



## Consensus-maker

Vajpayee demonstrated that politics is indeed the art of the compromise

If one word could best describe a man, then for Atal Bihari Vajpayee that would have to be compromise. Ever the contrarian, Vajpayee was equally the consensus-seeker and the alliance-builder who could traverse ideological divides and overcome political animosities with a skill set that was a throwback to the Nehruvian era. A brilliant parliamentarian and a shrewd politician who could demolish political opponents with his acerbic wit, Vajpayee was also the elder statesman who was never afraid to reach out and make peace with India's neighbours. Without a doubt, he was born of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the torch-bearer of Hindutva. But his rise in the Jana Sangh was at a time when it was not on the ascendant, and this meant he always tried to outgrow his organisation. Vajpayee spent a lifetime trying to make his party displace the Congress from power, and to this end he switched between fighting the Congress's tactics and mimicking them. If the Jana Sangh came to power as part of the Janata Party in 1977, it was in no small measure due to his readiness to mend fences and build bridges with former political opponents. Indeed, he became the acceptable public face of a party propelled by divisive forces. Whether he was a mere frontman, a 'mask' as one of his party colleagues described him, or a driver of change in an organisation with deep-seated prejudices, is difficult to tell; the truth lay somewhere in between.

Vajpayee's first hold on power was a stint as External Affairs Minister in the Janata government in 1977-79, where he made a bold effort to normalise relations with China. Subsequently, he had three stints as Prime Minister, a 13-day misadventure without the required support in 1996, a 13-month experiment with strange bed-fellows in 1998-99, and a full term with a reasonably cohesive alliance during 1999-2004. The National Democratic Alliance that the BJP formed in 1998 would not have been possible without Vajpayee as the leader. His image as a moderate trying to rein in extremist elements in his party made it easier for others such as the Telugu Desam, the Trinamool Congress and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam to join the NDA. The BJP would not have come within sniffing distance of power without him, but he brought the party to power by keeping its most contentious issues, Ayodhya, Article 370, uniform civil code, out. It is a matter of debate whether Pokhran-II was a strategic mistake, an unnecessary concession to a hyper-nationalistic constituency, but there is no denying the remarkable maturity he displayed during the Kargil crisis in 1999. But the compromise man could not win a second substantive term. Forced as he was to carry on a delicate balancing act, he often came across as an indecisive and cautious Prime Minister, even if at times an endearing and loveable one. There was no way to judge whether he softened the BJP or the BJP toughened him. Perhaps it was a bit of both.

## Back from the woods?

His run at the PGA Championship suggests that the Tiger fairy tale is far from over

Truly great sportspersons may have their ups and downs, but they rarely fade away, as Roger Federer and Serena Williams have reminded us. For almost a decade, the golfing world has debated whether the Tiger Woods fairy tale is really over. Having notched up 14 majors and looking as if he would overhaul Jack Nicklaus's record 18, the story began to sour in November 2009, after Woods crashed his car into a fire hydrant a couple of days after news of his infidelity became public. A broken marriage, four spinal surgeries, and an alarming drop of form left the former world number one's ranking in tatters; he languished at 1,199 just last December. Last weekend, Woods hinted, and very strongly, that he still has what it takes to be amongst the best. Finishing a close runner-up to Brooks Koepka in the PGA Championship, the fourth and final 'Major' of the year, Woods shot a stunning final round 64, signing off with a magical 19-foot birdie. It wasn't enough to win, but more than sufficient to demonstrate that he cannot yet be written off. The fist pump that followed his loss seemed like a celebration of what his form signalled for the future. Already the golfing world is electrified, speculating whether he can add to his cache of 14 majors and end the drought that has continued since his third triumph at the 2008 U.S. Open.

In a relative sense, 2018 has been a decent year for Woods. He played all four Majors and raised hopes of winning two of them, the other being the British Open, where he eventually finished in a tied sixth place. He had a poor start in the PGA before going on to shoot 64, his best score in the final round of a Major. When personal issues led to his form dropping a decade ago, it seemed as if what prevented him from returning to his winning ways lay entirely in the mind. Over the years though, the challenge also assumed physical proportions. What began as niggling injuries morphed into a major back problem. The spinal fusion surgery 16 months ago and the need to cope with excruciating pain forced Woods to overmedicate himself, after which he was arrested for driving under the influence (DUI) in 2017. An exasperated Woods had said, "I'm done with golf." But the game was clearly not done with him. It is doubtful whether Woods will ever relive his glory days, when he stood well above his fellow golfers like a colossus. The competition today is talented and runs deep, and it is important to remember that Woods has 'lost' about a decade of his golfing life. But the next few months will provide the great man the opportunity to demonstrate that he has truly returned to form and that his run in the PGA was not just a last stab at glory.

# A statesman and an orator

Atal Bihari Vajpayee was a large-hearted leader, always civil and never afraid to take tough decisions for India



MANVENDRA SINGH

Barmer had suffered devastating floods in 2006, and as the MP representing the constituency, I was involved in relief operations. Pranab Mukherjee, as Defence Minister in the United Progressive Alliance government, had accompanied Sonia Gandhi, then Congress president, for a survey to take stock of the operations. A district administration briefing was planned in Barmer for them, and as soon as they arrived Ms. Gandhi told me, in earshot of mediapersons, "Your MLA has behaved very badly with me." Unaware of what had happened, I nevertheless apologised with folded hands "on behalf of everyone", including the MLA, who like me belonged to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). That little apology made it to a tiny news story, which in turn reached Atal Bihari Vajpayee, then already in retirement from politics. He sent me a thank you message, the first and only one I received from him, "for maintaining Indian traditions, culture and our dignity".

### A dignified man

It was this civility and dignity that marked Vajpayee's life and politics, and which seems completely at odds with the prevailing political culture of today. His endearing manner, display of affection and quality of giving earned him respect all around, including from the Opposition. His easy manner was reflected in his ready smile and a wink, and it kept debates

from escalating into confrontation. His mannerisms, including his long pauses, were easy to interpret as earnest. Yet, he would not shirk from the toughest decisions – in calls he took for India, he revealed the steel in him that his amiable persona often cloaked. There were two decisions that he took during his prime ministership (1998-2004) that helped change India completely; they still define India today. In taking them he demonstrated the willingness to take the bull by the horns.

On May 11, 1998, India began a two-stage series of nuclear tests that changed the way the world perceived decision-making in New Delhi. To top it off, de facto nuclearisation was claimed as a policy, giving nightmares to economists and policymakers. Vajpayee had factored it all in, including the likely course of Pakistan's reactive tests and the effect of sanctions on both countries, before giving the green signal. From that moment, the global attitude towards India began to change, and it defined India's rise.

The second decision has changed India internally – it was the launch of the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY). Unlike the much celebrated 'Golden Quadrilateral' and the expansion of other highways undertaken on his watch as Prime Minister, it is the PMGSY that has completely altered the lives of farmers in India's far-flung villages and hamlets. For the first time they came to be connected to markets through a motorable road, thus bypassing middlemen who had always controlled access. Till date, it remains India's only pure data-driven scheme, unalterable by political pressure. Both decisions were game-changers for India.



Vajpayee's birth in Gwalior on December 25, 1924 to Krishna Devi and Krishna Bihari Vajpayee, and his subsequent upbringing and education are well documented. His early influences from Arya Samaj and then the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) are just as well known. His full-time commitment to the RSS, and subsequent secondment to the Jana Sangh, brought him in contact with Syama Prasad Mookerjee. The political graph was only upwards from there, bringing him appreciation from India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who prophesied that one day Vajpayee would lead the country. But before he became Prime Minister, Vajpayee cut his teeth as India's first non-Congress External Affairs Minister (1977-79) in the Janata Party government, and provided a glimpse of his future direction.

### Efforts with Pakistan

By the time he became Foreign Minister, Pakistan had been defeated in war, divided into two, and was headed for another round of military rule. Despite all that, he launched persistent efforts with Pakistan, beginning with a visit to the neighbouring country. This was to remain the foreign policy theme through his tenure as Prime

Minister. It drew from a realisation that India would never be able to earn its place under the sun unless it made peace with Pakistan.

But doing business with Pakistan was never easy. After the bitter rhetoric of the 1998 nuclear tests, there was the euphoria of the bus journey to Lahore in 1999. A little-known fact about the bus trip is that as it crossed the Radcliffe Line at Wagah, the Border Security Force was playing Daler Mehndi's Punjabi pop hit 'Sade naal rahoge to aish karoge' (If you stay with us, you'll do well). Obviously it was a message lost on Pakistan, which thereafter responded with the intrusions in Kargil that led to a brief but bitter war that summer. Vajpayee held his nerve and didn't waver despite adverse military conditions in the early days. Eventually India won a military victory as well global goodwill, a rare double achievement. Years later, I was the first Indian journalist to meet Nawaz Sharif, who had been Prime Minister of Pakistan during the Kargil war, when he was in exile in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. He said: "Mr. Vajpayee is justified in feeling let down, we did let him down."

### Quietly purposeful

The humiliation at the end of the year in 1999, with the hijack of an Indian Airlines plane to Kandahar, was followed by another attempt to forge peace with Pakistan at the Agra Summit in July 2001. In between, in 2000, Vajpayee didn't hesitate to let Pakistan know what he was about. Unknown to most, though it is murmured about occasionally and was even hinted at in the Pakistani media at that time, there was a devastating strike across the Line of Control (LoC) that lasted the longest, and till now

accounts for the most casualties ever on the other side. All that the Indian raiding party left behind as evidence was an HMT watch, showing India time. Troops manning India's posts said at the time that they had lost count of the number of ambulance sirens wailing across the LoC. Behind Vajpayee's cherubic, charming exterior, there was indeed a spine, and he could take, and handle, ruthless policy decisions.

Vajpayee will ultimately be remembered for his oratory, the skill with which he summoned the apt word out of nowhere, his longish silences that would be suddenly broken by a beautifully worded sentence. His resignation speech of 1996 in the Lok Sabha stands out, as does his Srinagar address of April 2003 in which he held out the hand of friendship to Pakistan and which led to a sustained peace process. The 1996 speech had drama, anguish, integrity, hope, and sincerity that seeped through every word, every phrase. It remains a benchmark in speech-making, all of this before the era of PR speech-writers and social media platforms to take things viral. His speech went viral by the oldest known medium, word of mouth.

His command of words will always set him apart from other leaders. And nothing more so than his poetry. A couplet of his found pride of place in the BJP central office for the longest time. In translation: "With a small mind you cannot become great/ with a small heart you cannot stand tall." It was a dictum he heeded by living and governing with a broad mind and a big heart.

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# A long march since freedom

To overlook the strides India has made since 1947 is to miss the lessons of history



SALMAN ANEES SOZ

The Partition and the bloodletting that accompanied our Independence took up much of the energy of our founders. An opinion piece by an unnamed Indian official in the October 1952 issue of *Foreign Affairs* magazine describes the challenge: "In its [Partition's] wake came the immense task of organising, within a few weeks, the movement of no less than 6,000,000 refugees, of improvising arrangements for their immediate relief, and devising plans for their permanent resettlement and rehabilitation. When was a 'refugee problem' of this magnitude set before an untried government in the very first days of its existence and solved with equal expedition and success?" There was no significant foreign assistance to deal with a refugee crisis that was second in scale only to that generated by World War II. While presenting the

first Budget of independent India on November 26, 1947, Finance Minister R.K. Shanmukham Chetty noted that the immediate impact of the Partition's "tragic developments has been to divert the attention of the Government almost completely from normal activities".

### A difficult start

The Partition was an unwanted addition to an already full plate of immense problems. Most of India's 350 million people then lived in staggering poverty. One of the biggest problems was that of food, or the lack thereof. The Bengal famine of 1943, which claimed three million lives, was still fresh in memory. In his maiden budget speech, Chetty noted that India's "food position has continued to cause grave anxiety both to the Provincial Governments and the Central Government".

Writing in 1958, more than 10 years after Independence, the economist John Kenneth Galbraith was of the view that India's villages, where over 80% of Indians lived, were "preoccupied, with the production of food". Galbraith noted that "Indian economic life



BHAKRA-NANGAL, 1956. TH ARCHIVES

as a whole" was mostly about food production. To address inadequate food production, our first government focussed on expanding India's irrigation capacity. Chester Bowles, an American diplomat, noted in an opinion piece that India embarked on creating three large dam systems (Damodar, Hirakud and Bhakra-Nangal) that had an irrigation capacity 70% more than that of the Grand Coulee (in the U.S. state of Washington), which was at that time the largest irrigation system in the world. The breathtaking ambition of such an irrigation system at a time of deep uncertainties and insecurities is a marvel in itself.

Be that as it may, our founders were visionary and understood the need for balanced develop-

ment. While today we keenly observe the ups and downs of the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), India imported 90% of industrial goods around the time of Independence. The Five-Year Plans that many mock today helped India's industrial sector grow by an average of 7% over the 1950-65 period. The decline under the British was being reversed even as the basic building blocks of a new socioeconomic order were being put in place. In the 50 years before Independence, India's GDP growth averaged about 0.9% per annum. During the first three Five-Year Plans, it averaged 4%. In 2018, we can say that 4% was low and that our founders were ineffective. Who in the year 1900 could imagine that India would grow at 4% a year over a 15-year stretch? In those 15 years (1950-1965), India's average GDP per capita growth rate was almost 20 times that achieved during the 1900-47 time period.

### Building blocks

Yes, Prime Minister Narendra Modi can call today's IITs "India's instrument of transformation" but he fails to express a sincere debt of

gratitude to those who founded IITs. We can debate the quality of education in India but must also keep in mind that when India became free, the literacy rate was just 12%. The current government takes victory laps after reportedly electrifying 18,000 villages even as it whitewashes the fact that when independent India was born, only 0.2% were electrified. By the time Manmohan Singh passed the baton to Prime Minister Modi, 97% of villages had been electrified already. For those of us who want India to become truly great, developing an understanding of where India came from is essential. Otherwise, with the benefit of hindsight, we can mindlessly criticise past efforts and be distracted from our current context. After all, with all of the knowledge and expertise available in 21st century India, the current Prime Minister ended up enacting a disastrous economic policy of demonetisation that his predecessor described as "organised loot and legalised plunder". Never forget.

Salman Anees Soz, formerly with the World Bank, is a member of the Indian National Congress. Views are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Remembering Vajpayee

Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was a beloved leader whose appeal cut across party lines ("Atal Bihari Vajpayee, former Prime Minister, passes away at 93", August 16, online). He was a paradox: a liberal and moderate politician and an avowed pracharak. He was a poet and had a pluralist approach to politics. He will go down in history as a great statesman. Vajpayee was too much in the Nehruvian mould to look like the inheritor of the legacy of the likes of K.B. Hedgewar and M.S. Golwalkar. He once said, "The Sangh is my soul." Yet he had an uneasy relationship with the RSS when he was Prime Minister. He famously distanced himself from the Ayodhya movement and revealed his mental make-up when he asked Narendra Modi, then Gujarat Chief Minister, to follow 'raj dharm' in 2002. Vajpayee's efforts with

Pakistan hold lessons for today. He believed that friends can be changed but not neighbours. His coinage, "Insaniyat, Kashmiriyat and Jamhooriyat", still resonates as the only plausible solution to the Kashmir problem. What is still debatable is whether the Pokhran nuclear tests he conducted fortified our national security.

G. DAVID MILTON,  
Maruthancode

Vajpayee will be remembered as a poet-politician. During my college days in the 1960s, some classmates who had heard Vajpayee speak on stage told me that he was the most eloquent speaker around. My own chance to hear him in person came in January 1971. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had got the Lok Sabha dissolved and had called for elections in February 1971. The Grand Alliance opposing her was countering her popular slogan "Garibi

Hatao" with "Indira Hatao". Vajpayee, then the national president of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, came to Mumbai to address an election meeting at Gandhi Maidan in Chembur. He began his speech: "*Hamari Pradhan Mantri kehti hain 'Garibi Hatao'*" (Our Prime Minister says remove poverty)". Then, after a brief pause, he said: "*Garibi hati nahin hai! Garibi ghati bhi nahin hai*" (Poverty has neither been eradicated nor reduced!)"

J.V. YAKHMI,  
Mumbai

Vajpayee will be especially remembered for his acumen in running coalition governments, which was why he is often referred to as the architect of coalition politics.

MURARI MOHAN,  
Kolkata

Seeing the high price of petrol now, I remember how Vajpayee arrived at Parliament House in a bullock cart in November

1973 to protest against the increase in petrol and kerosene prices. Vajpayee was also known for his oratory, so much so that it was Nehru who had noticed his questions and speeches in the Lok Sabha and had predicted that Vajpayee would become Prime Minister one day. As Prime Minister, Vajpayee's biggest gifts were the National Highways Development Project, the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, not the nuclear tests that he is remembered for today. He will also be remembered as a politician who was civil in public discourse. His passing away is a great loss to the nation.

BIDYUT KUMAR CHATTERJEE,  
Faridabad

In the passing away of Vajpayee, the country has lost a great parliamentarian, a charismatic leader and a great Prime Minister. Vajpayee's eloquence is

unparalleled. There are few statesmen like him, in the true sense of the word.

SESHAGIRI ROW KARRY,  
Hyderabad

### The PM's speech

Narendra Modi's last Independence Day speech before the next general election was a politically significant one, both in terms of what he said and what he didn't ("PM healthcare scheme from Sept. 25", August 16). The Prime Minister harped on farmers' distress, violence against women, and the condition of the marginalised. He also spoke of Muslim women and an "inclusive Constitution". Thus he sought to blunt the Opposition's campaign about how the NDA government is intolerant. Projecting himself as an impatient agent of change, he as usual castigated the previous Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government by taking 2013 as the base year to measure the level of progress of the

nation in the last four years. His speech was a report card of his government's performance, but the Prime Minister knows that his government has to step up to challenges such as providing employment, which he mentioned but didn't dwell on, and the falling rupee.

K. S. JAYATHEERTHA,  
Bengaluru

### Floods in Kerala

The Kerala government has dealt with the unprecedented emergency, which has led to the loss of many lives, quite well ("Kerala reels under its worst floods", August 16). If not for its efficiency, the casualties would have probably been much higher. Though the Centre has promised all possible help from its end, it would help if the catastrophe is declared a national calamity.

T.N. VENUGOPALAN,  
Kochi

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