

Chandigarh's Hyde Park

by MANOHAR SINGH GILL

He stands defiantly on the traffic island leading to the Punjab Secretariat. He wears a yellow turban and a military great coat, over which he carries a sword. A steel chakra in his hand, a distant and aloof look in his eyes, he occasionally walks with a proud and measured step along the concrete rim of the traffic island. Sometimes he stops and addresses in lofty tones the 9 o' clock traffic of Ministers and civil servants that swirls past him.

I do not know what his grievance is, but he is one of many who come to Chandigarh "to ring the king's bell of justice". Sometimes it is heard, and perhaps sometimes it is not. I do not know what his name is, but I shall call him Phakkar Singh, for he seems to me to be a "malang" in the best sense of the Purjabi word.

He lives in a make-shift tent next to the traffic island. His disciplined routine would do credit to a Morarji Desai. In the early morning, as I go for

tennis to the club, I see him sleeping peacefully on his string charpai, covered head to toe with a thick quilt. Next to the bed he has a footstool of two bricks, on top of which his plastic shoes are neatly arranged.

NOBLE SOUL

By the time I return Phakkar Singh is lighting his little camp fire and cooking his frugal meal. Sharp at 9 a.m., as punctual as the best of civil servant, he is ready to face the world with his grievances on the traffic island. Immaculately turned out, he presents a picture of a noble soul in adversity. Is he King Lear or Don Quixote? I wonder.

As soon as the rush to the Secretariat is over he settles down to grind his drink for the day in a "koonda" kept near his bed. The cool drink wafts him to a higher world. Though he spurns company and main-tains a De Gaulle-like aloofness, he occasionally favours a pri-

vileged visitor or two in the afternoons with conversation. Phakkar Singh has made the corner his home, and is apparently determined to stay till the stone walls of Chandigarh yield him justice.

Around him are other tents, mostly of employees' unions. One can take one's pick between the cooperative staff, the overseers, the teachers, and many more. At any given moment there are three to four tents in the area. These are bigger, and better appointed with durries on the floor. The unions obviously can muster more resources than poor Phakkar Singh.

HAPPY & IDLE

It is interesting to see their routine. As I pass them in the early mornings they are all sprucing themselves up for the day, with the Sikhs in white "thathas" continuously twisting their moustaches to a laser

point. They are well fed and relaxed. A few read the newspapers while others lounge about in happy idleness, as only we Indians can.

At 9 o' clock they too emerge out of their tents to shout a few ritual slogans as Ministers go by. Then they generally settle down to playing cards. Unlike Phakkar Singh, they do not have to worry about their next meal, for they are well provided. Even when there is an occasional hunger-strike, relay or otherwise, they rarely lose weight.

And so life goes on at this traffic island. I once suggested to the powers that be that they might call the place Hyde Park, Chandigarh, and provide a few amenities such as benches, a water tap and a couple of well-designed and hidden toilets for the many who come to seek justice from the men who sit in Carbusier's Secretariat. Justice they may not always get but, surely, they are entitled to a little comfort.