



**THE HINDU CENTRE**

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Politics and Public Policy

Interview



## Unambiguous Commitment to Secularism Needed: Prof. B.K. Chandrashekar

S. Rajendran

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Prof. B.K. Chandrashekar

*It is over two decades since the historic Babri Masjid was demolished to construct of a Ram temple in Ayodhya. While the leaders and workers of the BJP and the Sangh parivar built up a frenzy resulting in the demolition, it was evident that the focus was to gain a political advantage and promote Hindutva. **Prof. B.K. Chandrashekar**, who had served as Karnataka's Minister for Education, Chairman of the Karnataka Legislative Council, and as professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, places the 1992 demolition in political perspective. Excerpts from an interview with **S. Rajendran**:*

**How would you place the demolition of the Babri Masjid in political perspective over two decades years after the demolition?**

Has that heinous act passed out of our memory? The Muslims I have spoken to over time preferred not to say anything, and it does not take much to interpret a silence that, perhaps, recalled L.K. Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi monitoring the demolition, Uma Bharathi climbing on the back of Joshi in celebration of destruction. The then Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao, perhaps believed that the 'conclusion' of the Babri Masjid dispute would end the anti-Muslim sentiment.

The symbols have changed. Historic buildings and monuments have got a respite, but substituted by human beings. Muslims, by and large, are suspect in the light of terrorism of ISIS and Al-Qaeda. A Muslim colleague at a University remarked: "how can we forget Advani's observation that 'all Muslims are not terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims'", but who was behind Malegaon's blasts? A mere Muslim identity carries fear, anxiety and uncertainty, mirroring extended prejudice in society. Post-2014, the Government appeared unwilling to stop its own Ministers, MPs, MLAs and party men making provocative anti-Muslim utterances. Isn't this, ironically, fodder for Muslim fundamentalists?

Just over two decades after the demolition (Dec 6, 1992) and the bloodletting that followed, do Muslims feel any safer now? Statements such as 'although Kalam was a Muslim, he was a patriot'; 'if a Muslim offended "our culture", he has to go to Pakistan'; and 'Aamir Khan's concern about "intolerance" betrayed his 'ingratitude' to the country which made a success of him' and so on, are reminiscent of the slogans during Advani's Rath Yatra: "*Musalman Ko do hi sthaan Pakistan Ya kabristan* (There are just two destinations for a Muslim: Pakistan or the cemetery)." This is the political perspective. Surely [one] can't be very comfortable being a Muslim in India? But the Bihar results, I believe, hold out a hope for all, and not just for Muslim fellow citizens.

**Why did the Congress, which was heading the Union Government, not do anything to prevent the demolition, despite prior information, as mentioned by M.L. Fotedar in his book, *The Chinari Leaves*?**

The Kalyan Singh-led BJP Govt. in Uttar Pradesh filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court saying that it would prevent the *parivar'skar sevaks* from violating the order of the High Court that no temple would be built on the land – outside the disputed area – acquired by the Government. As the R.S.S. mouthpiece, *Organiser*, itself claimed: "The Sangh Parivar played its cards well in this battle of wits with the PM...It was decided to devise a strategy to confront the Centre while avoiding a clash with the Judiciary. It was as part of this strategy that the UP government filed [an] affidavit in the Supreme Court... that the government would not allow violation of the Court's orders."

But Kalyan Singh facilitated construction activity in violation of his affidavit. He even said that the U.P. Govt. was helpless in stopping work while Narasimha Rao continued to rely on legal constraints against demolition. West Bengal CM Jyoti Basu had also cautioned the PM on December 4, that the mosque might be attacked.

Did P.V. Narasimha Rao fear public disapproval of imposition of President's rule? Did it matter when BJP was brazen in its defiance of the rule of law? It is also puzzling that he chose not to rely on the very specific enabling words of the Supreme Court: "Union Government is at liberty to make its own assessment of the matter and take such action as would be proper and permissible to it under the Constitution" (while rejecting, on November 25, the U.P. government's request for a week's time to "negotiate with and persuade" religious leaders to postpone kar seva).

### How much has politics changed since December 6, 1992?

The Congress, remember, had popularised, in the years leading up to the 2004 general elections, the contrasting living standards of those in rural and urban areas calling it the deprived '**Bharat**' as against affluent urban '**India**' [Emphasis by Prof. Chandrashekar]. The BJP was put on the defensive in explaining its promotion of urban '**India**' consisting of educated and IT-trained Indians impressed by Western political institutions and values such as access to education of one's choice, freedom to practice one's profession, freedom of expression all facilitated by legal guarantees.

Although it won a landslide victory in 2014, the BJP's focus, with Prime Minister leading the charge, is again on west and urban India. The Land Acquisition Bill fell through. Agricultural distress continues. There have been huge cuts in social sector spend. That Mr. Modi himself did not even once tour to take stock of the severely drought-stricken States has not been well-received by farmers. Despite all its accusations that UPA government with a weak Prime Minister could not control terrorism, a strong Mr. Modi has not done any better. Terrorism has become routine speculation in the media. It appears that lax law and order in BJP-ruled States is now compounded by unprecedented protests by renowned writers and artistes throughout India against 'intolerance' and attacks by Hindu fundamentalists. In this environment, Muslims provide easy alibis. An increase in their population is highlighted by the *parivar* leaders but not the decline in growth rate.

### What do you see as the way back to restore public faith in the secular nature of the India state by both the Congress and the BJP, as the two principal national parties?

The very recent statements by the Prime Minister that the **Constitution** is our sacred reference book are most welcome: "In India, our one place for guidance is the Constitution. Our path forward is the Constitution". While this will help, whether the BJP, and crucially the RSS, will abide by the definitive implications of the PM's commitment is a matter of guess since both are committed to "**Hindutva**" – which is not on the same page as the Constitution. We need an unambiguous commitment to 'Secularism' to be made in the Parliament and in all State Legislatures. Also, a unified opposition should regularly campaign with the people on the values enshrined in our Constitution and why we should defend them.

### What is your view of the role of groups such as the RSS, which are outside parliamentary politics, but are said to influence governance?

The BJP and RSS had repeatedly accused the Sonia Gandhi-led 'National Advisory Council' of being an extra-constitutional authority. It was an **advisory** body formally **set up** by the UPA government to advise the PM on social Policies for the **poor** and disadvantaged. Many previous Prime Ministers too had advisory bodies. All its members were either distinguished academics like Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, Prof. Jean Dreze, Prof. Madhav Gadgil, or non-party social activists like Aruna Roy, Mirai Chatterjee, Farah Naqvi and others. Surely, the BJP would have known that Dr. Manmohan Singh often disagreed with NAC's advice/recommendation on some of the social legislations.

The RSS on the other hand is not a statutory or executive body constituted by any government. It is simply BJP's ideological parent, no less. Its subject specialists (for eg. on education, culture, history, even science!) openly advise Union Ministers on what needs to be discarded and what should come in. Its consent is obtained by government for appointments in educational and cultural organisations. It virtually **directs** the Modi Government on **policy** issues. Ministers, including the Prime Minister, attend its meetings and respond to queries on the working

of the government. The RSS calls itself a 'cultural body', but it is pre-eminently a political outfit although marginally disguised!

Most important, it does not endorse the values of the Constitution of India since the Constitution includes the words 'secularism' and 'socialism'. The RSS is clearly not within the framework of constitutionally sanctified structure of governance, including the Parliament, Judiciary and Executive.

**It is nearly a quarter century since the Babri Masjid was demolished. Ironically, a large section of the minority community at the present juncture is feeling insecure and coincidental is the grievance of intolerance being expressed in several quarters. What is your view?**

I have answered this partly in response to your third question.

Minorities, Muslims in particular, suffer from two different senses of fear. Aggressive declarations made every now and then by leading proponents of Hindutva is obviously a cause of worry. The RSS chief said on December 1, that he will see the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya in his life-time. Other leaders of BJP are now making – with their party occupying state power in Delhi - more strident comments meant to unnerve a Muslim. In the case of Muslim women, to quote Justice Rajinder Sachar Committee “the only ‘safe’ space (both in terms of physical protection and in terms of protection of identity) is within the boundaries of house and community”.

Secondly, the occurrence of communal conflict tends to worry Muslims for their safety especially because such conflicts instantly take on a political colour. There is a feeling in the community that the police are not dispassionate in their interventions and that sections of the media overplay the involvement of Muslims and underplay the role of other groups; and that nowadays, any bearded man is looked at with suspicion that he may be an agent of a terrorist outfit. Such sense of fear tends to cut across beyond one's territory of living.

Hindutva cannot reconcile itself to a non-Hindutva (as different from 'non-Hindu') faith and culture. In a different dimension Hindutva is also “intolerant” of expressions of views not in tune with Hindu fundamentalism, be it literature, history, culture or arts.

**Debate and discussion in the parliament is also at a standstill and the people of the country are obviously worried over the future. What is your view on the need for a meeting ground between the ruling and the opposition parties? The need for a successful democracy is an understanding ruling party with a strong opposition.**

The move by the Prime Minister to invite Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh on the eve of the ongoing Parliament session has already sent the right signals. Prior information and open-minded consultation on proposed legislation has been a time – honoured Parliamentary practise, in most liberal democracies. The initiative for such a process will necessarily have to come from the Government. Leaders of opposition parties – including as in this case a former Prime Minister as well as the leader of an important Party - cannot be unresponsive.

**How important is to remove the caste system from the domain of politics. Will it not be appropriate to give party tickets to contest elections without a bearing on the caste to which a candidate belongs?**

It is a significant issue for an increasingly larger number of the youth. The practice of giving tickets on the basis of a caste is to get, or hope to get, electoral support of that caste. But we do have quite a few examples of candidates

elected despite the inadequate numbers of voters of their caste in the constituency. Conversely, often caste might not be decisive after all. The practice also perpetuates caste-based vested interests and caste animosity creates lasting wounds in politics which can only adversely affect the citizens. However, nothing of what I have said refers to or questions the constitutionally-mandated provisions on reservations for SC, ST and OBCs.

**There is also the view that Muslims in India enjoy considerable comfort, more so, with the political parties keeping them in good humour with an eye on elections. What's your view?**

Not at all. Parties can and do offer various incentives, vulgarising democracy, but Muslims can now judge very well the motivations of parties and leaders. Their greatest comfort level will be when they are offered security as a matter of law and order, and demonstrably equal opportunities in education, health, employment and delivery of public services without discrimination. The Aamir Khan episode should discount "comfort" that Muslims are supposed to "enjoy" in India – elections or no elections!

**The VHP is still speaking about constructing the Ram Temple at Ayodhya. The matter comes up for discussion only at the time of elections and a large amount of money has been raised for the construction of the temple. It is another matter that the largest number of mosques in the world is in India. What do you have to say?**

The VHP speaks of the Ram temple as and when it suits them, not only on the eve of elections. When they do not, one of the other Sangh outfits fills the gap! How much money has been raised, who keeps in what accounts etc., do not appear to be in the public domain. The largest number of mosques may well be in India, but what does it prove?

In any case, that number has been less by one after December 06, 1992!

*(S. Rajendran is Resident Representative, Karnataka, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, based in Bengaluru. Until recently he was Resident Editor/ Associate Editor, The Hindu, Karnataka.*

*In a journalistic career of over 35 years with The Hindu in Karnataka, he has extensively reported on and analysed various facets of life in the State. He holds a Master's degree from the Bangalore University. The Government of Karnataka, in recognition of his services, presented him the Rajyotsava Award — the highest honour in the State — in 2010.)*

E-mail: [srajendran2009@gmail.com](mailto:srajendran2009@gmail.com)