

SARG Review of Abhishek Choudhary's *Vajpayee: The Ascent of the Hindu Right, 1924–1977*. Pan MacMillan. 2023

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On August 16, 2023, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, along with a group of senior cabinet ministers, paid their respects to Atal Behari Vajpayee on the fifth anniversary of his passing. During an address, Modi recognized India's first Hindu nationalist Prime Minister for his pivotal role in the nation's political history. Despite Vajpayee's significant stature, there has been a noticeable absence of comprehensive and critical analysis regarding his life, era, and his influence on nurturing the Hindu nationalist movement. In light of this, Abhishek Choudhary's comprehensive biography of Vajpayee emerges not only as a timely contribution that sheds light on a figure about whom we possess limited verified knowledge but also as a historical account of right-wing politics in that period.

The book brings forth numerous contributions, ranging from dispelling the often-repeated notion that Vajpayee was the “right man in the wrong party” and “more comfortable writing a reflective brand of Hindi poetry or playing with small children at his sprawling villa in New Delhi than visiting Hindu temples.”¹ It goes on to depict how post-independence party politics was ideologically porous, likely influenced by the legacy of the Indian nationalist movement. Moreover, the book is notable for the methodological rigor that Choudhary brings to his work.

Pundits on Indian politics often attribute overwhelming importance to political figures, often with good reason. In contexts where parties are commonly perceived, with or without good reason, to be weakly institutionalized, individuals can have a disproportionate influence on the directions that their parties take. Conversely, political scientists tend to analyze political developments through the lens of institutions that establish the rules governing the political landscape. However, an inherent challenge arises when employing institutional analysis in environments where these rules are flexible and subject to the peculiarities of a dominant political figure—a role that Vajpayee certainly embodied.

Here Choudhary uses his dual background as a researcher and journalist to good effect. Although this account of Vajpayee is technically a biography, it places his subject squarely within the political climate and the larger incentives structures facing the Hindu nationalist movement. In doing so, Choudhary weaves a skillful narrative of the environment and institutions that created Vajpayee, and in doing so contributed to the present moment in Indian democracy.

The first of this two-part biography sees 53 years of a changing India through the eyes of an upper-caste boy from Bateswar, a small town in Uttar Pradesh. The son of a school teacher who was later promoted to a school inspector, Vajpayee began his initial life with a sense of pride at his intangible and unearned inheritance, but little to show for it whether it be through his academic performance, or economic status. These conditions were ripe for developing a profound sense of victimhood, exacerbated by education and propaganda that further lacerated his young mind instead of healing it. From the outset, Choudhary subtly

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<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/16/world/man-atal-bihari-vajpayee-poet-politician-with-fondness-for-lion-king.html>

introduces these central notions by alluding to the looming threat of attacks in the Ganga-Yamuna doab, the region encompassing Bateshwar. An otherwise unremarkable town, the only time Bateshwar could be said to be truly alive was during its annual cattle fair. But as the Mughals shifted their capital to Agra, Bateshwar's fortunes dwindled. Over the centuries as the British and locals withdrew their patronage of the fair, the town's light flickered and died. This dimming of Bateshwar—and what it represented—with Mughal rule and the British, sparked a flame that has smoldered for generations and we are yet to see the full extent of what it consumes and transforms.

The Hindu nationalist movement is in many ways a response to a loss of masculinity within the Hindu community. Indeed, the success of the colonial project cannot be measured solely in terms of its control on India's economy, resources, and trade; it also extended to capturing the Indian psyche. This influence shaped how Indian men viewed themselves in relation to the colonial power, as well as other communities and women.² For Hindus, this colonial impact led to a sense of diminished masculinity, which was further exacerbated by the historical context of Islamic invasions.

In this milieu, desperate to salvage a semblance of pride, Hindu revivalists revised and reinterpreted their history as not one of secular subjugation, but as a series of heroic contests that Hindus lost only due to subterfuge without and treason within. This alternative or *Arya Samaji* historiography—named after the most prominent revivalist organization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—held significant sway over the young Atal. This influence drove him to compose some of his most impassioned poetry valorizing Hindus and condemning Muslims. As Vajpayee's obvious talents in writing and oratory—and physical unsuitability for the role of a full-time RSS propagandist or *pracharak*—became evident, he was placed in charge of journalistic propaganda for the organization. In his early editorials for RSS publications like *Rashtra Dharma* and *Panchajanya*, he vociferously argued that Indian Muslims needed to demonstrate their loyalty through a comprehensive set of convictions that closely aligned with the more militant aspects of the contemporary Hindutva movement.

The portrayal of the young Vajpayee stands in stark contrast to the image of the moderate face of Hindu nationalism attributed to him since he became a parliamentarian, and especially since the 1980s. The question arises: why is he remembered in this manner? Could it be due to the emergence of hardliners like Advani, against whom Vajpayee's stance appeared comparatively moderate? If so, do we remember him not solely as an individual, but in the context of his larger party, where he seemed to embody the moderate façade? Did he transform into a seasoned politician who engaged in calculated doublespeak, much like many of his contemporaries? Or was it a matter of his personal evolution, maturation, and display of personal growth?

As is often the case when delving into matters of human nature, the answer is a mix of all these elements. Rather than attempting to persuade readers that Vajpayee's moderation was driven by a single dominant reason, Choudhary unveils how it was a concoction of all these elements at different times, in varying proportions. While a more comprehensive understanding of Vajpayee's stance towards the more radical aspects of the Hindu nationalist movement may require the next volume, his notable inclinations, such as incorporating a diverse array of heroes into India's historiography, along with his subsequent record of refraining from direct acts of polarization, acknowledging the Babri Masjid demolition as a “blunder of Himalayan proportions,” and other actions, all imply a fusion of moderation and individual strategy in his

² Nandy (1983); Chatterjee (1989)

later endeavors.³ It could certainly be argued that this transformation was wrought *entirely* by an evolving strategic awareness. However, Muslims had never formed a central constituency for the BJP, and it was unlikely that they would become one in the future. Therefore, attributing this shift solely to strategic motives for the *party* on a broader scale is challenging.

A second moderating force can be traced to his personal life, notably the loss of his parents in quick succession, and his relationship with the Kauls. Observations about the Kauls' influence have been made previously but Choudhary's research leads to a nuanced picture—that it was not simply Rajkumari, his lover, but also Professor Brijan Kaul, a philosophy professor and her husband, who softened Vajpayee's more radical inclinations and intonations in his addresses. In a remarkable display of triangulation, Choudhary also finds distinct changes in the themes and content of Atal's poetry at this time. From unidimensional celebrations of Hindu valor, his verses became more autobiographical, introspective, and even melancholic, suggesting that the politician-poet did pass through a phase of personal, emotional, and possibly intellectual growth.

Lastly, the broadening of Vajpayee's horizons can also be attributed to a more tangible and experiential source. His tenure as a Member of Parliament where he was able to observe a colossus like Jawaharlal Nehru from close quarters, especially in terms of how he dealt with detractors; and his journeys to the United States and other democratic nations played a significant role. These experiences not only enriched his perspective on international affairs, a topic he had already displayed interest in through his writings in RSS publications, but they also introduced him to the workings of democracy across the world. For instance, watching presidential debates between Kennedy and Nixon, gave him a glimpse of the dynamics of democratic processes in countries other than India. These experiences also brought about cultural exploration, leading him to develop a taste for Chinese food, and even visited nightclubs once he was reassured that they were not of a risqué nature.

But at the same time, Vajpayee's moderate turn was not unusual in the prevailing environment. The Congress, at the forefront of India's struggle for independence, had embraced a pluralistic form of nationalism that was in stark contrast to the increasingly fervent calls for a religious nation reminiscent of the Muslim League's aspirations. Not only did the organization offer space to liberals like Nehru, but it also provided an umbrella to orthodox and conservative Hindus like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Madan Mohan Malviya (who served as its President for a record four terms), and Purushottam Das Tandon. Indeed, it was ironic but certainly not out of place that Mauli Chandra Sharma, a Congress leader but one whose father was in the Hindu Mahasabha—a right-wing party banned in the wake of Gandhi's assassination—made the arrangements for Gandhi's funeral, and later advocated on behalf of the RSS when it was banned!

Why focus so much on Atal's personal journey in this review? In this increasingly polarized era, Atal's turn towards moderation shows that it was as much a personal journey, perhaps a strategic imperative, and in tune with the prevailing environment. This holds valuable lessons that people often hold a complex mix of liberal and conservative sensibilities, and that developing inclusionary or reversing exclusionary

³ This is not to discount his culpability in the Babri Masjid demolition, as he did give a speech the day before the demolition. However, he left Ayodhya after this, and was not present at the site when the mosque was brought down. Vajpayee has a remarkable ability to escape the consequences of his actions as illustrated in the book.

attitudes—if deeply held beliefs—for good can often be long arduous personal journeys that can be hard to replicate in one-shot experiments, although they can be instructive as proofs of concept.

Even though the prevailing political dynamic between the incumbent and opposition parties in India seems more centrifugal than centripetal, Choudhary's illustration of the *practice* of politics till 1977 evokes a strong sense of déjà vu. From project inauguration sprees in the run-up to elections, to protesting against corruption and inflation, spectacles are critical to the practice of party politics. In this, the current opposition could draw insights from the long years that the BJP spent outside the corridors of power. Indeed one of the more amusing anecdotes recounted in the book is Vajpayee leading a herd of sheep through Delhi's streets to the Chinese embassy in 1965 to compensate for the alleged theft of 800 sheep and 59 yaks by Indian soldiers. At the same time, the current incumbent could learn from Nehru and Shastri about how to nurture—rather than ride roughshod—over democratic ideals and engage constructively with the opposition.

Ultimately, Vajpayee might not have aligned with the rigid expectations of a staunch activist within the party he led, yet he undeniably fulfilled what they needed. His ambivalence, dilemmas, and internal struggles—what underscored his humanity—also rendered him relatable to politicians across party lines, earning their recognition, respect, and perhaps even trust. This quality proved indispensable for the BJP's current position. Choudhary goes to lengths to show that the Vajpayee of this first volume is the right man in the right party, returning him to the Hindutva fold. But even so, Vajpayee does stand—even if just a bit—as a vacillating and self-contradictory but also an expansive man with multitudes in a movement that aims to consolidate and homogenize.

Choudhary spent more than seven years researching this book, and it shows. Archival work across India and the US led him to unearth the young Vajpayee's smoldering sense of victimhood. These archival nuggets puncture myths of academic excellence but also make him relatable. Indeed the seemingly innocuous act of his father reducing Atal's official age to allow an additional attempt at securing a government job—or extend his employment span—speaks to the psyche of pre-liberalization India where the state was a crucial source of stability, not only for its employees but also their families and community. Although I am not in a position to review interview methods that biographers employ, Choudhary occasionally uses an approach that has stood me in good stead during my qualitative research—multiple interviews over the course of several visits. Choudhary's meticulous research in the archives, careful perusal of historical newspapers and academic scholarship, holds significant lessons for upcoming biographers but also researchers and academics. The tenacious use and triangulation of these original and secondary sources of data, and cross-verification of commonly held myths help him separate the dilemmas from doublespeak, to the extent possible. Indeed, such an approach was perhaps all the more important for this book given the stupendous importance that Vajpayee holds for the current dispensation, and the lack of verifiable statements since private papers were unavailable to the author.

In conclusion, the dynamics between individuals and institutions, as showcased through Vajpayee's journey, remind us of the intricate reciprocity that underpins the course of political evolution. This volume vividly illustrates how Vajpayee's immediate surroundings and institutional affiliations influenced his perspectives. But was this unidirectional? It seems reasonable to speculate that this interaction was far more intricate, especially considering Vajpayee's substantial role as a ten-time Member of Parliament and three-time Prime Minister. Given this, delving into how Vajpayee, in turn, shaped the organizations and

institutions that nurtured him would be an immensely important contribution to our understanding of the Hindu right wing, and I look forward to the second volume that will track Vajpayee at a point when he was in a position to wield this influence.

References

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