



## **Politically (In)Correct: An Imagined Conversation with Manmohan Singh**

By Tanessa Puri, December 23, 2018

First, they came for a college student and I was scared

Then, they came for the academics and I was frightened

And then, they came for the journalist and I was quiet

Now, I don't know who they come for...

Most of our mothers hushed us to sleep by scaring us with stories of approaching monsters. The Narendra Modi government scares me similarly. I am a broke college student. My standards for feeling whole are low. I'm grateful if someone gives me a word, a penny, a source of employment or even some respect. If this wasn't enough to feel out of place, I also belong to the Sikh minority. And so, I wonder if I am Hindu enough for Modi ji's *Bharat*.

Thinking about all of these things, one day I decided to write a letter to former prime minister Manmohan Singh. It was almost as if I was engulfed by the child-like idea that if I called for help with all my heart, help would arrive, despite the beastly bureaucracy and deceiving democratic processes. And so I wrote.

"Dear Dr. Singh,

I wish I were a graduate from Yale or Harvard or even New York University. But I am neither a graduate nor at an Ivy League university. I wish I were a politician or an industrialist or an influential academic so I could be in the league of people who converse with you.

When you were the prime minister, I felt safe as a citizen. I enjoyed listening to Shashi Tharoor and P. Chidambaram. We lived in an era of healthy debate. Dissent was encouraged and parody well-received. My Facebook posts were honest, not swaddled in fear.

I was born in 1997, so I only learnt about your time as the finance minister only from my 12th standard CBSE textbook. Back in school, I didn't believe in learning much, but the bare minimum I knew helped me colour the world into shades of black and white. I felt pride when you came up with 'Liberalisation-Privatisation-Globalisation' policy. I miss that feeling.

I wish that you could come back to lead the nation; to touch us with your words, knowledge and presence. We would trouble you with questions about anything and everything but your presence would help us escape this awkward fear of speaking our mind. Please teach us to be a little like you, so the world can comfort itself at the thought of a better future.

Soon, I found someone- a mediator of sorts who helped me get an appointment with the former PM.

I expected an overwhelming security apparatus but I was met with warmth and respect.

Inspired by our meeting, I started wondering what the world looks like from his perspective. This is what I came up with:

"Dear friend,

All I am now for this country is perhaps a footnote or an acknowledgement

Some mention me in passing, and for some I am entirely lost.

They think corruption can be remedied with a one-stop-solution like creating new notes

They think India can be cleaned with a 'Swacch Bharat Abhiyaan'

They think the central government should control the RBI

I am trying to find the moment

The moment when tolerance started to mean ‘hating those who are different’ instead of ‘loving those who are similar while accepting the ones who are different.’”

Writing this, I’m aware of the truths we all live with now.

We are not free anymore.

We are told what to eat

We are told who to love

We are told who to trust.

I do not fear much.

But I am scared of the beastly ordinances the system keeps placing upon us

I do not fear the sensitive and thin-skinned ones

But I fear the dictatorship that sits behind the mask

I fear how every citizen looks up to the other

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