

ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE 1924-2018

Popular, Wise, Brave, Prime Minister

INDIA'S MOST LOVED



Sanjaya Baru

A politician, a poet, a people's prime minister. Atal Bihari Vajpayee is, without doubt, the most loved politician of our times.

Jawaharlal Nehru was admired. His prose was impressive. Vajpayee was loved. His poetry and his oratory were mesmerising. Not surprisingly, a genial Nehru identified a young Vajpayee as a potential PM.

In 1996, Vajpayee failed in his first attempt to become prime minister because he did not have the numbers in Parliament. But everyone across the country who heard him speak in the Lok Sabha, in those pre-TV times, on the radio, ended up voting for him in their minds. When the time came, in 1998, the tide turned. BJP's first government was not formed on the strength of its cadres or parliamentarians. It was formed because of the love and admiration that Vajpayee had garnered for himself and his party across the country, across Parliament.

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What explains Atalji's universal popularity? First, his graceful and endearing personality. Second, Vajpayee was a true patriot and nationalist

who spoke for every Indian when he championed the national cause. As leader of Opposition, he accepted Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao's invitation to lead the Indian delegation to the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) and defend India's record in Kashmir. Finally, his courageous leadership as PM through a difficult moment in recent history following the Pokhran two nuclear weapon tests in 1998 and ending in the Kargil War.

Vajpayee's contribution as PM was across the policy spectrum. Many think of the nuclear tests as his great achievement. In fact, that is not true. The preparatory work for the nuclear tests was done under PV

Narasimha Rao's watch. Vajpayee's real contribution was in managing the economic and diplomatic fallout of the tests. The economic and financial initiatives taken to bolster foreign exchange reserves gave the economy the space to manage the impact of post-test economic sanctions.

The diplomatic initiatives taken were equally important. Vajpayee's decision to very quickly unveil India's nuclear doctrine with its 'No first use' policy reassured the international community and eased the sanctions imposed. Several countries like France and South Korea did not even impose sanctions. In the end, the US came around to recognising India's nuclear status.

On the economic front, Vajpayee

was quick to grasp the importance of Narasimha Rao's 1991 policy initiatives. Not only did BJP implicitly support Rao's minority government through the latter's first year in office, but as PM, Vajpayee continued the policy initiatives taken by Rao. An important initiative taken on the economic front was the launch of the Golden Quadrilateral, a highway connecting New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata. It was perhaps the most significant infrastructure project taken up after Nehru's many irrigation projects.

Atalji saw connectivity as the key to development. The rapid spread of telecommunication systems during his time has helped in the emergence of India as a major informa-

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tion technology provider.

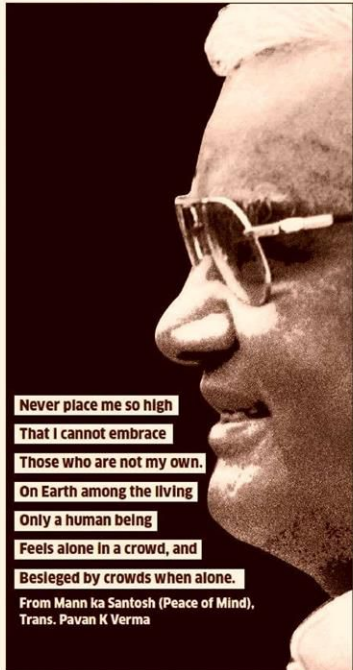
Pushing forward policies for economic liberalisation, Vajpayee understood the value of drawing in India's neighbours into its growth process. Standing firm against considerable resistance to the idea of an India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (FTA), opposed at the time by both the ministry of commerce and the business chambers — the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (Ficci) and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) — Vajpayee lent his prime ministerial weight to it, earning accolades from Sri Lanka's Chandrika Kumaratunga. The India-Sri Lanka FTA became the template for many FTAs since.

Vajpayee's leadership during the Kargil War and his astute decision-making, limiting the conflict to the line of control (LoC) but not hesitating to deploy air power, greatly enhanced India's prestige internationally. The Kargil War was won not just on the battlefield but also on the diplomatic one. At the end of it, the US was encouraged to finally recognise the LoC as the virtual border between India and Pakistan.

In his last two years as PM, he took two major initiatives that laid the foundation for what became his successor's signature policies. His outreach to Pakistan, and to the people of Kashmir in 2003, was the basis for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's conversations with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf. The fact that a BJP leader was willing to think out-of-the-box emboldened his Congress successor to take that initiative forward.

Vajpayee also laid the foundation for the US-India civil nuclear agreement when he surprised US politicians by calling the US India's "naturally". That set the tone for an engagement that has since been called by a US president as "the defining partnership of the 21st century". His government's 'First Steps' towards strategic partnership with the US were followed by the 'Next Steps in Strategic Partnership' (NSSP) that became the basis for the nuclear deal signed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. May his soul rest in peace.

The writer was media adviser to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh



Never place me so high

That I cannot embrace

Those who are not my own.

On Earth among the living

Only a human being

Feels alone in a crowd, and

Besieged by crowds when alone.

From Mann ka Santosh (Peace of Mind),
Trans. Pavan K Verma