

## *A Fascinating Grass Roots Level Officer*



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This website provides the impressions and opinions of many educated, elite persons. Some of them worked in bureaucracy, some of them were private individuals/men of standing. They have written about the historic transition of our country from a British colony to a free democracy and its governance during that period.

This story is about a person who served one wing of the government at the grass root level. He was not particularly articulate, but he sometimes spontaneously gave out his opinion in his own way, without any concern about style.

It was July 1958 when I received the posting order from Engineer in Chiefs Branch, Army Head Quarters, and New Delhi. I was eagerly waiting for the letter – I had passed the required UPSC examination nearly three years ago.

After getting relieved from my employer in New Delhi, I took the day train to Ambala cantonment. They knew I was coming. They had sent a vehicle to pick me up – a big bulldog Chevrolet, World War II vintage. I was taken to the mess, where I deposited my belongings, refreshed myself, and went to the Garrison Engineer's office.

I met the Garrison Engineer - a Major. After some enquiry about me, he called the office superintendent and handed me over to him. The office superintendent took me to his office, where I presented the appointment letter, and submitted joining report. After some enquiry and tea, he took me around the office, and introduced to three other fellow officers, all civilians, and the Unit Accountant.

Then he took me to my office room. There I met Gujjar Singh, who was officiating as Assistant Garrison Engineer (maintenance) and holding the fort. After introduction and formalities, Gujjar Singh called the subdivision clerk. The joining formalities were over, and I was formally deposited in my chair. I was now Assistant Garrison Engineer (Maintenance) of one of the largest cantonment of the day – and Gujjar Singh's boss.

I had no clue about what is what in the garrison and what were my duties. However, the atmosphere was friendly. The routine slowly grew upon me

Gujjar Singh was a six-foot tall Sikh. He had a grisly beard peppered with grey and henna shade here and there, and had a little squint in his eye. I guessed he was in his late fifties, and perhaps had a few years to retire. To me, a lean and average height person from South India, he appeared to be an impressive personality.

I learnt, as the days passed by, that he had joined service at the low rank sub-overseer. Slowly, by hard work and loyalty, he had progressed and risen to the rank of Superintendent Gde 1. He carried a sharp *kirpan* (a sharp 15 cm knife - one of the five requirements a good Sikh has to have with him) in the belt that he wore over his trousers.

In his trouser hip pocket, he carried an army regulation aluminium pouch, which had rum all the time. When he was accompanying on my inspection/learning tour, whenever he found my talk or action not officer-like, he would step aside, have a small sip of rum, take a small pocket of powder from his other pocket, swipe a pinch of it into his mouth, wipe the mouth and moustache from the back of his left hand, and again pay attention to what I was saying.

I learnt that he believed that the powder he consumed would hide the smell of rum. But to us, he always smelt of rum and his eyes were always blood shot. Still, no one, not even the Officer Commanding had stopped him drinking while on duty. He was rough and gruff and most people left him alone. When they had to be in his company, they humoured him.

It was evident that he thought poorly of us Indian officers, compared to the pre-Independence British officers. Whenever someone superior to him asked inconvenient questions, his favourite expression was “*Angrez chale gaye and aulad chod gaye*” (*The British have left, and they have left the country to their kin - a bunch of bastards Indians.*)” This he would mutter under his breath.

The great quality in him was his loyalty to his officer superiors and to the department. He had taken me, a slight looking “Madrasi (a person from Madras Province down south)” under his wings, and had extended some sort of paternal protection.

No contractor would dare challenge Gujjar Singh. If Gujjar Singh said the contractor’s work was bad, it was bad, and it had to be redone. If he said this was the measurement, it was so.

Once, in some work being supervised another Grade 1 Superintendent, I felt that the contractor was not performing well. I asked Gujjar Singh as to how to tackle this contractor. Next day, the contractor came running to me, and pleaded what wrong had he done which displeased me? I told him that the concreting was poor and required to be demolished. Next day, I saw that portion was indeed dismantled - Gujjar Singh had prevailed!

I do not know much about Gujjar and family, who were carpenters by profession. He was from a village near Ludhiana. Gujjar was the youngest son of a Lance *Naik*, who had joined infantry as foot soldier and spent most of his time in helping British dismantle Ottoman Turk Empire, carving out small sheikhdoms in the Middle East, and extending the dominance of the British. After rising to the rank of Lance *Naik*, he had retired, returned to his village, and died shortly afterwards. Most of the time, Gujjar’s father left his family in his ancestral village in *biradari* (*Mohalla* of his clan).

Since Gujjar was the youngest in his family, his family indulged him. As a result, he did not focus on studies. He had also no interest in family’s traditional profession. Due to small pox in childhood, he had a damaged left eye and partial vision. That made him unsuitable for regular army service.

But, because of his good physique and adventurous spirit, and with help from his father and other supporters, he had been recruited as a sub-overseer. Before Independence, his service was in the North West Frontier Province, mostly Peshawar, Dera Gazi Khan, Jamud, Landi Kotal etc. Everywhere he had proved his worth as dependable man. There were rumours about his exceptional bravery in Landi Kotal when tribal people attacked it. Landi Kotal, I learnt after looking at atlas, and asking some others, was a small town at the Khyber Pass; the British had a hard time keeping under their control. It was said that Gujjar, with a hand full of labour and Pathan loyalists, had kept a rampart of the Fort in fit condition against heavy odds.

Most of the works that Gujjar was involved in at that time were related to the defence of fortification and surface communication. They were carried out mostly by the Military Engineer Service. The Engineer officer and immediate subordinate sergeant were British. The other lower supervisory staff were Indians, mostly Sikhs and Punjabi Muslims. The British put their country's interest first, but did not take bribes - maybe an occasional liquor bottle for Christmas, but not beyond that.

According to Gujjar Singh, in NWFP, some works were genuine, but others were fictitious - just to bribe friendly and influential Pathans who were helpful to the British. No one talked about them, as loose talk was frowned upon. The payment to contractors was in silver coins. The British kept their contact with contractors to a minimum. Payment for genuine works or for buying peace with money to powerful chieftains through fictitious works, were through Indian subordinates.

Even though Gujjar worked for the British, he had great regard for the Pathan contractors. One incident, he narrated that is green in my memory even now is, happened when bag of silver was handed over to a Pathan contractor by Gujjar and the accountant. The Pathan emptied the silver on the table, and drew his sword. Using his sword, he cut a small part from the silver pile, and pushed that part towards Gujjar as his share; another small part went to the accountant. The Pathan pushed the rest towards himself, pushed it all into the bag with his sword, and rode away on the horse after salutations.

Was Gujjar Singh honest when it came to taking bribes from contractors? No - but he was a person who was satisfied with *mamool* (each of the subordinate staff from the lowly peon to high up in the subordinate rank who was somehow connected with the work had a fixed small share from the sanctioned payment for bills submitted; this was the norm, and no one bothered about it). But he never compromised with the quality of the work. He considered the department as his "*mai baap*" (mother and father) and felt "*uska namak khaya hai*" (owes them). That was also the attitude of most of the subordinates of those days. Rarely one found someone who was greedy and would try to squeeze more from the contractor. That person would be despised and people kept away from him.

Gujjar Singh had a different view about officers. He felt that officers should be honest. In his opinion, they were well paid, so there was no need not for them to stoop down. Officers had to take decisions which were of consequence to the Government, its invincibility, and sometimes safety of the persons and works under them.

Gujjar had no regard for rules and regulations. Once, after my efforts to get a copy of Military Engineering Services (MES) regulations failed, I asked him whether he could get it. He told me

that even though a copy was supplied to each formation, it would get stolen - those days there were no copying machines or scanners. He knew that the unit accountant had a copy but he would deny it.

He felt officers like me should not depend too much on rules. Confidence was most important for an officer, according to him. Officer should be just, firm and go by common sense, he would say. Too much focus on the rules would inhibit him.

Once he narrated this incident. When he was young, he worked under a British sergeant. According to Gujjar, one contractor was a downright scoundrel. When the contractor's quality went bad, it seems, Gujjar told his sergeant that that the contractor's work should be terminated. Next day, the sergeant called that contractor and Gujjar, and heard both of them. Then, the sergeant asked Gujjar to tear a paper from a notebook. On this paper, the sergeant wrote, "Your work is bad. You have been warned many times. So I hereby, terminate the contract." The sergeant signed the document, handed it over to the contractor, and told him never to show his face again. The contractor complained about this decision and that sergeant had no authority. The complaint went up to the Garrison Engineer, who in those days was a powerful man. But the decision did not change.

This, in Gujjar's opinion, was good government and good governance. At that point, of time I had no idea of how things would shape in India in the future - what changes governance would undergo in India as time flies.

Narayangarh is at the foothills of Shaivalik hills. It was being used by the troops as a long arm and artillery range. There were a few structures, mostly earth, thatch, pulleys, drains which MES had to maintain. Once, when the firing practice season was in full swing, I asked Gujjar to accompany me. He told me we might have to stay for a night. The villagers were very friendly, and we could sleep in the open with the charpoys of hemp, which they would supply. He also told me villagers were very good hosts.

Gujjar took his double barrel gun with him. As our jeep drove along rural roads, Gujjar would shout "partridge, partridge!" and shoot. Sometimes he would cry out "*khargosh*" (rabbit), and down went the animals. By the time we reached the village, we had a sizeable quantity of meat, some of which he gave to village *mukhiya* (chief).

The village *mukhiya* welcomed us, and offered us sugarcane juice. Even though the juice was welcome in the September sun, the size of the *lota* (Brass tumbler) overawed me. Gujjar had a hearty laugh, and spoke to the *mukhiya* in local dialect, *Sahib Madrasi hi* (Boss is South Indian.). The crowd laughed and I had to laugh and put up a brave front.

After a tour of the range, pulleys and thatch hut, Gujjar instructed local leader-cum-contractor about what repairs were to be done. He then tried to teach me shooting with this double barrel - how to avoid shoulder injury, which he did with great gusto and to delight of local onlookers.

We had a sumptuous meal of *Makki ka roti* (corn flour pancake), *sarason ka saag* (mustard leaf dish), sliced onions, and some Punjabi pickle of mango and some berry, and roast meat of partridge. After meals, our hosts offered us bamboo cots. The shade of the huge banyan tree was very inviting, and we had a sound sleep. When I woke up, it was evening. The *mukhiya's* household prepared tea, or more appropriately, sugar syrup and tea leaves boiled.

During this time, I asked Gujjar what he considered as good qualities in an officer. He hedged but ultimately he told loyalty to country, department, standing by the subordinates, uprightness, quick in decision, not going back on words. He spoke in Punjabi, the local language. He told me that when he was in Jamud with Khyber rifles, they had tents. In the evening, when Officers, all British, sat for dinner they would raise toast to King and Empire before they started eating.

*Officer me niyat honi chahiye. Tabhi wo afsur hai* (Officer should have integrity. Then only he is an officer). Nowadays, he said, he was seeing even officers in uniform beginning to take bribe etc. “Why only Officers should have these qualities?” I asked. He said “*Afsur vade vade decision lete hain* (Officers take major decisions)”. As our work had been completed, we decided to return to Ambala the same day. In two hours, we were back in the cantonment.

My contact with Gujjar was only for a year and half. After that, I was transferred out of Ambala. He went his way and I mine. But, in this period, I came to know that in his heart Gujjar was ill at ease with the changes in the governance, and of the quality of officers coming in after the British left. He remained loyal to his boss and to his department – but his Indian officers could never get his approval for their bearing and demeanour. ❖

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