

Atal Bihari Vajpayee

Atal Bihari Vajpayee's life in politics spanned the evolution of Hindutva politics from the days when the Jana Sangh was just a marginal player in Nehru's India to its rise to power as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). His driving ambition from the day he entered Parliament was to make his party the national alternative to the Congress, and this book tells the gripping story of how he achieved this ambition, becoming the first non-Congress prime minister to serve a full five-year term, paving the way for the BJP's political dominance. In many ways Vajpayee represents a bridge between the Nehruvian age and the Narendra Modi years.

Spellbinding orator, coalition builder, wise statesman, benevolent father figure, Vajpayee was also a bundle of contradictions. He was both Hindutva loyalist and liberal centrist; eloquent poet and ruthless political tactician; faithful member of the puritanical Sangh Parivar who never hid his unconventional personal life. The political leader whom even his opponents dubbed 'the good man in the bad party', he became – with all his flaws and weaknesses – arguably India's most loved prime minister. Deeply researched, and with new insights and anecdotes from his closest confidants, this is the most revealing personal portrait there is of Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

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*In the 75th year of Indian Independence, this book is dedicated to the
spirit of India's Parliament*

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Introduction

Every year for the last twenty-five years, as the world celebrates Christmas Day, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Vijay Goel holds a birthday party for the ‘maha-purush’ he considers his ideal politician. The celebration is a ‘bhajan sandhya’, an evening of song and poetry, Goel’s way of remembering former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on his birthday, 25 December. Goel once even arranged for the streets and homes of Old Delhi to be bedecked with flowers in Vajpayee’s memory.

Goel, who cut his teeth in Delhi’s combative student union politics and was a minister of state in the Vajpayee PMO (Prime Minister’s Office), admits to being an unapologetic Vajpayee ‘bhakt’. ‘Yes, he is India’s most loved prime minister,’ he says, insisting that Vajpayee is even more loved than Jawaharlal Nehru, adding, ‘Even when he was ill and couldn’t leave his house, hundreds of people would ring me up asking to at least see him once.’

This is my second biography of an Indian prime minister, the first being of Indira Gandhi, *Indira: India’s Most Powerful Prime Minister*, published four years ago. Why have I described Vajpayee as ‘India’s Most Loved Prime Minister’? The reason is that among India’s prime ministers, while Indira Gandhi was the toughest wielder of power politics, Vajpayee was, by the end of his life, the recipient of

a sympathetic love from wide cross-sections of the population who regarded him with near-universal goodwill. He was a politician of the Nehruvian 1950s, the democratic time when opponents were comrades and adversaries could become friends. The Congress leader Karan Singh, who ran against Vajpayee in Lucknow in the 1999 general elections, recalls the fight as the most cordial contest of his life. However bitter the battle, Vajpayee invariably brought a smile to the faces of his rivals. He radiated a sense of easy comfort, like a genial patriarch able to unite a disparate family. His foibles, failings, inconsistencies and inadequacies were unhidden, his (often weak and futile) struggles for the ideological centre an open dilemma for all to see. In his personal loves and likes there was no humbug or hypocrisy. He not only enjoyed his whisky and non-vegetarian food, he lived for most of his life with the woman he always called 'Mrs Kaul' and her husband, his friend 'Kaul Sahab', and once candidly admitted, '*Main kunwara hoon, brahmachari nahin* [I'm a bachelor, not a celibate].'

His sincere push for economic prosperity brought him gratitude, his self-deprecating humour revealed an all too frail human being. He was an ambitious and calculating politician, a Jedi in the dark arts of political intrigue, but he still shied away from personal vindictiveness against opponents. Where Indira struck awe and fear and Nehru was the adored god-king placed on a pedestal, Vajpayee was loved as a family elder might be, sitting comfortably among all kinds of people, munching on his samosas and rasgullas, a familiar and reassuring paterfamilias. In 2007, in an opinion poll by *India Today* magazine, ORG Marg and AC Nielsen, Vajpayee was voted the people's favourite to be prime minister, ahead of Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi.¹

His was an epic journey of toil and painful progress, much longer and more harrowing than Indira Gandhi's shorter and more privileged life. Travelling across India year after year, by second-class train and tonga, bathing at railway stations, sleeping in public parks, fighting long and hard to establish his party as the Congress's 'national alternative' and ascending to the prime ministership only in his twilight years, by

the end the old, weather-beaten man was so familiar and so fallible, so leavened by repeated failures and victories, so invincible at the polls – he won ten Lok Sabha terms and was a member of Parliament (MP) twelve times, with two terms in the Rajya Sabha – and seen as so valiantly trying to mainstream his party in India's political centre that he was regarded, even by his detractors, with indulgent approval.

No doubt, Vajpayee's image as the embattled liberal softie in a hard-line Hindu party was part cleverly crafted and only part genuine. He never broke with the religious majoritarianism that propelled him to power. He did not find the strength to quell forever the fires of extremism in his own party. Yet at key moments, by erring on the side of parliamentary constitutionalism, staunchly holding to the Nehruvian line in foreign policy and to the free-market line on the economy when in office, and by embodying, in his own ambiguous, poetry-reciting way, a resistance to bigotry and closed-mindedness, and by strategically publicizing his own disapproval of firebrand street-fighting Hindutva, Vajpayee not only wrestled with his own existential dilemma of trying to be the 'Hindustani Nehru' or the Bharatiya 'sanskritic' liberal, he also in the process created a template for Indian conservatism expressed in a democratic way.

This doctrine of 'Vajpayeeism' was by no means clearly articulated. Vajpayee didn't hesitate to show he was often plagued by self-doubt. He appeared as a bundle of contradictions, now challenging his ideological parent the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), now falling in line with it, one day an unapologetic champion of political Hindutva, the next day speaking the language of an inclusive society. The party he created in 1980 with L.K. Advani was, in its foundation and early years, positioned as 'Gandhian socialist' – a centrist, inclusive force that aimed, above all, to challenge the dominance of the Congress and become the 'national alternative'. Yet, just over a decade after the formation of the Bharatiya Janata Party, its cadres had willingly participated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid, an act that let loose a spiral of communal violence and religious polarization that still stalks

India. Through this critical period, Vajpayee chose to avoid confronting the Hindutva rabble-rousers. His decision to stay away from Ayodhya on the day the Babri Masjid was demolished reflected both his political limitations and his complicity with saffron nationalism.

For an earlier generation of the BJP (and for the Jana Sangh before it), he was the ultimate mascot, figurehead and trophy, infusing the party with his own harmonizing, all-embracing presence, in the process attracting the wrath of uber-Hindutva outfits like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM). Advani provided the BJP its ideological direction and organizational vigour, raising the BJP from two seats in 1984 to a stunning 182 in 1998, an achievement Advani described as ‘unparalleled in the history of parliamentary democracy’. Yet it was Vajpayee who provided the Ram movement’s party its constitutional respectability. Advani wasn’t the BJP’s statesman, Vajpayee was. A perennial Pied Piper-like figure in Parliament and election rallies, Vajpayee rejoiced in his cult status and guarded it tenaciously. But he resisted the temptation to become a one-man show, adhering always to a collegiate style of decision-making and never, for better or for worse, imposing his will. Many saw this as weakness. But to him it was a matter of party discipline and a bid to stay relevant.

That collegiate BJP has completely changed today. In fact, the BJP’s universe has transformed dizzyingly in the decade and a half since Vajpayee virtually bid farewell to public life in 2004. The shift from the Age of Atal to the Era of Narendra Modi has been swift and dramatic, to the point where the Vajpayee years have almost faded away into sepia-tinted photos from forgotten days. Goel and several others have, in a sense, become ‘victims’ of this transformation; those who were once in the former prime minister’s charmed inner circle are now increasingly peripheral figures in the ‘new’ BJP. A dwindling number attends Goel’s Vajpayee parties. Instead, the Modi-led BJP government organizes its own events marking 25 December as ‘Good Governance Day’.

But the legacy of Atal Bihari Vajpayee – party builder, crafty

politician, Hindu nationalist, poet and parliamentarian – can't be reduced to a single day merely commemorating governance. There are other, far more important reasons why Vajpayee the personality should be remembered, primarily because he strove, however imperfectly, to establish Hindu nationalism as a viewpoint located in India's parliamentary and democratic spectrum, as a set of ideas straining at the confining leash of the RSS. His was a belief system that did not balk at an open reach-out to Pakistan, Kashmir, to Muslims and other religious minorities. Today the saffron top brass shuns iftar parties, but Vajpayee every year attended the Eid and Diwali parties hosted by the Congress's Ghulam Nabi Azad.

'Vajpayeeism' is the opposite of modern-day Modi-tva, the strident dogmatism hammering away at the Constitution itself, its high-pitched battle cry casting all opposition to itself as anti-national and seditious, while openly seeking a 'Congress-mukt Bharat'. For Vajpayee, an Opposition politician most of his life, such name-calling would have been unthinkable. He didn't constantly look for enemies; he was eager for new friends. In Vajpayee's time, a BJP government lost its majority by a single vote and resigned, revealing a commitment to the supremacy and integrity of Parliament. Today, such practices have become almost quaint. Using a political majority to bulldoze contentious legislation is the norm in the Modi era, as seen in the manner in which Jammu and Kashmir was suddenly downsized to a union territory by executive firman.

Two of Vajpayee's closest allies in his prime-ministerial years were Jaswant Singh, the ex-military man who did not come into politics through the RSS and maintained his distance from it, spoke pucca English, loved his Mozart and Tchaikovsky, and George Fernandes, the dishevelled socialist openly critical of the Sangh Parivar. Today such figures would be regarded as beyond the saffron pale and would be derided as the 'Khan Market Gang'. Today the rise of the populist nationalist Supreme Leader Modi has seen the BJP embark on a cultural 'war' against its ideological 'enemies', but the Vajpayee era

was marked by bridge-building with diverse groups.

In that sense, Vajpayee was very much part of the post-Independence governing class and far more comfortable with a whisky-drinking son of a former Congress chief minister, Brajesh Mishra, than with RSS ideologues. Vajpayee had no truck with any cultural war against the Nehruvian social and political elite, as the Modi years have seen. This is another sharp contrast between Vajpayeeism and Moditva.

So, why does Vajpayee still matter in the age of Modi? In these times of relentless breaking news, public memories are shrinking into 24x7 news cycles. Gargantuan PR and media machines have built a larger-than-life personality cult around a single individual. In the process, the path-breaking ancestors under whose shadow the BJP organization was built are being rapidly pushed into obscurity, even irrelevance. After his 2014 victory, Narendra Modi removed all senior leaders, including past BJP presidents L.K. Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi, from the BJP's all-important parliamentary board and sidelined them into the 'margdarshak mandal' (think tank of party seniors). Vajpayee, incapacitated by ill health and retired from politics, was awarded the Bharat Ratna in 2015, and there are several government schemes named after him. His death in August 2018 led to an outpouring of grief. Yet there is an unmistakable sense that he, in some way, represents a bygone era in Indian politics, remembered with a touch of wistfulness by only some, and forgotten all too easily by most others. Some even dismiss his leadership: the BJP could never cross the 200-seat mark in an election under him, they say. This is deeply unfair to India's first non-Congress prime minister who completed a full term.

An exploration of the life of Atal Bihari Vajpayee is surely needed when the ideas he embodied are in danger of being forgotten, when there is so much we can learn from him. In this biography I have sought to re-establish Vajpayee as a living presence, without whom the rise of the BJP would not have been possible. I have attempted to present to readers his cerebral, clever, unconventional, ambitious, wily, droll,

all-accepting, charismatic personality. As I researched the book, he reminded me of a slowly strengthening river, starting from a small, lonely spot, gradually gathering force, carrying within him layers of evolution – a river that when it finally reaches the ocean spreads into twisting tributaries of varied lived experiences.

The arc of Vajpayee's career spans virtually the entire length of post-Independence India. He contested elections in 1955 and was still fighting elections in 2004. In a public life of over five decades, he was witness to the many shifts and swings in Indian politics, mainly as a leading oppositional figure, but eventually as prime minister. As India completes seventy-five years since Independence, Vajpayee's life story mirrors the evolution of modern India, from the dreams of a young nation just freed from the yoke of colonialism to a country with superpower aspirations.

Another reason to decode the Vajpayee story is to understand the progress of BJP and Hindutva politics, from the days of the Jana Sangh, as a marginal player living in the shade of the towering Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi-led Congress, to its twenty-first-century avatar as India's dominant party. It would perhaps be fair to say that there would be no Narendra Modi if there had not been an Atal Bihari Vajpayee to pave the way. Vajpayee was the political flagbearer of the Hindutva right for decades, playing a critical role in making the saffron parivar – ostracized for years as 'untouchable' after Mahatma Gandhi's assassination in 1948 – into an acceptable party for allies and governance. He shaped the debates on secularism, communalism, nationalism and Hindutva, which are so common today, and gave Hindu nationalism its intellectual parliamentary heft. While Advani was his staunch, lifelong comrade in this exercise, it was Vajpayee who became the most enduring symbol of a party whose rise from two seats in 1984 to consecutive majorities in 2014 and 2019 represents a voyage of struggle and hardship, and many defeats and failures, before the eventual triumph.

Hindutva politics has been alternately deified and demonized.

Majoritarian cultural nationalism and its stark, violent religious undertones are subjects of intense and fractious debate. The idea of a Hindu Rashtra, as espoused by the RSS, does strike at the foundational principles of India's Constitution, which derives its heart and soul from the concept of equal citizenship. As a long-serving and outstanding parliamentarian, Vajpayee was a steadfast constitutionalist. But as someone who emerged from the womb of the RSS – he joined as a swayamsevak or volunteer while still in school – Vajpayee's primary political attachment was always to the Sangh Parivar. He was a 'mukhauta' or mask to his critics, and indeed he masked Hindutva's darker side and enabled Hindu nationalism to gain the kind of democratic legitimacy and popularity that his ideological forebears Savarkar and Golwalkar could never achieve. Yet he was a talisman to his admirers. His balancing act between his constitutional commitments and Hindutva impulses was a lifelong tightrope walk, his doublespeak, humorous asides and long silences the devices he used to discover the tricky middle ground of reconciliation.

Vajpayee's unique ability to be the great reconciler of differences made him a politician tailor-made for the coalition era of the 1990s and early 2000s. It is this that makes him such an attractive figure for a 'new' hyper-polarized India to embrace, and should be considered his abiding legacy. Reconciler, bridge-builder, a pursuer of consensus, he possessed the quintessential virtue of the democrat: the ability to form friendships even with those who sharply disagreed with him.

Contemporary Indian politics is seeing a destructive schism of ideas and dialogue, to the point where conciliation and compromise seem almost impossible. Not only is this causing terrible institutional damage, the fractures are spilling on to the street, in conflicts and violence suggesting a nation at war with itself. In this context, the Vajpayee approach offers a template for a new generation of political leaders to understand. One of the reasons why I, as a professed liberal, embarked on this biography was to try to understand a viewpoint very