

A PUNJABI TAMILIAN

by MANOHAR SINGH GILL

In a country obsessed with the activities of politicians, big and small, the death of a bureaucrat in distant Madras should be a matter of no importance to the people of Punjab. Yet Jeet Singh Bhangoo, former Transport Commissioner to the Government of Tamil Nadu, deserves notice, howsoever briefly and fleetingly, by his countrymen.

Born of simple peasant stock in the district of Bhatinda, Bhangoo was a self-made man. Selected for the Indian Administrative Service, he was allotted to Tamil Nadu in 1957. I first met him at the railway station of Madurai at the unearthly hour of 2 a.m. in the winter of 1958 when I had gone on a tour of the South as an I.A.S. probationer.

He and another Punjabi boy had come to the railway station just to have the pleasure of meeting fellow-Punjabis from the North. I guess these boys were lonely. The banging on the compartment door woke us up, and we tumbled out into the garish light of the railway station to be engulfed in a warm, bear-like hug by Jeet Bhangoo.

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Punjabis in Tamil Nadu services were then rare, and rarer still were turbaned Sikhs. Jeet was one of the first. Once allotted to Tamil Nadu, he made that State his home, and never looked back to far-away Punjab. He learnt Tamil till even masters of that language, such as Mr Kamaraj, Mr Annadurai, Mr Karunanidhi and Mr M. G. Ramachandran, were moved to admiration. He could lecture a crowd with the fluency of the best of them.

When Mr Karunanidhi came to Punjab during the time of Mr Gurnam Singh, Jeet was his interpreter. His command of and affection for the Tamil language earned him the respect and love of all Tamilians.

He went further. He took to their food, and even to wearing their dhotis their own way on suitable occasions. If this country is to hold together, then its diverse people must understand and develop an affection for the culture and ways of others. Jeet did pre-

cisely that. So passionately did he immerse himself in the ways of the Tamilians that he spent all 22 years of his brief career in Madras.

I.A.S. officers, particularly Punjabis, posted far away from home are ever anxious to come to the Government of India. Some even try for cadre changes. Jeet spurned such thoughts. In the best traditions of the old British civil servants in India, having been sent to Tamil Nadu, Bhangoo made it his home and gave it all his affection. His concern for the Tamilians and theirs for him is the sort of stuff on which the unity of India ought to be fashioned.

He was recognised as one of the best officers of the Tamil Nadu cadre. After working as Deputy Commissioner of two major districts he spent a lot of time in municipal administration. The citizens of Madurai still remember his work as Corporation Commissioner. His last job was as Transport Commissioner, and the reputation for efficiency and clean service of the Tamil Nadu Transport Undertaking is in no small measure due to Bhangoo's dedicated efforts.

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Bhangoo was known widely in the four Southern States because of his reputation as a civil servant and Tamilian. If the Punjabis, and Sikhs in particular, are spoken of well in the remote parts of Tamil Nadu, it is because of the example of dedicated service set by Jeet Singh Bhangoo.

I am told that on Tuesday half of Madras, including the Chief Minister, Cabinet Ministers, civil servants and a wide cross-section of local citizens, came to the airport to bid final farewell to Jeet Bhangoo. The Government of Madras sent six senior officers to Chandigarh as a mark of the State Government's respect for this remarkable man.

As Punjabis we can take legitimate pride in the record of service of such a man who, by his performance in Tamil Nadu, has added a little bit to the stature of each one of us. The country needs such men of broad vision and sympathies.