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My encounters with Vajpayee: He combined razor sharp astuteness with lightness of touch and largeness of heart

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I met Atalji for the first time during his third term as prime minister. It was during this period that we established our Foundation to work with India's government schools. This first meeting with him, and every meeting thereafter, was about school education.

Dileep Ranjekar, the CEO of the Foundation, and I were together in this first meeting with him. Dileep suddenly bent to touch his feet. Dileep is the most irreverent person I have met, so to see him display the most traditional of gestures of deep respect was surprising. But he told me later he had grown up listening to the stirring speeches of Atalji, and their impact was such that when he saw him for the first time, he instinctively touched his feet.

Like everyone born around the time of our independence I am a child of the Nehruvian era. I began school as India became a republic and held its first general elections. Pandit Nehru was a towering leader, but such was our thriving democracy that the country had space and regard for leaders from across the political spectrum, be they Acharya Kripalani, Rammanohar Lohia or the redoubtable C Rajagopalachari.

But to many of us the most striking figure was that of the young Atalji. It was electrifying that someone as young as him, who had grown up like the average Indian, could stand his own against legendary figures including Nehru. So much so that Nehru predicted that Atalji would, one day, become the prime minister of India.

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It was a complete coincidence that a few weeks before Atalji's passing away, I read the tribute he paid to Nehru on his demise, in Parliament. It is a moving speech, generous, full of honest admiration for the immensity of Nehru's contributions to India, and a deep sense of personal loss. It is Atalji's capacity to *hold himself above the fray, and* speak from the heart of India, that reflected in that speech. This was a capacity that over time flowered and made him one of the greatest statesmen leaders that India has had, after the generation that led us to independence.

Atalji was an extraordinary listener. We would emphasise every time that the PM should become the chief advocate for equity and quality in public education. He would not interrupt at all; at times he would sort of ask us to pause and contemplate a point. We urged him to accept Education as the fourth crucial pillar in the slogan for national progress – along with Electricity, *Roads and Water (Bijli, Sadak,* Paani), and he responded enthusiastically to the idea. When we suggested the PM make universal quality education the main point of his Independence Day speech from the Red Fort, Atalji started glowing and immediately said 'haan, ye to zaroor karenge'. He asked us to provide all the inputs to the person who was helping write his speech. With impish humour, he added that he must include this in his election manifesto.

His demeanour was truly special. He was somehow able to convey that he was totally approachable. It was not mere modesty or humility. He knew he was the PM, and he held himself such that one could approach him and express themselves without the slightest apprehension.

That simplicity and openness combined with a lightness of touch. At times, one knew he would implement a particular suggestion because he would sit up and say in his inimitable style, 'Hona chahiye!' Wit was ever-present, and at the end of each of our meetings we would leave feeling good. That was his unique quality.

For a man with his legendary skills of oratory, he could have *won every argument. But Atalji* never wanted to win arguments, he wanted to win hearts. Which he did. No wonder heartfelt tributes are being heaped on him – by leaders from every political party and from every walk of life. He has been the true Indian statesman of our times, demonstrating that razor sharp astuteness can co-exist happily with large heartedness, decorum and simplicity in public life. Greatness sat lightly on him. Atalji touched my life as of everyone else in this country.

The writer is Chairman, Wipro and a leading philanthropist

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