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"There have been moments of exhilaration; and there have been times we have felt ourselves down in the dumps. But our track record has been such that, after every set back, we have bounced back with greater strength and vigour" (Union Home Minister and BJP leader L. K. Advani while addressing the National Executive Committee meet at Goa, April 12-14, 2002. BJP Today, May 15-31).

Elaborating his points, Advani made a reference to the set backs of the party in 1953 after the death of Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, and rout of the BJP in 1984 Lok Sabha poll, when its strength in parliament was reduced to 2. His remark might be a natural outcome to boost the sinking morale of the party in view of its successive electoral defeats since the BJP came to power at the centre. But how far would his message reinvigorate the party for electoral gains in future elections ? Only time will tell.

In 1984 the rout of the party, when it was in opposition was not only due to the pro-Congress wave following the assassination of Indira Gandhi but also due to the disappointment of the parent body RSS over 'Gandhian socialism' accepted as political ideology by the party leadership. The party pursued it against the core ideology of 'integral humanism'.

According to a media report, the RSS chief K.S. Sudarshan in a meeting of the top leaders of BJP and RSS at P.M's residence in last week of April this year felt that " the party's credibility with the masses had diminished and further erosion had to be checked". He was also quoted saying, " if the credibility remains intact, power will follow. But if we lose credibility, we lose power as well."

If the declarations and resolutions of the National Executive followed by the joint meeting of the top leaders of both the BJP and the RSS are any indication, the party leadership has perhaps realised the ground reality and gone for a self introspection and soul searching exercises.

This may be a part of the preparation for the assembly elections due next year to be followed by Lok Sabha election in 2004.

While discussing the issue of credibility we may like to analyse the fifty- month rule of the BJP at the centre:

At the dawn of this new millennium, the BJP got a unique opportunity to take over the reins of the country. This opportunity was available to them after struggling for about half a century of political journey, when their leader A.B.Vajpayee with his Hindu nationalist background emerged as a nationally acceptable leader.

Vajpayee became the chief executive of the country essentially as a compromise between the conflicting interests of various competing groups for sharing power and not to strengthen the democratic process of the country *per se*. One should remember that Vajpayee always tried to project himself as a moderate leader due to his political compulsions but he perhaps did not realise that his moderate objectives were contrary to the spirit of the policy objective of his party. The result was he could neither meet the expectations of the people nor maintain the credibility of the party.

By forcing the BJP to rely more on its allies in the government, Vajpayee made the party more vulnerable to accusations within the party that he has lost the policy objective moorings of the party. In pursuing two options to remain in power and losing its ideological and electoral base, the BJP as a prisoner of its allies lost its direction. Unmindful of the larger interest of the party, he preferred to play more the politics for appeasement of the allies and keeping a distance from the ideological moorings of the party than showing any genuine concern for the sinking morale of the party cadres.

After taking over the command of the country in 1998, Vajpayee took courage on May 11,1998 to declare the country a nuclear power. This was his first action, which enhanced his image as the tallest leader of the country. But gradually he displayed no such courage in taking unpleasant actions even for the greater benefit of the people and the country. He gave more importance to weighing the consequences even if such actions required were in the larger interest of the nation. Compromise with terrorists, who hijacked the Indian Airlines was a classic example, which was viewed as 'Hindu cowardice' by the former RSS chief Rajendra Singh.

Within Sangh Parivar, Vajpayee is viewed as a leader suffering from a sense of individualism like Nehru and Indira, as he did not make any sincere effort to strengthen the party. Allowing the intra-party feud in state units and changing the chief ministers in Delhi and U.P., where the party had completely lost its credibility proved to be futile attempts on the part of the leadership. Similarly, he pushed through Bangaru Laxman as party president and imposed Chennai declaration on the party, which was not in tune with the ideological moorings of the BJP.

Ignoring the party ideologues having expertise in various fields, his preference to former bureaucrats like Yaswant Sinha and Brajesh Mishra, bureaucrat turned politicians, who had no link with the ideological roots of the party - as as Finance Minister and Security Advisor antagonised the Sangh leaders. Sangh Parivar of which Vajpayee is a 'swayamsevak' does not believe in personality cult and therefore his

attempt to project himself as an internationalist was frustrating. This gradually affected even his image as a Hindu nationalist. Mahatma Gandhi rightly said, " it is impossible for one to be an internationalist without being a nationalist (Legacy of Gandhi by N.G.Jog,-1966, page 8)."

Kashmir was and continues to be a prominent issue in the agenda of the BJP. But what has happened? By accepting the electoral legitimisation of the dynastic politics of Abdullahs in tune with Nehru-Gandhi culture, Vajpayee Government continued on the Kashmir issue where the country was at the time of Independence. The hot pursuit, proactive policy and decisive battle against Pakistan remained simply as slogans of L.K.Advani in the absence of any positive action on Kashmir policy.

The new economic policy has directly hit the urban and sub-urban middle class, which has been the vote bank of the party. Low bank interests on savings and investments, fraudulent actions of a number of financial institutions and exposure of scams disappointed the people. Swadeshi was never a priority of Vajpayee Government.

Relegated to the third slot in U.P. Assembly, the parliamentary board of the BJP took a decision to sit in opposition. In a sudden U turn, the party accepted the partnership of BSP for sharing power in a coalition Government led by a mercurial leader Mayawati. This has antagonised large sections of the upper caste who formed the vote bank of the party in UP. It only showed the indecisiveness of the party leaders and politically open to the charge that it is also playing the same caste based opportunistic politics like other political parties.

To bring back the lost glory of the country has all along been the focus of the political ideology of the BJP. To achieve this goal the party ever since its formation in 1951 as Bhartiya Jana Sangh banked upon its slogans of 'justice for all, appeasement to none'. Besides, the party was a staunch propagator for uniform civil code and abrogation of article 370 of the constitution. In late eighties Ayodhya temple issue was also included in the party's agenda, which actually provided largest political space to it in Lok Sabha. But the Hindutva agenda of the BJP, which was its 'ideological mascot' was kept out of the national agenda of governance under a compromise formula of the NDA.

In the long-term interest of the nation when the BJP emerged as a party alternative to Congress, people of the country had greater expectations from it. Its slogans of cultural nationalism, a party with difference and qualitatively better governance had an electrifying effect on the middle class population of the country. But judging in the context of historical events during the last 50 months and gradual decline in BJP's credibility as reflected in successive elections are indications that the party has substantially lost its influence over its supporters. The country on the other hand is not found moving in a direction, which was shown by the party, while it was in opposition. In fact there is no perceptible change in the direction of governance. Prime Minister Vajpayee, the tallest leader in the party did not remain as dear to party cadres as he was as an opposition leader.

Vajpayee was a staunch propagator for the change of the present parliamentary system. He said, " the present system of parliamentary democracy has failed to deliver the goods and that the time has come to introduce deep going changes in our structure of governance

(Organiser dated November 14, 1996 -page 4)". But even the Constitution Review Committee set by his government lacked such reference.

BJP with its political philosophy of cultural revivalism attracted the middle class as a party with a difference and was expected to free the people from their spiritual and intellectual slavery. However, as a leading party in NDA Government, it failed to make any perceptible attempt in this direction and as a result its image has been adversely affected in this class of voters.

The BJP emerged as a strong and responsible opposition but failed to be a credible ruling alternative. Though, the inherent fragility in opposition parties benefited Vajpayee to remain in power, his party had also to pay a heavy price for it as it did not maintain its ideological commitments. To remain in power with the support of the parties with divergent political interests and carry forward the weight of its ideological baggage posed a dilemma for the party, which Vajpayee as its leader in Government failed to resolve.

An impression is gaining ground that the BJP after leading a government at centre has not only run out of the issues for which it was known as a "party with difference" but it has also lost its steam, which it had while in opposition. Ironically, none of the issues relating to social, political or economic problems of the country being dealt by the NDA government is anywhere closer to the political ideology of the BJP.

In an era of competitive politics, when regional parties are promoting sectarian interests the BJP as a national party has not been able to develop a mechanism to make any favourable and lasting impact in the hearts and minds of the voters. What to talk of common people, it even failed to develop a mechanism to keep its folk disciplined in tune with the changing time and the political culture. As a party in power the BJP also failed like its predecessor to develop any mechanism to meet the challenge of credibility crisis of the government.

On the issues relating to Hindutva Vajpayee has not maintained a consistent stand. He claimed to resolve Ayodhya tangle by March 15, 2002, the date line fixed by the VHP to start construction. Later, he joined the same chorus to abide by the decision of court, which was contrary to the earlier stand of the party. Now, when VHP is not ready to abide by the court verdict on this issue on the plea that it is a matter of faith, the BJP is trying to keep a distance from the former.

BJP leaders harp on party's achievements like Pokharan II, coercive diplomacy against Pakistan to fight terrorism, and creating differences among the opposition parties by pushing A.P.J. Kalam as Presidential candidate of the NDA. But such achievements have not stemmed the receding tide of its popularity. It has neither paid any dividend for strengthening the ideological constituency of the party.

The main problem of the contemporary Indian polity is the fragile nature of unity either in opposition or within the ruling combine even on issues of national interest. The need of the hour is a strong and credible ruling party with equally strong and responsible opposition. But their internal contradictions and personal ambitions of sectarian and casteist leaders have made the politics complicated and pushed the people to a crossroad. In stead of unifying the people they created division and dissensions in society, which gradually caused intellectual stagnation and moral degeneration. BJP was expected to initiate some action to resolve such situation but the party did not like to look back

to its political ideology.

The immediate problem before the party is therefore to improve its electoral performance in next-year assembly elections in 10 states, the outcome of which may set the trend for the Lok-Sabha election in 2004.

Note: This paper was written before the recent reshuffle of the cabinet on 1st July which the opposition maintains as the re-assertion and dominance of BJP in the NDA- Director.

(The writer owes full responsibility of his perception discussed in the paper. E-mail<ramashray60@redif.com^[1]>)

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