

Editorial



Letter and spirit

The new detention policy seeks to address a real issue, but it fails

Among the key school education reforms instituted by the UPA government as part of the Right to Education were Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) and a 'no detention' policy up to Class 8. Both sought to create a benign environment in school so that there was no pressure of final examinations and "standards" on the child. The CCE was to be executed from Class 6, in discrete steps throughout the year, which meant no scary final test of just academic achievement based on a year-long curriculum. Whether those reforms contributed to the current situation or not, the reality is that a significant number of students passing out of primary school do not have foundational numeracy and literacy. And they do not seem to catch up by the time they leave middle school. Recognising the gap in achieving learning outcomes, the NDA government sought to do away with the no detention policy, in 2019, leaving it to the appropriate State governments. The CCE was given up too. But the COVID-19 pandemic intruded and made it impossible for schools to even consider detaining students. The recent notification of the Ministry of Education has removed the discretion given to State governments. It has mandated a final examination at the end of Class 5 and Class 8, which will assess a child's competence. If he or she is not found to be competent, the child will be re-examined after two months after additional instruction. If the child fails again, he or she will be detained. The rules say no child should be expelled before completing elementary education.

Practical necessity is driving this change in norms. Steps do need to be taken to address the gap in the learning outcomes achievement. An educated, capable and skilled population is needed to reap the demographic dividend. It takes an entire neighbourhood to educate a child, not just the school and parents. The dismal situation in learning outcomes is a collective failure of society that needs to be addressed. But it would take a lot more than this particular change in policy to trigger a turnaround. CBSE-affiliated and other private schools can easily implement the new policy. However, for some States, it will be a political hot potato. Private schools should not use this as an excuse to expel poor performing students – safeguards would be needed. A sad consequence of the policy is that it brings back a single final examination as an arbiter of a child's promotion or detention. While NEET or the JEE may be taken as special cases applying to extremely competitive professions, to bring back one final test at the school level is a regression. The National Education Policy 2020, for instance, wants to replace summative assessment with formative, and promote self and peer assessments. It promises a "holistic, 360-degree, multidimensional progress report card" detailing the "progress and the uniqueness of each student". The new detention policy does not reflect the NEP's spirit.

Security in safety

Authorities must ensure public spaces are safe environs for all

People derive a sense of ease from what they perceive to be safe cloisters; that they their guard down in these areas and, relax. When an attack happens in safe environs, it would be a harsh betrayal of that sense of trust. In the recent case of sexual assault within the campus of Anna University, Chennai, there has not only been a vile violation of a young student's bodily integrity, but also, possibly as painful, a gross betrayal of trust. On December 23, in one of Tamil Nadu's top engineering institutes, Anna University, a public State-run institution, the engineering student and her friend, also a student, decided to take a walk after dinner. As they walked into a rather secluded neck of the woods, the horror began for them. A stranger there accosted the male companion, threatened him and then went on to sexually assault the girl. Traumatized by her ordeal, the girl called the police helpline – 100 – the next day, and a team from the all women's police station nearby reached the university and took her complaint. She gave a full account of the incident, assuring them that she would be able to identify the culprit if she were to see him again. On Wednesday, police arrested Gnaneswaran, a roadside vendor who has a bunch of petty cases against him, after he had been identified in an identification parade. Apparently, though not an employee, he used to frequent the varsity campus as his wife was a contract labourer employed by the university to work within the premises.

In the aftermath of the incident, the Higher Education Minister said more lights would be provided across the campus, and all the overgrown bushes trimmed. Efforts have also been initiated to regulate who enters the campus, by conducting an ID check before allowing visitors in. While the incident has provoked widespread outrage, it has also acquired varied political hues, with reactions from some quarters bordering on the absurd. What is essential is for the government to ensure, without a doubt, that every corner of all its educational institutions and their vast cloisters are safe for all students. Whatever needs to be done in aid of that should be done, costs notwithstanding. Additionally, the personal details of the complainant were revealed in the public realm, a clear violation of the law and repeated court guidelines. This too must never be allowed to happen another time. The alacrity displayed in apprehending the culprit should be extended to the filing of charges and securing a conviction for a just closure to this horrific crime.

Marginalised by caste, marginalised in education

Atul Kumar, the son of a daily wage worker and from the Scheduled Caste community, lost his seat at IIT Dhanbad after he was unable to pay the seat booking fee of ₹17,500 that was required to secure his admission. His case gained widespread attention on social media, prompting the Supreme Court of India to intervene by exercising its extraordinary powers under Article 142 to grant him admission. There are many and similar cases like Atul's, but which never draw media attention or receive justice, leaving many deserving students without opportunities due to financial constraints and systemic inequalities.

The rise in tuition fees

The struggles that Dalit students face echo the challenges of pre-independence India when they were barred from enrolling in educational institutions because of their caste. While these historical restrictions were overt, the situation now is more insidious. Under the "Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan", the Government of India has been pushing for self-reliance in institutions, leading to a significant increase in fees in many government colleges and universities such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT), the Indian Institutes of Management, the central universities, and the National Law University. For instance, in 2016, the IIT Council's standing committee agreed to increase the undergraduate tuition fees by 200%. This meant a fee increase from ₹90,000 to ₹3 lakh a year.

In response to the criticism regarding the fee increase, the committee set up by the government asserted that students from marginalised communities would benefit from the Vidyalakshmi scheme, which offers interest-free scholarships. However, while this initiative aims to provide support, it remains insufficient to fully address the financial challenges faced by these students, especially as fees continue to rise. The hike in fees that was implemented in seven IITs including increased tuition fees; IIM Lucknow hiked it by nearly 30%, IIM-Ahmedabad and IIM-Shillong by 5%, IIM Lucknow by 29.6%, IIM-Calcutta by 17.3%, IIM-Kozhikode by 23.1%, IIM-Ranchi by 19% and IIM-Tiruchirappalli by 20%. IIT-Delhi increased tuition fees for full-time M.Tech students in the semester in 2022-23. The total academic fee is now ₹53,100, which does not include hostel fees. This is a 100% increase from last year's fee of ₹26,450.

The frequent hikes in fees have made it increasingly difficult for students from the marginalised communities to afford higher education or even pursue studies through loans.



Sumant Kumar
Associate Professor at the Alliance School of Liberal Arts, Alliance University, Bangalore

With rising costs in the Indian education system, many students from the marginalised communities are unable to even consider enrolling in prestigious institutions such as the IITs and the IIMs despite securing competitive ranks. As a result, while some students manage to cope with the financial burden, there are others who are overwhelmed by the stress and the inequality in academic institutions. This pressure, exacerbated by the high cost of education, has a human angle too. In 2021, data showed that over the past seven years, 122 students from the IITs and the IIMs had ended their lives, many due to the financial strain of rising fees and the anxiety of securing employment.

The issue of dropouts

Another harsh reality is that many students who manage to enrol themselves in prestigious institutions eventually drop out due to their inability to afford rising education fees. The Human Resources Development Ministry reported that 2,461 students dropped out of IITs in just two years (2017 and 2018). Last year, this issue was raised in the Lok Sabha, revealing that over the past five years, more than 13,500 students from the Scheduled Castes (SC), the Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) had dropped out of courses in the central universities, the IITs and the IIMs. Government data showed that in the central universities, 4,596 students from the Other Backward Classes, 2,424 SC students, and 2,622 ST students dropped out during this period. In the IITs, 2,066 OBC students, 1,068 SC students, and 408 ST students left. Similarly, the IIMs saw 163 OBC, 188 SC, and 91 ST students drop out over the past five years. These numbers highlight the significant challenges faced by marginalised communities in accessing and sustaining higher education in India.

One of the key reasons behind the poor economic conditions of the Dalit community is that their identity in India is still largely defined by caste. Dalits continue to be denied the opportunity to perform work that is on a par with others in society. This has not only left them economically marginalised but also socially vulnerable. Dalits in India are considered an oppressed and discriminated class, often labelled as "untouchable". Historically, this stigmatisation has meant that Dalits have been denied access to education. The term "untouchables" also refers to those who have been forced into the most undesirable and degrading jobs. A recent survey in 29 States on urban sewer and septic tank workers revealed that 92% of these workers belong to Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled

Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC). A 2019 report by former Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal revealed that 95% of faculty positions in IITs were held by individuals from upper caste backgrounds, with only 5% allocated to SC, ST, and OBC categories, despite these groups representing 70%-80% of India's population. An RTI filed by IIT-Bombay students further exposed the disparities, showing that 24 departments had no SC faculty, 15 lacked ST representation, and nine had no OBC faculty. These statistics highlight the deep-rooted caste-based inequalities that persist in both employment and education.

The barriers still exist

After independence, with provisions in the Constitution and welfare mechanisms, Dalit school enrolment rates have improved over time. However, Dalit children continue to face significant barriers in education, including poverty, social discrimination, and caste-based prejudice. Dalit students are often judged based on their clothes, language, and other markers, making it difficult for them to integrate with their upper caste peers.

In many cases, caste-based remarks and discrimination would stand these students, leading to social isolation. Some students succumb to the emotional toll of this prejudice – there are cases such as a woman postgraduate medical student in a medical college in Maharashtra and two students from IIT Bombay and IIT Delhi that are painful reminders of this reality. These incidents underscore the persistent shadow of casteism and harassment over the aspirations of many Dalit students. This troubling situation raises a critical question: how can these prestigious institutions effectively address this issue and foster a safe, inclusive environment for all students?

The unfortunate incidents of student suicides point to the immense pressure students face in the education system. Many students are burdened by their families' expectations that completing a degree will solve their economic problems. But unemployment in India is also high. An RTI filed in 2024 about IIT placements showed that approximately 8,000 students (38%) across 23 IIT campuses remained unplaced this year. For students from the marginalised communities, this struggle is even more pronounced, as their caste identity often doubles the challenges they face in securing jobs. These issues underscore the pressing need for systemic reforms in education and employment to alleviate the pressures on students and address caste-based disparities.

Rules that still manacle the captive elephant

In India, where elephants are revered as sacred symbols of wisdom and strength, privately-held captive elephants live a stark contradiction. Reflecting on this grim reality, the Kerala High Court recently likened the lives of these captive animals to an "eternal Treblinka", drawing a poignant comparison to the infamous Nazi extermination camps. Elephants used for religious purposes, entertainment and tourism are subjected to much cruelty and forced to behave in unnatural ways. These social animals are subjected to isolation and abusive training methods to break their spirit. Although elephants have the highest protection under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, they have been at the forefront of practices that seek to capture them from the wild for a life in captivity.

New rules and loopholes

In its intent to regulate potential misuse of captive elephants in private custody and curb illegal captures from the wild, the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) published the Captive Elephant (Transfer or Transport) Rules in March 2024. These rules facilitate the transport and the transfer of elephants and also specify the procedure of transfer of ownership.

However, the ambiguity in procedures and rationale for transport and/or transfer of wild elephants could pave the way for further commercial exploitation. For instance, it states that when an owner is no longer able to maintain an elephant, the ownership of that elephant may be transferred. However, there is no obligation for this exchange to be non-commercial. Elephants can, therefore, be traded as movable property.

The rules also provide for transport of the elephants temporarily. Again, there is no explicit requirement to justify the transportation of a privately owned elephant across or within State borders on an interim basis. States with a high



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number of privately owned elephants could potentially leave their elephants to serve as props, from religious ceremonies to weddings to political rallies. These are activities that compromise the welfare of elephants even as they objectify and commodify them. This regularisation of the transfer of elephants for religious activities, tourism, or any other commercial ventures effectively contributes to the economic valuation of elephants, treating them as tools for generating income. Thus, the legislation could be misused by private elephant owners to essentially "rent out" their animals, which risks incentivising the capture of wild elephants and directly undermines elephant conservation.

Microchip misuse, births in captivity

As of January 2019, there were 2,675 documented captive elephants in the country, with a deeply disturbing implication. It has been reported that when these animals die, they are replaced by elephants captured from the wild. Most captive elephants were microchipped as part of a 2002 initiative that Project Elephant launched to track all captive elephants in India that have valid certificates of ownership. Anecdotes suggest that these microchips are retrieved from an elephant posthumously and then inserted into an elephant caught in the wild to legalise an illicit capture.

Despite this popular *modus operandi*, the Rules do not require the removal and the destruction of microchips implanted in captive elephants, which should be done in presence of forest officials. Moreover, the Rules do not require the submission of a post-mortem report in cases where an elephant dies during transfer or transportation, leaving a critical gap in monitoring and accountability. Worse, this fuels the never-ending cycle of elephants in captivity. This cycle is perpetuated by a provision in the Rules that recognises the birth of calves in captivity, allowing them to be legally classified as

owned captive elephants.

What is required instead, is a mandate to implement humane, non-invasive birth control measures for elephants in private custody, to break the cycle of commercial exploitation and prevent more elephants entering captivity through birth. Additionally, a shift from using live elephants in temples, processions, and tourism to alternatives such as electronic elephants is crucial. Civil society, temple committees and the government should lead this change to protect wild elephants.

The trade between States

Further, there are numerous reports of elephants being transported from the northeastern States to the southern and western States. One such instance involved an elephant being "gifted" to a Delhi temple by a private owner in Assam. Unfortunately, in all these transfers, the new rules have served as an enabling agent for trade in an endangered species.

In August, following reports and objections submitted by this writer and others, the Elephant Project, under the aegis of MoEFCC, took action. It issued an office memorandum that flagged the illegal transfers of captive elephants. The memorandum reiterated the need for the strict adherence to Captive Elephant (Transfer or Transport) Rules, 2024 and emphasised the mandatory digitisation of the genetic profiles of captive elephants. The Ministry's efforts to address captive elephant transfers are commendable. Yet, they fail to adequately remedy these key issues in the Rules.

Regrettably, the legislation lacks the teeth to ensure the meaningful protection of captive elephants. Without language that speaks the welfare of elephants and safeguards them from any form of commercial exploitation, the paradox of the elephant being venerated as a sacred animal while also being the most exploited wild animal will persist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Manmohan Singh

The passing of former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh will be felt for long (December 27). Yet in his lifetime, he could best be faulted on being reticent, more correctly lacking a liberal tongue to grandstand on a Dalit theme or denigrating leaders in the Opposition at the drop of a hat. He went about his remit assiduously, much as a cricketer.

He was the first Prime Minister who felt safe. He was a leader who was

respected by all and all. There was no deviousness and no vile and polarising talk. There was much respect for the diversity in India's demography.

Tara Fonseca,
Ponda, Goa

India has lost a tall leader. When he was the Prime Minister, we felt safe. He was a leader who was

respected by all and all. There was no deviousness and no vile and polarising talk. There was much respect for the diversity in India's demography.

Tara Fonseca,
Ponda, Goa

Dr. Manmohan Singh was a rare leader whose statesmanship and decency resonated across the political divide. He was the first Prime Minister who saw the tomorrow. The way he

shepherded the civil nuclear deal was a master move, earning him the moniker, 'Singh is King'. The gentle sardar of politics will continue to inspire us.

Dr. A.S. Farida,
Bengaluru

Dr. Manmohan's legacy is

Corrections & Clarifications
In the front page report, "Nation mourns former PM Manmohan Singh..." (December 27, 2024), the name of his wife was mentioned as Gurcharan Singh. It should have been Gursaran Kaur.

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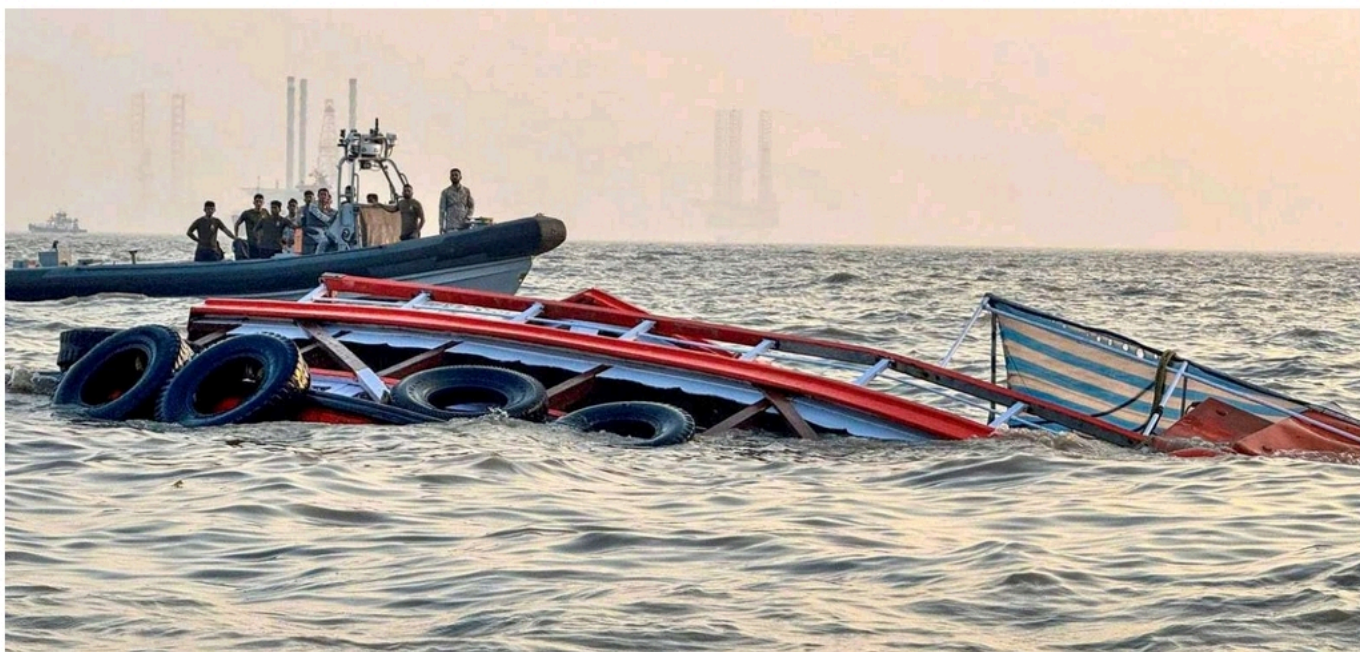
time tested and he will be remembered forever in the history of the country. He steered the country in two different junctures and ushered in a new era of liberalisation, redefining democracy in his own way.

Sateesh Reddy Kanaganti,
Thirupathy, Nalagonda, Telangana

Manmohan Singh's journey, from humble beginnings to the pinnacle of Indian leadership, is an inspiring tale of intellect and perseverance. He will remain a symbol of transformative leadership and public service. His legacy of progress will inspire generations.

Amarjeet Kumar,
Nazaribagh, Jharkhand
Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name.

GROUND ZERO



Rescue work underway after a ferry capsized off the coast of Mumbai when a Navy speedboat crashed into it on December 18, 2024. PTI

In Mumbai, a joyride that turned fatal

On December 18, a collision between a ferry and an Indian Navy speedboat in the Arabian Sea off the coast of Mumbai claimed 15 lives, raising concerns about safety and alleged negligence by the Navy. **Snehal Mutha** reports on the tragedy, the problem of overcrowding, the lack of adequate life jackets for passengers on ferries, and the complaints of ferry operators regarding the Navy's speedboats

It was at noon on December 18 that Tanvi Wakchaure saw her father, Deepchand, for the last time. Deepchand, a 45-year-old plumber, had dropped Tanvi, 17, at college in Govandi, an eastern suburb of Mumbai. He did not tell her where he was headed to next.

When he did not return by night, Deepchand's family, who live in the same area, started getting worried. "We began calling his friends one by one," says Tanvi.

They learned that Deepchand, an avid explorer, had boarded a ferry to Elephanta Island, located 9 nautical miles off the coast of Mumbai from the Gateway of India. Every day, about 3,000 people visit the UNESCO world heritage site, says Sardar J. Mahadkar, president of Jal Vahatuk Sahakari Sanstha Maryadi, an organisation representing ferry owners. The island is home to the rock-cut Elephanta Caves, which were constructed in the mid-5th and 6th centuries AD and reflect Hindu and Buddhist iconography.

"He liked to explore the city," says Deepchand's friend, Chandrakant Hevale. "That happened to be one of those days. When we found out that he had boarded the ferry and there had been an accident in the Arabian Sea, we rushed to the Colaba police station in the early hours of December 19." The Colaba police station is located about 600 metres from the Gateway of India.

The police asked the family and friends to go to the state-owned J.J. Hospital. On rushing to the hospital, the family found Deepchand's body.

"Just a day earlier, he and my mother had celebrated their wedding anniversary," remembers a distraught Tanvi.

At around 3.30 p.m. on December 18, an Indian Navy speedboat had rammed into the passenger ferry not far from Elephanta Island. The ferry capsized. Thirteen people, including Deepchand, died. Two remained missing, including a child. On December 19 and 21, their bodies were also recovered. The death toll increased to 15.

In deep water

Every day, during the off season (the rainy months of July-October), at least 25-30 rides are scheduled from the Gateway of India, an arch built in the Indo-Islamic style in the 20th century to commemorate the landing of King George V in India, to Elephanta Caves. During holiday season (October-January), this number increases to 50 or even 100, says Sardar.

On December 18, the last ferry of the day, Neel Kamal (blue lotus), had left the Gateway at 3:00 p.m. Neel Kamal had a capacity of 80 passengers, but it was carrying 110-115 passengers that day, says an investigation officer on the case from the Colaba police station.

Natharam Chaudhry, 24, a carpenter based in Kurla, was on the upper deck, enjoying the breeze, when the ferry was around 20 minutes from its destination, the Gharapuri jetty at Elephanta Island. He says many of his co-passengers were lounging on the lower deck.

Natharam was among the first to spot the Navy speedboat, but there seemed to be no cause for alarm. "I was fascinated, so I started shooting the speedboat with my phone camera," he says.

The speedboat took two sharp turns before

We raised concerns regarding the speed limits of the speedboats and about possible accidents

IQBAL MUKADAM
Secretary of Jal Vahatuk Sahakari Sanstha

hurling towards the ferry. It rammed into the right side of the vessel "with a loud bang, like an earthquake," Natharam recollects. "We ran downstairs. The ferry started sinking on the right side, so everyone congregated on the left side."

Realising that there was no way he could balance himself on the sinking ferry, Natharam grabbed a life jacket, strapped it on, and jumped with his cousin and uncle into the cold water.

"The moment I jumped in, I thought of my parents. I panicked about what they would do without me. People were in the water shouting for help," he says.

Natharam went blank for a bit after that, but it was this quick-thinking action that saved his life. His uncle and cousin survived too.

Survivors allege that the ferry did not have enough life jackets. One survivor says, "The people who managed to access life jackets managed to live, while some others drowned."

Natharam was the complainant in the First Information Report (FIR) registered at the Colaba police station against the Navy speedboat which was carrying two Navy personnel and four workers. The driver of the Navy speedboat has been booked under Sections 106(I) (causing death by negligence), 125 (actions that endanger personal safety), 282 (rash navigation of a vessel), and 324 (mischievous causing damage to government or local authority property) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023. Natharam's video is now being treated as evidence by the police.

Within a few hours of the accident, the Indian Navy released a statement. It said that the speed boat, which was undergoing engine trials, "lost control and collided with a passenger ferry, Neel Kamal, off Karanja, Mumbai."

A Defence spokesperson explained the accident: "The throttle (acceleration) was stuck in the top position, preventing them from taking a turn or slowing down the boat."

Of the 115 people who were rescued, 13 people — one Navy personnel and 12 civilians, including three workers on the speedboat — were declared dead by Mumbai's civic body and Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis. By December 21, two missing bodies were recovered from the sea.

The Chief Minister announced financial assistance of ₹5 lakh to the families of the dead. The Prime Minister's Office also announced an ex-



A video grab shows the speedboat before it crashed into the passenger ferry. PTI



When I reached the spot, I found that nearly 95% of the ferry had sunk. Approximately 50 people, including children, were clinging to the tiny bit that remained above water.

ANMOL SHRIVASTAV
Captain of the JNPA pilot boat

gratia of ₹2 lakh for each family of the dead and ₹50,000 for the injured from the Prime Minister National Relief Fund. The Indian Navy has constituted a Board of Inquiry to probe the accident.

The rescue operation

The survivors say they received help within 20-30 minutes of the accident.

A Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) patrol boat and a Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority (JNPA) pilot boat were the first to reach the spot. "We heard people screaming for help. We saw some people holding children tight and some clinging on to the boat, which was partially submerged in the water. We first focused on rescuing children," says a CISF officer, who was patrolling a 2-3 kilometre radius from the accident spot.

The officer says the biggest challenge was oil spillage. "The diesel from the ferry had spilled on the passengers. It became difficult for us to hold them and haul them up from the water as they kept slipping from our hands."

The captain of the JNPA pilot boat, Anmol Shrivastav, says he heard a distress call on radio channels 12 and 13 from an oil tanker, Tony, moored at Jawahar Dweep 5, a jetty at the Jawahar Dweep oil terminal on an island off the coast of Mumbai. The tanker reported that a ferry was sinking and requested urgent assistance.

"I checked my location and realised that I was only about five minutes from the incident site. When I reached the spot, I found that nearly 95% of the ferry had sunk. Approximately 50 people, including children, were clinging to the tiny bit that remained above water. There were 20-25 people floating nearby. Some were wearing life jackets and some were not," says Anmol.

Eleven Navy boats, three Marine Police boats, two Coast Guard boats, and four helicopters were also deployed in the area for the search-and-rescue operation, says a Defence spokesperson.

Along with the help of CISF personnel, the JNPA rescued 57 people, says Anmol. "The CISF's boat was lower in the water, allowing easier transfers. Together, we created a chain of rescue operations. The CISF pulled people from the water and transferred them to our pilot boat."

Later, the Mumbai Port Authority (MPA) pilot boat, Purva; the Naval ferry, Suvidha; and two fishing boats also began assisting in the rescue operations. Arif Banne, a master (boat driver) with the MPA, says, "All we could hear was 'bachao bachao' (help, help). It felt like a scene from a film. A foreign couple helped us in rescuing people and performing CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) on those who were critical." The MPA helped in rescuing at least 35 passengers, he says.

The passengers also helped one another. "A German man who could swim well helped rescue a three-year-old child and gave him CPR. He also helped us rescue other passengers," says Anmol.

All the passengers were taken to the JNPT Hospital, the Navy Dockyard, Ashwini Hospital, St George's Hospital, and Karanja Hospital. The passengers were mostly from other districts, including Sangli, Dhule, Nagpur, and Nashik; and Goa and other regions.

The autopsy of 11 out of the 15 dead was carried out at the Indira Gandhi Rural Hospital in Uran in Navi Mumbai. "The reason for the death was asphyxiation due to drowning," said Medical Superintendent Dr.B.M. Kale. The rest were taken to J.J. Hospital.

Navy personnel Karmveer Yadav is still in a critical stage and undergoing treatment. Two people, a six-year-old boy and a 43-year-old man, went missing after the accident. Six Navy and three Coast Guard personnel were deployed to

search for them.

On December 19, the rescue team found the body of the man, identified as Hansaram Bhati, a Malad-based proprietor. The next afternoon, they found the body of the boy identified as Zohan Pathan.

Hansaram's son Tarun, who had held the hands of Natharam Chaudhry and his cousin, was rescued. Since then, he has been in a state of shock. "Tarun has got a fever and is constantly asking about his father," says Jongaram Bhati, 58, Hansaram's brother.

Zohan had come to Mumbai on vacation with his family from Goa. While his maternal aunt, his father, and his 10-month-old brother survived the accident, Zohan and his mother Shafina Pathan, 35, died in the accident.

Sitting outside the Indira Gandhi Hospital in Uran, his maternal aunt, Sonali Gonde, recalls the tragic turn of events. "My sister and her elder son went down to the lower deck looking for a life jacket. She informed me that no life jackets were left, so I asked her to come up. But when I looked down she was gone. All I had were her chappals in my hand. We had shopped for those in Colaba market before taking the ferry ride." Sonali says her sister died because there were not enough life jackets on the ferry.

While the owner of the ferry, Rajendra Padte, refuses to respond to questions, his brother, Shekhar, had only one thing to say; "The ferry was new. It was launched just a year ago."

Trials and tribulations

Locals and ferry owners demand to know why the Navy was conducting trials in an area that is extensively used by ferries. "For the last 3-4 years, the ferries have been tolerating all kinds of shenanigans by the Navy boats. They perform stunts and sometimes come very close to the ferry," claims a tourist guide, Trikal Patil.

Kavita, who sells caps at Elephanta Caves, echoes this allegation. She says, "In the last 5-6 years, we have seen altercations between people in the ferry and Navy personnel."

A Defence spokesperson dismissed these allegations. "This is not a joyride [for the Navy]. It is for the safety of the harbour. The nature of trials is to check extremities. These may seem like stunts but they may be part of trials."

The secretary of Jal Vahatuk Sahakari Sanstha, Iqbal Mukadam, points out that several oral and written complaints have been lodged with the Maharashtra Maritime Board and the Mumbai Port Authority about the movements of the Navy's speed boats. "We raised concerns regarding the speed limits of the speed boats and about possible accidents," he says. Minor collisions between ferry boats and Navy boats have been reported in the past, he adds.

In fact, on December 12, a few days before the accident, Jal Vahatuk Sahakari Sanstha had written a letter to the authorities about the "unauthorised speedboat berthing from jetty 1,2,3, and 4", instead of using "dedicated jetty 5". The letter also cited safety concerns and warned about the risk of accidents.

On December 19, given the mounting concerns about safety, especially after the accident, the Gateway of India is less crowded than usual. A man sitting at a ticket counter made out of tin sheets says, "Today, we have very few passengers."

The police have sprung into action and are busy counting passengers, checking life jackets, and the licences of ferries. A police officer, Jayesh Chavan, who has been stationed at the base of Elephanta Island, says, "This is a routine inspection. But due to the accident, we are being more careful than usual."

The survivors continue to deal with the trauma of the incident. Ishiyak and Arha, a newly married couple, had landed in Mumbai after their honeymoon in Kashmir. "They thankfully survived the accident," says the couple's uncle, Rafique Shrivra. "But they are so distressed that they have decided to stay away from all water bodies, especially the sea."

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[OUR TAKE]

An emblem for the India story

Mamohan Singh's life and work are entwined with post-Independence India's transformation from a poor country to a global power

Gentle. Erudite. Transformational. A man of uncommon wisdom. Strong leader. Weak leader. Reluctant king. Helpless. Many monikers have been used over the last three decades to describe the life and legacy of Mamohan Singh, who died after a long ailment on Thursday night. But the truth is that the mild-mannered economics scholar's life — both personal and professional — was emblematic of the India story in all its glorious complexity.

Born to a father who worked as a clerk and a mother who died young, Singh was representative of the post-Partition generation that yearned to leave behind the tragic communal carnage that followed Independence, and build a better future for their families. Singh chose education as his vehicle of mobility, worked hard and took the conventional way up the socioeconomic ladder. Singh rose through the academic world before joining government service and served as the deputy chief of the Planning Commission and the governor of the Reserve Bank of India. The scholar-turned-politician represented the zeal and impatience of a generation held back by the Licence-Permit Raj. When in one fell swoop, Singh unleashed the potential of the Indian market. In June 1991, he also laid the foundation for the middle class. As the Indian economy entered the fast lane of the global highway and picked up pace, the political risks that the likes of Singh and then Prime Minister (PM) PV Narasimha Rao took were proven to be well worth their effort.

In his two terms as PM, Singh embraced the contradiction — he was a technocrat who gave importance to social protections; he green-lit both Aadhaar and the world's largest rural jobs programme; he was a quiet internationalist who pushed for better India-US ties and even bet his government on the stance, but was also conscious about shielding India from the vagaries of the global economy; he championed economic growth and presided over a boom that created enormous wealth but was not blind to the lopsided nature of that growth. It is here that the limitations of Singh's politics came to the fore. He represented the pitfalls of incremental progress and political compromises without structural changes. As corruption cases dented his government's reputation and even corroded his personal appeal, Singh appeared reticent, unable or unwilling to make the drastic changes required to get his administration back on track. In his setbacks, Singh underlined that the India story needs constant attention and innovation, lest global vicissitudes and structural deficiencies derail it.

But more than anything, Singh represented the hope inherent in a country that established a Republic against all odds, pulled millions of people out of poverty and fed them when none thought it possible, and established a stable democracy tolerant of its multiple faiths, creeds and languages. His ascension suggested that by dint of hard work and integrity, the common man can make a difference. He embodied the transformative power of education. He wore the badge of secularism proudly, highlighting his Sikh heritage to argue that the constitutional promise of equality extended to all communities. And he showed that decency and civility are not weaknesses but strengths. That will be the legacy of India's 13th prime minister — a man who tried to give every Indian the opportunity for a better life, even if he couldn't always ensure it.

[INCIDENTALLY]
Gopalkrishna Gandhi

Prime minister, great economist, a greater ethicist

Mamohan Singh showed that honesty could be at home in politics, and politics in honesty

An outgoing diplomat is of little or no importance to a Leader of the Opposition (LoP). But when, in the July of 2000, just before moving to Colombo, I sought to call on the then LoP in the Rajya Sabha, Dr Mamohan Singh, I was surprised to get a date at once. As I entered Dr Singh's modest room 43 in the old Parliament House, I saw there was no one fussing over him, no one hinting to me that I should do this or not do that. The leader rose warmly from his seat and showing me to a chair, congratulated me on my appointment and asked: "So, Gopal, what would you advise the Congress to do or say?" I was aware that I was going as a National Democratic Alliance (NDA) appointee, identified for the post by Prime Minister (PM) Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and here was an Opposition stalwart asking me to advise him on Sri Lanka.

Politics need not always politic; nor diplomacy speak in whispers. I said what I thought was the right course, namely that the rights of the Tamils in Sri Lanka should not be conflated with the demands of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and that India must press for a political solution that meets the aspirations of the Tamil people with the sovereignty of Sri Lanka staying intact. By the time we finished, I had spent 45 minutes with one who I would never have imagined would be PM of India, four years from that day. He had asked me the most incisive question: "I think through crucial aspects of India-Sri Lanka ties. I was moved when, as I left, he said, 'Gopal, you go with my blessings.'"

Governors rank high in protocol, low in political priorities. I had no illusions about where I stood in the pecking order of value

when Dr Singh and Gurnsharan Kaur came to Kolkata, early in 2005. The few minutes of exclusive glory that governors get when driving with a visiting PM from the airport to Raj Bhavan, are coveted by them. There is a sense of exclusiveness to the conversation in the hush of that vehicle. I cherished every moment of that drive for I was new to my job, as he was to his, and I wanted to be mentored in my responsibilities, in a crash course by this man who was in politics but not of it, in power but as its handler, not exploiter.

I got the lessons I expected in the first few minutes of that drive. Not a harsh word was said, but every "stroke" of his descriptions of things in West Bengal was a masterstroke. As we neared Raj Bhavan, he asked me who the last British governor of Bengal was. When I told him of Sir Frederick Burrows, a railway union leader appointed by PM Clement Attlee, he was most interested. And he laughed as audibly as anyone ever heard Dr Singh laugh when I told him of Burrows saying at a party of Calcutta burra bhais, "When you gentlemen were huntin' and shootin', I was huntin' and shootin'."

I can well imagine Jawaharlal Nehru, on a visit as PM to Calcutta, calling on a veteran politician from outside his own party. Mamohan Singh called on former chief minister (CM) Jyoti Basu. This was a courtesy visit, not a political thing and certainly not a party-politics

IT IS A THOUSAND PITIES THAT THE INDO-US NUCLEAR CIVILIAN DEAL COMBUSTED THE UNITED PROGRESSIVE ALLIANCE'S MUCH-NEEDED COLLABORATION WITH THE LEFT, WHICH HAS CAST A LONG SHADOW OVER INDIA



Civility has shrivelled, decency withered, in the departure of a great economist and a greater ethicist loaned to politics for its redemption. Dr Singh was in office, not in a war-room. His table was a desk, not a battle-board.

affair. And so, I accompanied him and Mrs Kaur to the octogenarian Marxist. "Please advise us," the PM said to one who could well have been PM himself, listening to the sage counsel that he got, as a student might from a teacher.

Civility in public affairs need not be in the nursery class of politics. Dr Singh asked me to my complete surprise: "Would you like to go to Gujarat (as governor)?" I said without a moment's hesitation, I would not, for I would not like to go to a state where my appointment would be seen as a counter to the CM. He indicated that he saw the point by a faint and silent smile.

He told me that he valued the then CM Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's political integrity. It is a thousand pities that the Indo-US nuclear civilian deal combusted the United Progressive Alliance's (UPA) much-needed collaboration with the Left, a break that has cast a long and lengthening shadow over India. Impulse can be good in the service of human relations, not always so in political ties. Frank consultations could have averted the break.

On another visit, Dr Singh was invited to inaugurate a football tournament in Kolkata. The ball was placed near but not too near the

goalpost for his inaugural "kick". With one determined move of his right foot, he sent the ball tearing into the net. The city that loves Diego Maradona applauded.

At dinner with my wife and me in Kolkata's Raj Bhavan, no politics was even thought of, much less discussed. And the fare was frugal, exactly as the visiting couple wanted. When all of us had done, he rose and waited for my wife, his junior by some three decades, to pass the dining room door before exiting himself.

Civility has shrivelled, decency withered, in the departure of a great economist and a greater ethicist loaned to politics for its redemption. Dr Singh was in office, not in a war room. His table was a desk, not a battle-board. His pen wrote, not decreed. The world is clever but is no fool. Though liable to err, it knows who is who and what is what. It admires the powerful for it must deal with power, but it respects the honest. Syntaxis is the Hindustani for politeness, shariat for honesty. Mamohan Singh showed that shariat could be at home in syntaxis, and syntaxis in shariat.

Gopalkrishna Gandhi, a former administrator, is a student of modern Indian history. The views expressed are personal

Making policy for the last man in the queue

I was finance secretary in Delhi when I was appointed governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in September 2008. Before moving to Mumbai, I went to call on Prime Minister Mamohan Singh to thank him for the confidence he reposed in me. It was a brief meeting — just about 15 minutes. We talked about the economic situation, of course — the government's fiscal challenges as well as RBI's unlikely problem of deciding the rupee against appreciation.

After about 10 minutes of this, I said: "Sir, you were governor of RBI yourself. Do you have any advice to give me?" Dr Singh very characteristically demurred with that faint smile of his which you saw more in his eyes than on his lips. "What advice do I give you, Subbarao? You've been in the IAS, you know the country, you know the government, and you are familiar with RBI. Do what you think is best for the economy. I am sure you will do well," he said.

After a couple of minutes, I took leave of him. As I got up, he rose from his chair, came from around the table and escorted me to the exit. At the door, he put his hand on my shoulder and said: "Subbarao, you asked for my advice a moment ago. I do want to give you one piece of advice. You are moving from the IAS into RBI. That's a big change. Unlike in the IAS,

in RBI, you run the risk of getting lost in numbers like inflation, interest rate, money supply and credit growth, and you will tend to forget how all this matters to people and their livelihoods. Keep your ear close to the ground."

My mind was so clogged at the time to wind up all the things that I had to do to win up in Delhi and move to Mumbai that Dr Singh's advice disappeared from my head within a minute of after I left his office. The real point of his advice came to me when I cut my teeth into the RBI job over the next few months. Consider this. In the lead-up to the policy review every quarter, RBI runs through a standard drill of consulting all stakeholders — banks, non-bank finance companies, economists, and markets. No governor has ever said: "No, get me 25 ordinary people from the street as it were. I want to consult them on inflation, jobs and other things that matter to them."

What RBI does matters to people's everyday lives. Yet RBI neglects to consult those everyday people. Inflation after all is a regressive tax. It hurts the poor more than it hurts the well-off. Keeping an eye on them was what Dr Singh was telling me through his doorstep advice. Mamohan Singh had great regard for RBI and understood the need to preserve its autonomy. Differences between the government and



Duvvuri Subbarao



An endearing quality of Dr Singh was his keenness to understand the ground situation.

RBI on policy direction are not unique to any one government or any one RBI governor; in some sense, they are hardwired into the system. Those differences showed up during the UPA government as indeed they are showing up today during the National Democratic Alliance government. That is par for the course.

Those differences, however, become sharper when the economic situation is grim and complex as was the case during United Progressive Alliance II (2009-14). Recall there was much talk of policy paralysis within the government and there was fear of stagflation — low growth and high inflation. I had differences with the finance ministers of that time — Pranab Mukherjee and P Chidambaram — on policy directions. To his enormous credit, Dr Singh never interfered in the policy action. Whenever I went to brief him on our proposed policy

action, "I hope you've settled this with the finance minister" was all he'd say. I never felt comfortable with this bit of the conversation, but I would nevertheless tell him of the finance minister's reservations and the matter would end there.

An endearing quality of Dr Singh was his keenness to understand the ground situation. He once asked me, from out of the blue, if banks were functioning normally in extremism-affected areas. I was deeply embarrassed because it never occurred to me to probe that question. Another time he asked me about farmers' suicides in my home state of Andhra Pradesh and at another time how the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNRGA), the employment guarantee scheme, was actually working at the field level.

I was a mid-level official in the finance ministry in 1991 when India unleashed the blitzkrieg of reforms that changed the course of our history. Dr Singh's first budget speech where he famously invoked Yogi Berra to say: "No force on earth can stop an idea whose time has come" would surely go down as one of the most iconic budget speeches in India's economic history.

In one of his last media interactions, Dr Singh said that history will be kinder to him (than real-time critics and commentators). That certainly will be true of this thoughtful, scholarly, humble and mild-mannered man who served the country with great dignity and distinction.

Duvvuri Subbarao was governor, Reserve Bank of India (2008-13), and is now visiting faculty at Yale. The views expressed are personal

Reformist leader, who was in step with history

Mamohan Singh leaves a legacy of bold economic reforms, and a leadership style marked by decency and grace. He will be remembered for many things, but it is the ordinary human qualities that stand out.

Two episodes are telling. As finance minister in the 1990s, he had to devalue the currency. He had just returned from Geneva having served as chief of the South Commission there. He calculated the rupee gain due to the drastic devaluation decision and donated it to the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. Another story is from the time he fought the parliamentary elections and lost. He had taken a loan for his campaign expenses, which he returned to Khuswant Singh, much to the surprise and amusement of the latter. He had not expected

a net to return the borrowed money. Singh's passing away is truly the end of an era. From humble beginnings, a Partition refugee, he rose to great eminence through sheer hard work and perseverance. His life ran parallel to the rise of India, from an impoverished and illiterate nation under British rule to becoming the fifth-largest economy in the world today. He studied at Cambridge and Oxford, having won scholarships, and came back to teach at Panjab University and later, at the prestigious Delhi School of Economics. At Cambridge, he topped the Economics Tripos and was awarded the Adam Smith Prize, one of only four Indians to win that prize. His PhD thesis at Oxford — later his 1964 book, *India's Export Trends and Prospects for Self-Sustained Growth* — was an advocacy



Ajit Ranade

to return the borrowed money. Singh's passing away is truly the end of an era. From humble beginnings, a Partition refugee, he rose to great eminence through sheer hard work and perseverance. His life ran parallel to the rise of India, from an impoverished and illiterate nation under British rule to becoming the fifth-largest economy in the world today. He studied at Cambridge and Oxford, having won scholarships, and came back to teach at Panjab University and later, at the prestigious Delhi School of Economics. At Cambridge, he topped the Economics Tripos and was awarded the Adam Smith Prize, one of only four Indians to win that prize. His PhD thesis at Oxford — later his 1964 book, *India's Export Trends and Prospects for Self-Sustained Growth* — was an advocacy

against the then prevailing export pessimism. It took another three decades for India to adopt exports also as a driver of economic growth.

The economic reforms he unleashed in 1991, with the dismantling of the Licence Raj, deregulation of banking, and opening of the economy for trade and foreign investment are some of Singh's most prominent achievements as finance minister. He quoted Victor Hugo in his national budget speech on July 24, 1991, saying: "No power on earth can stop an idea whose time has come." That idea was the emergence of India as an economic power, driven by its youthful demography and entrepreneurial dynamism, unleashed by the bold reforms.

The cautious and reserved nature buttressed Singh's consultative style and co-opting of diverse views. He set up committees to chart out reforms in banking, insurance, and taxation, chaired by appropriate eminent persons. Singh brought an unusual combination of skills as an economist and scholar, administrator, regulator and also politician.

Later, as Prime Minister (PM), his consultative style sought decisions and results amidst strong differences among members within his party and among coalition partners. During his tenure, landmark legislations such as the right

to information, right to food, and right to employment were introduced, and he oversaw the rollout of Aadhaar. He showed extraordinary courage and even staked his government's survival to ensure the passage of the historic Indo-US civil nuclear cooperation deal.

His career graph went from being a professor in the 1970s to the governor of the Reserve Bank of India and head of the Planning Commission in the 1980s, and from Union finance minister in the 1990s to the PM in 2004. During his term as head of the government, India clocked its highest-ever growth rates and joined the league of two trillion-dollar economies. No other economist comes even close to these spectacular achievements — of a major career leap in every decade.

Singh had more than his share of strident critics. But he never hesitated to listen, engage, debate or even confront them. He once said, better than thousands of accuracy questions is my silence. For I have maintained the dignity of my detractors. As he assured, history will judge him more kindly than his contemporaries.

Ajit Ranade is an economist. The views expressed are personal

[EDITOR'S PICK]

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

KNOW THE STATESMAN

Former Prime Minister (PM) Mamohan Singh, who died on Thursday night, leaves behind a remarkable imprint as an administrator and leader. His 10 years as PM, Singh oversaw the implementation of laws such as the Right to Information, Right to Education and Forest Rights Acts, and MNRGA. The UPA II government was weakened by corruption scandals, but few dared to doubt Singh's integrity and honesty.

In Siriraj Prasad, Mamohan & Gurnsharan, Damjan Singh, his daughter, offers a rare, intimate glimpse into the life of the man who reshaped India's economic and political landscape. The book focuses on the personal journey of Mamohan Singh and his wife, Gurnsharan Kaur, tracing their partnership from humble beginnings to the corridors of power. Damjan Singh's narrative is warm and engaging, shedding light on lesser-known facets of their life. Gurnsharan emerges as a pivotal figure, balancing her roles as a homemaker and a steadfast force in Singh's life. *Strictly Personal* is a touching tribute to a statesman.



Strictly Personal: Damjan Singh Year: 2014



Opinion

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2024

Pioneer of reform

As finance minister, Singh's reforms laid the foundation for a market-driven economy

A DISTINGUISHED ACADEMIC, economist and lawmaker, Manmohan Singh will be forever admired and revered as the chief architect of India's reforms. He was determined to make India a market-driven economy and, backed by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, took path-breaking policy measures to make it one. His handling of the severe economic and balance of payments crisis, early on in his tenure, revealed his ability to come up with solutions. Devaluing the rupee against the dollar by 18%, in two stages, was no easy task. Also, Singh realised that the Indian currency needed to be more market-determined and made it largely that by 1996. The dismantling of the licence raj, and the revamped industrial licensing policy, freed many industries from the shackles of regressive licensing controls. The earlier unhealthy regime that fostered monopolies was liberalised and many more businesses were empowered. Restrictions on imports were eased, throwing open the economy to global competition, and ushering in more of a free market that allowed for greater competition and encouraged entrepreneurship. Restrictions on capital flows too were eased. Amendment to the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act allowed businesses to utilise their surpluses to foray into sunrise sectors even as it curbed the monopoly status that public sector enterprises had enjoyed for decades.

During the five years, Singh brought in changes to the taxation framework both for direct and indirect taxes. He reduced tax slabs, raised the exemption limit, and lowered the maximum marginal rate of personal income tax from 56% (including the surcharge) to 40%. The long-term capital gains tax was cut. Ad valorem excise duties and a presumptive tax for small units were introduced. Critically, customs duties were slashed. Singh's reforms for the banking sector and money market sector too were pioneering. After the regressive step taken to nationalise banks in 1969, the banking sector was opened up to the private sector with new licences being given. Even though the Congress Party wanted control over the nationalised banks, the government's ownership was reduced. Importantly, banking operations were eased, giving lenders more flexibility. In a very tough decision, fiscal discipline was ushered in with steps taken to abolish the ad hoc treasury bills. This meant the government would have to borrow from the market to fund the deficit and could not access the Reserve Bank of India's resources. All of this required vision and courage, which he had in abundant measure.

As Prime Minister, Singh built on the achievements of the Vajpayee government, staying the course on reform despite it being difficult to always secure a consensus in a coalition. While the guaranteed wage employment scheme for rural households, or MGNREGA, lifted rural India, the National Food Security Act (2013) ensured subsidised food grains for nearly two-thirds of India's population. The Unique Identification Authority of India project came into being under his watch. The Right to Information Act (2005) strengthened transparency and accountability, empowering citizens to access public information. His biggest achievement was the signing of the Indo-US nuclear treaty on which he staked a great deal. Without the foundation that Singh built, India could never have become the world's fifth biggest economy. At heart he was a simple Indian. As bold as he was in reforming the economy, as an individual Singh was completely the opposite, unassuming to the core. Always warm and courteous, Singh will be remembered, above all, as a gentleman.

Bollywood's dark past is threatening to return

DISASTER, FLOP, AVERAGE. If you had to bet on a Bollywood movie's fate in 2024, those would have been your three best options in a year set to end with a 30-40% drop in box office collections. The world's most prolific film industry is desperately hoping for a better 2025. And so are the city's cops. While the theatres go empty, the body count starts to rise on the streets of Mumbai. That's what the 1970s were like — and everyone's dreading a repeat of lawlessness in India's financial capital.

The fears are far from exaggerated. Baba Siddique, a local politician and real-estate developer who enjoyed close friendships with celebrities actors, was gunned down in October as he was about to get into his car. A member of the gang that claimed responsibility said in a Facebook post that "Bollywood, politics, and property dealings" were behind the murder.

Organised crime and the show business of Bombay — as the megalopolis was known until 1995 — have been joined at the hip for a long time. The Golden Age of Indian Cinema that began around the country's 1947 independence from British rule had a 20-year run. Politics took a cynical turn in the late 1960s, and popular culture began to reflect the loss of idealism. Bollywood scripts shed the social concerns of a young republic and became the escapist fantasy the world knows today.

By the early 1970s, India was releasing hundreds of Hindi-language films. Banks wouldn't finance them. That's where the likes of Haji Mastan came in. One of Mumbai's most powerful dons at the time, Mastan was a banker for glamour. Dressed in all white, the stylish boss became something of a private-equity player for the entertainment business when he began to finance movies for his access lower.

The mob had eked out its initial capital from the docks of Bombay, smuggling gold and electronics. As it reinvented itself for a more open economy in the 1980s and 1990s, bootlegging and extortion gave way to money laundering, trafficking in drugs and guns... and more cinema. Dons were no longer satisfied with a profit share, a 2003 report by the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies noted. They wanted "partnership by becoming producers and getting overseas riches for film and music distribution".

Leading this change was Dawood Ibrahim, a policeman's son who rose to prominence as the city's most feared mobster in the post-Mastan era. Dawood began operating from Dubai in the mid-1980s, but his syndicate, known as the D Company, is believed to have carried out the assassination of the founder of T-Series, a music-production powerhouse, in 1997. Just when it looked like the city had escaped from that cycle of violence, there are fresh signs of unease. In February 2021, a car packed with explosives was found parked outside the home of Mukesh Ambani, India's richest tycoon. An elite detective — a former "encounter specialist" — is awaiting trial in that case. While denying the ex-cop's bail petition last year, a court said his aim was to spread terror in the mind of the Ambani family. The repercussions go beyond showbiz. Lawrence Bishnoi, the leader of the group suspected of murdering Siddique, has been accused by the Canadian police of colluding with Indian government agents to kill and harass members of the country's Sikh diaspora. A gangster who's at the centre of a diplomatic spat — and at the same time threatening to eliminate Salman Khan, one of India's biggest film stars — adds a new dimension to the threat.

A second-generation Mumbai producer recently sold half of his studio to Adar Poonawalla, the billionaire vaccine maker who earned handsome profits during Covid-19. The pandemic marked a crucial inflection. It fuelled demand for original content people could stream at home on Netflix, Amazon Prime, and home-grown apps like Hotstar — when cinemas were under lockdown. Now everything is open, and yet audiences are so bored of the insipid fare on screens big and small, they're neither out for a movie night, nor clicking through big-budget web dramas. When everything starts bombing for Bollywood, things take a sinister turn in Mumbai.



ANDY MUKHERJEE
Bloomberg

DR SINGH'S APPROACH WAS SUPREME EFFECTIVE IN CREATING SPACE FOR EXCHANGE OF VIEWS

A truly great son of India

● HUMILITY AND WISDOM

RAGHURAM RAJAN

The writer is former governor, Reserve Bank of India



I CAME TO know Dr Manmohan Singh during his first term as Prime Minister when he, on the advice of Montek Singh Ahluwalia, appointed me as an economic advisor. Over the years since then, through my term as Reserve Bank of India (RBI) governor and after, I had the privilege of interacting with him periodically.

Dr Singh was a brilliant economist with an ambitious vision of what a liberal India could be, combined with a fine sense of what was possible politically. He was understated and soft-spoken, which allowed him to attract the best and the brightest, ranging from Ahluwalia to C Rangarajan, to his team. The liberalisation and reforms he undertook with the support of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao laid the foundations of the modern Indian economy, and spurred the decades of robust growth we still enjoy.

In his terms as Prime Minister, Dr Singh's ability to reform the economy further was somewhat hampered, first by coalition politics and then by opposition non-cooperation. Nevertheless, his government passed landmark legislation like the National Food Security Act and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, targeted at segments of Indian society that are often overlooked. He also sought to strengthen Indian institutions and apply checks and balances on the government. The Right to Information Act stands out as one of the few pieces of legislation where the Indian government has subjected itself to greater scrutiny. And some of the reforms his government contemplated but could not enact, such as the goods and services tax, were enacted by the subsequent National Democratic Alliance government.

Dr Singh also had singular achieve-

ments on the administrative side. In his first term as prime minister, he strengthened relations with the US, culminating in the Civil Nuclear Deal. In some ways, the US-India relationship may be the key global relationship of the 21st century, and Dr Singh put it on a stable footing. In his second term, he appointed Nandan Nilekani to head the unique ID rollout, which became the foundation of the India Stack and successful products like Unified Payments Interface.

Those were also years of extraordinary growth. After the initial recovery post-global financial crisis, Dr Singh recognised the growing risks to the economy from excessive spending, and brought back P Chidambaram as finance minister to restore macroeconomic stability. While India experienced volatility during the Taper Tantrum, matters could have been much worse without Dr Singh's presence.

What struck me in our meetings was Dr Singh's curiosity. He opened every one of our personal meetings with questions about the world and what I worried about. Most persons with his experience and achievements would have held forth on their views. Instead, Dr Singh heard others out, and then tried to make use of

what they conveyed.

I particularly remember a lunch he hosted for senior officials to discuss the final report of a committee I chaired on financial sector reforms. Throughout the meeting, Dr Singh was silent while others debated. I remember thinking that few persons in authority would be so self-effacing. But his approach was supremely effective in creating the space for an exchange of views, a space that could be easily snuffed out if someone with his knowledge and experience, leave alone his position, expressed their thoughts. At the end, Dr Singh thanked everyone and gave a sagacious summary of what could be taken forward from the report.

Dr Singh never dismissed criticism or critics. One of my most vivid memories is of a panel organised by the late Isher Ahluwalia in early 2012, while releasing a book celebrating Dr Singh's reforms as finance minister. There were five people on the panel and a packed auditorium. Isher led off, praising the reforms of the 1990s, but she then turned to the need to correct the current drift in the government and the economy. She did not mince words, even though the Prime Minister was her

friend. TN Ninan and I followed, taking our cues from her. In much the same vein, while Duvvuri Subbarao, the governor of the RBI, was appropriately measured in his tone.

Finally, the fifth panelist spoke. It was Dr Singh. Instead of reacting angrily or defensively, he simply said he had obtained a lot of food for thought, and he would reflect on it. I believe that some of the subsequent changes to the government, including the finance ministry, may have emanated from that reflection.

That exchange said a lot about both Isher Ahluwalia and Dr Singh, and an era that seems so long ago. She said what needed saying, and saying it in public had added force. He understood why it was being said. On an occasion when praise was all that might have been expected, he also received criticism, and did not take it as a sign of hostility. How different our country would be if more leaders imbibed the spirit of these two friends.

Dr Singh was a man of great integrity, never using any of his office for personal gain or to benefit his family. Though corruption scandals engulfed some government ministries and coalition partners in his second term, they never touched him. Nevertheless, they clouded his record. With the passage of time, though, many of the allegations have not withstood judicial scrutiny, while his economic reforms seem ever more visionary and important.

After he demitted office, I used to ask Dr Singh why he did not write a book about his life and experiences, in part so that the nation would have a true record. He always demurred, suggesting it was not for him to write his own history. Now it is too late, but I believe history will judge him as a truly great son of India.

The quiet catalyst

Dr Singh demonstrated that effective leadership stems from competence, integrity, and a genuine concern for the welfare of all

S RAMADORA

Former CEO & MD, TCS, and former chairman, National Skill Development Corporation



AS THE NATION mourns the passing of former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, I reflect on my professional and personal association with him. His demise marks the loss of a visionary economist, a statesman, and a leader whose humility and grace distinguished him in public life. Having witnessed his leadership up close, I am reminded of the profound impact of his intellect and values on the nation's journey.

Having been associated with the technology sector since the 1970s, I vividly recall the challenges we faced in hardware and technology imports. The economic liberalisation of 1991 came as a transformative moment that few could have imagined. What was once a herculean task — even importing basic computing equipment — gave way to an era of unprecedented growth. Today, that same sector has grown from a mere \$150 million in 1991 to over \$245 billion in annual revenue, employing 5.4 million directly and creating indirect employment for over 10 million Indians. The reforms did not just open up the economy; they unleashed India's entrepreneurial spirit, putting the nation on the global map and creating opportunities for youths across the length and breadth of the country.

Digital public infrastructure creation became a cornerstone of the post-liberalisation economy. The setting up of the National Stock Exchange (NSE), which completes 30 years this year, marked a watershed moment in India's financial modernisation. When Dr Singh, the then finance minister, inaugurated the NSE's electronic trading system at the Nehru

Planetarium hall in Mumbai in June 1994, it signalled India's commitment to creating world-class financial infrastructure. As part of the TCS team that was actively involved in this trading platform, I witnessed first-hand how this transformed our financial markets. Dr Singh's vision then was as grand as I would witness later while working closely with him. The NSE would eventually become the world's third-largest stock exchange, handling millions of trades daily through its satellite communication system connecting hundreds of cities. The platform has exceeded all parameters, with remarkable growth in trading volumes and market capitalisation.

The year 2004 was significant, as Dr Singh took over as Prime Minister, and it was also the year when TCS went public. As TCS grew from strength to strength, I had the privilege of meeting him on numerous occasions. Each discussion with him was rich in content and substance. His vision of technology as a tool for inclusiveness and democratisation was evident in our conversations. He consistently emphasised the importance of building at scale while ensuring no one was left behind.

This commitment was particularly evident in initiatives like the MCA21 e-Governance project, which transformed company registration processes and set new benchmarks for ease of doing business by making them digital and highly

efficient. He was always receptive to new ideas and supportive of projects that could accelerate India's progress.

It was this same vision that led to my involvement in the National Skill Development initiative in 2011. The late professor C K Prahalad had identified skill development as a crucial pillar in his India@75 vision. Dr Singh recognised its importance and took decisive steps to address this national priority despite enormous challenges.

The task was immense. India needed to skill millions of youth, yet lacked basic infrastructure, data, and established standards. Under Dr Singh's guidance, the National Skill Development Mission expanded rapidly. We succeeded in building new partnerships through the National Skill Development Corporation, standardising and digitising training processes and curriculum with over 40 sector skill councils. The initiative grew exponentially, covering

almost every district. His interest in the Northeast and setting up skill development centres, along with the modernisation of industrial training institutes, reflected his belief in bridging disparities through skilling.

His personal involvement was crucial in coordinating with multiple ministries and state governments. His ability to iron out issues and build consensus was remarkable. The foundation was robust, and it has been heartening to see subse-

quent governments strengthen these initiatives further, including establishing a dedicated ministry of skill development and entrepreneurship, an important milestone for India.

What truly set Dr Singh apart was his unique leadership style that combined intellectual rigour with humility. Policy discussions with him were never just about administrative details — they delved into fundamental questions about impact and long-term implications. Despite his position, he remained extraordinarily accessible. His response to every communication, whether via email or letter, reflected not just courtesy but genuine engagement with ideas.

The institutions and frameworks established under his leadership — from modernised financial systems to robust governance systems, technology initiatives to skill development frameworks — form the backbone of Indian economy. Throughout his career, Dr Singh demonstrated that effective leadership stems from competence, integrity, and a genuine concern for the welfare of all. These values are his enduring gift to the nation, which will be increasingly important as we navigate a complex world.

Our interactions continued after his retirement, meeting at his residence without agenda — engaging in intellectual discourse to pass on ideas to the younger generations.

His passing marks the end of an era, but the institutions he nurtured continue to shape India's journey forward.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

End of an era

Manmohan Singh's words, "History will be kinder to me" ring true (and louder) as time passes. The most striking thing about his personality is that he conducted himself with great dignity. He never said a word or did a deed that was unworthy of the exalted office that he held with so much grace during 2004-2014. His government's flagship programme, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural

Employment Guarantee Scheme, alleviated rural distress.

He introduced measures liberating India's economy, spurring an unprecedented economic boom in the 1990s. His guiding mantra was that a better future should be delivered to the people, no matter the ideology. He will go down in the annals of Indian history as a statesman who did his best to serve his motherland.

—G David Milbrant, Marthandur

Upgrading agriculture

Apropos of "Transforming agricultural research" (FE December 27), transforming agricultural research needs an interdisciplinary approach and co-ordination among agri-stakeholders. Focusing on precision and digital agriculture as the main levers, agri-research must be in consonance with the farmers' problems and climate change, and it has been heartening to see subse-

only ensure productivity but also concern with soil health conservation and efficient water management. Cluster farming could resolve the needed data and report problems of agri-research institutions, enhancing them to transform research with inputs that could give pragmatic results on detailed and varied analyses.

—NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

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JOBS CREATION: A CRITICAL CONCERN IN 2025

AMIDST growing concerns over rising unemployment in the country, the latest figures released by the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) offer a glimmer of hope. The EPFO has recorded a net addition of 13,41 lakh members during October, reflecting the increased employment and higher awareness of employee benefits among workers, according to the Ministry of Labour and Employment. The EPFO enrolled around 7.5 lakh new members in October, out of which a significant 58.49 per cent are in the 18-25 age group. The net number for this dominant age group is 5.43 lakhs.

Compared to the earlier data, it becomes discernible that most individuals joining the organized workforce are youth, primarily first-time

job seekers, indicating the increasing employment opportunities in the economy. Another key development is that among the new additions around 2.09 lakh are new female members. The rise in female member additions reflects a broader shift towards a more inclusive and diverse workforce.

It may be noted here that it is the EPFO Payroll Data that gives an idea of the level of employment in the formal sector. According to the government, more than 1.3 crore net subscribers joined EPFO during 2023-24. During September 2027 to August 2024, more than 7.03 crore net subscribers joined EPFO, indicating an increase in the formalisation of employment.

While the data points to improved employment scenario in the

country, for India to gain from its demographic dividend, there is a need to generate productive/formal employment for about 7 million youth who join the labour force every year. According to a recent report by Goldman Sachs Economic Research

- 'What is driving job growth?' - in the last 23 years, around 196 million jobs were generated in India. As economists, analysts and even RBI Deputy Governor Michael Debabrata Patra point out, the prospects for agriculture and, thus, rural consumption are bright. However, there is a need to create more jobs and shift more and more rural youth into formal sector. The Sachs report estimates that India needs to create around 10 million jobs annually.

It is said that until 2035, the Indian working age population will remain

around 69% and the proportion will slide below 60% by 2050. That means the country has just a 20-year window to reap demographic dividends. As the country rings in New Year, the central and the state governments must push for measures to smoothen irritants to spur economic growth.

The GDP growth slowed to a seven-quarter low of 5.4 per cent during the July-September period. Though the RBI has downgraded its GDP growth forecast for 2024-25 to 6.6% from 7.2% earlier, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman says the slowing of Q2 growth is a 'temporary blip'. The Goldman Sachs report hits the nail on the head when it suggests prioritising three policy measures for creating jobs in India. There is a need to incentivise affordable social housing development as

real estate sector employs over 80% of construction workforce. The governments have to help shift IT hubs and global capability centres to tier 2 and tier 3 cities. They should come up with fiscal incentives for labour-intensive sectors. Last but not the least, governments have to particularly address the mismatch between skills and industry needs. Educational testing services firm Wheelbox has found that only 51.25% are 'employable,' as measured by a skills-assessment test. Other studies also lend credence to this grave reality of a nation which has the largest and youngest workforce. There is a need to overhaul the education system and promote industry-academia collaborations. This is crucial to maintain India's economic momentum.

LETTERS

Architect of India's economic reforms

INDIA was in a precarious and perilous situation when in 1991 Dr Manmohan Singh was called by the then PM Narasimha Rao to try to rescue the nation. After he presented the budget as FM, India has never been the same and MMS was responsible for unleashing the animal spirits of Indian business. Young people cannot imagine what it was like earlier when a landline telephone took decades to arrive after a long waiting list, or cars were owned only by the select few or coloured television sets were only owned by the privileged few. After the economy was liberalised, life became much easier as even the middle class began to fly to their destinations. MMS was a technocrat and not a politician and often had to pay a price for being a gentleman in an arena filled with power-hungry competitors.

Anthony Henriques, Mumbai

It was fortunate to have a little acquaintance with him. When I was a member of 13th Lok Sabha, he was a member of Rajya Sabha. We happened to meet frequently in the parliament library, then, a small room on the upstairs of building. We both were regular visitors to that place. A down-to-earth personality who loved reading books whenever he had time. Later, the spacious new library building was inaugurated and I lost the chance to read books sitting face to face with him. His gentle smile and soft talk are fond memories now.

Dr DVG Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram

Perhaps, it was paucity of time that compelled you to commit the news to limited space. Singh was a pioneer of economic reforms which uplifted the country under the noteworthy leadership of P V Narasimha Rao. Very dignified, non-controversial and a man of deeds but not of words certainly deserves our praise and gratitude. The country certainly bows in honouring the departed leader and prays. May his soul rest in peace!

Dr J Bhagyalakshmi, Madanapalle

THE death of Dr. Manmohan Singh is a great loss to our nation. He was instrumental in charting out India's civil nuclear agreement with the US in 2008 which ended our nuclear apartheid. GDP rose over 10% during his tenure. We have lost a great economist. He is an epitome of simplicity. It is the end of an era.

Sruvaru Ramachandran, Chennai.

LET us dip our banner in memory of Manmohan Singh, the great economist. We cannot forget his role as the architect of economic reforms. As the FM, he virtually built up India's foreign exchange reserves which had touched the rock bottom in 1990/91, and placed India in the world map as a strong economy. However, during Manmohan Singh's regime, maximum scams occurred. He failed to stop the recurrence of many scandals.

Jananthi Subramanian, Mumbai

SOMETIMES some unimaginable miracles happen in our lives. One is PV Narasimha Rao who did not contest for MP from anywhere as he was ready to move as saint in Kuthalham Peetham. The infighting among Congress leaders like Arjun Singh, ND Tiwari for PM's post had culminated in selecting PVNR as PM. Similar circumstances occurred in 2004 when Sonia Gandhi was chosen for PM's position, upon severe objections raised by BJP, then the offer had gone in favour of Dr Manmohan Singh. His bold steps in introducing the new economic reforms in the form of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation reaped bountiful results. All governments before and after him welcomed and continued these reforms.

N Ramalakshmi, Secunderabad

PV and Singh removed many obstacles in the way of FDI and initiated privatisation of government owned enterprises. Singh played a pivotal role in steering India's economic liberalization, implementing major reforms that included reducing import restrictions and taxes in 2004. Sonia Gandhi, the chairperson of UPA, made Manmohan Singh the Prime Minister. As an economist, policymaker and PM, he played a stellar role in shaping India's economic trajectory, steering the country through challenging times. He will always be remembered for his economic reforms and a clean politician image.

P Victor Scharaj, Tirunelveli

ENDOWED with a distinct vision foreseeing a fast-developing economy, Dr Manmohan Singh proved himself as an economist of great eminence both in the academic and in official spheres. However, owing complete allegiance to the Gandhi-Nehru dynasty, in spite of his studied silence on various issues, his observation that a section of the minorities must have the first claim on the country's resources was seen as quite off the mark.

Seshagiri Row Karri, Hyderabad

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Driving licences of 5,500 drivers suspended for drunken driving

BENGALURU: The driving licenses (DLs) of 5,500 people who drove and ride bikes under the influence of alcohol in the East Traffic Division of Bengaluru from January 1 to December 26 have been sent to the Transport Department for suspension.

The Deputy Commissioner of Police, East Traffic Division, Bengaluru, who issued a press release in this regard, said, "From January 1 to December 26, a special operation was conducted against drivers and riders who drove under the influence of alcohol in the East Traffic Division and 3,60,214 people were checked, and 5,500 were found to be under the influence of alcohol, and their DLs have been sent to the RTO office for suspension."

In addition, during the same period, a special drive was conducted against those who were wheeling within the limits of the traffic police station of the East Traffic Division and 29 two-wheelers were seized. In this regard, 29 separate First Information Reports (FIRs) have been registered and legal action has been taken, he said.

Read more at

<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>



The Dr Manmohan Singh I knew

MOHAN KANDA

I first met Dr Manmohan Singh when he was the Union Finance Minister, at a lunch hosted by N Janardhana Reddy, the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, at the Chief Minister's residence. I was then the Secretary of the planning department of the state and also Secretary, ex-officio, to the Chief Minister. It was a small group, just the Chief Minister, the Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister, K Madhava Rao, and I, apart from Dr Manmohan Singh.

As always, Mrs. Janardhana Reddy had produced a delectable fare, including the mutton cooked in Gongura, the special type of spinach leaf which Andhra Pradesh is famous for. The distinguished guest, however, was a vegetarian, though, he was fa-mously known for having offered, during a visit to Bangladesh in 2011, as Prime Minister of India, to break his vegetarian vow in order to savour the Hilsa fish the country was known for. He therefore, preferred to confine himself only to tasting the vegetarian items on offer, no less delicious.

Those were the days when the country was staging a dramatic recovery from near bankruptcy, thanks to the bold and far-sighted approaches adopted by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh. During the conversation that ensued, despite his position, and the reputation he enjoyed as an internationally reputed and distinguished economist, Manmohan Singh came off as a very simple person, polite and soft spoken. That, however, was only the external appearance. His views were firm and clear, and expressed in very gentle terms. I, for one, found it difficult to agree with his stand that public sector enterprises should either make profits or be exited from. I still believe that profitability should be the criterion, and not profit. Not that my view on such matters ever mattered much, anyway!

The next time I had the privilege and honour of working closely with Manmohan Singh was when he became the Prime Minister, and I had been appointed as a Member of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), of which Manmohan Singh, as Prime

Minister, was the Chairman, as stipulated by the provisions of the Disaster Management Act.

At a meeting of the Authority, with the Prime Minister in the chair, curiously enough, and much against my inclination, General N C Vaj, the Vice-Chairman of NDMA, had asked me to make a presentation, although it was the subject allotted to another Member. In fact, Vaj went on to the extent of saying that he knew, as a former Chief of Army Staff, which weapon to use on which occasion! I dutifully made the presentation, which the Prime Minister appeared to have liked. As the meeting was about to conclude, Manmohan Singh posed what seemed like a very innocent and straightforward query, enquiring how much the country was prepared for, in terms of readiness to manage disasters. All of us were totally stunned, because we had simply not expected, or prepared for, that question. It was so typical of Manmohan Singh to have hit the nail on its head, without any fuss or attempt to soften the blow. Preparing the answer to that poser was the beginning of a long journey, of research, investigation, analysis, and drawing of conclusions, about the various aspects of the disaster continuum, namely, prevention, preparedness, rescue, relief, and rehabilitation.

After we had completed our tenures, Vaj led the team to make a farewell call on Manmohan Singh. With his characteristic gentle smile, and a genuine expression of regret in his eyes, Manmohan bade us good bye, saying, "The country will be grateful to you." A compliment that will stay in my heart for the rest of my life. A man who, truly, was given a name that spoke volumes of his character, Manmohan Singh, or the man with a captivating heart!

With a heavy heart, I join the rest of the country in saying adieu to a great son of the country. Though not aging at 92, he left us all wishing that he had lived longer, and made his invaluable counsel available to those at the helm of affairs, at this critical juncture.

(The writer was formerly Chief Secretary, Government of Andhra Pradesh)

Belagavi meet: They came, they met and they left



The biggest challenge before the 139-year-old Congress party is how to rebrand and re-build the leader-based party into a cadre-based party, if it were to start winning elections after it got decimated in 2014 and since then has not been able to regain its lost ground.

When the party decided to hold its two-day CWC session at Belagavi in Karnataka, it was felt that the party would discuss its failures and challenges ahead in an impartial manner and work out a road map for 2029 polls and move in that direction. But it did not happen. It seems to be determined not to make corrections and does not want to change its narrative and strategies in 2025 as well.

Rahul Gandhi was named as the party's secretary general in September 2007 with his mother Sonia remaining as the president, and in January 2013, he was appointed the Congress vice-president. Rahul fought his first Lok Sabha election in 2004 from Amethi and people embraced him making comparisons between Rahul and his father Rajiv Gandhi. They saw a future PM in him. But during his two decade-long journey, the party has not only lost over 90 elections and is now fast losing the faith and trust of its alliance partners. It was expected that Belagavi session would go in for serious introspection and come out with major reforms in its organisational structure. But it did not happen.

People expected that the Congress would work towards getting a new avatar from Belagavi since this is the place where the historic CWC meeting was held when Mahatma Gandhi was the party chief. After his release from prison, Mahatma was unhappy with participating in debates and discussions and presenting irrefutable facts and figures to re-establish their connect with people not by the theatrics but by working with them at the booth level.

Most importantly, the Congress party needs to bring drastic changes in the party organizational structure by infusing young blood and moving away from the present team of cheer leaders if it plans to stage a comeback by 2029. Unfortunately, even a semblance of such efforts or thoughts were not found during the two-day meeting. It was just another meeting where leaders came, they met, and they left. It resolved that in a bid to get battle-ready for the challenges ahead, the Congress will decide on an action plan for the next year at the CWC meeting.

It means another 365 days are lost. It passed resolutions urging the NDA government to use its upcoming budget to provide income support to the poor and tax relief to the middle classes. If the Congress had raised this issue effectively in



the government, revive indigenous industries and reduce dependence on the British goods. To achieve independence, Gandhi stressed the need for communal harmony and the need for unity of all religious and ethnic groups in the country. It was also important as the noted vocalist Vessahanna performed the song 'Udayayagali Namma Chaluva Kannada Nadi' which became an anthem for Karnataka's unification movement.

In contrast, the CWC meeting chaired by the AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi at Belagavi held on December 26 and 27 failed to introspect why it found little favour with the voters since 2014 and why the party failed to galvanise the party cadre to win the elections. There is an urgent need for the Congress party to reinvent the wheel, but it failed to work in that direction as it refuses to see and accept the reality.

It should have known that naming the meeting as 'Nava Satyagraha Baithak' and giving a new slogan 'Jai Babu, Jai Bhim, Jai Samvidhan Abhiyan,' cannot revive the poll prospects of the party. It needs to go in for a complete overhauling of the rank and file, change its narrative, become more sensible and put the Union government on mat by participating in debates and discussions and presenting irrefutable facts and figures to re-establish their connect with people not by the theatrics but by working with them at the booth level.

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Rather than a 'Chintan Baithak', the CWC meet merely indulged in BJP bashing and did not unveil any road map to put the Narendra Modi government on the mat. It was expected that the two-day session would go in for serious introspection and roll out major reforms in its organisational structure. But it did not happen. The party needs to infuse young blood and move away from the present team of cheer leaders if it plans to stage a comeback by 2029. The session demanded income support to the poor and tax relief to the middle classes. If the Congress had raised this issue effectively in the winter session of Parliament, it would have helped the party connect with the genuine tax-paying sections of the society. The threat the Congress should understand is more to their existence than to the Constitution or anything else

the winter session of Parliament it would have certainly made the government ponder over it and would have helped Congress connect with the genuine tax paying sections of the society. If the budget did not reflect this, Congress would have got a powerful weapon to take on the NDA and it could have given a 'faita-faita guarantee' that it would do so if voted to power. But it lost a golden chance.

GST certainly needs a relook. There are no two opinions about it. Though, it has not become an absurdity as Rahul Gandhi feels, there is need to urgently rationalise the system and reduce the financial burden on the common man. Instead of simply making a demand for GST 2.0, the party should have torn into the government in Parliament on this issue and should have given its own proposal for a simple tax in practice. This would have helped the party make the people look at Congress party. But the winter session of Parliament ended with ruckus inside and drama outside.

Expressing concern over GST and making comments that it was tax terrorism on industry, trade and commerce or passing a resolution saying that it was designed to enrich a few of Modi's favourite business groups like Adani does not help. Such narrative people are now tired of listening to and repeatedly, the Congress had

been losing the elections. If the party still cannot realise what people want, then perhaps even God cannot save them.

CWC said, "Oligopolies in the economy are growing. While more and more Indians have a stake in capital markets, the integrity of regulators has been called into serious question. Private investment, which must drive faster economic growth, is still extremely sluggish and mass consumption is stagnating."

Making statements does not solve the problem. Such important meetings should have had more in-depth discussions. At least in the party forum, they should have discussed the alternative plans that could reverse the 'Oligopolies' situation and should have told the nation what they would do to put the country on much faster road to growth. Rambling never helps any party. They should explain the solutions they have up their sleeve.

They went on indulging in BJP bashing making vague statements on current political developments including their latest narrative that Constitution and its architect Dr B R Ambedkar were under attack and contrary to their pre CWC claims, they failed to come up with clear-cut ideas to address the challenges. The threat the Congress should understand is more to their existence than to the Constitution or anything else.

18 E. EXPLAINED

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2024

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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com



(From left) Prime Minister Indira Gandhi presides over the first meeting of the Planning Commission on April 21, 1980. Manmohan Singh is seated third from left; Finance Minister Singh at a pre-Budget discussion with economists on January 6, 1993. Montek Singh Ahluwalia is seated second from right; Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao with cabinet colleagues (from left) SB Chavan, Manmohan Singh, Arjun Singh, and Sukh Ram on June 29, 1994. R L Chopra, R K Doyal, Ravi Bhatia/Express Archive



EXPLAINED ECONOMICS

Manmohanomics, in his own words

Dr Singh's views did not exactly align with the 'Nehruvian' approach to economic policy. Long before he changed the Indian economy in the 1990s, he tried to mould policy in the direction of broad-based economic reforms and liberalisation. Very early on, he proposed ideas that are now part of India's policy consensus

UDIT MISRA
 NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

FORMER PRIME MINISTER Manmohan Singh, who passed away on Thursday, remains one of India's lesser understood public intellectuals.

He obtained a Tripos in Economics with first class honours from Cambridge in 1957, and a DPhil from Oxford in 1962. He taught at the Delhi School of Economics from 1969 to 1971, and went on to serve in some of the most important policymaking roles in India.

He entered politics in 1991, and became the Finance Minister who shaped India's transition from a centrally-planned, highly regulated, and largely closed economy to an open (in terms of trade), liberalised (in terms of regulations and restrictions), market economy.

As Prime Minister between 2004 and 2014, he oversaw the phase of fastest economic growth and poverty reduction in the country.

But he left office amid allegations of corruption against his government. The last phase of his tenure saw a "policy paralysis" in which coalition partners — and even his Congress colleagues — moved in different directions, and the Prime Minister appeared too weak to provide direction. The widespread public dissatisfaction reduced the Congress to its worst electoral performance in the 2014 election, and put a question mark over his legacy and beliefs.

Did Manmohan Singh really believe in the power of Indian entrepreneurs and market forces, and in the promise of free trade and export-led growth? Did he believe governments should "soak the rich" to address inequality? Did he try to support public sector enterprises even when they made losses? Did he care about household sanitation, and understand its links to the economy?

Excerpts from Singh's own writings — sourced from a five-volume set of his most important speeches and writings, published by the Oxford University Press in 2019 — on topics that often dominate the news today, show how far ahead of the curve he was on various economic policy issues long before India reached its current consensus on them.

On planning vs markets

Even as part of India's "Nehruvian" economic policy establishment, Singh showed he was not a blind believer in the planning process, nor was he blind to the threat of corruption in government. Delivering the Vithal N Chandavarkar Memorial Lecture at IISc Bangalore in 1986, Singh, who was then Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, said: "Planning is no panacea for economic ills. It all depends on the institutional setting... Adam Smith's preference for *laissez-faire* was to an important degree the result of his knowledge of the corruption in British life that regulations under mercantilist influence often led to. If the basic preconditions of a fairly efficient and honest public administration are not satisfied, planning cannot be expected to lead to an improvement either in resource allocation or income distribution."

However, Singh did understand why policymakers before him chose a planned economic approach. He said:

"Newly independent countries of the Third World found that they lacked both a well-developed infrastructure of social overhead cap-



Governments often fall prey to populist pressures and devise a regulatory framework with an eye on electoral appeal... This compels entrepreneurs to turn into short-term maximisers manipulating political processes, and provides them a strong incentive for evading taxes and [taking] funds abroad

MANMOHAN SINGH
 As RBI Governor, 1983

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi on December 5, 2008. Reuters file

ital as well as an entrepreneurial class with a strong propensity to bear risk and uncertainty.

"In this environment, exclusive reliance on market forces and private enterprise could not lead to fast enough progress... Since development in the initial stages is characterised by large discontinuities and externalities leading to a significant divergence between social and private costs and benefits, reliance on unregulated market forces was considered as contributing to sub-optimal investment decisions.

"There was also the additional concern that an economy characterised by highly skewed initial distribution of income and wealth, excessive reliance on market forces could accentuate these disparities to an extent which would not be acceptable to the broad mass of people. For all these reasons, a growing role for public ownership and regulation of private investment in the framework of broad national priorities as outlined in a medium term development plan found ready acceptance."

On the licence-permit raj

In his TTK Memorial Lecture in Madras in 1983, Singh, who was then Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, argued for sharply scaling back overly restrictive regulations on private enterprise.

"I see no hope of improvement unless there is a deliberate effort to confine detailed programming and licensing only to a manageable list of sectors and industries of critical importance to the country... In all other cases, industrial licensing can be dispensed with. Government can still release demand forecasts for guidance of prospective entrepreneurs but the choice of investment decision should be left to them. If growth of some of these industries is vital for sustaining the

process of industrial development, a scheme of positive incentives should be devised to attract investments into these industries. Licensing is a poor substitute for positive promotional measures in such cases."

On inequality, 'soak the rich'

Singh was concerned about the danger of widening inequalities if India chose the path solely of market forces. Data show that while poverty rates have fallen since economic liberalisation, income and wealth inequalities have soared. In another 1983 lecture, Singh underscored the need for "containing elite-mass contradictions" to avoid widespread social and economic unrest.

"[I]n a modern technological society... a certain distance between the elite and the masses is perhaps unavoidable. But if not controlled, elite-mass contradictions can be highly disruptive and destabilising. If the elite sections use their power and influence for personal material gain and comfort, this will lead to distortions in the allocation of scarce resources... Overall resources being limited, the insistence of a small privileged minority to enjoy living standards comparable to those prevailing in advanced postindustrial societies will inevitably result in the production structure being biased in favour of luxury goods at the very time when the great mass of our people do not have access even to elementary necessities of life.

[This] can give rise to serious political and economic tensions which can affect the growth of productivity and much more. The elite will be unable to persuade the mass of working classes to accept a degree of restraint on their consumption and, therefore, on wage claims, in the interest of faster accumulation

of capital. The resulting struggle between workers and employers... can easily degenerate into hyperinflation of the type one comes across in Latin America."

But Singh also warned against governments adopting "soaking the rich" policies to address inequality.

"The establishment of a relation of mutual trust and confidence between Government and private industry is not an easy task in an underdeveloped mixed economy operating in the framework of an open polity. Entrepreneurs usually belong to small minority groups and very often policies of 'soaking the rich' have a strong electoral appeal. Thus, Governments often fall prey to populist pressures and devise a regulatory framework with an eye on electoral appeal... This... compels entrepreneurs to turn into speculators, short-term maximisers, making a living by manipulating political processes rather than through creative productive activity, and provides them a strong built-in incentive for evading taxes and siphoning off funds abroad for investment in Swiss banks..."

On openness of trade

Many economists now point out that the trade protectionism of the Nehru decades was a mistake. India's weak export performance in the 1950s dismayed Singh as a DPhil candidate. In his thesis, *India's export trends and the prospects of self-sustained growth*, published in 1962, Singh argued that policymakers had underestimated India's export potential.

"Indian planners were swayed by undue export pessimism, which led to a neglect of the scope and potential of export growth and to the sacrifice of important efficiency gains associated with greater emphasis on interna-

tional specialisation.

"...In fact, given sensible domestic policies in areas such as the control of inflation and more realistic exchange rate policies, India's exports could do much better than assumed by India's development planners."

On PSU autonomy, unions

Political interventions leading to inefficiencies in public sector undertakings, price controls, and the role of trade unions in sick and struggling firms were areas of concern that Singh recognised as holding India back. In the 1986 lecture quoted above, he said:

"Autonomy and accountability of public sector enterprises have been under discussion for nearly two decades. Those who swear by the public sector and yet will not grant these enterprises legitimate functional autonomy are no true friends of the public sector. It has also to be recognised that if the top executives of public enterprises do not enjoy a reasonable security of tenure, we cannot expect them to take a fairly long term view of the interest of their enterprises."

"Trade unions which insist on the persistence of obsolete technologies for the sake of job security of their members do not advance the cause of the public sector or, for that matter, of employment."

"Lack of periodic technological upgradation often leads to uncompetitive costs, low profitability and restricted scope for future expansion of both output and employment. Similarly, public policies which will not permit adjustment of prices of public enterprises despite justified increase in costs also do not serve the cause of growth. Very often, needed price adjustments are postponed under political pressure so that in the meanwhile, losses go on increasing and public sector enterprises are starved of funds needed for their expansion. The time has come to depoliticise the process of price formation in the public sector."

On education, health, women

In a lecture at the National Productivity Council in 1983, Singh stressed the critical role of better education, health, and sanitation in boosting India's productive capacity.

"The spread of mass education can greatly help to change attitudes, aspirations, motivation and ability to master new skills. It is really unfortunate that even after thirty-five years of independence, universal primary education is not a reality... The heavy dropout rate [in schools] robs the rise in enrolment ratio of any great significance. The proportion of illiterates is much higher among women... [which] is bound to affect the progress of family planning and preventive health care measures through adoption of simple hygienic practices in our homes. Without paying adequate attention to the health care and nutrition needs of pregnant women, nursing mothers and young children, we can never hope to realise adequately the vast productive potential represented by a nation of 700 million people. An adequate and more equal access to basic public goods, especially education and health, can release vast latent human energies for creative, purposeful and socially satisfying work."

(EDITED EXCERPTS)

The year-ending series, 'New in the new year: Looking at 2025' will return on Monday.

EXPLAINED CULTURE

Why December, the 12th month, derives its name from Latin word for number 10

AISHWARYA KHOSLA
 NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

DECEMBER, THE 12th and final month in the Gregorian calendar, derives its name from the Latin word *decem*, meaning 10.

This is not the only etymological fallacy in the Gregorian calendar — September is derived from *septem* (seven), October from *octo* (eight), and November from *novem* (nine). Why?

A Roman folly

The solar year — the time it takes for Earth to make one revolution around the Sun — spans roughly 365.25 days. But the Roman calendar, adopted circa 738 BCE by Romulus, the founder of Rome, accounted for only 304 days. This was 61 days shorter than an accurate solar calendar, and 51 days shorter than a lunar calendar (based on the Moon's monthly cy-

cles), from which it was derived.

Romulus' calendar was divided into 10 months named Martius, Aprilis, Maius, Junius, Quintilis, Sextilis, September, October, November, and December respectively, with the final six months corresponding to the Latin names for the numbers five to 10.

Martius (now March) heralded the onset of spring. After December, Romans entered a temporal limbo — the unassigned 61-odd days (if one were to use a solar calendar) fell in the dead of winter, and were thus deemed unworthy of naming.

But this is not how calendars work — one cannot ignore the equivalent of two full months because society is unproductive during that time. Quickly and inconveniently, the calendar drifted out of sync with seasons.

Two new months

To address this misalignment, Romulus'

successor, Numa Pompilius, in 713 BCE introduced two new months, January and February.

January (January at the time), was dedicated to Janus, the Roman god of doorways and transitions. February derives its name from the Latin word *februus*, meaning "to cleanse", and was so named after the Roman festival of pu-

riification which was held in the month.

The months, however, were appended to the end of the calendar year, which still began in March. It was not until 153 BCE that New Year's Day was officially moved to January 1, a change made in order to enable newly-elected consuls to take office at an early date.

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This is when the etymological fallacy that we see today emerged. From being the tenth month in the calendar, December suddenly became the twelfth. Similarly, Quintilis, Sextilis, September, October, and November were all pushed two months down the calendar than what their names indicated.

But more changes were to come still

Switching to a solar year

The lunar year is roughly 10 days shorter than the solar year. Over time, the lunar year stops being aligned to the seasonal cycles, which are informed by Earth's revolution around the Sun, rather than lunations. A cycle of twelve lunar months regresses through the seasons over a period of roughly 33 solar years.

One can either live with this regression, which will mean that the year will not be aligned to seasons (like in the case of the Islamic calendar), or has to periodically insert

an extra month for the purposes of realigning the calendar. The Romans favoured the latter strategy till the last century BCE.

Or one can simply adopt the solar calendar, like Julius Caesar did in 46 BCE, advised by Alexandrian astronomer Sosigenes. The Julian calendar continued with the months already in use, but gave each month 30 or 31 days with the exception of February, which received 28 days (29 in a leap year). But Sosigenes' calculations overestimated the solar year by 11 minutes and 14 seconds. By the mid-1500s, this error had compounded, shifting the seasonal dates by about 10 days from Caesar's original design. In response, Pope Gregory XIII introduced a reform in 1582, which resulted in a 10-day adjustment. Since then, the Julian calendar has slowly been replaced by the Gregorian calendar worldwide, with the latter more accurately counting the length of the year.

14 The EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

WHEN THE PRIME MINISTER [MANMOHAN SINGH] SPEAKS THE WORLD LISTENS. — BARACK OBAMA

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

The arc of Singh's vision

It had a clear thread: Psychological and strategic dimensions of liberalisation and globalisation



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

IT IS A measure of Dr Manmohan Singh's greatness that his life and influence cannot be described in any conventional categories of political analysis. Assessments of his legacy are likely to be clouded by three short-sighted approaches. One is strictly instrumental, chalking up a long list of economic reforms over which he presided. This list is impressive indeed. He is, arguably, one of the most influential economic policymakers in the annals of history. The second approach is to see his legacy through the eventual meltdown and defeat of UPA-II. He was right that history would judge him more kindly than the contingent political failures of the era. The third mistake, often promoted even by his friends, has a touch of condescension to it. Epithets like "the accidental prime minister" or the "ideal number two man, capable, full of integrity and loyal" — an unbeatable combination — underestimate how he managed to remain his own man and stamp a vision on the world amidst all the upheavals of bureaucratic and political life.

Like all great men in history, Singh's life transcends the nit-picking accounting of policy successes or failures, a short-term historical reckoning, or simply a focus on his interpersonal relations. What is astounding is that, like all influential lives, his is both a personal marvel and a reflection of the zeitgeist. How did this person, who rose from humble circumstances, whose defining characteristic was an unmatched decency, and who had no political base, end up being indispensable in so many capacities? He was not just a bureaucrat or a finance minister but a defining prime minister for a decade. In a political culture where the one virtue that is always reliably absent is decency, Singh's ability to hold on to that trait now seems almost saintly. The nature of his power was complicated. In lesser men, it would have bred insecurity or a craving to project it. But to be both at the pinnacle of power and hold onto a consistent reticence about it is remarkable.

Singh's greatness was, in some ways, to embody the zeitgeist in the most graceful way possible. He was one of the greatest Nehruvians. Nehruvianism is not so much a set of policy prescriptions, which may sometimes be right or wrong, it is an approach to the world

that more deeply prepares India to take its place at the pinnacle of a thoughtful, decent modernity. It was a modernity that was, in political terms, secular, driven by a keen regard for process and consensus, building immense room for real debate, a suspicion of the legitimisation of violence, and a steadfast guided by the application of knowledge. Singh, in the first phase of his life, played the role of an ideal Nehruvian progressive.

But it was in the second phase of his life, when he became the prime minister, that he read the spirit of the age better than anyone else. He read geopolitics after the fall of the Soviet Union remarkably well, secured breakthroughs in our relationship with America and enjoyed an unprecedented bonhomie with China. He secured developmental space for India and positioned India brilliantly. It is a capital we are still living off. His most underappreciated place was his understanding of South Asia. The tactical debate over our response to 26/11 has clouded truths he grasped instinctively: That South Asia is not a conventional international relations problem; India needs a long game of fact that understands our neighbours' fears and learns to manage them. There has simply been no Indian prime minister whose grasp of the region and desire for the long-term goal of strategic alignment of the subcontinent was as acutely sophisticated as his. Not succumbing to the political clamour for vengeance in relation to Pakistan was not a sign of weakness; it was a display of strength that paid immense long-term dividends. The Musharraf-Manmohan agreement was a creative piece of diplomacy that the Congress party did not have the courage to follow through.

Singh's visionary arc had a clear thread: The psychological and strategic dimensions of liberalisation and globalisation. He had immense confidence in India's ability to compete. He knew that India could not be influential if it was not part of the sinews of the global economy. In a way, UPA-I, with all its flaws, was a workable model for India — liberalisation producing high growth that translated into a new welfare architecture, coupled with strengthening of institutions of lateral accountability like the Right to Information Act.

Singh presided over an unprecedented period of growth, decline in poverty, and expansion of infrastructure.

But his brilliant overall strategic vision was overshadowed by a party structure he could not overcome. The biggest mystery about UPA-II is not the political relationship between Sonia Gandhi and Singh. It is actually how the Gandhis, for all their seeming monopoly of the party, rather mysteriously acted as if they had lost complete control of it. The corruption scandals in Congress were real. As one senior party leader quipped, Congress is poor, but Congressmen are rich. The political economy of corruption did not in just the Congress Party but India's economy as well. Pranab Mukherjee's appointment as the finance minister was a disaster. Singh's stoic silences as all this unfolded cast a shadow on his own legacy. Congress, as is its nature, never actually projected Singh as its greatest asset. The credit for different elements was parcelled out. Election victories were all Rahul's; the welfare architecture, including the single most important scheme that saved India, NREGA, was all National Advisory Council. To add insult to injury, Rahul Gandhi humiliated the PM by publicly tearing up a government ordinance and the party's stand on Sharm-E-Shaikh cut him to size. The remarkable conceptual vision that held it all together, which was his, got lost. Just read his writings from the period to get a sense of it all.

Singh was a PM ideally suited for the "end of history" world — a progressive, technocratic, incremental, centralised, institutions-oriented, trade-focused, globalised, open world, one that has more or less collapsed. His political career is a commentary on how far statesmanship can go without power, decency without compromise, vision without a party. The reputation of every politician of that era, Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, and Singh, has been devoured by the furies of populism that followed. History is a mean avenger. But it is an extraordinary testament to Manmohan Singh's vision that it is still the most compelling framework India needs.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

THE LEADER WHO SAW THE FUTURE

Manmohan Singh will be remembered for showing how less power can be more

WITH GREAT POWER come great constraints. More than anything else, perhaps, the long and vivid arc of Dr Manmohan Singh's life and work embodied this essential truth about democracy. It's a truth, and a lesson, that so often goes unrecognised. Especially when, the world over, politics is about the powerful taking no prisoners and the winner taking all, seeking to vault over checks and balances. For the studious and soft-spoken boy from Gah in undivided Punjab whose family of meagre means was displaced by Partition, who went on to earn degrees from the world's storied educational institutions, who came back to hold almost all the top jobs in his country's economy, and then became Prime Minister, power was a more full-bodied and complex beast. It had an inner life that needed to be navigated with patience and respect for nuance. Manmohan Singh stepped up to the challenge of wielding power with that more — he brought to it wisdom and decency, dignity and grace, and humility above all.

Look, again, at the two empowering moments in Dr Singh's career: June 1991 and May 2004. Both strikingly circumscribed, conspicuously hemmed in. In the first, he took oath as Finance Minister in a minority government led by PV Narasimha Rao even as India confronted a balance of payments crisis and stared at the spectre of bankruptcy in a world unsettled by the ripple effects of the unravelling Soviet empire. In the second, he became Prime Minister, after a Lok Sabha election in which a fractured mandate brought back a pale and divided Congress which had yet to fully begin learning to share power with allies. He himself had no political constituency he could call his own, having lost the only Lok Sabha election he was to fight, from South Delhi in 1999. He was appointed PM by a Sonia Gandhi acting on her "inner voice", which promised to haunt him as much as it enabled him to govern a large and diverse nation, and it did both. He was also the first Sikh Prime Minister from a party blighted by the ghosts of the 1984 massacre following Indira Gandhi's assassination. Indeed, his August 2005 apology to Sikhs and the "whole Indian nation" was, as a US diplomat would later put it, a powerful "Gandhian moment of moral clarity."

MANMOHAN SINGH DID not come to his positions of power a powerful man. Self-effacing, his genius lay in seizing opportunities and steering breakthroughs that changed the course of the nation. As Finance Minister, with the reforms of 1991, he dismantled four decades of the old economy, industrial licensing and state-led planning, opening up the country to the irreversible forces of liberalisation and globalisation. The reforms he initiated helped lift crores out of poverty, created a middle class that continues to shape the country's economic and political future. In his term as PM, backed by Sonia Gandhi — even as that relationship was one that he also felt cramped by — he laid the foundational architecture of a modern welfare state, a rights-based edifice starring NREGA for the most marginalised, Right to Education, Right to Food Security — all undergirded by the Right to Information and its promise of accountability.

As PM, again, Dr Singh brought India to the global high table by signing the Indo-US nuclear deal, which ended India's isolation on the world stage and inaugurated its strategic embrace of the US as an ally on a more equal footing. To get the deal through, Dr Singh took on loud opposition from within and without, and especially from the Left, calling its bluff.

OF COURSE, DR Singh's path was not smooth. There were accusations that he was silent on too many issues, far too long; that he was much too forbearing of his own undermining by his allies, and more than that, by his own party. There were times when the remote control looked far from remote, the Sonia Gandhi-headed NAC behaved like an extra-constitutional authority. Rahul Gandhi, infamous, tore up an ordinance passed by the Manmohan cabinet in September 2013 — an abiding scar on his authority. The Congress also vetoed its own Prime Minister on a key foreign policy issue on Sharm-el-Sheikh.

In his second term as PM, Dr Singh seemed overtaken by the fragilities inscribed in his original compact with power, by the powerplay within Congress, by ally-troubles and a spike of alleged scams in his coalition government. The BJP-led Opposition called him a "weak PM." It could be said that his second term paved the ground for the Anna Hazare movement which, in turn, presaged the coming at the Centre of the BJP's Narendra Modi-led single party majority.

AND YET, MORE than what or who followed him, Manmohan Singh will be remembered, most of all, for showing how less power can be more. Towards the end of his prime ministerial tenure, he said that history would judge him more kindly than his moment. It took a man who could see the future, and who helped turn his nation's fate towards it, to call history so right.

THE UNFINISHED TASK

Governments, including Manmohan Singh's, have missed second set of reforms

MANMOHAN SINGH'S REFORM legacy, mainly as Finance Minister in the Narasimha Rao-led government, was about liberalisation and globalisation. These entailed de-licensing and opening up of most sectors to private players, dismantling price, exchange rate and import controls, and removing barriers to foreign investment (direct as well as portfolio), technology collaborations or raising monies from both domestic and international capital markets. It was about "letting the private sector in." The rupee's two-step devaluation, the unveiling of a New Industrial Policy and the 1991-92 Union Budget were nothing short of an economic revolution that upended the old dirigiste regime. From policies framed around central planning, import substitution industrialisation, protectionism and public sector monopolies, the Singh-Rao duo spoke a new language that "welcomed" foreign investors and trusted Indian entrepreneurs as being "second to none".

What subsequent governments — including the one Singh himself headed from 2004-05 to 2013-14 — missed, however, were the second set of reforms. These involved privatisation and rationalising government spending. In other words, "getting the government out of business." The fact that only a dozen or so state-owned companies have been privatised — Air India, Maruti Udyog, Bharat Aluminium and Hindustan Zinc — is proof of the limited progress in this direction. Even more glaring is the spiralling government expenditure on subsidies and transfer schemes with short-term welfare gains at most. The effects of subsidising urea, electricity and irrigation water, manifested in worsening soil nutrient imbalance, declining crop yield response and depleting aquifers, are well-documented. Government subsidy on fertiliser and even free food is not without opportunity cost — the taxpayer money can be used to build schools and hospitals delivering more durable welfare gains.

Singh's big-bang reforms were, partly at least, a response to a balance-of-payments crisis leaving the country with foreign exchange reserves to fund barely four months of imports in March 1991. There has never been a crisis like that since to force any government to undertake the unfinished reforms. But reforms are also about conviction and seizing the opportunity. The Narendra Modi government has laid the groundwork — from identification of beneficiaries to Aadhaar-seeding of their bank accounts — for replacing all market-distorting subsidies with direct cash transfers. The upcoming budget is an opportune time to relaunch reforms.



MANPREET SINGH BADAL

DURING HIS STUDENT days at the University of Cambridge, Manmohan Singh once visited Shakespear's native village, Stratford-upon-Avon, to watch one of his plays. During the intermission, a handsome man approached him and said, "We miss the Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan." Manmohan Singh did not recognise him and politely asked, "Who are you?" "I was once the premier of undivided Punjab, and my name is Khizar Hayat Tiwana," the man responded.

Manmohan Singh narrated this to me during one of our many meetings. "I have not seen a more handsome person," he said. Tiwana had opposed Jinnah and the Partition of India. As a Unionist, he took on the Muslim League, and for that, he suffered the confiscation of his lands by the government of Pakistan. Tiwana passed away in California, far from the lands he once lorded over.

But that is not the story I am narrating here. The story is about why Singh, who went to Shakespear's native village to honour the Bard of Avon, never visited his own native village after he had left it. For 10 years, while he was Prime Minister, he was repeatedly asked by governments in Pakistan to visit his native village, Gah, in the Chakwal district of Pakistani Punjab. After he had demitted office, I asked Singh why he never returned to his native village. "After all, as Prime Minister, you would have been fated

HE DIDN'T LOOK BACK

Why Manmohan Singh never returned to his native village in Pakistan

The local Government Boys' School in Gah village has since been renamed after Singh. Additionally, a mini-grid supported by India's The Energy and Resources Institute now brings solar power to numerous families in the village, which was once bereft of electricity. Yet, Singh chose to avoid the grandstanding that could have accompanied such a visit. Like millions of Indians, he moved away from the past and sought to rebuild his life.

In many ways, his story is the story of modern India — a country that has moved beyond the trauma of imperialism and partition to craft a success that is now the envy of the world.

A telling example of how Singh focused on India's future rather than reminiscing about the past is evident from another conversation I had with him. I asked him about the global leaders he had met. In an almost schoolboy manner, I asked: Who was the best global leader he had interacted with? "It is not a question of who was the best that matters," he told me. "It was a question of who was the best for India, and in that regard, I place George Bush (junior) above all others."

Taken back, I asked him to explain his rationale. He reasoned: "For decades, the United States had viewed India with suspicion. Even the end of the Cold War did not

result in a significant shift in trust towards India. However, George Bush became genuinely interested in India's story. He recognised energy as a key factor in driving India's progress and worked extraordinarily hard to secure the Indo-US nuclear deal."

The nuclear deal was more than just an agreement, it signalled a paradigm shift and encouraged US companies to start courting India. The underlying logic was simple: If the US government could trust India with nuclear technology, there was no reason not to trust Indian businesses. That, according to Singh, is what made George Bush the best leader from India's perspective.

I learnt much later that Bush, after his retirement, painted portraits of global leaders he admired, and Manmohan Singh's portrait was among them. I believe it's one of the exhibits at the Bush Presidential Center in Dallas.

From Calcutta to Cambridge, and from Gah to global statesmanship, Manmohan Singh's life epitomised the journey of modern India. I intend to visit the Presidential Center in Dallas one day to celebrate and honour the life of the Bard of Indian Economic Reforms — just as Manmohan Singh once visited Stratford-upon-Avon to honour the memory of the Bard of Avon.

The writer is former finance minister of Punjab



DECEMBER 28, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

POLL VIOLENCE

AT LEAST EIGHT persons lost their lives, and several others were injured in the Lok Sabha election-related violence in the country. The worst incidents of violence were reported from Andhra Pradesh, where six persons were killed and 25 people injured. In Uttar Pradesh, violence rocked several areas in Mainpuri and shoot-at-sight orders were issued to prevent any untoward incident during the counting.

PREPARING FOR RESULTS

BOTH ALL INDIA Radio and Doordarshan have made elaborate arrangements for the

prompt announcement of election results. Hourly news bulletins in both English and Hindi with poll analysis at intervals will also be put out on both AIR and TV. During this period, Doordarshan will make arrangements to telecast five Hindi feature films, besides plays and musical programmes. All India Radio and Doordarshan will broadcast election-related news from December 28 to December 30.

KAPIL DEV & BCCI

THE CONTROVERSY over the dropping of former skipper and all-rounder Kapil Dev from the Indian team has sharpened with some of the senior members of the Board of Control

for Cricket in India (BCCI) holding a secret meeting to prepare a case against a north zone official for having "misinformed" the board president N K P Salve, on the "Kapil Dev episode" in Delhi.

DELHI HOSPITAL FIRE

A MAJOR FIRE broke out in the basement of J P Hospital's maternity block on December 27, leading to the evacuation of around 250 women and newborns. No casualties were reported. The inmates of the three-story Sher Singh maternity block, which houses operating theatres, nurseries for neonates and wards, were shifted elsewhere in the hospital.

THE IDEAS PAGE

The pragmatic idealist

Manmohan Singh had an ambitious view of what a liberal India could be and a fine sense of what was politically possible



RAGHURAM RAJAN

I CAME TO know Dr Manmohan Singh during his first term as prime minister when he, on the advice of Montek Ahluwalia, appointed me as an economic advisor. Over the years since then, through my term as RBI governor and after, I had the privilege of interacting with him periodically.

Dr Singh was a brilliant economist with an ambitious vision of what a liberal India could be, combined with a fine sense of what was possible politically. He was understated and soft spoken, which allowed him to attract the best and the brightest, ranging from Montek Singh Ahluwalia to C Rangarajan, to his team. The liberalisation and reforms he undertook with the support of prime minister Narasimha Rao laid the foundations of the modern Indian economy, and spurred the decades of robust growth we still enjoy.

In his terms as prime minister, Dr Singh's ability to reform the economy further was somewhat hampered, first by coalition politics then by Opposition non-cooperation. Nevertheless, his government passed landmark legislation like the National Food Security Act and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, targeted at segments of Indian society that are often overlooked. He also sought to strengthen Indian institutions and apply checks and balances on the government. The Right to Information Act stands out as one of the few pieces of legislation where the Indian government has subjected itself to greater scrutiny. And some of the reforms his government contemplated but could not enact, such as the Goods and Services Tax, were enacted by the subsequent NDA government.

Dr Singh also had singular achievements on the administrative side. In his first term as prime minister, he strengthened relations with the US, culminating in the Civil Nuclear Deal. In some ways, the US-India relationship may be the key global relationship of the 21st century, and Dr Singh put it on stable footing. In his second term, he appointed Nandan Nilekani to head the unique ID rollout, which became the foundation of the India Stack and successful products like UPI payments. Those were also years of extraordinary growth. After the initial recovery post the global financial crisis, Dr Singh recognised the growing risks to the economy from excessive spending, and brought back P Chidambaram as finance minister to restore macroeconomic stability. While India experienced volatility during the Taper Tantrum, matters could have been much worse without Dr Singh's presence.

What struck me in our meetings was Dr Singh's curiosity. He opened every one of our personal meetings with questions about the world and what I worried about. Most persons with his experience and achievements would have held forth on their views. Instead, Dr Singh heard others out, and then tried to make use of what they conveyed.

I particularly remember a lunch he hosted for senior officials to discuss the final report of a committee I chaired on financial sector reforms. Throughout the meeting, Dr Singh was silent while others debated. I remember thinking that few people in au-



C R Sankumar

thority would be so self-effacing. But his approach was supremely effective in creating the space for an exchange of views, space that could be easily snuffed out if someone with his knowledge and experience, leave alone his position, expressed their thoughts. At the end, Dr Singh thanked everyone and gave a sagacious summary of what could be taken forward from the report.

Dr Singh never dismissed criticism or critics. One of my most vivid memories is of a panel organised by the late Isher Ahluwalia in early 2012, while re-releasing a book celebrating Dr Singh's reforms as finance minister. There were five people on the panel and a packed auditorium. Isher led off, praising the reforms of the 1990s, but she then turned to the need to correct the current drift in the government and the economy. She did not mince words, even though the prime minister was her friend. T N Ninan and I followed, taking our cue from her, in much the same vein, while Subba Rao, the governor of the Reserve Bank, was appropriately measured in his tone.

Finally, the fifth panelist spoke. It was Dr Singh. Instead of reacting angrily or defensively, he simply said he had obtained a lot of food for thought, and he would reflect on it. I believe that some of the subsequent changes to the government, including the Finance Ministry, may have emanated from that reflection.

I remember a lunch he hosted for senior officials to discuss the final report of a committee I chaired on financial sector reforms. Throughout the meeting, Dr Singh was silent while others debated. I remember thinking that few people in authority would be so self-effacing. But his approach was supremely effective in creating the space for an exchange of views, space that could be easily snuffed out if someone with his knowledge and experience, leave alone his position, expressed their thoughts.

That exchange said a lot about both Isher Ahluwalia and Dr Singh, and an era that seems so long ago. She said what needed saying, and saying it in public had added force. He understood why it was being said. On an occasion when praise was all that might have been expected, he also received criticism, and did not take it as a sign of hostility. How different our country would be if more leaders imbibed the spirit of these two friends.

Dr Singh was a man of great integrity, never using any of his offices for personal gain or to benefit his family. Though corruption scandals engulfed some government ministries and coalition partners in his second term, they never touched him. Nevertheless, they clouded his record. With the passage of time, though, many of the allegations have not withstood judicial scrutiny, while his economic reforms seem ever more visionary and important.

After he demitted office, I used to ask Dr Singh why he did not write a book about his life and experiences, in part so that the nation would have a true record. He always demurred, suggesting it was not for him to write his own history. Now it is too late, but I believe history will judge him as a truly great son of India.

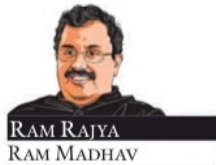
The writer is former governor, Reserve Bank of India

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The US was the main architect of the institutional underpinnings of the international order that guided Western liberal democracies after World War II and were ultimately embraced broadly around the world. If Washington decides to leave the scene, Beijing is most likely to... fill the gap." — THE WASHINGTON POST

History will be kind, but not to PM Singh

Manmohan Singh will be remembered for rescuing the economy. But his inaction in the face of corruption won't be forgotten either



RAM RAJYA RAM MADHAV

"WHO, ME?" THIS was the revealing cover text in *The Economist*, over a photograph of Dr Manmohan Singh speaking on the phone, when he became the surprise choice for prime minister of the UPA government in 2004. Singh, who was the first non-Nehru family leader to serve two terms as prime minister and the first Sikh leader to rise to that coveted position, died this week at the age of 92.

In an age of extreme political rivalries, Singh will be remembered with respect and honour. A man of few words, Singh was a gentle human being and an accomplished economist and scholar, qualities that endeared him to people of the country. His personal integrity was always commendable, although his deafening silence over the corruption of his colleagues was described as "the art of taking bath with a raincoat on". His humility was reflected in his final address to the nation, as he left the prime minister's office in 2014: "I owe everything to this country, this great land of ours where, an underprivileged child of Partition, was empowered enough to rise and occupy high office. It is both a debt that I will never be able to repay and a decoration that I will always wear with pride."

Of the three prime ministers that Congress produced who didn't belong to the Nehru family, Singh's tenure of 10 years was the longest. Although he remained loyal to the Nehru family until his last breath, his greatest contribution was as finance minister under prime minister P V Narasimha Rao, from 1991 to 1996, with the decimation of the Nehruvian legacy of the socialist economic model. Interestingly, Singh was not the first choice for the post — Rao had wanted bureaucrat I G Patel for the job — but he was certainly the best choice. "People say I was an accidental prime minister, but I was also an accidental finance minister," Singh once quipped. Those five years in the finance ministry were undoubtedly the most successful years for Singh, as he dismantled the license raj and led India into the age of globalisation.

As the country regained creditable economic progress in early 2000s under the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, Singh remained low-profile, failing to enter the Lok Sabha and settling for a seat in the Rajya Sabha. Despite all indices pointing to a period of good governance, the Vajpayee government lost badly in the 2004 Parliament election, winning just 138 seats, seven less than Congress. Congress president Sonia Gandhi's surprise decision to forgo the post of prime minister led to the mantle falling

on the shoulders of the unassuming Singh. Singh's loyalty, low profile and unassuming character were interpreted by many as the reason for him being chosen over many able colleagues, including frontrunners like Pranab Mukherjee. A seasoned politician and a statesman, Mukherjee never held Singh's elevation against him and stood by him through the next six-seven years, not only as a minister in the Union cabinet, but also as an able manager and troubleshooter of a difficult coalition. Singh was not that lucky with some other colleagues who treated him shabbily, often bypassing him using their access to the power centres at 10 Janpath. Although the UPA regime was described as a duopoly, the real power remained with Sonia Gandhi.

To his credit, Singh managed to diligently steer the coalition during UPA-I. Riding on the pace set by the Vajpayee government, he took the economy to higher levels. MNREGA and the Right to Information Act were some of the major achievements of his government in the first term. Although the groundwork began during Vajpayee's tenure, Singh successfully concluded the Indo-US nuclear deal, ending the country's isolation in 2008.

But Singh's success story came to a halt after that. The global recession of 2008 also hit the Indian economy badly, and the country reeled under inflation and economic slowdown. The GDP growth rate declined to 4 per cent at one stage. Singh's last major success — although many disagree that the credit should go to him — was the UPA's victory in the 2009 elections. While UPA-I won Singh laurels, UPA-II proved to be his undoing. Scandals like the 2G scam, coal scam, and telecom scam destroyed his government's credibility. As elections approached, in an immature bid to show Singh that his authority was over, Rahul Gandhi publicly trashed an ordinance moved by Singh's government in 2013 to save convicted legislators from disqualification.

Singh ended his tenure as prime minister, with a disastrous defeat for the Congress party in the 2014 elections, which reduced it to a historic low. Singh should have retired after that as he himself announced. But the party wanted him to continue in the Upper House where he spent several passive years before ill health forced him to withdraw.

In 2004, *The Economist* called him "the unexpected new leader". In 2009, Lal Krishna Advani called him "the weakest prime minister". In 2014, his political aide Sanjay Baru, in a tell-all book about Singh's tenure, called him "the accidental prime minister". Five years later, in 2019, a movie was also made with the same title.

Manmohan Singh had hoped that "history would be kind" to him. It will be, to the child of partitioned India who rose through hard work to the high office, to the honest and gentle soul who won not many enemies, to the finance minister who pulled India out of its socialist mess — but not, perhaps, to the *bhishma patit* whom, as prime minister, placed loyalty above Raj Dharma.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TO READ OR NOT TO

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Letting the reader down' (IE, December 27). The decision made by the India Post to discontinue the Book Post Service is saddening. We all know the importance of books, and how reading is the best way to gain insight and knowledge. This service was an excellent initiative that allowed people to send 5 kg of books for only Rs 80, but now, people will be required to send books as registered parcels, which will result in charges at least three times the earlier cost. With the rise of smartphones and low attention spans, this decision could make reading obsolete.

Anampreet Singh, New Delhi

KERALA'S ICON

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A cultural touchstone' (IE, December 27). M T Vasudevan Nair's body of work is a remarkable reflection of Kerala's landscapes, history, and complex socio-political fabric, masterfully woven with literary brilliance. For nearly seven decades, he explored the tensions between tradition and modernity, caste and class, and the complexities of heroism and human vulnerability. His iconic works reshaped Malayalam literature and cinema by combining mythology with personal stories, drawing inspiration from literary masters like Basheer and Mahesh M T's writing, deeply connected to the land and culture of Kerala, made him a cultural icon. His passing is a significant loss, not just to literature, but to the heart of Indian storytelling.

Ananya Anil, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A cultural touchstone' (IE, December 27). M T Vasudevan Nair was a remarkable cultural figure who left his imprint on the words of word and cinema. He was honoured by the Sahitya Akademi and the Jangthip, among others, while his films fetched him seven National Awards. However, M T's impact on Kerala's culture went beyond these accolades. He stood apart in Kerala as a public intellectual for his independent views and willingness to criticise the state. His sensitive treatment of language and finesse in sketching the emotions and tensions in relationships endeared him to generations of readers. The outpour of grief at his passing indicates the affection and respect he gained as a writer over the decades.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

FAREWELL, DR SINGH

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Dr Singh walks into history' (IE, December 27). The demise of Dr Manmohan Singh, former Prime Minister of India, marks the end of an era. As the architect of India's economic liberalisation in the 1990s, his policies helped the country transition from a closed, protectionist economy to one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. Beyond his political career, Singh's legacy as a scholar, a statesman, and a mentor to countless economists and policymakers is profound. His leadership, though not only in Indian politics but also in the hearts of those who admired his humility, intellect, and unwavering commitment to the nation's progress.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali



JOHN BRITTAS

Lal Salaam, Dr Singh

He held UPA-I as a role model. Was breaking ties with the Left a mistake?

IN JUNE 2021, shortly after joining the Rajya Sabha, I had a conversation with former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh. When he learned of my CPI(M) affiliation, though frail, but in a resolute tone he remarked, "UPA-I is the role model for any government."

This coalition, supported externally by my party, owed much to the efforts of my leaders like Harkishan Singh Surjeet and Jyoti Basu. However, it was Dr Singh's accomplished leadership that steered UPA-I through the choppy waters of the 2000s.

It was an unlikely combo. The Left — in the bulk of whose support came from Bengal, Kerala and Tripura — had won 63 seats in Lok Sabha primarily on an anti-Congress plank. Singh was the quintessential reformer man who believed capitalism could lift millions out of poverty. Yet, the unlikely partners came together to keep the BJP at bay. It lasted while it lasted primarily because of the moral high ground he enjoyed and his sincerity in taking Left's concerns seriously. I couldn't help recalling the turbulent days of the India-US nuclear deal that rocked UPA-I and eventually led to the alliance's downfall. I was part of the media delegation that accompanied him to the US where he engaged in talks with then-President George W. Bush to push forward the deal. Despite my affiliation with the Left, which vehem-

ently opposed the agreement, Singh included me in his entourage. Shortly after returning, he also gave an interview with Kairati TV, which I led, in his efforts to reach out to the Left. It was evident to me that he was a shrewd political strategist.

Why did Singh cite UPA-I as a model and not UPA-II? The answer lies in the 2008 fall-out over the nuclear deal, which led to the Left withdrawing support. The Congress-led government that returned in 2009, without Left support, was soon plagued by corruption and plunged into chaos. It quickly lost its moral authority. In hindsight, sidelining the Left was a costly mistake that left UPA-II vulnerable. It paved the way for the BJP's rise to power.

Under UPA-I, with the Left's influence, Singh's government introduced transformative measures: MGNREGA, RTI, food security, the Right to Education, and tribal rights initiatives. These policies are aimed at reducing inequalities. They were meant as a counterbalance to liberalisation, which the Left had warned would only help create new oligarchies. These concerns proved prescient, as oligarchs have since exerted tremendous influence over successive governments. Though ideological differences over liberalisation created friction with the Left, the debate remained respectful and fo-

cused on policy, a far cry from today's personal tirades. Those who thrive primarily in launching personal tirades against political opponents could very well take notes from those years.

One can't help wondering if we would have been living in a different India had UPA-I survived. I want to play the Devil's Advocate here: Was the risk that Singh took in alienating the Left worth it? And more importantly, did he or Congress gain anything out of this? True, Congress was not the only one who took the hit, the Left also suffered setbacks. But the downward spiral of the UPA without the Left's guidance was quite astonishing. It came back to power in 2009 — on the back of policies it followed thanks to the Left's interventions — but began to rot within months. As for the nuclear deal that was supposed to end India's nuclear isolation with the US supplying nuclear technology and fuel, hardly anything tangible came out of it.

The decision to sever ties with the Left made the Singh-led government in its second term vulnerable to attacks. It lost its way in the face of an anti-gang movement that eventually opened the doors for the BJP to return to power and work towards establishing a majoritarian rule. The exclusion of the Left was a costly misstep, leading to in-

stability and a loss of public trust.

But Singh's equanimity and integrity set him apart in Indian politics. Despite personal attacks, including harsh remarks from figures like L K Advani, Singh maintained his composure. Contrary to the "Manmohan Singh" label, he was far from silent. Between 2004 and 2014, he held numerous press conferences and engaged openly with the media. During that period, he spoke to the press on his foreign trips 72 times, besides holding annual pressers 10 times and on state visits on 23 occasions. Unlike many contemporary leaders who rely on theatrics to distract from core issues, Singh's focus remained on substantive governance. His critique of demonetisation in Parliament was particularly striking, as his warnings about its consequences proved prophetic. He had called it a monumental mismanagement.

The Left has always championed democracy, secularism, and federalism — principles Singh upheld throughout his tenure. For his unwavering focus on governance and national unity, history will undoubtedly be kinder to him, Dr Lal Salam, Dr Singh.

The writer is a CPI(M) member of the Rajya Sabha

17 BIG PICTURE

FROM THE vantage point, the greyish-green Siang river and the hills it snakes between are serene. The Siang, which unleashes its fury in the monsoons, is almost languid in the winter. The fields on either side are lush with crops grown by farmers from the surrounding villages — paddy, millets, greens and vegetables — and trees laden with the region's famous oranges.

"You just need to see this view to understand why people here instinctively oppose a dam on the river. That land by the river is our livelihood. Once it goes underwater, we will lose everything," says Dubit Siram, 30.

His village, Parong, is one of three along the Siang in Arunachal Pradesh earmarked as possible sites for what will be India's largest hydropower project, the proposed Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP).

While a large section of residents from the Adi tribe from villages in the state's Upper Siang and Siang districts fear the loss of their farmlands and homes to the proposed project, they are now facing increasing pressure from the government to let the work begin. Earlier this month, the state requisitioned the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) to tackle any resistance to the project.

The government's stand is that the SUMP is not "just any hydropower project", but an effort essential to "save" the river by countering the effects of China's dam building activities further upstream in Tibet.

As authorities press for a Pre-Feasibility Report (PFR), a preliminary analysis to assess the probable cost of a project and its feasibility in a given area, this belt has become a hotspot of activity and deepening fault lines.

While the state is pushing to begin the surveys this winter, the affected villages are witnessing demonstrations, meetings and mobilisation drives against this almost everyday.

Dependence on agriculture

"The land by the river is the only plain area here where we can grow our crops. Nearly everybody is dependent on agriculture here. There are limited government jobs, no industries, no factories or other opportunities in this remote place. We feed our families off the farms and sell produce to educate our children. If our land is submerged, there is nothing for us," says Tarik Gao, 47, another resident of Parong and a member of the village panchayat.

SUMP has faced opposition since it was first proposed by the NITI Aayog in 2017. But the push for it — and the opposition against it — increased this year. While government functionaries say the precise scale of the project will only be ascertained after feasibility surveys, a preliminary report submitted by the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) in December 2022 to the Central Electrical Authority was for an 11,000-MW project with a reservoir capacity of 9 billion cubic metres. This makes the project several times larger in scale than other projects currently in the works in the country.

The three sites earmarked for SUMP are Parong and Dite Dime in Siang district, and Uging in Upper Siang district. The Siang

Indigenous Farmers' Forum (SIFF), which is leading the protests and comprises farmers from the affected region, estimates that 13 villages are at risk of being completely submerged, while farmlands could be submerged at 27 others.

The Adi residents here revere the Siang as a provider, referring to it as Aane (mother) Siang. Cultivation on its banks was encouraged and facilitated by the state after independence to move away from shifting cultivation in the hills. So while settled agriculture along the river — or *poni kheti* as locals call it — is 60 years old among the farmers of this belt, they are now completely dependent on it.

"Look around you," says Gao, pointing to the steep hill further up the village. "It is jungles and rocks. There is no water there. Where will we go and where will we farm?"

The residents are especially worried over the state's decision this month to deploy nine companies of the CAPF and additional police forces at the proposed project sites and NHPC offices. The forces have not yet arrived but news of the decision spread panic and suspicion and has lent greater urgency to those opposing the project, spurring demonstrations in different villages. Their fear has a precedent — in 2016, two anti-dam activists were gunned down by the police in Arunachal Pradesh's Tawang.

"We are worried that if they (Central forces) come, they will restrict our movement and hold us captive in our villages so the survey can happen. We cannot allow such *zorbari* (coercion)," says Opak Gao, 57. She is one of the women from Parong who were, until recently, keeping a vigil near the survey site to prevent the entry of officials. With harvest season picking up pace, the women have halted their vigil for the time being.

A defunct school in their village has been picked as one of the places to accommodate the forces, and the district administration has issued instructions for it to be prepared for their arrival. The night after a water connection to the school was set up, some unidentified protesters broke and removed the pipe.

In the face of swelling discontent, Chief Minister Pema Khandu travelled to Boleng, the district headquarters of Siang district, last week to make an appeal to the locals.

CM visit and 'water bomb'

The Siang originates near Mount Kailash in Tibet, where it is known as the Yarlung Tsangpo. It traverses over 1,000 km eastward before forming a horseshoe bend around the towering Namcha Barwa peak and entering Arunachal Pradesh as the Siang. Further downstream, in Assam, it joins tributaries like the

THE SIANG UPPER MULTIPURPOSE PROJECT

Not without resistance

A feeling of disquiet hangs heavy in the air in two districts along the Siang river in Arunachal Pradesh, where protests against a hydel project, larger in scale than any ongoing ones in India, are building up due to fear of losses — of homes, land and everything familiar. SUKRITA BARUAH travels to Siang district, where the pushback from the people is bigger than the push for the mammoth dam



(Top) The Siang in Arunachal Pradesh; (above) a ritual being conducted by Riew residents at a bridge over the river. Sukrita Baruah



ABOUT THE PROPOSED PROJECT

- The 11,000-MW Siang Upper Multipurpose Project was first proposed by the NITI Aayog in 2017
- As per a preliminary report by the NHPC, which is in charge of the proposed project, the reservoir capacity is expected to be 9 billion cubic metres
- Three sites have been earmarked for the project in Siang district's Parang and Dite Dime, and Uging in Upper Siang district
- Around 13 villages in the region and farmlands in 27 other villages may be completely submerged due to this project

Dibang and Lohit to become the Brahmaputra.

On SUMP being touted as a counter to concerns over China planning the world's largest dam at reportedly 60,000-MW capacity on the Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet's Medog county, officials say the Siang project and its reservoir could counter water diver-

sion from the Tsangpo to water-scarce parts of China and the possibility of sudden release of water from such a dam.

In his speech to the locals in Boleng, Khandu said such a dam in Tibet — and not the damming of the Siang — was the real existential threat to the Adi community.

"It is not just the Siang area and the Adi people who will be affected. The effects will go down to the Brahmaputra in Assam and all the way to Bangladesh. The Adi community and the Siang are tied together since their origins. Do you want that in the winter, you'll be able to walk on foot from the river's east bank to the west bank? ... China will make its dam there for sure. It is just a matter of time. If they one day release the water, have you ever imagined the extent of damage it will do from Tutting to Pasighat? The impact will be so horrible that water will flow 15 metres over the town of Pasighat. Guwahati will also be submerged. ... This is not a hydropower dam. This is for the future of the Adi community, of the Siang river," the CM had said.

The term "water bomb" is one that is frequently used by government functionaries to warn residents about the possible effects of such a dam, even while the locals opposing the project remain sceptical, wondering if the claims are exaggerated.

Chants on a bridge

This Monday, dozens of villagers from Riew, another affected village, who are opposed to the project gathered on the Dite Dime bridge over the Siang. With chants led by the elders among them, they held a ritual praying for their land to be protected from the project.

"We will become refugees like Chakmas and Hajongs. There is no question of compensation. We have been on this land for hundreds of years," says Tashong Jamoh, 60, one of those who joined the rituals. He was speaking of the roughly one lakh Chakmas and Hajongs from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, then in east Pakistan and in present-day Bangladesh, who had fled to Arunachal Pradesh since the 1960s after their land was submerged by the Kapil dam project.

Unlike many other more strident local voices against the dam, Mongor Tamuk, 39, another resident of Riew at the ritual, says he could have been on board "if the system was good". They have to look after our basics before talking about national issues. We cannot be treated like *bali ka bala* (sacrificial lambs). Whatever they are doing, they are doing by force. They want to send forces here instead of coming to our village and talking to us. There was only one public meeting in our village on this issue in September, which was organised by the All Riew Students' Union instead of by them," he says.

The other such meeting this year, addressed by local MLAs and SIFF leaders, was held in October in Yinklong, the Upper Siang district headquarters. This too was organised by the All Upper Siang District Students' Union. An attempt at a public meeting by the

Siang District Collector in Parang in October was boycotted by most residents who say they want conversations with 'decision makers' in the government instead.

Meanwhile, state government representatives insist that they want dialogue. Arunachal Cabinet Minister Ojeng Tasing, the MLA from the Pangin constituency in Siang, claims that attempts at dialogue are being stonewalled by those opposed to the project. Tasing, who was incidentally one of the biggest leaders of the anti-dam movement in the same region against projects on the Siang in the 2010s, says, "When a representative goes to a village, activists don't let people meet them. When I went to the meeting in Riew, they did not allow us to make our presentation. The government is clear it wants to talk, but the people are being misled."

He says the Central and state governments are looking to offer "India's best compensation" to those affected, "but they need to come to the table to discuss it".

However, even those not opposing the project say they need more than just the government's word. These include Tamal Pabin, a *Goon Bum* (a village-level functionary) from Parang, who claims to be "neutral" on the subject. *Goon Bums* from the affected districts have been called for meetings at the offices of their respective District Collectors multiple times this year to create support for the surveys.

"It is certain that we will lose our farmlands, but the District Collector has said that villagers will get four to five the normal compensation because it's a project of national importance. He said those who lose their houses will be rehabilitated, and medical facilities and schools will be set up for development. Those not opposed to the project say it must be ensured that when the compensation comes, it comes directly to us, not through third parties. But these are things that have been promised; there is nothing on paper," says Pabin.

Despite the resistance on the ground, the government says it is confident of starting the surveys soon. "To be frank, there is a lot of push from both the Centre and the state government to move ahead with this project, given its importance, but there is a lot of objection from the SIFF. Naturally, there are objections to every dam project. We are working on how to win the confidence of the people, whether it takes 10 days or 10 months," says Ninong Ering, West Pasighat MLA and advisor to the Minister for Hydro Power Development.

Local NHPC officials said the "campaign" for outreach to villagers will now be conducted by members of village-level sub-committees, the SUMP Development Committee, constituted by the state, which villagers in favour of the survey have said to join.

"We want to explain to people that the survey is a very preliminary step. Based on this survey, one of the three sites will be selected. After that, there will be extensive investigation, the environmental impact assessment will be done and the compensation related data will be collected. Public hearings will be conducted before the DPR (detailed project report) is sent for approval. Without public approval, no funds will be allotted to the project," said the official.

But Gegong Jijong, president of Yinklong-based SIFF, says the resistance to this first step will continue. "If the PFR finds the area feasible, there will be no turning back. Such a big dam has never been built anywhere in this country, that too right among human settlements."

The term "water bomb" is being frequently used by government functionaries to warn locals about the possible effects of such a dam

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PAPER WITH PASSION

A silent crusader

Dr Manmohan Singh a reluctant politician yet a resilient leader and a gentleman is no more but his legacy lives on

Why RSS chief's push for large families is out of step



K S TOMAR

By advocating outdated solutions to demographic trends, Bhagwat's vision risks deepening societal divisions and ignoring the socio-economic realities of today

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat's recent appeal for larger families, framed as a response to perceived demographic challenges, reveals a worldview rooted in traditionalism. This perspective clashes with the progressive social, cultural, and economic ethos of modern India. While presented as a solution to counter declining population trends, Bhagwat's remarks have ignited debates over their communal undertones, potential to deepen gender inequality, and disconnection from contemporary realities.

Bhagwat's remarks are part of a larger discourse on demographic imbalances, often aimed at minority communities. This rhetoric fosters fear, undermines social harmony, and contradicts India's pluralistic traditions. Today's youth prioritise quality of life over larger families, influenced by rising living costs, career aspirations, and financial stability. Bhagwat's appeal appears disconnected from these realities, highlighting a gap between traditionalist agendas and contemporary Indian values.

The RSS chief's observations clash with India's family planning efforts from the late 1960s and 1970s when the emphasis was on small families. Even former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, during her tenure, highlighted the dangers of unchecked population growth, stressing the need for planned families.

Bhagwat's outdated stance ignores this historical context and the progress India has made in population stabilisation through education, healthcare, and women's empowerment. Bhagwat's proposal for families to have more children is based on the argument that declining fertility rates threaten the survival and dominance of certain communities.

This narrative, often accompanied by alarmist rhetoric about population imbalances, underscores divisive politics. Although demographic trends warrant attention, his suggested solution disregards socio-economic realities and entrenches regressive norms. Interestingly, Andhra Pradesh



Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu has echoed similar sentiments, advocating for larger families in his state.

However, such approaches seem out of step with modern India's aspirations. India is not experiencing a population decline but rather a slowdown in growth.

According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has dropped to 2.0, below the replacement level of 2.1. This trend reflects advancements in education, healthcare, and women's autonomy. While policymakers globally view such developments as markers of progress, Bhagwat's remarks frame this demographic shift as a cultural and religious issue, perpetuating communal narratives that risk deepening societal divisions.

Bhagwat's outdated stance ignores this historical context and the progress India has made in population stabilisation through education, healthcare, and women's empowerment. The RSS's vision aligns with traditional family structures, where women are expected to prioritise domestic roles.

By advocating for larger families, Bhagwat inadvertently reinforces these outdated norms, perpetuating cycles of dependency and limiting women's agency. Central to Bhagwat's argument is a patriarchal notion that reduces women to their reproductive roles. His call for more children disregards women's aspirations, autonomy, and wellbeing, placing an undue burden on them.

BHAGWAT'S OUTDATED STANCE IGNORES THIS HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THE PROGRESS INDIA HAS MADE IN POPULATION STABILISATION THROUGH EDUCATION, HEALTHCARE, AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Resource Constraints

With a population exceeding 1.4 billion, India faces severe resource constraints, including food insecurity, water scarcity, and unemployment. Increasing family sizes would exacerbate these issues, placing further strain on public services and natural resources. India's youth population, often hailed as a demographic dividend, grapples with high unemployment rates.

The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) reports that unemployment among those aged 15-29 exceeded 20 per cent. Without job creation, additional population growth risks turning this dividend into a liability. India is among the countries most vulnerable to climate change. Global policymakers advocate for sustainable development, making Bhagwat's vision seem misaligned with contemporary priorities.

Cultural and Ethical Disconnect

India's ethos is rooted in diversity, balance, and individual

choice. Bhagwat's remarks dismiss these values, echoing authoritarian tendencies that clash with Indian democracy. Family planning decisions are deeply personal and should not be influenced by socio-political agendas.

Intervening in such choices undermines personal freedoms and contradicts the principles of modern India. In a country where maternal mortality remains a concern and reproductive healthcare is uneven, urging women to have more children intensifies existing vulnerabilities. Instead of alarmist rhetoric, India's leadership should focus on forward-looking policies to address demographic concerns constructively. Improved access to education, particularly for girls, is key to stabilising population growth. Educated women are more likely to make informed reproductive choices, contributing to sustainable demographics and enhancing healthcare. Investing in maternal and child healthcare can reduce mortality rates and improve quality of life.

Policies empowering the youth and enhancing employability can transmute India's demographic potential into an asset. (Writer is a senior political analyst and strategic affairs columnist; views are personal)



The man with the vision and selfless dedication to the nation, Dr Manmohan Singh is no more. Dr Singh passed away on December 26, 2024, at the age of 92. Dr Singh, a towering figure in Indian politics and economics, breathed his last at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. His demise marks the end of an era defined by humility, intellect and steadfast dedication to nation-building. Dr Manmohan Singh's contributions to India's economic and political landscape are unparalleled. Widely regarded as the architect of India's 1991 economic reforms, Singh's tenure as Finance Minister under Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao was transformative. At a time when the Indian economy teetered on the brink of bankruptcy, Singh introduced a series of bold measures that liberalised the economy, dismantled the license raj and opened the doors to foreign investment. These reforms not only rescued India from an economic crisis but also set the stage for decades of robust growth and development. During his tenure, Singh's policies prioritised the devaluation of the rupee, moderation of taxes, privatisation of public sector enterprises and encouragement of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). These initiatives catalysed India's transition into a globally integrated economy and solidified his reputation as one of the nation's most accomplished economists.

Known as a reluctant politician, Dr Singh's foray into politics was driven by a profound sense of duty rather than ambition. When he assumed the role of Prime Minister in 2004, heading the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, he brought the same commitment and vision that had defined his career as an economist. Serving two consecutive terms until 2014, Singh's leadership was marked by both humility and resolve. One of the most defining moments of his tenure was the Indo-US nuclear deal in 2008, a landmark agreement that underscored his courage and conviction. Despite staunch opposition from the Left Front, which led to their withdrawal of support, Singh's government survived a vote of confidence, thanks to the support of the Samajwadi Party. The deal elevated India's status on the global stage and symbolised his unyielding dedication to the nation's strategic interests. Dr Singh was often described as a 'gentleman leader', a man of integrity who preferred dialogue over confrontation. His humility was legendary, yet he was resolute when it came to principles. Throughout his career, he commanded respect across party lines, not just for his intellect but for his moral rectitude. His tenure as Prime Minister may have been criticised for perceived passivity, but his calm demeanour and quiet determination left an indelible mark on Indian governance. A seven-day period of mourning is a fitting tribute by the nation to a great visionary. His last rites will be conducted with full state honours. While his absence leaves a void, his contributions to India's progress and his example of selfless service will continue to inspire generations. Om Shanti.

PICTALK



Tourists enjoy paragliding after fresh snowfall, in Solang valley in Manali

PTI

Homeschooling: Affordable and holistic education option

Homeschooling is transforming its image from an unconventional option to a widely accepted educational route as many parents opt for this affordable choice

With the rising costs of living, an increasing number of parents are reevaluating the conventional approach to education. An increasing number of families nationwide are viewing homeschooling as a legitimate and empowering option compared to traditional education systems.

The choice is influenced not only by financial considerations but also by a commitment to nurture the child in a manner that aligns with their unique needs and the family's values. For many years, traditional educational institutions have been the cornerstone of childhood learning. However, nowadays, an ever-growing number of parents are questioning whether the significant expenses associated with private education, or even the costs of public schooling, truly justify the investment. The homeschooling movement presents a compelling argument: education can occur beyond the confines of traditional classrooms. The main factor driving this change is the expense involved. Education, particularly in private schools, often



presents a challenging list of costs: tuition, uniforms, transportation, extracurriculars, and supplies. Homeschooling greatly alleviates these financial burdens. Parents now have the opportunity to invest in essential resources such as top-notch educational materials, online courses, or tailored coaching—all designed to cater to their child's unique needs. Moreover, homeschooling encourages families to tap into their creativity and resourcefulness. Libraries, free online resources, and community programmes provide abundant learning opportunities with minimal or no expense. In a time filled with numerous digital resources, parents have the ability to craft a curriculum that is both cost-effective and thorough. In addition to reducing expenses, there are numerous

other factors contributing to the rising popularity of homeschooling. Parents hold the view that homeschooling can significantly enhance a child's personal and academic development. In contrast to conventional educational institutions, homeschooling offers remarkable flexibility, allowing lessons to align with a child's interests, learning pace, and preferred methods of engagement.

A student passionate about science, for instance, can dedicate additional time to experiments and practical activities, while those with a flair for the arts can unleash their creativity free from the limitations of a rigid schedule. Another key factor is the importance of comprehensive development. Homeschooling transcends traditional textbooks and offers genuine, real-world learning experiences. Cooking transforms into a blend of maths and chemistry; gardening embodies principles of biology and sustainability; a visit to the museum or park imparts lessons in history and ecology. These activities, along with practical knowledge, foster

family connections—something that seems rare in today's world. Certainly, homeschooling comes with its drawbacks. Concerns have been voiced by critics regarding socialisation and the stress it imposes on parents. Nevertheless, families who choose to homeschool have found innovative ways to address these issues, including forming co-op groups, engaging in community sports, and coordinating group field trips.

This signifies a movement towards appreciating cost-effectiveness, adaptability, and personal expression in education—a tendency expected to expand as households adjust to financial circumstances. Ultimately, homeschooling transcends being merely an educational option; it embodies a declaration of empowerment. For parents aiming to reshape education in a way that resonates with their values, this journey offers not just information but a profoundly rewarding experience for both themselves and their children.

(The writer is a motivator and a freelance writer; views are personal)



RACHNA LAKHPATI

MANMOHAN SINGH PASSES AWAY

Madam — The sad demise of former PM Dr Manmohan Singh is an irreplaceable loss to the nation. Singh will be remembered as the statesman who saved the Indian economy from going over the edge. When he took over as finance minister in the minority government of Narasimha Rao in 1991, the Indian economy was very close to sovereign default. Foreign exchange reserves were barely enough to cover a month of imports, and the country had to suffer the ignominy of having to ship its gold reserves to England.

All of that would change with the famous 1991 Budget which Manmohan Singh presented, and the industrial deregulation that accompanied the Budget. Hailed as an architect of India's economic liberalisation, he served as Prime Minister from 2004 to 2014. During his tenure, he spearheaded transformative policies that shaped India's modern economic landscape. His leadership saw India achieve its highest GDP growth rates, and his role in the Indo-US nuclear deal significantly enhanced India's global stature. India is on its way to becoming the third-largest economy in the world in a couple of years, and the seeds of India's growth story were sown during the economic reforms. More than three decades later, there is as big a consensus for reforms in India as there was opposition to it when the process started.

N Sadhasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGE FOR INDIA

Madam — A formal request by Bangladesh to India to extradite former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who fled to India after she was ousted by mass student-led protests, poses a severe diplomatic challenge for India. Dhaka has chosen her path, and it does not seem to be interested in normalising ties with India; hence this extradition path. The extradition request and the political developments around Hasina's asylum in India have the potential to influence India-Bangladesh relations significantly, and it requires deft diplomatic handling by both nations. Hasina's presence

ICC fines Virat Kohli



Virat Kohli found himself in an awkward situation when he was in the midst of a controversy over an altercation with Australian debutant Sam Konstas. It was a lucky escape for Virat Kohli as he was in the middle of a test at Melbourne, which otherwise would have ended as a typical 'Boxing' Day episode. The 19-year-old teenager has not spared the Indian bowlers, including Jasprit

Bumrah, in his attacking 60 runs, which was a treat to watch. It was an intentional act captured in-camera when Kohli appeared to be dashed against Konstas in the middle while walking across, which sparked an encounter. Watching this, the Aussie legend Ricky Ponting and England's Michael Vaughan were quick to voice their opinions, calling for ICC action.

Kohli has been slapped with a fine of 20 per cent of his match fee and given one demerit point by the ICC as well. This is not the expected behaviour from a batter who played 121 tests, 295 ODIs, and 125 T20s. If Kohli was baffled by Konstas' belligerence, he should have proved himself as a batter in the middle rather than engaged himself with the intimidating tactics, which can be construed as cheap for all his calibre.

A P Thiruvadi | Chennai

In India and her public statements against the interim government have strained relations between the two countries, which have further been worsened by the persecution of Hindus and other minorities in Bangladesh. India is examining the request on legal grounds, but India can refuse extradition, citing political nature or justice-related concerns, but ultimately it is going to be for purely political reasons. The ball is firmly in India's court, and if India sends her back, we would see her fate as she is bound to face the death penalty in Dhaka, and if it rejects this request, then we should be ready for more hostility from our neighbour, and our ties would go from bad to worse. Whatever India chose to do will have long-term ramifications on this whole region.

Bal Govind | Noida

EMPOWERING RURAL ECONOMY

Madam — The government is committed to revitalising the rural economy through cooperation, recently inaugurating 10,000 Multipurpose Primary Agricultural Credit

Societies (PACS). These societies not only generate employment but also ensure optimal resource availability and connect farmers' produce to international markets, aligning with the vision of 'Prosperity Through Cooperation'. PACS, as the cornerstone of the cooperative three-tier structure, play a pivotal role in rural upliftment by addressing needs like credit, fertilisers, storage, and water management. The government aims to establish 2 lakh PACS in five years, strengthening rural infrastructure and promoting unity, harmony, and self-reliance. To revive dormant PACS and establish new ones, a detailed Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) has been developed, targeting the setup of PACS in 15,000 villages. These societies are evolving into hubs of multifaceted services, including digital amenities like ticket bookings and financial inclusion via RuPay Kisan Credit Cards and micro-ATMs.

R K Jain | Barwani

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Trump gloom or green shoots? Europe's year ahead



LIONEL LAURENT

After Covid-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, is Europe about to get its next existential shock in the shape of Donald Trump? From trade to defence to tech, the combination of mercantilism and MAGA is going to hurt — but hopefully also jolt Europeans out of typical complacency.

The list of reasons for the European Union to worry is long. The open, trade-oriented 27-member union thrives in predictable, rules-based environments that

put commerce first and conflict second. That's better for the Trumpian knife, with the incoming president preferring to move fast, apply pressure and transact bilaterally. Even before getting his feet under the Oval Office desk, he's leaning on Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy to cut a deal with Vladimir Putin to end the Russian invasion and threatening allies with a blanket 10 per cent tariff to redress deeply held grievances on trade. The combined effect would be a new security dilemma to Europe's east, with EU defence nowhere near ready to pick up the slack of a US pivot to Asia, and a reduction of EU's gross domestic product by 0.3 per cent by 2026 if tariffs happen, according to Citigroup Inc.

The unity keeping Europe together is also getting weaker. Unlike Mr Trump's first term, which produced that remarkable image of Germany's Angela Merkel and assorted G-7 partners staring down a defiant American president, the list of leaders able to rally support in the face of a fraying trans-Atlantic relationship is Post-It-sized.

France's Emmanuel Macron has gone from walking on water to getting drenched — and may not see out his second term. Ms Merkel's successor, Olaf Scholz, is even more unpopular and faces elections in February. Europe's far right is gaining and getting an unexpected boost from Elon Musk's wealth and influence. Still, even a coterie of Trump whisperers like Italy's Giorgio Meloni and Hungary's Viktor Orban sees their influence rise, everyone's playing with a weak hand. Investors already concerned by the EU's economic and tech lag relative to the US (and China) are voting with their wallets.

It is just about possible to glimpse a silver lining, or the contours of a response taking shape, amid the gloom. At a recent gathering of ministers and experts in the Italian Alps organised by Grand Continent, I was encouraged by the pragmatism of euro elites assessing the EU's ability to plan and respond rather than simply calling for more utopian Hamilton moments. Trade, one area where the size of the EU market

and its 440 million consumers gives the Brussels machine genuine sway, has seen war-gaming begin in earnest. This means identifying carrots to pre-emptively offer Mr Trump to rebalance a \$201.6 billion EU surplus — such as buying more energy, goods, weapons — and retaliatory tariff threats if they don't work. This won't be easy, given the scale of what Trump calls a "tremendous deficit," but it's doable. The next goal should be the kind of mindset shift that can hold a common pan-EU line if Mr Trump opts to divide and rule by offering concessions to individual countries.

On security, a truly defence-ready Europe still looks a distant prospect even after the biggest full-scale conflict on home soil since 1945. Yet here again, the size of its market may get it a voice at the table when it comes to Ukraine's fate. It should seize the initiative to play a leading role in the country's reconstruction, which could cost up to \$486 billion over the next decade. On top of meeting existing pledges of €241 billion (\$250.7 billion), Europe also

has a card to play in the form of around \$300 billion sanctioned Russian sovereign assets, which have been used creatively to help Kyiv without full confiscation. Looking for closer ties with the UK, a logical defence partner for the EU despite the bad blood of Brexit, should also bring a boost to the UK's defence sector.

Finally, the tech-industrial-tariff complex. Truly, the European economy, if it can escape terminal decline, might also serve as the thread between what Europe needs and what Mr Trump wants: A more autonomous and resilient continent that's driven by its own consumers rather than exports to China or imports of Russian gas. Though it's taken hits from its lack of technology giants and from a still-fragmented capital market, this is a market with household savings equivalent to €335.3 trillion and with strong companies. A cast of recent recommendations from Mario Draghi and Enrico Letta shows the way to unspooling red tape, knocking down silos and building up companies in fragmented sectors like

telecoms. Interest-rate cuts from the European Central Bank can also drive demand and repair battered corporate and consumer confidence. Maybe some of the elements of MAGA, from de-bureaucratisation to countering China's unfair trade practices, might be emulated in Europe.

Grabbing these opportunities will depend on the political instability at Europe's core not getting worse. There is at least one reason to be optimistic: The current frontrunner to succeed Germany's Scholz — Friedrich Merz — might be the key to unlocking approximately 0.7 per cent of GDP in extra spending by reforming the much-maligned debt brake, according to UBS, which would brighten prospects. Still, caution is warranted given what's going on in France.

Maybe the best thing one can say about

2025 for Europe is that expectations could hardly be lower. While it's Mr Trump's own mood and the health of the US consumer that will decide most of how his blows land, Europeans shouldn't forget their own (limited) ability to parry.

© Bloomberg

India's uncharismatic reformer



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

Charisma. The late Manmohan Singh had many of them. That lack of charisma was actually foundational to his political career and his remarkable achievements.

He would, on the basis of his concrete achievements, be considered India's best-ever finance minister and, arguably, the best Prime Minister. As PM, he delivered a combination of intellectual ability and hard work allowed him to acquire the skills required to handle difficult economic situations on a vast scale.

Politicians found him unthreatening due to his lack of charisma. He had no power base, and no apparent interest in building one. Hence, others were willing to let him go through the hard grind of actually pulling India out of a monumental balance of payment (BoP) crisis, and rebooting the economy in the early 1990s. The unthreatening personality of the man was also why later, he was an effective Prime Minister. As PM, he delivered another growth spurt and, just incidentally, steered India carefully through the worst global financial crisis in decades.

Charisma wins elections, and along with associated qualities like effective demagoguery, personal charm, and the ability to lie flu-

ently, it is an attribute much prized by politicians. But charisma is not necessarily associated with the qualities required of a competent administrator, or a good policymaker. Just as an example, think of Adolf Hitler and Angela Merkel. One had oodles of charisma. The other turned Germany into an economic and geopolitical powerhouse.

Singh would have struggled to win an election. He was in Parliament, courtesy the Rajya Sabha. But he did successfully reboot an economy mired in trouble, and later managed another financial crisis on an even larger scale, all while working within coalitions.

The monumental nature of his achievements is best understood if you look at alternative futures — the might-have-beens for India. In mid-1991, India was facing a BoP crisis that could easily have spiralled into years of default and misery. Indeed, a lot of people thought it would. In similar circumstances, Argentina, Brazil, Jamaica, Mexico, Russia, even the Asian tigers suffered years of hyper-inflation, currency collapse, and ruin, or near-ruin.

India could well have ended up a basket case and a cautionary tale like Argentina. In 1991, India had a BoP crisis, near-zero economic growth, terrible infrastructure, insane red tape, and high unemployment. It had to live with energy imports, which could barely cover. India also lacked the basic intellectual capital needed to skill up, due to its under-educated workforce.

Singh's recipe of a New Economic Policy that removed the worst aspects of the Licence Raj helped accelerate growth to over 6 per cent, from almost zero. A calibrated currency depreciation

helped with the trade balance. In retrospect, Singh wrought an economic miracle. Five years after the BoP crisis, India was not only better off compared to 1991; Indians were better off than they had ever been, period.

Singh also does not get full credit for managing the subprime crisis and the subsequent "second wave" through 2008-12. His early years as PM coincided with a period of global prosperity, which he capitalised on. India had never enjoyed growth at the rates achieved during that period.

When the subprime crisis blew up, he managed to continue delivering growth. Again, you need to think of the might-have-beens to understand the magnitude of his achievement. The knock-on effects of the US mortgage crisis led to a second global crisis, which nearly crippled the European Union and left the global economy shaken for years. India survived almost unscathed.

Through it all, a man who understood money and its uses better than most remained untouched by personal scandal, which is also incredible. There were all sorts of scandals associated with the two United Progressive Alliance regimes. But nobody ever questioned Singh's probity — at best, he has been mocked for his lack of oratorical skills.

Uniquely among Indian politicians of the 21st century, Singh wasn't interested in self-aggrandisement, or in limiting his legacy by enriching his family. His children are highly-educated professionals who have made their own way.

There will be all sorts of platitudes written about him now, but they are unnecessary. He would have found them embarrassing. His legacy speaks for itself.

Dr Singh's other reform

Manmohan Singh's success lay in making a decisive and historic shift towards the West. It was also audacious, in my book even more so than the 1991 reform, given how little support it had within the Congress and the UPA

Millions of words are being written and spoken about Dr Manmohan Singh in these couple of days, most of them will focus on the reform he introduced in 1991. We can understand how his life is often seen monochromatically by his admirers — including those who don't vote for the Congress and probably never have.

That's very unkind to him in many ways. One, it limits him and his legacy to something he had done almost a decade and a half before he became the Prime Minister of India.

Second, it gives him sole credit for the reform, even though it was P V Narasimha Rao, then the Prime Minister, who carried the political risk for what was done in 1991. That reform is, therefore, as much to Rao's credit as it is to Singh's.

And third, because it limits his legacy to this

Jugalbandhi and denies him the place he deserves in our history for the other substantive contributions he made as Prime Minister.

When Singh became Prime Minister in the summer of 2004, much of the discussion was about what kind of economic agenda the UPA was going to follow. Was he going to pick up the thread from where he and Rao had left it in 1996, or would he return to the ideology of his party and its largest parliamentary ally, the Left Front? Even the most astute watchers of North and South Blocks were not prepared for the more substantive and historic changes to come in foreign and strategic policy.

This was especially so given the Congress's chronic suspicion of the US and the West and its persistent nostalgia for the Non-Aligned Movement and Third-Worldism. If you had told someone on the morning of July 24, 1991, that by the afternoon, Rao would junk Jawaharlal Nehru's 1966 Industrial Policy Resolution with one speech from the industry minister presiding the Budget (Rao held the industry portfolio), you'd have been asked to get your head examined.

You'd need to have been even more brainless in the summer of 2004 to imagine that within a couple of years, a Left-of-Centre coalition, surviving at the sufferance of the Left Front with 61 MPs, would be finalising India's first substantive treaty with the US. A

strategic one, as it turned out.

This change was rooted in deep, intellectual thinking, even more so than the reforms of 1991. Then, at least there was the alibi of a crisis, the demands of the IMF. There was no such compulsion to reposition India strategically. That India had to warm up to the West is an idea that had been brewing since Indira Gandhi's return in 1980, when she was deeply troubled by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and India's strategic compulsion to back it at the UN. She did reach out to Ronald Reagan in Canada but never really.

But the relationship didn't pick up pace. Rajiv Gandhi and then Rao also made some moves, but these were carefully measured baby steps. Of course, the Soviet Union had disappeared, but suspicion and scepticism of the US were still formidable. Atal Bihari Vajpayee made some significant moves, and was attacked by the Congress for the "shift".

Manmohan Singh's success lay in making the same shift much more decisively as the head of a Congress government. It was also audacious, in my book even more so than the 1991 reform, given how little support this had within his party and among the UPA partners. The Congress was still filled with kind of American phobia, including some of his senior-most Cabinet colleagues. And, Janpath was simply not prepared for it. Nor did it see the need or compulsion.

Forget support, there was deep resistance — even resentment — in the foreign service bureaucracy. Many there were hoping that with Vajpayee's NDA gone, there would be a return to Cold War-era American phobia, including some of his senior-most Cabinet colleagues. And, Janpath was simply not prepared for it. Nor did it see the need or compulsion.

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SHEKHAR GUPTA

NATIONAL INTEREST

Future fast-forwarded

EYE CULTURE

KUMAR ABISHK

In 2021, as India battled the Delta wave of Covid-19, a new challenge emerged: Vaccine hesitancy. Would we fall into the scepticism trap seen in the West? Enter the digital heroes! Celebrities and influencers flooded social media, turning hashtags and posts into a collective cry for the jabs. These vaccines, developed at a pace that pushed the boundaries of medical innovation, became symbols of hope. People — binge-watching Netflix on high-speed internet and ordering groceries on their smartphones — turned to the CoWIN app to book vaccination slots. Ride-hailing apps stepped in as impromptu chauffeurs to vaccine centres.

It's a snapshot of just how far technology has carried us since the Y2K era. In 25 years, cellphones became smartphones, we decoded the human genome, and wrestled with climate change — first adding CO2 with abandon, then scrambling to trap it. Humanity scanned Pluto, India reached Mars, and we got gold coins delivered at our doorsteps in under 10 minutes, thanks to quick commerce. Social media sparked revolutions (remember the Arab Spring?), and generative AI opened new creative doors.

Back in 2000, the internet was a gentle murmur on dial-up. Now, it's a roar! Smartphones have revolutionised how we connect, work, and learn. The iPhone's 2007 debut changed everything — putting cameras, maps, and libraries in our pockets. By 2023, over 6.8 billion

people owned a smartphone, connecting seamlessly across continents. In India alone, over 700 million people now use smartphones. The government tapped into this digital boom to bring banking to remote villages. Aadhaar gave over a billion Indians digital identities, enabling them to access pensions and food with just a fingerprint.

Social media? Oh, it's been a wild ride. Platforms like X, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube shaped friendships, politics, and self-image. But the flip side? Misinformation, privacy breaches, and bias-riddled algorithms. It's a double-edged sword — equal parts unity and chaos.

Generative AI is rewriting the rules of creativity, transforming how we write, code, and innovate. While it sparks productivity, it also raises questions about authenticity, job security, and ethics. Meanwhile, General AI is inching toward human-like intelligence, pushing the boundaries of language and decision-making. And the future? Quantum computing is on the horizon, spearheaded by IBM and Google, promising mind-blowing computational power to crack problems in medicine and climate science.

Healthcare is undergoing a transformation too. The Human Genome Project, completed in 2003, unlocked the door to personalised medicine. CRISPR, unveiled in 2012, offers hope for curing hereditary diseases and cancers. By 2021, over 6,000 clinical trials using CRISPR were underway. mRNA vaccines, developed during the pandemic, saved millions of lives. Wearables like

Fitbits and Apple Watches now track every heartbeat, while xenotransplants — like pig organ transplants — offer new hope for organ shortages.

On the roads, EVs are stealing the show — sales are projected to hit 16.7 million units in 2024, up from 13.9 million in 2023. But extracting rare earth elements for batteries stirs environmental and ethical debates. Self-driving cars, still under construction, promise to make roads safer and travel easier.

Entertainment and shopping? Radically reshaped. Streaming platforms like Netflix and Spotify ditched traditional media, handing us endless content on demand. E-commerce is exploding, with online sales set to hit \$6 trillion globally by 2024. Meanwhile, VR and AR are blending digital and physical worlds, creating endless possibilities for entertainment and education.

Space exploration is now within reach. SpaceX's reusable rockets slashed costs, and India achieved milestones like Mangalyaan and Chandrayaan-3 moon landing. The James Webb Space Telescope's stunning images of cosmic galaxies remind us of the universe's vastness. 3D printing is rewriting the rules of manufacturing, crafting custom healthcare solutions and affordable housing layer by layer. It's an exciting time as innovation reshapes industries.

In just 25 years, we've come a long way, turning challenges into milestones. But perhaps the biggest achievement isn't any single invention but the realisation that as these advancements are interconnected. They amplify each other's potential, forming a symphony of innovation that propels us toward an even brighter future.

The riddle of leadership



BUSINESS & PURPOSE

R GOPALAKRISHNAN

There are two contrasting views about great leadership. Business writing has largely adopted the "Great Man Theory", perhaps inspired by Scottish essayist Thomas Carlyle, who wrote: "The history of the world is but the biography of great men." American anthropologist Margaret Mead too had said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world."

On the flip side, Jane Ridley, professor of Modern History at Buckingham University, dismisses the "Great Man Theory" as "romantic claptrap". Leo Tolstoy had felt that "history is made by the sum total of an infinite number of small decisions taken by ordinary people, whose actions are too unremarkable to be documented". In the "structural forces" perspective, geography, economics, technology, and even chance conspire to create the great leader.

I doubt if there is a single truth, and I am inclined to the view about

structural forces. My interest lies in the world of enterprise. George W. Merck of American pharmaceuticals, for example, was a major Merck & Company defined his business purpose altruistically: "Medicine is for people and not profits. If you remember that, profits will follow." One of his successors, Roy Vagelos, initiated the longest-standing donation programme in history by supplying free Ivermectin, Merck's new drug, for river blindness, to Africans who could not afford to buy the drug.

The great men of enterprise include two types: Those with an insatiable aptitude to chart new paths (John D Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie) or those who could extract maximum value from every resource. In particular, the efficiency extractors are lionised during their times — and, quite often, they are criticised later. Think of Harold Geneen of TIT, Jack Welch of GE, and Carlos Ghosn of Renault Nissan.

Efficiency and effectiveness do not mean the same thing. Technological systems lend themselves to actions of efficiency, while social systems desperately cry out for actions of effectiveness. Peter Drucker was regarded as a great management guru during his lifetime. Charles Handy, who died last month, disliked being called a "management guru". He preferred to be called "a social philosopher". Both Handy and Drucker focused their life's work on the effectiveness vector rather than on the efficiency vector of enterprise.

Society and business organisations are living systems that

must balance efficiency with effectiveness. Too much of one can be a killer. When I ask managers whether an entrepreneur can earn too much wealth or a firm can earn too much profit, my audience is nonplussed by the silliness of my question. The reality is that too much wealth or profit can kill. For example, humans get oxygen through the lungs 20 per cent presence in air. If one breathes 100 per cent pure oxygen from a cylinder, one will be dead in days. Chemical molecules like fentanyl heal when consumed in small doses, but too much kills.

Pre-industrial revolution times of Frenchman Honore de Balzac triggered the remark that behind every great fortune there lies an equally great crime. Modern enterprises permit legitimate accumulation of wealth. Very wealthy entrepreneurs must figure out what happens after their death. Recall how Swami Vivekananda subtly influenced Rockefeller in 1894. "It is possible that you are merely a conduit for this wealth?" After several years, Rockefeller wrote all his wealth to the Rockefeller Foundation. On November 25 this year, Warren Buffett wrote to his shareholders: "... hugely wealthy parents should leave their children enough so that they can do anything, but not enough that they can do nothing ... I have watched my children grow into good and productive citizens ... they enjoy being comfortable financially, but they are not preoccupied with wealth" (italics mine).

On December 28, when this article appears, Ratan Tata would have turned 87. His virtues far outstripped his frailties. That is why so much was written by so many, so many institutions held memorial meetings, and so many causes were launched to memorialise his name. It can be unendingly stated that he was the Ratan of today's Bharat, whether a Bharat Ratan or not!

Perhaps one big lesson from the life of Ratan Tata, and indeed the 156-year-old experiences of the Tata organisation, is that men and women get catapulted amid the maestros of technology, society, geography, economics, and chance to accomplish great things for mankind and society. Recall the humility of Jamsetji Tata when said to Bombay residents that he was a "humble servant of the community". "Providence has favoured me with so much wealth."

Great leaders are team players. Jamsetji with contemporaries like Bezonji Mehta and Burjorji Padshah; JRD with contemporaries like Sumant Moolgokkar and Fajir Chand Kohli; and Ratan Tata with contemporaries like Noshir Soonawala and Jamshed Irani, all felt humbled by their opportunity to play an important role. It is valuable to reflect on Ratan Tata's spirit of innovation, wealth creation, and community centrality. This is exemplified also by others like TVS, Godrej, Bajaj, and so on.

Food for thought. Happy New Year.

The writer's latest book is JAMSETJI TATA: Powerful Learnings for Corporate Success, coauthored with Harish Bhat. rgopal@themindworks.me

THE ASIAN AGE

28 DECEMBER 2024

A humble & gentle PM who transformed India

In a remarkable journey from an economist to central banker to a transformational finance minister and then an accidental Prime Minister, his integrity, humility, knowledge and calm and gentle way were Dr Manmohan Singh's constant companions. Never cut out for the rough and tumble of politics, he leaned on his qualities to carry him through every situation and succeeded largely until his gentility became so virtuous that it would prevent him, in his second term as PM, from stemming the slide into a morass impelled by greedy politicians around him.

His greatest contribution to India will remain his leading the country out of the darkness of a closed economy based on protectionism with a negligible rate of growth to the free market in a stunningly bold move fashioned by his economic wisdom that helped transform the nation into the fastest growing major economy in the world it is today. That he led the country out of nuclear isolation by signing the Indo-US nuclear deal against great odds would rank as his second great contribution in the shaping of modern India.

His commitment to humanity saw him devise the jobs to fend off poverty through the MNREGA even as he rationalised the tax rates to reward the earners and give breathing space to the middle class. He was the driving force behind so many progressive ideas that made a difference as India rapidly modernised after a historic dose of liberalisation that he pioneered to offer the breakout national moment by changing the very DNA of economics.

It was, perhaps, his faith as a humanist that led him into trusting Pakistan with overtures to peace which were shattered. The misplaced faith led to a failure of judgment that may have affected him deeply in the ferocity of the minutely planned 26/11 attack on Mumbai that exposed Pakistan's perfidy. Within months, the UFA alliance was to come through with a surprising victory again, in 2009, but it was unfortunate that coalition drama had become such a burden as to drive a man of ideas into his shell from which he never emerged.

At the height of what was popularly diagnosed as "policy paralysis" when India may have needed very strong leadership because the need of economic strength after two decades in the open era was also dipping, Dr Singh may have found that his qualities of goodness were inadequate as fears arose that the Indian dream may fade. Where assertiveness may have helped, a quiet gentleman was found wanting. The silence of a good man may have hastened the path into laissez-faire, as in "let things pass", and India headed towards a crossroads at which a turn to the right came.

"History will judge me kindly", he said, which is true as his economic reforms opened the door for India to become part of a new world. It is his legacy that most Indians are far better off today than they may have imagined three decades ago. He stayed poised to honest statesmanship as a way of handling a job that was given to him because his only allies in the complex world of Indian politics had been his principles, and his leader did not feel up to taking the chair as the party was riddled with factions and needed someone she could implicitly trust. His success with economics will far outweigh gaps in his personality that prevented him from attaining success in politics.

Dr Singh's growth prescription

It sits down to pen India's economic history after independence, it could be broadly classified into two eras — Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's socialist era from 1950 to 1991 and Dr Manmohan Singh's liberal economic regime from 1991 onwards.

The economic policies before 1991 were largely influenced by India's suspicion of foreign traders, in view of its experience with the British who sailed to Indian shores for trade and enriched themselves as rulers. The distaste for foreign investment continued even though the Indian economy performed at suboptimal level growing at an yearly average of 3.9 per cent from 1950 to 1990. While India managed to lay the foundation for large basic industries, the lack of competition and a captive market robbed the Indian manufacturers of incentive to produce world-class products.

In 1991, following India's worst financial crisis, Dr Manmohan Singh dismantled the old Fabian socialist thought in India by opening up the Indian economy. Instead of fear for foreign capital, India's leaders as rulers exuded his confidence in the Indian economy. He argued for allowing direct foreign investment into India for capital, technology, and markets. His words about the arrival of India on the global stage proved to be truly prophetic.

Since 1991, India's economic growth has picked up and helped more than 500 million people to come out of extreme levels of poverty. Manmohan Singh's reforms, which were continued by his successors, created globally competitive companies in India. His policies laid the path for the robust expansion of the middle class.

It also created prosperity in the country, which funded the government's ambitious welfare programmes like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, subsidised food grains to the poor, midday meals at schools and social security schemes for elderly.

In one of his last interviews in 2023, Dr Singh sounded confident about the Indian economy's ability to navigate through the recent geopolitical and geo-economic maelstroms, provided the country remains a harmonious society. India must not forget this prescription of Dr Singh ever.

Subhani



A gentleman and a scholar, he changed the India story



Manish Tewari
Tribute

It is trite to say Dr Manmohan Singh was an institution. He was a colossus who strode the economic and governance firmament like an intellectual giant in a landscape populated by pygmies.

Born at Gah, now in Pakistan, he came across the Radcliffe Line to India as a refugee, like millions of others who lost their homes and hearths in the holocaust called Partition.

With sheer hard work and perseverance, he built a life as a distinguished professor, an economist, a reputed finance minister and finally Prime Minister of India for a decade.

In his long and successful career, he held a diverse array of posts in academia and government. He was always polite to a fault, humble, self-effacing, the epitome of gravitas who carried success lightly on his shoulders.

As chief economic adviser, Reserve Bank governor, finance secretary and Planning Commission deputy chairman, among several high-level positions, he got an unique understanding of India's economic and governance challenges.

As finance minister from 1991 to 1996 he leveraged this understanding to preside over the most fundamental reset of India's economic trajectory when he dismantled the licence quota permit raj and unshackled the creative animal spirits of India's entrepreneurs. This reset of India's economic trajectory took place as the post-WWII world order collapsed and political scientists were predicting the "end of history".

He created a new world for millions of young people who came of working age in the post-globalisation and liberalisation period. It is unfortunate India's political class and language never mirrored this economic reset and is populist to this day.

As Leader of the

Opposition in the Rajya Sabha from 1996 to 2004, he brought a quiet dignity and sobriety to that august office as political polarisation had proceeded extremely toxic, to put it mildly.

As Prime Minister, he risked his government's future to break the nuclear apartheid that had plagued India since the first nuclear test in May 1974 "when the Buddha smiled" in the Pakistan desert of Rajasthan.

After becoming Prime Minister in 2004, Dr Singh built upon the Jaswant Singh-Strobe Talbott dialogue in the aftermath of India's second nuclear test in May 1998, that led to a second reset in India-US ties by signing a 'New Framework' for India-US Defence

MANMOHAN SINGH (1932-2024)

Relations" on June 23, 2005, marking the full-scale start of defence cooperation between India and the US. Twenty days later, on July 18, 2005, the US and India announced the launch of the civil nuclear cooperation initiative. Under this, India agreed to commit all its civilian nuclear facilities to IAEA safeguards.

In 2004, the Congress had only 145 seats in the Lok Sabha. It was dependent on the critical outside support of the CP(M), CPI and other Left parties who had 55 seats. Historically, the Left always had an anti-imperialist and anti-US worldview.

In June 2008, Dr Singh threw down the gauntlet and said India would go ahead with the US civil nuclear deal. Ironically, the BJP, which was the author of the reset with the US after the 1998 nuclear tests, and signed the "Next Steps in Strategic Partnership" in 2003, brought a no-confidence motion against Dr Manmohan Singh's UPA government in July 2008.

Dr Singh in turn tabled a vote of confidence. Among stormy scenes in the Lok

Sabha, with the BJP opposition displaying wads of currency notes in the House, bringing proceedings to a new nadir, the government carried the day and won the vote, paving the way for the India-US nuclear deal to become reality, that was succeeded by the historical swerve by the Nuclear Suppliers Group, possibly the first ever for any non-signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

In the general election of May 2009, the Congress swept every city in India from Thiruvananthapuram to Jammu — a fact attributed to the esoteric effects of the US nuclear deal which almost had a magical effect on the Indian middle classes, who probably never fully understood or appreciated its clauses and nuances.

Dr Singh's second term was also marked by major reforms like permitting Foreign Direct Investment in Multi-Brand Retail. His foreign policy was characterised by a friendly relationship with neighbours, including a robust back-channel dialogue with Pakistan that produced a four-point formula, better known as the Manmohan-Musharraf Agreement. If implemented, it may have changed the dynamics of South Asia. But the 2007 Lal Masjid siege and the lawyers' strike destroyed Gen. Musharraf's political capital, and thus became a missed opportunity for not only India and Pakistan, but the region as a whole.

During Dr Manmohan Singh's second term as PM from 2009 to 2014, the UPA-2 government was at the receiving end of the most torrid, toxic and corrosive onslaught by the media, which ironically got bound-

less opportunities after Dr Singh's unshaking of the Indian economy. But Manmohan Singh never lost his calm or equanimity.

As his I&B minister and government spokesperson, I had to do the heavy lifting of putting the government's official position in the public space on a daily basis in 2012-2014. One day, flying to Ludhiana, my erstwhile parliamentary constituency, for the golden jubilee celebrations of the Punjab Agriculture University in December 2012, I asked him a conceptual question: What should be our approach to the media? Without batting an eyelid, he responded: "It should be an essay in persuasion and not an essay in coercion". I pushed back, saying a biased and agenda-driven paradigm can't be influenced by persuasion as they are just puppets on a string, whose masters are elsewhere.

He was unconvinced and said: Put yourself in the shoes of the Opposition and try and imagine what you would think if the entire media turns into a government mouthpiece.

A true democrat, his prophetic words came true in the decade that followed his premiership. On January 3, I anchored his mega press conference at the new National Media Centre. It was a cold wintry morning. Dr Singh gave an excellent summation of his ten years as PM. Replying to a question, he said philosophically: "History will judge me kindly".

The press, however, concentrated on his announcement that he would retire in May 2014 after completing his second term. One newspaper even ran a photograph of an exit sign over a door, with Dr Singh walking towards it. It was an eloquent testimony to the ignominy he was put through — primarily because he was a decent person.

On December 26, 2024, as he breathed his last, all that we need to say is that a gentleman is with us no more. Adieu, Sir: another world awaits.

Manish Tewari is a lawyer, a third term Lok Sabha MP and had served as I&B minister in the Manmohan Singh government

HISTORY
WILL BE KINDER
TO ME...



LETTERS

BHAJAN VS HYMN

The reluctance of the authorities to take any meaningful action against the right-wing groups has only emboldened them to continue their tirade against the minorities. This was evident in the manner they forced a food delivery boy to take off his Santa costume. The singing of bhajans during Christmas services outside a church in Lucknow is a blatant attempt to ignite communal passions against the Christians. Had any other community members done it they would have been behind bars for trying to disturb the peace by creating religious enmity. Those indulging in this activity are clearly identifiable from the videos posted by the groups themselves. Will the CM Adityanath take any action against them?

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

INDUSTRY GRATEFUL

WHEN the economy was stuttering and license raj was the order of the day and there was a suffocating environment for industrialists, Dr Manmohan Singh became the architect of liberalisation in 1991 that allowed our country to take a giant leap forward. The Victor Hugo moment of our 1991 budget was declared by him which led to India emerging as an economic powerhouse. We should not forget that he put his government at the state when he signed the nuclear deal with the United States for the larger good of the nation. A man who never got his rightful due, indeed history will be kinder to him than what he would have granted himself.

Bal Govind
Noida, UP

PROTEST DAM AT UN

CHINA IS planning to build the world's largest dam over Brahmaputra close to the Indian border. This strategic decision taken in its own area is, however, going to have serious ramifications in the foreseeable future. It will give China the option of destroying Indian infrastructure and life on the downstream side of the river just by opening the floodgates of its dam during hostilities. It is time for India to plan its forthcoming projects including defence deployment in the affected areas and raise the issue at the international level along with the affected nations to arrive at a credible solution.

Col R.S. Narula (retd)
Patiala, Punjab

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Farrukh Dhondy
Cabbages
& Kings



"Chappatis are what you knead, my friend
'Cos there's not enough nash to go around.
The sun rises every day, it seems without end
What astronomers tell us is profound
Time is an illusion and dimensions make space
Hold close your cards, don't play your ace!"
— From The Book of Buck Verse, by Bachchoo

As world rejoices
at Christmas time,
Xmas tree burnt
in protest in Syria

This year I've received numerous Christmas greetings, cards through the post, texts on my phone and emails on the computer. I won't say how many as a large number would seem like boasting and a meagre one will seem pathetic in comparison to the numbers my gentle readers may have received.

The point is not to raise relative measures of popularity with contemporary bores of the numbers of "followers" one has on Twitter or the existence of herds of Facebook or Linked-in "friends". It's to note the religious diversity of the greetings I've received: from Christians of course, but then in great numbers from Zoroastrians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, atheists and the undecided. Why do all these send out best wishes for the festival celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ? It's certainly not because they have all been recently baptised.

It's almost certainly because of European colonialism which took Christmas — trees, stockings, lights, reindeer and all to very many parts of

the globe.

Which observation poses the question. Is there any part of our world which completely ignores Christmas? Is it forbidden to celebrate it in any jurisdiction, say that of the strict Ayyatollah or Islamicists? Or is there a region of the world, some remote island in a forgotten ocean, where news of the Virgin Birth, 2024 years ago, hasn't reached?

Two incidents in this Christmas advent week drew my attention as at least one of them is connected to such antagonism. In Syria, a group of masked men set fire to a Christmas tree which had been installed in the public square by the majority Christian population of that town. There followed mass demonstrations all over Syria by Christians and their supporters protesting against the purported blasphemous, but certainly aggressive and offensive, arson.

The "government" of Syria which, after the recent expulsion of President Bashar al-Assad, seems to be in the hands of the dominant insurgent group which brought about his expulsion, has pronounced the presumably-Islamicist arsonists as criminals. There's hope there as it indicates that this "government" takes seriously its pronouncement that all religions and sects in multi-faith Syria will be equally respected. Acts of aggression by one sect against another will not be tolerated. True secularism? A lesson and model for the Middle East? Hope springs eternal?

Then there was the very strange video, circulated universally, of a Muslim cleric in full Arab garb standing on Tower Bridge in London, facing the Thames and loudly pronouncing verses from the Quran. He was filmed by the media and protested as he prayed by the Metropolitan Police. Again, an act of secular tolerance. Shame on the Brit and right-Tory antagonism towards the minorities. God save our gracious Tolerance... etc.

Fire has been the weapon of lethal and sometimes symbolic antagonism throughout history. It's not certain whether Nero didn't like Rome, but it's true that the SOB Alexander-the-damned set fire to the Persian capital of Persopolis. He was a demented, in-bred desire to leave no stone of Persian imperial greatness unburnt.

Then there were the poor women burnt at the stake for being accused of witchcraft. Even so, this was in my short and happy life the first time I've heard of setting a Christmas tree on fire to demonstrate a disapproval of Christmas. Yes, I have seen books have been burnt through the ages by people who disagreed with their content.

In our times the outstanding case was that of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* being ritually burnt by Islamist activists all over the world. They weren't arrested, though the burning of books accompanied by incendiary speeches appeals to me as a "hate crime" and even a provocation to worse. I am, gentle reader, in every way against such

book burning. Except of course if say 20,000 or a million people object to something in one of my books and each buys a copy to burn. It would of course increase carbon pollution, but it would also probably help to propel my book into the best-seller list.

No such luck, even though my first published book, way back in 1976, faced some opposition and even public demonstrations.

It was (is?) called *East End at Your Feet* — a collection of short stories published by Macmillan. One of the stories called "Pushy's Pimples" is about the contemplation of sex by a young teenage British-Indian girl. Another story contains a quoted line from a very popular and widely circulated Rolling Stones' song with the word "Star-f" repeated a few times.

A few days after its publication the Macmillan editor rang me to say that there was a demonstration outside a South London school demanding that the book be withdrawn from the curriculum. The next day the *Daily Telegraph* published an editorial denouncing my book. I got an invitation from ITV, the national commercial station, to debate the *Telegraph's* editor. I went and pointed out that the demonstration at the school gates was led by the National Front, Britain's avowedly fascist party.

So did the demo, editorial and TV debate help sell copies? Are lions non-vegetarian?

A quiet revolutionary

At the heart of Singh's legacy lies his unwavering commitment to the well-being of ordinary citizens. He believed in empowering the vulnerable, strengthening democracy, and fostering economic self-reliance. His ability to navigate complex political landscapes with integrity and resolve earned him respect, even from his critics. "Singh will be remembered as a decent human being and a great reformer," said Modi. As the nation prepares to bid farewell to one of its most beloved leaders, the void left by Singh's passing is profound. His life was a masterpiece of resilience, intellect, and service—an inspiration that will continue to guide generations. In his own words, often recited in Parliament, "Agreed I am not worthy of drawing your sight, but look at my zeal, my longing." Today, as India mourns, it also celebrates the extraordinary life of a man who dedicated himself to its progress.

Views expressed are personal

In India, we are yet to recognise marital rape as a crime — this is a legal lacuna that necessitates careful treading but is also a gaping loophole in protecting married women

The writer is an author and media entrepreneur. Views expressed are personal

FIRST COLUMN

HUNGER FOR POWER

Lure for power is a universal phenomenon but in the capital, it is at next level



APS MALHOTRA

I have come to seek your support and valuable vote, as I have decided to stand for re-election, declared the bespectacled, heavy-set, middle-aged man—dressed in an off-white safari suit—rather pompously, as he stood with folded hands at the door of my house, surrounded by a bevy of churches and churches, who suitably nodded their head in unison. "Vote for which re-election?" I muttered under my breath, irritated at the uncalculated intrusion into my privacy on a rather lazy Sunday morning. "I am the President" he replied sheepishly, maybe taken aback at my nonchalant reply. "I had decided not to stand for this year's election due to increased professional and personal commitments—actually I had desired to give someone younger a chance to bear the responsibility, and take a backseat—but had to relent under the immense pressure from fellow residents, who want my leadership for a further period of three years" he continued, his voice a cocktail of benevolence and beneficence for his 'supporters', and the seasoned politician's chicanery. "But isn't Mrs. Draupadi Murmu the President?" I retorted, further trying to pull his leg. "Malhotra jee, I am the President of our Resident Welfare Association (RWA) for the past several years," he said, flabbergasted, a tad angry and certainly deeply offended at my failure to recognize him, and worse, acknowledge his self-perceived exalted status. Although I had recognised him the moment he pressed the doorbell of my house, and I opened the front door to face him,



my innate aversion to people who like to throw their weight around and flaunt uncalculated appellations came forth with all its bitterness.

Nonetheless, realizing that the man was getting increasingly exasperated at my manoeuvrings, I salvaged the situation by promising to cast my vote in his favour and profusely apologized to him for my failure to identify his 'Excellency', with the pretext that my better half is the face of our family for outside interactions, while I busy myself in mundane things, like reading and writing. Not too surprisingly, denizens of my beloved Dilli, sitting on the centre of power since the dawn of history, have a deeply ingrained fascination for posts and titles—while they proliferate dime a dozen—and take a macho and perverse pride in flaunting them, with the same exuberance with which a child displays his or her toy, albeit not with the same innocence.

This fact is borne out in the form of roadside boards and car number plates, which often bear vague titles—such as 'Secretary, Youth Media Cell, ABC party, B-block, Village XYZ'. A carryforward from the era of the Mughals and British imperialists, this is a desperate shot to seek the much-desired VIP status, at least in the circle one operates in. Thus, it is not unknown to find members of RWAs who run virtual fiefdoms in their associations, maybe as recompense for the voluntary service rendered in serving the community. The perks could include a free car wash and laundry facility, use of funds near the residence where the self-styled Maharajas live, et al.

One can only speculate as to what would happen if this maniac lure of titles and appellations invaded the next, and perhaps the last bastion of community living, the home. Then, it would be no surprise to see name boards outside individual residences read like this: '1/103, Beverly Park: APS Malhotra, President; Sonia Malhotra Vice President; Dr. Mehak Malhotra, Secretary (in absentia). In families with patriarchal tendencies, the designations could be reversed. Well, worth a thought!

(The author is a freelance writer; views are personal)

India must stand firm against Sheikh Hasina's extradition



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

India faces a pivotal decision as it considers Bangladesh's request to extradite Sheikh Hasina, former Prime Minister and a steadfast ally



Sheikh Hasina must not be sent back to Bangladesh in response to the note verbale received from that country's interim government calling for her extradition. Dhaka's move has followed the issue of an arrest warrant by Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) against her and a number of her former ministers, advisers, military and civil officials. The allegation? "Crimes against humanity and genocide". There are two broad reasons why India should not send her back. As prime minister of Bangladesh, she has been a steadfast friend of India whereas other heads of that country's government, except her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, have tended to be unfriendly. Second, she will, by no means, receive a fair trial in Bangladesh and perhaps even be lynched, given the intense hostility of the current rulers of Bangladesh harbour towards her.

There will be solid legal basis for India's stand. Article 8 (1) (a) of the 'Treaty Between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of Bangladesh Relating to Extradition', says that a person may not be extradited if "he satisfies the Requested State that it would, having regard to all the circumstances, be unjust or oppressive to extradite him" because, in the words of Article 8 (1) (A) (iii), the accusations against him "have not been made in good faith in the interests of justice". Besides Article 8 (2) reads, "A person who has been convicted of an extradition offence may not be extradited therefor unless he was sentenced to imprisonment or other form of detention for a period of four months or more." Sheikh Hasina has yet to be sentenced to any period of imprisonment or detention. Also, she can very well claim that it would be "unjust or oppressive" to extradite her because the accusation against her had not been made in "good faith in the interest of justice" and are a result of pure vindictiveness. That she would be justified in saying so becomes clear on considering the diatribes unleashed against her by the advisers of the interim government and the relentless persecution, including involving in hundreds of false cases, of



SHEIKH HASINA HAS YET TO BE SENTENCED TO ANY PERIOD OF IMPRISONMENT OR DETENTION. ALSO, SHE CAN VERY WELL CLAIM THAT IT WOULD BE "UNJUST OR OPPRESSIVE" TO EXTRADITE HER BECAUSE THE ACCUSATION AGAINST HER HAD NOT BEEN MADE IN "GOOD FAITH IN THE INTEREST OF JUSTICE", AND ARE A RESULT OF PURE VINDICTIVENESS

Awami League's leaders and ministers in the party's government. According to a report in The Daily Star carried under the headline, "No option but to succeed: Yunus" on August 18, 2024, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus had said during a "Meet and Greet" session with foreign diplomats in Dhaka, "In their efforts to stay in power, the Sheikh Hasina dictatorship destroyed every institution of the country. Judiciary was broken. Democratic rights were suppressed through a brutal decade-and-a-half long crackdown. Elections were rigged badly. Generations of young people grew up without exercising their voting rights. Banks were robbed with full political patronisation. And the state coffers were plundered by abusing power."

Referring to a proposed Awami League rally on November 10, 2024, Muhammad Yunus' press secretary, Shaheer Alam, had written in a Facebook post on November 9, "The Awami League in its current form is a fascist party. There is no way this fascist party will be allowed to hold protests in Bangladesh. Anyone who would try to hold rally, gathering and processions by taking orders from the mass murderer and dictator Sheikh Hasina will face full force of the law enforcing agencies."

Leaders of the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement (ADSM), formed on July 1, 2024, to carry the students' struggle forward, and Jatiya Nagarik Committee (National Citizens Committee), formed on 8 September, 2024, to consolidate the movement's message and political goals, have spoken in a similar strident and denunciatory vein.

According to a report by Ashbil Islam Rifat in the Dhaka Tribune (23 October, 2024) appearing

under the headline "Nahid: Awami League will never be allowed back into politics in our lifetime," Md Nahid Islam, an ADSM leader who is now advisor, in charge of information and broadcasting and other ministries, said at a discussion, that the Awami League's return to politics in the manner and ideology it previously adhered to would be tantamount to "a betrayal to the martyrs of the uprising. And certainly, as long as we are alive, we will not allow this to happen." Leaders of political parties like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat) have also denounced the Awami League.

One can argue that the ICT, and any other court where Sheikh Hasina and other accused may be tried, will ignore such vituperations and pronounce its judgement on the basis of the evidence and arguments placed before it. A horse would gallop on hearing this. The judiciary has been brought to heel through forced resignations and dismissals. The process began as early as August 10, 2024, when chief justice Obaidul Hassan of the Supreme Court and five judges of the appellate division, resigned as hundreds of students affiliated to the ADSM gathered on the court premises demanding that they quit, and threatened to besiege their residences if they did not. On October 16, the new chief justice, Syed Refaat Ahmed, sent 12 High Court judges, appointed during the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League rule, on leave following a demonstration in the court premises by adherents of the ADSM led by Hasnat Abdullah and Sarjis Alam. According to a report in Bangladesh's The Business Standard on October 16 itself, announcing the plan, Hasnat

Abdullah, had written in a Facebook post on October 15, "In demand of the resignation of the fascist judges of the Awami League, we will besiege the High Court tomorrow (Wednesday) at 11am." The ICT itself was reconstituted on October 15, 2024, with Justice Md Golam Mortuza Majumder from the High Court Division of Bangladesh Supreme Court as its new chairman, and Justice Md Shafiqul Alam Mahmud and retired District and Sessions Judge Md Mohitul Haque Enam Chowdhury as members of the panel.

The result is a pliant judiciary and the use of the justice system to persecute not only those associated with the Awami League but civil society activists, writers, journalists and human rights activists. A shocking example is the levelling of a false murder charge against a highly-respected senior advocate of Bangladesh's Supreme Court, ZI Khan Panna. Referring to the case, The Daily Star wrote in an editorial titled "This weaponisation of legal cases must stop" and published on October 21, 2024, "Over the two months and a half since August 5, we have published multiple reports and editorials on the indiscriminate filing of such murder cases without any evidence, mostly implicating the leaders, activists, and suspected supporters of the Awami League regime. Even journalists and rights activists were not spared. In many cases, fabricated FIRs were filed. There were also instances of the names of accused in cases predating August 5 being replaced. This is nothing but a weaponisation of the legal process for harassment and political vendettas." Will Sheikh Hasina get justice in such a situation?

(The author is Consulting Editor, The Pioneer. The views expressed are personal)

Unlocking economic potential: Bridging the gender gap in public procurement

In India, strides in gender budgeting and supportive policies are fostering greater opportunities for women entrepreneurs

How much of the goods and services purchased by government departments and public sector enterprises come from women-owned businesses? This crucial question is rarely asked, and it underscores the need for gender-responsive procurement policies in India and across South Asia. With government procurement "accounting for an average of 12 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in OECD countries, and up to 30 per cent of GDP in many developing countries," the untapped economic potential for women entrepreneurs to contribute as suppliers of solutions to governments is immense. Yet, globally, women-owned enterprises still win only 1 per cent of this significant public procurement market.



ELIZABETH A. VAZQUEZ

WEConnect International is actively working to bridge this gap. Our efforts are making headway, especially in countries such as India, where policy frameworks are beginning to reflect a greater emphasis on gender inclusivity. The central government has increasingly prioritised women-centric policies, evident from the substantial rise in gender budget allocations, which is another way to support women and girls in addition to buying their products and services. For example, in 2013-14, Rs 97,134 crore was earmarked for women's welfare and empowerment. By 2024-25, this figure had reached Rs 3,27 lakh crore, marking a 19 per cent increase over the actual gender budget expendi-

tures of 2023-24 and a 218.8 per cent increase since 2013-14. For 2024, the Gender Budget accounts for 6.5 per cent of the Union Budget, the highest since the Gender Budget Statement was introduced in 2005-06. The Statement serves as a vital tool for ministries reviewing programmes from a gender perspective to ensure that more resources are being allocated to benefit women and girls. In the last year (2023-24), the actual expenditure on gender budgeting was 16 per cent higher (Rs 2.75 lakh crore) than the total budgeted amount (Rs 2.38 lakh crore). The Indian government's Public Procurement Policy for Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) Order, 2018, exemplifies this progress. The policy mandates that every central ministry, department, and PSU must procure at least 25 per cent of their needs from MSEs, with 3 per cent specifically reserved for women-owned micro and small enterprises. There has been progress since the mandated 3 per cent procurement target for women-owned MSEs was introduced in 2018. Public procurement from these enter-

prises has risen from almost zero in 2017-18 to 1.8 per cent in 2023-24. The number of women-owned (owned and controlled by women having the minimum financial interest of 51 per cent of the capital and with women constituting at least 51 per cent of generated employment) MSEs benefiting from public procurement grew from 1,410 (accounting for Rs 232.56 crore) to 21,128 (Rs 3056.4 crore) in six years. While the evidence is encouraging, there are still gaps and

challenges that, if addressed, could help India achieve a more gender-inclusive public procurement ecosystem. For example, there is currently no independent body to resolve complaints in the procurement system, leaving unhappy bidders with only two options: filing complaints directly with the purchasing entity or taking them to arbitration or court as outlined in the General Financial Rules (GFR) 2017. Generally, there is a pressing need for transparency, well-defined processes, and a robust mechanism for addressing grievances in tender and procurement procedures so that women-owned businesses receive constructive feedback if their bids are unsuccessful. This would enable them to

refine their future proposals and compete more effectively. Such measures would help mitigate biases in tendering and procurement processes that disproportionately disadvantage women-owned enterprises. The government could also pass procurement legislation to standardise bidding processes using a central law that sets national standards and state laws that fit specific needs, with the central government providing comprehensive oversight. Public authorities could also sensitise officials on the need to counteract gender biases that may influence the design of procurement processes. A strong starting point would be to appoint more women to oversee public procurement in government departments.

Public procurement from women-owned enterprises in India over the past six years has grown at an average annual growth rate of 70.5 per cent, while the number of beneficiary women entrepreneurs has increased at an average annual rate of 77 per cent because the baseline was close to zero. In 2023-24, total public procurement in India reached Rs 1.70 lakh crore, highlighting a growing opportunity for women to engage with the expanding public procurement market in the world's fastest-growing economy. (The writer is CEO and Co-Founder of WEConnect International. With inputs from Ereshan Alagaretnam, Regional Director for South Asia, WEConnect International. Views are personal)