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The Right Man: Vajpayee and His Party

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Was Vajpayee indeed the right man in the wrong party, as popular lore and a new biography suggest?

When Atal Bihari Vajpayee stepped down as prime minister in 2004, he was the first non-Congressman to have completed a full term in that office. He was also the first prime minister whose association with India's struggle for independence was fleeting.

Elected first to the Lok Sabha in 1957, Vajpayee was the Bharatiya Jan Sangh's face in Parliament, thanks to the power of his speech. In 1977, his engagement with India's foreign policy issued made him the natural choice as foreign minister in the Janata Party government of Morarji Desai. Vajpayee did not let the Jan Sangh's animosity against China determine the government's approach and he covered ground to normalise ties with China, soured as they had been since 1962.

In 1998, as prime minister, Vajpayee acted on the longstanding agenda of the Jan Sangh and then of the BJP to exercise the nuclear option, despite being aware of the consequences, especially sanctions, from the United States. He also walked several extra miles to be seen as India wanting to be friends with Pakistan-a bus ride to Lahore being the most important image in the minds of some, including this reviewer. His response in 1999 to Pakistan's incursions in Kargil and then the 2001 attack by armed men in Parliament House were instances that brought out elements of his statesmanship. Vajpayee the prime minister did not turn these tragedies into spectacles.

It is not easy to write about one's own times, more so to ensure a biography does not turn into a hagiography. Abhishek Choudhary's two volume biography of Vajpayee is not hagiography. However, it does not give an impression contrary to the widely held view that Vajpayee was a good man who kept bad company.

This aspect comes out starkly in the second volume (*Believer's Dilemma*), unlike the first volume (*The Ascent of the Hindu Right*) which meticulously argues that Hindutva remained an article of faith for Vajpayee ever since he entered public life.

The Making of the Believer

The Ascent of the Hindu Right brings out, with clarity, Vajpayee's early association with the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS). Choudhary writes with felicity as to how Vajpayee remained firm in his belief that the Hindus had suffered persecution over the years and that it was imperative that any idea of national liberation ought to be focused essentially on redeeming the Hindus and their pride. He brings this out when he discusses Vajpayee's recital of his poem, *Hindu Tan Mann*, at the annual confluence of RSS associates in Nagpur in 1941, when Vajpayee was barely 17 years old.

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Choudhary discusses a protest at Bateshwar, Vajpayee's native village, in the midst of the Quit India agitation to tell a story that others have not: that Vajpayee recorded his confession before the trial judge wherein he spoke of his brother Liladhar Vajpayee's leadership on the ground, where the building housing the state treasury was set fire to. Choudhary stresses that though Vajpayee's confession was there in the records before the trial court, this was not cited in the judgment convicting Liladhar Vajpayee to three years in jail. He notes that Vajpayee, who was just 17 at the time, spent a short while in jail as an under-trial and this helped him emerge as an elected student leader by 1943. In Choudhary's words, Atal's *accidental arrest* served him exceedingly well.

Choudhary delves into the years in Vajpayee's life when he steered *Rashtradharma*, an RSS mouthpiece, and argues how the long articles Vajpayee published in it were shaped essentially by wild thoughts about the Hindu faith being in danger and of Gandhi being responsible for much of these perceived threats to Hinduism. This was in August 1947. Choudhary makes a point: In the summer of 1947, it was a popular belief among the Hindus to call the Muslims who refused to move to Pakistan 'traitors'; Vajpayee was only giving print space to this skewed thinking. "In retrospect, Atal's confused essay is the most succinct summary of Hindutva's neurosis and the lack of intellectual coherence or organizational strategy in 1947," he writes of one of Vajpayee's articles. (It may be argued that such thoughts, neurotic as they were then, are today no longer notes from the margins but believed as truth in the mainstream.

Choudhary, however, does not take this argument further.)

The point that Choudhary drives hard in the first volume is to establish that Vajpayee, contrary to an imagination in the present that he was less of a bigot-especially among sections that have been critical of the BJP since 2014-was indeed among those who suffered from a neurosis that the Hindu faith was in danger.

Masking His Beliefs

Yet, by *Believer's Dilemma*, the second volume, Choudhary maps a transformation in Vajpayee's world view-a genuine one, rather than as double speak or the quality to speak with a forked tongue. Some of this shift was "unmistakable," Choudhary writes, the outcome of "Vajpayee outgrowing his ideological forbears to carve an independent voice in the Janata setup."

Choudhary argues that Vajpayee had tasted power during the Janata Party government of 1977-1979 and this "made him bigger that the Sangh Parivar." Even if only for 28 months, Choudhary asserts, "the believer now had dilemmas."

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Believer's Dilemma ends up labouring to establish that after 1977, and especially after the foundation of the BJP in 1980, Vajpayee consciously and continuously worked to disentangle himself and the party from the RSS's hold and establish the party on a middle of the road platform rather than a face of Hindutva.

Vajpayee did embark upon this course, but it was certainly not against the RSS. The autobiography of longtime Jan Sangh leader Balraj Madhok suggests that those in the highest echelons of the RSS had steered the BJP in this direction. Vajpayee was their preferred choice to play the game. The RSS threw the hardliner Madhok under the bus: he was expelled from the Jan Sangh in 1973. While Choudhary discusses the Madhok episode in some detail, he does not connect the dots.

In this sense, Govindacharya, among the RSS men to fall out of the BJP's favour for having said that Vajpayee was a mere "mask" for the organisation, was absolutely right. Choudhary refers to this episode, but does not draw any inferences.

Choudhary also plays along with the popular narrative that Vajpayee fought hard, within the RSS, to throw its doors open to members of the Muslim community (and succeeded in promoting at least a few such faces in the BJP). He would have profited immensely from reading the political scientist Pralay Kanungo's detailed work on the RSS and escaped the trap that most analysts of Vajpayee have fallen into, of calling him a good man in bad company.

Similarly, Choudhary celebrates Vajpayee as prime minister for having resisted senior RSS leaders such as the trade union leader Dattopant Thengadi in their attempts to derail the 'reforms' programme and ensuring continuity with the Narasimha Rao-Manmohan Singh regime. He also suggests that Vajpayee's choice of such non-RSS men like Jaswant Singh, Yashwant Sinha, and Arun Shourie as his economic ministers between 1998 and 2004 were instances of his ability to chart a course independent of the Sangh.

Yet, the shift to the right in the political domain and the shift away from welfarism in the economic domain, as witnessed in India since the late 1980s and accentuated since 1991, cannot be seen as independent of one another. The rightward shift in economic policy, bound to cause distress to a section of the society, would necessitate the political discourse turning sectarian and autocratic. The continuity that Vajpayee ensured with Liberalisation-Privatisation-Globalisation (the Washington consensus) was as much in tune with the RSS thinking then. RSS leaders were unfazed by the occasional noises made by the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, its trade union arm. By resorting to rhetoric, Choudhary misses this nuance and attributes to Vajpayee some courage to take on the RSS on this aspect.

Overstating the Case

The parts of the biography on Vajpayee as minister for external affairs in the Janata government are indeed substantive insofar as the subtle shift registered in India's foreign policy is brought out. All credit is attributed to Vajpayee and his own shift to pragmatism from doctrinaire beliefs.

But Choudhary's biography has a proclivity to write the political history of India in the 1960s and 1970s through Vajpayee's persona. For instance, he sees the Jan Sangh's strategy in the 1960s to join the anti-Congress coalition as Vajpayee's strategic vision rather than

driven by the RSS. But as detailed by the socialist leader Madhu Limaye, the strategist of this coalition was Ram Manohar Lohia; Vajpayee at the time was not as prominent a player as the biography makes him appear. Moreover, the coalition, an arrangement following the 1967 polls, came a cropper-the Jan Sangh's inclusion in that was resisted by the Socialist parties and was the biggest hindrance to the project. Choudhary attributing the unity (that did not materialise) to Vajpayee is far from true.

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This is also the case with the Janata Party. Choudhary is off the mark when he attributes to Vajpayee a central role in the making of the Janata Party. It was Nanaji Deshmukh who steered the Bharatiya Jan Sangh within the Janata Party. Nanaji was the Jan Sangh's designate to be anointed as the Janata Party general secretary. News reports of the time establish that Nanaji was Prime Minister Morarji Desai's first preference as his cabinet colleague, but the Jan Sangh leader recused himself and chose to remain with the organisational machinery. Vajpayee along with L.K. Advani constituted the second line of leaders at the time.

Choudhary goes to the extent of elevating Vajpayee to the position of having drafted the Janata Party's manifesto for the 1977 elections, but does not support this with any archival evidence. News reports on 12 February 1977, the day after the Janata manifesto was released, do not suggest Vajpayee having played a role in its making, leave alone a central role. Nor does a reading of the manifesto suggest any decisive stamp of Vajpayee or the Jan Sangh's political or economic programme.

Conclusions

A political biographer could have resisted the temptation to devote much space to Vajpayee's private life, which unfortunately is done here in the manner tabloids do in the world of journalism. As for instance, when Choudhary expresses his excitement over finding that Vajpayee's performance in school was just average, or when he makes an emphatic statement that the journalist-turned-politician Sagarika Ghose's biography of Vajpayee was incorrect in describing the leader's relationship with one particular individual as platonic love. At the same time, Choudhary has largely skipped over the acts of impropriety by Ranjan Bhattacharya, the husband of Vajpayee's adopted daughter, from the prime minister's residence. He neither confirms nor repudiates tales of Bhattacharya's murky dealings with a business house, something that a political biography ought to have spoken about.

Such grey areas notwithstanding, Choudhary's biography is worth reading. Unlike other biographical works of Vajpayee, most of which have been by fellow travellers, he has tread through piles of archival documents, including in the United Kingdom, to tell his story. The two volumes stand out for this very reason. He has also used interviews with Vajpayee's contemporaries and colleagues, though he has not used the private paper collections now available of Vajpayee's contemporaries like Morarji Desai, Charan Singh, and George Fernandes, which would have made the work richer in some parts.

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