

Q. Do you also have a penchant for writing or did it just happen by chance?

A. Obviously, why do I write a book if I don't like writing? I have been writing all my life. I was a student of literature and have done my masters in English literature. Reading is my passion and I write also. I have been writing in many newspapers and journals. I started with Khushwant Singh in Illustrated Weekly. I have also written many books. I wrote a major book on agriculture – *An Indian success story*. It is a study of Punjab and all the agricultural developments and also the green revolution.

*Q. What prompted you to write **Himalayan Wonderland**?*

A. I went to the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, HMI in Darjeeling. It is a mountaineering training school set up by Nehru after Tenzing (Norgay) climbed Everest in 1953. Tenzing was also the director of mountaineering training. In 1960, I went there and got trained. I was the first and the last IAS officer to do this. Otherwise, Navy, Air and Armed Forces go there. I went there because of my passion and

*An IAS officer, he has been the development commissioner of Punjab and deputy commissioner of Lahaul-Spiti and now the Union sports minister of India— M S Gill has reminisced his lifelong affair with the Himalayas in his travelogue **Himalayan Wonderland**. NILOFAR SHAMSI discusses his passion for adventure.*

Tenzing trained me. He became a friend and mountaineering has been linked to me all my life. In 1961, I was posted as deputy commissioner in Lahaul-Spiti. It is now in Himachal but then it was all Punjab. At that time, I was a young man of 26-27, in the early stage of my career. It was a tough time, as there were no roads, I lived in the valley at 11,000 ft, the Rohtang Pass was closed and there were no helicopters in those days anywhere. I stayed there and did a lot of writing in the six month-long winters of snow, which later on transformed into a book.

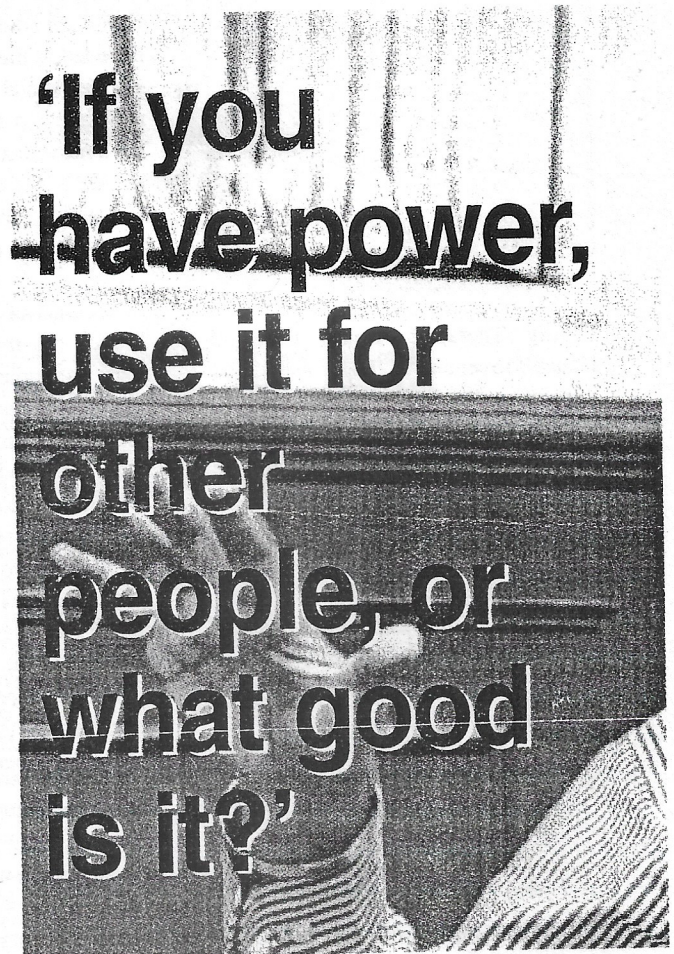
Q. You seem adventurous, as you chose hills over plains...

A. I chose both because old Punjab consisted of both the desert and hills. Haryana was all desert. My first posting as SDM (sub-divisional magistrate) was in district Mohindergarh, which is 80 miles from Delhi. This is Haryana beyond Gurgaon. Now, it has witnessed a bit of development but at that time, it was all sand and desert. No

wells for waters, no electricity, nothing. But I served there for a year-and-a-half. After that, I asked and went to Lahaul-Spiti, which is high in the Himalayan mountains.

Q. How has been your six-year experience as the president of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation?

A. My interest in mountaineering after training with Tenzing remained all my life. I tried to help mountaineering. Even now, I visit Leh, Ladakh and Nubra valley. I am not young now, I don't climb high mountains, but I have been up to about 19-20,000 ft in Kullu area in Parvati valley. Now, I go with my wife, she is interested and we both keep going wherever we can in mountain areas like Uttarakhand. So, the interest has stayed with me. Therefore, I became president of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, to help young people in adventure. All my life, I stayed close to mountains and mountaineers. After six years, when I finished, I gave it up. Then I became president of the Himalayan Club. It was set up by the British in 1928 in Darjeeling, Calcutta. In those days, Darjeeling was the



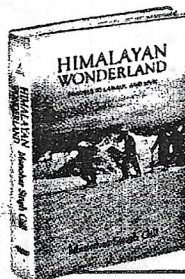
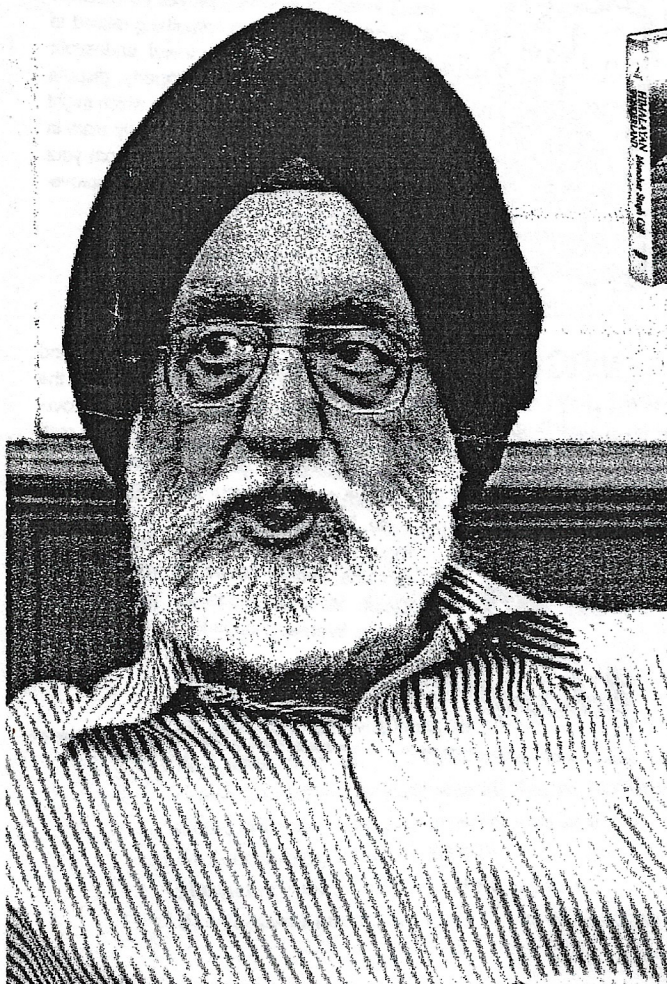
headquarter for climbing Everest and Sherpas. Now, I am no longer the president, as I thought six years is more than enough. But I make it a point to help them. This year also, I went to Mumbai and presided over the annual meeting of the Himalayan Club. So, all my life, I have kept that interest alive which is good for me. I try to promote mountaineering and adventure. As a minister, I have promoted lots of Himalayan adventure, because I know this business and I have done it for the Indian youth. The moment I took charge last year, I started a new scheme - Rajiv Gandhi Adventure Scheme. I have already sent about 2,000 girls and boys. We pick up groups of 10, 12 and 14 and send them across India from Kullu Manali, east Himachal to Arunachal, Ladakh or to the high mountains in Uttarakhand. We send them on 12 days of trekking. They trek up to 12-14,000 ft high passes, along with their everyday camping, walking and climbing. It builds up a very good leadership quality in them as it helps them to know people from all over India. It is very successful, people love it. I have started similar treks from Barmer to Bikaner in Rajasthan also.

Q. What is so special about Lahaul-Spiti? Why did you call it a 'wonderland'?

A. It is indeed a wonderland. Spiti is the nearest place to experience what it would be like to be on the moon! It is as barren and stark, high mountains but all dry. There is no monsoon, no rain and no forest to be seen. So, going to Spiti for trek is like setting foot on the moon. I recommend it to all young people. I have been to Lahaul-Spiti all my life and I keep going there. It has been 50 years now but I keep in touch with all those people. Since I have held high government positions, I have always liked to help those border people. I send them money to buy camping equipments for adventure clubs. If you have the power, you should use it for other people; what good is power otherwise?

Q. You complain, the government is not being able to take care of this Indian legacy.

A. I was there in 1960 and now it has been 60 years. I can feel the difference. The Shigri glacier is the biggest glacier when you go to Spiti from Lahaul. At that time, the glaciers



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used to come down from 21,000 ft right close to the Chandra river. Now, as I keep going, I see that in the last 30-40 years, the glacier has reduced and gone up back to the mountain. The stone slope is left behind. It is obviously an indication of the environmental danger and global warming.

Q. You have mentioned your special bonding with the people of Lahaul and Spiti valley. Comment

A. Yes, I possess special bonding with them. It is a relationship that has stayed all my life. At the book launch also, quite unlike others, I called the Lamas from Lahaul and they started the ceremony with the singing of some of the best prayers, *Mangal Ucharan* ... which means good wishes, auspicious wishes. I have always maintained the relationship. I am their representative wherever I am.

Q. Do you have plans to come up with more books in future?

A. Yes, I am going to write another book on Lahaul-Spiti, I collected a lot of folk tales and folklore. So, I intend to include that also. ■