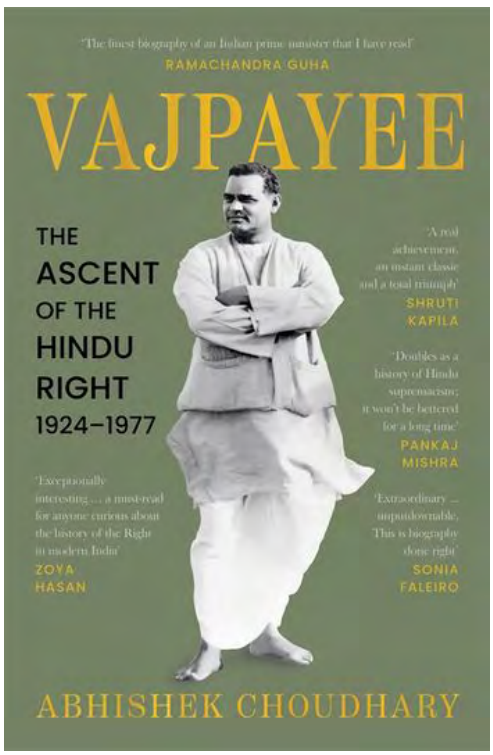
Book Review

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Explaining Contradictions of A Complex Personality

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VAJPAYEE: The Ascent of the Hindu Right, 1924–1977

Author of the book:
Abhishek Choudhary

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Abhishek Choudhary, the author of the latest book on the former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in an interview to promote his work had said that biographies are not a place for tribute but assessment. And this he says despite being unabashed in calling Vajpayee the Amitabh Bachchan of Indian politics. The book, which according to the author took him almost eight years to write, reiterates the point in the preface itself saying, "A

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biographer I have learnt, ought not to be awestruck at the beauty of the tapestry: I have tried my best here to examine the underside."

Now let me say that this review may not be bereft of bias not because I somewhat know Abhishek Choudhary but for the reason that I was a witness to the making of this book in the making at least for two years, before the onset of Covid forced lockdowns. I had almost forgotten about the project when a few days back I read the announcement that the book is out.

I first met Choudhary at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library at Teen Murti house sometime in 2016, when I was piloting a project on Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel with a group of young scholars from Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University. As is the wont at NMML, the tea break discussion gives one insight into many realms of knowledge, so did I get into what Choudhary was planning. I took a liking for him for another reason that like me he too came from a military school, made a career in journalism and now taking a dip into academic research. Meanwhile, I had a very bitter parting of ways with then NMML management as they tried to shape and shade our thoughts on Patel in sync of their agenda.

A few weeks after the parting, I was surprised to receive a call from Choudhary wanting to connect. Surprised because Choudhary had been introduced to me by the person who the villain of piece of our short-lived NMML story, where we were robbed of our idea and project. I mentioned this to Choudhary but he was clear that he wanted to know about my experiences as a reporter who covered some of the public rallies of Vajpayee, and that he would not let me go.

Thereafter the association was rekindled. Choudhary's focus and perseverance is fabulous, which comes across in the content of the book. I approached the book with certain amount of apprehension thinking Choudhary would be under the influence of my two dear friends – Akshay Mukul and Dhirendra K Jha. Despite being good friends I have had my difference of opinion with the two comrades. Though Choudhary expresses gratitude to the two for helping him in his endeavor but the book's text is bereft of any obvious influence.

While there is a plenty of literature available on Vajpayee, the politician, the statesman, and the prime minister, it's to Choudhary's credit that he starts the book with a guided tour to Vapayee's home town Bateshwar near Agra. He takes us through him childhood, adolescence and finally emergence as a political activist. A very interesting revelation here is that

Vajpayee's ideological make-up was not rooted in reading of any ancient Indian texts from Vedic or the later period but gorging on the Arya Samaj's interpretation of Indian history.

Another interesting aspect of the book is clearing many a popular beliefs around Vajpayee, be it about his relationship with first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, his daughter and India's third Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and about his friend Rajkumari Kaul. None of the hagiographers of Vajpayee ever attempted to clear such 'misgivings', probably because their work lacked the rigour of research to counter popular beliefs, howsoever wrong.

Coming back to his growing up years especially at Gwalior, the book tells us why the Gwalior state went rightward. It's to be seen in the context of the rise of the Muslim League, which enjoyed the patronage of the neighbouring principality of Bhopal. What's however is interesting is that Gwalior's Rajmata Vijayaraje Scindia entered the electoral politics around the same time as Vajpayee in 1957 albeit on Congress ticket. She remained with the Congress till 1967, when she joined the Swatantra Party and finally the Bhartiya Jans Sangh in the same year.

Vajpayee, whose major benefactor was Gwalior state, was initiated into Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1953. The author explains it as a young man looking to make a career in either journalism or academics being overtaken by circumstances and ending up in politics. His initiation into politics too is rather interesting as his essential role was being the 'voice in Hindi' of Bharatiya Jana Sangh founder Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and entering the Jana Sangh fulltime only after Mukherjee's death. It's between 1953 and 1957 that the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh propels Vajpayee across the country to participate in almost all of the political movements then going on from Jammu and Kashmir to Goa. When he enters Lok Sabha in 1957, he is no novice but an acceptable leadership face within the Sangh *parivar*.

Another clarity which the book brings is on some calling Vajpayee a Gandhian. He wasn't one and his writings in Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh publications are very critical of Gandhi's Khilafat movement and also going on a fast unto death to end communal riots following partition. Vajpayee's admiration for Gandhi in later part of his life was not that of a political activist but a mature statesman, who felt the need for accommodation to become part of the mainstream. Thus also comes his grudging admiration for Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

One of the best part of the book is the one describing the relation between Vajpayee, Rajkumari Kaul, the mother of his daughter and her husband BN Kaul. A very complex

relationship very sensitively written about including the problems it created for Vajpayee with a 'conservative' RSS, but then Vajpayee was best known for managing contradictions.

This volume ends with onset of Janata Party government in 1977. The more exciting political journey of Vajpayee begins only after that, which would be something to look forward to in volume two of this book.