

Atal Bihari Vajpayee: The Ajatshatru (A Person without enemy)

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Abstract

Atal Bihari Vajpayee was able to cultivate lasting friendships in his party and among rival political parties. He had no enemies or rather he was able to turn enemies into friends and hence he was called Ajatshatru i.e. on without enemies.

Keywords: Vajpayee; Ajatshatru; Person without enemy.

INTRODUCTION

Atal Bihari Vajpayee became Prime Minister of India three times and his political career spanned over six decades and during that long time he developed friendly relations and personal equations with leaders across party lines. Union Minister Rajnath Singh called Atal Bihari Vajpayee 'Ajatshatru' one without enemies and praised him for his leadership style. He wrote that Atalji was a true 'Ajatshatru' because he had many friends

across the political spectrum and also because he believed in political consensus and his beliefs had tremendous effect on Indian politics.¹ He led a political party and had an ideology which was regarded as untouchables of Indian politics during Congress and left dominated politics of independent India. In independent India since 1947 anyone who spoke of protecting Hindu interest was branded as communal and untouchable in Indian politics. Atal Bihari Vajpayee not only became acceptable but also was able to form a stable non Congress government at Centre which completed its full term by increasing acceptability of his political ideology of protecting Hindu interests in a majority Hindu country whose Hindu born leftist oriented politicians, intellectuals and media despised everything Hindu and branded anyone with pro Hindu ideas as communal. He took his party from being political untouchables to acceptable to many political parties thus paving the way for leaders like Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah to emerge as most

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popular and powerful leaders.

Friends in rival political spectrum: Atal Bihari Vajpayee had good relations with politicians in other political parties. Parties that considered his political party untouchable considered him to be a friend. He often parleyed with Narasimha Rao and Chandrashekhar on national issues, exchanging views and advices.² He had always enjoyed a special relationship with P M Narsimha Rao who also accorded Padma Vibhushan to Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Rao's trust in Atal Bihari was so evident that he made Vajpayee leader of the Indian delegation to the special session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva to defeat Pakistan sponsored resolution to censure India on its human rights record in Jammu and Kashmir and Vajpayee kept trust of Rao by successfully thwarting Pakistani move with Indian team. Rao was very pleased when the 1996 general election threw up a hung Parliament and the then President, Shankar Dayal Sharma, appointed Vajpayee as PM. Rao passed on a chit to Vajpayee at the swearing in ceremony at Rashtrapati Bhavan itself which said "now is the time to accomplish my unfinished task". The unfinished task Rao had in mind was conducting the nuclear tests to make India a nuclear power. Rao was happy because he wanted Vajpayee to secure India with nuclear weapons. This shows the rapport Atal Bihari Vajpayee had with Narsimha Rao although Rao was a lifelong Congressman.³ Atal Bihari Vajpayee gave all credit of second nuclear test to Narsimha Rao saying that Rao had made all preparations and he only had to give the go ahead.⁴

Atal Bihari Vajpayee also had good rapport with Gandhi family. On his death Sonia Gandhi stated that "his warm personality and his gift of friendship won him admirers and friends across the political spectrum and from every walk of life." She accepted that "his death left behind a huge void and she mourned this loss and prayed for the departed soul." Rahul Gandhi said that "India has lost a great son" adding that Atal Bihari Vajpayee was loved and respected by millions. He acknowledged that Atalji would be missed by him.⁵ Sonia also said that "Shri Vajpayee was a towering figure in Indian national life. Throughout his life, he stood for democratic values and demonstrated this commitment in all his acts, whether as a parliamentarian, a cabinet minister or prime minister of India. She added that he was a spellbinding orator, a leader of great vision, a patriot to the core for whom the national interest was paramount."⁶

Atal Bihari Vajpayee had a good connection

with Jawaharlal Nehru although they belonged to very different ideologies and generation. Nehru had introduced Vajpayee to foreign dignitary as the future prime minister of India when Vajpayee was just a first time Lok Sabha MP in 1957. Although Vajpayee was openly critical of Nehru government's policies with regard to China and Kashmir, he was lavish in praise at Nehru's death.⁷ When Atal Bihari Vajpayee became India's foreign minister in 1977 he noticed that one of Nehru's pictures was removed from the gallery. He ensured that picture was placed at its usual place again. He believed that despite difference of opinion politician should respect opposing point of view in a democracy and different point of view must not create misunderstanding among politicians. He remembered that despite his conflicts with Prime Minister Nehru they also shared a warm relationship.⁸

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi also trusted Atal Bihari Vajpayee and consulted him on issues of national importance. For example when she was considering sending army to Golden Temple to flush out terrorists like Bhindranwale, she consulted Atal Bihari who advised her not to do so. To consult Atal Bihari, who was in Varanasi she got laid special telephone line to Jindal's naturopathy clinic in Varanasi so that the news may not leak as Atal Bihari was undergoing treatment for peptic ulcer there at that time.⁹

Atal Bihari Vajpayee had good rapport with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi too who also included Atal Bihari in a UN delegation in 1988 so that Atal Bihari could get treatment for his kidney ailment. Atal Bihari acknowledged this when he told the world at Rajiv Gandhi's death that Rajiv Gandhi was the reason he is alive. He told that Rajiv Gandhi made sure that Atal Bihari Vajpayee would come back from the US only after receiving treatment for his kidney ailment.¹⁰ Although the same Rajiv Gandhi had mocked at Atal Bihari with 'Hum Do Hamare Do' (family planning slogan) on winning only two seats in Lok Sabha in 1984 election.¹¹

Vajpayee knew how to make friends, he once apologized to Manmohan Singh (who was the then Finance Minister) after he took Vajpayee's statements to heart. When Vajpayee received word from Narsimha Rao that his remarks against Manmohan Singh's policies and persona had hurt the Congress man's sentiments, he took no time in reaching out to Singh and offering him an apology along with wise political advice: "Do not take these remarks seriously, the task of the opposition is to bring the government of

the day to task,"¹² Vajpayee had admiration for Manmohan Singh's policies economic reforms in 1991-92. While debating the liberalization Budget of 1991, Vajpayee raised various objections but also praised Manmohan Singh for paving way for an open market. Manmohan Singh in turn acknowledged Vajpayee's criticism assuring him to take appropriate corrective measures. During 1996 and 1998 there was no political stability as governments were losing power one after the other. Vajpayee was so concerned about instability in the government that he had proposed to provide outside support to a Congress government at the Centre in order to ensure political stability in the country, if Manmohan Singh was made the prime minister. Manmohan Singh did not become prime minister then but it shows that Vajpayee had national interest in his heart.¹³

Manmohan Singh acknowledged that as Finance Minister he had developed good relations with Vajpayee and he used to consult Vajpayee on various issues as both Vajpayee and Advani were sympathetic towards the liberalization policies advocated by Manmohan Singh. On some important occasions Vajpayee rescued Manmohan Singh in Parliament for example when Manmohan presented the Budget for 1992 and fertilizer prices were a big issue. Once, when Manmohan had a very rough time in Parliament, Vajpayee advised Manmohan to have a thick skin and stay on the path even if opposition is not in agreement and is opposing his policies.¹⁴

Vajpayee was also in good terms with Chandrashekhar who used to call Vajpayee Gurudev and Vajpayee considered Chandrashekhar a personal friend and a fighter and clever politician.¹⁵

His close friends in other political parties also included former president R Venkataraman, former Prime Minister I K Gujral, former speaker Somnath Chatterjee, the NCP leader Sharad Pawar, whom he appointed as chairman of the Disaster Management Group.¹⁶

Surprisingly Vajpayee had good relations with Left leadership. Once in 2006 Somnath Chatterjee became upset on seeing Vajpayee's signature in a letter accusing Somnath of partisanship as speaker of Lok Sabha. Somnath Chatterjee decided to resign immediately. When Vajpayee learned about it he persuaded Somnath Chatterjee not to resign.¹⁷ Vajpayee quite often called upon the then West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu late in the evening and the two would discuss matters of mutual interest.¹⁸ The duo had been friends from the days of Vajpayee entering Lok Sabha in 1957. In those

days Vajpayee used to visit Bengal to strengthen Jan Sangh in Bengal. Vajpayee reportedly used to meet Basu when he was under ground as Basu's party used to be banned most of the time. It was this friendship that convinced Communist Basu to join a coalition with the BJP against Congress under V.P. Singh's leadership. Both the leaders shared stage in Kolkata's Brigade Parade Ground in 1989, but both of them continued to tread their own political paths and became idols for their own parties. They were friends in need for each other. But his friendship did not come in the way of calling the spade so. In 1999 Vajpayee visited Kolkata and in Rajbhawan scolded Jyoti Basu for calling Advani criminal. He told Basu that Advaniji is his friend and also an esteemed colleague like the leaders with Basu and any attack on Advani is an attack on Vajpayee.¹⁹

Atal Bihari Vajpayee had good relations with President R Venkataraman who congratulated Vajpayee on conducting nuclear tests. Venkataraman praised Vajpayee for enhancing the prestige of India in the world and proved India's technological excellence to other developing countries. He added that Prime ministers are a dime a dozen, they come and go, unwept, unsung, but Vajpayee will be indelible in the nation's memory.²⁰ R Venkataraman took to New Delhi's streets along with Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Chandrashekhar to protest bad treatment of Shankarcharya and his followers in jail by UPA. At that time Venkataraman remembered his association with the Kanchi mutt and praised the Shankaracharya for doing social work through the *mutt* such as setting up a number of schools, colleges and hospitals for the welfare of the people and demanded that Shankaracharya should be treated properly.²¹

FRIENDLY RELATIONS WITH COLLEAGUES IN HIS PARTY

Atal Bihari Vajpayee regarded Shyama Prasad Mukherjee as his leader and was shocked by latter's mysterious death.²² Vajpayee blamed Nehru for conspiring for it.²³ He was a great admirer of S P Mukherjee and was friendly with Deendayal Upadhyaya. He liked Upadhyay's frugality.²⁴ Atal Bihari Vajpayee walked barefoot to immerse ashes of Deenayal Upadhyay in Prayag.²⁵ Vajpayee had turned whole time RSS Pracharak in 1947 and his political journey started by editing Rashtradharma and Panchjanya. He came in contact with Deen Dayal Upadhyay when he shifted to Lucknow and Upadhyay developed an instant liking for the young Vajpayee. In 1951 Shyama Prasad Mukherjee was forming Jan Sangh. Upadhyaya introduced

Vajpayee to Mukherjee and recommended that orator-pracharak be taken into the party. Mukherjee was impressed with Vajpayee and the Vajpayee soon became Mukherjee's assistant.²⁶

The partnership between Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani was most remarkable partnerships in Indian political history. They had much in common their loyalty to Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS); their desire to unite Hindus; their hard work for building Bhartiya Jan Sangh organization from scratch; their time together in prison during emergency; respect for each other; their joint decision to merge the Jana Sangh into the Janata Party; their work together in Morarji Desai government; their joint decision to leave Janata Party and set up the Bharatiya Janata Party on 'dual membership'; their interest in literature, journalism and cinema. Seven decades of working together made them friends, political partners and colleagues. They were colleagues but they also had their differences which made them adversaries with their own loyalists, camp followers, beliefs and styles which led them on somewhat different political journeys. But they did not let their differences come in between their common goals. This led Advani to declare Vajpayee to be the party's Prime Minister candidate. Both Vajpayee and Advani became power centers when the BJP came to power leading to private tensions and differences on issues but both maintained cordial ties and displayed respect for each other in private. Advani was undisputed number two as deputy PM and contained his ambitions respecting the hierarchy.²⁷ Remembering Vajpayee Advani said their friendship was 65 years old and they watched movies and read books together. Advani remembered that Vajpayee taught him many things and gave him a lot.²⁸

Vajpayee was also very close to Bhairon Singh Shekhawat. Vajpayee not only attended Shekhawat's daughter's marriage but also did kanyadaan.²⁹ Abhimanyu Singh Rajeev, grandson of Shekhawat remembers that whenever Vajpayee visited Jaipur, he would stay for a day, have lunch with the family and never left without tasting Ghevar and Mishri Mawa, sweet delicacies of Rajasthan. Even while at the Centre, he would ask for it and Shekhawat's would get it delivered. They used to discuss everything; politics, films, family, books and they would prefer family members to serve the food instead of staff.³⁰

Vajpayee had a special relationship with Sindhia family as Jiwaji Rao Sindhia, the Maharaja of Gwalior had helped in his higher education which

would not have been possible without his help of Rs 75 scholarship per month. His family was facing financial problems due to marriage of his two sisters, and limited resources due to retirement of his father. Due to scholarship given by Sindhia's Vajpayee went to DAV College at Kanpur for his law education. Vajpayee never forgot this support and always acknowledged the support of the Sindhia family towards his personal life and party. He gave due respect to Rajmata Scindhia who was a key member of BJP and also to her son Madhavrao Sindhia who was a member of Congress. Rajmata and Madhavrao had problems but Vajpayee never got involved. Madhavrao Sindhia reciprocated respect towards Vajpayee except for the 1984 elections when the two contested Lok Sabha polls against each other. When Madhavrao Sindhia died in a plane crash in September 2001 Vajpayee was the prime minister. He wrote in the condolence book, "Lightning has fallen. Can fate be so cruel. My salute". He not only visited Gwalior for the cremation but deputed his senior most minister Arun Jaitley to accompany dead body of Sindhia in an Air Force aircraft. He was given a state funeral.³¹

Vajpayee shared a warm relationship with Pramod Mahajan and his family. His daughter Poonam remembers that Mahajan's fondly called Atal Bihari Vajpayee as 'Baapi'. According to Poonam Mahajan the bond between Pramodji and Baapi was very strong just like that of father and son. As Pramod Mahajan had lost his father when he was very young he relied upon Vajpayee and Advani regarded them as family.³²

Friendly relations with Coalition partners

Among the then NDA partners, George Fernandes, Sharad Yadav, Nitish Kumar, Naveen Patnaik, Mamata Banerjee, Vaikore were his trusted lieutenants. Parkash Singh Badal, Om Prakash Chautala and Dr Farooq Abdullah always loved to chat with him. Brajesh Mishra, his principal secretary and national security advisor, was undoubtedly his closest aide in the PMO. Vajpayee would be frank in dealing with his PMO team. He was warm in his approach towards them. He also loved interacting with media without discrimination.³³

Vajpayee and Shiv Sena Chief Bal Thackeray respected each other, due to which the alliance between the two parties had a smooth sailing. Sena MP Sanjay Raut recounts that even as Prime Minister Vajpayee was in constant touch with Thackeray and always discussed various issues and shared a relation of comfort and warmth with Thackeray. Senior journalist Ambarish Mishra

said Thackeray had a "high regard" for Vajpayee. Thackeray would always speak before Vajpayee during their joint rallies. After the joint rallies at Shivaji Park, both leaders would chat and joke over a cup of tea at the Mayor's Bungalow next to the rally ground. Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray said Vajpayee took everybody along and was bereft of qualities like ego of power. Senior Sena leader Manohar Joshi said Vajpayee was friendly with everybody and though Balasaheb Thackeray and Vajpayee were poles apart in nature, the common factor between them was their funny streak and poetic mind.³⁴

Mamata Banerjee, a minister in Atal Bihari Vajpayee's cabinet recalls fondly how Vajpayee as Prime Minister came to her residence to meet her mother; touched her feet and savoured the "malpua" and sweets, made at home. She also recalled her direct access to Atalji claiming that she was more close to him than many in his own party as she would be called by him to discuss serious political matters as well as to be given elderly and parental advice such as accepting the coal and mines ministry when she was reluctant to join the cabinet in 2004. Mamata claimed that she advised Vajpayee to name APJ Abdul Kalam as the NDA's presidential candidate.³⁵

Aids as family but no fixers

Vajpayee's PMO was like no other PMO. It had a distinctly different ambience to the durbars of other prime ministers. There were hardly any hangers on or groupies there. Those who fondly imagined that they were close to Vajpayee found themselves out of favour the minute Vajpayee heard of them acting in his name. Vajpayee's instinct was to run away from the "fixers" and "operators" who doted the political map. The PMO had a positive air about it and often seemed like an extension of the family. Vajpayee never treated his brilliant private secretaries such as Shakti Sinha, Vikram Doraiswamy and Ajay Bisaria like assistants or secretaries. They shared a warm relationship with the family and were always fed by Namita (Vajpayee's adopted daughter) if they had to work late. They doted on Niharika (Namita's daughter) and became friends with Ranjan (Namita's husband). There was warmth not only in the PM House but also the PMO. It was something unique to Vajpayee establishment - never seen before or after him and that warmth was for everyone cutting across ranks or designations. Officers were treated with the same grace and attention as ministers in the government of India.³⁶ Vajpayee was frank in dealing with his PMO team but always careful in sharing confidential

information. He was warm in his approach but would not hesitate to snub attempts to gain unwarranted access to information. Vajpayee loved interacting with media without discrimination.³⁷

Vajpayee was a loner. Those who had enjoyed a long innings with Vajpayee personally had invariably kept a dignified distance. His natural instinct was to run away from fixers and operators but there was a small circle on which he leaned heavily. His political adviser Pramod Mahajan combined the roles of super assistant, trouble-shooter, spin doctor and spokesman for the PMO. He was on round the clock attendance at PMO. Vajpayee's personal secretary Shakti Sinha was a low key IAS officer, with an affable disposition, Sinha was attached to Vajpayee since 1996. He was so much a part of the Vajpayee establishment that insiders joked that the nuclear tests were named after him. Though he did not have any decision-making powers, no file reached the prime minister without going through Sinha. He also connected the PMO with the rest of the Government and Vajpayee often turned to him for guidance. Jaswant Singh was Vajpayee's key policy adviser on more subjects than his formal designation of deputy chairman, Planning Commission, would suggest. Singh was in virtually every task force set up by the Prime Minister, from defense to info tech. Brajesh Mishra, a former diplomat was Vajpayee's surprise choice as principal secretary the formal head of the PMO. The quiet man, who had a reputation for being a hawk on China, was catapulted into the limelight with the "big bomb". Apart from assuming responsibility of personally briefing western leaders on India's nuclear policy, he became the most authoritative voice of Indian foreign policy.³⁸

Vajpayee also trusted Ranjan Bhattacharya husband of Vajpayee's adopted daughter. Ranjan, an independent businessman, lived at 7 Race Course Road with the prime minister. His interest in politics stemmed from the family's anxiety to throw a protective shield around Baapji as the family called Vajpayee. Ranjan was thrust into managing the prime minister's affairs.³⁹

CONCLUSION

Vajpayee's style of functioning was 'Primus Inters pares' (first among equals), yet he effectively exercised his constitutional prerogatives with regard to the formation of his council of ministers and distribution of portfolios among his colleagues and control over administration. PMO of Vajpayee functioned on the principle of "need to know".

There was no trust deficit among the teammates.⁴⁰

Arun Shourie credits Vajpayee of bringing out the best in the people he leads, unlike some leaders who bring out the worst in others. He gave his followers full freedom to operate. He brought out the best among others as he was neither insecure nor jealous of expertise.⁴¹

Vajpayee was the "Great Connector". Connectivity is the essence of harmony. It has been Vajpayee's specialty in politics for achieving consensus and respect from both allies and opponents. He also connected the world with India, through his visits to the US, Russia, China as well Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Cambodia to ink economic deals and push neighbourly ties. Integrating India within and with outside is Vajpayee's main legacy. The spirit of democracy and gentlemanly conduct was one of Vajpayee's strength.⁴²

Vajpayee believed in the principle of live and let live. It was said "Leave him alone and he'll leave you alone as well!"⁴³ Former R&AW Chief A.S Dulat, who served as Atal Bihari Vajpayee's adviser on Kashmir hailed Vajpayee as the 'greatest after Nehru' adding that "He was good with people, he was good with words, and, above all, he had a sense of humour."⁴⁴ This sums up why he was called Ajatshatru and also gives an insider's glimpse of a man who was also the prime minister.⁴⁵

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