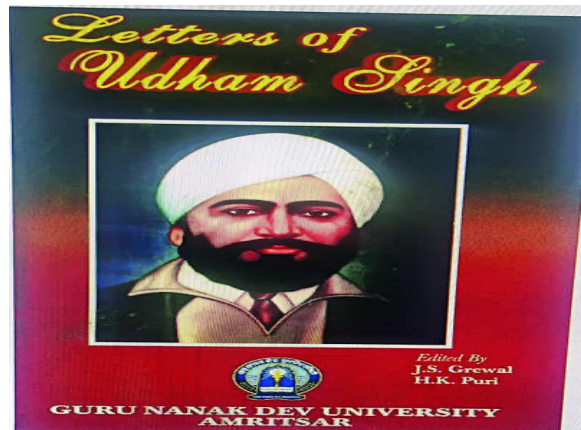


Printed from

THE TIMES OF INDIA

When M S Gill brought home Udham Singh's letters from UK

Oct 25, 2023, 12:37 PM IST



Chandigarh: Widely known for promoting the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs), India's former chief election commissioner Manohar Singh Gill, who passed away on Sunday, had also contributed to documenting the country's freedom struggle. Around 50 years ago, he brought home the first-ever set of Udham Singh's personal documents (the martyr's letters) from England to India in 1971.

The letter reached India 31 years after Udham Singh was executed by the British in 1940 for killing Sir Michael Francis O'Dwyer, who was the lieutenant-governor of Punjab at the time of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

Interestingly, Gill had stumbled upon Udham's letters by sheer chance, when he, during his England visit in 1971, was casually discussing a feature film that a Sikh immigrant from Sangrur was planning to make on Udham Singh. Once aware of the fact that documents carrying immense historical importance were lying in the home of a Punjabi immigrant in the British countryside, Gill made an extra effort to bring them to India in the same visit.

From 1940 to 1971, the letters were part of the personal library of Punjabi immigrant and Udham's friend Shiv Singh Jauhal.

However, the tale of how Gill, the bureaucrat-turned-politician, had traced the letters is equally interesting, which he himself narrated in an article he wrote for Illustrated Weekly of India in 1972. "In search of the history of Punjab in Birmingham, I ran into a Sikh immigrant from Sangrur... Mehma Singh brought up his pet project – a film on the life of Udham Singh," Gill wrote.

As per Gill, Mehma told him: "I have collected much material on Udham. There are numerous men alive who knew him in 1939-40. I have read his last letters from jail...Gill sahib they will make you weep."

On being asked about the whereabouts of these letters, Mehma told Gill: "An old friend and colleague of Udham Singh has them. But you won't be able to see them, let alone get them. They are the old man's life to him, a treasure beyond price."

As per Gill, he took Ajit Singh from Queen's College from Cambridge with him to meet Jauhal, who was then 65.

After a formal conversation, Gill came to the point and asked Jauhal, "I have heard that you have the last letters of Udham Singh. These are part of our history and will give flesh to our memories. You do not know me, but if you can trust me. But if you can trust me, let me take them back to Punjab."

However, unsurprisingly, and as predicted by Mehma, Jauhal replied negatively. "I have the letters. But these are not mine. They belong to the nation," Gill quoted Jauhal as saying.

Several rounds of conversations later and after another round of coffee, Jauhal came up with the letters. "With what love and care they had been kept...the envelopes, the bills and receipts of the trial expenses were all there neatly kept in the album. Shiv Singh picked up the album and handed it over to me. 'Please take them,' he said. I

know what cost him to say so. I myself felt as if I am carrying Udham Singh's ashes home," wrote Gill.

Around three years later, the letters were reproduced in the form of a book edited by Prof JS Grewal and Prof Harish Puri of Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar. The book 'Letters of Udham Singh', which became the first ever published account related to Udham Singh, was published by the university in 1974.