



IN  
MEMORIAM

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## A TESTAMENT TO THE POWER OF QUIET CONVICTION

When prime minister Narasimha Rao handpicked Manmohan Singh as finance minister in 1991, it was an audacious gamble. Here was a technocrat—soft-spoken, unassuming and seemingly ill-suited to the cut-throat world of politics. But Rao's instincts were correct. Facing a near-catastrophic balance-of-payments crisis, Singh unlocked India with reforms, dismantled decades-old red tape and gave wings to the nation's entrepreneurial spirit. His economic liberalization laid the foundation for modern India, his diplomacy expanded its global influence, and his integrity inspired trust in public life.

His 1991 Budget speech is now the stuff of legend: "No power on Earth can stop an idea whose time has come." These words, delivered in his trademark monotone, masked the monumental shift they heralded. Singh's reforms opened India to global markets, attracting investments, boosting industries, and laying the groundwork for the IT revolution. Millions were lifted out of poverty, and India's GDP growth began its ascent to global prominence.

An economist of rare brilliance, a statesman of unshakable integrity, and a man of quiet yet unyielding resolve, Singh leaves behind a legacy that defies the noisy rhetoric of politics. His life story—one of humble beginnings, transformative achievements, and steadfast principles—mirrors the aspirations of a modern, self-assured India.

### Coalition government

When Singh became India's prime minister in 2004, leading a coalition government, sceptics predicted he would be a figurehead. But his tenure proved otherwise. The India-US civil nuclear agreement, often cited as his crowning diplomatic achievement, showcased his ability to pursue bold, strategic decisions even when facing immense political resistance. The deal not only ended India's nuclear isolation, but also cemented its place on the global stage. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) was set up during his tenure as were many important pieces of legislation like the Right to Information Act.

Yet, Singh remained an unlikely hero. Despite his intellectual heft and historic achievements, he shunned theatrics. There were no grandstanding press conferences or fiery parliamentary speeches. A reluctant politician, as he liked to call himself, he navigated his roles with the same precision and patience that defined his scholarly pursuits. A journalist once quipped, "Singh's idea of making a scene is adjusting his turban mid-sentence."

**Manmohan Singh stood out as a leader who spoke sparingly but acted decisively**

The long list of his achievements was interlaced with a fair share of criticism as well. His second term as prime minister was marred by corruption scandals involving coalition partners, prompting opposition leaders to derisively call him a "silent spectator." Yet, in the face of these attacks, Singh maintained his characteristic composure, offering a memorable retort in Parliament: "History will be kinder to me than the contemporary media."

### A world apart

And history, indeed, is kinder. His understated charisma and incorruptibility set him apart in an era of polarizing rhetoric and personality-driven politics. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Singh wielded power with humility, valuing consensus over confrontation. In an age when shouting matches dominate public discourse, his quiet dignity serves as a reminder of a different kind of leadership.

I recall my first meeting with Singh as the Reserve Bank of India governor when he had come home for lunch at the invitation of my father. He was in his typical light blue turban, something that we picture instantly when we think of him. I then had the good fortune of meeting him several times in his various avatars as finance minister and prime minister. The couple of things that stood out was that he was a gentleman, very erudite, spoke quite softly and was amazingly thoughtful, and very loyal to the Gandhi family.

Most politicians have volumes of witty anecdotes that characterize their career. That is rare for Singh, not because he lacked a sense of humour, but because he rarely sought the spotlight. One oft-recounted tale involves a journalist asking him about his perceived timidity in public. Singh, with a twinkle in his eye, replied, "Yes, I am a politician who speaks less. But when I do, I try to make it count." His dry wit, understated yet incisive, often caught people off guard.

There's also the story of how, during a state banquet, an international dignitary complimented him on his wife's culinary skills. Singh smiled and replied, "I only wish she could teach me to cook up political consensus as easily."

Singh's life is a testament to the power of quiet conviction—the powerful sound of silence. In a world increasingly dominated by bluster, he stood out as a leader who spoke sparingly but acted decisively. In a final tribute to this remarkable man, let us remember his favourite words, borrowed from poet Guru Nanak: "*Nanak naam char di kala, tere bhane sarbat da bhala.*" (With the name of Nanak, let there be prosperity for all.) It is a sentiment that defined his vision and, indeed, his life.

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