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Liberal Opinion: Dr Manohar Singh Gill, A Doyen Of Punjab And Punjabiyyat

Prabhjot Singh
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He was a doyen of Punjab and Punjabiyat. Farmers and farming were very dear to his heart. It was he who conceptualized "Apni Mandi", a marketplace, where farmers could bring and sell their produce directly to the consumers thus eliminating the commission agents. Once introduced, it spread rapidly and neighboring State of Haryana and the Union Territory of Chandigarh, too, adopted it.

The man, Dr Manohar Singh Gill, a hardcore bureaucrat, lived 87 years of distinguished life, getting into prestigious Indian Administrative Service (IAS) at the age of 22. After superannuating from the elite central civil service, he was appointed Chief Election Commissioner. He was the pioneer of introducing Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) besides the first CEC to head a team of Election Commissioners.

Earlier in his career, he was Deputy Commissioner, Lahaul and Spiti, in undivided Punjab. It was here, he fell in love with the hills and mountaineering. He later served as Principal Secretary to the longest serving Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal and Development Commissioner, Punjab. He held several other important positions, both in Punjab and at the Centre.

It was not the end of his long-distinguished career. He joined Indian National Congress and served two terms as Member of Upper House of Parliament, Rajya Sabha. When India played host to the 2010 World Cup Hockey and the Commonwealth games in New Delhi the same year, he was then Union Minister for Youth Affairs and sports. It was his supervision that all stadia, including the historic Major Dhyani Chand National Hockey Stadium, were renovated in time for the two major sporting events held within a single calendar year.

Dr Manohar Singh Gill came from the Majha region of Punjab. His father, Colonel Partap Singh Gill (retd), was a great admirer of JP Narayan. And when the first non-Congress government was formed at the Centre under Morarji Desai, he was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Goa. After his stint in Goa, Colonel Gill came and settled in Chandigarh. It was he who thought of uniting hundreds and thousands of families separated by the 1947 partition. Since the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharief, originally belonged to Taran Tarn – Jatti Umrah was his native village – Colonel Gill floated Jatti Umrah Parivar Milap Trust. On getting in touch with Nawaz Sharief, he started working on families that had suffered the pangs of partition. On completion of 50 years of Independence. Colonel Gill, with all back up support from his elder son, Dr Manohar Singh Gill, took a delegation to Pakistan to reunite 20-odd families after an agonising and unending wait of 50-odd years. The delegation went as personal guests of Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharief.

Like his father, Punjab and Punjabiyat were very dear to Dr Manohar Singh Gill. Not only Apni Mandi, but he also initiated several schemes, both as a bureaucrat and later as a Rajya Sabha member for the welfare of farming community of Punjab. He played a stellar role in the development of Khadoor Sahib, a Sikh historic town in the Majha region. As a Union Sports Minister, he sanctioned a

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couple of synthetic hockey surfaces for the border belt as hockey remained a major sport in the region. His initiative helped young girls to take to competitive hockey well.

And not many would know that Baldev Singh, who rose to the fame by producing a record of women and men hockey Olympians from a sleepy town of Shahabad Markanda on the Amritsar-Kolkata National Grand Trunk Road, was chosen for the prestigious Dronacharya award even without his applying for it. Dr Gill told Baldev Singh that he had been following his work and was highly impressed. Baldev Singh still recalls his meetings with Dr Gill saying that he would not have applied or got the award but for Dr Gill.

Dr Gill was so attached to anything that was close to the hearts of Punjabis. When Punjab decided to organise World Cup Kabaddi championships, he did not like the new rules. "There is no Kabaddi until the raider keeps chanting kabaddi, kabaddi till the break of his breath," lamented Dr Gill as the game does not require "kabaddi, Kabaddi" chants anymore.

He was a vociferous supporter of solving Punjab problems, including Rivers Water dispute through a dialogue or negotiations than taking the matter for legal adjudication. He vehemently criticized the reorganisation of Punjab as he felt many speaking areas were left out of the 1966 partitioning of Punjab.

He was a scholar as he used to read and write a lot. Many while praising his uprightness and initiative in promoting Punjab and Punjabiya thought he was too strong and outspoken and lived to the adage "while getting things done, I do not listen to anyone". And this applied to his political career also. He would speak out his mind even if his comments were contrary to the party line on sensitive policy matters. But that was the way Dr Manohar Singh Gill was.

years with The Tribune Group, covering a wide spectrum of subjects and stories. He has covered Punjab and Sikh affairs for more than three decades besides covering seven Olympics and several major sporting events and hosting TV shows.)



Prabhjot Singh

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