

Has the Moment Arrived?

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WELL, INDIA HAS ITS FIRST minority Prime Minister. It is a 'first' indeed – not only in India but, possibly in all the world's democracies. The country's chief executive from a minority community – imagine that happening in the U. K. or here in USA – both countries with excellent functioning democracies but not yet ready for this to happen. And how about France – the cradle of all revolutionary thought – to allow freedom of headgear to its citizenry.

Whatever the reason – or compulsion – and there is so much speculation; the only credible explanation for Manmohan Singh's elevation to the august office seems to be that perhaps the moment had arrived for it to happen. I don't mean it in a fatalistic way – though such thoughts cannot be far from our tradition – but also perhaps as a comment on the confluence of forces where this may well be the best answer. We look not only tolerant but also a mature society grown beyond our years in democratic tradition.

Be that as it may, eventually it is likely that something extraordinarily good may come out of it. Manmohan Singh has impeccable qualifications – his experience and his expressed thoughts can be reassuring; with his awareness he would be able to lead through ideas. I hope that happens, though I look askance at the choice of his team for one could not have taken on a more challenging task than managing a group that is so disparate.

"Surprising as it may seem, I am somewhat worried by this sort of arrangement. Sonia Gandhi will still be the power (behind the PMO) — I hope Dr. Singh will turn out to be his own man!" reads a comment on a web chat site. Very plausible concern; though, to me, it seems that as we go along we will find that he is his own man. He is nice; he is pleasant; he is polite; he is respectful, but he may not be a pushover. What is more, he may be too ready to retire. That is the way he has been. He has been through the experience of an attempt at being made a scapegoat after the 1999 election debacle that Congress suffered. At that time *Hindustan Times* reported "the attack against Manmohan Singh was led by Arjun Singh and Mani Shankar Aiyer, with Rajesh Pilot and Madhavsinh Solanki joining it at different points." He offered to quit the Congress Working Committee, but the situation was saved.

Reading from so many speeches, comments and interviews he gave one gets the impression that he has a sense of destiny. He sees the country at a point when things can happen to bring about changes that may impact lives of millions for the better, the country to place itself on a trajectory of growth suitable to its genius, its rightful place in the world community and in harmony with its traditional moorings. He seems always to set a high bar for what can be accomplished – converting crisis into opportunity. That is bold. That speaks of a deep-seated sense of optimism and hope. His humility and resolve are perhaps two facets of the same character trait.

How about the 'expectations' game? I hope his media advisers and spokespersons will be sensitive and carefully evaluate the risks inherent in raising

the expectations too high. Talk of a “squeaky clean” image, and “excellent economist and administrator” who can make economic miracles to happen may lead to high hopes at a level not easy to reach. Besides, a lot of cobwebs surrounding the national priorities and policy imperatives in the real world of 2004 are still to be sorted out. For example the analysts have been saying that BJP was ostensibly thrown out for sins of liberalization. Manmohan Singh said in a recent interview to *Rediff*. “There is no evidence that liberalization hurt, or hurts, the poor.” By extension, one would find the same kind of confusion between what the polls suggest and the policy that needs to be crafted to further national interests. Hopefully he will provide a clear vision in keeping with national needs, priorities and aspirations, and one that leads, motivates, inspires and connects with the people.

‘To be or not to be a politician’ is not a question any more. He is into politics – has been there for a long time and is not defensive about it. He is also cognizant of the need for - and the importance of - political activity for he says, “Politics and economics cannot really be separated. One needs politics to resolve economic problems.” He does also seem to be acutely aware of his lack of political base at the grassroots level. “It is nice to be statesman, but in order to be a statesman in a democracy you first have to win elections,” he has said.

Winning an election for a seat in the Lok Sabha may not be much of a challenge for him now. He can and will have the choice of several “safe” constituencies. Finding a base of some kind is another matter. With the eyes of the nation on him he will have to be very measured in making political assertions and display sensitivity to the feelings of the diverse segments of the community and interest groups. Hopefully his '99 election experience is not lost on him. His statement alleging BJP's involvement in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots did not help him with the Hindu voters causing him to lose his election bid.

Writing about his '99 campaign Syed Naqvi had said, “A refreshing feature of Manmohan Singh's campaign has been the quality of people who have been impelled to come out and address his meetings. — He has attracted serious writers, artists, economists, sociologists, and others who place some premium on the life of the mind. — From the earliest days of our Parliamentary democracy, there had been a growing hiatus between the peoples representatives and the elite.” Sounds good but the recent elections have proved again, if ever there was a doubt, **that support of the elite is not able to garner votes of the poor and struggling. He must use his limited political capital carefully. The elite tend to be fickle and judgmental yet they are a very important constituency but national elections are won by carrying the masses.** Talk of the elite – just look at what the savvy Indian American's chatter is saying: “I don't like this guy's economics. Sounds like water is about to cost more money in India.”

His days will be filled with new problems and fresh challenges in the same way as his predecessors would have experienced. Prioritization can be an exercise in juggling with both hands tied and ear to the phone. Nonetheless, in his case, being a Sikh, there is audible Internet talk that “Throughout the ugliness of the late-1980s – Sikh militancy and heavy-handed anti-insurgent government actions in Punjab – Manmohan Singh stayed completely out of politics related to Punjab or Sikh issues.” It may have been a prudent choice thus far, but given his national responsibilities

now, and being a Sikh, he may have an opportunity to help bring a healing touch to the community still traumatized at the happenings in 80's and 90's. - 'Operation Bluestar' and the organized massacre of innocent Sikhs in Delhi and other places post-Indira Gandhi's assassination.

With hardly any prosecutions so far and little headway in resolving underlying issues has left the community disillusioned and made the Sikh support to Congress very ambivalent. Yet presently Sikhs are supportive to a man for his success. I was in California on a visit recently and was at the San Jose Gurdwara on one Sunday. Speaker after speaker came up and said that, notwithstanding any differences with his politics, the community stands one with him. There is an undercurrent of optimism among the Sikhs and they are proud to have one of their own as Prime Minister. This well may be the opportunity to reach out, for righting the old wrongs and strengthening the fabric of Indian society. Sikhs have made contributions to Indian Union disproportionate to their numbers and deserve to be integrated as happy campers. Sonia Gandhi also seems conscious of the need. Maybe this is another thing whose moment might have arrived.

Several Sikh community activists in America have worked ceaselessly since Sep. 11 2001 to spread awareness about Sikhs among the mainstream. There is a hope that his being Prime Minister, and consequential media exposure, may benefit the community in making their job easier. They also hope that issues like the French ban on headgear and several similar questions connected with Sikh religious observances may tend to be viewed more empathetically. One can only hope though that these benefits flow, for what can also happen is that, in time, like all political leaders, he may become a fair target for jokes and stereotypes. I did find evidence of such concern on the Internet, e.g. "In Indian popular culture – jokes, songs, movies – there is a bit of disrespectful stereotyping that many Sikhs find irritating. Sikhs are often portrayed as emotional and simplistic.

A question that my American friends have asked me is, if I have known Dr Manmohan Singh. Their expectation is that we are all sort of country cousins. I have experienced it before though in different ways. I have been asked if I was related to the Fijian golfer Vijay Singh when he burst in on the scene. On another occasion when an Indian was named for some wrong doing, the President of our Employee Union came up and asked me if he was related to me. I literally threw the man out of my room. But in this instance I will not duck the question. I did meet with Dr Manmohan Singh in 1975 when I was with the Department of Defense Production. I had made certain recommendations on the level of certain strategic reserves and related financial outlays and we needed to convince the Chief Economic Advisor to the Minister for Finance. I along with K N Parsad, JS had an afternoon meeting with him in his North Block office and, needless to say, got his nod. I also find that we share another interest and that is membership of Delhi Gymkhana Club, though we have never met there – but then I have been living abroad since '88 and even earlier was based away at Hyderabad for several years.

I also share with him our status of hailing from the Pothohar (Rawalpindi) region. Earlier this year, when I visited Pakistan, along with a group of well known Christian, Jewish and Muslim scholars from the US and UK to participate in conference[s] on faith perspectives on global issues of peace and justice, I did use that opportunity to visit our ancestral villages. People who are old residents have nostalgia for the days

that were and they do have sort of confused feelings for Sikhs that can transform into great warmth almost instantly. I hope that Dr Manmohan Singh will succeed in breaking the long-standing animosity and mutual lack of trust between the Indo-Pak peoples so that peace can prevail in our neighborhood. My sense is that the country's Partition most adversely affected the Punjabis, more so the Sikhs. Peace will possibly create conditions for Sikhs to have easy access to their holy places, help in their care and heal their feeling of deep loss on that account.

Has the moment really arrived? Let us wait and see the story unfold.

