

The Good Doctor: An Appreciation

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* Courtesy: The Hindustan Times.

PRIME MINISTER MANMOHAN SINGH's most striking qualities are his simplicity and integrity. Stories, many undoubtedly apocryphal, abound. For instance, one doing the rounds in Geneva, where he headed the South Commission in the late 1980s, claims that his wife Gursharan Kaur has taken an oath not to wear gold. Then, there is one about the difficult time he had selling his Ashok Vihar house because he insisted the entire transaction be in 'white'. There is another tale about how, as the Finance Minister who had to devalue the rupee, he insisted on a mechanism to ensure that his dollar-denominated UN pension was pegged at the older, lower rupee rate.

"He is so simple that there is nothing dramatic about it," says a former student. "What you see is what you get." Trawling relatives, friends, and associates for anecdotes of Dr. Singh's life you soon realize the easy truth of it. What you see is a wiry Sikh dressed in a *kurta-pyjama* and a *pugree* that is almost always steel blue. In power-drunk Delhi, his presence at a party or function surprises; he is more than likely to arrive and depart alone, no *chamchas* or aides. This is a man with a yard-long CV – professor, UN consultant, economic adviser to the PM, governor of the Reserve Bank of India, deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, chairman of the University Grants Commission, finance minister, and leader of opposition in the Rajya Sabha.

Honours:

He is certainly the most educated PM India has had, a world-class economist, educated at several Cambridge colleges where he won honours: Amartya Sen won the Adam Smith prize in 1954, Manmohan in 1956 (his youngest daughter, Amrit has also won the prize). Drs. Sen and Singh were also recipients of the prestigious Wrenbury scholarship.

A generation of students remember him as a great teacher. Those who studied international economics with him at the Delhi School of Economics say he would use his practical experience to lift the subject from its "theorem-based theorizing". One student, now a professor, recalls the time the good Doctor devoted to his student's thesis: "He was at the time Economic Adviser, and I would land at his house in the evening, and the moment he returned, he had a cup of coffee and he would work with me straight up to 10:30 at night, and only then have his dinner and retire". The thesis was on regional economic cooperation and the professor recalls the "obsessive" fervour Dr. Singh, the son of refugees from Pakistan, had for promoting the idea in South Asia. It's a passion he can pursue more than 30 years later, as countries of the region are ready for a South Asian Free Trade Association.

Far Sight:

Public service and institution building have been important components of his thought. When he went to inform U. Thant, the then UN Secretary General that he was throwing up his high-paying UN job to work in India, the Secretary-General recounted an old Burmese proverb which said "some times it is wise to take foolish decisions".

He's been associated with several academic think tanks like Chandigarh's Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development (CRRID), and Delhi's Research and Information System for non-Aligned and other Developing Countries (RIS). He's also the president of the India Habitat Centre, his association running through the years it has established itself as a fixture in Delhi's intellectual and cultural scene, says IHC director Raj Liberhan. "They don't make them better anymore," says Liberhan of the new PM.

Manmohan Singh is deeply religious, but most certainly does not wear his religion on his sleeve. He is the first of the minority Sikh community to become PM, and his link to community affairs is the Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, a Delhi-based institution honouring the memory of a great Sikh scholar.

Is Manmohan ready for the top job? In the 1990s, Singh was seen as a technocrat whose job was to fix the Indian economy. But he has clearly evolved. In interviews in the late 1990s, he insisted that he was a politician, plain and simple; he told Karan Thapar he was not averse to any post that his party may offer. More directly, when asked by Vir Sanghvi whether he wanted to be PM, his ingenuous response was; "Who does not want to be Prime Minister?"

Dream Candidate:

In the late 1990s as the Congress imploded, Dr. Singh was talked of as a potential PM candidate, the dream candidate who could pull the party out of its downward drift. However, he lost the 1999 election to the South Delhi Lok Sabha seat (it was a unique campaign, for he would set off alone from home to campaign in an Ambassador car, minus the noisy cavalcade of activists).

It was the time Sonia Gandhi began to discover the quiet Sikh's sterling qualities. Knives were out in the Congress; the belief was he would fall from grace like Pawar. But Sonia realized that unlike Pawar, Singh had no personal political agenda, neither did he have a clutch of relatives wanting to jump into politics. Singh's conversion to full-time politician was also marked by his role as a trouble-shooter of sorts, negotiating an alliance with Jayalalitha in 1999, with Mufti Mohammed Sayeed in 2002, and the hugely successful one with the DMK this year.

Pragmatist:

Through his academic, professional and political life Singh has exhibited a trait of liberalism and pragmatism. "He is a very balanced individual," says friend and former colleague A. Vaidyanathan. "He is not confrontational and will seek the path of consensus." His greatest quality has been his ability to avoid dogma and never stop learning. This is the quality that served him well in his several careers: teacher, economist, administrator, advisor, institution-builder, minister and politician. Now, this most qualified of our PMs, will need to distil all these to face his biggest opportunity - and challenge.

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Manmohan Singh: India's Prime Minister

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THE THREE OBVIOUS QUESTIONS this summer. **One:** why didn't Sonia Gandhi take the job? **Two:** what kind of Prime Minister will Manmohan Singh make? And **three:** will it work?

To the first one, I have no answer. I've heard all the speculation and listened to all the theories: she was scared of being assassinated; it was the children who insisted; she faked it at the last moment; and she didn't want to divide the country.

Of all the explanations, the one that makes the most superficial sense is the last one. There would always have been those who would have gone on and on about her Italian birth. Never mind that the BJP ended up fighting the last election on the issue of foreign origin – and lost it. There would always have been the temptation for the BJP to resort to race, religion and ethnicity because, after all, if the *sangh parivar* does not focus on those issues, then what does it have left? The essence of the *sangh* ideology is to emphasise difference, to reject an 'inclusive' view of India and focus on an 'us' and 'them' conflict.

Except, of course, that as plausible as this explanation sounds, I don't believe it. Five years ago, long before all this foreign origin stuff became the mainstay of the BJP campaign, Sonia Gandhi made exactly the same decision.

We forget now that after Atal Bihari Vajpayee lost the confidence motion in Parliament, the Congress came within a hair's breadth of forming the next government (as the leader of a coalition). That didn't happen chiefly because the Samajwadi Party declared that it would not support a Congress-led government. (How ironic now for the Samajwadis to have even more seats than they had in those days and still be reduced to gate-crashing dinners and trying to get their booking agent, Harkishan Singh Surjeet, to find them a place in a Congress-led government? If they had followed the same policy in 1999, we would not have had five more years of BJP rule – I wonder if their Muslim supporters recognise that?)

But if the Congress had formed the government in 1999, Sonia Gandhi would have still refused to become Prime Minister. During that crisis she told the then President, K. R. Narayanan, that Manmohan Singh was the Congress's candidate for the job.

Remember that this was before Sharad Pawar split to form the NCP and before the phrase 'foreign-origin' entered the lexicon of Indian politics. So, if Sonia didn't want to take the job long before there was all this talk of dividing India, then there must be another explanation for her reluctance.

I am not sure what that explanation is. I suspect that it is actually the simplest one, which is why we are all so unwilling to believe it. She has seen power at very close quarters: as Indira Gandhi's daughter-in-law and as Rajiv Gandhi's wife. It holds no attraction for her. She turned down the prime ministership in 1991 and thought that she could devote her life to the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation and to her family.

She would never have joined politics if Narasimha Rao hadn't destroyed the Congress party and if, under Sitaram Kesri, the Congress hadn't then seemed on the verge of extinction. Even then, she was a reluctant politician, acting out of a sense of duty rather than any ambition.

While I did believe that she should have become Prime Minister this time, I was not particularly surprised by her refusal to take the job. I knew what she had intended to do in 1999. And talking to her before the results came in this time, I sensed that she had not changed her mind.

My problem was this: nobody believed me. Nobody believed me in 1999 when I wrote that she hadn't wanted the job. And nobody believed me this time. Not even, I suspect, Dr. Manmohan Singh.

Which brings us to the second question: what kind of Prime Minister will Manmohan Singh make? In 1997, when the Congress seemed set to topple H. D. Deve Gowda and take office itself, I interviewed Dr. Singh. Would he, I asked straight out, like to be Prime Minister?

And because he is a straightforward sort of guy, he gave me a straight answer: "Who doesn't want to be Prime Minister?"

But in 1999, when I told him that he had missed being Prime Minister by a whisker (Amar Singh's whisker, if you want to be specific), he was frankly disbelieving. This time too, I interviewed him at the very start of the campaign (for TV) and asked him how it felt to be the most likely candidate for Prime Minister if the BJP did not make it.

Once again, he looked at me with an air of amused disbelief. The Congress's policy was clear, he said. All of them were committed to the leadership of Sonia Gandhi. Yes, yes, I said, but did he think he had it in him to be Prime Minister?

If you know Manmohan Singh, then the answer was predictable: he was suitably modest about his own capabilities. But, I persisted. Did he think he lacked the political skills required for the job?

Oh no, he said. He was a political person. That was not his concern. He knew what had to be done.

My feeling is that he is right. The Manmohan Singh of 2004 is very different from the Manmohan Singh of 1991. The brilliance and the integrity are, of course, still there. But this Manmohan Singh has been around. He has seen the ups and downs of politics. He has watched sleaze balls in his own party sabotage his Lok Sabha candidacy. He's seen the bad days. And he's learned from other people's mistakes.

Indian Prime Ministers fit into two broad categories. There's the PM-as-reformer avatar, examples of which are Indira Gandhi from 1969 to 1973, or Rajiv Gandhi for his entire term. And then, there's the PM-as-sage avatar. This began with the middle to late period Jawaharlal Nehru and he still remains a popular person. It was the key to A. B. Vajpayee's success and even a shyster like Narasimha Rao nearly pulled it off.

Manmohan Singh will not be the tireless young reformer that Rajiv was. Rather, he will be a sage-like figure who will be perceived (as Vajpayee was till Pramod Mahajan forced him to make unsolicited phone calls to lakhs of strangers) as being above the hurly-burly of routine politics. **Compared to Vajpayee, he has one advantage; he is far sharper on policy matters than the relatively inexperienced Vajpayee was when he first became PM. But he also has one**

disadvantage. Beneath his innocent exterior is a very innocent interior. As much as he has learned to cope with politics and politicians, he is still an essentially innocent man. Vajpayee, on the other hand, was a consummate politician whose every move was planned with brahminical cunning.

That leaves the third question: will it work?

In the short-run, Manmohan Singh faces two obvious handicaps. The first is the Left. My guess is that this will prove to be less of a problem than we think. On privatisation of profitable public enterprises, Manmohan's views are similar to the Left's. On labour reform, the Left will probably remain intransigent but, then, even the BJP government was unable to reform the labour laws.

The second short-term problem is the Cabinet. In my view, Dr. Singh is head and shoulders above his colleagues and contemporaries. Unfortunately, not all of his colleagues share my view. So, initially there will be some sniping and some envy. But it will, I expect, settle down soon enough.

The long-term problem is the familiar one of two power centers. There is no shortage of people within the Congress who will now make it their life's ambition to drive a wedge between Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi. Manmohan will be told that nobody takes him seriously; that Sonia still controls all the power. And Sonia will be told that Manmohan is sufficiently grateful to her and that he's working against her interests.

The trouble-makers will hope to succeed because Manmohan and Sonia are both relatively innocent people. But I suspect that the *Naradmunis* will fail because Manmohan and Sonia are also essentially decent people, willing to believe only the best of each other. They have worked together long enough to develop a mutual trust.

And if that trust endures, so will this government.

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A Gentleman and a Politician

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** Courtesy: The Telegraph. Kolkata.*

POLITICAL HUMOUR TENDS TO reinvent itself with changing times. An old joke, which did the usual rounds those days when Manmohan Singh was merely a finance minister, has found its way back into the circuit. Mr Singh, goes the gag, was once touring rural India when he came across a shepherd with his flock. "I bet I can say how many sheep you have there without counting them. If I'm right, will you give me the best of your flock?" Singh asked.

The man agreed, and was amazed when Singh told him the exact number in his flock. He was an honourable man, and asked Singh to choose the sheep. The good doctor picked up a particularly hairy and healthy-looking specimen and was about to walk away when the shepherd stopped him.

"I bet you are an economist. And if I am right, can I have my animal back?" he said to Singh. "How did you know that?" asked the puzzled Adam Smith prize-winner. "First let go of my dog, and then I will tell you," the shepherd replied.

Political jokes come with an unsaid Aesopian tag-line. The moral of the shepherd joke is simple: Manmohan Singh knows his numbers, but does he know a sheep when he sees one?

It's a question that is still being asked after India's first technocrat-Prime Minister took his oath of office. For long years – ever since the former bureaucrat became P.V. Narasimha Rao's finance minister in 1991 – most people viewed Manmohan Singh as an apolitical being. He was a gentleman, they argued, and therefore not a politician. But now it emerges that Dr. Singh, despite the obvious contradiction in terms, is a gentleman **and** a politician.

“ He may not be political player, but he is certainly a politician,” says a senior member of Manmohan Singh's Congress party. “He is a master political-economist,” adds Dr. Singh's Cabinet colleague, S. Jaipal Reddy.

Manmohan Singh's economic credentials, of course, are now being carefully aired. Ever since Congress president Sonia Gandhi decided to hand over the Prime Minister's crown to her trusted aide, his hitherto not-so-well-known story has been iterated and reiterated.

Everybody with even a passing interest in the media knows that the youth from village Gah now in Pakistan – was a class monitor when he was in the fifth standard, studied economics in Amritsar, topped both in his BA and MA examinations and went to Cambridge University on a grant to study economics at St. John College, before doing his DPhil from Oxford.

He taught at the Punjab University, joined the United Nations which he left for a teaching assignment in the Delhi School of Economics – only to be handpicked by Indira Gandhi's pointsmen for a plum post in the government. That was when Singh made his first politically significant move – he became the economic adviser to the ministry of foreign trade.

Since then, Singh's professional journey has taken an upward swing that would be the envy of many a blue-chip company. In the last three decades or so, he has been adviser to the finance minister, was appointed governor of the Reserve Bank of India and the deputy chairman of the Planning Commission. In the summer of 1991, P.V. Narasimha Rao called Dr. Singh, then heading the University Grants Commission, and asked him to be his finance minister. The bell was sounded, and Manmohan Singh took his first political bow.

There are some in the Congress who believe that Dr. Singh's impressive list of assignments underlines the political core of the new PM. “There are hundreds of brilliant bureaucrats at any given time,” says a minister in Singh's Cabinet. “But why is it that successive political leaders – from Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi to P.V. Narasimha Rao – chose out of so many others? Surely, that in itself would indicate his link with politics, the fact that he got along well with politicians,” he says.

Dr. Singh, a section in the Congress maintains, knows not just his sheep – but his onions as well. Observers refer to Rao's first address to the nation from the Red Fort, barely two months after he took over as PM. It was a populist address, supported by the finance ministry's tall promises of subsidies to the people.

Among the first things that Singh did on becoming the finance minister in the Rao government was to arrange for the repatriation of gold pawned by the Chandra Shekhar government. As a financial move, it was a weak measure that was hardly a

government priority. As a political move, however, it did wonders. It cashed in on the emotions of the average Indian who believed that pawning or selling of gold was the last-ditch effort of a family in financial trouble.

A few years down the line, Dr. Singh made his electoral debut as a candidate for the South Delhi Lok Sabha constituency. A group of academics and other intellectuals rallied behind him, but Singh lost to the Bharatiya Janata Party's V. K. Malhotra. "He may not be a politician of the kind that wins Lok Sabha seats and has a crowd doing '*zindabad-murdabad*' behind him," says a colleague. "But by no means can we say that he is not political."

Since then, Manmohan Singh – who now represents Assam in the Rajya Sabha – has been nurturing Kamrup like his own constituency. He's used a record 94 per cent of his local area development fund on the region.

Honesty is Manmohan Singh's middle name. Anybody who has worked with him would vouch for his integrity. And simplicity, his colleagues stress, is his calling card. When he was the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, his eldest daughter, a lecturer in history at Delhi's St. Stephen's College, was once asked what her father did. "He signs currency notes," she had replied. "You mean he sits and signs many millions of notes every morning?" was the incredulous reaction to that.

There are a great many stories about Singh's spartan ways. Like fellow economist Amartya Sen, he often moves around on a bicycle. When he gets off a plane, he doesn't have an entourage of sycophants or staff waiting for him. He is usually picked up by a relative and quietly walks out of the airport with his bags. He is a frugal eater, wife Gursharan Kaur told reporters, and gets upset if there are more than two kinds of vegetable dishes on the dinner table.

It's this squeaky-clean image of Singh that is going to be his bane as well as work to his advantage. It's not going to be easy for the "Mr. 10 per-centers" – as money making political henchmen are referred to – to function with Singh at the helm of affairs. Yet, at the same time, running a government calls for hobnobbing with the disreputable. "You have to be a man of letter to deal with him," says a political observer. "He won't know how to handle someone like Shibu Soren," he says.

Yet, Dr. Singh was comfortable working with Sitaram Kesri, the crafty, all-powerful ex-treasurer and president of the Congress. It was Kesri who put him in charge of a cell that looked into the party's economic and political policy. Kesri had also hoped to make him a party treasurer, and there was time when Dr. Singh was being viewed as the possible leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party. His services had earlier been used in Kashmir and in Punjab, where he is said to have fairly pleasant relations with the Akalis.

In fact, back in those days when Sonia Gandhi was still indoors and there was little to indicate that she would one day step out into the political limelight, Singh went to attend a function in Dehra Dun. He was presented with a portrait of Rajiv Gandhi painted by a young city girl. "But Singh refused to even touch the portrait," says a member of the audience. He left it behind in Dehra Dun, putting the district magistrate in a quandary because he didn't know what to do with the portrait.

But, then, it's not easy to imagine Mr. Singh travelling by the Shatabdi from Dehra Dun to Delhi, carrying a large portrait of the late Prime Minister. For if there is one thing that he has steadfastly steered clear of, it's the cult of sycophancy and

coterie. Some in the party believe that he will have to be mindful of a Punjab coterie that would like to surround him, though most insist that coterie will have a minimal role to play. "One of the best things about him is that he is greatly accommodating," says a minister. Adds Reddy: "Anyone driven by an ideology is a politician. Manmohan Singh adapts himself – and that's his ideology."

It is, quite possibly, this spirit that is going to chalk out the direction that the government is going to take in the next few months – especially in view of the Congress's lack of numbers in government. Dr. Singh's lieutenant, Jairam Ramesh, believes that the new government will direct its attention towards the much-neglected east. "The government will concentrate on agriculture," he says. "But it will move from a subsidy-based to an investment-oriented focus," says Ramesh. The spirit of accommodation would also entail that no hard decisions would be taken on foreign policy – at least not to begin with. Government insiders believe that not much will change on the Israel front, though the new regime would also voice its support to the Palestinian cause. "And as far as the Americans are concerned, our policy will be thus: no unnecessary *pangas* (confrontations), but we are not going to be a poodle either," says a party ideologue.

Dr. Singh's sense of fair play is a reason why coalition partners – despite some of the allies' reservations about his role in the no-holds-barred launch of economic reforms – believe that the government may leave a mark. "A coalition government is all about conciliation," says new minister Mani Shankar Aiyar. "The process of conciliation is the key to its survival," he says.

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