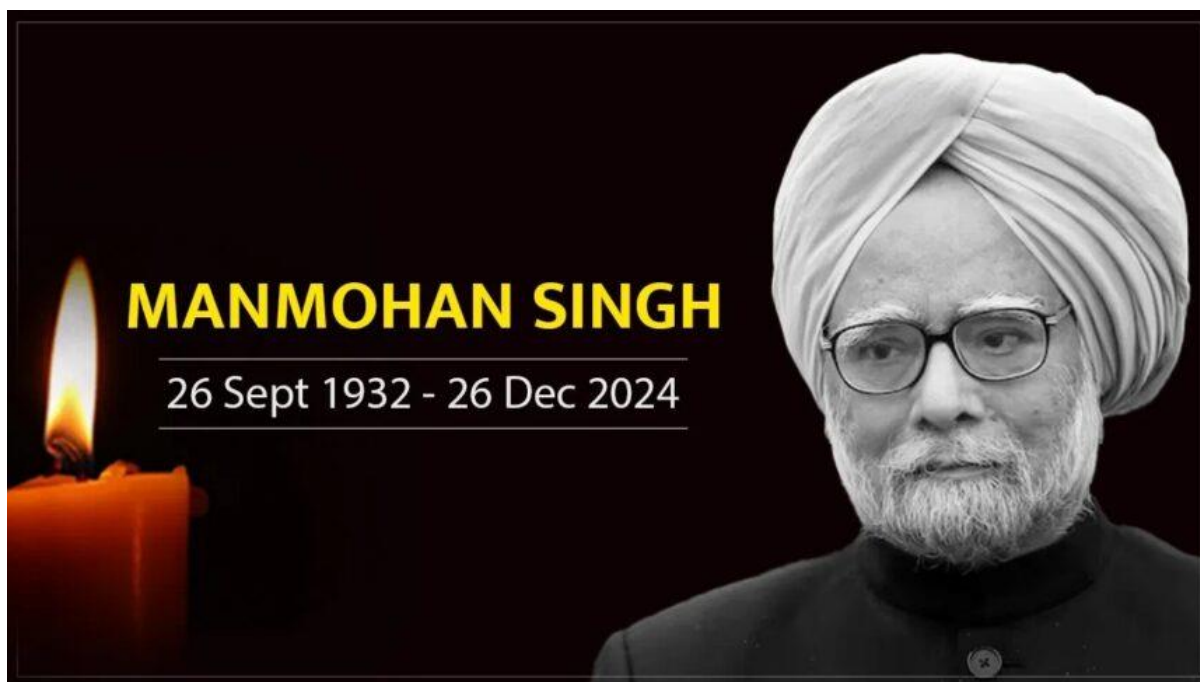


A Tribute to my dear friend Dr. Manmohan Singh

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Dr. Manmohan Singh India's Prime Minister from 2004 to 2014 and one of the architects of Indian economic reforms passed away on 26th December 2024. He was 92 years old and was ailing for some time, but the death was peaceful and painless – a mark of great soul.

Hundreds of eulogies and obituaries have been written and will be written about him but to me he was a dear friend whose company I really enjoyed and he mine. Though there was a difference of about 20 years in our age, we interacted as friends. I met him many times and we used to discuss many issues facing the country. This tribute is not about his great accomplishments but of a very noble person and a friend.

The first time I met [Dr. Manmohan Singh](#) was in 2000 when he had come to Pune to accept the Annasaheb Chirmule Award. The award was established

by [United Western Bank Ltd.](#) Its then Chairman Shri. P. N. Joshi - a very dear friend of mine, invited me to attend the dinner hosted in honor of Dr. Singh.

There were about 10-15 people including Shri. [Prithviraj Chavan](#) (who later on became the Chief Minister of Maharashtra). I had a short chat with Dr. Manmohan Singh and told him about the problem we were having in saving [our Institute](#) lands from being acquired under the land acquisition act. This acquisition was initiated by a local minister who was inimical to us, and this was his ploy to acquire our fertile Institute lands.

Dr. Singh told me to write a note on this problem and give it to him. I wrote a one-page handwritten note and handed it to him the next day during the Chirmule Award ceremony.

After reaching Delhi, Dr. Singh very graciously wrote a long letter to Shri. Vilasrao Deshmukh, the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra and requested him that the lands of NARI should be saved from acquisition since it is a charitable Institute working for the common good. Though Shri. Deshmukh promptly replied but the problem was not solved, and we finally had to fight our own battles and were able to save our Institute lands from being acquired. How we did it is a different story for some other day.

The second time I met Dr. Manmohan Singh was in Mumbai in November 2001 when he gave me the [Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Science and Technology](#). He liked my acceptance speech and wanted me to join him and the Congress Party. We



Dr. Manmohan Singh giving the Bajaj Award. L-R; AKR, Dr. H. N Sethna, Mr. Rahul Bajaj and Dr. Singh

had a lengthy talk after the awards function, and he was insistent that I come and meet him in Delhi.

That opportunity came in December 2002 when our Institute was given the [FICCI Platinum Jubilee Award](#) at the hands of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. Dr. Manmohan Singh gave me an appointment to meet him at his office in the Parliament House Annex.

He was very cordial in his meeting and told me that he wants to setup a [Knowledge Commission](#) with Sam Pitroda as its Chairman and wanted me to be a part of it. I told him I will be more than happy to be associated with him in whatever capacity he wants me to be. Looking back I was surprised that he probably felt that Congress would come back to power and hence he was making the plans for different commissions.

After that meeting, we kept in touch, and he used to regularly reply to my letters and articles that I sent to him. We also talked many times on the phone.

After he became the Prime Minister in 2004, I tried two times to meet him, but somehow his bureaucracy did not allow access. His former secretaries, who were friendly to me before, were immediately changed after he ascended the PM post. Since I never wanted any political posts or favors from him so did not persist in trying to contact him.

In 2015 after the defeat of Congress (UPA) I decided to meet Dr. Singh. I was given half hour appointment to meet him at his house-which stretched to almost 1 hour-15 minutes! I have always found that most politicians, when out of power, have enough time and inclination to meet. In our meetings I would jokingly tell him about this, and he had a great laugh.

Initially Dr. Singh was a little reticent – I was meeting him after almost 12 years but very soon he became very warm and friendly, and I got the feeling

that had I not left the meeting (I had lunch appointment somewhere else) the meeting would have lasted longer. His wife Smt. Gursharan Kaur also joined us for a short time.

Since that meeting in 2015 I met him many times and made it a point to meet him whenever I was in Delhi. In fact his staff told me that he does not give many appointments but whenever I wanted to meet him, I was always welcome.

Dr. Singh told me many times that he enjoyed my company and said that he looked forward to meeting me. All our meetings were one to one and I found him to be sharp and with excellent memory. We discussed the affairs of the country and what can be done for future. Because of his diabetes and heart problems he told me that he felt weak and little down, but I felt our discussions invigorated him.

He repeatedly told me that he was really sorry that his bureaucracy did not allow me to meet him when he was PM. I told him that I was not looking for favors or position, etc. and just wanted to meet him to discuss various issues facing the country and learn about his experiences. He was touched by it. I also [presented him my books](#) and he said that he will read them.

Accidental Prime Minister

He told me that he was not the first choice for P.M. It was fate that put him there. It was always Pranab Mukherjee, Sharad Pawar, Arjun Singh, etc. and they resented his ascendancy. I asked him how he managed such crafty people so with a smile he said that he knew ways to placate them and smoothed their ruffled feathers! He also said he was fully aware of the corruption of some of his colleagues, but his hands were tied!

I got a feeling that in the 2nd term of his Prime Ministership he was supposed to have vacated his chair. Since he did not do so, it resulted in making his life

hell by powers-to-be. It is generally felt that his first term were golden years, and the second term (2009-14) was a failure.

We did discuss some of the problems that he faced in the last year of his premiership. He told me that he had agreed completely to the [Lokpal bill](#) but Anna Hazare and others hurled abuses on him saying that he was corrupt and had taken money, etc. He said he was not allowed to function. I got a feeling that partly because of that he lost the will to govern which led to chaos in the last stages of his 2nd term. Naturally, it remains a mystery on why he did not resign rather than cling to power.

He also told me that the highest office is a very lonely place and had the greatest regret that he could not get good people to join and help him.

His Graciousness

He was gracious to a fault. Any time I went to see him he would always come to the car portico to leave me despite his health problems. Couple of times I had to hold him since he was unsteady on his feet but always displayed that gracious old-world charm. In my last meeting in March 2024 he was too weak



to walk. So he told his wife Smt. Gursharan Kaur to leave me till the portico. Besides he was always ready to help our Institute in whatever way he could.

He was curious to know what the youngsters think about the country. I would tell him about my interactions and lectures in IITs and various colleges. Once he asked me what I see as the future of India. I told him that we should have a new paradigm of development based on the [combination of spirituality and technology – a theme that I have been writing about for almost 20 years](#). He liked it very much and said that it should be propagated.

In my many discussions with him we discussed where the country was going. He felt sad about the present situation and said that this is not the India he recognizes. He said that India is a pluralistic society, and the leader has to respect the diversity of opinion and divisive politics will not work and will be harmful for the country.

Though the opposition said really nasty things about him, he was gentleman to the fault. In my many meetings with him he never uttered any harsh words against any leader. Since we were only two of us together that said a lot about the decency of Dr. Singh. I wish younger generation of leaders learn from him.

Some anecdotes from his life

He once narrated some incidences of his life specially his US stay and how he worked for 3 years in United Nations (UN), NY after teaching in Punjab University and then decided to leave it and come back to India. U Thant the then Secy. General of UN was not happy and told him that he is being foolish but then the rest is history. Dr. Singh told me that in 3 years at UN he got two promotions and possibly they were thinking of making him Under Secy. General, but he felt that he belonged in India.

I told him about my similar experience in US with University of Florida and USAID and told him that I came back but am nobody whereas he became the Prime Minister! He smiled at that and said that I have lived a noble life.

Maybe it was a political statement, but I got the feeling that he had read [my book on US experience](#).

He told me many times that he wanted me to meet Rahul Gandhi and will tell him to use my services. But somehow, I was not very inclined to do so.

We then discussed the Congress party. I told him to help revive the Congress since the country needed a viable opposition and Indian National Congress - the great party, to which [my father](#) belonged and now he belonged to, can only provide such an opposition. I also told him that till Congress is in hands of mafia and coterie it will never become a great party. He did not take any offense at this remark and was quite philosophical about it.

He said that young people have different vision of the party. They come to see him but only perfunctorily and think that he is irrelevant. It is really sad that very few people took advantage of his vast knowledge and experience. In fact I went to him to specifically discuss these issues and learn from his experiences, and I benefitted from it.

So many times during our meetings I requested him to write his memoirs since his long experience would have been useful to inspire the youngsters and future generations. He said it will not be possible since he will only write the truth, and it will hurt lot of living people. I then suggested that he should write on issues that need to be tackled rather than the personalities and that point he liked. In one of meetings I got the impression that he would write his autobiography. But alas it never came to be. So all that experience is lost.

We also discussed quite a few times about Gandhi ji. He had read most of my [articles on Gandhiji](#) and was curious about some of Gandhiji's experiments on food and sustainable living. Besides many times we discussed my [spiritual writings](#), and he echoed my idea that India will benefit from combination of spirituality and technology.

In one of my meetings I asked him a point-blank question; in whose presence did he feel happy, content and liked that person? I felt that he had met the who's who of the world, spiritual gurus of India and so many other "so called" great men and so will have an interesting answer. He thought for a moment and then answered President Barack Obama! After a moment he said that he also liked George W Bush and told me that President Bush had made a portrait of him. I requested him to show me that portrait, but I guess it must be in some box in his house. Later on he told me that it is in George Bush Presidential library in the U.S.

I was surprised that he talked about Obama and not anybody else. In retrospect that was a mutual regard and affection that both Obama and Dr. Singh had for each other since in [Obama's latest book he speaks highly of Dr. Singh.](#)

How Aadhaar came in Existence

Anytime I went to Delhi I made it a point to see Dr. Singh. In one such visit I met my friend Mr. Narayan Murthy (founder of Infosys) and my contemporary in IIT Kanpur. I told Dr. Singh about my meeting Murthy. He told me that Murthy is in trouble. I did not ask him what trouble he is in but got a feeling that he was up to date in his news.

Further on the issue of Infosys he narrated to me how he got Nandan Nilekani to run Aadhaar. Dr. Singh wanted to give a cabinet position to Nilekani after reading his autobiography. He asked him what he wanted to do. Nilekani wanted to become an education minister.

Dr. Singh told me that as a regular minister Nilekani would have failed since the seasoned politicians would have made him zero. So he asked Nilekani what else he wants to do. The idea of Aadhaar came out and this is how it started.

He was delighted when I got the Padma Shri and told me that he was looking forward to meeting me after the awards ceremony. I was not well during that time and felt that I may give my bug to him so did not go to see him. I called him and told him about it. He was very touched by that sentiment. I again met him in November 2023 and presented my latest book [“Exploring the Mind of God”](#).

The last time I met him was in March 2024 and was with him and his wife Smt. Gursharan Kaur for nearly 1.5 hours. He did not look well at all. He was in a wheelchair. His face was puffed up and his cheeks were nearly black. He lamented that he could not walk and hardly could speak. Also that he could not read. I suggested to his wife that he should be given audio books.

Yet he was as sharp as ever. He enquired about the Institute and said that he does not recognize the present India.

He took tea with me but could not drink it. His hands shook a lot when he held the cup and thus did not drink it. In all of my previous meetings he always drank a cup of tea. Just before leaving I asked him does he dream? He simply said yes and then added that they are not pleasant ones.

It was really sad to see him in such a state. And my gut feeling suggested that this was going to be our last meeting. And today when I heard the sad news of his passing away all the happy memories of my interactions with him came flooding back.

Lots of people have written about Dr. Manmohan Singh in not so flattering way about his politics and his tenure of Prime Ministership. However, in my many meetings (since 2000) with him I found Dr. Singh to be a very nice, humble, and decent human being. There was an element of spirituality in him, and it is this quality that attracted me to him.

He was a dear friend to me. I enjoyed his company and he of mine. Since I was not there to ask him for any political or other favors, our meetings were very cordial and noble. People always said that he did not talk much but with me he was open and talked at length about the issues or questions that I asked. I feel truly blessed in knowing such a noble soul.

I feel that if anybody deserves Bharat Ratna it should be Dr. Manmohan Singh. He and Shri. Narasimha Rao the former Prime Minister in 1990s ushered in new India. Shri. Rao got the Bharat Ratna last year. I do hope Modi ji is magnanimous enough to give it to Dr. Singh.

[HOME](#)

30 December 2024

[Published in South Asia Monitor, 30 December 2024.](#)

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