VAJPAYEE’S INTERVIEW
(Courtesy Indian Express)

Bharatiya Janata Party
Publisher's Note

The Nation has been having the benefit of hearing Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee's views on all subjects and matters almost daily when he was the Opposition leader.

But when he became Prime Minister occasions were few and far between when people could hear his views as there were constraints in view of his responsibility.

Recently, on September 11th Indian Express provided an opportunity to its readers and to the nation to know Shri Atalji's mind on various issues and he too readily offered his free and frank views in his usual inimitable style. As this was an wide-ranging interview it has assumed added importance.

We felt that our readers and others who did not have the opportunity to read that day's Indian Express have missed something which they should not have. This has prompted us to bring the interview as published in Indian Express in the form of present booklet so as to benefit all those who would like to read it and preserve it.

We are much obliged to the Editor, Indian Express in this regard.

Trust this publication will serve the purpose with which it is being published.

Bharatiya Janata Party
An Interview

with

Shri Atalji

IT was one of those more relaxed Sundays when the prime minister must find it easier to become Atal Behari Vajpayee - laid back, reflective, expansive, ready to talk about more than he would on other occasions. When he sat down with SHEKHAR GUPTA for an exclusive interview - the first comprehensive one-on-one to non-government media since he became prime minister - he had just finished watching Lajja with his family at home. He had liked the film, he said, though he found a few bits "crude". The conversation, which lasted close to two hours, was essentially in Hindi and punctuated by trademark Vajpayee pauses. Excerpts:

**You've been prime minister for almost three years in two spells. Can you recount some of the most difficult or challenging moments?**

Frankly, there haven't been that many (laughs).

**There must be something.**

This one is now an old story. The war in Kargil was on. Nawaz Sharif was in Washington. Musharraf was also there. Now Clinton wanted that I should also come there. He said the three of us will sit together and sort this out. It was fourth of July and America's independence day. This was going on late at night and there was nobody available to advise. Even Brajeshji wasn't there. I was by myself. I had to decide. I said Mr President, I cannot come now. Indian people won't appreciate it. He again insisted. He said you come, I not only guarantee you a Pakistani withdrawal but also a new chapter in India-Pakistan relations where I will also play a role. I said no, the Pakistanis must withdraw from all Indian territories first. I stood firm. And yet people go around saying I am soft, I bend easily. When did I bend? On the nuclear tests? We knew there will be sanctions but we withstood them. Again, at Agra, while the media may have conveyed a different impression, the one-on-one talks that took place between General Musharraf and me had a very different character.
• It is being said that some of it involved an education on the subcontinent’s history?

That is correct. The constant refrain was Kashmir, Kashmir. So I asked: but who attacked first? He even admitted that if the tribals had not been sent to invade Kashmir (in 1947) even the part of Kashmir they (the Pakistanis) still have won’t have been there. What does it mean? That if the people of Kashmir actually did not want to go to Pakistan, so the tribals had to be sent, force had to be used?

• There must have been more tricky moments. During Kargil, Tehelka?

Again during Kargil, in the later stages, it transpired that while Nawaz Sharif had promised withdrawal in Washington, he did not actually do it on the ground. Nawaz Sharif told us, please do not worry, we will withdraw. Let’s start to talk meanwhile. Let’s figure out the exact areas of encroachment first. We told them, this won’t work. There are maps available. LoC is clearly demarcated. This is not like the border with China. You better withdraw fully, or the war will go on, I said. Now, at this moment there was a great deal of confusion in Pakistan. They had not fully committed to withdrawal. Nor had they given out instructions to their troops. But news was floating that a withdrawal was to take place. So their soldiers did not know what to do. Many began withdrawing, presuming the war was over. But we told Pakistan firmly that the withdrawal should be total before any talks. Then there was also pressure at home that you cross the line of control. But I put my foot down. That we should not cross because, ultimately, we will have to withdraw. That we should stick to our principled stand.

• Did that pressure come from within the cabinet as well?

Yes.

• But I am sure there were moments, when casualties were coming, or things looked grim when you thought of crossing the LoC? When did you come closest to taking that decision?

Never. It never came to that. But there was always a thought in my mind. That in all the agreements we have had so far the adversary has taken something back as a gain. This time that should not happen.

• That reminds me of your initial opposition to the Simla agreement. I believe you gave a fiery speech at a rally the day the agreement was signed...

That was at Ramlila Maidan. I remember, it was getting a bit dark in the evening when so many people burnt pages of the Simla
agreement. Now, we were not against it because we did not want peace with Pakistan. We thought we had a real opportunity to settle the Kashmir problem for ever. We had the upper hand. We had the prisoners. The Pakistanis had been in the wrong. It is true there was international pressure. The world was saying how long you will keep the prisoners. But it still seemed that it was an agreement signed in a hurry. We even agreed to put the Kashmir settlement there. Now it's a problem.

- **How sincere is Pakistan now?**

  I am not so sure. An obsession seems to have built up there. They also realise that if we actually become friendly, improve trade and cultural relations, Kashmir may not remain such a big issue. They go on and on with this idea of Kashmir being the unfinished agenda of partition.

- **But aren't they worried about their own losses? Their economy? Their people dying in Kashmir?**

  They believe India's losses are much higher. Actually, this Track II has caused a lot of damage. It has made Pakistanis believe that Indians are desperate for peace. When Musharraf came here he may have thought, by the time he returns, everything would have been settled.

- **Were you able to disabuse Musharraf of this notion?**

  Yes. He has realised we will not give away Kashmir. That there is a strong feeling about Kashmir here as well. We may not talk too much or make a song and dance about jehad and so on but there is no way India would bend on Kashmir.

- **Do you think you achieved something at Agra?**

  I think so. But I do think we were lacking a bit in communicating with the media, in keeping them briefed. We thought, the talks are still going on, this is a retreat. But possibly we could have kept the media more properly briefed. But let me say the media also could have done better. He had come fully prepared. But the editors (at the breakfast meeting) should have also asked him some tough questions. Nobody even said that Pakistan had done wrong in Kashmir.

- **But the atmosphere then was different. Just a day earlier our own president, in his banquet speech, had hailed Musharraf as a distinguished son of Delhi. It was awkward now to suddenly be rude to him at his breakfast table...**

  Maybe, our media also thought he is a guest. We had, after all, left nothing to chance when it came to protocol and hospitality.
So do you still think some movement can take place in our relations while there is Army rule in Pakistan?

Yes, it is possible.

Do you think you might find Musharraf a different man from one you met in Agra?

Let us see. I am hopeful. The invitation has come from them. It wasn't always on the cards that we meet at New York. First, the foreign secretaries and the foreign ministers were to meet. But I am not so sure that substantive talks can take place in New York. Maybe that our foreign ministers can meet and a structured dialogue can start. But we have to keep reminding them that if J&K is the core issue, what lies at its core is the fact that they have always tried to take recourse to force. In 1947-8 they sent the tribals. If they were sure of the people of Kashmir coming to them, why did they send the tribals? Now they tried Kargil. Each time they lost. I think he (Musharraf) wants to show that he has made a gain.

Gain in Kashmir?

Well, gain in the sense that I got India to accept the centrality of Kashmir that it is the core issue. Actually, the real issue between us is distrust. Now you know Musharraf got upset when a television reporter in Agra said, can you trust that man? But when he was addressing his press conference in Islamabad a journalist similarly asked him, Vajpayee betrays you each time, Why do you talk to him? Is there any option but war? He handled it tactfully. But this is the point. There is so much distrust and first we must address that.

Do you still believe the dialogue can carry on bilaterally? Or has time come for us to think of a mediator given the deteriorating situation in Pakistan?

Pakistan's situation is actually improving right now.

You mean the economy?

Yes, the economy is doing better. But also in terms of international image. The general is talking of elections, a roadmap for democracy.

So that's all the more reason we must focus on our economy.

Indeed. And that is my biggest concern right now. We must remove the confusion. Wherever the Congress has state governments they are following the same reformist policies. We have been hesitating in reforming labour law. But Maharashtra is already doing it.

But your people are opposing it.

We have told them. In the Assembly they haven't opposed. But
the Congress also harasses our ally TDP when they reform in Andhra Pradesh. Congress actually offered free electricity and water. This has to stop on both sides.

- **You complain about the Congress but your own allies are offering freebies, like the Akalis in Punjab.**

  But they are now learning. They know we cannot bring in money from anywhere. The state governments' finances are in a mess. Now tougher questions will be asked before any money is given out. We will also increase the monitoring of how it is spent.

- **Do you see a realistic chance of an understanding with the Congress?**

  Yes, it is possible. But we know Soniaji also has problems and compulsions. If she follows a positive approach people say, you are mixed up with the BJP, you are not like the opposition. Of course, she has also sometimes said, where is the need for the Congress to act like the opposition when there is opposition within the BJP itself?

- **That is what I am coming to. People say the economic consensus exists between your government and the Congress. But not within the BJP or the Sangh Parivar.**

  I am trying to change this. This opposition has lessened a great deal. But they have a political compulsion. They say, who knows how long this government will last. We have to go back in the opposition. So we must keep our political posture alive or somebody else will take the opposition's role. The truth is, no one even seems capable of taking that opposition slot. This is what we have to appreciate.

- **That’s what 50 years in the opposition does to you? You aren’t even convinced you are the ruling party now?**

  Well, the opposition has lessened a great deal.

- **Did you tell them they are harming national interest?**

  I told them you are harming the nation and harming yourselves by conveying the impression that it is your government but it doesn't listen to you. Does this enhance your stature or clout?

- **Why do they do so?**

  It is now an old habit. Oppose everything. But there are some apprehensions as well.

- **You said the biggest challenge is the economy. How worrying is the situation?**

  The situation is tough. But it hasn't gone out of control. The steps
we have taken will show results.

- **There are mixed opinions about the cabinet reshuffle. It seems too many people have been rewarded for non-performance and others punished despite performing.**

  That is not true. I have tried to assess people only on the basis of merit.

- **Your finance minister? Haven't things gone wrong under the current dispensation in the finance ministry?**

  That is why he is still there. He knows exactly what is wrong there and should also know how to fix it.

- **Did you ever come close to changing your finance minister?**

  That wouldn't have been fair. That would have amounted to shifting all the blame on him. After all whatever decisions have been taken were taken collectively. It wouldn't have been fair to make only him the sacrificial goat. There were also many things that were beyond control. What happened in the stock markets for example.

- **Do you also believe conspiracy theories that the stock markets were brought down deliberately?**

  It is a matter of investigation. Particularly what happened after the budget. After all, the budget had won high praise. It was a very good budget. Some facts emerging from the Tehelka inquiry indicate the possibility of a conspiracy. But beyond that, I won't say anything right now.

- **But wouldn't there have been some mismanagement in the economy?**

  Not really. But some complacency had set in. That all is well, there is nothing to worry about.

- **But shouldn't someone have figured out the problems in the UTI earlier?**

  Yes. And the fact is it wasn't found out.

- **Have you pulled up the finance ministry?**

  I have asked them.

- **The biggest criticism against you is, you don't hold anybody accountable. Ten thousand Pakistanis sat in Kargil, we didn't sack even a havildar. Now such a mess in the economy and nobody's been punished except the UTI chairman. Why?**

  It isn't entirely true. But yes, we have to increase accountability. It will have to start from the political level.
There are some mistakes that are caused mainly by inexperience. What is going on the share market, what are the trends, for example, somebody has to keep an eye. Our finance minister said I didn't know what is going on. Now he spoke the truth when he said he didn't know what was going on (laughs).

- **But is that good enough?**
  It may not be good enough but at least we must appreciate the honesty in that answer.

- **How soon can we expect action on the economy?**
  Things are already happening. Meetings are taking place all the time.

- **Will you do something specific, on interest rates, for example?**
  Something is being done.

- **On Enron?**
  A process has been initiated. Let's see...

- **Are you hoping for repair work to begin before you leave for the US so it might improve the mood of the investors?**
  That is the effort at least.

- **What about the charges that people close to you and the Sangh Parivar have been calling institutions and banks to push financing decisions?**
  It is nothing new. It has always happened. People come with proposals and we tell (institutions and banks) bhai, yeh project hai, zara dekh lena. That doesn't mean there is any pressure. Now people are walking around with lists of telephone calls. That so many phone calls were made. Now making phone calls is no crime. What kind of a case of wrongdoing is made out just because somebody made phone calls?

- **Even if phone calls will continue to be made, shouldn't you institute some transparency? That a person should make a note of the call made?**
  We haven't done it as yet. But we will have to do it.

- **UTI is already in trouble. So is IFCI. IDBI is struggling. Will you now be firm that such things no longer take place?**
  Yes, indeed.

- **But people say Mr Vajpayee can’t be tough. His heart melts too easily.**
  Come on, how does the heart get involved in all this?
People say if you catch someone doing something really wrong, you may upbraid him a bit but then let go.

Now my nature is what it is. But in the next two years this won't happen. Until now I was more concerned about the survival of the government. It is a 24-party coalition, there should be political stability, nothing should go wrong. But now this will not happen.

So are you giving up the fears that the government might fall?

In the cabinet reshuffle, I have taken many courageous decisions.

Which is the most courageous one?

The decision to remove Jagmohan wasn't the most courageous one.

Why did you remove him?

In Delhi the atmosphere had deteriorated a great deal. It would have affected us in the corporation elections. I had backed him fully. But he was probably overdoing it.

But you didn't say which was the most courageous decision?

That I won't tell you (laughs).

What do we expect from the new Mr Vajpayee in the next two years?

The focus will be on governance. I will increase monitoring. Also, accountability.

What has made you give up old hesitations? What was bothering you? Health?

Health was a concern.

Was it a worry, or an irritant?

No, it was a burden on the heart.

Is that over now?

Yes.

Was it just the knees?

Yes.

So you now say that for the next two years, you will only do what is good for governance?

Yes. Some political considerations will be there.

But you won't be conscious as in the past?

Yes.
Did allegations against your office, and family also bother you?

Well, a strange atmosphere had been created.

But did you ever suspect that some of these allegations were true?

No. Never.

Do you really have a way of finding out?

Yes.

In the Tehelka revelations, direct evidence was found against certain people. But so much of the controversy surrounded people around you. Why?

Well, people took advantage of the situation. They tried to create this atmosphere deliberately. They tried to use Tehelka against me.

But wasn't this done by your own people?

Yes, by our own people.

Did you take it up with them?

But no, our people did not do Tehelka. They only took advantage of Tehelka.

Does that hurt?

Yes.

You know who these people are?

Yes, I know who they are.

What will you do to them?

What will I do? (laughs)

Have you confronted them?

They know. They are aware. They know exactly who were the people.

On a completely different plain, why is your government giving so many extensions demoralising the bureaucracy?

There haven't been that many.

The MEA has had many. Then the cabinet secretary...

The MEA has had some. But extensions are only given when necessary, when the right people are not available.

Yes. But again, you talk of one-man-one-post. But in such a large cabinet the same minister heads external affairs and
defence. Doesn't it look a bit ridiculous that you have created a dual charge in such important ministries just to keep the defence minister's chair warm for somebody?

To some extent what you are saying is right.

- **Does this ever worry you?**
  
  Not really. Not too much.

- **To go back to the earlier problem, do you feel targeted?**
  
  This happens because they do not like my style of functioning. Now they say I am liberal. Do they pause to think what we'd be if not liberal? What will be the consequences if we are not liberal? They even say I am doing it for the Nobel peace prize. Do I really care? Will there be something bigger than the prime ministership of India?

- **Are you putting this down firmly now?**
  
  Yes.

- **Is it working.**
  
  Yes. The opposition people target people around me to weaken me.

- **But more than the real opposition aren't they within your own midst?**
  
  Yes. That is why I had offered to resign.

- **Did that straighten them?**
  
  (Laughs aloud).

- **Did this controversy create any distance or tension between you and your family?**
  
  No, no. On the other hand it was because of me that they were exposed to tension and trouble. I felt hurt that all this happened because of me. Otherwise what do they have to do with all this?

_COURTSEY: Indian Express_

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