

Manohar Singh Gill

Switching on in Delhi after a 23 hour journey from a county HQ in Hebei province in China, via Beijing and Hong Kong, I discovered that MS Gill had died that same day. I felt very hollow but also fortunate to be close by. He and Vinnie were our first friends in India and our children are named after theirs. So this tribute is a personal one.

B.H. Farmer, the founding director of Cambridge's Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS), who appreciated his many qualities, had given us the Gills' address before we set out in July 1969 in an old Ford van to drive from Cambridge to mountaineer in the Kishtwar Himalaya. Hardly stopping from the Khyber Pass through Pakistan Punjab, the Wagah border crossing and down the tamarind-lined GT road past overflowing wheat markets, we found the address in Chandigarh. I remember that we tumbled out of the van, dusty and dishevelled, a bit sticky from mangos, in jeans and shirts which needed washing. Into a cocktail party with IAS officers, their chic wives and the editor of the Tribune.

If Manohar and Vinnie had felt like batting an eyelid, they did not show it and they welcomed us as they would do properly attired old friends. Manohar was fascinated by wild places, saw our expedition as a form of sport and quizzed us enthusiastically about our plans. A mountaineer himself, he had already compiled folk tales and myths and cut his teeth as a travel writer from his time as DC in Lahaul and Spiti. As a high-flying IAS officer in Punjab cadre, if my memory serves me rightly, he had also played a role in organising India's Olympic participation. There was also much common interest in the Green Revolution, then taking off in an exciting way even if he was concerned that farmers were spending the new money not on tractors but on liquor, and even if he would not have been surprised if the Green Revolution had turned Red.

In 1974-5, he and Vinnie spent a year at the CSAS in Cambridge, with Manohar making a pioneering comparative study of the Green Revolutions on either side of the frontier which you could only do outside India and Pakistan. He published academic papers. Fast forward a few more years, as director of the National Co-operative Development Corporation, he saw that my humble field-work on post-harvest technology, which most people thought was nerdy, had implications for his co-operatives. Asking me to write a short report, he distributed it among his field officers asking them to report back. Most said that, yes indeed, the new mills were costly white elephants – over capitalised, less efficient than small mills in engineering terms, and labour displacing. It was still an era when labour-intensive growth mattered or at least was paid lip service to. Manohar stalled the programme, only advocating 'modern' rice mills later when the stream of paddy to market was appropriate. Thanks to him, it became practically useful work.

Soon after that, Manohar spent time working for the World Bank on a West African agricultural development project far up country in Sokoto, on the border between northern Nigeria and Niger. Many people are seduced into careers in IBRD headquarters in Washington after tests like that, but not Manohar. He returned to India and quietly wrote a PhD on co-operatives in Punjab which was subsequently published as a book. Then came the Election Commission period between 1996-2001. As Chief Election Commissioner, he is famed for introducing electronic voting and also for entering politics later. But I remember thoughtful conversations about loneliness at the very top of the greasy pole. How late at night he would visit K. R. Narayanan, the then President, to discuss matters of high moment which neither man felt able to talk about to anyone else.

And so to Congress politics in retirement from the IAS. From 2004-2016 he served in the Rajya Sabha. In 2008 he became minister for youth and sports knowing he would face an almost impossible deadline to deliver the Commonwealth Games, which somehow he did and which provided him with rich ethnographies of the tribulations of public-private 'partnerships'. With a strong sense of irony as well as duty, never afraid to be outspoken, he used his years in the Rajya Sabha to stand up whenever possible for India's constitutional values of democracy, secularism and socialism - and for Punjab.

Administrator, researcher and writer, politician, intellectual... Most endearing was his pride in the achievements of his wife Vinnie in her art – as in her unstinting support- and of their three gifted feminist daughters: Natasha in finance, Gauri in photography and Kaveri in public policy.

Everyone has to die but Manohar will live on in our lives, made richer by the good fortune of our contact with him.

- Prof Barbara Harriss-White, FAcSS,
Emeritus Fellow, Wolfson College