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The Telegraph *online*

Wednesday, 24 July 2024

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'If you know your Shakespeare, you can do well in life. People can decide whether I have done that or not'

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Sports Minister M.S. Gill Is Adept At Dodging Topics He Doesn't Want To Talk About. But He's Voluble On Other Matters, Seetha Discovers | Published 25.05.08, 12:00 AM

The Telegraph *online*



Keep off what he doesn't want to talk about — sports controversies, for instance, or his days in the Election Commission — and youth affairs and sports minister Manohar Singh Gill is an interviewer's delight.

Well, a bit of a nightmare too, I realise when I sift through my notes and find a surfeit of unrelated stories. But the able raconteur that he is, I get swept away as 71-year-old Gill careens down memory lane, his narrative peppered with caustic asides and Punjabi-accented Hindi one-liners, often veering off from the main story and forgetting to come back to it. Confession: it's all so fascinating and funny that I forget to bring him back too!

We sit on beige and cream sofas in his minimally decorated office with wooden flooring and contemporary furniture instead of the heavy conventional stuff usually found in ministers' rooms. But then Gill hasn't been a very conventional person.

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A little over a year into his first posting as sub-divisional magistrate in the boondocks of Mahendargarh (now in Haryana), the 23-year-old 1958 batch IAS officer from the then undivided Punjab cadre sent a handwritten letter to the chief secretary — the late E. N. Mangat Rai — bypassing his deputy commissioner (DC). “Which is stupid, I could have been charge sheeted,” he confesses. Since Himachal Pradesh was then in Punjab, Gill suggested that young officers be trained in mountaineering and sought permission to go to Darjeeling to train under Tenzing Norgay.

Gill heard nothing for two months and was sure a charge sheet was on its way. Instead he got a telegram from Rai asking him to proceed. Knowing his DC would not allow him to go, Gill left a letter addressed to him and quietly slipped away to Darjeeling. By the time the DC learnt of his departure, Gill could not be contacted. The DC did try to take action against him later. But then Punjab chief minister Pratap Singh Kairon — Gill’s uncle was a close friend of his, and they were all from the Tarn Taran district of Punjab — came to his rescue, writing on a file that the state needed such adventurous people. The matter died there.

That wasn’t the last time he bypassed the chain of command. When posted as deputy secretary, labour, in Chandigarh, he went to see Rai again, seeking (and getting) a posting to Lahaul Spiti, crossing the Rohtang pass in winter. That stint yielded two books on Lahaul-Spiti.

Years later, when he was in the cooperatives department, he went off to do an advanced course in mountaineering. Once again, he left a note for his boss and took off for Manali, another charge sheet-worthy act. “I got away somehow,” he laughs.

The admission to the IAS was not without drama. Gill’s final year MA examinations clashed with the civil service examinations, which were being held in Patiala, roughly 80 km away from Ludhiana where he was studying. Gill got on to a bus to Chandigarh, barged into the office of Panjab University vice chancellor A.C. Joshi and said, “Sir, other states help their students sit for the IAS and you are preventing us.” The examination dates were tweaked a bit. Gill appeared for an MA paper in

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Ludhiana, got into his father's Studebaker and drove like mad at night to reach Patiala. The car broke down on the way. Luckily a bus came along and he managed to reach Patiala by 10 am the next day to appear for the civil services. He had to do this thrice. But the result was worth it — he stood eleventh in the civil services examination.

The IAS was perhaps more tolerant of Gill's irreverence than the army — his first choice, given four generations of his family were armymen — would have been. He had appeared for — and cleared — the military entrance examinations in the early 1950s, after six years of boarding school at St George's College, Mussoorie. But the night he was to leave for Dehra Dun to join the Joint Services Wing, a conversation with his father made him change his mind. Colonel Pratap Singh Gill, who was lieutenant Governor of Goa from 1977 to 1981, suggested that his son study further. So Gill went to Ludhiana for a BA (Hons) degree and a Masters in English literature.

“If you know your Shakespeare, I think you can do well in life. People can decide whether I have done that or not,” he laughs. He still knows Julius Caesar by heart and has an abiding love of reading. Greek and Roman history are particular favourites, as are books on historic campaigns and generals. “You name a book on the army and I have read it. I can lecture the staff college any time.”

He has also devoured tomes on agriculture economics and the cooperative movement by two British ICS officers of the Punjab cadre — Malcolm Darling and H. Calvert. “Those books make you cry. They knew what was going on with peasants' lives. Today with all this talk of farmers' debts and suicides, they would know what to do. Sadly, I am not sure other people know.” His many postings in agriculture-related departments in Punjab in the 1960s and in Delhi in the 1970s saw him collect two kit bags of material on agriculture cooperatives. In the late 1970s, he took study leave (“one of the most civilising things about the IAS”) and, with some funding from Cambridge University, went off to its South Asian Studies Centre to write a 600-page book — *An Indian Success Story: Agriculture and Cooperatives in Punjab*. Later, a friend in the Punjab University persuaded him to write a PhD thesis on the subject.

His stint as director, sports, Punjab, gave him insights into sports administration. He also accompanied the Indian contingent to the Mexico Olympics in 1968. “Why do you think I know this business,” he asks. Love for sports was also instilled in St George’s, where students had to play all games. He’s done his share of boxing as well. “Even if we lost, we got one point for the class. *Maine badi maar khayi hai* (I have taken many beatings),” he recalls. But he never asked for the sports portfolio. “There wasn’t the slightest idea on the horizon that I would become a minister,” he says.

So does he feel cricket gets undue attention and is he going to do something about it, I can’t help slipping in. “I was a rather good left arm bowler and like all Indians a bad fielder.” Clearly he’s also adept at verbal batting. The duty of the minister of sports, he expands, is to look for and promote sports that are good and suitable for the *aam admi* — games which are inexpensive and can be played on any ground and in any weather.

Football is one. All you need is a ball and two bricks to mark the goal, he says. “It’s a world game. It must be an India game,” he says and laments that nobody remembers Chuni Goswami and Jarnail Singh or India’s performance in the Melbourne Olympics.





Hockey is another. “Hockey is our spiritual game. *Hindustan ka dil iske saath juda hai* (India’s heart beats for hockey),” he says reeling off names of India’s hockey greats. “Even if we lose again and again for the next so many years, hockey will remain our premier game. We will fight to get a medal. But it doesn’t mean that if we don’t get a medal, it goes away.”

He wants to talk only about sports, and certainly not about his time in the Election Commission from 1993 to 2000 when he worked first as election commissioner with G.V.G. Krishnamurthy under the crusading T.N. Seshan, and later as Chief Election Commissioner. “It was a fascinating and amazing situation which happened to all three of us. Nobody, except the three of us, knows what really happened inside.” He will, he says, write about that period. “It is India’s constitutional history. I can’t write it now but I am duty bound to write it. It’ll be a shame if I don’t.”

It's time for me to leave. Next in line: a sports journalist to talk only about sports.

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