

KISAN RALLY

Was This Costly Tamasha Necessary?

The kisans got a free ride, and helped give the Congress(I) a lift

CREATIVE EYE



Never had so many people gained so little from so heralded an event as the Kisan Rally in Delhi on 16 February. Estimates of the crowd gathered on the Rajpath lawns ranged from 2.5 million by Delhi Police Commissioner

PS Bhinder to 5 million by Congress(I) General Secretary Kalpnath Rai. But the most generous calculation, taking into account the number of people who had entered Delhi for the Rally until the previous night and the capacity of the huge venue, put the figure at one million people, who waited over five hours through an unusually warm winter morning for Indira to put in her appearance.

It was history's largest-ever gathering, if Congress(I) leaders were to be believed. But to what end? After all the to-do and the anticipation, the entire *tamasha* ended in an unforgettably anti-climactic manner when, clad in a white sari, Mrs Gandhi mounted the 15-ft high rostrum. Forty minutes later, a little out of breath, she ended what was possibly history's most expensive speech (estimated cost: at least Rs 1 lakh a second) and yet gave the farmers no benefits at all.

So completely is loyalty within the Party expected, and taken for granted, that not one reference was made to the hundreds of thousands of party workers who must have worked to make the Rally a success. Five minutes before Mrs Gandhi's arrival, nine of her chief ministers lined, beaming, along the southern side of the rostrum so that the photographers massed below could devour them.

The Kisan Rally itself was merely the tip of an iceberg. Beneath it, out of sight, there had been a month of preparation nation-wide—a mobilisation of men and resources that would have done an army proud, a pace that, once set by all the party Chief Ministers, gathered awesome speed and ended in an invasion that left the capital's six million citizens speechless. Discerning observers, however, put the actual kisan presence at a quarter of the crowd. The rest were not so much kisans as loyal camp followers: factory workers, lawyers, government employees, teachers, and the like.

If DPCC (I) president HKL Bhagat (who was overall in-charge of arrangements) were to be believed, the Rally was a miraculous event. "All activity countrywide began exactly two weeks before the Rally," said Bhagat. But the meticulousness of the planning seemed to confirm that the

mobilisation had begun a month earlier when, concerned by vaguely-worded Opposition plans to gather farmers in Delhi on 16 February, (the day the Budget session of Parliament opened) the Congress(I) decided to pre-empt its rivals.

An event of this magnitude renders a quantification of all the effort put in difficult. But reports flowing in from all parts of the country indicate the gigantic scale of mobilisation of the Congress(I) machinery, the misuse of official machinery, the disruption in routine in all the Congress(I)-ruled states, and the arm-twisting that must have taken place in order to ensure a grand turnout. All Congress(I) MPs, all six Congress(I) general secretaries, all Congress(I) MLAs in each state and all party leaders and workers worked non-stop towards this end. In addition, district transport officers, block development officers (BDOs), panchayat officers, district magistrates and their personnel, and *gram pradhans* in every states had, perforce, to contribute their mite.

The entire exercise was accompanied by a well-coordinated publicity blitzkrieg. Advertisements appeared in every newspaper worth patronising, touting the Party's concern for farmers and listing state-wide measures undertaken for their betterment. Millions of posters, thousands of cassette tapes carrying "kisan" songs, miles of cloth banners, some not-so-subtle coercion applied to industrialists, and a few conciliatory sops given here and there ensured that every party worker worth his salt would claim to be a "kisan's son" and that survival as a Congress(I) animal would depend on ensuring maximum participation in the circus on 16 February.

No magician could have laid claim to such mass hypnosis. The AICC (I) headquarters at 24 Akbar Road began to wave the wand in directions that were mysteriously indicated—by Rajiv Gandhi, as it transpired (see box on page 33)—after a meeting of seven ruling party Chief Ministers in Delhi exactly a month before the Rally. The Party's genies set to work at once. A nine-member central coordination committee was set up, consisting of general secretaries Vasantrao Patil, Rajendrakumari Bajpai, Karupiah Moopanar, Kalpnath Rai, Satyanarayana Rao and Shyam Sunder Mohapatra, as well as kisan cell president Chaudhury Randhir Singh, publicity mastermind Shrikant Verma and DPCC (I) president HKL Bhagat. Special cells of the various state party units were set up in the compound of the Party headquarters. Beginning from 28 January,



CREATIVE EYE

An entry road to the capital on the morning of the Rally: Choked with incoming vehicles

She flaunts her loyalty; but draws attention too

A Leonine follower of the Prime Minister: a surefire way of drawing attention



KM KISHAN

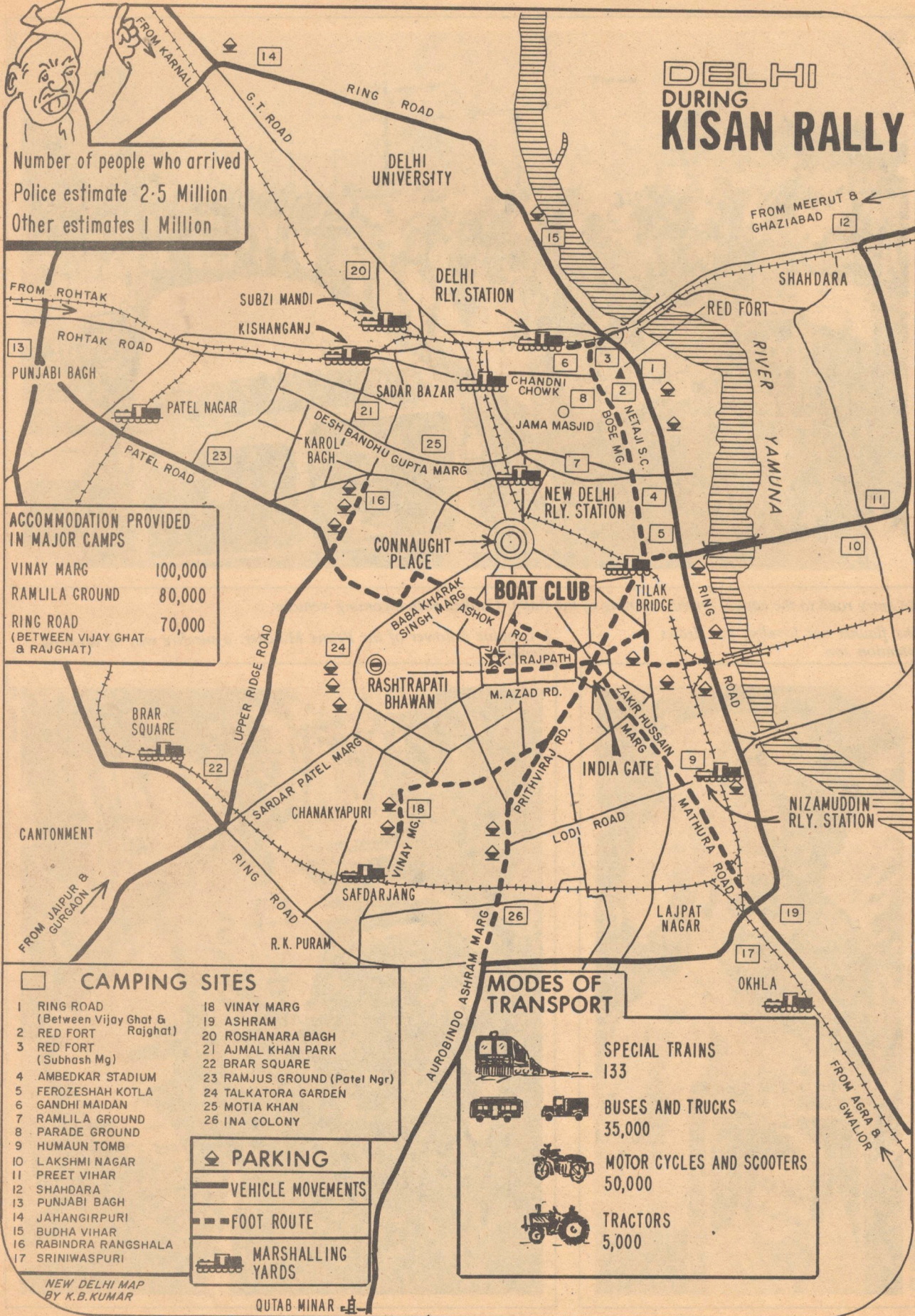


KM KISHAN



DELHI DURING KISAN RALLY

Number of people who arrived
Police estimate 2.5 Million
Other estimates 1 Million

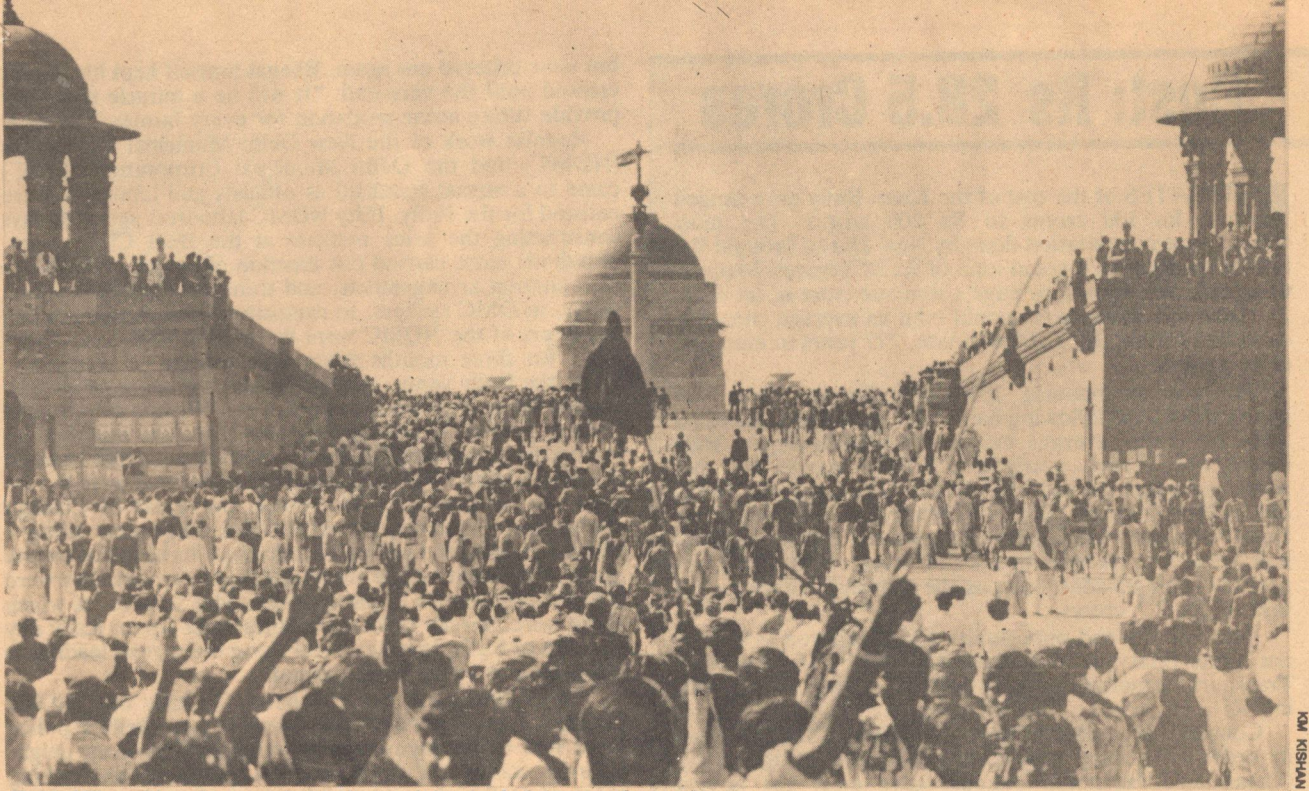


ACCOMMODATION PROVIDED IN MAJOR CAMPS

| | |
|--|---------|
| VINAY MARG | 100,000 |
| RAMLILA GROUND | 80,000 |
| RING ROAD (BETWEEN VIJAY GHAT & RAJGHAT) | 70,000 |

- CAMPING SITES**
- | | |
|--|------------------------------|
| 1 RING ROAD (Between Vijay Ghat & Rajghat) | 18 VINAY MARG |
| 2 RED FORT | 19 ASHRAM |
| 3 RED FORT (Subhash Mg) | 20 ROSHANARA BAGH |
| 4 AMBEDKAR STADIUM | 21 AJMAL KHAN PARK |
| 5 FERESHAH KOTLA | 22 BRAR SQUARE |
| 6 GANDHI MAIDAN | 23 RAMJUS GROUND (Patel Ngr) |
| 7 RAMLILA GROUND | 24 TALKATORA GARDEN |
| 8 PARADE GROUND | 25 MOTIA KHAN |
| 9 HUMAUN TOMB | 26 INA COLONY |
| 10 LAKSHMI NAGAR | |
| 11 PREET VIHAR | |
| 12 SHAHDARA | |
| 13 PUNJABI BAGH | |
| 14 JAHANGIRPURI | |
| 15 BUDHA VIHAR | |
| 16 RABINDRA RANGSHALA | |
| 17 SRINIWASPURI | |
- PARKING**
- VEHICLE MOVEMENTS**
- FOOT ROUTE**
- MARSHALLING YARDS**

- MODES OF TRANSPORT**
- | | |
|---------------------------|--------|
| SPECIAL TRAINS | 133 |
| BUSES AND TRUCKS | 35,000 |
| MOTOR CYCLES AND SCOOTERS | 50,000 |
| TRACTORS | 5,000 |



Even Vijay Chowk, way behind the dais, had throngs of people

Kalpna Rai (who is also the convenor of the Party kisan cell) toured Punjab, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa. At local levels, a frantic campaign to raise funds began. Now that the Congress(I) seemed well entrenched in power, it was easy to extract 'donations'—in cash and kind—from traders, industrialists and anyone else desirous of "long-term" gains.

In her speech at the Rally, Mrs Gandhi recalled that she had been in prison when Charan Singh had organised his kisan *tamasha* on 23 December 1978. This time, she was making sure, '*kulak*' leaders like Singh would be decisively upstaged. In order to show that the Party enjoyed widespread grassroots support in every nook and corner of the country (the farmers at Charan's Rally came only from Hindi-speaking states) an adequate representation from the south and the north-east had to be ensured. Each Congress(I) Chief Minister and party leader in every opposition-ruled state was therefore allotted a 'quota'.

The quotas kept changing as the logistics of transporting so many people to the capital unfolded. By 12 February, the state-wise quotas totalled 3.2 million 'farmers'. Haryana and UP were expected to contribute 7 lakh farmers each. Punjab's figure was five lakh. The figures began tapering off as the distance from Delhi increased.

The logistics of transportation depended on the extent to which the Railways could be persuaded to cooperate. On 10 February, however, Railway Board Chairman MS Gujral, in a blunt statement, made it clear that the Party would have to pay up every paisa in advance before it could hope to obtain 'kisan special' trains for the Rally. Although reports indicate that payments were indeed made in full (even for the return journeys) the inconvenience to passenger traffic, and the dislocation of goods traffic, could not be averted because many kisan specials ran hours behind schedule, snarling up regular rail traffic. At Rally's end, a total of 133 trains had been requisitioned to transport approximately 3 lakh participants. The cost to the Party: a whopping Rs 3.4 crores (see box on costs, page 32).

Since the majority of participants, necessarily, had to come from neighbouring states (Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and UP) a huge number of trucks, buses and motorcycles had to be roped into the Rally 'fleet'. Police Commissioner Bhinder put the total inflow of vehicles at

35,000, a super-convoy that gulped down 28 lakh litres of diesel.

Chief Ministers, state party chiefs and senior functionaries shuttled by air and road and rail to and from Delhi countless times in the final days of preparation. Both Houses of the UP Legislature were adjourned from 7 to 18 February. The Punjab Assembly was adjourned on 11 February to enable MLAs and ministers to prepare for the Rally. The next morning, as the pace became hectic, the secretariat building in Chandigarh wore a deserted look.



In Delhi, 25,000 Congress(I) workers toiled round the clock for nearly 10 days in order to ensure that arrangements worked smoothly. Twenty-seven tent-and-shamiana camping sites, each named after a champion of the downtrodden and designed to accommodate four lakh farmers, came up on open spaces around the capital. The largest, on Vinay Marg, which was to accommodate one lakh people, had 1,000 *choldaris*, 500 big tents, 600 impromptu latrines, 150 taps (taken out from the nearest water main) and 30 stalls selling food packets.

Each camp was manned by a three-tier cell consisting of Party workers, ex-servicemen and trained scouts who belonged to the Party. Announcements of train, truck and bus arrivals and departures were made over public-address systems rigged up at each site. In addition, each camp site had a telephone connection and a medical post. Bhagat revealed that he had roped in many college lecturers to help with arrangements. "They are excellent, conscientious people and know how to deal with problems," he said.

Plans went awry when the Railway Board refused to allow the farmers to sleep on trains, which the party had hoped would be parked on convenient sidings. Additional camping sites therefore had to be hastily requisitioned. The DPCC (I) set up reception offices at the 10 railway stations where trains were arriving. The trains were then shunted off to distant places like Mathura so as not to block traffic. Even so, problems persisted. When an unseasonal downpour descended on the night of 14 February, farmers at the Subzi Mandi camp tried to occupy newly-built DDA flats,

Cost: Rs 28.5 Crores

ESTIMATES of the cost of the Kisan Rally have ranged from Rs 100 crores to Rs 200 crores. The most conservative computation done by NEW DELHI brought the bill for the Rally to a grand total of Rs 28.5 crores. Many of us do not even know how huge a sum one crore is, let alone 28. Take this example: it would take an average company executive earning Rs 3,000 a month, 277 years to earn one crore rupees.

The cost of booking 133 Kisan Special trains was computed on the following basis: reservation charges of Rs 5,000 per train; average number of passengers per train (there were heavy overfills): 2,500; average cost per passenger ticket (to and fro): Rs 100. The total here works out to Rs 3.5 crores. On 19 February, however, Railway Board Chairman MS Gujral told newsmen that the railways had earned a revenue of Rs 1.4 crores from the kisan specials. This obviously means the railways suffered a net loss of Rs 2.1 crores.

Actual losses and opportunity losses suffered in industrial areas (Haryana was hardest-hit here) and by State Transport Corporations, lorry companies etc total a number Rs 5.65 crores.

Concessions granted by quite a few State Chief Ministers in order to ensure maximum attendance at the Rally (Rajasthan's Jagannath Pahadia gave away the largest package—see article) plus the opportunity cost of so many lakh farmers taking leave from their work, total (again, conservatively) a whopping Rs 7 crores. The approximate break-up is given below:

| (Figures in rupees lakhs) | |
|--|-------------------|
| Advertisements in countrywide newspapers | Rs 100.0 |
| Revenue earned by railways from 133 specials | Rs 140.0 |
| Net loss suffered by railways on kisan specials | Rs 210.0 |
| Cost of 28 lakh litres of diesel for trucks and buses | Rs 76.0 |
| Money expended on food by one million farmers at a minimum of Rs 5 a day | Rs 200.0 |
| Petrol consumed by Cong(I) vehicles in mobilisation, countrywide | Rs 100.0 |
| Cost of hiring a helicopter on Rally day to monitor traffic | Rs 1.0 |
| Losses suffered by road transport corporations, truckers' associations etc | Rs 65.0 |
| Industrial loss of production | Rs 500.0 |
| Cost of printing 3m posters at Rs 2 each | Rs 60.0 |
| Cost of flags (small and large) | Rs 22.5 |
| Cost of hoardings, construction of enclosures at Rally site, etc | Rs 15.0 |
| Cost of construction of rostrums | Rs 2.0 |
| Cost of closed-circuit TV and loudspeakers | Rs 10.0 |
| Cost of 25,000 pre-recorded cassettes | Rs 10.0 |
| Cost of plane tickets for party leaders' trips to and from Delhi | Rs 5.0 |
| Cost of banners | Rs 10.0 |
| Cost of train tickets for lesser party leaders' trips to and from Delhi | Rs 4.0 |
| Cost of tents and shamianas | Rs 100.0 |
| Cost of police deployment | Rs 25.0 |
| Wages paid to party workers nationwide | Rs 100.0 |
| Cost of last-minute concessions granted to ensure attendance | Rs 700.0 |
| Overbilling etc | Rs 400.0 |
| Grand Total | Rs 2,855.5 |

but were ordered out again. Bhagat himself kept his fingers crossed until the very end. "It will be a miracle if we can provide sitting accommodation for every farmer," he said.

Regular work of the New Delhi Municipal Committee (NDMC) and the Delhi Municipal Corporation (DMC) came to a virtual standstill as officials and labourers were enlisted for the Rally. Fifty NDMC labourers spent 10 days constructing the brick rostrum at the Boat Club venue. Hundreds more carried out erection of camps, installation of sanitation arrangements, and transportation of drinking water, in DMC tankers, to campsites. Two superintending engineers of the NDMC were threatened with compulsory leave for three months when they refused to cooperate.

At the Rally venue, at least 20 km of pipes were used to cordon the huge space into enclosures. Weston Electronics Pvt Ltd pitched in with 125 TV sets that were mounted on lampposts along Rajpath, and a video camera that beamed the Prime Minister to sections of the crowd that were too far from the rostrum. The Motwanes, purveyors of Chicago Radio sound-systems, installed 600 loudspeakers along a two km length, and put up 50 amplifiers to keep the output going. The night before the Rally, 50 cycle-rickshaws were pressed into service to paste up left-over posters (of which there were literally lakhs). Delhiites woke up on Rally day to miles of Rally bunting strung along every road leading to Rajpath and every traffic island.

The planning did not end here. On rally day, 20,000 policemen were pressed into service, and Delhi's police force had to be augmented by contributions from neighbouring states. DPCC(I) workers prepared painstaking maps of Delhi, showing points of entry, foot and vehicle routes to the Rally, camping sites and the 16 different parking sites around the capital (See graph). It was obvious that the parking sites, designed to accommodate a maximum of 20,000 vehicles, would not be able to cope with the huge inflow.

At the campsites, food stalls were allotted to zealous party supporters who dished out often substandard food at 'cheap' rates (a plate of four *puris* and *bhaji* cost one rupee, tea 50 paise, and a rice-plate a rupee) on a no-profit-no-loss basis to farmers complaining at having to pay for their food. Congress(I) MP and soft drinks magnate Charanjit Singh did his bit by selling the Campa range of aerated drinks at 50 paise a bottle (after the Government, reportedly, had agreed to waive excise duty).

The execution: It was in the execution of the Kisan Rally that the Congress(I)'s methods of achieving its aims became crystal-clear. On 10 February, for instance, Haryana Chief Minister Bhajan Lal, who was keen to contribute the largest contingent to the Rally, summoned Faridabad industrialists to an informal meeting at a tourist complex. The industrialists agreed to put every available truck at the disposal of the Party. The weekly holiday for the Faridabad workers was advanced from Monday to Sunday, and workers attending the Rally on Monday were treated as on duty. In return, Bhajan Lal announced that eight hours of uninterrupted power supply would be ensured five days a week, and that 50,000 litres of diesel would be supplied immediately to local industrial units. Rally day was declared a holiday in the Ghaziabad, Faridabad, Ballabgarh and Bahadurgarh industrial areas.

In Rajasthan, Chief Minister Jagannath Pahadia and his Transport Minister asked the Rajasthan State Road Transport Corporation (RSRTC) to give 1,200 buses for the Rally. Never before had the RSRTC had to part with so many buses to a 'private' party. The Congress(I) paid RSRTC Rs 6 lakhs for diesel, but the three-day requisition (RSRTC's total fleet is 1,800 buses) cost the Corporation a Rs 14-lakh loss.

In Punjab, Chief Minister Darbara Singh remained in touch with district offices throughout, and left late on the night of 15 February for Delhi from Rai, Haryana, after seeing off every truckload of Punjab farmers. Punjab PCC(I) workers were ordered not to touch liquor until they

Rajiv and the Rally

No doubt about it, it was his show



Did Rajiv Gandhi bring off the Kisan Rally? Perhaps not single-handedly,

but there is little doubt that the Rally was his brain-child. The Rally itself was a historic anti-climax. But it yielded the Congress(I) a massive propaganda victory. From beginning to end, the entire affair was characterised by a relentless media blitzkrieg, helped along by the party's organisational expertise.

In early January, Rajiv and his friends, looking around for a way to prop up Mrs Gandhi's and the Party's sagging morale, hit upon the idea of convening a Kisan Rally. Why a Kisan Rally? Because, Rajiv's men argued, a party workers' Rally would smack of storm-trooping and win little acclaim. Farmers in various parts of the country were raising banners of revolt. What better way to deflate those "sham" farmers' leaders, and the opposition parties who sought to take up their cudgels, than to call a farmers' Rally? What better way to demonstrate the Party's crowd-gathering power than to stage a gimmick that Charan Singh had invented in 1978, and succeed doubly?

All that was needed was a quiet suggestion to Arjun Singh, Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister, who responded admirably. On 16 January, Singh summoned six fellow CMs (Darbara Singh, Gundu Rao, Bhajan Lal, VP Singh, Jagannath Mishra and Jagannath Pahadia) to a meeting at MP Bhavan in Delhi. Word went out

immediately to the Party's far-flung outposts.

One man who helped Rajiv a lot was Romi Chopra, the balding adman who, very evidently, was in charge of "conceptualising" the Rally. Chopra supervised the design and construction of the huge rostrum on the Boat Club grounds, inspected floral designs, decided the colour scheme for the bunting, arranged for closed-circuit television at the venue, and in general, was Rajiv's very efficient factotum.

As the rostrum neared completion on 13 February and miles of barricades came up, dividing the huge swath of land from the Boat Club to India Gate into enclosures, Rajiv began to make regular appearances at the site to supervise things. The first day he drove up in Sanjay's Matador and attracted a lot of attention. Along with Romi Chopra and DPCC(I) President HKL Bhagat, he also oversaw the placement of 125 television sets. The rostrum was to be draped in Congress(I) colours, and Rajiv asked Pramod Mathur, a free-lance photographer, for lighting suggestions. Mathur was to produce a short film on the Rally. When a photographer from the *National Herald* clicked a few shots, he was requested firmly not to print them.

Uneasy: The next day, wiser, Rajiv arrived in a brand-new Ambassador, accompanied again by Chopra. This time, NEW DELHI's photographer managed to get a few shots from a distance. But Rajiv was patently uneasy. He kept gravitating towards Chopra's side, and when Chopra was

not close by, went off to a shady corner. All the while, however, Rajiv issued instructions on seating arrangements for dignitaries, security precautions and the like.

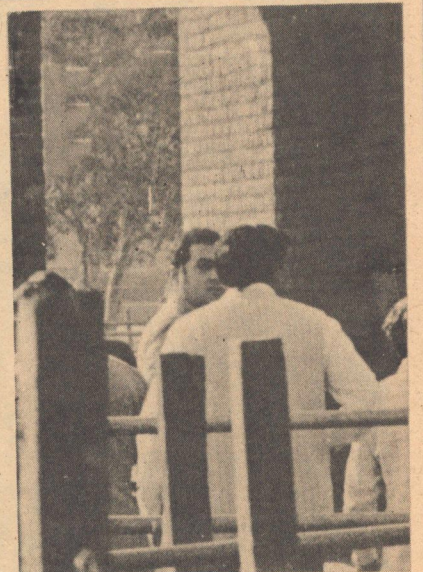
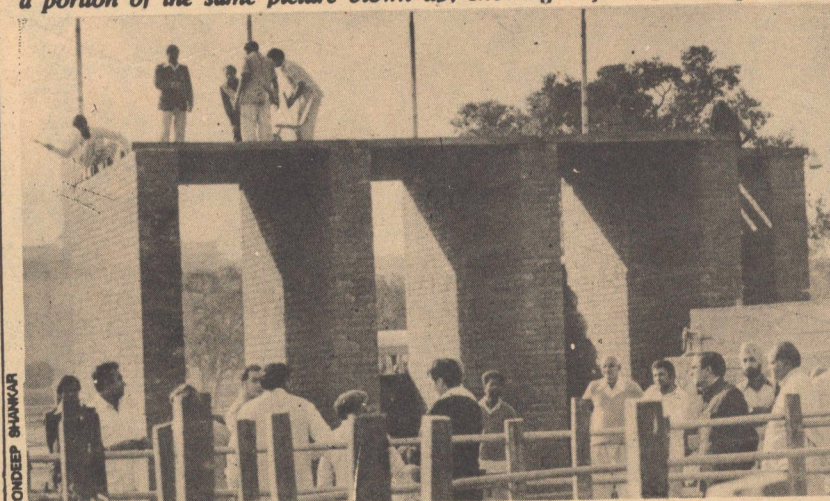
Chopra was not idle, meanwhile. He frequently visited AICC(I) headquarters at 24 Akbar Road, where he seemed to enjoy unrestricted access to the general secretaries. Affecting a casual jean-clad look (as did Rajiv) Chopra, a packet of Dunhill cigarettes in hand, became a familiar figure—talking to deferential police chiefs, Congress(I) leaders and workers, gesticulating, scribbling instructions on a tear-pad, and hovering around Rajiv. Worried that NEW DELHI might use the Rajiv photograph, Chopra produced a complicated simile. "Why do you want to photograph a woman when she has just got out of bed?" he said. "Take all the pictures you want when she's put on her make-up."

Even Mrs Gandhi's white sari seemed hand-picked, because it stood out in vivid contrast to the flaming orange canopy over her head.

The master stroke, however, was that Rajiv himself was not present when the Rally actually took place. The previous night, he visited most of the 27 kisan camps around Delhi, met the farmers, enquired after their welfare, and returned to the Boat Club to oversee final touches. Early in the morning, on Rally day, he took a joy-ride in Vishwa Bandhu Gupta's balloon and had a bird's-eye view of the arrangements. Then he drove off home, confounding the prophets who had predicted that he would be "ordained" officially at the Rally. Later, basking in the well-executed Rally's aftermath, a Congress(I) leader had the honesty to admit: "If it wasn't for Rajiv, this Rally would have never got off the ground."

—CK

Rajiv Gandhi (extreme left, half-hidden by a party official) supervising last-minute arrangements near the Boat Club rostrum on 14 February. At right is a portion of the same picture blown up, showing Rajiv at closer quarters



returned home from the Rally. Aspirants for berths in the Punjab Ministry (a cabinet expansion is due in March) vied with one another to take as many participants as possible to Delhi. MLAs belonging to the Darbara Singh and Zail Singh camps tried to assert supremacy by competing for participants.

Warring factions in the West Bengal Congress(I) had to promise full support for the Rally at a meeting at Union Energy Minister ABA Ghani Khan Chowdhury's residence in Calcutta on 11 February. Subroto Mukherjee and Ajit Panja, the two rival leaders, were asked to forget their differences in the interests of the Rally.

The populism: The populism generated by an event like the Kisan Rally had to be heard to be believed. Senior Congress(I) leaders fell over each other in affirming their undying faith in the leadership of Mrs Gandhi. It seemed as though an intensive course had been designed to indoctrinate them for the Rally, so identical were their protestations of loyalty and their parroting of party ideals vis-a-vis small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers, the landless, and the "downtrodden".

At an interview in the AICC(I) headquarters on 13 February, Kisan Cell President Randhir Singh and convenor Kalpnath Rai waxed eloquent about the Rally. "Kulak leaders like Charan Singh represent only five per cent of the farmers," said Rai. "The Rally will be a mammoth exercise in national integration," said Singh. "Our Government has given the most to farmers out of a minimal exchequer," said Rai. "The Rally will strengthen the kisans," chimed in Singh. "We have asked all our Chief Ministers to do this for the party. This will strengthen the party, too—it'll be a symbol for the country."

It was on the question of costs that every Congress(I) leader proved adroitly slippery. Vasant "Dada" Patil said: "If the papers say we are spending Rs 100 crores, all the better. It will only help our image." Shrikant Verma pleaded that the costs were incalculable because each State Government and Party unit had contributed its mite. Kalpnath Rai, however, was annoyed at persistent question-



Darbara Singh, Chief Minister, Punjab (left, with glasses) coming to Delhi with a truckload of farmers

ing. "Hisaab na karo lala jaise (don't ask for accounts like a merchant)," he exploded. "Money is no consideration, even if millions and billions are spent on this."

Pahadia possibly gifted the largest concessions in order to ensure kisan participation in the Rally. On 3 February, he announced a package that included increased electricity supply, more hours of lighting for rural networks, exempted new generating sets from octroi duty, raised the farmers' diesel quota, and announced eight lakh additional litres of diesel, as well as the withdrawal of taxes on tractor-trolleys.

The event: As the Rally neared, the AICC(I) organised daily trips for the press to various camps. In general, all the participants appeared to have come willingly because they got a free ride to the capital. In many camps, the farmers complained about the poor quality of food being sold them.

Kisans going to the Rally with Parliament House in the background: the stuff of democracy



Some were angry because they had been promised free food and had discovered, too late, that they had to pay for it. Many of the camps, even on the eve of the Rally, appeared to be half-empty. Unexpected showers on 14 February brought temperatures down from their balmy heights, and in the Ram Lila grounds camp (capacity 60,000) 500 kg of firewood was consumed in bonfires that warmed the shivering farmers.

State ministers made it a point to visit camps where "their" farmers were staying in order to oversee arrangements. At the Vinay Marg camp, farmers from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh gheraoed their leaders and threatened to quit if adequate food were not immediately provided. The next day, Andhra Pradesh's newly-sworn in Minister for Minor Irrigation visited the camp to soothe tempers.

Delhiites were surprised to meet many "well-dressed" farmers. One such group from Tamil Nadu, sporting natty shirts and trousers, went foraging in Connaught Place for decent food, disgusted at the quality of the food being dished out in their camp. Shopping seemed to be high on the list of priorities for the visiting farmers. Said Kanshi Ram, president of the Ropar District Congress(I) Committee: "I know that quite a few general merchants who have come here as farmers are mainly interested in the free lift they got. They will prefer to visit Sadar Bazar (the wholesale market) and not join the Rally." On Rally day, Assistant Commissioner of Police Nikhil Kumar, in a hired helicopter, hovered over the Rally site and the city, alerting his men to possible bottlenecks and facilitating an easier flow of people and traffic. Mercifully, many scooter-rickshaw and taxi drivers ignored the call to join the Rally. Many government offices wore a deserted look, because employees had gone to see the *tamasha*. All schools in the capital were closed.

From early in the morning, hundreds of thousands of people began trudging towards the Rally venue. By 10 am, the vast space stretching from the Boat Club to India Gate and beyond had filled up with a sea of faces. Congress(I) workers helped the police in controlling the crowds and shepherding them into the hundreds of enclosures. At one

point, the workers began walking through the seated mass, throwing out small Party flags like confetti.

Behind the rostrum, near Vijay Chowk, two large balloons held a huge portrait of Mrs Gandhi aloft. Dozens of hoardings trumpeted the Prime Minister's enduring love for the farmers. Although NDCC(I) president Vishwa Bandhu Gupta, through the good offices of a central minister, got a free supply of gas for his large US-manufactured raven balloon, strong winds and the inflammability of the butane gas used thwarted the hot air that could have kept the gimmick in the air.

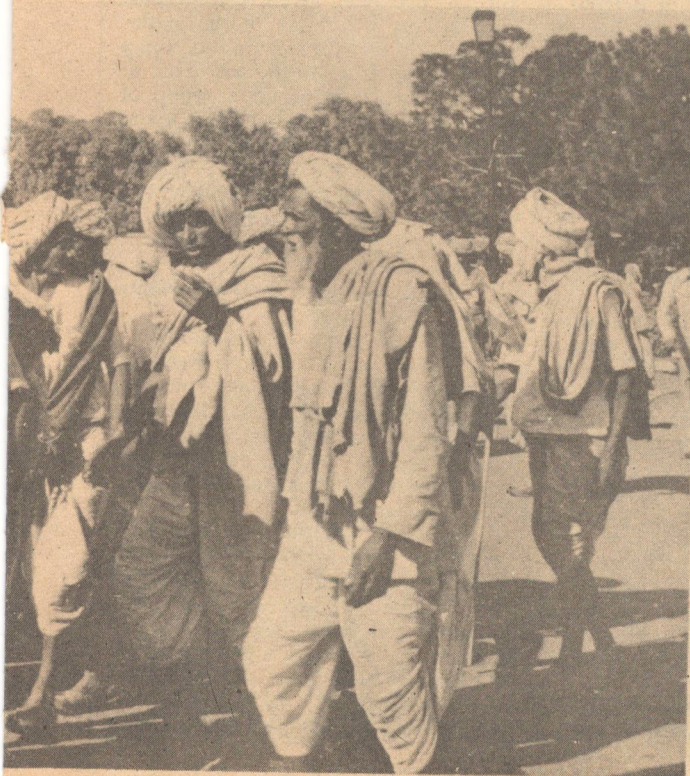
There was plenty of hot air circulating nearby, however. A ragged choral group belted out songs extolling Mrs Gandhi's and her Party's virtues from a smaller dais fronting the rostrum. Self-appointed poets laureate inflicted their atonal paens on the suffering crowds. The crowds suffered because of the heat, too, and quite a few fainted in the crush. From time to time, sloganeers led by DPCC(I) president HKL Bhagat mounted the dais to work up some fervour. As time dragged on, however, the crowd began to get restive. Many thousand farmers, in any case, had to turn away from the Rally because there was no space to squeeze into. Party General Secretary SS Mohapatra told a foreign journalist: "Half a crore will come, mark my words. Delhi is jam-packed, the rooftops are jam-packed." But, however far one craned one's neck, the crowd did seem to stretch, but not towards infinity.



Mrs Gandhi arrived at 1:08 pm, well behind the crowd's schedule, after policemen had had to wield lathis liberally in order to prevent sections of the crowd from surging out of their enclosures. It was all over 40 minutes later. And that was what struck everyone at the spot: millions of man-hours had been expended, crores of rupees spent, hundreds of thousands of people inconvenienced, for a 40-minute speech that meandered, shrilled, and said nothing spectacular, nothing new.

For months to come, Congress(I) leaders will dwell

A poster portraying Mrs Gandhi's humility ('I only serve')



nostalgically on the Kisan Rally and its "historic" gains. But their utterances will not erase the impression any sensible person would have got: that the Rally was convened not because the Prime Minister had historic concessions to grant the farmers. It was convened because the Ruling Party was floundering, riven by internal dissent. It was convened because the Government (and in particular its leader) seemed all at sea. It was meant to be a massive shot in the arm. And Party leaders, prodded along gently by the invisible Rajiv Gandhi, pressed home the plunger of this gigantic hypodermic syringe.

It was left to Khushwant Singh, long-time supporter of Indira Gandhi, to sum up sentiments in a signed editorial in *The Hindustan Times* the day after the Rally. "That the kisans are the backbone of the people is not disputed by anyone," wrote Singh, "but that they belong exclusively to the Congress(I) will certainly be questioned by many. Also, although few will dispute the fact that Indira Gandhi is today the undisputed leader of the country, that she needs these kinds of demonstrations to reconfirm her unique

leadership will certainly be questioned by most thinking people."

NEW DELHI's computation of the Rally's cost brings the bill to a whopping total of Rs 28 crores. That such an exorbitant *tamasha* was staged is itself shocking. What is alarming to contemplate is the rash of smaller (never, possibly, larger) kisan rallies that will now mushroom around the nation. The Bharatiya Janata Party has already announced its own kisan rally, to be held in Lucknow on 6 April. State and district Congress(I) committees will not lag behind in repeating the *tamasha* on a smaller scale. Twenty-six months earlier, after Charan Singh's Kisan Rally, people had heaved a sigh of relief, believing that they had seen the last of such shows. Never were they more mistaken. Yet, last fortnight, picking their way through the detritus of the latest Kisan Rally, people still thought they had seen the last of such shows. People never learn.

—Chaitanya Kalbag with Vivek Sengupta in Delhi, Raj Chengappa in Bangalore and Partha S Banerjee in Calcutta.

Sideshow



NEW DELHI learnt a day before the Rally that several thousand people from the resettlement colonies around Delhi would be ferried to the Rally. As inducement, and to make them look like farmers, we learnt they were given free turbans and kurta-pyjamas. NEW DELHI's Madhu Jain spent two hours in the resettlement colonies across the Yamuna, Khichripur and Kalyanpuri, while, a few kilometers away, the Rally was on. Her brief: to check if the rumours were true. She reports:

Main street Kalyanpuri is like a ghost town on the morning of the Kisan Rally. Rather, like a town from which all the men have been sent off to the war front.

The woman at the tea stall, where this massive resettlement colony with its 25-year hovel-like houses and stinking drains begins, first refuses to answer anything about the Rally. But a young dandy of the colony, one of the customers, breaks the five-minute silence. "Yes, *bhenji*, thousands of people have gone from here. There were about ten buses and they made at least three trips. I've been to the Boat Club and back myself twice."

"To attend the Rally?" we ask him.

"No, to see the fun. Some of us had nothing better to do. But if you want to know the exact number go further down to Doctor Ashok's."

Obviously, the "thousands" were not farmers; they were just reaping what others had sowed.

I ask the scooterwallah to find Dr Ashok. The office is easy to find: a Congress (I) flag flies high over it and a huge photo of Mrs Gandhi inside. The doctor is away in one of the camps at Laxmipur. But his wife tells us that

her courageous husband returned home in the early hours of the morning after attending to 915 sick people.

"How many buses went from here?"

The doctor's wife is not too sure, but along comes a Congress (I) worker. With each person one speaks to the number grows. This worker puts the figure at least 10,000 from Kalyanpuri, Khichripur and Trilokpuri.

"Our camp at Laxmipur, near Radhu Palace cinema has at least 75,000 from this side of the bridge..."

The story a couple of hundred yards away is completely different. Khichripur might also wear the look of a town deserted at high noon; but the exodus was to places of work, not to the Rally.

The young man standing in front of the fair price shop certainly has not seen any buses pass by all morning. Nor have any of the crowd which seems to materialise from nowhere.

The only trucks have vegetables as cargo. "Do you think we can afford to miss a day's work and attend the rally? We have to fill the mouths of our children. These people have not arranged any transport for us. How are we to go?" asks one of Khichripur workers?

The *Netaji* type with the usual white khadi, off-white at that time of the day, is more explicit: "What can I tell you? I am a worker, a Congress (I) worker. Do you understand! Can you imagine, they did not arrange any bus for us. I had all the posters, the flags ready, my heart is just broken, they did not think about me who worked day and night for them..."

As tears are about to fall, we carry on to find a farmer. Surely, amongst the supposed thousands there should be a few farmers. The first farmer we meet is from neighbouring Dholpura village.

The farmer wants... a ride: Ah, a real farmer at last! But this farmer wears a very long face and quite a grudge.

He's missed the bus, literally and figuratively. "I don't know if any farmer from the surrounding villages has gone to the Rally. There were no buses for us. They were for the Congress (I) workers. They filled the buses with their *karamcharis*, sweepers, friends—you don't think those buses from here had any farmers in them do you?"

This farmer is certainly not going to vote for the Congress (I) next time: "They only come here before the elections... HKL Bhagat is supposed to represent this area; do you think he's ever come? We asked him once and made all the arrangements, but he never turned up."

We were told that *pugrees* (it takes five yards of cloth to tie a farmer's turban) had been given to thousands of "farmers". Nobody in the settlement colonies we meet has seen any being given. But, on the way back to the city we come across a group of farmers waiting for a bus into town.

"Have you seen any *pugrees* being given?" we ask one of them. A farmer from Meerut doesn't know about this area, but he had seen nearly a thousand being given in Nongloi.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I saw them; they were white ones."

"Are you going to the Rally?"

"Oh, no, but I did get a free ride into town. I was coming on bus number 321 from Meerut and told the conductor I wanted to go Khichripur. He did not take any money from any of us. He said it was free for farmers going to Delhi..."

The spritely farmer who thought I was from the Congress Party wanted to extend his free trip: he wanted to hitch a lift into the city as well. But another man at the bus stop was not "amused": "Who is going to pay for all this? They might give money today; but it is people like us who will have to pay twice that much later.... nothing is free."