

Of Kandahar, statesmanship, and contrasting approaches

*Transcript of an interview that the former Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister and former National Security Adviser, **Brajesh Mishra**, gave **Karan Thapar** this week. The interview was featured on the CNN-IBN channel on Thursday and will come up again on Sunday night in the programme 'Devil's Advocate.'*

Karan Thapar: I want to start with the Kandahar episode, and let me begin by asking you: how was the decision to exchange three terrorists for the hostages taken, and who all took that decision?

Brajesh Mishra: The decision was taken by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) which has five members — the Prime Minister, Home Minister, Finance Minister, External Affairs Minister and Defence Minister — and some other supporting staff. As it is known, they initially wanted the release of 36 terrorists, \$200 million and the remains of some terrorists who were buried in Kashmir. Nobody was prepared to accept these demands but once these demands were brought down to three with no money and remains of terrorists, then a unanimous decision was taken by the committee that in order to save the lives of the hostages the three terrorists will be released.

This was a unanimous decision?

Of course.

So the Home Minister of the day, L.K. Advani, was part and parcel of the decision?

Yes, of course.

He didn't in any way differ or disagree?

Let me again say that to begin with no one was in favour of any concessions.

But at the end...?

In the end all agreed to do it.

And Advani was part of that consensus?

Of course, he was part of the Cabinet Committee meeting.

The second critical decision connected with the Kandahar episode was that the then External Affairs Minister, Jaswant Singh, should accompany the terrorists to Kandahar to ensure that nothing went wrong. How was that decision taken and who all were party to that decision?

The CCS used to meet every day during that week — December 24 to December 31. So they met on the morning of December 30 or 31 and Jaswant Singh proposed that he would go to Kandahar to bring back the hostages and he explained that the Indian representatives who were negotiating in Kandahar — diplomats, the IB people, RAW — they had suggested that somebody senior should be there in order to take care of any last-minute complications, etc. This he informed the CCS and they agreed that he should go.

Again, was it a unanimous decision by the Cabinet Committee?

Of course, it was.

Advani was part of that consensus?

Of course, all the members were there. Three members of the CCS have already said that he was there, and I'm talking of Jaswant Singh, George Fernandes and Yashwant Sinha.

In fact, George Fernandes told this to me too. So I would just reiterate this that Advani was not only aware of this decision but he also agreed that Jaswant Singh should go to Kandahar.

I wouldn't say that he opened his mouth and said he agrees but the decision of the CCS was that he could go.

And did Advani in any way dissent?

No, there was no dissent.

In which case, let me ask you how did Vajpayee respond to it when several years later, to be precise last year, in his autobiography and then in the interviews he gave at that time, Advani not only said that

he disagreed and differed with the decision but almost disowned the decision?

I'm not going to comment on that because that is between the politicians and between Advani and Vajpayee.

But your recollection of events is very different from what Advani presented in his books and interviews.

My recollection is what I told you.

Let me come to a second important episode which happened during Vajpayee's government. After the Gujarat riots and killings, Vajpayee believed that Narendra Modi should resign or should be removed as the Chief Minister of the State. Can you confirm that?

Frankly, the politics of Gujarat was never discussed between Vajpayee and me. But he did say publicly that "Raj Dharma" (moral duty) should be followed, and this he said a few days before the National Executive meeting in Goa. My impression was that he is not going to insist on the resignation of Modi, instead he would ask him to take corrective actions to take care of the situation. And I think Jaswant Singh also used the same words "corrective actions" in an interview to another news channel on the same issue. I think this is the correct view of what Vajpayee would have thought to do. I don't think he would have demanded Modi's resignation.

In recent interviews, people have begun speaking about the conversation or the meeting that took place on the flight between Delhi and Goa. Present on that occasion were, allegedly, Advani, Arun Shourie, Vajpayee and Jaswant. At that meeting Vajpayee spoke in terms which have been interpreted to suggest that he would like to see Modi removed or resign, but Advani got up and said if that is going to happen *bawal mach jayega* (there will be an uproar in the party).

If I remember the contents of that interview with Jaswant Singh, according to him what Vajpayee said was — *Gujarat ka kya karna hai* (what has to be done about Gujarat issues?), and then of course followed what you mentioned that Advani went to the rest room, etc. I wasn't on that plane because I hardly went for any of the BJP's political meetings with Vajpayee, but from this very thing it is clear that he did not say to Jaswant Singh that ask Modi to resign. All that he said, as I remembered,

was: *Gujarat ka kya karna hai*. I quite agree with what Advani said — and what Jaswant Singh told in the interview — that there would be uproar in the party if Modi would have been asked to resign or would have been removed. If you remember, Modi offered to resign in the Goa meeting but he was shouted down by the party members

Did Vajpayee believe that the corrective actions he wanted to be taken were taken, or did he feel disappointed on that issue?

I don't know but I don't think any corrective actions were taken.

There was no corrective actions taken, so the presumption is that even Vajpayee believed that no corrective action was taken.

I can't say on his behalf because he never discussed this issue with me.

In one of his interviews, Jaswant Singh said that on this issue Vajpayee was so moved that once he picked up his pen and began to write his resignation letter but Jaswant Singh reached out and stopped him. Were you aware that Vajpayee wanted to resign on this issue?

Again, if I remember the interview correctly, then Jaswant Singh said that he himself doesn't remember the context properly. So, I'm not going to jump to the conclusion that it was Godhra. As far as the resignation is concerned let me tell you after the first year of his prime ministership and the event in the month of April in the year 1999 — when Jayalalithaa withdrew her support from the government and when Mayawati promised in the morning that she would vote in favour of the party and she changed her decision — though he [Vajpayee] never mentioned this to me, my feeling is that he was disgusted. About his resignation, he had spoken to me so many times when he said, “Why're we here? Let's just go.” So, I am not very surprised with what Jaswant Singh said in his interview.

You said two very important things. First, there were many instances when Vajpayee was disgusted with the state of affairs in the first year of the prime ministership, but you also said that this also happened after October 1999, after the second victory.

In fact, he said to me *achha hua ab hum jeet gaye hain, ab chalte hain* (good that we have won, now let us just go).

And these sentiments, ‘why I am here’ or ‘I should resign,’ were these prompted by his colleagues, politics or the people around him?

I don't think so. After the BJP had come to power and he had been the Prime Minister for a year or so, by then he didn't feel the need of being there. This is my interpretation because to me he merely said "*chalo chalein*" (let's go from here). And now I won't discuss the disgust anymore because it was my belief that he was [only] disgusted in the first year of his prime ministership [March 1998-April 1999].

After the first year of disgust and the second victory he [Vajpayee] thought he had achieved what he wanted to achieve and he wasn't keen to remain in power just for the sake of being Prime Minister?

Exactly, but this is my interpretation.

On those sort of occasions, did you talk him out of it?

He was my boss. I was not his colleague like he was the colleague of Jaswant Singh. Hence, I merely said, what is the need, and persuaded him, whatever it is.

During the period 2002 and 2003 after the American invasion of Iraq, there was a lot of speculation that the Indian government was considering sending Indian troops to Iraq and it was reported and believed that Mr. Advani as Home Minister was in favour of this. What exactly happened?

I cannot say that Mr. Advani was in favour of it, although I remember the reports and rumours that had come up at that time. When the matter came up to the Cabinet Committee and security agency — of course there were informal discussions before the formal meeting with the committee — Mr. Vajpayee was very clear in saying, no we can't send troops to Iraq. And it is my belief that the Prime Minister would never have sent the troops to Iraq. The experience of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to Sri Lanka is still fresh in our minds. No. 2, we as a government did not believe that the action in Iraq was a correct one by the U.S. at that time. There was no question of anyone, including Mr. Advani, of supporting the issue of sending troops to Iraq.

Despite the speculation at that time, Mr Vajpayee was very clear that there was no question of Indian troops being sent?

I believe from the beginning that he would never have agreed to it. This is my belief.

Let's broaden our discussion. You were there right beside Mr. Vajpayee for the six years that he was the Prime Minister. What was the nature of the relationship between Mr. Vajpayee and his Home Minister, Mr. L.K. Advani?

That's a very difficult question to answer. They were colleagues for 40-45 years. They were the two top leaders of the BJP and they worked together very well. Of course, they had differences. Mr. Vajpayee refused to be present in Ayodhya when the Babri Masjid demonstration was going on. If you remember, he had regretted in Parliament what had happened in Ayodhya. He [Vajpayee] had different kinds of views. He is by nature very liberal and generous in his thoughts. You criticise him today and suddenly tomorrow, the man who had criticised him asks for a meeting, and he says okay, come and talk to me. Now, there are very few people who can do like that. I would say that Mr. Vajpayee is a statesman more than a politician. Mr. Advani, on the other hand, was a very good organiser. He organised the BJP and helped Mr. Vajpayee in the organisation. They had worked very closely that way.

By implication you are also suggesting that Mr. Advani is not a statesman?

Well, I'm not going to say that, but that was it.

There was a moment some time towards the end of 2002 and early 2003, when Venkaiah Naidu was the party president and it was suggested that Mr. Vajpayee should be elevated to the top office of President and Mr. Advani should take over as Prime Minister. The phrases *Loh Purus* [iron man], *Vikas Purus* [development man] were coined at the time and Mr Vajpayee responded talking about *naa* retired, *naa* tired (neither retired nor tired). What exactly happened?

We were in Moscow when the statement about *Loh Purus* and *Vikas Purus* was made by Mr. Venkaiah Naidu. I can't say whether Mr. Vajpayee was surprised or not, but certainly I was very surprised at the statement because when your Prime Minister is out of the country, to indicate that there is another leader in the country to more or less rival [him], is very impolitic and very undiplomatic. Perhaps Mr. Vajpayee felt the same. So when he came back, in his most inimitable fashion, Vajpayee made it clear that he was unhappy with the statements. Whether

that was connected in any way to his becoming the President and Mr. Advani becoming the Prime Minister, I don't know. I'm not aware of that.

How, then, did Mr. Advani end up as Deputy Prime Minister?

In a way, I would say that was his due.

Did Mr. Vajpayee readily accept that, or was he pushed towards that?

I don't think he was pushed. Let me tell you one thing. Despite the impression that one might have talking to Mr Vajpayee, he is a very determined man. You cannot sway him by just cajoling or threatening him.

So the belief that Mr. Advani could sway or push Mr. Vajpayee is mistaken?

It was his [Vajpayee's] decision to make him [Advani] Deputy Prime Minister. Again, I think it was his due. As I said earlier, they had been together for 40 to 45 years, they had worked together as a team. So, why not?

The other critical relationship Mr. Vajpayee had was with the RSS. How do you view that relationship?

We never discussed his relationship with the RSS. Not for a single moment.

Right at the very beginning of Mr. Vajpayee's first tenure as Prime Minister in 1998, when he wanted to make Mr. Jaswant Singh the Finance Minister, it was believed that Mr. Sudarshan had stepped in and indicated that the RSS didn't want this. What exactly happened?

I don't know, because I had not become Principal Secretary at that time. I'm aware of the fact that there was talk of Mr. Jaswant Singh being included in the Cabinet but at the last moment it was given up. But to answer your question in a more general way, after all within six months, he [Jaswant Singh] was made External Affairs Minister.

In other words, Mr. Vajpayee found a way around the obstacle or problem?

If there was an obstacle, I don't know about it. And ultimately he ended up as Finance Minister.

In fact, at that time, people were surprised that Mr. Vajpayee as Prime Minister didn't fight and insist upon Jaswant Singh as Finance Minister. What you are suggesting is that Mr. Vajpayee found a very effective way within six months of ensuring that Mr. Jaswant Singh was in the Cabinet.

Definitely, and an important member of the Cabinet.

This is in fact proof of Mr. Vajpayee's thoughtful determination?

Yes. People shouldn't mistake him [Vajpayee] for being a weakling or anything like that.

He got what he wanted without having to fight, or any unpleasantness?

Definitely, that's a unique quality.

What was the special quality that Mr. Vajpayee had that allowed him to hold a party like the BJP together and a government of 24 members together without any real major problems?

The first quality that he has is that he is very generous at heart. He never denied anybody the opportunity to speak his or her mind even though it may be critical of him. He dominated Cabinet meetings through his silence. [At] innumerable meetings of the Cabinet, he would keep quiet. Every member who wanted to speak or say was allowed to speak their minds. At the end of the session, Mr. Vajpayee would say just one sentence — 'Shall we do it this way?' And that was it. This quality of his was a rare one. That's why I call him a statesman, not a politician. He understands people, he gives them all the opportunity that they want. It's human nature that once you have been given the opportunity to put your say forward, then you tend to be more amiable to decisions being taken.

You are clearly saying that both by giving people the opportunity to speak and also by his masterful silences, where he withheld what he himself would be thinking, he was actually a master tactician?

If you want to call him a master tactician, I would say that was something inborn. That was within his nature. Perhaps this tactician business is a by-product of his nature rather than something which he has cultivated deliberately.

The second point which flows from what you are saying is that, because of his character he always got the better of the sort of person who wants to burst out and speak first.

Yes.

He was never scared of others jumping into the fray wanting to speak and voice their opinion?

No, never.

It seems he got the better of his entire Cabinet?

I gave you instances. He let everyone speak but at the end he finished it with one sentence.

The press at that time used to frequently compare between Mr. Vajpayee and Mr. Advani. There was a perceived sense that Mr. Advani was not exactly a threat but someone waiting and wanting the job. That doesn't seem to have concerned Mr. Vajpayee very much at all?

No, not at all. Otherwise, why would he keep talking, "Let's go, we've done our work. Let's go"? He wasn't threatened by it.

He never saw Mr. Advani as a threat?

Certainly not. Not a threat at all. The difference between Mr. Advani and Mr. Vajpayee is the difference in their nature. I don't mean to say this as a criticism of Mr. Advani. As far as Mr. Vajpayee is concerned, the entire party was his party. He had no faction in the party. Nobody could claim that he or she was Mr. Vajpayee's man. Everybody could claim that he or she was Mr. Vajpayee's man. That's the way he functions.

In a sense, he elevated himself above politics?

He regarded the party as a whole.

How would Mr. Vajpayee have responded to the controversy that has been created by Mr. Jaswant Singh's recent book on Jinnah?

Let me put it to you this way. He [Vajpayee] never criticised Mr. Advani when he [Advani] went to Pakistan in 2005 and wrote in the visitors' book of Jinnah's mausoleum. I don't believe he would have criticised Mr. Jaswant Singh. We all knew that Mr. Jaswant Singh was writing about Mohammed Ali Jinnah. He had mentioned it to Mr. Vajpayee, he had mentioned it to me and to so many others.

So it follows that a BJP headed by Mr. Vajpayee would not have expelled Mr. Jaswant Singh for writing a book on Jinnah?

Certainly not expel him without calling him personally and asking him for an explanation.

Have you asked Mr. Vajpayee what he thinks about the way Mr. Jaswant Singh has been treated?

No, I did not. I rarely get into political matters.

But of one thing you are certain: that he [Vajpayee] wouldn't have criticised Jaswant Singh and certainly he wouldn't have expelled him?

I say he would not criticise him because he didn't criticise Mr. Advani.

During Mr. Vajpayee's prime ministership, there was a controversy about the James Laine biography of Shivaji, when the Bhandarkar Institute was attacked and several books were destroyed. At that time, how did Mr. Vajpayee respond to what was happening?

I must confess to you that I don't recall that incident ever having been discussed with him.

But the Vajpayee you know would have been pained by that, wouldn't he be?

I'm sure he would have been. He did not believe in banning this or that.

What would Mr. Vajpayee think of the way his party, which he led to power, which saw its golden days under his leadership, is today squabbling and falling apart?

I would say that he would be deeply hurt in his heart by the situation in the party today.

Would he feel that a party that he lived his life for and that he took all the way to power against the most unlikely odds, today has let him down?

I don't think that he would say that his party has let him down because he never claimed the ownership of the party. That was not his style. However, he would be deeply disappointed, deeply hurt at the way things are now going. The daily increase in the number of leaders coming out with criticism of the party or criticism of certain leaders, I think if he were active today he would have put an end to it.

I'm intrigued by it. How would he put an end to it?

I think he would have just called them and said something like — *Ap jo bhi kar rahe hai, yo party ke liye theek nahi hai* (whatever you are doing is not good for the wellbeing of the party). And that would have been enough.

And that was all that they would have needed from him?

Yes.

He had that commanding stature?

It's clear. Everybody in the party is missing him.

Would you say that he had that gift of leadership where just a few carefully chosen words, sometimes just a look, sometimes just a gesture, was enough, either to give assurance or to admonish and to ensure that what he wanted was to be done?

Yes. If you have the time, I'll give you an instance.

Please do.

There was some proposal to have a memorial fund for somebody who had died and the discussion was on. Following which a man came up to me and requested me to inform Mr. Vajpayee what was happening and I told him [Vajpayee] about the things, and he responded by saying, *Mujse*

toh koi nahi pucha (Nobody has asked me about it!) and the proposal just ended.

He knew exactly what to say for each occasion?

Yes.

His successors don't have that touch?

Well, I'm not going to talk about it.

How would Mr. Vajpayee have viewed the attempt by his party to remove a Vidhan Sabha leader who has the support of 68 or 69 out of 78 MLAs?

Mr. Vajpayee is a very democratic personality. In my view, he would not have approved. If my assumption is correct that he would not have insisted on the resignation of Mr. Modi and that he would have asked for corrective action, then how can I say that he would have supported this kind of thing in Rajasthan? It is not possible. If he had a problem with Vasundhara Raje, he would have called her and asked her what was going on. And the message would be sent across. He would have asked her to take corrective action and finish it off.

But he would not have supported an attempt to remove as leader a lady who has the majority support?

Certainly not. But I must also confess that I don't know the circumstances in which all this is happening today. Vasundhara is very quiet about it and hardly any statement is coming out.

Mr. Mishra, a pleasure talking to you.