

OBITUARY

Son of the soil: Manohar Singh Gill, former CEC (June 14, 1936 — October 15, 2023)

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Aditi Tandon

Among the last few Facebook posts from Manohar Singh Gill is a verse from Jalaluddin Rumi. "Half of life is lost in charming others. The other half is lost in going through anxieties caused by others. Leave this play, you have played enough," reads the message, which defines the way Gill lived life, on his own terms.

Known for taking independent positions on controversial issues, Gill, a Punjab cadre IAS officer who began serving in 1958, went on to assume prominent national roles — as Chief Election Commissioner who introduced electronic voting machines, a two-term Rajya Sabha Congress MP from Punjab, and a Union minister.

But no matter where he was or what he achieved, Gill's heart always beat for Punjab, more so for its farmers.

In 2016, when Delhi's ruling AAP government first began linking capital's smog to the farmers of Punjab and Haryana, Gill stood in latter's defence.

"They have no option but to set the nine-inch paddy stubble to fire before sowing the next crop. Cash-rich Delhi and the Central government should pay Punjab and Haryana farmers for technical solutions. Everyone should know these states were not paddy growers. They were forced to grow paddy 30 years ago to feed a deficient nation," Gill has said in 2016.

In 1985, when he became Development Commissioner, Punjab, after returning from the World Bank, Gill replicated the Saturday market concept of English towns as 'Apni Mandi' in Chandigarh. The idea spread across Punjab, Haryana and beyond, helping farmers sell produce directly to consumers, eliminating middlemen. "The worth of an idea is in its life after the man is gone," Gill would say. His book "An Indian Success Story – Agriculture and Cooperatives in the Punjab" chronicles his approaches to farming, a subject close to his heart.

For his acumen, Gill was a much valued bureaucrat. When he was Joint Secretary in the Union Agriculture Ministry, late Parkash Singh Badal asked him to be sent to Punjab and made him his first Principal Secretary in 1971.

Gill retired as Chief Election Commissioner in 2001 and later joined the Congress and came to the Rajya Sabha representing Punjab from 2004 to 2016. He was inducted as Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports in April 2008 and oversaw the conduct of the 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi. In July 2011, he resigned as minister.

Party affiliations apart, Gill was known to speak his mind. While the Congress was opposed to demands of clemency for former CM Beant Singh's assassin Balwant Singh Rajoana, Gill always called capital punishment barbaric and advocated its abolition. He favoured dialogue over judicial route as a solution to the festering SYL issue and lamented the loss of Punjab's riparian rights after the 1966 reorganisation.

One of the most significant stints of Gill as a bureaucrat was as the Lahaul and Spiti DC, when he fell in love with the hills.

Gill went on to author "Himalayan Wonderland: Travels in Lahaul and Spiti" and serve as president, Indian Mountaineering Foundation, and president, Himalayan Club.

His interest in the Himalayas was abiding. Mentally active till the end, Gill had retreated to his East Nizamuddin home in New Delhi to lead a rather private life after he retired from the Rajya Sabha in 2016. "There is so much to say about my father. In this difficult time, I will just mention his most beautiful eyes, deep compassion, purposeful optimism and his wish to always be of service to others," said Gauri Gill, his daughter.