Dr. Manmohan Singh Memorial Lecture

Delivered by Dr. Angela Merkel, Former Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany

26 February 2026

Dear Upinder Singh, Dear Daman Singh, Honorable Ambassador, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In April 2025, a few months after the death of your father Manmohan Singh, you wrote to me, dear Upinder Singh, as his eldest daughter, and asked me to deliver the first lecture of the Trust named after your father in his honor, and thereby also to establish an annual tradition. I have gladly complied with this request.

Why?

First of all, out of very fundamental considerations. Throughout my entire active political life, the flourishing of German-Indian relations was close to my heart, and that remains the case today.

Particularly during my 16-year term as Federal Chancellor from the end of 2005 to the end of 2021, I attached great importance to the cooperation between our two countries. This is why Manmohan Singh and I held the first German-Indian Intergovernmental Consultations in 2011 and continued them later on a biennial basis.

The strategic importance of our relations, as well as those of the European Union with India, is obvious to me: India and Germany are two democracies, with India being the largest in the world. The EU is the second-largest global economic power; Germany is the largest economy among its member states. Alongside China, India is one of the two states with more than a billion inhabitants—by now, India is the most populous country on earth. For many years, your country has shown annual economic growth of well over 5 percent and possesses a virtually inexhaustible economic development potential for the future. Compared to Germany, India has a young population; the average age is just under 30 years, whereas in comparison, people in Germany are on average 46.8 years old.

Most recently, I am pleased that finally, after an 18-year negotiation marathon, an agreement on an FTA between the EU and India could be announced.

And I hope that today's event can also make a small contribution to the consolidation of the relations between our two countries.

Why do I dare to hope so? In a time when the world is currently changing dramatically, can there even be an interest in a speech by me in honor of Manmohan Singh? After all, he became Prime Minister of India back in 2004 and left this office a good ten years later in 2014, more than 11 years ago now; and I am a former Federal Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany who ended her active political career more than 4 years ago. So why did I nonetheless find it appealing and rewarding to accept Upinder Singh's invitation on behalf of the Manmohan Singh Trust?

First and foremost: It was a great pleasure for me to work together with Manmohan Singh for almost 10 years.

Manmohan Singh—I felt this immediately at our first encounter—was a very special personality. I think everyone who knew him felt similarly: he could captivate people, even though he did not appear dominant in either his demeanor (*Habitus*) or his speech. He was more than 20 years older than I. We met for the first time in April 2006 in Germany for the opening of the Hannover Messe, the world's largest industrial fair at the time, at which India was invited as the partner country and Indian companies could thus present themselves to the global public.

What impressed me about Manmohan Singh was his alert and curious gaze, which radiated experience and openness in equal measure. He seemed both composed (*in sich ruhend*) and gentle as well as determined. As the first Prime Minister who was not a Hindu and belonged to the Sikh minority, he embodied the pride of a nation that seeks its equal in religious, ethnic, and geographical diversity in the world. He did this without losing many words over it—to me, he radiated a natural authority that did not, however, act intimidatingly, but rather gave me courage—courage to ask questions and courage to conduct open conversations.

Manmohan Singh's life path was impressive. He was born in 1932 in the village of Gah in what was then British India and is today Pakistan. The Partition of India in 1947 after the end of British colonial rule forced the family, because of their adherence to the Sikh religion, to flee to Amritsar in today's Indian part of the Punjab. Manmohan Singh was one of ten children; his father Gurmukh Singh was a merchant and provided for the family, who lived in simple circumstances. The experiences of flight and a completely new beginning sensitized him already in his childhood to the fragility of political orders. Thus, as an adult, he was able to empathize with the historical peculiarities not only of his country, but also of other countries better than others.

After school, he studied economics in Chandigarh in the Punjab and continued his studies in 1957 in Cambridge, Great Britain. Subsequently, in 1962, he earned his doctorate at Oxford University on questions of foreign trade and economic development. His global understanding of economic issues, particularly international development and trade policy,

was sharpened by his work as an Economic Affairs Officer at the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) from 1966 to 1969 in Geneva. In this role, he also dealt with the integration of emerging economies into the world economy.

This time outside of India was to become formative for his further work. Having returned to his homeland, he was able to contribute his experience both in academic teaching and as Governor of the Indian Central Bank and advisor to the Indian government.

But he had a truly formative effect on the future of his homeland as Finance Minister, an office he held from 1991 to 1996. After India had fallen into a severe financial crisis, he implemented courageous reforms. Until that point, India had been a heavily regulated and strictly shielded economy. The so-called "Licence Raj" stood representatively for a dense network of state permits, controls, and restrictions under which no entrepreneurship could develop and no growth could arise. Manmohan Singh liberalized foreign trade, dismantled domestic bureaucratic hurdles, and opened the Indian market to foreign investors. In this way, he succeeded not only in stabilizing the state finances. These reforms made it possible for India today to look back on an almost 30-year history of economic growth.

Manmohan Singh belonged to the Congress Party. He was a politician who could convince people above all through high expertise and his personal integrity. Thus, after the election she won in 2004, party leader Sonia Gandhi decided to propose him as Prime Minister. At first he hesitated, but then performed this office over two legislative periods until the year 2014. In his farewell speech on May 17, 2014, in which he addressed the citizens of India, he recalled once more with what resolution he had taken up his office 10 years earlier:

> *"…with diligence as my tool, truth as my beacon and a prayer, that I might always do the right thing."*

For me, as Federal Chancellor of approximately 84 million inhabitants, it was fascinating in itself to converse with a colleague who bore responsibility for more than a billion people. Added to this was the fact that, unlike in Germany, most people in his country were poor. When Manmohan Singh took office in 2004, the GDP per capita in India was 624 USD; when he left it in 2014, it was 1,553 USD. That meant an increase of about 2.5-fold in 10 years. These figures speak for themselves.

I was not impressed by the sheer size of your country alone. India looks back on a 5,000-year history; in the Indian constitution, 22 official languages are recognized; the unity of the country grows out of its diversity. Tolerance and respect are essential prerequisites for peaceful development. We in Germany have every reason to take more interest in the history of this country and to do everything we can to better understand life in your country.

In our conversations, Manmohan Singh illustrated to me again and again, not reproachfully but in a firm tone, what reservations emerging countries like India had toward us, the rich industrialized nations, including Germany. From his point of view, we continually expected great interest from them in our economic and political problems, but were in no way prepared to show them, the emerging countries, the same measure of curiosity and interest. From then on, I engaged even more strongly with the conditions in emerging countries, including India, and the challenges these countries faced.

In my political memoirs, I describe how my view of the world sharpened through such conversations as those I had with Manmohan Singh. On my desk in the Chancellery stood a globe, which served as geographical orientation during my phone calls with heads of government of other countries. At some point, I began to think about the difference between a globe and a map. In doing so, it became clear to me that my worldview, like that of many other Europeans, was Eurocentrically shaped. On a globe, the distance from every place in the world to the center of the globe is the same, and thus no place in the world is highlighted. On a world map, it looks quite different. On it, there is a center and margins. The decision of where the center lies is arbitrary. Our world maps used today are based on a decision from the year 1884 made at the International Meridian Conference in Washington. It determined the English town of Greenwich as the prime meridian and the time there as the world standard. The result was that I grew up with maps where the second-smallest continent on earth, Europe, is always in the center. This shaped my thinking from childhood. Only when I came across a corrected world map by the Australian Stuart McArthur from 1979, on which North and South were swapped and the prime meridian went through Canberra instead of Greenwich—which led to Australia moving into the upper center of the map and Europe ending up in the right-hand marginal position—did my way of seeing, and thus thinking, change. It became suddenly clear to me that we in Europe are far off the beaten track, or at least not the navel of the world. I believe that for Manmohan Singh, this realization was a matter of course from childhood; for me, it was a late insight.

Now, the world has changed dramatically since the time when Manmohan Singh was Prime Minister. Not only has the economic and political weight of the emerging countries—symbolized by the BRICS group of states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa)—shifted significantly in favor of the former compared to that of the industrialized states—known as the G7 group (USA, Canada, Japan, France, Great Britain, Italy, and Germany). That it would turn out this way had been expected for a long time, including during our respective terms in office.

What weighs more heavily today is that in recent years, seemingly unshakeable certainties have been shaken. Let me name three of them:

In Europe, the principle of the territorial integrity of states was violated by Russia's attack on Ukraine, and thus the European order after World War II was thrown into turmoil. Thereby,

the right to territorial integrity and sovereignty of every member of the United Nations, which is also enshrined in the UN Charter, was trampled underfoot.

Multilateralism as a concept for our international cooperation is under pressure. The USA under President Donald Trump is leaving or weakening international organizations such as the World Health Organization, the World Trade Organization, or the Paris Climate Agreement. They openly call into question the role of the United Nations with its Security Council as a place for the settlement of international conflicts, or replace it with unilateral action. In this way, the previous order of cooperation is being replaced by an order in which, more and more, the right of the strong prevails instead of the strength of the law.

Added to this is the fact that new technical possibilities such as so-called social media, as well as the associated developments in the field of Artificial Intelligence, are capable of calling truths lies and lies truths. This has grave effects on our democracies and our coexistence in freedom.

In view of these developments, many people in Germany, but perhaps also here with you in India, ask themselves which principles they should orient themselves by in their lives in the future—in the education of their children, in coexistence with other groups in society, and in professional life. Likewise, the fundamental question arises for politically active people whether it continues to be worthwhile to commit oneself to democratic rules and the validity of the law in the future.

What does all this have to do with Manmohan Singh?

I believe that in view of these fundamental challenges, Manmohan Singh's work can give us orientation for our actions today. What could that be?

First: What defines democratic orders? On July 19, 2005, Manmohan Singh delivered a speech in Washington before both houses of the American Congress. This could not be more topical. After he had spoken about the essence of Indian democracy, he warned:

> *"The real test of a democracy is not in what is said in the Constitution, but how it functions on the ground."*

He then detailed what is indispensable for a democracy—in this case, the Indian one: free and fair elections with an independent election commission, an independent judiciary as defender of the constitution and guarantor of the rule of law, a fearless press as a key element, as well as the protection of minorities and civil society organizations that can work unhindered. Manmohan Singh left no doubt that each of these elements is equally constitutive for a functioning democracy. What applied then applies all the more today. Promoted by parties on the fringes of or outside the democratic spectrum that call these

principles into question, and driven by so-called social media in which we can distinguish lies and truths only with difficulty, democracy is coming under pressure, at least in Germany. Therefore, it depends on every individual. We must make no compromises on what we regard as essential for our order. We must be prepared to show our stance publicly as well and not back away from hate and incitement on the internet or controversial discussions. On this depends whether we can continue to live in freedom, for which a functioning democracy is a necessary prerequisite.

We can no longer simply view democratic orders as unshakably given. If we want to continue living in democracies, we must actively stand up for them.

Second: Whatever important countries on our planet do, we should continue to commit ourselves to the principles of multilateral cooperation. In his various speeches on the occasion of the annual General Assemblies of the United Nations in New York, Manmohan Singh repeatedly recalled this. Thus, in his speech in September 2013, he pointed out that member states are most successful when they adhere to the letter and spirit of the Charter of the United Nations. By this, he meant constantly striving for the broadest possible consensus of the international community and, in doing so, balancing the needs and responsibilities of nations in different stages of development in a fair manner.

However, he also emphasized that for a multilateralism that functions in the future, a reform of the United Nations is required. In this field, certainly too little, if anything at all, has happened since then. However, it is my conviction that the answer to this cannot consist in giving up the principle of multilateral cooperation and replacing it with the unilateral enforcement of interests, as we are experiencing increasingly today. We must strive for the United Nations; we have nothing comparable.

Third: Global challenges such as man-made climate change, the protection of biodiversity, or the oceans imperatively require collective action by the world community. Therefore, India and Germany commit to the Paris Climate Agreement and, in doing so, to the principle of the common but differentiated responsibility of the states of this world. The latter principle was particularly important to Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister of an emerging country. In this, he did not only think of India but always had the developing countries in view as well. During his term in office, he considerably intensified cooperation with the countries of the African continent. I also strengthened development cooperation with the countries of Africa during my time in government. We both agreed: a life in peace and security would only exist if global growth is inclusive—that is, that all people on earth can participate in it.

Manmohan Singh showed this exemplarily in his government action. Since the development of India's rural regions was particularly close to his heart, he introduced a rural employment program that secured every household a guaranteed claim to at least 100 days of paid work. In this way, poverty in these areas could be significantly reduced.

Furthermore, he introduced a law that established the right to free and compulsory education for children between 6 and 14 years, thereby significantly reducing the school dropout rate.

Through these two examples, one recognizes how he enforced growth and improvement of living conditions for all Indians through state measures.

Fourth: In his speech on the occasion of the UN General Assembly in 2011, Manmohan Singh already dealt with the negative effects of globalization, which became visible in the following years, especially after the global financial crisis of 2008 originating from the USA. Economic recessions in the industrialized countries led to economic upheavals in the emerging and developing countries. He made it clear that, from his point of view, these difficulties can only be overcome with a cooperative approach and not with a confrontational one.

Today, as more and more protectionist trade practices hinder the growth of the world economy, Manmohan Singh's warnings are of great importance. For the poorest countries and the poorest in the emerging countries suffer most from this development. Precisely for this reason, the agreement on a Free Trade Agreement between the European Union and India is so significant in these times. However, it could only be concluded after the interests of all sides were sufficiently taken into account. For India, agriculture naturally plays a major role, as about 46 percent of the population is still employed in the agricultural sector today. We as Europeans should understand this particularly well, as the interests of our farmers are also the subject of many political disputes in the EU.

And **fifth:** If there are new technical developments that fundamentally change life in all states of this world, then these technologies must also become the subject of multilateral agreements and regulations. This applies equally to the protection of personal and economic data, to the designation of responsibilities in the so-called social media, and to regulations for the rapidly growing areas of application of Artificial Intelligence. Such a demand appears at the present time like a utopia. Instead, the world's leading states in this field try either to set their own rules, like China, or to prevent any regulation, like the USA. Even if it appears utopian, the way must be paved for the principle of multilateral cooperation in these areas as well. Otherwise, the so fundamental principle of multilateralism fossilizes (*versteinert*)—that is, it becomes obsolete. We must never accept that.

I hope I could make clear through these selected examples that, in view of the many challenges we face as societies today and in view of the many questions that young people in our countries especially have about what a prosperous development for them and their children can look like, it can help us even today to reflect on the maxims for action and concrete political steps of Manmohan Singh. I am convinced that his political work can still be an inspiration to us today and can give us courage to go our own ways in his spirit despite

changed conditions. Therefore, I continue to find it a good idea, dear Upinder Singh, to establish the tradition of an annual Manmohan Singh Lecture here today, and I thank you that I was allowed to hold the first of these lectures in this future series.

[*English translation of the text of the lecture delivered by Dr. Angela Merkel in German*]

[Dr. Angela Merkel was in conversation with Ambassador Shivshankar Menon after the Lecture]