

## **Role of Atal Bihari Vajpayee as Prime Minister (1999 – 2004)**

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### **Abstract**

*India follows a Parliamentary system of government. In the Indian parliamentary democracy, the real head of the state is the Prime Minister, who is the true representative of the people. Richard Crossman has named the Parliamentary form of Government as the "Prime Ministerial form of Government."<sup>1</sup> The august office of the Prime Minister witnessed various ups and downs in its prestige and authority under different incumbents in office. From the first Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru to the present Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the functioning of the Prime Ministers has been reflective of the distinct phases of leadership styles and authority systems based on the stature and grip of the leader on the party organization as also on the government. Prime Minister exercises this power with the support of his colleagues who are considered to be his equals in theory, but in practice, they are subservient to him. The President cannot dislodge the Prime Minister as long as he can command majority support in Parliament<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, every minister in the Council of Ministers can hold office only as long as it pleases the Prime Minister. So, The Prime Minister leads the executive branch of the Government of India. The Prime Minister is the senior member of the Cabinet in the executive branch of government in a parliamentary system. This paper evolves the position of Prime Minister during the period of Atal Bihari Vajpayee.*

**Keywords:** *Government, Prime Minister, Parliament, Coalition.*

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## **Introduction**

*The Prime Minister's role is, and should be, an important role. He is not only a figurehead but a person who should be more responsible than anyone else for the general trend of policy and for the coordination of the work of various government departments. The final authority necessarily is the Cabinet itself. But in the type of democratic setup we have adopted, the Prime Minister is supposed to play an outstanding role"*

*Jawaharlal Nehru*

## **Objectives of the study**

- Ø To examines the importance of the Indian Prime Minister.
- Ø To evaluates the role of Atal Bihari Vajpayee as a Prime Minister under BJP coalition governments.

## **The methodology of the study:**

The present study is based on historical and analytical methods.

## **Importance of the Study**

The significance of the study is that the Prime Minister is the 'keystone of cabinet 'arch' in the Indian parliamentary system. He heads the Council of Ministers and guides all the activities of the Council in all spheres. His leadership is an accepted fact, as on his advice the other Ministers are appointed by the President. He is regarded as the chief spokesman of the government on the matter of general policy. He makes all the important announcements. The study of Atal Bihari Vajpayee reveals the capacity to deal with boundary crises, towards poor love, international brotherhood, and cooperation.

## **First Prime Ministership Inning of Atal Bihari Vajpayee (16 May to 1<sup>st</sup> June 1996)**

After the 11<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha election in May 1996 a hung Lok Sabha in which no party or combination of parties got majority. Congress itinerated badly with 140 seats. B.J.P emerged as the single largest party with 161 seats and National Front and Left Front combination secured 180 seats. On 16<sup>th</sup> May 1996, the President Shankar Dayal Sharma invited Atal Bihari Vajpayee as the largest party to form the government and prove his majority on May 31. The President addressed both Houses of Parliament assembled together on 23<sup>rd</sup> May. Atal Bihari Vajpayee decided to proceed in the hope that the Congress Party and the National Front-Left Front parties would remain divided and that the Congress (I) would not oppose the formation of the government. He also hoped to gain support from powerful regional parties, but in the intense maneuvering that followed the Vajpayee announcement, the Congress

(I) switched positions and decided to support the National Front-Left Front alliance which had secured 131 seats to the Congress party's 140 seats. Vajpayee managed to pull a coalition together that lasted all of thirteen days (16 May to 1<sup>st</sup> June 1996) in office. He could not prove the majority on the floor of Lok Sabha and submitted his resignation to the President on 28<sup>th</sup> May. Thus Vajpayee had the shortest tenure as time as a coalition government.

### **Second Prime Ministership Inning of Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-1999)**

The 1998 elections again produced a Hung Lok Sabha with BJP as the single largest party with 182 seats and its alliance got a total of 254 seats. On 15<sup>th</sup> March 1998 the President, after holding a fairly long meeting with Atal Bihari Vajpayee and handed over the letter appointing him as the next Prime Minister of India. Vajpayee was sworn as Prime Minister on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1998. President Narayanan asked Vajpayee to prove his majority within 10 days.<sup>3</sup> The appointment of Ministers and distribution of the portfolios among them was done by the President on the recommendations of the Prime Minister. Similarly, the session of Parliament was summoned and prorogued by President K. R. Narayanan on the advice of Prime Minister Vajpayee. The President's Address to the Parliament was also presented in accordance with the wishes of the Prime Minister Vajpayee.

During Vajpayee's second inning, on 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> May 1998, India successfully demonstrated its nuclear potential by testing five underground nuclear devices as a remote place called Pokhran. It was a great opportunity during the Vajpayee government. These nuclear tests were conducted in complete secrecy. The USA and its allies could not discover India's proposed detonations beforehand. They were duly taken aback. They expressed their consternation and also decided to impose certain sanctions on India. The USA also insisted that India should sign the CTBT unconditionally and immediately. But the Vajpayee government refused to oblige. Indian independence and sovereignty were permanently secured by Vajpayee after the test of atomic bomb. Mrs. Gandhi had changed the geography of that continent by cutting Pakistan, so Atal Bihari changed the history of the Indian subcontinent by doing nuclear tests.

On 1<sup>st</sup> December 1998, the minister of parliamentary affairs, Madan Lal Khurana, challenged the local section of opposition to bring a no-confidence motion against the government if they dared. But the challenge was not accepted. On 11<sup>th</sup> December 1998, the government had planned to introduce the Women's Reservation Bill in Lok Sabha. However, this move was thwarted by a certain member of the Opposition, Durga Parsad Saroj, in a crude and uncouth manner. This member got

involved in a scuffle with Mamta Banerjee in the well of the House. Another Opposition member physically prevented the minister from tabling the motion in the House and this bill was lapsed. The whole year 1998 passed as a period of blackmailing by allies supporting Atal Bihari Vajpayee from inside or outside.<sup>4</sup> All parties supporting the government were putting one demand or another every day forcing Vajpayee to talk about incapable decisions or deferring decisions. Thus, Vajpayee's government was not free from internal crisis. Cabinet minister Madan Lal Khurana resigned from the Union Cabinet. He earned the displeasure of RSS by questioning the organization for its criticism of the coalition government.

Trinamool Congress leader Ajit Panja met the Prime Minister in the first week of January 1999 and announced that the Trinamool Congress would be joining the government. The Coordination Committee of the BJP and its allies met on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1999 in New Delhi and demanded that the price of wheat and rice was hiked. But Mamta Banerjee and her party members did not attend this meeting.<sup>5</sup> There was a crisis brewing for the government. At the end of the first week of February 1999, when the Prime Minister Vajpayee went to Jamaica to attend an important meeting of G- 15 countries. After the Prime Minister had left the country, Om Prakash Chautala of the Indian National Lok Dal announced that his group comprising four MPs would withdraw support to the Vajpayee Government if, within two days, it did not roll back the proposed increase in prices. Prime Minister Vajpayee telephoned Chautala thrice from Jamaica. This was the major rumbling of discontent. So the role of regional parties was emerged in parliament during Vajpayee's this inning.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee had to face rough weather from AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) Chief Jaya Lalitha and he failed to fulfill her demands. Her three demands were sacking of George Fernandes from the post of Defense Minister and reinstatement of the sacked Navy chief, Vishnu Bhagwat, and setting up a Joint Parliamentary Committee to probe into allegations made by George Fernandes against Bhagwat. Atal Bihari Vajpayee asserted that indiscipline by anybody in the armed forces could not be tolerated, in an obvious reference to the Bhagwat case. Lalitha withdrew support from the government in the first week of April and forced it to seek vote of confidence in Lok Sabha. Hence the President asked Atal Bihari Vajpayee to seek a fresh vote of confidence. After 2 days of acrimonious debate in the Lok Sabha, the Vajpayee government was defeated by one vote on 17<sup>th</sup> April, 1999 (269 votes in favor and 270 votes against the motion of confidence). Vajpayee went to meet President K. R. Narayanan and submitted his resignation to him. Thus, Vajpayee's second term was only fourteen months.

### **Third Prime Ministership Inning of Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1999-2004)**

A charismatic leadership plays an important role in a traditional society like that of India and can bring greater cohesion and dynamism in the functioning of the Council of Ministers and maintaining its stability. Vajpayee who had been an outstanding parliamentarian, an amiable person, a great orator, and a man with a clean image, had enhanced the quality and status of the coalition government. The elections for the 13th Lok Sabha were held in September-October 1999.<sup>6</sup> The BJP formed an alliance-the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) with 23 other Parties and adopted a common election manifesto. Later on, the Janata Dal (United) also joined this alliance. The Congress made electoral arrangements or understanding with some Political Parties (CPI, BSP, RJD, RPI, and AIADMK) in different states, but did not try to forge a full alliance. The left front particularly the CPM tried to revive the Third Front, but with little success. The emerging Indian Political scene reflected the possibility of the rise of 183 three groups in the Indian Party system. In these elections, the NDA was in a position to secure a simple majority- 296 seats in the 13th Lok Sabha. Later on, the National Conference and some other elected MPs decided to join it and its majority improved to 304 seats.<sup>7</sup>

A coalition government is weak by nature. It works on the on the principle of consensus and in our political system, it is difficult to maintain consensus. Atal Bihari Vajpayee was a very confident and experienced one to run the coalition government following its crucial as well as behavioral norms. So he became the first Prime Minister to complete full term of the government as a coalition leader with the support of 23 parties. The appointment of Ministers and distribution of the portfolios among them was done by the President on the recommendations of the Prime Minister. Similarly, the session of Parliament was summoned and prorogued President K. R. Narayanan him on the advice of the Prime Minister. The President's Address to the Parliament was also presented in accordance with the wishes of the Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Seventy ministers were inducted into the Council of Ministers, but a few days later 4 more ministers were added. The jumbo size of the ministry reflected fully a large number of constituents of the NDA- a coalition of 24 parties.

He legitimized himself as a true coalition leader. But he faced many ups and downs during this regime but as a seasoned politician. He boldly faced every minor or major challenge to his government. If there had been a dominating theme in Vajpayee's stint at the top, it was with three K's- Kargil, Kandhar, and Kashmir. Vajpayee suffered badly in Kandhar in December 1999 when Indian Airlines flight IC- 814 was hijacked to Kandahar, he had to surrender 3 dreaded hard-core terrorists to the Taliban in Afghanistan. It was a very low point in Vajpayee's third regime.

The biggest crisis for the Prime Minister came with the Tehelka Scam. The Tehelka incident was a much-talked about the affair during Vajpayee's Prime Ministership. Tehelka people showed several people of the BJP as well as army officials taking bribes regarding defense deals on the basis of secret cameras. The public saw this scene on several television channels. The worst victims of the Tehelka incident were the then BJP President Bangaru Laxman and NDA convenor and Defence Minister George Fernandez. Laxman Bangaru resigned from his post and George Fernandez also resigned from his post. After a few days, Vajpayee recalled George Fernandez to the council of ministers and again made Fernandez the Minister of Defence. The opposition was always against George in Parliament. Whenever George stood up to speak, the opposition would go on a rampage or walk out of the house and their situation continued till the end.

On 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2000, the NDA coalition government faced a major crisis when Mamta Banerjee along with Ajit Panja of Trinamool Congress resigned from the Union Cabinet in protest against the abnormal hike in petroleum products. On 13<sup>th</sup> December 2001, a group of masked men with fake IDs stormed the Parliament building in Delhi. The terrorist managed to kill several security forces concerned and killed the men, who were later proven to be Pakistan nationals. It was a bad incident of the Vajpayee era. The prevention of terrorism Bill or popularly known as POTA was tabled in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha on 18<sup>th</sup> March and 21<sup>st</sup> March, 2002 by the NDA government. In the Lok Sabha when the Bill was tabled to vote, it was supported by 261 members and 137 members of Lok Sabha voted against it. However, in the Rajya Sabha, the Bill was defeated where 113 members of Rajya Sabha voted against the Bill and 98 members supported it. Finally, in a joint session of the Indian Parliament on March 26, 2002, the bill was passed, and thus the Vajpayee government succeeded in putting the law in its book.<sup>8</sup>

The most talked-about plan of the Vajpayee era was the Golden Quadrilateral plan. Under this, he wanted to connect the major cities of the north and south of the country with long broad roads. A large part of this plan was completed during the time of the Vajpayee government, if his government were to run again for the next five years, his road construction dream would have been fulfilled completely. Vajpayee had advanced the election dates by six months in the hope of riding a wave of optimism about India's economic prospects captured by the *India Shining* campaign mounted by his Bharatiya Janta Party, in leading party in the alliance. However, reports of suicides by cotton farmers in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra stained the NDA's image.

## **Conclusion**

The finding of this paper is that the position of the Prime Minister in relation to the Council of Ministers or his decision-making process were concerned, these remained very weak due to the unstable position of the Prime Minister during the second inning of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The coalition government was also affecting the role of the Prime Minister. He had to sphere power with the leaders of other parties; he had less authority in coalition government. Prime Minister was not in a position to choose members as ministers in the Council of Ministers who do not belong to his own party, instead those Ministers were being chosen by the respective party leaders. He was also unable to dismiss them without carrying the wrath of the respective party. He was acting as a mediator between different political parties. During the third inning of Prime Ministership Atal Bihari Vajpayee proved that coalition government can be stably provided the parties forming the coalition observe coalition culture and work with the limits set by the agenda of coalition government better known as Common Minimum Programme. Vajpayee was projected before the nation as an able leader for a stable government as the leader in war and peace. He was described as a statesman who was above party and politics and narrow loyalties. The Indian middle class saw Vajpayee as an able leader in the era of unstable coalitions. Shri Vajpayee's government was also successful on the economic front, the policy of economic liberalization was adopted during Narasimha Rao, the same policy continued during Vajpayee's Prime Ministership. Thus, Prime Minister Vajpayee completed the third innings of his Prime Ministership successfully.

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