

Thank you, Mrs. Gandhi!

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I AGREE WITH MRS. SONIA GANDHI that the country is in a safe pair of hands.

Those of Dr. Manmohan Singh, the man I have known as my Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha. He is a rare thing in Indian politics – a gentleman who never led the “*hulla gulla*” brigade of the Congress. Dr. Singh was always the economics professor of the House, treating it like an extension of the D School. While I never had the privilege of attending Dr. Singh’s classes in D School, having myself studied in a village school, his speeches were like a tutorial for me.

I got the opportunity to initiate almost ten debates in the House on different economics issues in the past five years and it is Dr. Singh’s great humility that he listened to me like a professor listening to a student. Dr. Singh not only listened to me but also, on many occasions, complimented me, saying “spoke well”. His praise meant as much as an actor receiving an Oscar, but look where the praise was coming from - the father of economic reforms. After every debate, my colleagues from the Left would come up to me in the lobby and almost in a ritual, first congratulate me and then point fingers at Dr. Singh, saying he was responsible for the reform policies.

I have always observed this dichotomy in Dr. Singh while debating issues such as disinvestments of BALCO, Centaur, the Air India share scam and UTI. These issues cropped up due to the ‘economic reform.’

The cliché about the reforms mouthed by everyone, including the Left, is “reform with a human face”, even I always said this. Even today the new PM is still saying this. The country will now watch the reform messiah’s decisions. I, his non-formal student, will watch him in his new role from opposing to proposing. Same House, same issues, same policies and - still the Left in the middle. My position has now changed. I still expect Left support, but will my Professor still say “spoke well”?

Dr. Singh has always been cool, calm and collected, gifted with sincerity and farsightedness. Once I wanted to raise the issue of fake currency notes being pumped into the country by Pakistani’s ISI. After much ado the Chairman agreed to allow me to raise the issue. I was sitting in the chamber all set to raise the subject when Dr. Singh happened to come there. At that time the markets were in a slump. The moment Dr. Singh came to know, he told me: “Why do you want to create more panic in the markets?” I retorted that it was a critical issue for our economy. Dr. Singh in his imitable style said: “We need a healthy capital market and it is not necessary to raise each and every issue which can impact the market.”

Dr. Singh, the champion of the market, was the last word. I was never allowed to raise the issue as the chairman was convinced of his point of view. I chafed and, like a child denied his favourite toy, was upset. Realisation dawned later and after sulking for a couple of days, I realised that Dr. Singh was right.

There were controversies galore during the tenure of the NDA government such as Tehelka, Dangs, Gujarat riots, and so on and so forth. While leading the

opposition to the government, Dr. Singh always personified a picture of amazing grace. Picture this. The house is in complete uproar over Gujarat, passions run high. We were going all out to defend Narendra Modi, the Opposition was vociferously demanding his resignation. Final scene – the Opposition, left with no option, but to walk out. Dr. Singh gets up, the House falls silent – a privilege enjoyed by the Leader of the Opposition, that he has the right to speak at any point and as a convention the House will have to listen. Dr. Singh announces a walkout. The Opposition benches start trooping out. We are bewildered as to what happened.

Dr. Singh always announced a walkout in a whisper audible only to the Chairman, Pranab Babu and himself. Though I am known as a high-decibel MP, even I was impressed by Dr. Singh's class act. Even on the most volatile issues the opposition can be courteous.

I have always felt the Doctor's healing touch in the Rajya Sabha. Will the entire country now feel it?

Thank You, Mrs. Gandhi.

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