

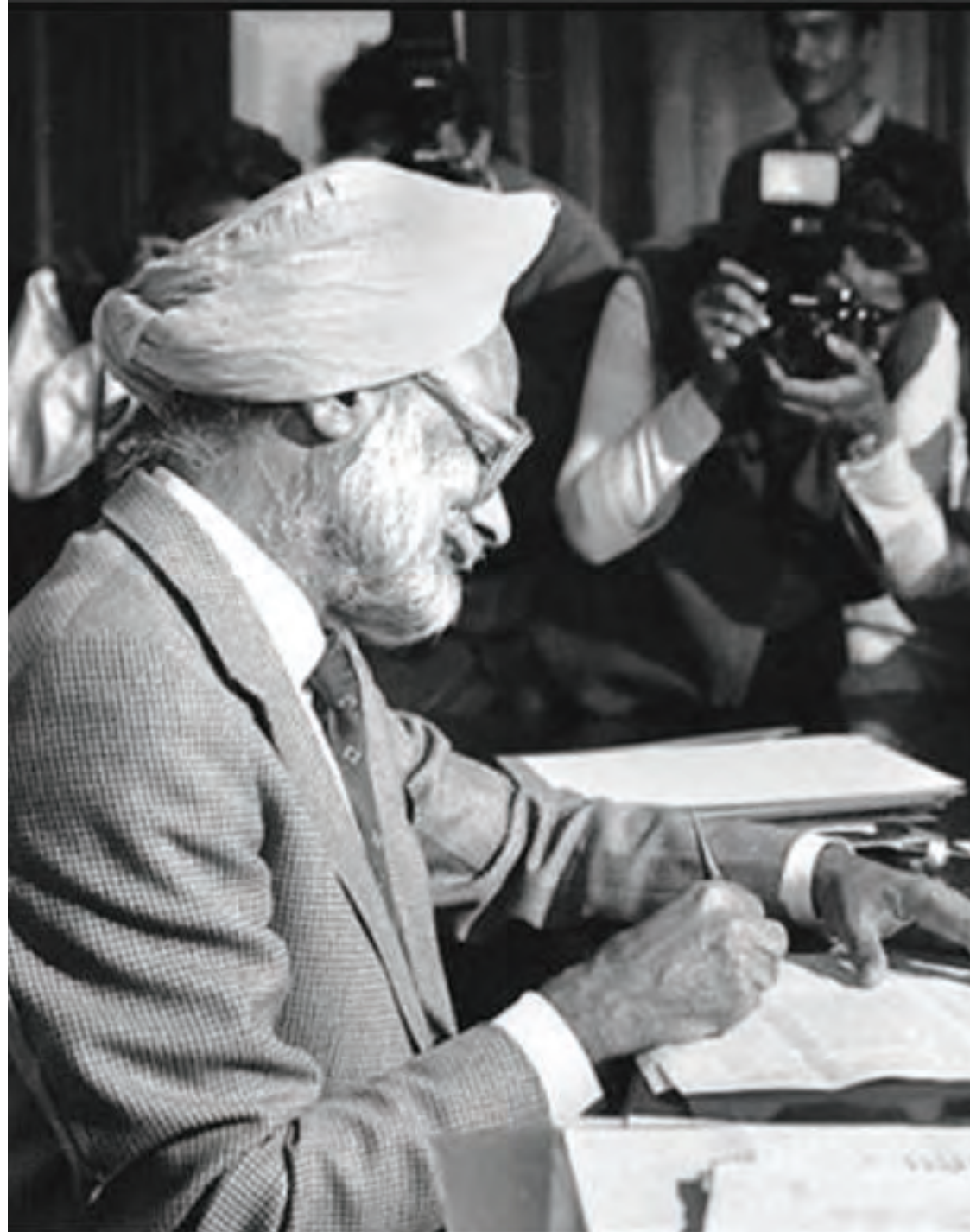
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Dr. Manmohan Singh (1932-2024)

Manmohan Singh, who died on December 26th, was never supposed to be Prime Minister. Born in Gah, now part of Pakistan, he fled the violence of partition as a teenager and reached Indian Uttar Pradesh with his life but little else beyond extraordinary talent. That took him to Cambridge and Oxford, the United Nations and senior roles in India's central bank and civil service.

When the Congress party won a surprise victory in the 2004 national election, the foreign heritage of its leader Sonia Gandhi made the prospect of her as Prime Minister divisive, and Mr. Singh was hastily put forward as a compromise choice. He ascended to the office with little political constituency of his own, nor any other elements of a politician's usual toolkit. Wholly devoid of charisma, he delivered speeches quietly without appearing to move any part of his body, even his mouth, and listeners frequently had to strain to make out his words.

He presided over two terms of unwieldy Congress-led coalitions in which the unseemly compromises required to hold the government together often spilled into the open. Accusations of corruption were rife, though none were levelled against Singh himself. The political opposition labelled him a weak figurehead for the true Congress party powerbrokers behind the scenes, while Time Magazine plastered an image of a hapless looking Mr. Singh on its cover above the headline "The Underachiever" (Figure 1).



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Figure 1: The Underachiever – A Moniker That Stuck



Source: Time Magazine

The moniker stuck, yet it never captured the full measure of Manmohan Singh the leader or the man. As a safe, apolitical choice for Finance Minister in 1991, he faced a crisis almost immediately when the country came precariously close to running out of foreign currency reserves. Eschewing a temporary fix, he persuaded the government to instead address the deeper roots of the problem. In a matter of months, India shed decades of socialist orthodoxy and pushed through a raft of measures to ease the way for domestic competition, foreign investment and private enterprise.

Later, as Prime Minister, he navigated daunting coalition politics to further open the economy to foreign participation in a range of industries, established a national health insurance program and initiated the Aadhaar biometric ID. All of these have been greatly expanded under Narendra Modi's subsequent leadership, but Mr. Singh's government bequeathed him something to start with and a Congress party, now in opposition, that was already on record supporting a range of modernizing ideas. That's not nothing, nor was the 7% average real GDP growth over Singh's two five-year terms, the highest rate achieved by any prime minister.

Singh's shyness was real, mostly, but there was steel beneath the surface. He defied Indian public opinion to reach a civil nuclear deal with the United States, a measure with little short-term political payoff, but far-reaching strategic importance: uniquely in the global non-proliferation landscape, India received major investment in a civil nuclear energy program while retaining its military nuclear deterrent. More broadly, it shifted India's longstanding posture of geopolitical non-alignment to one of much closer collaboration with the United States. What did the US get in exchange? Greater access to the Indian market, a partner in the Indo-Pacific, plus, and this is true, permission to import India's famed Alphonso mango (Figure 2). Not a bad outcome from India's standpoint.



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Figure 2: The Fruits Of Negotiation



Source: News articles

Prime Minister Singh likewise ignored prevailing political winds to pursue more stable relations with long-time adversary Pakistan. Singh was born in what is now Pakistan, while Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf was born in New Dehi. They were the last heads of the government of either country born before partition, or on the “wrong” side of the border and probably knew they would be. Singh had little personal affection for Pakistan’s leadership, which had been widely accused of organizing a series of terrorist attacks in India, and his willingness to improve relations had limits, but in placing ties on a safer footing at considerable political cost he allowed future generations to be a little less burdened by the weight of a hot conflict on the frontier.

Even Manmohan Singh’s diffidence had a firmness of purpose to it. Our own favorite image of him remains the one below (Figure 3). It’s hard to imagine another Indian politician of that era at any level subjecting himself to the perceived indignity of standing in line to vote in a country in which the optics of political viability often seemed to demand an escort of SUVs festooned with machine-gun wielding commandos.

But there he was, the Prime Minister of India, commander in chief of a standing army of a million men, blending into the background as he waited patiently to exercise his civic duty like anyone else.

And while Prime Minister Modi cuts a very different public image that is wholly his own, he has sounded similar notes, in one well-known case refusing a sofa that was offered to him at an event in favor of the ordinary chairs available to other guests. The message, now firmly established, is that India doesn’t do kings. It’s governed by citizen leaders.

India’s rise in recent years owes credit to many. To Prime Minister Modi and his government, to its tireless entrepreneurs, to the people in the millions whose efforts and belief in themselves are powering the change. And also to Dr. Manmohan Singh: limited, flawed, ultimately great, and who perhaps more than any other leader would welcome being credited simply as one of the many.

Figure 3: Citizen Singh - The Prime Minister Waiting To Vote In 2008



Source: Assam Times



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