigation also shows that illegal or benami employment is one of the biggest rackets in the coalfields, and proves lucrative for both management and union officials.



Miners gambling their earnings away: easy come, easy go

three of the 10 dispensaries in the area are actually working. Serious complaints are referred to the Central Hospital in Manendragarh, the railhead, which is popularly known as *maut ka adda* (death chamber). The hospital acquired its first specialist in three years in early April when Dr P.C. Naik, a young surgeon, took over as superintendent.

Naik contradicts Ram Narayan Kumar's grisly picture of miners dying in their hundreds. "Only 192 tuberculosis patients were admitted here last year," he says. But Naik and his colleague Dr A.K. Sen claim that they have to requisition medicines at least six months in advance. Adds Naik: "It is true that occupancy in the hospital averages only 50 per cent." This because most miners prefer to travel to far-off hospitals where they get better treatment—and have to pay for it.

Leaders of the Madhya Pradesh Koyla Mazdoor Sabha (MPKMS) which

Significantly, the president of the pro-Congress(I) union, the Madhya Pradesh Colliery Workers' Federation (MPCWF), Ratanlal Malaviya, prepared a lengthy memorandum for Union Energy Minister A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chaudhary because he heard that Chaudhary might visit the mines in the aftermath of the Delhi siege. The memorandum lists inadequate medical facilities, poor drinking-water supply, woeful communications between the mines, and the perennially haphazard railway link to Anuppur junction, 40 km east of Shahdol, on the South-Eastern Railway.

Ultimately, most of these instances of exploitation, avarice, and indifference are not peculiar to Jhagrakhand. Manendragarh and Jhagrakhand are only two more dots on India's coal-mining map. Thanks to Kumar, however, they have achieved nationwide prominence. —CHAITANYA KALBAG

and the rebel Lok Dal.

Shastri and other leaders of the MPKMS insist that they never advocated violence of Kumar's kind. But the MPKMS itself is a peculiar union in a milieu where all coalfield trade unions are characterised by corruption and opportunism. It contains elements of both the Janata and the Lok Dal—but the latter have been effectively sidelined by Shastri. The union's vice-president Tiwari is Shastri's nephew, and a criminal lawyer in Manendragarh, the rail head for the mines. Disgruntled MPKMS activists complain that Shastri has also unfairly foisted general secretary Nathu Lal Pandey on the union.

Companion: Pandey is prone to hyperbole that is akin to Kumar's, and explains every visible sign of rebuttal of Kumar's claims with the facile theory that the mines' management, scared by the publicity, embarked on a crash programme of improvement of the miners' conditions. Pandey met Shastri soon after the latter was rendered totally blind in March 1975—Shastri had earlier lost one eye in the Goa liberation struggle—and became his nurse, companion, and confidant.

On September 22, 1980, Shastri abruptly announced to Jhagrakhand miners that he was appointing Pandey the general secretary of the MPKMS, and gifting them with

his "eyes". Last year, Pandey visited Australia for a conference and allegedly returned laden with purchases.

It is true that the situation in the Jhagrakhand mines is ripe for union activism, and that the unions other than the MPKMS are content with being channels for many of the rackets that usually flourish in mining regions, and with collecting their monthly *chanda* (membership fees). The MPKMS has therefore been able to gather support with its agitational methods.

The Delhi siege did result in some action at Jhagrakhand. Water supply was improved and better purified, the Manendragarh Central Hospital for coal workers acquired a fresh coat of whitewash, and Union Minister of State for Energy in charge of coal Gargi Shankar Mishra was to inspect the mines. Mishra's expected visit, however, was preceded by a shake-up in the mines' management. Personnel Manager J.K. Ghosh, who was on transfer but had been asked to stay on pending a replacement, was abruptly asked to relinquish charge on April 21. The same evening, his deputy S.N. Prasad, who has worked in the same area since 1968 and has acquired a rather unpopular image, was peremptorily relieved of his charge via a wireless message, and asked to go on transfer to the Korba mines.

Instant Career: The biggest beneficiary of the entire affair, of course, will be Kumar, a rolling stone who has finally gathered the moss of instant notoriety. How meticulously he had planned his escapade is clear from telegrams that he and Pandey jointly sent to nine news organisations on March 20 from Jhagrakhand. The cables read in part: "Hundred thousand people living inhuman existence...indifference of media responsible for existing order." It may perhaps indicate Kumar's cleverness that, aside from Arun Shourie of the *Indian Express*, the other cables were all addressed to foreign media representatives—ranging from Associated Press and Reuters to BBC and the Voice of America.

Clearly, Kumar was more interested in a media build-up. Perhaps he is gambling on the chance that he will be hailed as a saviour of the Jhagrakhand miners when he eventually gets out of jail. So far, he has only gained free entry into the nation's hall of infamy. The most disturbing spin-off of Kumar's adventure could be that other disgruntled elements might choose to hit at the power structure in similar ways—and gatecrash into a political career and a ready-made villainy as quick and as ersatz as instant coffee.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG in Jhagrakhand

Women workers pushing a coal-laden railway wagon: exploitation

KAGITHU RAI

