

Impresario with a cast of millions

Manohar Singh Gill, charged with running India's third election in three years, talks to Khozem Merchant

The India International Centre in New Delhi is a political icon adored by the city's "chaterati". Its dining area is stuffed with bureaucrats, the intelligentsia, and more economists than is good for the place (apparently because they quibble over the bill).

It was conceived in the 1960s by a former Indian president who believed the city needed a think-tank. Today the centre feels more like a western university campus, which seems apt as that is where the founder and many IIC members were educated before they returned to govern India.

Manohar Singh Gill is just such an Indian. A Cambridge-educated civil servant, Gill is chief election commissioner. His job is to run fair and free elections. Next month, 650m people may vote in India's third national election in three years. An army of 4m officials will watch over the voting at 800,000 polling stations. This year their task will be eased by the use of computerised voting. It marks a departure from cardboard boxes and string, ink and sealing wax.

"These people are the real heroes of Indian democracy — they will see to it that there is not one failure at a single station or this and that," says Gill, with a gentle twisting flourish of the hand. Many of Gill's sentences end with this flourish of the hand and the curiously Indian sing-along suffix "this and that". It can mean anything.

This will be his third election as CEC and he regards it as the most important. "The political stakes have never been higher. Kashmir was a concern but our democracy is stable and can withstand this. Of course, there are problems, but I fight these. I remain childishly optimistic. It's easy to talk of perfect democracy

when your per capita income is \$20,000. Try doing it on \$300. We've done it for one-fifth of mankind. We will do this one also."

As CEC, Gill has huge powers. In the interregnum between the dissolution of one parliament and the convening of the next, he is arguably the most powerful man in the country.

Gill can rap the caretaker government by intervening in public policy. He has banned candidates, such as Bal Thackeray, the Hindu rabble-rouser (and admirer of the 19th century English writer whose name he adopted); and, of course, he has stopped crass vote-rigging, such as a chief minister's bid to win over villagers by giving away free gas cylinders.

The waiter arrived but, like the Indian electorate, we were still undecided. I was distracted by the use of the word "starters" on the menu. I recalled the novel *The Last Burden* by Upamanyu Chatterjee, in which a character says that a *desi* (ordinary) Indian would "not fathom the phrase *hors d'oeuvres* unless pronounced as whores dee overs".

We chose the set meal of tomato soup, baked fish, potatoes and peas, followed by ice-cream, and a beer for me but not for him. It was bland, not even offering the opportunity for chutney.

Gill's more difficult recent choice was selecting a date for the election. May to September is wet (the monsoon months). July and August are hot (44°C). September, the latest a poll could be held before the new parliament must convene in October, is, in any case, full of festivals: *Durga Puja* in the east, *Ganesh Chaturti* in the west and *Janmashanti* everywhere else.

"I told one politician from Calcutta: 'Why are you always cele-

brating festivals? You shut down the roads and build bamboo palaces better than Buckingham Palace. How can Marxism ever help you when you are forever doing this and that? Do some work."

Gill is a voluble speaker, unlikely to hold back a tale for a plate of baked fish getting colder by the anecdote. He is famously accessible, at home picking up the telephone himself and startling the caller who had expected a servant to answer.

His daughter tells of how villagers fax their grievances directly to the Gill household, alleging: "Sir, I have been offered

many free teas by a politician, and have seen the same politician proceeding into the house of a businessman." Gill says he always responds.

"I went to my village in Amrit-

During the interregnum between parliaments, Gill has been arguably the most powerful man in India

sar where nobody lives now, and from this village I link to every village in India. Because India is out there... a larger India which can't be ignored. And we have not served them enough. Above

all they look... to the rule of law and institutions like the CEC. India's strength is its institutions; they are the pillars of the system."

Intermingled in Gill's emo-

had his tongue in his cheek.

"I'm a Humphrey," he adds, a reference to the civil servant in the BBC's *Yes, Minister*, a comedy about a mischievously punctilious bureaucrat and an accident-prone British cabinet minister. Of course, it is a mirror of the Indian counterpart but that does not stop Indian bureaucrats bursting into bellyaches of laughter.

But is there more Gill's claim to Englishness, even if it is now mostly used as a cultural and social metaphor? He is a passionate public servant and cherishes the values bequeathed by the former British administrators

which, he says, help sustain Indian democracy.

"I went to Bihar [a byword for lawlessness] at the last election. I collected some deputy commissioners. I thought, what am I going to say to them? They know that I can't protect them. After the election some chief minister or somebody can murder them. You know... it was only to touch them in their idealism. I told them: 'Gentlemen, I've looked at you and I'm satisfied that the election will go well. I'll tell you why. You're all aged 35-40. I believe even in India idealism doesn't die that fast.'"

This idealism has found its greatest fulfilment not in Gill's present job but in the post of development commissioner of Punjab which he held in the mid-1980s, when the state was ruled directly by Delhi during a terrorist campaign for a separate Sikh homeland. Gill, a Sikh, is an agricultural man. His PhD at Cambridge was on farming in Punjab, today the granary of India.

"In Punjab, I became chairman of many things. Instead of nepotism and politics and this and that, I was sole boss. I brought in agriculture graduates. The poor sods were waiting to get the jobs

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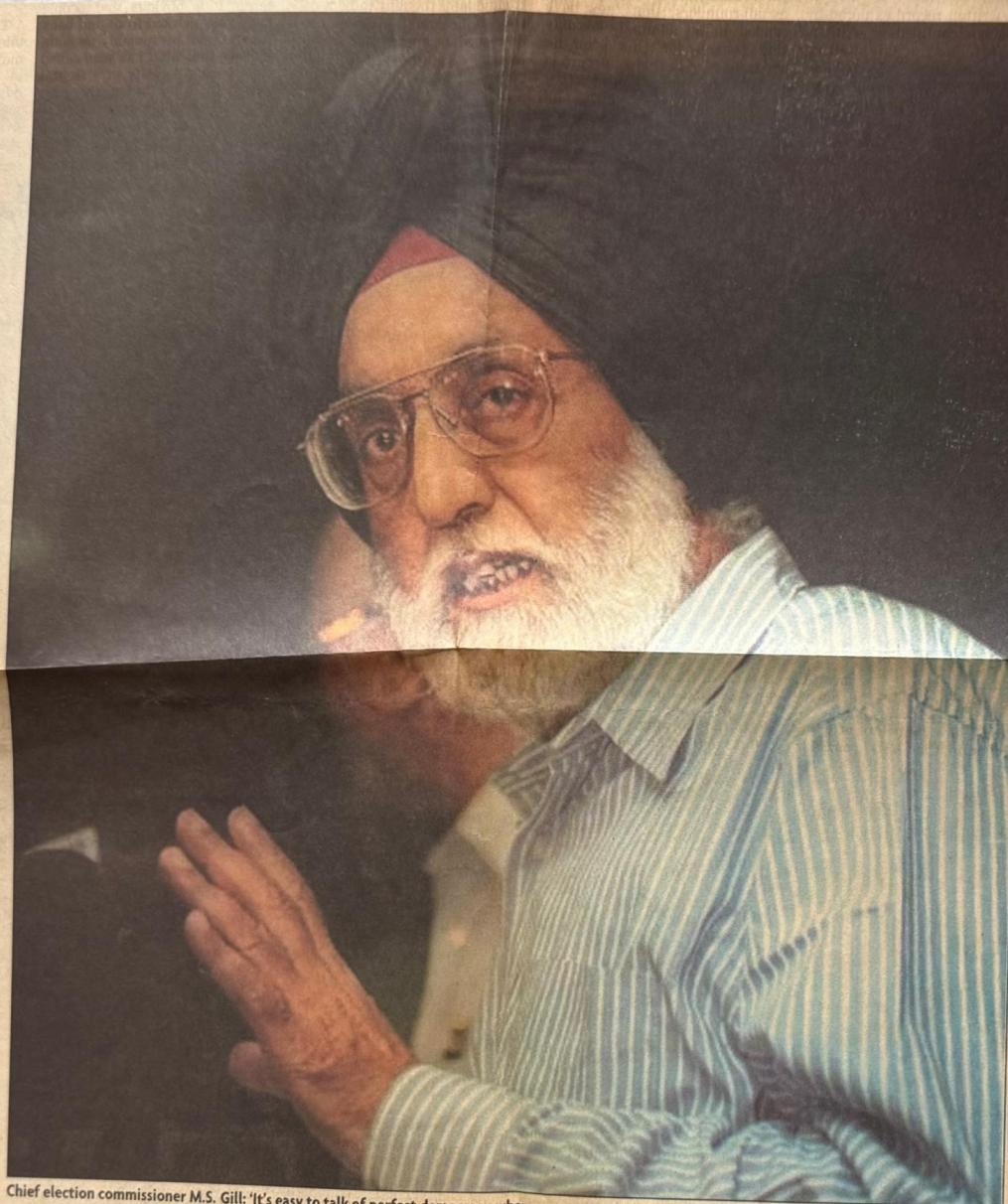
and nobody ever gives it to them. Suddenly I pushed dozens of them in as marketing heads."

His enduring achievement in his beloved Punjab was a road-building programme. With the 30,000km of new roads came factories and jobs. "I was given an opportunity to go out and do what I could and I believe I did." Gill caught the eye of Delhi and, though he rose swiftly, he boasts that he remains "the development minister of Punjab. You can't take that away from me".

The bill came and I privately wagered the cost of the lunch — a quibble-free Rs1,053 (£14.90) — that the election would be indecisive. Gill kept his counsel and instead reminded me of the historic dining room in which we were seated.

"The IIC is an important constituency. Like the north [which produced prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru]; the south [P.V. Narasimha Rao]; the west [H.D. Deve Gowda], the IIC had also produced a PM," he said. I.K. Gujral was a distinguished IIC member and a loquacious pillar of the "chaterati". He rose from his lunch table to become prime minister in 1997 and was the author of the famously vacuous *Gujral Doctrine* on India's foreign policy.

Apparently it was cooked up over pea soup and pie at the next table.



Aurabh Das