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Manmohan Singh: A Towering Statesman Who Transformed India's Destiny

Jawhar Sircar | Dec 27, 2024

Manmohan Singh

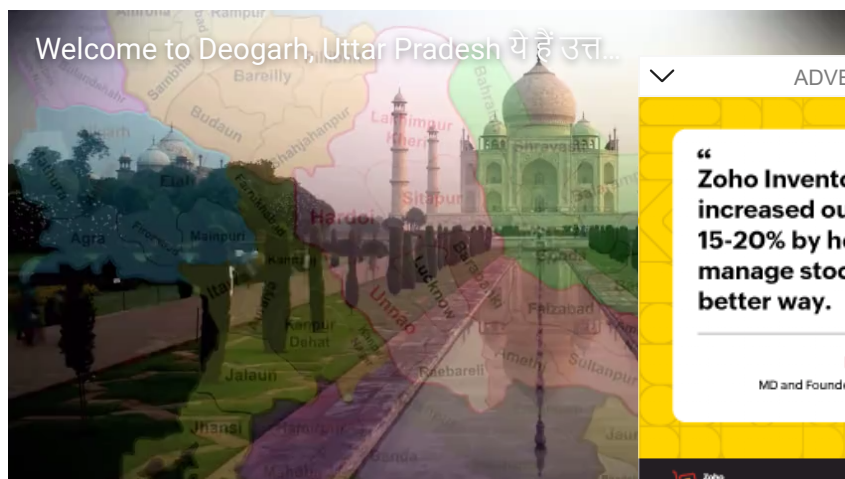
India

Destiny

Manmohan Singh, India's economic reform architect and statesman, embodied integrity, humility and a transformative vision that shaped the nation's destiny, writes Jawhar Sircar



The year 1991 is etched in the history of India as the first significant break with the economic policy that was so dear to the Congress after Independence. It was then that I first met Dr Manmohan Singh, who served as the Finance Minister in Narasimha Rao's cabinet. I was then a Director in the Commerce Ministry, tasked with delivering a confidential note from my minister, P. Chidambaram, to him.





What struck me instantly was his fairness—not just his complexion, which photographs rarely captured, but the deep-seated honesty and simplicity that he represented. Dr Singh had just saved India from the brink of an economic abyss. The transformation he spearheaded was no less than tearing down the Berlin Wall of India's tightly controlled economy. As part of the Central government team, I witnessed firsthand the mess of the license-permit Raj—where decisions on trivial matters, like the export of peacock feathers, were cloaked in absurd bureaucratic rituals. With his quiet but unflattering resolve, Dr Singh dismantled this system, introducing transparency and efficiency.

His critics often dismissed him as a weak leader or a Gandhi family loyalist, but they failed to see his profound strength. He was the architect of India's economic liberalization, a decision that required immense courage in the face of opposition from entrenched bureaucratic and political interests. As Finance Minister and later Prime Minister, he brought together young, dynamic minds like Montek Singh Ahluwalia and Jairam Ramesh to shape a new vision for India.

My interactions with him extended beyond the economy. When I served as Culture Secretary and he was the Culture Minister for 18 months from May 2009, I observed his disdain for unnecessary controls, even in cultural governance. One example remains vivid: he opposed a retrograde amendment in the monuments law that burdened citizens with unreasonable restrictions. While the law eventually passed, it was clear that Dr Singh stood firmly against such excesses.

Dr Singh's humility and authenticity were unmatched. He often recounted his journey of walking several kilometres to school, reflecting his rootedness and resilience. He detested self-promotion, embodying a quiet dignity rare in public life. Despite rumours of open rivalry with contemporaries like Pranab Mukherjee, I witnessed a working relationship based on mutual respect, a testament to his statesmanship.

As we mourn his passing, we remember not just the reforms he introduced but also the values he upheld—pluralism, secularism, and democracy. He was a visionary who dreamt of an India where economic and cultural freedom went hand in hand. His legacy will inspire generations to build an India that is both inclusive and progressive.



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Dr Manmohan Singh was not just a reformer but a national treasure, a beacon of integrity in public service. India owes him a debt of gratitude that words can scarcely repay.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publication.



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Jawhar Sircar is former MP Rajya Sabha, ex Secretary, Govt of India and ex-CEO, Prasar Bharati. He is known for his contributions as a writer and public intellectual.

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