

# Manmohan Singh: An Underrated Prime Minister

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Dr. Manmohan Singh, India's 14<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister and renowned economist, redefined modern political leadership through quiet competence rather than loud rhetoric. Often mischaracterized as a "silent" Prime Minister due to his stoic demeanor, he instead utilized a measured, intellectual approach to governance that steered India through historic transformations. Unlike the typical firebrand politician, Dr. Singh's authority stemmed from his academic rigor and policy integrity. Educated at the University of Cambridge and Oxford University, he transitioned into public service as the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India and later as the finance minister in 1991. Thrust into this role during a severe balance of payment crisis, he quietly engineered the monumental Liberalization of the Indian economy. As Finance Minister, he let his work speak for itself relying on structural reforms rather than self-promotion. It is an established view that Dr. Singh saved the Indian economy in 1991 by spearheading radical reforms-Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG) - that rescued India from a severe balance of payments crisis and bankruptcy. As Finance Minister, he abolished the license raj, devalued rupee to boost export, and welcomed foreign investment, transforming India into an open market.

As Prime Minister (2004-2014) Dr. Singh's leadership style was a stark contrast to the performative bravado frequently seen in global politics. His self-spoken nature and gentlemanly ways were viewed by supporters as quiet resilience and democratic commitment, even amid intense political turbulence. He believed in consensus, dialogue and strengthening institutions rather than dominating them. His tenure also coincided with significant socio-economic achievements, including massive poverty alleviation and record economic growth.

The "silent leader" label became a double-edged sword. During his second term, when his government

faced various political scandals and media scrutiny, his traditional practice of not responding to motivated, personal criticisms was heavily scrutinized. He did not utilize modern communication or social media to publicly manage perception or amplify his government's achievements. Nevertheless, he pushed back against the "silent" narrative in public appearances, maintaining that a leader's worth is found in tangible results. Dr. Singh's legacy proves that quiet strength can indeed change a nation. His tenure laid the ground work for India's global economic integration, and he guided the nation with unparalleled dignity. As public consensus continues to evolve, his leadership is increasingly recognized as a profound example of statesmanship, humility and principled governance.

Manmohan Singh's primary achievement in economic growth lies in transitioning India from restricted, state-controlled system into one of the world's fastest-growing major economies. His tenure yielded significant historical landmarks. As Finance Minister, Singh dismantled the license raj. He drastically reduced import tariffs, encouraged Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and eliminated much of the state control that had hindered private business. The bold set of reforms saved India from a severe balance of payment crisis and laid the groundwork for decades of rapid development. Serving two constructive terms as Prime Minister, Singh presided over an era of unprecedented economic expansion. Under his stewardship, India maintained an average GDP growth of roughly 7.5% to 8% annually, making it one of the strongest growth periods in the country's post independence history. India successfully integrated into the global economy through trade agreements and by opening up service and manufacturing sectors. His economic policies helped India navigate and recover quickly from the 2008 global financial crisis. His approach balanced high-speed growth with inclusive

social development. Government implemented transformative rights-based legislation and welfare programs, notably the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which provided guaranteed wage employment and helped lift an estimated 300 million people out of poverty. This Act served as a critical safety net in India, actively reducing rural poverty through guaranteed wage employment, income smoothing during lean agricultural seasons and the creation of durable community assets. The act legally guaranteed up to 100 days of unskilled manual work per financial year to rural households. Furthermore, the scheme strongly empowered women-requiring a minimum 33% participation-which has tangibly boosted female financial independence and household decision-making power. Studies by organizations like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) highlight that income stabilization from MGNREGA significantly lowers poverty headcount ratios and reduces household's reliance on exploitative informal moneylenders.

One of the important act formulated and implemented by Manmohan Singh government was the Right to information act, 2005. This act is a landmark Indian law that empowers citizens to request access to government records. Its significance lies in transforming Indian democracy by institutionalizing transparency, ensuring bureaucratic accountability, and combating corruption, making governance directly answerable to the public. Public officials are now legally required to justify administrative decisions and actions, which minimizes arbitrary use of power and improve decision-making processes. The Supreme Court of India recognizes the 'Right to Information' as a fundamental right derived directly from Article 19 (1) a (Freedom of speech and expression) and Article 21 (Right to Life).

Dr. Singh officially launched The National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) on April 12, 2005. It is a flagship initiative launched by his government to provide accessible, affordable and quality healthcare to rural populations, with a special focus on vulnerable groups like women and children. It revolutionized India's public health system by creating a decentralized community-owned healthcare delivery model. It proved to be vital in drastically reducing the infant mortality rate and maternal mortality rate. By promoting and facilitating safe deliveries in hospitals,

it has helped save countless lives. This scheme has helped in eradicating diseases like Malaria, Tuberculosis and other local epidemics.

Though, India's Look East Policy was launched in 1991 under the leadership of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, it was Manmohan Singh who transformed this Look East Policy from a primary economic initiative into a strategic, security-driven geopolitical doctrine. Prime Minister Singh successfully operationalized the Indian-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in goods (signed in 2009) and laid the groundwork for further service and investment agreements. He also spearheaded bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs) with Japan and South Korea. His administration pushed toward major infrastructure initiatives, including the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project.

One of the major achievements of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was the 2008 Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement (the 123 Agreement). The agreement was a watershed moment in global geopolitics that officially ended India's three decade long nuclear isolation. It granted India de facto recognition as a nuclear weapons state while opening the doors for legitimate, full scale civil nuclear trade and technology sharing with the United States and the rest of the world. As a result of the agreement 48-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) allowed India to access civilian nuclear technology and fuel without having to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The deal allowed India to import uranium for nuclear reactors.

The Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 was also a landmark legislation brought by Singh's administration making free and compulsory education a fundamental right for children aged 6 to 14. It was a vital legislation for ensuring equal learning opportunities, empowering marginalized communities, prohibiting discrimination, and building a more just, inclusive, and literate society. This act eliminated financial barriers by ensuring free elementary education. 25% of total seats in private schools were reserved for children from economically weaker sections (EWS), and disadvantaged groups, fostering social inclusion. Similarly, The National Food Security Act (NFSA) was enacted in 2013 that legally shifted food security from a welfare scheme to

a legal right. It ensured access to adequate, quality food at affordable prices, thereby safeguarding the most vulnerable populations from hunger and malnutrition. The act also wanted to empower women as it mandated that the eldest women in the household (18 years or older) is designated as the head of the household for issuing ration cards. The act definitely played a crucial role in India's socio-economic development and women empowerment.

Outdated colonial-era act of 1894 was replaced by The Land Acquisition Act of 2013 during Manmohan era. The act was an important legislation that revolutionized property governance in India. Its primary importance lies in balancing essential infrastructure and industrial development with the fundamental rights and socio-economic security of affected landowners and marginalized communities. This act legally provided guaranteed housing, employment opportunities, and monetary support for livelihoods to affected families. The act required a thorough government-led study before any land was acquired to evaluate the impact on livelihoods and community structures.

In an unprecedented development, it was the Manmohan Singh government that provided permanent commission to women officers of short service commission. The first beneficiaries of this scheme were the women officers of the Air force whose case was given approval by Defence Minister AK Antony in June 2010. Today, women are joining the National Defence Academy. All this has become possible because the first step was taken under the premiership of Dr. Singh who reversed the policy of Vajpayee government that had ruled against granting permanent commission to women officers.

Dr. Singh supported India's space program which saw significant milestones during his period. In fact, space exploration under his administration reached historic heights, primarily marked by India's maiden lunar and interplanetary missions. India successfully launched Chandrayaan-I in 2008 and Mars Orbiter Mission/Mangalyaan in 2013. The Singh's administration oversaw India's 100<sup>th</sup> space mission- the successful PSLV-C21 launch carrying foreign Satellites, which cemented ISRO's position as a globally competitive commercial space agency.

The Aadhaar project was initiated and rapidly scaled under Singh's government to provide identity to marginalized populations and streamline government

subsidies. In July 2009 The Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) was established with Nandan Nilekani appointed as its first chairperson. In September 2010 Prime Minister Singh launched the project nationally in Tembali village, Maharashtra, where the first Aadhaar number was issued. In October 2012 Singh launched Aadhaar enabled service delivery in Dudu, Rajasthan. This marked the beginning of Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT) to link subsidies directly to beneficiaries' bank accounts, aiming to curb leakages. By early 2012, the project successfully enrolled over 200 million residents, eventually expanding to cover 600 million people by 2014. Aadhaar now serves as a universal proof of identity and address, enabling access to government welfare schemes, seamless banking, and paperless digital verification across the country.

Unfortunately, between 2010 and 2013, three major controversies dominated national headlines: the 2G Spectrum allocation, the Commonwealth Games, and Coal block allotment. Reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) estimated national losses from these scams at lakhs of crores. Anti-Corruption protests started in many parts of the country- most notably the one led by Anna Hazare under the India against corruption banner. Such protests created a climate in which political messaging could tap into deep public resentment. Round-the-clock television coverage and the rise of social media amplified this sentiment, compressing complex policy debates into stark binaries: honest versus corrupt, reform versus loot. By the time 2014 election arrived, the perception had hardened. The UPA years were widely equated with corruption. As a result, UPA and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was voted out of power.

However, on March 27, 2026, a Delhi Special Court, in a CBI-investigated case related to the coal block allocation in Maharashtra, described the evidence as "highly insufficient" and based on "conjectures and surmises". The court acquitted former coal Secretary H.C. Gupta and others, finding no evidence of criminality, undue influence, or dishonest intent in the allocation process. In the 2G case, a special court had already acquitted all the accused in 2017, citing a lack of evidence. Similarly, most of the Commonwealth Games related cases either collapsed or produced limited outcomes.

A pattern thus emerges across what were once projected as three major scams: allegations that

appeared politically conclusive struggled to withstand judicial security. The gap is significant, courts require demonstrable proof-clear intent, identifiable gain and a direct nexus between decisions and benefit. In several instances, judges found these elements missing. The Supreme Court did flag serious irregularities in the allocation of 2G Spectrum and coal blocks, even cancelling licenses. But these findings pertained to flawed policy and procedure, not necessarily to criminal culpability.

The Nation owes an apology to former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh for the intense political attacks and vitriol he endured over corruption allegations during his later years in power, which were later largely debunked by the courts. Dr. Singh will be remembered as the architect of India's 1991 economic liberalization, global respect as an economist, his personal integrity, and the contrast between his quiet dignity and subsequent political discourse. In fact Dr. Singh was a kind and soft-spoken politician, who changed the course of Indian history and impacted the lives of millions. At a news conference in 2014 Dr. Singh said, "I honestly believe that history will judge me kindlier than the contemporary media".

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