

Great Opportunity, Tough Challenges

Celebrating Dr Manmohan Singh's assumption of office as Prime Minister of India

I.J. SINGH (USA)*

* Head & Coordinator, Dept. of Anatomy, New York University. Res: 2414 Capri Place, N. Bellmore. NY 11710. USA. Email: ijs1@nyu.edu

LISTEN TO THE BBC OR LOOK AT THE *New York Times*. These pillars of communication in the modern world don't just package and pass on the news; *they make news*. And this past month of May, 2004, they have been full of Manmohan Singh and the Parliamentary elections in India, the world's largest democracy.

In my 44 years away from India I have rarely seen Indian politics front and center in the world's news media. The last time a Sikh was on the front page of New York Times was in 1985, when Rajiv Gandhi and Harchand Singh Langowal signed their ill-fated "Memorandum of Understanding." Indian political leaders – from Nehru to Indira Gandhi and Vajpayee – have adorned the papers, but never so fully or flatteringly.

There are many things to celebrate in the elevation of Manmohan Singh to the office of Prime Minister of India. Pictures say a thousand words; add a few well-chosen words and it turns priceless.

The Times highlighted Manmohan Singh on the *front page* and noted his sky blue turban that has become his trademark. Even if a reader only scanned the pictures he saw the visage of a turbaned man, clearly identified as a Sikh, not to be mistaken for an Arab, Iraqi, Iranian cleric, or whatever. For us in the diaspora imagine the value of this visual message.

With brevity and clarity that couldn't be missed, the *Times* pointed out that Manmohan Singh, a Sikh, would be the first "non-Hindu" to hold the post that is not 'ceremonial' like the office of the President but, in fact holds the reins of power. In one sentence it tells the world that Sikhs are not Hindus.

Just think of the efforts that we (Sikhs in the diaspora) have expended in conveying this simple message to the world, to the Hindus who are often bent upon enveloping us in their stifling embrace by denying our individuality, and even to many of our fellow Sikhs who often fail to see that Sikhism is clearly a refreshingly different system and religion from Hinduism.

Then, in one brief piece, the *Times* pointed out the delicious irony of the fact that standing next to the Sikh Prime Minister was Sonia Gandhi, who was raised a Roman Catholic, and that Manmohan Singh would be administered the oath of office by President APJ Abdul Kalam, who is a Muslim. India remains, at least nominally, a secular democracy.

This little factoid noted by the *Times* highlights that India may yet have an unparalleled opportunity to redeem the vision that has been sidetracked in its pursuit of *Hindutva* as national policy and ethos, and in its relentless attempts to subjugate its minorities - *pogroms* against Sikhs in the 1980's that killed thousands; against Muslims, notably in Gujarat two years ago; smaller but methodically executed

activities against Christian churches and organizations. In most of these systematic discriminatory activities successive Indian governments have been complicit. At this moment in history, India could turn an about-face on such errant and uncharacteristic behavior.

And then just about every report emphasized that Manmohan Singh is intelligent, totally honest, modest and very aware of his humble beginnings and his Sikh roots. To be spotlessly clean in the politics of the Third World is a miracle worth celebrating in itself. Every report, including a comment by Professor Bhagwati, a former colleague, now at USA's Columbia University, noted that Manmohan Singh is not a politician. But I think that we should not underestimate Manmohan's political acumen. He is a product of *academia* and has spent many successful years in international bureaucracy; both require finely honed political instincts.

All the papers and media broadcasts traced Manmohan Singh's career from Punjab where he was a star student, to Cambridge and Oxford where he earned his PhD in economics, his stint as governor at the Asian Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and other international organizations, his tenure as the Governor of Reserve Bank of India and, finally, his five years as India's finance minister from 1991-96. In 1991, India was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy with reserves for only two weeks, when Manmohan Singh was called to rescue the country. He opened financial markets, won international acceptability for his initiatives and the rest, as they say, is history.

A major reason of his elevation to the head of government now is also the fact that although the Indian economic engine has been chugging along extremely well, its benefits have largely eluded the teeming millions who live in abject poverty. A miracle worker is needed to correct the imbalance, and Manmohan Singh seems to be it.

What could be better for the Sikhs worldwide, particularly in the diaspora, than the image of a fellow Sikh who commands - and deserves - the world's respect, striding across the global stage?

At the helm of power in India now are two world-class technocrats. The President, APJ Abdul Kalam, a Muslim, is a nuclear scientist of no mean repute and is the father of the Indian nuclear program. The Prime Minister is Manmohan Singh, a Sikh internationally known and respected for his talents in economics. Two people holding doctoral degrees, with outstanding credentials as scientists, running a developing nation - now this is a matter worth celebrating. They may have come from the unworldly ivory towers of academia, but they can take India to heights where it has never been.

But we also recognize these two men come from minorities in India who have been largely marginalized over the past 50 years. Their one chance - day in the sun - depends not so much on what they can deliver, for they are undoubtedly competent, but on whether they will have a real chance to show their worth.

Much of India remains economically and educationally deprived. This largely poor and uneducated majority is easily manipulated by shrewdly playing on the politics of fear, regional and religious differences. This is how politicians have ruled - and despoiled India over the past half a century. Indeed, in this context, the appointment

of the loyalist Gyani Zail Singh as President of India (1982-87) by Indira Gandhi was a political strategem of a different kind.

International media have not failed to notice that now the two leaders at the helm, in India and Pakistan, Manmohan Singh and Pervez Musharraf, respectively, are children of the Partition of India in 1947 at independence. Manmohan was born near Rawalpindi in what is now Pakistan, while Musharraf was born in Delhi. Perhaps they will have a more understanding view of each other when the leaders of these historically hostile nations meet, even though Kashmir remains an intractable problem that defies solution.

Manmohan Singh doubtless heads a messy coalition government and some disappointing compromises are inevitable. I noticed that, for example, his new government has nominated Jagdish Tytler as a minister. Tytler's claim to fame is that he is widely known as one of the evil brains behind the genocidal massacre of Sikhs in Delhi in 1984. There are seven Muslims in the cabinet, but not another Sikh because the Shiromani Akali Dal chose to have a pre-election alliance with the BJP.

Apart from the many issues that disturb one's mind early on, such an opportunity that is in India's lap today comes rarely. And that is the challenge.

