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M.S. Gill rekindles his love affair with the Himalayas in a new book

By Sangeeth Sebastian

A MINISTER IN WONDERLAND

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IT MAY be anachronistic to see a bunch of Buddhist monks chanting away to glory at the launch of a book release. But Manohar Singh Gill's revived *Himalayan Wonderland*, *Travels in Lahaul and Spiti* could not have received a better opening.

The unconventional launch, in a way, also reflected Gill's affinity and love for the tradition and rituals of the region, which he himself expressed rather unambiguously during the event. "Religion sits lightly on me. But when I want something for myself, it is not *gurdwaras* or *mandirs* but the Lamas of Lahaul and Spiti that I look up to," explained Gill, who is also the minister of state for youth affairs and sports.

The 268-page-tome, published by Penguin and priced at Rs 599, is a mix of memoir and travel and traces the author's lifelong affair with the Himalayan region. Gill has been frequenting the Himalayas for the last 50 years.

First published in 1970, the book in its new avatar comes complete with a foreword by the Congress president Sonia Gandhi, and makes an illuminating account of a faraway land from the 1960s, when few knew about the place, to the modern world of receding glaciers and lost cultures. When first published, the book had carried a foreword by Indira Gandhi, which has been reproduced in the new volume.

"This is an entirely new book. A lot of extra work has gone into making this book happen. All my later visits to the region have been incorporated in this book," explained Gill, dismissing allegations that it is old wine in a new bottle.

Now with the years of accumulated experience in the region, Gill could not help but make some startling observations about the Himalayas to a wide-eyed audience. "The glaciers have shrunk. The forest and wild life have gone. The area used to have a high wild life population in terms of tigers and panthers, all that is gone."

So, is the administration doing enough to preserve the valuable treasure? asked Malavika Singh, publisher *Seminar*, a monthly journal chronicling social issues. She was moderating a panel discussion comprising senior journalist, Vinod Mehta, mountaineer and editor of *Himalayan Journal*, Harish Kapadia and Tshering Dorje, writer and Gill's companion on his expeditions.

"People who run Delhi do not show adequate interest in the corners of India like Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar islands," said Gill. There are a lot of places and sites in the Himalayan region that need to be preserved, he added.

That was a sentiment shared by Dorje too. While hinting on the region's potential to be developed as a destination for adventure sports, he said, "Lahaul is one of the most suitable areas for mountaineering in the country."



Describing Gill as a man for all seasons, Mehta, on a humorous vein, explained how the minister for sports and youth affairs stood out from the run-of-the-mill politicians in the country. "People who do not read books can become politicians, but they are unfit for higher office. Gill qualifies for the high office."

As a restless young IAS officer in the Punjab, belonging to the 1958 batch, Gill was trained in mountaineering for nearly six weeks under none other than Tenzing Norgay, one of the first two humans to scale the summit of Mount Everest along with Edmund Hillary in 1953. He was

also an avid reader of books on mountaineering.

"As a trainee IAS officer, I wrote to the Deputy Commissioner asking permission to visit the mountaineering institute headed by Norgay. He refused and nearly chagrined me for the request. That's when on a special request, the chief secretary of the State allowed me to go," recalled Gill.

The book is illustrated with more than 40 photographs taken by Gill and also features detailed contour maps and information on trekking routes in Lahaul and Spiti.

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Minister of state for sports M.S. Gill signs a copy of his book, *Himalayan Wonderland*, for Commonwealth Games vice-chairman Randhir Singh (right); Gill's companion in his sojourns, Tshering Dorje, looks on



Chief Election Commissioner Navin Chawla at the launch