

The Making of Atal Bihari Vajpayee



Vidya Subrahmaniam



Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1924-2018) File photo: Shaju John

An act of magnanimity by his long-time associate, Lal Krishna Advani, set Atal Bihari Vajpayee on a journey of accomplishment that he had been convinced was not in his destiny. And then, things changed, and so quickly, that in the space of five years Vajpayee moved from the margins of party politics to its centre and from there to becoming the Prime Minister of India. As Prime Minister, he will be remembered most for his innovative outreach to Pakistan and Kashmir and the warmth he shared with his allies, and across much of the Opposition. Yet, Vajpayee tended to flit between positions, alternately revealing a statesman-like breadth of vision and echoing the bigoted ranks of the Sangh Parivar, which he joined as a schoolboy in 1939, and whose Hindu worldview he shared all his life. To the outside world, Vajpayee was a liberal caught in an illiberal party. But in his own words, he was a "swayamsevak first". In this essay, Vidya Subrahmaniam, Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, traces Vajpayee's career landmarks, dilemmas, and ideological flip-flops while simultaneously attempting to answer the question: Who was Atal Bihari Vajpayee?

here was a period in the history of the Bharatiya Janata Party when Atal Bihari Vajpayee felt lonely and sidelined as a result of being second best to Lal Krishna Advani, the party's and Sangh Parivar's favourite for the longest time. Advani was many things to Vajpayee -- friend, confidant, long-time associate and fellow Swayamsevak but he was also a rival who commanded passionate, undying loyalty from the party's second rung and its cadre. The rank and file's devotion to Advani was in contrast to the near absence of a throng around Vajpayee.

This was around the time of the Ayodhya movement, and to visiting journalists Vajpayee's loneliness was apparent. It was something he implicitly acknowledged when in a husky voice laced with wit -- a Vajpayee trademark that over the years got honed into a beguiling craft, confusing and disarming friends and foes -- he would ask his visitors why they were wasting their time on a man who was "mar-gi-na-lised", each syllable stressed to underscore his irrelevance in a party which had all the time for Advani but none for him. The smile hid what at that juncture must have been a lifetime of hurt. He was 66 already and with Advani topping the charts, it would have required a miracle for him to pull ahead. The miracle did happen. But neither he nor those then tracking the BJP could have known that his career's many highpoints, and its dazzling zenith, were still to come. In his memoirs, *My Country, My Life*, Advani attributes the BJP's meteoric growth from the sidelines of power to its centre to the Ayodhya movement, and says of the period: "It was the time when Atalji chose to remain relatively inactive."

Advani's commitment to Hindutva bordered on fanatical, the quintessential Ayodhya warrior who was beloved of the Sangh. Many previous battles spanning over a century and more had been fought over the ownership of the site where the Babri Masjid stood. But the raw, frenzied passion that Advani's Ram mandir campaign stirred in tens of thousands of people, rousing them to be Hindus first, was unseen in electoral politics. Under Advani's astute and driven stewardship, the land dispute acquired spanking new ideological overtones, and very swiftly, before the political class could comprehend the tectonic and life altering nature of what was being planned, Ayodhya became synonymous with Indian nationhood.

Maryadapurushottam Ram transformed from mythical hero of the Ramayana to totem pole of Hindu identity, self-respect and pride. If the Ramayana's Rama slayed Ravana with his simple bow and arrow, Advani's Rama would aim the power-packed trishul at the heart of Muslim 'appeasement' or the alleged indulgence of Muslims at the expense of Hindus. There was no evidence to bear this out but Advani claimed that Muslims, though in a minority in Hindu majority India, had received a share of the state's bounty and attention that was disproportionate to their numbers. He called this pseudo-secularism, or a deliberate misunderstanding of secularism to convert Muslims into a pliable vote-bank. As he notes in his memoirs, "The fragmented votes of Hindus and the consolidated votes of Muslims have created a pernicious dynamic in Indian politics. Sadly many parties succumbed to the lure of this vote-bank politics and justified it in the name of secularism." Advani called for a national debate on secularism, and declared from atop his Ram rath that he would not rest till a grand Ram temple was built at the very spot where the Babri Masjid stood.

How could a temple be built without destroying the masjid? For the record, the BJP said the masjid could be moved brick by brick. But the crowds that panted and rushed after Advani's rath understood the call for what it was and matched him roar for roar. "*Ram Lallla hum aayen hai*" (We have come to you, Lord Rama), the leader would thunder to reciprocal shouts from the jostling crowds of "*mandir wahin banayenge*" (We will build the temple right where the Masjid is).

"Advani's speeches were incendiary, and the symbols he carried with him were shockingly violent in their imagery."

Advani's speeches were incendiary, and the symbols he carried with him or received as gifts as his rath cut a bloodied path through the heartland, were shockingly violent in their imagery: the fabled Sudarshan Chakra, which could travel at the speed of light and kill an army, and vessels of blood representing determination and sacrifice. The Rath yatra jolted the learned elite and newspapers wrote editorials condemning it, but the more they protested, the stronger grew the BJP's core.

Vajpayee to the fore

Advani's ideological clarity and the reputation he enjoyed as an organisation builder, endeared him to the younger generation of party leaders such as Arun Jaitley and Uma Bharti. Such was Bharti's loyalty to the ideologue that she refused to consider Vajpayee her leader. On a visit to Bharti's house once, I found Advani's pictures on her living room wall but none of Vajpayee's. Even when she became a minister in the first Vajpayee cabinet, Bharti's priorities did not change and she chose to hang a picture of Advani above her desk at home. Asked the reason for this, she replied with a defiant," he is my leader."

The short point of this longish exposition on Advani and his rise to stardom via the Ram temple movement is this: Advani's peak coincided with Vajpayee's trough and vice versa. Ironically, it was Advani's rise that set Vajpayee on the path to success. Advani's rousing speeches were plainly a call to arms; there were few nuances and the clear and bold spelling out of what he wanted -- for Hindus to awaken to their rights vis-a vis Muslims – won him delirious supporters, not to mention the allegiance and fealty of the party's second rung. But as Advani was to realise, while this support consolidated the BJP's hardline core, the hawkish, anti-Muslim image also acted as a barrier to the party's expansion. It was this trap that brought Vajpayee to the fore.

"In the public perception, not matched in reality, Advani was the Hindutva hawk to Vajpayee's soft, indeterminate liberal."

In the public perception, not matched by reality, Advani and Vajpayee were like chalk and cheese. Advani was the Hindutva hawk to Vajpayee's soft, indeterminate liberal. Advani was troubled by this contrasting positioning but figured soon enough that the black and white binary could be put to good use. As he recounts in his book, "For a long time after I launched the Ram yatra in 1990, to mobilise support for the Ayodhya movement, a peculiar asymmetry arose in the media projection of Atalji and me. Whereas Atali was seen as a liberal, I was labeled as a 'Hindu hardliner'. It hurt me initially, as I knew that the reality was entirely contrary to the image that I had come to acquire... it was then that some colleagues in the party, who were well aware of my sensitivity to my portrayal, advised me not to battle the image problem. They said, 'Advanji, in fact, it helps the BJP to have one leader who is projected as a liberal and another leader projected as a hardliner'."

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Vajpayee was never the liberal that became his primary identity in the years he was the Prime Minister; indeed even in his death it is this unsupported assumption about him that has been most extolled. What Vajpayee had was a chameleon-like ability to change with the mood, and edit and modify his stated views, emerging none the worse for it. If anything, in the public eye the flip-flops became qualities of flexibility and tolerance that helped the BJP break out of the rigid mould that Advani's ideological brinkmanship had pushed it into.

Advani's definitive articulations left nothing to the imagination, his Hindutva was undiluted by obfuscation, and this is what endeared him to the BJP core. On the other hand, Vajpayee's gift with words and poetry, a lasting impression of rising above petty politics for the public good, topped by a cultivated ambiguity about ideology, all added up to a picture of a liberal in an illiberal party. It is easy to see why the layered Vajpayee who lent himself to multiple interpretations won friends outside the party. The Advani loyalists were party insiders whereas it was outside the party that Vajpayee was most valued and respected and to his last day. Prime Minister Vajpayee was way taller than the BJP.

"Vajpayee's allies mourned his death with a heart-felt sincerity that has almost vanished from today's fractious political space."

It's a truism that virtue attaches more easily to a person in death than in life. Yet in Vajpayee's case, the outpouring of grief upon his passing on August 16, 2018, was genuine. Former allies who had worked with him in either or both the governments he ran mourned his death with a heart-felt sincerity that has almost vanished from today's fractious political space. The unstinting praise showered on the "consensus man" as the funeral flames consumed his mortal body conveyed equally a longing for a lost era and a regret for the incivility and violence that have become the signature attributes of politics under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The issue of acceptability

While Vajpayee certainly does not merit being compared with Modi, his lionisation has almost wilfully overlooked his many trysts with intolerance and bigotry. But, as Advani himself ruefully observed, the projection of Vajpayee as a liberal foil to Advani as the bigot was a demand of the time. And thus it is that the 'making of Vajpayee' began. In 1995, the BJP held a Maha Adhiveshan (high-level conclave) where Advani as the BJP president, announced Vajpayee's name as the party's Prime Ministerial candidate for the parliamentary elections of 1996. Why did Advani push Vajpayee to the frontlines when the party and the Sangh recognised him as the architect of the party's growth, one who brought legitimacy and glory to Hindutva by relentlessly pushing the envelope on it?



The Prime Minister-designate A.B. Vajpayee and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president L.K. Advani, at a press conference, in New Delhi on May 15, 1996. File photo: PTI

Advani explains this in his book: "Some people in the party and the Sangh had chided me then for making the announcement. 'In our estimation', they said, 'you would be a better person to lead the government if the party wins the people's mandate.' I replied, and I did so with all the sincerity and conviction at my command, that I disagreed with their opinion. 'In the perspective of the people, I'm more of an ideologue than a mass leader... But Atalji ... has an appeal that transcends the BJP's traditional ideological support base. He would be acceptable not only to the allies of the BJP, but, far more importantly, to the people of India.'"

Advani further writes that some people (presumably including the Sangh) felt that he had made a "big sacrifice" by announcing Vajpayee's name. "However, I was steadfast. What I have done is not an act of sacrifice. It is the outcome of a rational assessment of what is right and what is in the best interest of the party and the nation."

Vajpayee's nomination as the BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate came three years after the brutal destruction of the Babri Masjid by manic parivar affiliates in the presence of Advani, who, because he was unaccompanied by Vajpayee, became wholly culpable for it. The shame and ignominy made the BJP untouchable for potential allies. For a while the party basked in its 'splendid isolation' but returned to the mainstream coinciding with Vajpayee's elevation and in anticipation of the 1996 Lok Sabha election.

The BJP's first tentative steps towards its future allies resulted in small but significant breakthroughs – seat-sharing pacts with the Samata Party and the Haryana Vikas Party followed by a post-poll alliance with the Akali Dal. The 1996 election was a milestone also because the BJP became the largest single party, toppling the Congress from a perch it had held continuously since Independence barring the short period of Janata Party rule. Based on its 1996 performance, the BJP won the Presidential invite to form a government at the Centre¹.

But respectability still eluded the party. In fact, the high point of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's first government was its inglorious exit after only 13 days. The opposition stood as one bloc, refusing to crack under pressure brought upon it by BJP's emissaries. The lesson the BJP learnt from the experience was this: What was more important than Vajpayee leading the party was the version of Vajpayee that would be presented to the world. A heated debate followed the moving of the confidence motion by Vajpayee in Parliament on May 27, 1996. Opposition members questioned the BJP's divisive ideology, and Inderjit Gupta of the Communist Party of India flew at the 13-day old Prime Minister. Mincing no words, he accused Vajpayee of being double faced.

"Sir, my friend Shri Vajpayee who is a very very old friend of mine and I think we are on very good terms with each other. We have seen one face of him here in this debate, during this debate. All the media, the Press and everybody have definitely been very much impressed by his sobriety, his calmness, his appeal to everybody, his reasonableness etc. etc. But I regret to say that Shri Vajpayee on occasions also has a different face. This is the trouble."²

Gupta went on to remind Vajpayee of a speech he made in 1983 that preceded the massacre of over 2,000 mostly Muslim men and women in Nellie in Assam. He quoted an excerpt from the speech: "Foreigners have come here; and the Government does nothing. What if they had come into Punjab instead, people would have chopped them into pieces and thrown them away." Gupta called the speech inflammatory and irresponsible and said: "This is very different to the type of speech that he made here yesterday [when Vajpayee moved the motion]."

The 'image of a martyr-statesman'

When Vajpayee rose to make his exit speech, it was such a masterly telling of his side of the story, his outlook and vision that the moment got recorded as one that forever changed the BJP's history. His audience, not just the members of Parliament but the many that watched him on television, heard him in rapt in attention. With the media finding its newest hero in Vajpayee, Gupta's accusations were forgotten.

India Today ran its story with the headline, "Atal Bihari Vajpayee goes down but with the image of a martyr statesman." The magazine said the BJP had to exit because its liberal mask had convinced no one. Yet it was full of appreciation for the fallen Prime Minister. The magazine said Vajpayee's "sterling performance" had showcased a "martyr-statesman" at a time when television cameras beamed "turbulent, often acrimonious scenes enacted in Parliament" into millions of homes. *India*

Today said it had information that the BJP planned to distribute video and audio cassettes of the debate across the country 3 .

The marketing of Brand Vajpayee had started in earnest. The BJP began the laborious process of identifying, wooing and winning allies. Mission- BJP alliance rested on two planks: 1) Projection of Vajpayee as a middle-roader who had wearied of the Hindutva baggage. 2) The pursuit of at least one ally in each State.

By 1998, the resolve of the anti-BJP coalition to stand against the Hindutva party was in tatters. Two governments at the Centre, led respectively by Deve Gowda and Inder Kumar Gujral, had crashed out and the time was ripe for a realignment. With Vajpayee as its calling card, the BJP chipped away at the anti-BJP bloc and ensnared many of its former foes: The Jayalalithaa-led All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, the Ramakrishna Hegde-led Lok Shakti, the Naveen Patnaik-led Biju Janata Dal and the Mamata Banerjee-led All-India Trinamool Congress. As the BJP-alliance hovered on the margins of victory in the 1998 Lok Sabha election, many more secular champions fell, all of them citing Vajpayee's liberal credentials. Among them, the Chandrababu Naidu-led Telugu Desam Party and the Farooq Abdullah-led National Alliance besides a number of smaller parties ⁴.

Muscular India, but a growing impatience within

The BJP's 1998 experiment collapsed at the altar of overvaulting ambitions of its own members, temperamental politics of its allies, and lastly due to constant interference by the Sangh Parivar which never forgot that Advani was its first choice. The early months of Vajpayee's first term were undoubtedly deeply fulfilling for the RSS. Thanks to the BJP helming the government, India had gone nuclear, bringing into the open a capability earlier governments had kept hidden from the world fearing sanctions. This made the RSS doubly proud of Vajpayee whose courage, it said, had transformed India from an apologetic, timid country into a nuclear power. Nuclear India was integral to the Sangh's idea of Hindu Rashtra. Hindu Rashtra rested on two planks: Hindu unity and a muscular nation exulting in its superior strength.

"It appears that the Sangh disapproved of the economic liberalisation line that the Vajpayee government was pursuing"

Yet for all the early euphoria, the Sangh-Vajpayee relations were mostly strained and praise for the Prime Minister was invariably interspersed with impatience at his seeming reluctance to toe the line. Later in 1998, the Sangh threw caution to the wind and issued a dire warning to Vajpayee. The December 27, 1998, issue of RSS mouthpiece *Panchajanya* carried a statement of the then Saha Sarkaryavah (joint general secretary), K.S. Sudarshan, slamming the Vajpayee government for going back on its declared policies: "Should the government act against the national interest, we will be compelled to speak out", he said, underscoring menacingly, "Every government is ours regardless of who heads it." Though Sudarshan did not specify what his peeve was, it appears that he and the Sangh disapproved of the economic liberalisation line that the Vajpayee government was pursuing. Through all this turmoil, a government lost, and a war fought and won in Kargil, there was not a dent in Vajpayee's personal popularity. On the contrary, he was now a war hero, infallible and beyond doubt or controversy.

The unlikeliest allies

Vajpayee's personal popularity rating was 70 per cent when, in 1999, he returned to power at the head of an expanded National Democratic Alliance. The unlikeliest of allies congregated around him. Who would have thought that the rationalist Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam would trade a lifetime of supporting the Dravidian cause, for a partnership with the Hindi-Hindutva party? Or that the beef-eating parties of the north-east could break bread with a party with a commitment to cow protection?

"The 2002 anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat eclipsed the perception of a philosophic Vajpayee detached from an Islamophobic party."

The February-April 2002 anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat severely tested the perception of Vajpayee's philosophic detachment from his Islamophobic party and colleagues. The pogrom appeared to affect him, and this was reflected in two incidents, both taking place during his visit to Gujarat on April 4, 2002. Earlier in the day, Vajpayee walked through the Shah Alam Camp in

Ahmedabad, which, in the aftermath of the violence, had become home to 9,000 displaced Muslims, men, women, and children rendered refugees in their own land. Perhaps moved to act by the enormity of the suffering he saw, Vajpayee called the violence a "national shame" and spoke of India having "lost face in the violence." $\frac{5}{2}$

At the airport the same evening, he addressed a press conference, where he was asked if he had a message for Narendra Modi. Turning to Modi, he said he would ask the Chief Minister to follow his Raj Dharma (administrative justice). Vajpayee said he himself followed his Raj Dharma. Though Vajpayee was characteristically cryptic, the interpretation was that as a Prime Minister doing his duty, he was asking the Chief Minister to do his duty which he wasn't.

Three months after the violence, Vajpayee would write to Modi pointing out that there had been a gross underestimation of damages to the houses of the (Muslim) victims of the violence which required swift rectification. The letter urged Modi to create a climate of confidence which would enable the victims to return to their homes. Vajpayee said where there was no option but to relocate the victims such as those "in the worst riot-hit areas like Naroda Patiya in Ahmedabad and Lunawada in Panchmahal ... only active government support during their relocation will protect them from unscrupulous elements." He added: "Needless to say that undue influence by such elements will only exacerbate the already complicated situation." ⁶

Who were these unscrupulous elements? The Prime Minister did not name them but anyone with any knowledge of the period would have known that they resided within the BJP's extended family.

"If these instances suggested that Vajpayee could be righteous, it was shattered by an irrational blaming of Muslims."

However, if these two sets of instances suggested that Vajpayee could be righteous in enforcing social equity and distributive justice, even if that went against the larger mood in his own party, that impression was wholly shattered by an intervening episode of irrational blaming of Muslims. That episode is the by-now well-known explosion of anger in a speech he made at the BJP's national executive meeting held in Goa on April 12, 2002 -- a month and a half after the Godhra carnage and the severe, unrelenting retaliatory attacks by Hindu mobs on Muslims across Gujarat.

To quote Vajpayee: "What happened in Gujarat? If the conspiracy to burn alive the innocent, helpless and blameless travellers on the Sabarmati Express had not been hatched, the Gujarat tragedy could have been averted. But this did not happen. People were burnt alive..." Then in redhot anger, "Aag lagayi kisne?"; " Aag phailey kaise?" (who lit the fire; how did it spread?) Not stopping at that, Vajpayee went on to accuse Muslims everywhere of not being able to live in harmony: "Wherever Muslims live, they don't like to live in co-existence with others, they don't like to mingle with others; and instead of propagating their ideas in a peaceful manner, they want to spread their faith by resorting to terror and threats. The world has become alert to this danger."² Seeing the reaction to this wholesale condemnation of Muslims living anywhere, the Prime Minister's Office quickly clarified that, Vajpayee's reference was to 'some' Muslims, not all. But the damage was done. Not just the offending parts, the speech in its entirely was anti-Muslim. As Siddharth Varadarajan pointed out in a recent article in the Wire, "There is (in the text of the speech) no remorse about the killing of hundreds of innocent people, no apologies for the failure of the government to protect its citizens. He makes no attempt to distinguish between the criminal perpetrators of the Godhra attack and the innocent victims of the 'subsequent tragedy in Gujarat'..."

Which was the real Vajpayee?

So which was the real Vajpayee? The one who appeared stricken by the plight of Muslims in the Shah Alam camp? The one who asked Modi to follow his Raj Dharma, implying that he had not? The one who wrote to Modi directing him to protect Muslim victims of 2002 from unscrupulous elements? Or the one who made the vicious speech in Nelli? The one who spat out in anger against the Muslim community as a whole? The one without empathy for the victims whom he blamed for their own plight?

Throughout his political career, Vajpayee switched between roles, now vowing the world with his statesman-like large-heartedness and now pandering to the vile instincts of the raw swayamsevak. Vajpayee appeared stricken by the fall of the Babri Masjid, and BJP insiders say that he wrote out his resignation in anguish. But in later years a video recording surfaced of a speech he made in Lucknow on December 5, 1992, where he was seen looking happy and relaxed and supporting the milling assemblage. The video showed him asserting that there was no question of

stopping the kar seva which had the permission of the Supreme Court and so must go on (throwing his arms about and speaking forcefully). Also that it was natural for people to assemble in strength: "Bhajan is not done by one person. Bhajan is done together with others …we need even more people for kirtan …"⁸

Vajpayee was the Prime Minister at the time of the 2002 Gujarat pogrom. Initially he gave every impression of wanting Modi sacked. But in the end, despite his stratospheric popularity, and the plentiful support he got from his allies, he could not enforce his writ within his own party. Instead, he joined the party and Sangh ranks, speaking in the same sectarian tone that he seemed to disapprove of but perhaps did not.

Similarly, even while in an uneasy relationship with the Sangh, Vajpayee did not flinch from asserting his Sangh origins. Visiting New York in September 2000 to attend a session of the United Nations General Assembly, Vajpayee was all sober and Prime Ministerial. But no sooner was he done with the U.N., he wore a different hat and travelled to Staten Island for a date with United Sates-based Sanghi hotheads. Speaking from a platform put up by the fanatical Vishwa Hindu Parishad, he said "*Main pratham swayamsevak hoon eh adhikar koi chheen nahin sakta* (I'm first a swayamsevak, and no one can take that right away from me)²." Three months later, on the anniversary of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, a day deeply painful to Muslims, Vajpayee spoke of the Ram temple as "a national sentiment". When questions were raised in Parliament – Jaipal Reddy described the remark as the 'slip of the mask' – Vajpayee modified the statement with the caveat that any solution to Ayodhya would have to be "peaceful and amicable".

"On Pakistan and Kashmir, he was every bit the statesman, in supersession of every flaw, every misstep."

On Pakistan and Kashmir, he was every bit the statesman that his countless admirers -- who gathered at his funeral and the subsequent memorial service -- insist he was, in supersession of every flaw, every misstep. Kashmir held its first free and fair election when he was the Prime Minister. Vajpayee's words "Insaniyat, Kashmiriyat, Jhamooriyat" have been immortalised. Vajpayee made bold to take a bus into Lahore, following that with a visit to Minar-e-Pakistan, a lofty gesture that won him admiration and appreciation in India, Pakistan and the world. Vajpayee was a grand creator of moods. When he wanted friendship with Pakistan, Indians joined him in his jhappis (hugs). When warring with the neighbor, Indians warred with him. Vajpayee's relationship with Pakistan meandered from love to hate to 'only business', and at each turn he found his country standing with him. Very different from how severely Manmohan Singh was excoriated when he tried to normalise relations with Pakistan. Vajpayee's achievement is made all the more remarkable by the hate flowing in today's India for Kashmir and Pakistan.

There was something about Vajpayee that earned him flattery from the most unexpected quarters. In mid-2003, the RSS's *Panchjanya* invited a wide spectrum of intellectuals to evaluate Vajpayee's performance in office, M.J. Akbar, Vinod Mehta, and Saeed Naqvi among them. Akbar and Mehta were editors respectively of *Asian Age* and *Outlook* magazine and were regarded as Congress sympathisers while Naqvi, who was a commentator, claimed to be neutral ¹⁰

Akbar said Vajpayee was "without compare in his own party and in the opposition. He understands the country and has an instinctive feel for its needs. He is above vices like greed and ambition." Vinod Mehta eulogised: "Historians will give him a high rating. To successfully run a coalition government when your own party has only 180 seats, you need charisma, imagination and organisational skill." Naqvi went one up: "Vajpayee is much more than a statesman. On his side, there's vision, there's commitment and there's will to power. Only a superior leader can simultaneously project mass appeal and carry off Ayodhya. And that's Vajpayee. He comes from the RSS stable but has evolved enough to be able to appropriate the middle ground." Remember, this was 2003, not 2018 when tributes flowed in commemoration of the life and times of the man. So again the question arises: Who was the real Atal Bihari Vajpayee? The answer to this might lie in part in a poem he penned as a schoolboy:

Hindu tan man, Hindu jeevan, rag, rag mera Hindu parichay

(I'm a Hindu in heart and body, my life is Hindu, Hindu is my only identity).

But was that all to Vajpayee? A Hindu and only a Hindu? Yes and No. In his own words, he was primarily a swayamsevak. Yet he filled the Prime Ministerial chair in such a way that those who came into contact with him detected no fallibility, no flaws, and if they did, they chose not to recognise them. (Vidya Subrahmaniam is Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy. She was until recently Associate Editor with *The Hindu* based in New Delhi. In a journalistic career spanning 34 years, she has written and reported extensively in a number of newspapers in Chennai, Mumbai, Lucknow and Delhi. She has also served on the national news bureaus of *The Indian Express, The Indian Post, The Independent, The Statesman*, and was an opinion page writer for *The Times of India*. She holds an M.A. degree in Geography from the Delhi School of Economics. In 2013, she won the Ramnath Goenka Award for Excellence in Journalism in the category, 'Commentary and Interpretative Writing'. She can be contacted at <u>vidya.subrahmaniam@thehinducentre.com</u>)

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