

# INDIAN MOUNTAINEER

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**FIRST ASCENTS - TSANGYANG GYATSO - MERAK**  
**ALL-WOMEN CLIMBATHON - BARA SHIGRI**  
**PAPSURA - SNOWBOARD DESCENT**  
**EXPLORING THANGMAN LUNGPA - SWARGAROHINI**

## DR. MANOHAR SINGH GILL (1935 – 2023)

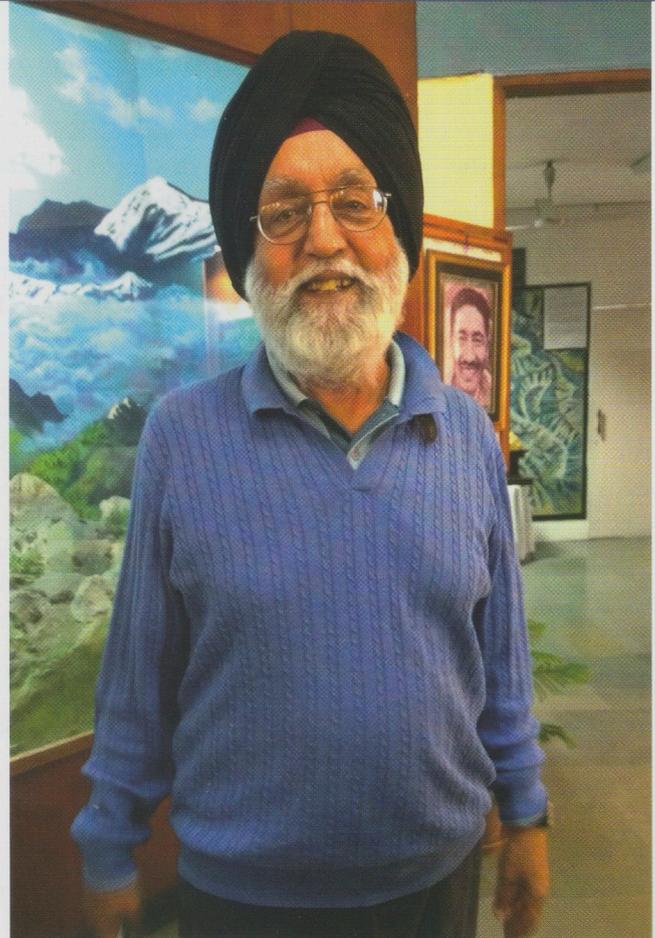
**W**idely admired, fiercely principled, a towering and an outspoken figure, Dr. Manohar Singh Gill, in his lifetime, wore many hats. He was a bureaucrat, a politician, and was, at varying times, the Chief Election Commissioner of India, Sports Minister in the Government of India, President of two major mountaineering associations in India, and a devoted family man with friends from all walks of life.

Manohar Singh Gill attended St. George's school in Mussoorie, India, from 1947 to 1953. He graduated in History and Political Science with Honours in English Literature and earned his Masters degree in English Literature from Government College, Ludhiana, and subsequently a Doctorate in Development Studies from Punjab University in 1958.

With a brilliant academic career, Gill joined the Indian Administrative Service in the Punjab cadre, and served in different capacities in Punjab before and after its trifurcation in 1966, which steered the formation of Haryana State, and Union territory of Chandigarh, and also led to transfer of territory from Punjab to Himachal Pradesh.

Gill served as Deputy Commissioner of the Lahaul-Spiti district—now in Himachal Pradesh—in 1961/62, a remote district at the time. He toured many places in Spiti in the course of his duty, and fell in life-long love with the area. He wrote extensively about how they managed the district, especially in snow-bound conditions. His published books include *Himalayan Wonderland: Travels in Lahaul and Spiti*, (republished in 2010) and *Tales from the Hills*, (republished in 2014). He lobbied for years to have the Rohtang tunnel built in order to benefit the people of the area.

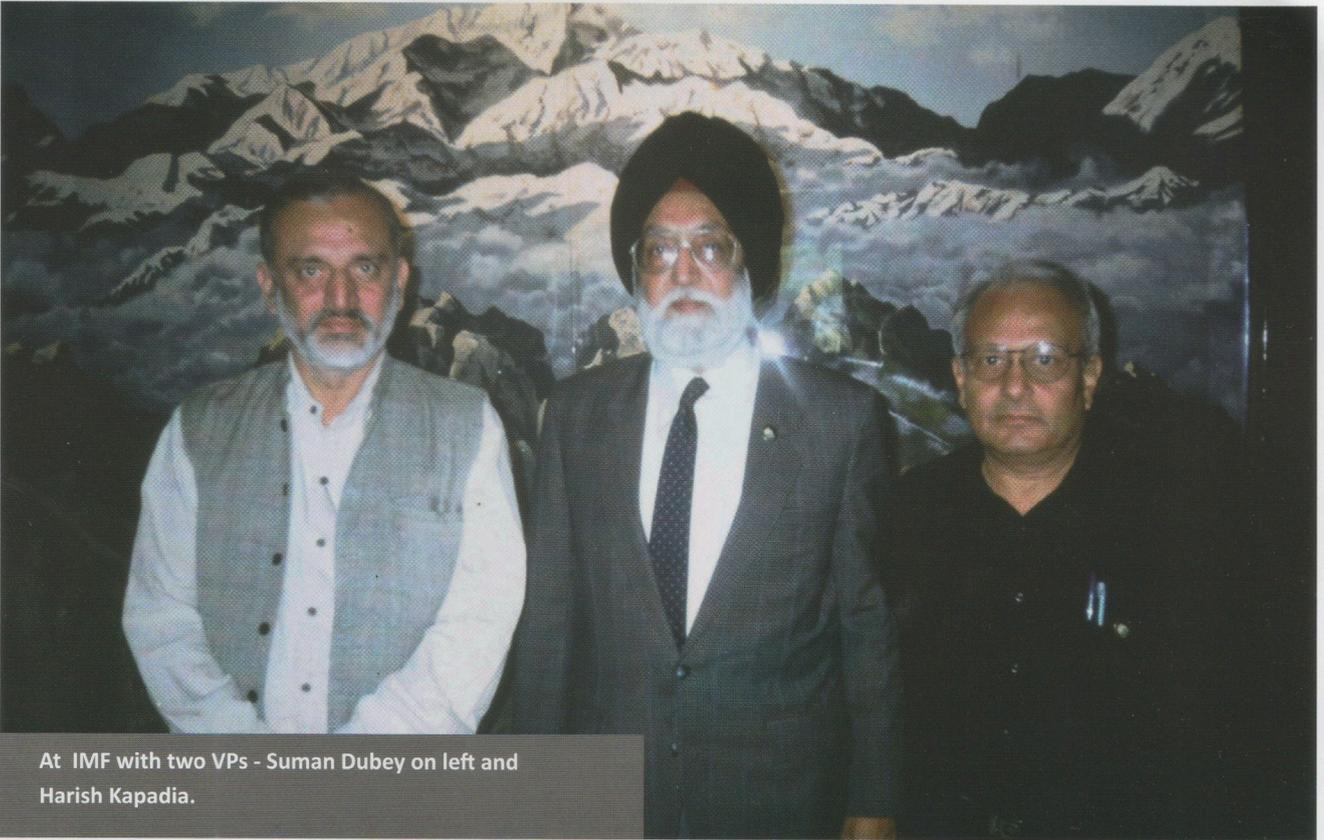
He was a brilliant raconteur and once shared with me a particularly amusing incident. During the 1965 India-Pakistan war, Gill was serving as the Deputy Commissioner of the Ambala and Jalandhar districts—an area that bore the brunt of the conflict. He was an avid golfer and played daily with the local army commander. When war broke out, the commander briefly stopped visiting the course, but after a couple of days, he resumed his rounds, jokingly remarking, "Kya kare, kartoos hi khatam ho gayi!" ("What to do,



the ammunition is finished!"). With this, Dr. Gill and the army commander sat down with maps and began to jokingly plan a campaign to conquer golf courses all the way from Punjab to Lahore, and even beyond to the Durand Line, on the Afghan border!

In 1967, Dr. Gill went to Cambridge University for a Masters in Development Studies; he was subsequently invited there on a Nuffield fellowship to write his book, *An Indian Success Story: Agriculture and Cooperatives in the Punjab*, (1993). Later, he served as the Development Commissioner of Punjab, as Secretary to the Government of India in the Ministries of Agriculture, and Petrochemicals, Chemicals and Pharmaceuticals. He often travelled abroad to deliver lectures on diverse subjects at universities in UK and USA.

Gill was appointed to the Election Commission of India with the unenviable task of steering complicated



At IMF with two VPs - Suman Dubey on left and Harish Kapadia.

issues, and was made the Chief Election Commissioner, a tenure that lasted from 1996 to 2001. He took a central role in the successful introduction of Electronic Voting Machines in 1998. He de-franchised a leading politician once, exemplifying his strict adherence to rules of democracy and the courage to do so. He was awarded the Padma Vibhushan in 2000, the second highest civilian award, for his work as Chief Election Commissioner.

In 2004, Dr. Gill was inducted into the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of Indian Parliament, for two successive terms from Punjab. He was the Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports from 2008 until 2012 and helped facilitate the Commonwealth Games held in New Delhi in 2010.

With such a notable political career it is surprising that he continued with his abiding interest in the outdoors, especially the mountains. His love for the mountains manifested in different ways. He took a training course under Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, the man who made the first ascent of Everest in 1953. Dr. Gill also used to talk with pride of meeting Sir Edmund Hillary. He would often joke that this was the closest he came to Everest summit — twice! He remained friends with the Hillary family to the last.

As President of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, New Delhi (from 1993-1999) Dr. Gill took up the assignment with great enthusiasm. He organised the first ever computer training for the staff, ordered latest mountain climbing equipment from Korea, arranged for waiver of import duty on these sports goods - and became the driving force behind the creation of the new face of Indian mountaineering. Indian climbers now had access to the best equipment in the world at affordable prices.

Gill was responsible for organising what we later jokingly called the "Owners and Users" conference, wherein he invited and hosted Presidents of all Himalayan mountain associations from countries like China, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan, and also members of The International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation (UIAA) and other climbing associations from the UK, Europe, Japan and USA to voice and discuss the difficulties they faced during their Himalayan climbing experience. UIAA wanted a variety of concessions such as lower Peak fees, free Visas etc. Dr. Gill's response was firm and clear: "We will extend facilities to the degree possible, but our Government cannot grant all the demands. These mountain ranges are in our countries and you are

welcome to use them but within our regulations.”

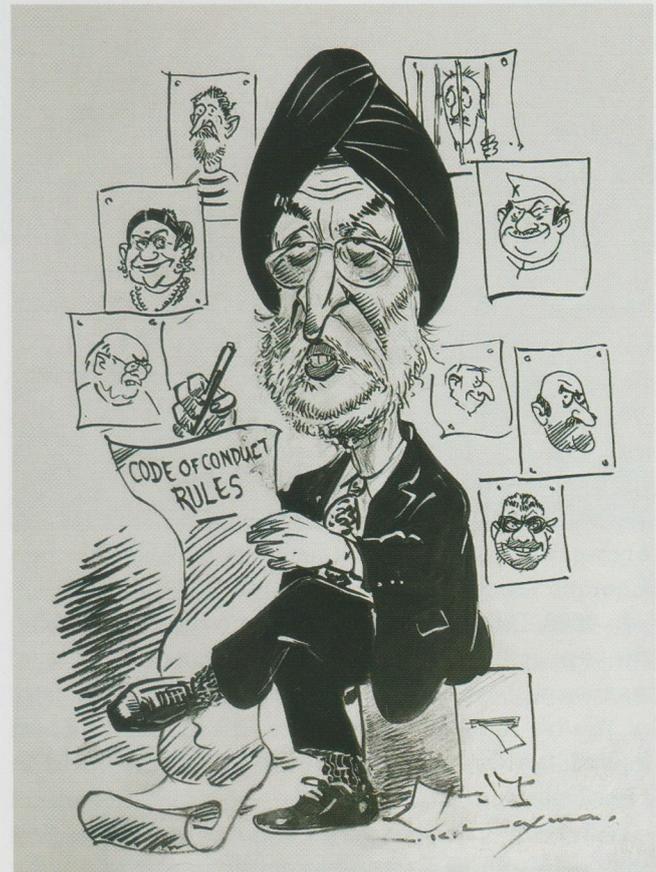
Dr. Gill used his vast administrative experience in conducting meetings and handling challenges with great diplomacy and humour. He even got Pakistan, China and India to agree on several issues!

After six years at the helm of IMF, Gill was elected President of the Himalayan Club (HC) for six years (2000 to 2005; he continued as President Emeritus from 2013). Thus he had the distinction of heading the two major mountaineering institutions of India. Taking over the Himalayan Club with his usual vigour, he organised a Sherpa gathering to which the three surviving Tiger Sherpas were invited and feted in Mumbai. For the 80th year celebration of the Himalayan Club, Gill organised a meeting with the Prime Minister of India and the Army Chief of India at their residence and office respectively.

Dr. Gill played a pivotal role in getting Himalayan Club its permanent home in Mumbai. The club had operated from rented office spaces all along, with frequent change of locations. Dr. Gill not only got several industrialists in Mumbai to donate funds to the HC, but also tactfully convinced the Chief Minister of Maharashtra State, narrating to him the historic significance of the club and its association with Mumbai, to grant the Himalayan Club a lovely office in a prime locality in Mumbai. Dr. Gill proudly inaugurated the office with its large library of books and maps, a museum and a conference room. The Himalayan Club owes this to Dr. Gill.

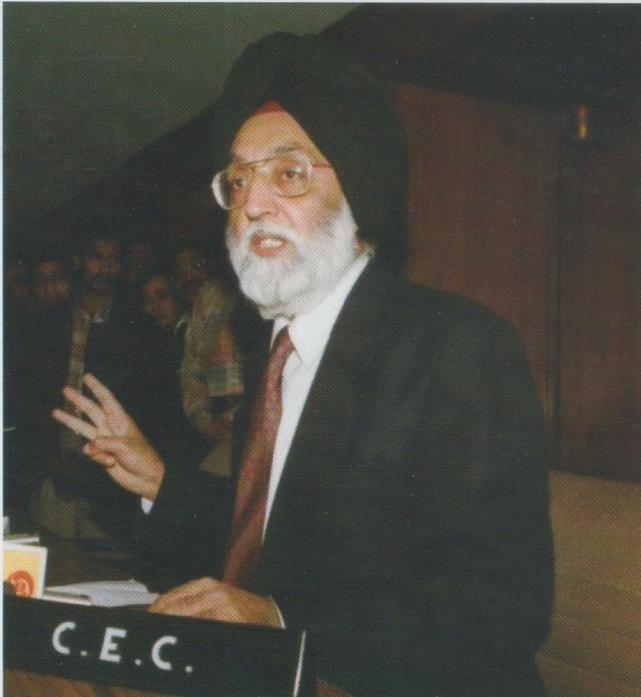
Mountaineering expeditions transiting through Delhi were well acquainted with his generous hospitality. Expedition members were invited to his home where his wife Mrs. Vinnie Gill played a gracious hostess. He would proudly show the different trees in his garden and at times delve into the history of Delhi. I was able to record some such moments of his life as an “Oral History”. (You Tube link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COfojQweMPo>)

A devoted family man, Dr. Gill took great pride in his daughters’ successes and cherished his time with them. The eldest, Natasha, is a Managing Director at a renowned Swiss reinsurance company. The second daughter, Kaveri, an economist trained at Cambridge University, has taught at Shiv Nadar University and is now a Buddhist nun, having been ordained by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. The youngest, Gauri, is a celebrated photographer whose work has been showcased in museums across Europe, London, New York, and Canada. In 2023, she won the prestigious



10th Prix Pictet Award. “Families are like branches of a tree,” he would often say, “growing in different directions, yet their roots remain as one.”

He spent many holidays in Switzerland with his daughter Natasha and her family. “He loved the woods around our house - the rolling hills and the walk up the Swiss war memorial. With his sheer grit



Dr Gill as Chief Election Commissioner of India.

and will power he'd persevere to walk around the Klonthalensee, despite a bad back and use of a cane. He loved the view of the Eiger, Monch and Jungfrau on a clear day from the house, quoting bits from Eiger dreams!" Natasha reminisced.

I had observed Dr. Gill's simplicity on several occasions. One such memorable occasion was a train trip to Goa with him. During the journey, we got off at a few stations, where the train halted, for a cup of tea. People at the platform, noticing him, seemed to wonder if he was truly "the" Dr. Gill, the Chief Election Commissioner. With his characteristic humour, he would smile and say, "Yes, my friends, I am Dr. Gill. Come, let's shake hands—I won't bite!"

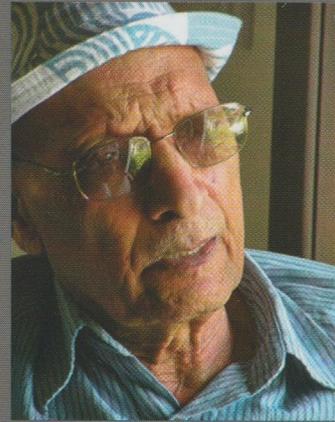
What I truly enjoyed about Dr. Gill's company was his great sense of humour, and his many anecdotes, several in rustic Punjabi mixed with Hindi. He expressed what he felt, naturally and bluntly, but he also forgave easily and fully. "Every Saint has a Past, Every Sinner a Future" so don't keep a grudge, Mitti Pao (pour mud on it)."

After retirement he settled in Delhi, where we would often meet and converse, enjoying the warmth of the winter sun on the terrace of his home. He left in good health, his mind at peace — a man content with both his life and his family. He was 88.

- Harish Kapadia

## GURDIAL SINGH (1924-2023)

THE FIRST TRUE INDIAN MOUNTAINEER



### Correction

The 2023 issue of Indian Mountaineer published an incorrect photograph in the obituary of Late Mr Gurdial Singh. The image that appeared was mistakenly used. We sincerely apologize for this error and any confusion it may have caused.