

Far from the beauty

BOOKMARK Former Chief Election Commissioner and Union Minister, Manohar Singh Gill, revisits Lahaul and Spiti valleys in book form

At a full-house Teen Murti auditorium, this was an usual affair – the launch of a book with some well known personalities attending it, speaking about it in the presence of the author. There was however, one difference. Here, the author of the book “Himalayan Wonderland – Travels in Lahaul and Spiti”, Manohar Singh Gill, better known to us as the former Chief Election Commissioner and Union Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs, looked a tad unhappy. He might have felt nice about people like Malvika Singh, publisher of Seminar magazine, asking him questions on the book, Vinod Mehta, the editor-in-chief, Outlook, recalling his association with Gill, Harish Kapadia, a distinguished Himalayan mountaineer, and Tshering Dorjee, Gill’s companion to the Himalayas, sharing the author’s love for the mountains and the glaciers, but when it came to Gill’s own speech, he poured his heart out.

Way back in 1962, Gill visited the Lahaul and Spiti valleys of Himachal Pradesh and spent a year there. He worked with local people, formed the Himalayan Club and also contributed to the development of the region as the president of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation for six years. Adventurous by temperament and a writer at heart, he “hurriedly” put down some notes on the places he visited and presented them to former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Impressed, she wrote a foreword to it and Viking published it as a book in 1971. Now, many years later, the book is now reprinted by Penguin with a foreword by Sonia Gandhi. It is a part memoir, part travelogue and part anthropology with some 40 pictures taken by the author, detailed contour maps on the trekking routes to these valleys.



THE HILLS AND THE LOSS From the launch PHOTO:S.SUBRAMANIAM

The book, however, is penned in a lighter vein. Says Gill, “I joined IAS in 1958 and was sent to the North for training. Travelling there was an uphill task with no facilities. I was so fascinated by its pure beauty and its people’s hospitality that I wrote about the places but when I now see the old book which is no longer available, I wonder since earlier visits as a lot has changed there. So, my new book is not just a reprint, it’s a rewriting as I have gone back and forth doing a comparative study. Those days, for instance, we could see the spectacular Shigri glacier flowing straight from Chandrabhaga river to Chenab. Now, 30 years later, this glacier has shrunk abysmally. Sikkim where I worked at 12,000 feet, had thick forests, orchids and birds. Now, they are all gone and a deserted road has replaced it.”

Expressing sadness

Revisiting the valleys over the years has made Gill unhappy and he doesn’t mince words. “Many times over, I have asked the administration to spare some money for the people working in tough

conditions there but I wasn’t heard. There are edifices like the spectacular Tabo monastery, I wrote to the administration to document it, they didn’t respond. Later, I saw a coffee table book on the same in Zurich by a German author. I thought, *chalo kisi ne to likha.*” Then he adds, “Those days, there were so many tigers and panthers in our forests that it was difficult to avoid them. The administration did nothing to save them.”

A visibly upset Gill also reasons why such beautiful Indian legacy isn’t taken care of. “In 1958, I wrote to the Government to post only those people in these places who love mountains, but to no avail. Till date, they send those who don’t want such postings and thus, we see a disinterest among the employed officers there. People in politics don’t take care of the beautiful places like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. It is sad but a reality that most IAS officers want postings from Chandigarh to Delhi to the World Bank.”

“Expecting little” still, Gill concludes saying, “I have done my job.”

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