

Lal Krishan Advani

There is a rather pessimistic French phrase, *toujours le regrets* (always the regrets). In essence, no matter what you achieve, you always tend to remember the things that went wrong with much more clarity. Lal Krishna Advani nowadays seems to convey the impression that he genuinely regrets the happenings at Ayodhya on December 6, 1992. He has even gone on record to say that the demolition of the Babri Masjid was 'unfortunate'. Obviously, such statements have not endeared him to the top brass in the Sangh Parivar, who still look upon that dark day as one of the crowning moments of their existence. Advani's name will forever be linked to them demolition for the simple reason that it was his Rath Yatra that set-in motion the chaotic events that would eventually lead to the assault on the centuries-old structure by the mar Sevak's. Perhaps Advani himself had no idea of the consequences of his actions. But for a seasoned politician like Advani, that a poor excuse.

The Bombay blasts, the bombs that went off in Coirribatore, the communal riots that flared up in various parts of the country, these were all a direct offshoot of the happenings at Ayodhya. 'As you sow, so you reap. Advani has all of this on his conscience and it is possible that that prompted him to make such a statement. But until he blotted his copybook at Ayodhya, Advani was 'the man India awaited'. At that point of time, Advani was very much the 'face of the BJP'. Vajpayee was really nowhere in the picture. It was only later when the BJP started to realise the full import of what they had done that they started to assiduously bring Vajpayee to the forefront. They realised that, rightly or wrongly, Advani would always be seen as a 'militant', treated with extreme suspicion by the predominantly centrist voters whom the BJP hoped to price out of the Congress clutches. Vajpayee's moderate, poetic and dreamy image suited their requirements perfectly and led to his being projected as the future of India. Advani, loyal foot soldier that he always has been, moved aside. To his eternal credit, there were none of the tantrums usually associated with abdicating the 'throne'. They are a fascinating contrast, the two leaders who have done so much to ensure that their party enjoyed the fruits of power. In a sense, they invite comparisons with Generals Patton and Bradley, who led the allied onslaught on Nazi Germany. Patton, like Vajpayee, was a charismatic character though Vajpayee is nothing like as controversial. Bradley was the archetypal worker ant, going about his tasks with minimum fuss. Because of his charisma, 'Old Blood and Guts', as Patton was known, earned most of the plaudits. But men who fought in the War would tell you that Bradley's contribution was no less vital in ensuring that Hitler's war machine was brought to its knees.

Advani's contribution to the revival of the BJP can never be ignored. The party was left with a paltry couple of seats after the landslide that swept Rajiv Gandhi into power. By 1989, the party had improved its tally to 86, and they were in a position to dictate terms to V P Singh's minority government. Much of the credit for this dramatic turnaround in the party's fortunes has to go to Advani, though the communal agenda that he adopted to fulfil this aim would come back to haunt him later. After almost a year of 'supporting' the National Front government from outside, the BJP withdrew support when Laloo Yadav halted Advani's ill-conceived Rath Yatra on its entry into Bihar.

The BJP and Advani must have harboured dreams of power going into the elections of 1991, after Rajiv Gandhi had shown Chandra Shekhar's motley crew the door. A suicide bomber and a few pounds of RDX put those dreams on hold, as the Congress swept back into power, riding the sympathy wave generated by Rajiv's assassination. Narasimha Rao was to rule for five years. His government's inept handling of the Ayodhya issue was as much responsible for the deplorable incidents that followed as the BJP was. Needless to say, Advani's life changed irrevocably after December 6, 1992. From that point on, he has been a marked man, the prized target for Islamic fundamentalists of every ideological persuasion. The demolition also probably sounded the death knell of Advani's hopes of leading the nation, if he had harboured any.

Though he was later exonerated, the publication of the infamous Jain diaries prevented Advani from contesting the election in 1996. In the event, the first ever 'saffron' government was to last just thirteen days, with the BJP unable to drum up enough support to win the crucial vote of confidence. The party went back to the drawing board after that, realising that the 'Hindutva' ideology that they professed needed to be diluted in order to gain mainstream support.

Advani has been in political life for almost half a century now. He was one of those forced to flee the province of Sindh in the wake of Partition and the massacres that followed. It was hardly surprising then that he gravitated towards the RSS school of thought.

Though the Rath Yatra saw him in the full glare of the media flashbulbs, Advani has essentially been an organizational man. He has never openly hankered for power, being quite content to toil away behind the scenes. The one area where the BJP has left the Congress far behind is organizational discipline. The Congress has degenerated into a motley, ragtag bunch, all gathered around a single leader, anxious to see that they don't miss out on their slice of cake. The BJP machinery on the other hand, is much better geared for the purpose of fighting elections and even for propaganda purposes. After coming to power in 1998, albeit at the head of a minority government, Vajpayee appointed Advani as

his Home Minister. Though much has been made of the rivalry between the two, it is quite clear that there is also immense mutual respect. Even the old beliefs, or those perpetuated by the media, are fast changing. Time was when Advani was the golden boy of the RSS and Vajpayee was someone they viewed with intense suspicion because of his self-professed admiration of Jawaharlal Nehru.

Vajpayee still has his critics in the Sangh Parivar, but they have accepted the harsh fact that their electoral campaigns have to be built around him. Advani's recent statements regarding the Babri Masjid demolition have seen his stock plummet within the saffron camp. But people are reluctant to criticise him openly, as he is still seen as the 'hero of the Ram Janmabhoomi liberation' movement. While it would be harsh to blame Advani alone for the demolition, it cannot be denied that he had been the main impetus behind the demons' that were unleashed that day. As Home Minister, Advani has courted further controversy after the massacres of minorities in various states. The gruesome killing of Graham Stains, in particular, showed the Sangh Parivar in a very poor light. What was worse was the attempt afterwards to wish away the incidents, claiming that they were just creations of the media or part of a 'widespread international conspiracy to discredit India'. Men like Advani and Vajpayee have enough political savvy to know that unless elements of the Parivar like the Bajrang Dal and the VHP are kept at arm's length, their dreams of a prolonged spell of government at the Centre will go up in smoke. That is the onerous task facing Advani now, to ensure that the BJP keeps to an almost centrist path, instead of regressing back into the militant Hindu mode. It will not be easy for him, as the Bajrang Dal and the VHP form the core of electoral support for the party. They will not take kindly to any sort of dilution of their 'pure' ideology. Advani himself is 'a changed man, almost unrecognizable from the person who went around the country in a makeshift chariot, causing so much chaos as a result.

He has probably learnt his lessons. Extremism does not work in Indian politics and a more pragmatic approach is called for. The forthcoming elections will determine how much progress the BP have really made since that shameful day in 1992. Advani will never forget that winter morning when the Kar Sevak's started 'work' on the disputed structure with their crude pickaxes and other implements. He has had a long time to reflect on the events of that day and how they changed his life. They say that it is easy to be wise in hindsight. But you would have to say that but for that single event, Advani would probably have become Prime Minister of the world's largest democracy. Instead, he has to be content with playing second fiddle to the party's charismatic face, Vajpayee. But ever the selfless worker, Advani will not utter a murmur of complaint. He will just soldier on, doing what he believes is right, though it may not always coincide with the nation's best interests.