

Following is the full text of the speech –

“My dear sisters and brothers!

We have all gathered here today to pay homage to a great son of India, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was one of the most respected and admired Prime Ministers in India and abroad. He was a statesman whose vision accelerated economic reforms in our country and fast-tracked development in various sectors ranging from gram sadak to space exploration. Atal ji was a towering intellectual and an orator par excellence, who endeared himself to the masses and struck an instant chord with them with his down-to-earth simplicity and disarming innocence. Displaying an amicable nature always, he only had friends and no foes across the political spectrum—the rarest of virtues in our public life.

Vajpayee Ji was a man of impeccable integrity and high moral values. Setting high ethical standards in public life, he never compromised on the values in which he believed

I compliment the India Foundation, New Delhi for organizing the Atal Bihar Vajpayee Memorial Lectures since 2018.

I had the privilege of learning from and working with the late Shri Atal Ji over a period of a long association with him. In fact, for many of my generation, Atal Ji and Advani Ji were the gurus, guides, philosophers and mentors.

While recalling my association with Atal Ji, I am overwhelmed by the memories of his affection, love and concern showered on me over the four decades of my stint in public life.

Talking about Atal Ji is like exploring the deep ocean. He had many facets that made him a total personality. He was both 'Atal' and 'Bihari'. True to his name, he conveyed himself as a man of 'firm words and deeds' and a 'dreamer'.

Atal Ji epitomized the politics of conviction and consensus. He was an embodiment of courage, caliber, capacity, conduct and character, worthy of emulation.

Having born in 1924, Atal Ji had witnessed the freedom struggle and the birth pangs of our nation at the stroke of midnight. This early impression kept him rooted all the time to the cause of contributing to the building of a new India. Since entering the Parliament for the first time in 1957, he kept on making significant contributions to public life and the development of the country in various capacities.

Atal Ji was the first Prime Minister backed by the longest parliamentary experience of about 40 years.

As a parliamentarian, Atal Ji enriched the debates with the force of his thoughts and convictions, the flow of language, the punch and the wit and his occasional poetic expressions. Even the Prime Minister late Shri Jawahar Lal Nehru was impressed by the oratorial and effective interventions of Atal Ji.

The infectious smile of Atal Ji endeared him to all those around and helped him connect with the masses effortlessly. That smile of Atal Ji remains to be his insignia. We sadly miss his presence but are always reminded of his persona. Behind that smile of Atal Ji, there was a steel resolve that guided his words and deeds.

His 13-day stint as the Prime Minister for the first time, the 13-month second tenure and the subsequent full term of five years as the Prime Minister was a clear indication of the emergence and consolidation of a new spirit of nationalism in the country reflecting the change in the mindset of the people. We are now witnessing a further consolidation of this spirit. Atal Ji

was the first non-Congress Prime Minister to have served a full term in office and this has its own significance.

During his premiership between 1998-2004, Atal Ji had pioneered several policy and programmatic initiatives, with an intention to make a difference to the development of our country. It was a golden era for the economy as it grew at a rate of 8% per year. He steadfastly pushed several major reforms that paid rich dividends. Atal Ji said and I quote "Empowering the individual is empowering the nation. And empowerment is best through rapid economic growth with rapid social change." (unquote). He contributed subsequently towards this goal.

Despite heading a coalition government, Atal Ji as Prime Minister kept his focus on untangling the hurdles that were coming in the way of socio-economic transformation. He gave a big push to increase domestic and foreign investment, modernization of public and industrial infrastructure, creation of jobs, a rising hi-tech and IT industry and urban modernization and expansion. These initiatives improved the international image of our country.

Atal Ji ushered in a connectivity revolution by aggressively pursuing the building of national highways and promoting communication infrastructure. He introduced the path-breaking Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojna (PMGSY). I was privileged to be the Rural Development Minister at that time. Atal Ji was a 'Vikas Purush' in its true sense.

He was a lover of peace and harmony. These attributes propelled him to take far-reaching initiatives to improve ties with the neighboring countries. As External Affairs Minister in the Janata Party Government and later as Prime Minister, he guided our country's foreign policy on the foundation of the ancient values of our land of peaceful co-existence.

The steely resolve of Atal Ji was evident in conducting nuclear tests in 1998. Even more significant was the way in which he steered the country through the economic sanctions imposed on us further to Pokhran-2. The way Atal Ji handled the misadventure of our neighbor in Kargil in 1999 was a vindication of the firmness and the clarity of thought of Vajpayee Ji. The way the leading powers of the world refused to condone the aggressor was a testimony to the way Atal Ji articulated and handled various aspects of the conflict that was thrust upon our nation.

After the success of 'Operation Vijay' in Kargil, the statesman in Atal Ji was keen to restore normalcy with the aggressor but the military-minded rulers botched up his good intentions.

It has been suggested to me to speak on "Building democratic consensus - The Vajpayee way."

For Atal Ji, 'Consensus' was not an expedient political tool. It was a core element of his convictions. He was democratic to the core and accordingly consensus building was a natural corollary. Being fully conversant with the diversity of our country, the consensual approach was his preferred methodology. It was this spirit of democracy that made Atal Ji widely acceptable across the social and political spectrum.

Atal Ji became the Prime Minister when the body polity was in a state of flux. Unstable coalition Governments were the order of the day. I believe that the attribute of consensus-seeking of Atal Ji enabled him to successfully lead a large coalition into a full term. He was patient till the point of requirement. He was open to various points of view and good at forging the broadest acceptable position.

The fact that Atal Ji pushed several reforms as the head of the coalition government holds a mirror to this commendable quality of carrying all with him. At the same time, he did demonstrate that consensus does not necessarily mean compromise all the time.

Atal Ji made a significant contribution in the domain of coalition politics by leading a coalition for a full term of 5 years in the centre for the first time. He led two coalitions and guided the maturation of coalitions. Hence, I have no hesitation in calling Atal Ji as the 'Father of Coalition Practices' in our country.

A coalition government is but natural to be pulled in different directions by the constituents who bring into play different kinds of pressures on the leadership. During his second stint as the Prime Minister, Atal Ji refused to budge under the pressure of a coalition partner and sacrificed his government. Further to which the nation rallied behind him giving a thumping majority in 1999.

Since medieval times, the diversity of our country has further expanded. This warrants enhanced commitment to consensus building in mounting a collective effort towards building a new India. The assertion of 'Sabka Sath-Sabka Vikas-Sabka Vishwas' by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi is an affirmation of the commitment to the spirit of inclusive and democratic governance and the continuation of Atal Ji's legacy.

The Constitution of India and our parliamentary institutions offer clear guidance and opportunities for a negotiated resolution of various issues. Every contentious issue can be resolved through dialogue and discussion. There is a record of several such major issues having been resolved that way.

Atal Ji, all through his long stint in public life and as the Prime Minister, inspired the people of the country and enjoyed their goodwill and confidence. It was primarily because of the way he conveyed himself and was understood by the people. The core elements of this mutually beneficial relationship were adherence to the principles of democracy, spirit of accommodating and forging a common position.

Atal ji was an embodiment of decency, dignity, decorum, and at the same time demonstrated necessary dynamism.

I would like to call the path and practices adopted by the visionary leader Atal Ji and his legacy as the 'Atal School of Politics and Values' that helped the nation at a critical time.

Shri Vajpayee gave primacy to economic reforms and the fact that he created a separate ministry of disinvestment bears testimony to this important aspect of his governance. One of the pioneering initiatives was the introduction of Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, which sought to curb government spending and limit fiscal deficit to 3 percent by 2008. Similarly, he was instrumental in giving a huge fillip to infrastructure in the country and Golden Quadrilateral project. Electricity reforms, telecom connectivity, rail connectivity, air connectivity and providing free elementary education were some other significant initiatives taken under his leadership.

The erosion of values in public life, more so in the political arena and also in the media, is not only a matter of serious concern but needs to be urgently arrested with the involvement of all the citizens. People will lose faith in the political class unless there is concerted and collective action towards cleansing the system and promoting clean politics.

It is the duty of all political parties to ensure that their members, including legislators, maintain ethical conduct at all times and at all places. I also urge young politicians to read the debates of the Constituent Assembly as also the speeches made by veteran parliamentarians on important occasions. There is a need to raise the level of debates, follow standards, avoid unruly behavior and always adhere to 3Ds—discuss, debate and decide—avoid the 4th D-disrupt.

Absence of value-based politics, lack of ideology, hunger for power, muscle and money power and the entry of people with a criminal background into politics is leading to violence in the political arena and debasing politics. Unless these undesirable trends are checked, the the situation will further deteriorate and cause irreparable damage to the country's polity.

Time and again, we have been witness to the manner in which the anti-defection laws have been rendered ineffective. If public life is predicated on value-based and issue-based politics, the sanctity of laws is upheld. Otherwise, the desired results will not be achieved by the mere enactment of laws. I have always been advocating the need to make the anti-defection laws more stringent and effective by making it mandatory for the presiding officers to dispose of defection matters within three months. There has to be a time limit as defection matters cannot remain undecided for long periods. We will be making a mockery of democracy if we fail to plug the loopholes in anti-defection laws listed in the 10th Schedule of the Constitution.

I feel that the time has come for political parties to bid goodbye to 'Politics of Convenience' and practice the 'Politics of Conviction' and 'Politics of Consensus'. Shri Vajpayee was an ideal politician, who unwaveringly stood by his conviction—be it in giving up the post of the Prime Minister or not succumbing to pressure from the USA on the nuclear issue. Similarly, he believed in a meeting of minds and adopting a consensual approach on all matters of national importance.

His remarkable ability to be tolerant and accommodating of others' viewpoints enabled him to smoothly run a coalition government.

I also feel that all political parties should put an end to populism and accord priority to long-term development. Political parties should not resort to competitive populism. Such policies will prove to be unproductive in the long run.

Unfortunately, over the years, decadence has crept into various walks of life and we frequently witness corrupt practices with an all-round decline in values and ethics.

Corruption is a major menace that is eating into the vitals of the system and must be combated with resolute determination at all levels.

Today, India is a young country with about 65 percent of the population under the age of 35 years. I call upon the youth of the country to be at the forefront of eliminating evils like corruption, discrimination of any form, violence against women and the problem of poverty. The present-day youth and politicians must learn from the lives of visionary statesmen like Shri Atalji ji.

Finally, before concluding, I would like to appeal to the people to elect their representatives on the basis of 4Cs—Character, Conduct, Calibre and Capacity. Unfortunately, another set of 4Cs—cash, caste, criminality and community—is trying to hold politics hostage to its vicious interests and needs to be completely eliminated for India's democracy to flourish and become a role model for other nations.

I take this opportunity to pay my tributes to Atal Ji and express my gratitude to him for shaping a generation of new leadership.

Thank you all!