

# Sins Of Bhagwan

**O**NE YEAR after Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh left India, the controversies which have dogged him follow his every move. When they left India, Rajneesh's lieutenants refused to admit that they were shifting permanently to the United States. To get around complex American immigration laws, his visa application, accompanied by reports from Pune doctors, stated that the godman wanted permission to temporarily enter the US for medical treatment for his spine. Said John Mallott, deputy principal officer at the United States Consulate in Bombay: "He was given a temporary visa on humanitarian grounds. The temporary visa was for six months, and later he got a six-month extension. Now he has applied for permanent residence in the US, and that application is pending with our immigration department."

US immigration promptly started an investigation into Rajneesh's antecedents. The aim: to find out if the original application on medical grounds was merely a ruse to defraud American immigration and gain entry into the country. In fact, preparations for the move began

over a month before it actually came about. A large number of the 7,000 Rajneesh sanyasins then in Pune spent May 1981, feverishly sorting, packing and crating every movable that would be of value in America. Thousands of books published by the Rajneesh Foundation, and the godman's personal library of over 2 lakh books were meticulously sealed in polythene and packed in wooden freight crates.

**Preparations:** Only two days before leaving Pune, seven trustees of the Rajneesh Foundation, who were to accompany their Bhagwan, resigned. Included in the list were managing trustee Laxmi T. Hirji, better known as Ma Yoga Laxmi, and Sheela Silverman, or Ma Anand Sheela, a radical hardliner who took over the ashram administration in the last few months before leav-

ing. Although no official statements were made, every move was patently towards a permanent shift to the US. Admits Niranjan Pandya, a trusted Rajneesh insider who worked as architect and interior designer to the godman for over a decade: "It was very clear that they were going off forever. They systematically wound up all the work here, demolished and sold off all the extra constructions they had made, and shipped out everything else."

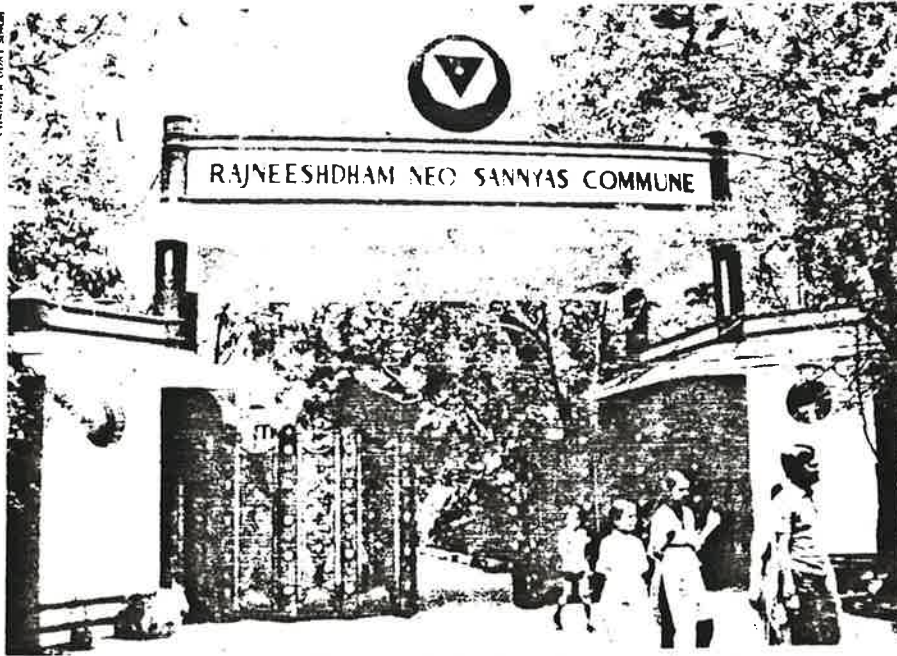
Even while his application for permanent residence hangs in the balance, the

Foundation is merely biding its time till buyers for the property can be found.

**Selling Out:** In the past year, virtually every saleable property in and around Pune has been sold by the foundation. A huge fort at Saswed, roughly 30 km from Pune, has been returned to its owner even though eight years of the ten-year lease still remained. Trucks and jeeps which were overworked only a year ago have been sold to the highest bidder, and Pandya confirms that at least Rs 40 lakh worth of material from demolished structures have hit the market. Although Ma Yoga Mukta, who heads the ashram in her godman's absence, insists that the Pune centre will not be shut down, this is belied by the deliberate shut-down of facilities at the ashram. Said Pandya: "What is left for them here now? They are trying to sell the

Koregaon Park property, but there are some problems with the title to the land. The moment that is cleared they will sell and leave."

Notwithstanding the year-old departure of the Rajneesh brigade from Pune, the sins of the saffron sanyasins have come home to roost. Disclosures in Pune last fortnight revealed that the Rajneesh Foundation was up to its neck in income tax arrears, defalcations with the charities commissioner, a major insurance fraud, and a string of cases for criminal offences which were still being investigated when they left. Income tax arrears



The entrance to the Koregaon Park ashram in Pune: systematic exit

opposition to his saffron brigade from native Oregonites has been steadily mounting. Says Mallott: "There's very bad blood between the Rajneesh people and local residents and relations are very strained."

But while Rajneeshpuram is a hive of activity, the scene at 17, Koregaon Park in Pune makes a stark contrast. Barely 25 trusted Rajneeshites man the posh, six-acre residential plot which only a year ago accommodated up to 7,000 sanyasins. The 16,000-square foot Buddha Hall, the twin-storied buildings which housed printing presses and cafeterias, and numerous wooden structures which dotted the plot have been torn down and their materials auctioned. Numerous rented bungalows and lodging houses in the area stand deserted, and it is obvious that the Rajneesh Neo-Sanyas

till the assessment year 1978-79 alone amount to Rs 1.07 crore, and the three subsequent assessments, still to be completed, will increase the figure by at least 100 per cent. Although foundation bank accounts have been attached by tax authorities, it is unlikely that these accounts will yield even a fraction of this figure.

The foundation also owes Rs 3.22 lakh to the charities commissioner's office for unpaid contributions levied by the state Government. But financial and property affairs in the Rajneesh Foundation are in such a murky state that it is unlikely that the authorities will be able to pin down the offenders. Seven of the 11 trustees, technically liable for mismanagement or defalcations by the trust, have resigned and left the country. The titles to trust-owned pro-

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Rajneesh with one of his four Rolls-Royce Corniches in Rajneeshpuram USA: applied for permanent residence

erty, moreover, are in a deliberately muddled and confusing state: of the four bungalow plots which make up 17, Koregaon Park, only two are legally transferred to the foundation; another piece of real estate, a 300-acre farm in Saswed, is owned on paper by a cooperative formed of members of Rajneesh's following, technically distinct from the foundation. Admitted a revenue official: "It will be almost impossible for us to recover the amounts that are outstanding from them. Everything has been muddled to such an extent that we'll be lucky to get even a part of it."

**Victimised:** Only shortly before Rajneesh's disappearance last June, the ashram and its inhabitants were embroiled in a string of incidents which were publicised by the Rajneesh press office as being proof that they were victimised by Puneites. A police inspector attached to the foreigners registration branch was alleged to have raped a foreign sanyasin, a brother of the assistant charity commissioner was accused of molesting sanyasins, the landlord of the Saswed fortress was implicated in a case of attempted rape, and cases of bombing and arson were registered against the same landlord when a number of home-made bombs went off in a Rajneesh book godown and the Rajneesh medical centre. The loss from fire in the godown was declared as over Rs 1.5 crore. State CID was called in, insurance claims filed, and the investigation begun.

A year later both police and CID officials in Pune are unanimous in their charge that the incidents were rigged by Rajneesh followers. In the godown fire case, ashram officials lowered their declaration of losses from Rs 1.5 crore to Rs 5 lakh as in-

vestigations progressed. Furthermore, the foundation had less than two months before the fire taken fresh insurance for Rs 25 lakh on the contents of the godown. Said Additional Inspector General of the CID Ramakant Kulkarni: "The circumstances ruled out the possibility of involvement of outside persons. Considering that no outsiders had any access and that the godown was manned round the clock and that they had their own security guards, the possibility

of someone from inside having perpetrated the crime gains importance."

The string of rape and molestation cases filed against Pune citizens have also been written off by police as false complaints. "These were simple cases of entrapment," said a senior police official. "Whenever they found anybody stepping out of line in his dealings with them they would set him up and trap him in a molestation case." Unofficially, however, police officials admit that they will be unable to prosecute the foundation or its members for lodging false and malicious complaints. Since the people responsible have already flown the coop, the police will write off the criminal cases "for lack of evidence".

Rajneesh arriving in Oregon last year



In Pune, meanwhile, the absence of Rajneesh's orange following is sorely missed. Hotels and lodging houses, which had a field day in the seven years of saffron colonisation, have slashed their rates by upto two-thirds, and many in the Koregaon Park area have downed shutters. The open cafes and soft drink stalls around Bund Gardens, many of them coloured saffron or orange to attract the Rajneeshite custom, are virtually empty today. In Centre Street, once cluttered with cloth shops which had switched over completely to the saffron trade, only one remains. Said Lachu Akatrai, its owner, despondently: "Even we're going to go back to normal colours and clothing in a week or two. Last year at this time we sold 50-60 dresses daily, and now if we sell 15 in a whole month we're lucky." The bonanza over, Puneites are gradually slipping back to the pre-Rajneesh days. While the godman takes his custom to Oregon.

—CHANDER UDAY SINGH