

A Swiss aid project

by MANOHAR SINGH GILL

I had taken an Air India flight from Heathrow for Delhi. The Jumbo jet was packed with Punjabis looking forward to a home holiday, and an assortment of Westerners eager to savour the excitement of the East. The Jumbo is like a vast class III carriage of an Indian train. The scene was made more familiar by the wailing of children and the sniffing into their sarees of women going home alone.

My seat was at the back of the plane. I settled in and looked around. A European face — not English — smiled at me from the seat on the left. He was Swiss and member of a group of 30 odd people. They had the shining good looks and the fervour of the Moral Rearmament folk. We chatted for a while, and then I took to my book.

As the plane crossed the English Channel people called for drinks and began to prepare for dinner. Across the aisle from me sat a man whose loud check trousers proclaimed an American, but his brown face an Indian. He seemed to be looking around for acquaintance and smiled in my

direction. I gave him a non-committal nod. After a while he opened a bottle of Scotch, and began to press it on his neighbour, who was only too happy to oblige. He then leaned across and offered a drink to the European sitting near him, who declined. After a while he came across and introduced himself:

"I am Santa Singh from Vancouver, going on a visit to my home in Ropar," he explained. I asked him the usual questions about the lumber lands of Canada and the doings of the Sikhs there. He pressed a drink on me, then another and yet another.

REAL MOTIVE

I was a little mystified at his generosity. The man had the peasant's inherent shrewdness, and I could sense that there was perhaps a purpose behind the hospitality. I waited. After a while he came to the point:

"Bhaji, could you carry a bottle of Scotch for me through the Customs?" he asked.

I expressed my helplessness since I was already carrying

the one bottle that is allowed free. He would not give up and thought a way out could be found. Having consumed his Scotch, I felt obliged to help. There was a man on the plane, the brother of a holy man from Punjab, and I foolishly went and asked him if he would carry a bottle. He had no objection except one: how would he explain this to the holy man who was going to receive him at Palam?

TIMELY HELP

I gave up, but Santa Singh did not. He kept on badgering me. Then an idea struck me. I turned to the Swiss on my left and explained. Would they help? I asked. The man was amused at Santa Singh's predicament, and thought it a right occasion to do his good deed for the day. He consulted his friends and said yes. I introduced him to Santa Singh. They shook hands and smiled. Neither knew much English, but I knew they would manage. After that I went to sleep.

I woke up just in time for the early morning landing at

Delhi. I had forgotten all about Santa Singh as we shuffled into the Customs area. I spied him standing with the large group of Swiss. He waved back from the Customs counter they were at. I cleared my bags and came out into the chill morning air of Palam. I was settling into my car when, to my surprise, I found the Swiss trooping out under the watchful eye of Santa Singh.

As he stepped out Santa Singh was hugged, bear-like, by a burly Sikh whom he introduced as his brother Banta Singh. The brothers then smartly shepherded the docile Swiss to a Taxi into the boot of which each one of them dropped a bottle of Scotch. Soon it was full to the top. Brother Banta Singh slammed the lid shut.

Santa Singh shook hands with the Swiss men, and kissed a gentle goodbye to the women, and then the brothers were off to Ropar in a grind of gears and the screeching of tyres. How I longed to be with them that evening in a village somewhere by the bank of the Sutlej.