

Sinha, S. (2020). *The years that changed India: Vajpayee*. India: Penguin Random House, pp. 357.

The book written by one of Vajpayee's close associates, who worked initially as secretary to the leader of the opposition (1996-97) and later private secretary during his Prime Ministership (1998-1999). The book unfolds multifaceted persona of Vajpayee as an ardent patriot, a poet turned Statesman, Prime Minister and above all a good human being. The book transmits immense contribution in the field of Indian politics and governance. It is a piece of literature conceived and executed by one who was in the immediate vicinity of the Prime Minister, and hence the author includes multiple vantage points and incorporates various experiences. This book can therefore be categorized as a semi-biographical work.

With penetrating into Vajpayee's era, the unconscious artist in the author instinctively displays his literary excellence delving into various dimensions of the 1990s decade. The book is divided into 10 chapters which rationalizes the theme based content. The narrative focuses on the decades of Vajpayee's political and intellectual journey that starts as being External Affairs Minister in the short lived Janata government to heading the government as the Prime Minister. The coalition government headed by Vajpayee made a remarkable footprint in the political history of India.

The book portrays Vajpayee as larger than life figure which in a way meant a seasoned Politician above Politics, having excellent oratory skills personified with unaltered generosity. He was the star of Indian politics during the 1990's as no other political leader could match his proficiency in governance and politics. He worked very hard for his speeches and in remembering the contents of parliamentary debates. Vajpayee's favorite subject throughout his life remained foreign policy. After Nehru, he was one of the most significant leaders who helped in shaping the foreign priorities and policies. Vajpayee's approach was larger than that of the party's and his popularity was far greater than

that of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) with leaders from opposition parties having great admiration for him. Even though critics often commented that Vajpayee was 'right man in the wrong party', he dismissed all such thoughts (p. 9).

In the words of the author, "Vajpayee always believed that the fruit was a product of, and drew its qualities from the tree" (p. 326).

According to the author with BJP's march to power, Vajpayee emerged as the shadow of the party changing the contours of Indian party system. In 1994, he was elected as the leader of opposition. Throughout this period Vajpayee stood shoulder to shoulder with the government. In 1996 Vajpayee became the party's Prime Ministerial candidate, thereby making a serious bid for power. The book unfolds the formation of Vajpayee's government. Vajpayee was full of enthusiasm and has achieved so much in politics without any godfather. He was a keen observer and has always worked for the country's national interest and urged the parliament to come together on security issues. Thus he proclaimed that on national security issues there can be no politics.

The 1998 government under Vajpayee's leadership, the BJP's performance was exceptional. However, he had to maintain balance throughout his tenure managing the various strands of NDA (National Democratic Alliance). The allies of the BJP created problems throughout the tenure of Vajpayee as the regional allies were continuously demanding considerable concessions or else they blackmailed him to withdraw the support that would lead to the fall of the government. Through the years of his Prime Ministership he rarely got support of the allies. As author quotes Jaswant Sinha, "Vajpayee's most of the energies were consumed by 'coalition compulsions'" (p. 148). The regional allies - AIADMK, Samata party, TDP used blackmail tactics which paralyzed the functioning of the parliament and the Vajpayee government. However, the writer saw the failure of BJP in managing the

regional parties than that of Vajpayee. Consequently, the strength of Vajpayee increased in an incremental manner over the years within the ruling coalition. Vajpayee followed the policy of “coalition dharma” in striking the balance between different political parties (p. 175).

Under the leadership of Vajpayee, the NDA formulated National Agenda for Governance (NAG) which was considered the common programme for the allies of NDA (p. 60). The BJP was trying for electoral reforms. Vajpayee was in favor of Lok Pal that would even cover the office of Prime Minister, ensuring 1/3rd reservation for women in state legislatures and parliament, legislations on Uniform Civil Code (UCC), the abrogation of article 370 and the construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. He also stressed the need for having a national security council to analyze military, economic and political threats to the country. The NDA government was unable to make headway on majority of these issues due to lack of political consensus. Vajpayee was a man of political ideocracy and ethics. His far sighted approach in politics made him a distinctive personality and staged his level above the routine politicians. Contrary to the popular impression, “Vajpayee was an iron hand in a velvet glove” (p. 17). He was committed to abolishing hunger, doubling women’s literacy rates and participation and delegating powers to the states. Apart from his views on governance and in bringing out the potential of public his government was also committed to secularism and upholding the constitutional ideals.

The narrative highlights the most commendable efforts of the Vajpayee government with regard to India’s self-enlightenment and security interests. Vajpayee was an old advocate of the nuclear option, which is why he welcomed the 1974 tests, refused to sign CTBT and unfailingly paving the way for credible nuclear deterrence thereby making India a nuclear state. He highlighted that there was a price to be paid for becoming a nuclear state, and the country must be ready to pay it. As a measure of retaliation the western countries imposed sanctions upon India.

However, Vajpayee was assertive and confident in the matters of national security.

While mentioning India's relationship with its neighbors the author argues that Vajpayee was a strong votary in enhancing India's relations worldwide and was prepared to go 'extra mile' to improve relations with Pakistan. Vajpayee conceded that border disputes with china and Pakistan and the Chinese nuclear and missile assistance to Pakistan had resulted in India facing two nuclear armed neighbors. The Sino – Pak cooperation has allowed Pakistan to use jihad as the instrument of extremist terrorism to destabilize its neighbors (p. 105). Vajpayee stressed on the need of a focused leadership which attends to the security needs. Thus the decision to conduct the nuclear tests was in the national interest. The writer acclaims that "Vajpayee was far more a person of steel than was apparent" indicating towards his committed nature.

The Vajpayee government maintained its domestic and international priorities while diffusing the tensions. U.K., France and Russia were the supporters of India being a responsible power and backed the nuclear tests. Even Dalai Lama sent a personal letter to Vajpayee supporting the decision to conduct the test by alluding that the possession of nuclear arms would deter any offensive actions and therefore ensure peace (p. 106). In this regard, Vajpayee clarified that India's interests were deterrence and not using the weapons as instruments of offense.

During the Vajpayee years the BJP-RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) relationship was a complex one. Though he publicly mentioned that RSS was his soul but there were some hidden strains in the RSS and Vajpayee's terms on some issues pertaining to Ram Mandir and his economic policies. Vajpayee is often considered as a holder of liberal view of economy, in this sense the swadeshi segment of the RSS was uncomfortable with his economic ideas. When in 1999 the Vajpayee government was defeated by one vote in the no confidence motion, Dattopant

Thengadi, a senior RSS leader criticized Vajpayee as a 'petty politician' playing into the hands of his 'policy advisors with doubtful credentials' (p. 264).

In 1999, India faced serious external challenges. Vajpayee expressed his concerns on the China - Pakistan nexus. After losing in no confidence motion, he acted as the caretaker Prime Minister. As the author says this gesture of Vajpayee was highly commendable as despite many national political problems and not being the formal head of the government, he defended his country militarily as a statesman. The Kargil war and its tactful management by the team of Vajpayee acclaimed India's image on the international scene as the responsible power.

On the question of Kashmir - Vajpayee publicly stated that India was ready to talk to Pakistan on all issues, including Kashmir. This dangerous move of Pakistan went in India's favor in a major way as Pakistan was criticized by the international governments whereas India was trying to peacefully de-escalate the situation. However the international situation became normal during the Kargil War. The western political class criticized Pakistan for its act of cross border terrorism and infiltration of Jihadi terrorism.

In an attempt to reframe international orders, Vajpayee initiated a bus service from Delhi to Lahore in a bid to build peaceful and cooperative relationship with Pakistan. From his historic speech at Minar-e-Pakistan he assured the people of both countries for the desire for lasting peace and friendship. From the understanding of the author, Vajpayee's bus ride to Lahore was part of Confidence building measures between the two countries (p.228).

The account elaborately discusses about the political turmoil faced by the Vajpayee government. Though the period of Vajpayee's Prime Ministership seemed to be short, but it was full with obstacles ranging from domestic political issues with the allies to the nuclear question and the Kargil war. The road was not easy for Vajpayee as government inherited a weak economy and it was enveloped by the political upheavals. Through this period, he carried too much burden

on his shoulders worked hard in every aspect be it industry, ensuring minority rights, infrastructure building, managing illegal infiltration, structural economic reforms, national security and the most important foreign affairs. The major incidents such as Pokhran tests, Kargil war, the bus ride from Delhi to Lahore, the political instability due to unsupportive tendency of allies, Vajpayee's foreign visits and his speeches has been extensively covered in the book. The author himself witnessed these occurrences which makes his narrative a firsthand experience for the readers. The book offers deep insights into Vajpayee's leadership during India's most difficult yet transformative years. Therefore, the author aptly justifies the title of the book – the years that changed India: Vajpayee.

Looking at the entire canvas, the author has successfully captured the life of Vajpayee from bird's eye view. An in-depth reading of the whole account shows how essentially the themes are being connected. The use of multiple sources makes the book a great literary work and gives many primary insights into the political years of Vajpayee's journey. The book provides an extensive account on the political and administrative voyage of the former Prime Minister Vajpayee. The book showcased that Vajpayee has a distinctive character of carrying all the political opinions together. However despite the belief that personal is political, the author has chosen not to uncover the personal aspects of Vajpayee's life of that period, which if done, could have added new dimensions to the understanding of the text. Nonetheless the book showcased the successful tenure of the Vajpayee's government, his decisive governance and far sightedness paving the way for Shining India and unprecedented rise of India in the global world.

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