

More to hockey than Gill's removal

On Record

by Ajay Banerjee

THE recently inducted Minister of State for Sports, Manohar Singh Gill, is a man who has handled many assignments with distinction. A trained mountaineer and former Punjab cadre bureaucrat, Gill possibly scaled yet another peak in his life last Sunday when he was made a minister in the Manmohan Singh government.

Gill, who hails from Tarn Taran, has been credited with working actively for the success of the Green Revolution in Punjab during the 1960s. An avid sports enthusiast, Gill went on to become the Chief Election Commissioner in 1995.

A recipient of the Padma Vibhushan, he was elected to the Rajya Sabha from Punjab in 2004. He has been Secretary in the ministries of agriculture, petrochemicals and chemicals and pharmaceuticals at the Centre.

Besides, Gill has also authored a book "An Indian Success Story: Agriculture and Cooperatives in Punjab" and served on a World Bank project on agriculture and infrastructure in Nigeria between 1981 and 1984.

A day after taking over as a minister, Gill was at his candid best while talking to *The Tribune* in his office.

Excerpts:

Q. What is your list of priorities?

A. The first task at hand is the conduct of the Commonwealth games scheduled to be held in Delhi in 2010. The country has accepted to hold the games. The requisite funds have been provided.

Everything – the stadia, infrastructure – should be built properly and within time. The athletes and visitors should go back with good memories. To ensure a total success, all aspects have to be taken care of and that is the immediate priority.

Q. Any new objectives you will have for your ministry?

A. My heart is in sports. Since the time I was appointed the first Director Sports in Punjab by the then Chief Minister Pratap Singh Kairon, I have been working for sports and promoting it actively.

My dream is to have a podium finish in the core of athletics that is the track and field events, the races, the shot put and the hurdles, among others. These were the events that were part of the original Greek Olympic movement.

In the 1956 Melbourne Olympics we were the semi-finalists in football, today who would believe such a scenario?

Q. What about helping sportspersons in distress as



Manohar Singh Gill

heart-rending tales of penury are highlighted in the media from time to time?

A. I would push every avenue for jobs for sportspersons in public sector undertakings. If cricket is the lead sport in the country, then the cricket administration must dip its hands in its pockets and start a fund for needy sportsmen.

I will speak to BCCI chief Sharad Pawar on setting up a fund that can be replenished and used for the needy sportspersons of other disciplines.

Q. Should sports bodies be headed by bureaucrats and politicians?

A. I do not want to get into these factors. These bodies have their own autonomous structure. My style is not confrontation. It is about dialogue and discussion and listening to the other side also. And If I can do something, by God I will do it.

The government cannot be disinterested in sports and huge sums of money are being given. In the past men like Maharaja Bhupinder Singh had patronised sports bodies and sports flourished.

Q. What about the IIF and its boss KPS Gill? There has been a hue and cry since the hockey team did not qualify for the Olympics? Will you be for removing him?

A. The issue is more complex than the removal of KPS Gill. The decline of hockey has been steady. If we have not qualified, we will see what can be done to make things better. I have been reading in the papers and how the media has been demanding the sacking of Gill.

Q. Would you have been happier in the Agriculture Ministry? Well that was being expected that the government would utilise your rich experience in view of the ongoing crisis of foodgrains?

A. My past is in agriculture and that is my passion. The Agriculture Ministry is headed by better men and I am happy in the Sports Ministry. The passion remains for agriculture and I am linked to small and marginal farmers. ■