

Shastri, the blind Socialist leader and MP who is functioning as the main spokesman of the group. "The issues at stake are most fundamental in character. We feel that a Ministry comprising persons who carried a stigma against their names could not be a fit instrument for the realisation of the goal of total revolution of JP's dream." Mr Shastri said that the Chief Minister had refused to discuss with him the names of MLAs for inclusion in the Ministry in spite of the instructions of Prime Minister Morarji Desai to do so. As an "undesirable" Minister, the Socialists name Mr. V. K. Saklecha, who had to bow out of the race for Chief Ministership when Socialist opposition to his name tilted the balance overnight in the favour of Mr Kailash Joshi. The Socialists allege that Mr Saklecha was hobnobbing with the Congress during the Emergency.

The Socialists also feared that they may be denied important port-

folios and consequently the Government may turn into a rightist bandwagon. On the other hand, the Jana Sangh felt that it must cry a "halt" somewhere to the blackmail by their junior partner. It, however, played a cool, calculated game. It succeeded in roping the rebel Minister-designates of the Congress (O) BLD and CFD, one by one. Even two Socialist candidates joined the Ministry leaving only five, including Jahar Singh, to fight it out.

Socialist claims notwithstanding, their actions have aroused strong and adverse public reaction. The common man feels that the dispute is about sharing the loaves and fishes of office. Their image was further worsened by disgruntled elements, belonging to the CFD, who had joined the Janata bandwagon at the last moment and were defeated at the polls, joining hands with the Socialists in their fight against the so-called Jana Sangh "caucus."

the cows of the temple strayed into the field of Kata Sheikh and he tried to take it to the nearest pound. Netaichand Das, a young Bengali devotee and 'Commander' of the temple, intervened and dragged Kata Sheikh inside the temple compound. It is alleged that Kata was severely beaten up and tonsured; mercurochrome was dabbed on the exposed scalp. Meanwhile the village was full of talk that the 'sahibs' had killed Kata. Soon an angry mob came to the temple gate, armed with various farming implements and lathis, (incidentally, the villagers are renowned lathi wielders), even scissors. The ISKCON devotees allege that many of them were carrying lethal weapons.

The inmates of the temple probably lost their nerve with the furious mob raging at the gate. When a few rounds of blank fire — fired from a second floor balcony in the air — failed to disperse the crowd, two of the inmates went near the gate and fired into the crowd from two .12 bore double barrel guns. The villagers fled and almost all of them were shot in the back. Fifteen villagers were wounded including two children. Towaj Sheikh and Towab Sheikh sustained head injuries. Fortunately the guns were loaded with buckshot and none was seriously wounded. They all are now recuperating at Shaktinagar Hospital.

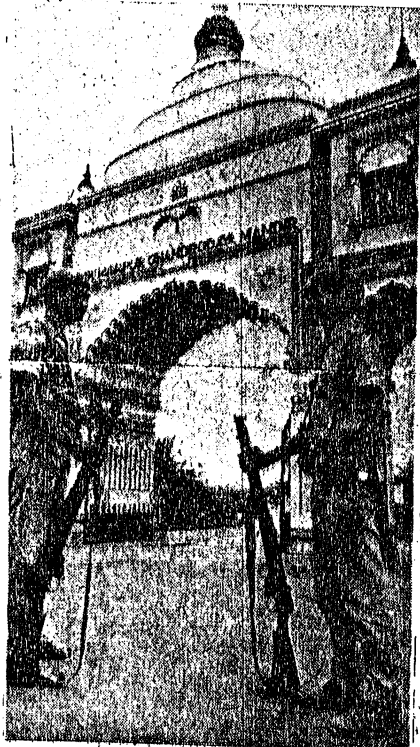
The ISKCON people, however, give a different version. According to them, some of the villagers repeatedly trespassed into the temple compound to steal Gyama grass (a kind of fodder) and other crops. Some days before the day of the incident Kata Sheikh was caught in the act but was released when he signed a pledge not to steal again. Yet on the fateful Friday afternoon he stole inside the compound with the same motive. Netaichand caught him and brought him inside the temple. Soon a frenzied mob of 200 villagers came to the gate, armed with lethal weapons, and started throwing stones. In defence, the order to shoot was given. When the rounds of blank fire failed to scare the mob away a couple of rounds were fired into the crowd, but these were aimed at the legs.

Since a court of law has been moved, it is for the trying judge to decide which version is the correct one. The police arrived on the spot three hours after the incident, though Mayapur is a bare 20 km from Krishnagar. When I reached Mayapur on the night of July 9 it was raining hard. Armed police were stationed at the main gate. There was no blood stain on the ground near the gate though that was where the villagers had fallen wounded; apparently the rain

Gun shots at Chandrodaya Temple

Temples are not quite the place to keep guns at and Vaishnavas are the last persons expected to use the guns. But that is what happened at the Mayapur temple run by the ISKCON people. What was the provocation and what really happened? SUDEB ROYCHODHURY goes to the spot and reports.

QUITE a storm has brewed up over the clash at the Chandrodaya Temple of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) at Mayapur on July 8. This temple of the white-skinned Vaishnavas on the bank of the Ganga, 75 km from Calcutta, has aroused a lot of interest in Calcutta as well as in Delhi. Gunfire and bloodshed at a temple! And at a Vaishnava temple to boot! And all this at Mayapur, the hallowed birthplace of Sri Chaitanya! The thoroughly un-Vaishnava-like conduct has not only made the local villagers angry, people all over the State have resented it, too. The US Consul at Calcutta rushed to Mayapur because there are four American citizens among the 11 swamis arrested in this connection. When I reached



the place about 28 hours after the incident, all seemed normal, however. The ISKCON devotees were chanting 'Hare Krishna, Hare Rama' as if nothing had happened.

But, around 3.30 p.m. on July 8, something had happened. One of



(Left) Kata, with shaven-off pate, tells his story and (right) Hiranyagarbha Adhikari (born Benjamin in Canada) under police guard in hospital

had washed everything away. Three of the Temple inmates, including a foreign devotee, Shrimati Vishal-akhsee Devi, have also sustained injuries. She was discharged from hospital after being given first aid. The other two are still there at the Shaktinagar Hospital. Of them Hiranyagarva Adhikari — from Canada — has a fractured arm and Netaichand Das has sustained a head injury.

The eleven Ashramites arrested in this connection include six foreigners, four of them American. One of the four, Bhabananda Swami, has been a controversial figure for quite some time. The son of an American multi-millionaire and a former film director, his actual name is Edward Charles Baccis. Last year, when he was one of the co-directors of the temple (the other co-director, Jaipataka Maharaj, is also an American citizen), the Government refused to extend his visa and made him quit the country. But he soon returned, this time travelling on a Kenyan passport. The West Bengal Chief Minister Mr. Jyoti Basu, has sought clarification from the Centre on how Bhabananda could do this? Who issued the tourist visa and on what ground? He has called for a thorough probe also. The police have impounded the passports of the six foreigners now in custody. Two 12 guns found at the Ashram have been confiscated also. Their owner Mr. Pravass Singh,

a Bengali devotee, has arrived at Mayapur from Brindavan. Who fired into the crowd, how many rounds were fired and whether it was all in self defence, as claimed by the ISKCON people, remain to be investigated. Mr. Basu has sent a report on the clash to Delhi. The 11 arrested inmates of the temple have been charged with attempted murder and illegal possession of firearms.

I met the US Consul, Mr. Joseph Patrick O'Neill at the temple gate. He told me he was there as four Americans were involved. "I do not have anything to do with the rest", he commented. "I have met the District Magistrate and the officials concerned, and I believe that the four American citizens would be dealt with as per the laws of the land. I have visited them in custody. They have been accorded all due facilities, including diet of their choice", he added.

The villagers too have calmed down. "They have complete faith in the authorities who, they are sure, would take appropriate measures", said the West Bengal Dairy and Animal Husbandry Minister, Mr. Amritendu Mukherjee and Mr. Debi Bose, the local CPI(M) MLA. A police force armed with search warrants, led by Mr. Madan Gopal, the Superintendent of Police, Nadia and Mrs. Rann Ghosh, the District Magistrate, have searched the temple

premises and recovered 49 live cartridges and 13 empty shells.

Mayapur bears the sacred memory of Shri Chaitanya. The Chandrodaya Temple was built in 1970-71. The present complex sprawls over 20 acres of ground. There are about 250 permanent inmates including 80 children, most of whom are from the poor families of the locality. The number of foreign devotees is 35. "I came here first", Achyutananda Swami, (from America) told me. "We started with 11 acres of land. Fakir Saheb, a local villager came out with help. It was then an obscure village. Farakka Dam was far from finished and floods were a yearly phenomenon". It was only in 1974-75 that this four-storied temple was constructed", he said.

The complex also includes a 380-room guest house to accommodate devotees from other parts of the country and abroad. The temple stands on eight acres of ground; the remaining 12 acres are used to grow paddy, wheat and other crops. The ISKCON plans to buy another 300 acres of land to expand their activities, but the owners are quoting exorbitant prices." The plots flanking the pucca road are tagged at Rs. 30,000 a bigha whereas just six years before they were valued at Rs. 1100 to Rs. 1200 a bigha. In view of the high prices the ISKCON has appealed to the West Bengal Government to help it acquire the land at reasonable prices. They propose to build an airstrip so that 'prasad' can be flown to devotees abroad. Mrs. Ghosh, the District Magistrate, sent the file to the State Chief Secretary, Mr. B. R. Gupta, who in turn asked for a number of clarifications. These mainly dealt with how many people would be rendered landless after the acquisition and how they could be rehabilitated. The questions are yet to be answered and the matter rests there. According to the State Home Department the American devotees were permitted by the State Government to raise the temple on land vested in the Government, but the rest of the campus area that was later taken over had been earmarked by the Land and Land Revenue Department for allocation to 45 landless peasants. A high official of the department was present at the inaugural ceremony that was held when the expansion job was complete.

ISKCON is apparently an affluent organisation and, like many others, I wondered to the veteran Achyutananda Swami where the money came from. He said they have 1400 life members in Calcutta who have each paid Rs. 2222. The Chandrodaya Temple is the biggest ISKCON centre of worship in India but they have temples in Brindavan, Calcutta, Delhi, Chandigarh, Hyderabad, Bhubaneswar, Bombay and Ahmedabad also. The State Governments know everything about their finances and there is nothing secret.