

MUSINGS An officer and a mentor

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Manohar Singh Gill. PTI file

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As Deputy Commissioner, Manohar Singh Gill was my first superior. The short training period of a few months 'spoiled' us — three fresh IAS officers who were placed in his care in Ambala, then a district of Punjab. I use the word 'spoil' as he regarded himself not as our boss but a friend, philosopher and guide. An ancient Greek epic narrates that when Odysseus was fighting the Trojan War, it was his friend Mentor who tutored his son Telemachus. Like that ideal teacher, MS Gill took us under his wing, entrusting us with significant duties in the office and the field; within weeks, we were regarded as 'chhote DCs' or Deputy Commissioners in the making. He toughened us up too, assigning work such as providing relief in flooded villages, which required us to strip to our underwear to reach marooned people. On one occasion, he asked me to deputise for him at a public function, where I stumbled to speak in the local dialect. He subtly loaded us with work (we were then aged between 23 and 25). At home, his charming wife Vinnie would make us feel at home, gently castigating us for not accepting her invitation to stay with the Gills. My time with Gill was fun on the job. It was his method of imparting practical learning, now a dying service tradition. He was for me an imposing personality; he wore no turban then, a tall, strapping young man who spoke the local dialect. I recall that my uncle (with whom I was staying in Ambala), then divisional commissioner and thus Gill's immediate superior, envied the visible authority that his junior commanded. Manohar lived up to the meaning of his name — one who wins hearts and minds.

Not many are aware that Gill had conducted an unusual study, backed by hard economic data, which he shared with me. At the time of Independence, the portion of the original Punjab that fell in Pakistan was much more prosperous than that which was in India. Thanks to the country's model of democracy, the Indian Punjab marched far ahead.

Gill rose to become a Secretary in the Government of India, then the Chief Election Commissioner, a two-time Member of Parliament and also a Union minister. These distinctions weighed lightly on him; he allowed me to approach him at any time as the youngster he had trained decades earlier. Gill often displayed remarkable ready wit and repartee among his seniors and juniors alike. On one occasion, a colleague remarked in jest that there might be something in the diet of officers in Punjab that their progeny were mainly daughters. Gill added: 'Our daughters are our strength!' Such banter among civil servants is rare today. It is also a style of mentoring the younger members in a fraternity!