

HARYANA

# The Bhajan Bludgeon



THE SPRAWLING city that Charles-Edouard le Corbusier had designed for bureaucrats and retired people looked like an army encampment girding up for an enemy onslaught. As the

expected moment of conflict neared, Chandigarh's streets were gradually cordoned off with bamboo and steel barricades; a vast area taking in the Punjab, Haryana and Union territory secretariats, the legislators' hostels, and the Assembly building was clamped under Section 144, and every vehicle was closely checked. Said a long-time Chandigarh citizen: "There seem to be no democratic rights left in this city. Bhajan Lal has turned it into his personal property, and we are being searched as though every one of us is an arsonist or rioter."

Bhajan Lal's trial of strength scheduled for June 24, when the Assembly was convened for a two-day session, turned out to be anticlimactic. The massive deployment of governmental machinery ensured that only around 20,000 Devi Lal supporters could "infiltrate" a fortified Chandigarh to attend the rally. And in the Assembly the following morning, Bhajan Lal's nominees for the speakership and deputy speakership, Tara Singh and Ved Pal, were elected with a comfortable margin—with 48 votes in favour and 40 against in the 89-member House. By hook and by crook, Haryana's crafty chief minister had successfully hung on to power.

Eight parties—the Lok Dal, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Janata, the Congress(J), the Congress(S), the CPI (M), the CPI and the Akali Dal (Longowal group)—set up a Save Democracy Committee in early June to wage a populist battle against Bhajan Lal. The committee's President, Devi Lal set out on a state-wide tour, whipping up support in every town he stopped at with fiery speeches against the Government. When he exhorted his followers to reach Chandigarh armed with sticks and stones for the rally, fears were aroused that the storming of the capital would be violent and uncontrollable.

**Paranoia:** In the ensuing weeks, the Haryana Government moved with a paranoia not witnessed even during the Emergency. Chandigarh was occupied by an invading army of paramilitary forces. At least 15,000 men from the Central Reserve Police Force, the Border Security Force, the Provincial Armed Constabulary of Uttar

Pradesh, the Haryana and Punjab armed police forces, and the two states' civil police, along with those of Chandigarh, moved into battle positions in and around the city.

Despite the overkill, a sizeable crowd did turn up for the Opposition rally at the parade ground in Sector 17 on the June 23. For more than three hours, the audience patiently listened to, and repeatedly cheered, a galaxy of leaders from every party as they made full-throated speeches attacking Bhajan Lal and his patroness Indira Gandhi. Haryana was pictured as the doomsday precursor of a nation-wide crackdown on democracy. Congress(J) President Jagjivan

side the area under prohibitory orders; the lathi-charge was fuelled with all the savagery of a pent-up force that had been denied violence, and at least 80 people were injured, some seriously.

**Special Scrutiny:** Outside the Assembly's ungainly and slapdash building, a huge police force stood poised to halt any attempted storming. Each incoming car was searched for trouble-makers, and the convoy carrying the Opposition MLA's was subjected to special scrutiny. Worse still, at least 100 toughs, reportedly belonging to Bhajan Lal's Bishnoi community, had been recruited for the two-day session. Under the garb of



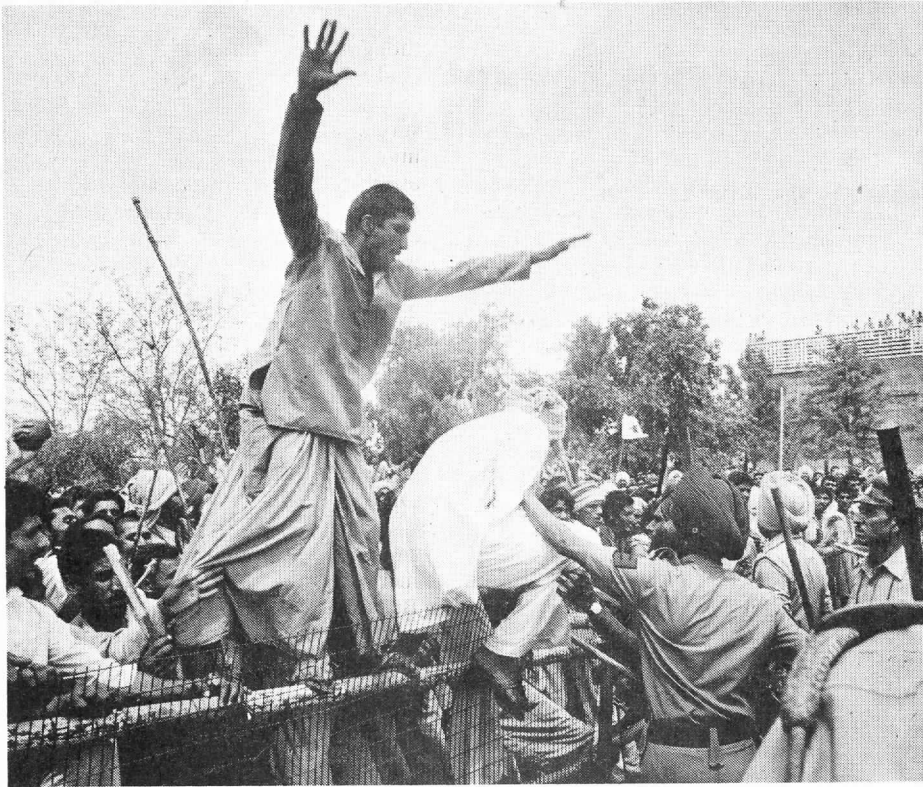
Bhajan Lal (third from left) leaving the Haryana Assembly: show of muscle

Ram and Lok Dal Chairman Charan Singh, who had flown in that morning, promised that the struggle would not end with the Assembly session, and that Haryana would become the focal point for a nation-wide movement much as Bihar had, at Jayaprakash Narayan's urging, defied an authoritarian Centre in 1974.

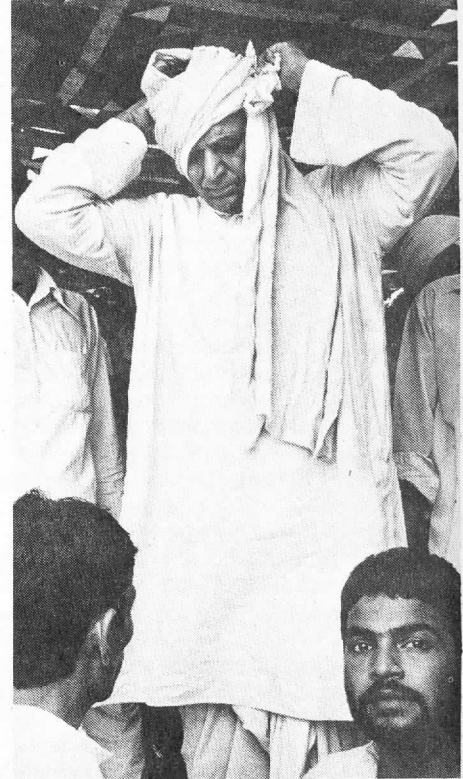
The next morning, an hour before the Assembly met at 9 a.m., a large procession set out, armed with freshly-cut bamboo staves, on a protest demonstration. Led briefly by former Punjab chief minister Parkash Singh Badal, the demonstrators were permitted to pass through the first cordon. But the police repulsed an attempt to break through the second barricade, in-

Watch and Ward staff, they checked every visitor's identity with scant delicacy. At least 30 of them were even posted inside the Assembly chamber, behind the Opposition benches.

Aside from jeering and catcalling by the Opposition every time a defector MLA was sworn in, there was little other drama inside the House. The anticlimax peaked when Governor G.D. Tapase arrived to deliver a short and perfunctory address. The Opposition rose to its feet and, waving pieces of black cloth and showering choice abuse on Tapase, kept up a constant barracking of the diminutive head of state. Throughout the tumult, Tapase grimly mumbled his speech, while the Congress(I) MLA's smiled smugly at



PRAMOD PISHKARNA



Demonstrators leaping over the fence to confront policemen at Chandigarh and (right) a weary Devi Lal

the Opposition's antics.

Said Devi Lal after the day's session: "The fight to unseat Bhajan Lal will continue to the bitter end. I was born to fight, and I will fight this impostor." Retorted Bhajan Lal: "My position has been vindicated. For one month Devi Lal had been inciting Haryana's peaceful people to violence. He is shameless—he has joined hands with Badal, whose Akali Dal is obstructing the Beas-Sutlej link canal which will bring valuable water to the state. Devi Lal is an enemy of Haryana."

**Frantic Manoeuvring:** The manoeuvring that went on throughout the month preceding the Assembly session was frenetic, and each side tried desperately to hang on to its MLA's and entice more from the "enemy side". Bhajan Lal was far more successful in this than Devi Lal. Using a mixture of threats and cajolery, he kept his men on a tight leash. The best Cabinet posts went to defectors, and there were rumours that loyal Congress(I) men, resenting this, would cross the Assembly's floor on D-Day.

But Bhajan Lal succeeded in luring three more Opposition MLA's to the Congress(I) fold before the session opened—Vijayvir Singh of the Congress(J), Azmat Khan of the Janata, and Mahendra Pratap Singh of the Lok Dal. Mahendra Pratap's switch in particular was very bad news for the Lok Dal. A follower of Bansi Lal, he had been expelled by the

Congress(I) and fought on a Lok Dal ticket reportedly at his mentor's behest.

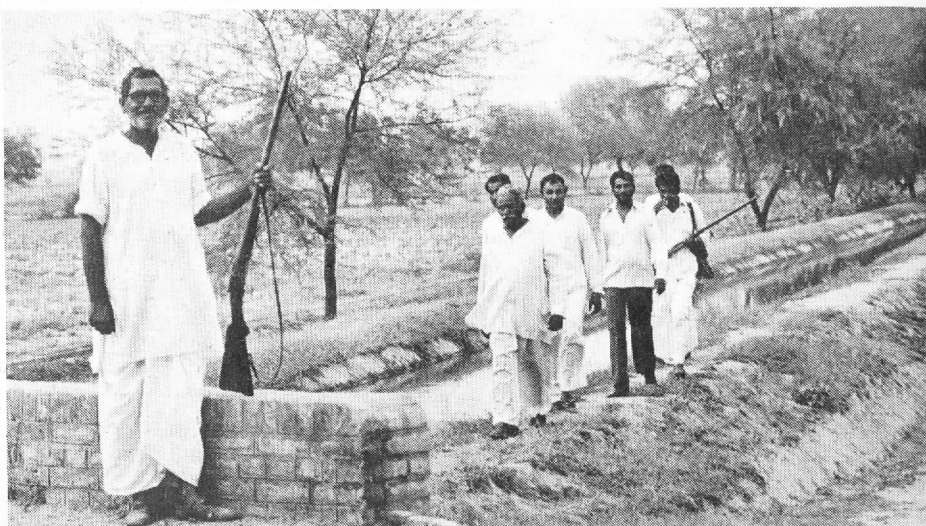
The mending of the fence between Bhajan Lal and Bansi Lal was signalled when the latter's son, Surinder Singh, was hastily allotted the agriculture portfolio on June 7. But the Lok Dal won some retribution when Bansi Lal's daughter Sumitra Devi, the same day, joined hands with Devi Lal in protest against the chief minister's amoral politics.

Expectations that the Bansi Lal group of MLA's—numbering eight—would desert

the Government at the crucial moment were fuelled at the Chandigarh rally when Sumitra Devi spoke emotionally of the disgust that had made her join the Opposition. "My father has not objected to my action," she told the crowd.

**Precautions:** Bhajan Lal, meanwhile, had been busy keeping his men happy. The Congress(I) MLA's were lodged at a guest house at Morni, 55 km from Chandigarh, and cordoned off from the outside world by police pickets. There was also intensive in-

#### Armed escorts for Lok Dal MLAs at Teja Khera



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doctrination for the defectors. The powerful group owing allegiance to Union Agriculture Minister Rao Birendra Singh was said to be unhappy because Bhajan Lal had taken its arch-enemy, former speaker Colonel Rao Ram Singh, under his wing. The chief minister cleverly avoided the possibility of this group's cross-voting by not giving Ram Singh the speakership again; instead, he rewarded Ram Singh with the home portfolio.

Devi Lal had not been idle either. While he gathered support for the rally, the 32 Lok Dal MLA's were housed at his farm at Teja Khera, 350 km from Chandigarh. There, the rustic legislators were lavished with earthly delights—good food, outings to nearby Chutala, where Devi Lal was born, and the Indo-Pakistan border, Hindi movies every evening on a video screen, and the tender care of a 50-man contingent of guards toting twelve-bore shotguns and sophisticated rifles. The guards, said the legislators, were to keep outsiders out. But it was clear that no MLA could step outside without an armed escort. Every morning, the legislators bathed in the canals criss-crossing Devi Lal's huge farm and repaired to farmhouse to smoke *hookahs*, play cards, and listen to the radio. It was one happy Boy Scout camp, with every man swearing eternal allegiance to Devi Lal.

**Determined:** Said Hari Chand Huda, one of the MLA's in the camp: "Public pressure has made us even more determined to fight Bhajan Lal. We have become like stone." Added Hukam Singh, an independent who had joined the Lok Dal after the elections: "Bhajan Lal has been conducting *havans* at Haryana Bhavan in Delhi. Tantra will not get him a majority."

But the grim fact was that only eight of the Lok Dal MLA's were sitting members; all the rest had been voted in for the first time. How far they can resist Bhajan Lal's blandishments remains to be seen. As for Devi Lal, his major hope is that the chief minister will sooner or later run out of favours and positions to confer on his followers, and that some ruling party members would then cross over to join the Opposition.

There are reports in Chandigarh that the Congress(I) High Command has promised disgruntled partymen that Bhajan Lal will be replaced by a more 'acceptable' chief minister the moment matters cool down and the Government is firmly in the saddle. For the moment, it seems inconceivable that Indira Gandhi can dispense with Bhajan Lal's services: he is the genie in the Congress(I) lamp, ready to keep each legislator happy, a renegade fisher of men dangling juicy bait before every weak-willed opposition MLA.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG

AIR-INDIA

## Death At Dawn

**W**HEN the landing announcement was made at the tail-end of Air-India's flight 403 to Bombay via Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Madras on June 22, most of the plane's 99 passengers were either asleep or dozing. Visibility was down to the bare minimum as the four-engined craft came in from the pre-dawn darkness. At 400 ft, the *Gauri Shankar* shot suddenly out of a thick cloud bank and straight into a severe squall, the fragile shell of the Boeing 707 lashed by pouring rain and near-gale winds.

The touchdown came with a jarring thump which tore off one engine and bounced the plane 50 ft into the air. Bouncing a second time the plane tilted dangerously, a wing tip scraped the ground and a second engine was sheared



The remnants of the ill-fated Boeing aircraft

off its body. Seconds later it had skidded off the runway, lost its undercarriage and another engine, and ploughed at break-neck speed through the reeds and *nullahs* which flank the tarmac. When the plane smashed a boundary wall and finally came to rest, it was broken into three distinct pieces, and the tailplane area was pulverised beyond recognition.

**Miraculous Escape:** The *Gauri Shankar* crashed at 4.37 a.m., but it was late in the afternoon before the last body was extricated and the list of passengers accounted for. The final toll: 17 dead and 12 injured, nine of them seriously. Miraculously, the disintegrated plane did not catch fire, and of the 111 passengers and crew on board 82 emerged virtually unscathed. Among those saved was the leading Indian atomic energy scientist, Dr Raja Ramanna. Said G.N. Pandey, a passenger who escaped unscathed: "Each time we landed, both at Kuala Lumpur and at Madras, it was an extremely rough landing and we thudded down very hard. When we bounced again in Bombay I

thought at first it was yet another rough landing like the other two."

The reaction to the catastrophe was surprisingly slow. For more than 12 minutes Air Traffic Control (ATC) was unaware of the disaster; the first fire tender on the scene appeared almost 14 minutes after the crash; the Bombay Fire Brigade, which finally rushed in extra fire fighters and tenders, was informed of the accident 40 minutes later; and Air-India was ignorant of it for almost an hour. Organisation during the downpour was so bad that a number of the passengers who managed to get out were forced to walk in the rain to the terminal.

By June 23, investigators from the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) had begun an enquiry into the causes of the crash. The next day a nine-member fact finding commission from Britain and the US arrived in Bombay and plunged into the investigation. The "black box", G-force recorders, ATC re-

ports and meteorological department records had all been seized for study. Unofficial reports suggest a few probable reasons for the crash:

- ▶ that the sudden squall affected the aerodynamic stability of the plane and forced it downwards suddenly;

- ▶ that due to poor visibility the pilot, who was under command check, misjudged and landed short of the touchdown point; or

- ▶ that the Instrument Landing System (ILS) which guides aircraft down on an electronically-controlled path, was affected by the severe rain, bringing the plane in on a lower path than is normal.

In the past year at least two accidents have taken place in heavy rains while a plane is landing, and so far courts of enquiry the world over have been unable to pinpoint the precise reason for this. Said a seasoned Air-India pilot: "The airline has sent all pilots the findings of these enquiries and pointed out the current aviation mystery which surrounds low-altitude flights in severe rain."

—CHANDER UDAY SINGH