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FROM THE RINGSIDE

A prime ministerial embrace for August 15

For the first time in post-Independence India, the country would have the privilege to hear a true professional as India's Prime Minister from the historic ramparts of the Red Fort. Undoubtedly, this will be a rare moment and high point in the life of Dr Manmohan Singh. What should the nation expect from him?

- First and foremost, the Prime Minister would do well to abstain from the beaten track of using this occasion to announce some more popular schemes or grandiose projects. By now the country has lost track of the number of schemes and projects announced on the occasion of our Independence Day. More often than not, they get amalgamated into some ongoing schemes and retain a tenuous identity till they get subsumed in the next set of announcements. There are enough other occasions for the Government to announce initiatives, viz. the President's address, the Budget statement or the Annual Plan. The Independence Day speech should instead be used for a "Vision Statement" on what the Prime Minister foresees as the country's future and the ingredients of a continuing partnership between the people and the Government.
- Second, Nehru laid the foundation of India's foreign policy which has served the country well since our independence. The independence of our foreign policy needs to be jealously preserved and our traditional friendship with the third-world countries fortified with renewed emphasis in the economic and commercial sphere. However, the world has changed and foreign policies need to be constantly evolved in consonance with altered realities. On a variation of what Lord Palmerston, former Prime Minister of UK, had once said, "in the area of foreign policy there are no perpetual enemies and no perennial friends". We only have the perpetual and perennial interest of India and policies adapted to subserve this overriding objective. This Government has been in office for just under three months. However, the talk of a Indo-Pak peace roadmap, including Kashmir, has been debated for quite some time. No one knows if such a roadmap exists beyond rhetoric. Notwithstanding diplomatic circumspection about the sensitive issues of national security, its ingredients need wider national consensus since it so vitally concerns our national fabric and goes well beyond the tangible economic benefits which any peace dividend will yield.
- Third, it will never be repetitive for any Prime Minister to reiterate that a prosperous India must be bereft of abrasive social and communal tensions and secularism will remain the bedrock of any Government which tries to achieve sustainable growth and stability which is truly participative of every segment of society. Any institutional mechanism or legislation towards this end deserve high priority.
- Fourth, while reiterating the nation's gratitude to the continued dedication and sacrifices of India's defence forces we must recognise the need for a "lean but

mean” defence force. This requires rapid modernisation. The Prime Minister knows too well that almost every year financial allocation for defence remain under-utilised. While this may have helped successive Finance Ministers in fiscal management, it has seriously retarded defence modernisation. In no small measure this is prompted from fear of allegations and financial malfeasance. While checks and balances, as well as financial rectitude, in procurement policies is essential there is need for a consensus on transparent institutional structures which will not make defence modernisation a hostage of our fears.

- Fifth, there is need to categorically state that economic growth is central to our employment and social policies. While growth is a necessary pre-condition, it may not be a sufficient condition for rapid employment generation. Sectors which have high employment potential deserve higher priority. We need also to improve data and monitoring on employment generation to fine-tune policies. While the politics of coalition necessarily involve compromises and flexibility, the country needs to be reassured that at no stage will our growth imperatives be compromised. The “politics of survival” must be symmetrical with the “politics of development”.
- Sixth, the neglect of agriculture is being rightly reversed. However, these involve complex issues of creating a framework for greater investment both public and private, increased application of user charges, repealing many onerous State-level and Central regulations, changing food and procurement policies in consonance with changing consumer preferences and giving our farmers the benefit of a large common market. No strategy is worthwhile till it can truly make a more abiding dent on poverty and make the improvement in life quality a sustainable one. While pursuing the reforms with a human face is unexceptionable, it would not be sensible to reverse many gains painstakingly achieved under the Prime Minister’s own leadership in the initial phase of our reform strategy. For example, bankrupt States can hardly afford to become more bankrupt by guaranteeing free power to agriculture. Either their Budgets cannot sustain upfront subsidy payments or the fragile health of State Electricity Boards will deteriorate further or increase in cross-subsidies will further erode industry competitiveness. We need to exercise caution; short-term populism has limits.
- Seventh, one of India’s biggest asset given its demographic profile, is its young population. Between now and 2010, over 400 million Indians would be in the age group of 18-30. Experience of other emerging markets, particularly East Asian countries, suggests that this has a multiplier effect on savings, consumption and expansion in the size of the market. The challenge is how to convert what could be a “demographic drag” into a “demographic opportunity”. This cannot be done without substantial investment in Human Resource Development. While augmenting resources through special measures like a cess is well-deserved, it is important to recognise that money alone is neither the constraint nor a solution to our complex HRD challenges. De-politicisation of education goes far beyond de-saffronisation. Issues like de-politicising appointment of teachers (currently in many States they are regarded as potential polling officers), creating greater competition between public and private schools, altering patterns of accountability, monitoring drop-out ratios, assessing the quality of teaching at the end of the year are major issues even in primary education. Technical and higher education face serious problems of faculty retention, autonomy in their functioning and a credible framework for public private partnership. I am therefore surprised that the Government has so far not acted on the commitment contained in the CMP for the

constitution of a Education Reforms Commission.

- Eighth, while talented young Indians will power India, we must recognise the need to accord much higher priority to demographic management. Population policies in the past have been unduly driven by political and ideological predilections. The plain fact is that the land-man ratio has rapidly deteriorated. There are significant slippages in achieving population stabilisation. Even by 2045 we may not achieve population stabilisation since the more densely populated States would fail to achieve the stipulated TFR of 2.1% by 2010. Can we have a more credible population policy which is depoliticised and driven by the centrality of our developmental goals?
- Ninth, the renewed emphasis on efficiency of public expenditure and arresting the deterioration in the quality of public services is well placed. Prime Minister's recent initiative on Civil Service reforms is also timely. However, these have been repeated earlier. We must go beyond accepted platitudes. These impinge on serious issues of governance, particularly in the poor and backward States and any cynical approach that "people get the Government they deserve" will not work. Serious attention needs to be given to "stonewalling" and creating institutional checks and balances even within the existing fabric to secure visible progress even in the short run.

Prime Ministers who lead coalition parties inevitably face the Shakespearean challenge of "to be or not to be". It is our fervent hope that Dr Manmohan Singh would choose "to be" his natural self — sincere, decent and uncompromising in the dogged pursuit of national interest, unalloyed by the trappings of the high office he now occupies. He knows better than us that Prime Ministers are expected "not just to manage, but to change society and to define its finer values".

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