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The Rediff Election Interview/ Dr Manohar Singh Gill

'Out of the 1 billion Indians and 600 million voters, you can't find 543 good people? Are you joking?'



There are no threats, nor any muscle flexing. But plain talk.

*And when Chief Election Commissioner **Dr Manohar Singh Gill** says he would sack all the senior civil servants found guilty of abuse of power during elections, he means business.*

M S Gill



He is forceful when he shares his views on what form of governance suits the country best. Having a deep faith in the Parliamentary system and a great respect for the Indian voter, Dr Gill is against the Presidential system.

*In a freewheeling interview with **Rajesh Ramachandran**, Dr Gill shares his style of functioning which runs contrary to that of one of his predecessors. He talks about the laughs he shared with T N Seshan, the controversial former CEC. And is nostalgic of the only election he fought and lost.*

Would not the State funding of elections completely change the political ethos of the country?

It is not something to be seriously thought of and discussed in the middle of an election. Because these are ideas of reform and change which can only be taken up by the new Lok Sabha.

Then all of us can discuss these issues. And if there is a way of doing these to some extent, by all means they have to be looked at.

But one has to be careful and one has to give the proposal a deep thought before giving cash to parties. Because you read critical media reports on development money disappearing into thin air. So if you give to a party a certain sum, you will start asking it where the jeeps have gone; where the money has gone... In other words, everybody should think coolly as to how

it should be done if it has to be done.

But you might have noticed that the Election Commission has done a historic funding of parties -- indirect funding. Doordarshan and All India Radio belong to the country. In the long past they have been used by the government in power. Then we ensured the 'negative fairness'. We would block it against misuse during the election.

However, last year, when I took over, I realised that 'negative fairness' is a waste of national investment and resources. We discussed this with all the parties. Following this, we have allotted 122 hours of free prime time -- worth a lot of money on Doordarshan and radio -- to all the 43 recognised parties. We have even asked them to fix two national debates for the national parties.

This is a historic move which also starts the funding of parties. But it is a funding that can't be misused. You can only use it directly. We are going to expand it in coming years. Like in the West, they will get a lot of time which helps them to explain, and people can listen calmly and then assess and decide who to vote for.

It also reduces the nuisance of jeeps, loud speakers, posters or whatever... It also ensures the neutral, independent position of Prasar Bharati.

Why is there a ban on exit polls for almost a fortnight during the election?

People haven't understood that the EC has changed nothing since 1996. We have repeated what we said then and which is the world system. They can take samples on the polling days, but do not publish them. And on February 28 after 1700 hours, when voting is over (in all states except Jammu and Kashmir), they can start telling you what their astrology and *jyothishi* guess is. And, as results start pouring in, the people would know how accurate their guess was.

What do you think of the allegation that the Election Commission is infringing on the powers of the legislature?



No, no. Again we have not done that at all. The Election Commission is a very careful constitutional body. The trouble is that nobody -- not even the media -- reads our guidelines. You can take from Malhotra (*his secretary*) a copy of what we sent to all the state governments...

We made only one suggestion. We are discharging a high constitutional duty to give India a national Parliament. If a legislative session is in the middle of our voting and propaganda, it would be reasonable to make a request that the session should be postponed, especially if the idea is to extend financial concessions. In order not to disturb our fair working, let the session be delayed a little bit.

Our voting will be over on February 28. And they can have their session in March -- the financial year ends on March 31.

In spite of our request and suggestion, if someone announces concessions, then I only blame the media for not highlighting what the true facts are.

The EC is the last body to try and interfere or even think of interfering with their constitutional duty.

Do you think the present system would suffice to weed out criminal elements from politics?

I'll give you a very clear proposition. The EC can only apply the law as made by Parliament. We can suggest improvements on the law, but we don't create it.

The country, the media, the people and the EC are all equally responsible for eliminating criminal elements. However, let me clarify that the problem affects only small pockets of the country. So don't smear India's name totally.

And that is why India manages to change prime ministers and chief ministers regularly. If we were cheating all over the country, then you could not do it. So remember this about booth- capturing and criminals. It is only in pockets and specific areas. Thank god for that. We don't want it to spread. We want it to end there also.

But, in areas where it is taking place, the literacy level is very low. India's literacy after 50 years of Independence is 52 per cent. It is something to be embarrassed about. All Indians, including those abroad, should think of it. Do we need another 50 years to learn 'ABC'? Then how are we going to progress?

There are states with poor literacy and very little development in 50 years and very little social change and social engineering. This is the larger agenda for India and even the new Parliament and those states. Otherwise, the social tension and violence are going to continue. That is why it is happening where it is happening. I will not name it.

As for checking the entry of criminals into politics, we are for the first time applying Section 8 of the Representation of People's Act 1951 strictly. The law allows the disqualification of those who have been convicted.

I have a suggestion in this regard. Why should Indians be negative always in their attitude and thinking? It is not a question of not putting up a criminal or half a criminal. It is the duty of every party to put up the ideal candidate.

There are 43 parties in India, recognised by the EC. They are all patriotic, and they want to do their best for India.

I have been reminding them of their duty over the last two months, and it

has had some effect on them. I think it checked the trend a little bit. But not totally.

I keep asking them, "Out of the 1 billion Indians and 600 million voters, you can't find 543 good people? Are you joking? Or, is it that you want to continue doing things which you have always been doing?"

As far as we are concerned, we are making a list of all those cases. We will step up vigil to see what can be done to prevent such characters from misbehaving, at least during elections. The rest is not our job.

Now a section feels the means (conduct of elections) is good but the end is disastrous. Do you agree?

No, no. Don't say that. Just because of isolated incidents in some parts of the country, the entire country should not be blamed. Booth capturing. Kerala never does it. Punjab never does it. I can go on naming states. Goa never does it. Why doesn't it happen there? Kerala is 100 per cent literate -- civilised people to me. Punjab has a high development rate and nobody starves...

You see, in the last assembly election in Punjab only a year ago, not one complaint was registered either by the Congress or the Akalis or the Bahujan Samaj Party or the Bharatiya Janata Party. Let people in America or wherever you are taking this to note this.

Therefore, don't say that Parliament is like that. There are a few individuals. If they are given tickets -- and if they win -- yes, they will be there. And India should think about them.

[Dr M S Gill, continued](#)

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'People think they know what troubles we had in the past with Seshan. They are wrong... And yes, Seshan laughs like hell'

What do you think about the size of the states, particularly when some states like Uttar Pradesh can make or mar a majority?

That is not something for me to discuss at election time. It is a political matter, and I have lot of views on it. But not today. I have views because I have been in the government for so long.

M S Gill



What is being done to help those who have to brave 'boycott calls' to exercise their franchise?

Efforts would be made. We have to prevent that. That is why all the time I am working on security forces, more forces, particularly in bad areas.

Another observation. In the last 50 years, the civil services have been damaged by the way they have been used or misused. However, if the top civil servants stand clear and neutral, India can do anything on development and elections.

I have been making it clear to everybody that I will be -- and so will the EC -- focusing only on the senior people. In the last six weeks, we have sacked from field duty many collectors, commissioners and deputy inspector generals of police in six states. Wherever we had the slightest doubt, out he goes. We said we want a better man, and we got it.

Therefore I have been levelling the playing field -- and that is to remove undesirable senior officers. I don't have to worry about tehsildars. The collector should worry about them.

But we will sack the collector, and we have sacked many even before the election. During the election also we will do it. My colleagues and I are going all over the country. We are confident that with we will ensure a level playing field, a fair and peaceful election.

There has been an allegation that the voter identity card programme has been a huge flop. Do you think so?

Don't waste your time on voter identity cards now. It is not an issue just now. You can come back later.

Being the CEC you should also be anxious about the outcome of the poll.

No. We are not. We want everyone to play fair, have a clean election, have a fair election. And may the best party win. We are not worried... I only hope and pray to god that whoever comes in gives a good government to the country. So we have no favourites.

Can you really call India a vibrant democracy when people are really voting on the basis of symbols?

No, no. I want 100 per cent literacy in India. You know literacy alone is not wisdom and the Indian has plenty of wisdom. And we are political people -- we strongly watch and observe because in a poor country, sadly, the government still matters. More than in a developed country like America.

And our voters are more shrewd than all the English papers in Delhi and Bombay which are putting out all sorts of ideas. I don't buy them. I have been an English-type all my life, but I am also a villager. The Indian masses are going to decide. And only they know what they are going to decide.

Why not a switch over to the Presidential system?

It is a bigger debate, but I would be very worried. I don't like the idea of a billion people being ruled by one man, whoever he may be. And there are no such gods that you can bring to earth. I think a billion people are entitled to have a participative democracy. I want a share in the governance of India, so does everybody in Madras, in Mizoram and Nagaland.

Someone might be having this idea of a great man. And that is the trouble with Indians. They think that one great angel will take the country through. No, all of us together have to do that. I think Indian democracy is deep and the people like it.

Last time there was an allegation that the EC was counting the number of jeeps, posters and video taping the electioneering seriously.

Everybody has his style. I don't criticise the past. I never will. My style is different. The code of conduct has to be enforced forcefully. But it has also to be enforced intelligently, not in an absurd, legalistic or non-democratic manner. We are in relationship with a huge democratic system -- parties, candidates, people. And they are also

celebrating democracy and they are doing something.

Imagine in an Indian parliamentary constituency, there are almost two million people. A candidate has to get to them in 15 days or three weeks time. I don't want to kill this democracy. I only want to prevent the misuse. That is all.

What about the caste factor? Though there is a bar on talking about caste and creed, even the Leftists field candidates on the basis of caste. What can you do about it?

The only solution to this is not in election laws, but in literacy and development.

Unless we create huge industries and bring about a change in the people's outlook, there is no solution. In Delhi, nobody is bothered about what your caste is. But if you live in your village, you are oppressed by your caste hierarchy. This can only be killed by literacy, development and mobility. That is a larger agenda for India and the 12th Lok Sabha, I hope.

Your style of functioning is said to be strict, but unobtrusive; vigilant, but not dramatic. How do you react?



Well, that is one description. I am not all that unobtrusive, but I do not believe in doing an *ulta tandav*. You are a south Indian, I think. Anybody who knows classical music and dance would know. In classical dance, *ulta tandav karne ki zaroorat nahi hai*. I don't wish to do it. My colleagues won't do it. The reason is very simple.

Yes, we will be firm but we will also be calm and steady because we are a very high constitutional body. Frankly, I have been placed much higher than I deserve.

The media has to forget this idea of focusing on individuals --whether Gill or his colleagues or anyone else. You can't entrust all the powers to an individual. So we have to balance and we are equal. And I am happy with that equality because we persuade each other. Nobody outside actually knows what our relationship is.

People think they know what troubles we had in the past with my friend Seshan. They are wrong. I will write my book later of what we did, how many laughs we had, how many jokes we cracked with each other. And yes, Seshan laughs like hell. And we laugh at each other and ourselves, because true laughter is at your own self.

Once the ambiguity over the constitutional position of the CEC ended - the Supreme Court had ruled that all the three election commissioners have equal powers -- we worked together and it was

always unanimous.

How else do you think we had arrived at unanimous decisions on Kashmir and everything?

Because my proposition was clear. Seshan gave me enough time, so I gave him every time, so did my colleague G V G Krishnamurthy. There were days when I told Seshan, "*Seshan tu nahi manega to hum doonom chotdenge* (we will leave if Seshan does not agree)." Because a good Commission or a good Cabinet never works on the basis of voting. I have seen five prime ministers. You argue and persuade and that is what we do to each other. Nobody knows how many times I give up. I don't feel overruled, it is just that GVG has got a better idea or (Election Commissioner) J M Lyngdoh has.

Have you ever contested any elections?

Contested ha ha ha! Yes, yes, yes. You know when I was in Government College, Ludhiana, we had a good democracy and used to elect a president. MA students used to contest the poll, campaign and then met in the college hall. The candidates used to make speeches and then you went and voted. I wish this would go on in the country calmly.

I was then in BA. My friends somehow pushed me and said you stand for the class representative. Somebody asked my friend Jaggi Anand, who is Maneka Gandhi's uncle, to contest the poll, which he did. Then all our mutual friends said one of us should withdraw. But my attitude to life is that once it is done it is done, there is no going back.

I am an Amritsar Taran Taran man. You better remember that. I said 'no'. So we stood and I lost to Jaggi. But after that I think I got good wisdom -- *election me mut khade hona. Ya khade hona to* (don't contest the pool -- if you do) then you'll have to lose. That is part of the game.

And in future

I mean, this is my attitude. I leave it at that.

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