

PROFILE

# Ever Upward

**W**HATEVER else he may lack, Giani Zail Singh, the 66-year-old former home minister and now contender for the Presidency, has rarely been known to lack self-expression. His earthy exuberance and often bumbling *bonhomie* have on occasion led him to exemplify the typical Sikh joke; and his combined foot-in-mouth utterances have given birth to a new phrase: "Zailisms".

Such Zailisms as may have caused his colleagues grave embarrassment —such as his recent adulatory speech about Hitler on the floor of the Lok Sabha—have at other times aroused genuine humour, so that those who speak of him as a court jester cannot help reserving a certain sneaking affection for his amiability. There is a degree of sincerity in his absurdity, so that the joke never sours. In fact, it takes off because of its inherent vanity, or self-deprecation, or simply because it is accompanied by great, back-slapping guffaws.

**Humble Origins:** Described at the time of his swearing-in as home minister on January 14, 1980, in his own "bio-sketch" as

the "tall, handsome and immaculately dressed Giani", Zail Singh has frequently held forth on his own humble and impoverished origins as the son of a farmer in the Faridkot district of Punjab. He once mesmerised the Lok Sabha during a dull debate on jail reforms by diverting it with the story of how he came to be called "Zail". With characteristic *élan*, he informed the House that his name was originally Jarnail Singh. When years ago he was arrested for political activity and taken away to Lahore jail, the warden asked him what his name was. As a joke, he said "Jail Singh". The name stuck but, as Gianiji told his fellow MP's, by the time he was out of prison he was so enamoured of his own name that, by amending it slightly to "Zail", he decided to keep it for life.

Just as names, however silly, have a habit of sticking, so do images. And what no doubt amazes most people is the fact that a man labelled as a bit of a buffoon should now manage to waddle his way into the highest office in the land, into the very precincts of Rashtrapati Bhavan. For the

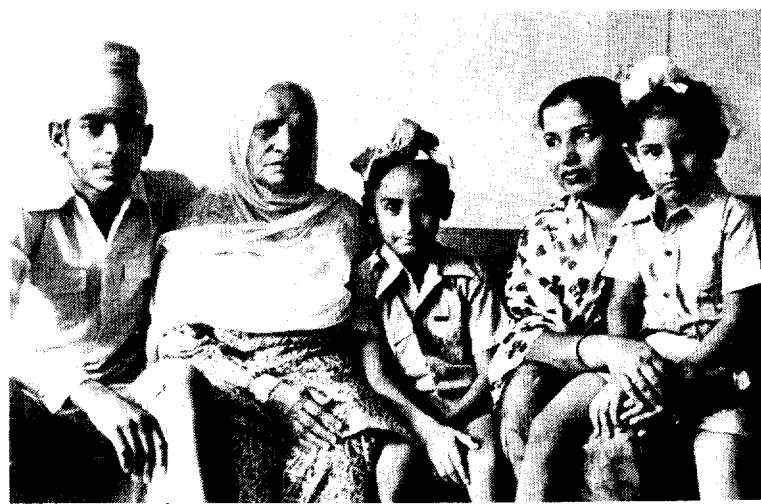
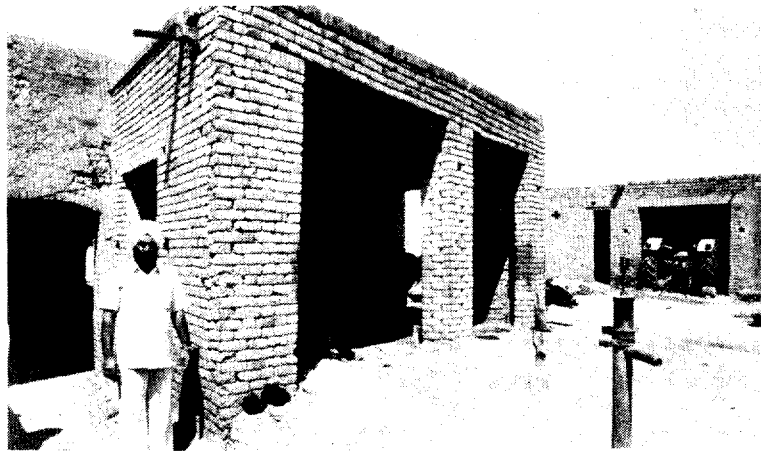
Presidency is still associated, in the popular mind, with the qualities of unimpeachable impartiality, restraint and dignity. Will Zail Singh, the ruling party's unanimous nominee, fill the bill?

Zail Singh may be a far cry from the great symbols of the Indian Presidency graced by figures like Dr Rajendra Prasad, Dr Radhakrishnan or Dr Zakir Husain, but his arrival in the President's chair indicates the changed role of the Presidency (see main story). He is a rabidly partisan political figure, whose presence as President might be a special plug for the Sikhs, but is unlikely to elevate the role of the President to its original, revered status. Instead, what Zail Singh has to offer is unflinching loyalty to the ruling party and the party leader Mrs Gandhi who is also prime minister.

**Devoted Follower:** "It is only the grace of God," the ebullient Giani muttered, beaming broadly through his well-trimmed moustache and neatly-tucked beard when he heard of his nomination. And the truth is that, as a deeply devout man, Zail Singh has never forgotten his gods, be it the Granth, the holy book of his religion from which he quotes freely and often, or Sanjay and Mrs Gandhi whom he once called his *rahnuma* (saviour).

Ironically, Zail Singh alias Jarnail Singh, was ordained to teach the scriptures. Born on May 5, 1916— he shares a birthday with Karl Marx—in Sandhwan village in Faridkot, he barely managed to get through his matriculation before deciding that he would become a *granthi*—a professional reader of the holy Granth. His training to become one earned him the title of Giani, meaning the "learned one".

However, his brand of politics originated simultaneously with his religion, as a form of militant protest against the erstwhile ruler of the princely state of Faridkot. Inspired by the freedom movement, he challenged the maharaja of Faridkot by founding the Congress Party in his domain. In 1938, he was thrown into Faridkot jail, where he stayed five years. He retains a clear memory of his time there. "It was an animal's existence," says the man who will be the last of a



The house where Zail Singh was born (top) and (above) his wife Pradhan Kaur (second from left), daughter-in-law and grandchildren: humble beginnings

generation of Presidents to have participated in the freedom movement.

**Powerful Links:** It was at that early stage that Zail Singh established his links with Jawaharlal Nehru: establishing the Praja Mandal, and later a parallel government to that of the maharaja. He was often subject to severe humiliation and torture by police. Once the local police chief ordered that he be dragged through the streets of Faridkot with his hair tied to a jeep but, at the last minute, the drastic order was revoked.

With such credentials, it was natural that Giani would be elected to office in independent India; he was. From 1948 to 1952 he served as first revenue, then agriculture minister in the first Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU) government. Soon after, he became president of the PEPSU Pradesh Congress Committee and, when PEPSU and Punjab state were merged into the single state of Punjab, Zail Singh found himself in the Rajya Sabha.

In 1962 he fought, and won, an election

to the Punjab Legislative Assembly and was promptly included in Pratap Singh Kairon's Cabinet. Unfortunately, he was forced to quit when the Cabinet strength was reduced. Still, he has always cherished his relationship with Kairon whom he admires and often quotes as an example of a progressive and able chief minister.

**Unflinching Loyalty:** It is a notable trait in Zail Singh that he never in his entire political career switched loyalties or suffered a change of heart in moments adverse to the Congress Party; nor, for that matter, have his relationships with real political heavyweights, be it Sardar Patel, Indira Gandhi or Pratap Singh Kairon ever been threatened. On the contrary, his overflowing affability, good humour and fawning humility have helped him to ingratiate himself into the inner sanctums of power, in both Chandigarh and New Delhi.

It is also notable that the man's private life has never impinged upon his public one. His son still helps to farm the family's 57 acres held jointly by Zail Singh and his brothers back in Faridkot; the mud hut in which he was born still exists; his wife, a simple and conservative woman has seldom stepped out of the village; and his three daughters, two of them qualified doctors, rarely visit him though he keeps in constant touch.

News of the Giani's nomination to the nation's highest office was greeted with obvious jubilation in the dusty, sun-baked village of Sandhwan (population: 3,500) 5 km, from the former princely state of Faridkot—where he was born in a carpenter's family. Time hangs still in this remote village which boasts of a ramshackle railway station named after the illustrious son—Giani Zail Singh. Dayal Singh Parwana, 75, recounted his association with the Giani, who was his one-time pupil at the local gurudwara singing Sikh bhajans and kirtans. Says Parwana: "I know Giani very well. For 15 years he had been propagating that the Khalsa would rule under the *kesari* flag, until later he shifted to the Congress tricolour. It is good that he will be the President." Added 70-year-old Arjun Singh,

a farmer: "Faith and dedication are two rare qualities of the Giani. And he has been richly awarded."

The only sour note came from Gurdev Singh, another farmer in his middle age. Said he: "It is good that Giani will be the President. But we cannot enjoy his patronage. He hardly did anything for the village." But the mood of jubilation was most conspicuous among the relations of the presidential candidate. Says Vasant Kaur, the Giani's 85-year-old aunt: "I know Giani is becoming President of the 'World'. There will be illumination in the village and we will distribute ladoos." Signs of elation were also evident in Giani's only son, 44-year-old Joginder Singh, who was unable to complete his schooling because of his father's preoccupation with politics. "The whole village is happy and I have been flooded with congratulations," says Joginder Singh, adding, "although he had less time for us. We have had enough love from him."

For a man who has shunned the constraints of domestic life and wholly given himself to politics, Zail Singh remains fastidious about some things. His dress, for instance. In personal appearance, he is almost always seen in a variety of *sherwanis*, of which he maintains a full wardrobe. And at least a dozen pairs of shoes which, along with a variety of subsidiary footwear, are lined lovingly along the base of his double bed.

**Spartan Life-style:** Apart from these few sartorial extravagances, his life-style remains fairly spartan. "What does a man want in life—I live only by the Guru's name and for the good of my people," says he, before diverting his interminable monologues to eulogies of Mrs Gandhi, the morality of the administrative service, troubles in Punjab or anything that catches his fancy.

For Zail Singh is never short on opinion, however startling they may be, or for that matter admissions about himself and his role. As chief minister of Punjab he once described himself as "the engine of a goods train dragging bogies on a sand track". And confessing to his imperfect hold over the English language he once candidly remarked: "I can speak telegraphic English. I conversed once with Kamaraj when no one else was around." But not all the jocularly can hide his canny ability to play ducks and drakes in politics, and the effusive show of affection—he is wont to greet the merest acquaintance with crushing bear-hugs—disguises shrewder motivations.

Zail Singh's first golden phase in politics—as chief minister of Punjab from 1972-77 though admittedly trouble-free for the state—was known for its populist manoeuvrings. He managed to keep the Akalis, as well as other religious hard-liners, at bay because he paraded his religious

devotion more fiercely than the rest. He activated the Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar, linked all the state's famous gurdwaras with a 400-km highway called Guru Gobind Singh Marg, rechristened a dozen state-run hospitals after the names of Sikh saints and went so far as to rename a small town outside Chandigarh after a son of Guru Gobind Singh.

**Covert Methods:** And though he was by no means the most capable chief minister Punjab has had, his regime was strengthened by his equally fierce devotion to Sanjay Gandhi in the early days of the late leader's haul to the centre of power. As an administrator, Zail Singh demands the same loyalty that he has himself extended to his leaders. This he has achieved, both as chief minister of Punjab and Union home minister, in a covert manner. In the latter role he filled his ministry, sections of the police, and even the judiciary with his trusted men.

But nothing has been more obviously subversive to his image than his stormy relationship with Punjab Chief Minister Darbara Singh. No doubt Zail Singh considers Darbara Singh a poor and incompetent Congress(I) choice after his own tenure as the state's chief minister, but their unmitigated attempts at undermining each other's roles have shown up both leaders in bad light. In private conversation, Zail Singh is said to reserve some choice Punjabi phrases for the chief minister, especially his handling of growing secessionist forces in Punjab.

In retaliation some of the adverse propaganda from the opposing camp has stuck to Zail Singh. It was not so long ago, at the height of the agitations in Punjab, that his name cropped up along with the Dal Khalsa. Zail Singh has gone on record to suggest that the agitation flared up because of inept handling by the state Government—but if his known antagonism towards the chief minister is any indication, Zail Singh can be equally artful a manipulator in his attempts to dislodge a political rival.

As President, however, Zail Singh will have to rise above not only the smaller antagonisms of state politics, but all politics. At the same time he will be required to adhere to the Constitutional role as a truly national political arbiter. The Presidency, in that sense, is his greatest challenge. For a man of small beginnings, who has risen from grass roots politics to hold top positions in national politics, Zail Singh may not be expected to take an unbiased view but certainly a view large enough that keeps the national interest as its primary motive. Zail Singh may be the least literate President India has ever possessed but he is not lacking in perceptions of his own new role.

—SUNIL SETHI with GOVIND THUKRAL in Sandhwan