

The Inimitable Dr. Manmohan Singh

A 'London Times' Appreciation

AMIT ROY

DR. MANMOHAN SINGH MAY come to be seen as “the great politician of our age”, according to an end-of-decade review which appeared in *The Sunday Times*, Dec. 27, 2009.

The article by Bryan Appleyard, who pens weighty “think pieces” for the paper, confirms the Indian Prime Minister’s status as “a thoroughly good egg”, to use the kind of English slang of which P.G. Wodehouse, for one, would probably approve.

Dr Singh has been conferred honorary degrees Oxford and Cambridge universities.

The British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, always appears genuinely pleased to meet his “old friend” on occasions as disparate as the G20 summit in London and the Commonwealth heads of government meeting Trinidad and Tobago.

While some of the acclaim heaped on Singh results from the desire of others to forge closer links with India during a period when the country is seen as being on the rise, both economically and politically, at least, a portion of the praise is probably because of the man himself.

The British media, which practically ignored Pratibha Patil’s state visit on its own doorstep in October, covered President Barack Obama’s state banquet at the White House for the visiting Indian Prime Minister not as a politically significant development but more as a celebrity event.

Indira Gandhi, in marked contrast from the old days, always felt she was given a rough ride by the British press, which did not get any friendlier when she declared a state of emergency in 1975. But even before that, when she was facing a crisis not of her own creation with the looming civil war in East Pakistan in 1971, she received neither sympathy nor understanding in Washington.

A section of the Sikh population in the UK felt her son, Rajiv Gandhi, was involved in events leading the storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, with the result he received mixed reviews from the British media.

Prime Ministers since then have aroused no great feelings one way or the other, though Atal Bihari Vajpayee was recognized as being personally a decent man even though questions were being asked about the BJP’s attitude towards Muslims. Before him, Narasimha Rao got credit for opening India to the global economy.

The recession has made “thinking people” in the west aware that power is shifting to the east. While China is considered as the dominant economic power, more and more in the West are attracted by “the idea of India”.

In a recent editorial, the Guardian observed: “India is more than a country. It is also an idea, expressed by Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar. As India grows in regional importance, the challenge will be to express that idea clearly and attractively to others.”

When Dr. Singh was re-elected Prime Minister in May, Brown’s message of congratulation was not entirely routine.

“I have sent a message of congratulation – I believe it will be on behalf of the whole House (of Commons) – to Prime Minister Singh, who is very respected not only in the region but throughout the world,” he said.

In 2005, when Oxford, which had once also honoured Mrs Gandhi (but not Margaret Thatcher or Zulfikar Ali Bhutto), was conferring an honorary Doctor of Civil Law on Singh, *The Scotsman* newspaper noted that the leader of the world’s largest democracy was “an economist credited with crafting India’s economic liberalization policies during his tenure at the country’s finance ministry.”

As the British satirical magazine *Private Eye* would say, Dr Singh is now in danger of becoming “a legend in his own lunchtime.”

[Courtesy: *The Telegraph*]

