



# THE HINDU CENTRE

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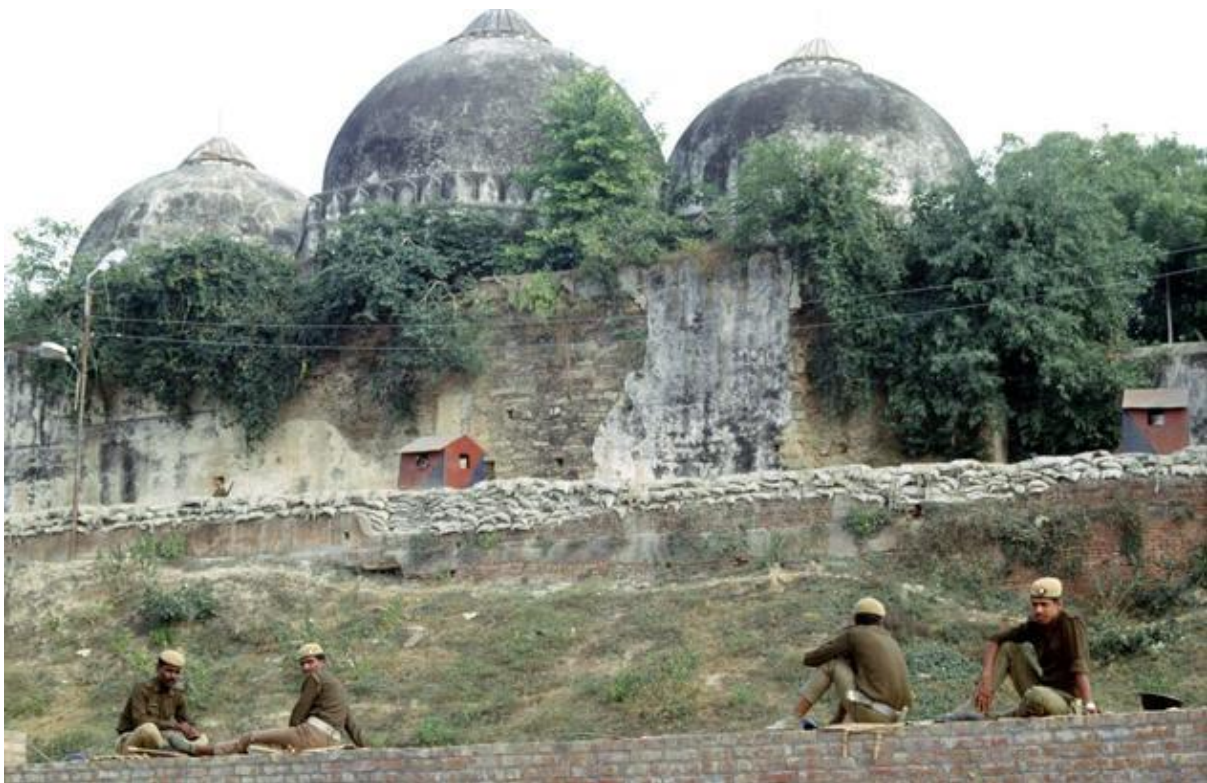
Politics and Public Policy

Essay

## What December 6 Means for India

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The Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. File Photo (1992): Subir Roy

[The Hindu](#)

*The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 by kar sevaks led by Hindu right-wing organisations reset India's political discourse. In this essay, **Mujibur Rehman** analyses the reasons behind the shrinking of secular space and its implications for India's politics and public discourse, the restructuring of the relationship between Indian Muslims and Hindutva ideology, and the manner in which Indian Muslims have responded to Ayodhya.*

December 6, 1992 was the darkest day in the history of modern India. On this day, the Babri Masjid was demolished by *kar sevaks* of the Ayodhya movement led by various Hindu right-wing organisations such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Shiv Sena (SS), Bajrang Dal and others. The Hindu right-wing organisations would like to challenge such a formulation. On December 15 of the same year, the Narasimha Rao government that was running New Delhi dismissed the three BJP-run State governments of Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan by invoking Art 356. The demolition was seen as a pre-meditated one by most scholars and political commentators.

The Congress leader, M. L. Fotedar, in his recent book titled, *The Chinar Leaves: A Political Memoir* (2015), has given a detailed description in a chapter titled, the Demolition of Babri Masjid (Fotedar 2015: 270-280) <sup>1</sup>. Fotedar considers Narasimha Rao “culpable” together with the RSS and its allied organisations. In another interesting account, one of Rao’s trusted advisors, P.V.R.K. Prasad, disclosed that the former Prime Minister had a plan of his own to build a Ram temple by an apolitical trust <sup>2</sup>. Close to a quarter century later, India is now governed by the BJP owing to the massive mandate it received in 2014 Parliamentary election led by Narendra Modi, who was virtually unknown not only in national politics, but even in the quiet corridors of the Ayodhya movement.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992, and the politics associated with it, have contributed to radical transformations of Indian politics. Looking at the political trends characterising the expansion of social base of Hindutva politics, I would argue that December 6 remains the only day that could entirely redefine the connotation and symbolism representing August 15 (Independence Day), and January 26 (Republic Day). Those who would challenge this formulation obviously are hesitant to recognise the inherent contradictions between the moral visions of politics that led to December 6 and the other two historic days. It could even render August 15 and January 26 redundant in the wake of *Hindu Rasthra*, a dream project for Hindutvadi - whose work has been in progress for many decades. The implications thus associated with December 6, 1992 are complex, multi-layered, and have very sharp political connotations.

On March 6, 1993, Jaswant Singh who later served as India’s External Affairs Minister during the Vajpayee-led NDA government, organised a one-day workshop in the Annexe of Parliament with 25 prominent scholars, journalists and public figures. Participants in this workshop included: Imtiaz Ahmed, Bashiruddin Ahmed, Arun Shourie, Girilal Jain, Tavleen Singh, Maulana Wahiddudin Khan, Saeed Naqvi, Rajni Kothari, Swapan Dasgupta, George Verghese, Amrik Singh, Bhabani Sengupta, Tahi Mahmood, Abu Baker and a few others <sup>3</sup>.

An observation by Ahmed in this workshop is worth recounting:

“[H]owsoever, deplorable and sad the experience of December 6 might have been, it had one silver lining, in that it has forced every Indian, including sections of minorities, to some kind of an introspection - introspection both in terms of the kind of strategies that they followed in the past and also in terms of their perspective of the future.”(Singh 2008:19)

In the light of this observation, it is crucial to reflect on whether there was indeed any introspection that took place among India’s political elites and also among minorities ever since. And, if it did, why does India today appear to be swayed by majoritarian politics? Retrospectively, the events and patterns of politics that catapulted the BJP to not just as India’s largest political party, but also its ruling party today, indicate that the introspection did not take place in the manner Imtiaz Ahmed anticipated. Why? I shall try to reflect on this question primarily by limiting my comments on December 6 to two main areas:

- Firstly, its meaning for Indian Muslims and impact on Muslim politics in general;
- Secondly, its influence on the discourses of secularism and minority rights in India.

### **Indian Muslims and Post-December 6 India**

Among all religious minorities, Indian Muslims are those directly impacted by the politics of the Ayodhya movement. It was one of the most organised political movements launched by any political party in India during the modern era - and also the longest - even longer than the anti-Emergency movement. It also created a social and political

polarisation that was unprecedented in modern Indian history reminding many survivors of Partition of the days of 1930s and 1940s.<sup>4</sup> A series of riots that ensued - including the worst one in Mumbai 1992 - created an unprecedented law and order situation. And, the Mumbai blasts in early 1993 literally redefined India's relationship with its troubled neighbour, Pakistan. The implications, therefore, are not confined to India's domestic politics; but also to its neighbourly relations - now extended to the fight against terror that has global dimensions.

Although the Ayodhya movement is yet to accomplish its final objective of building the Ram temple at the disputed site,<sup>5</sup> the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the campaign associated with it, have made Muslims the most vulnerable, subjecting them to various demonising interpretations in India's popular discourse about their place in Indian polity, and their relationship with history. One major slogan during the Ayodhya movement was to present Indian Muslims as *Babar's santan* (Babar's children) - with a clear goal to challenge their claim as India's indigenous population. This argument of *Babar's Santan* even today resonates in recent statements of BJP MP Yogi Adityanath's "go to Pakistan" or the statements of the Governor of Assam.<sup>6</sup>

"Go to Pakistan" remains an exclusive form of abuse hurled by the Hindu right at Indian Muslims, a rare 'privilege' not extended to any other India's religious minorities. It is an ultimate form of de-Indianisation of Muslims invented by the Hindu right and its bigoted minds. Furthermore, Muslims and Christians for separate reasons are seen as hostile, intolerable minorities by the Hindu right. According to Hindutva theory, these two religious minorities have the ability to alter India's Hindu character.<sup>7</sup>

*“The politics of polarisation and hate often thrive on rumours and power of its campaign”*

Furthermore, these two communities are portrayed as being "pro-active" in formulating strategies to achieve their "goals": Muslims by their propensity to have large families and Christians by religious conversion. Historically, despite more than nearly 1,000 years of Muslim rule and over 300 years of British rule, India's Hindu majority character has remained intact. Little evidence exists on the ground to demonstrate that these concerns have any truth, but the politics of polarisation and hate often thrive on rumours and power of its campaign.

As a result of this Hindutva theory, questions concerning Muslim population become part of a frequent controversy - particularly after every decennial Census of India. A debate erupts almost regularly during and after the submission of the population report by the Registrar General and Census Commissioner on the question of the growth of India's Muslim population. On the one hand, Hindutvavadis seek to demonstrate that there is evidence of conspiracy in their growth among Indian Muslims to over-populate India; and on the other side, population experts and secularists challenge it by offering scientific explanations, such as how poverty is the key reason for large families, in order to debunk the conspiracy theories.

Questioning the loyalty, patriotism and legitimacy of Indian Muslims as Indians remains the founding argument of the Hindutva ideology that blossomed with Ayodhya movement. During the post- December 6, 1992 era of Indian politics, there are evidences indicating that the relationship between Indian Muslims and Hindutva ideology has been restructured - moving from complete hostility to careful co-option. And, the latter is reflected in its concerted attempt for *Ghar Wapsi* programme, about which widespread media coverage is made ever since the current government came to power in May 2014.<sup>8</sup> However, the core argument of the Hindutva ideology remains intact. According to this, Indian Muslims have to lead lives according to the *diktat* of Hindutva ideology; and as a

community, it cannot enjoy its right to religion and practice. The current controversy on beef eating that led to the lynching of Mohammed Aklaq in Dadri village is one example of this ideological view. <sup>9</sup>

### **The shrinking of secular space**

In the larger domain of Indian politics, the events of December 6, 1992, pushed Indian Muslims towards a new era of fear, anxiety and uncertainty, shaking off the confidence given to them by India's founding leadership. It also lent legitimacy to Muslim conservatives to expand their hold over the community. Consequently, these rather contradictory trends contributed to the shrinking of secular space. In electoral politics, this also led to politics of *competitive fundamentalism*.

The unfortunate irony of this development is that secular voices of Muslim community are either slighted or ignored owing to the open patronage Muslim conservatives often enjoy from the supposedly secular parties and regimes in different parts of India. This nexus of secular regimes and political parties with Muslims conservatives consolidated the shrinking of secular attitudes and beliefs among younger generations of both the religious communities. It also incrementally pushed the younger generations of the Hindu community towards the Hindutva ideology.

One typical example of this politics is the famous *Shah Bano* case. Though it took place prior to the demolition, its narrative and political consequences continued to be felt even today. The marginalisation of Muslim secular elites among secular political parties and regimes created further opportunities for Hindutva ideology to grow. Arif Mohammad Khan's political life is an interesting testimony to this argument showing how secular and progressive voices were often silenced by powerful secular parties and leaders from the majority community. Nearly all major secular parties often courted Muslim conservatives under the assumption that they hold sway over Muslim voters. When a large number of Muslims chose to ignore the *fatwa* by Imam Bukhari of New Delhi's Jama Masjid to vote for the BJP-led NDA in the 2004 elections, it became evident that the Muslim clergy did not control Muslim voting behaviour, as it is widely believed that Muslims in India voted for the UPA coalition.

At the national level, the BJP faced major resistance for its anti-minority, particularly anti-Muslim agenda, reflected in its political manifestos. Among others, this agenda included: 1) to build the Ram temple in Ayodhya, 2) removal of Art 370, and 3) establishment of Uniform Civil Code, to state a few. The most successful challenge to the BJP came with the almost unanimous decision by most major secular parties of India not to extend any support to the Vajpayee-led BJP 13-day government formed after the 1996 national election leading to its defeat and the setting up of the Deva Gowda government (1996-1998).

Political developments since 1996 suggest that the politics of resistance that arose owing to the events of December 6 has been diluted. The Ayodhya movement and the demolition of Babri Masjid brought unprecedented electoral benefits to the BJP, creating a saffron wave in modern India. However, the 1996 resistance forced the BJP to rethink its strategy encouraging it to look at the politics of secularism differently, though in reality its rhetoric on secularism and commitment to Hindutva remained largely intact. One major argument against secularism is the BJP's accusation of an appeasement policy and thereby presenting Muslims as a pampered community.

These accusations have been the founding arguments of Hindutva ideology and dates back to the colonial days. This campaign continued even after India's independence. One comes across its evidence in a letter by India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. In his letters to Chief Ministers, on October 15, 1947, he wrote:

"I know there is certain amount of feeling in the country.... That the Central government has somehow or other been weak and following a policy of appeasement (italics mine) towards Muslims."(quoted in Rehman, 2016:5)  
That the Indian Muslim community is a pampered one is an argument forcefully made by Hindutva votaries that has severe political implications. On the one hand, it has amused Muslims particularly because there is little evidence of them being treated favourably by any regime in modern India. At the other extreme, such a campaign contributed to the growing resentment among members of the Hindu community thus creating a new wave of hostile attitudes towards Muslims and further conditions of legitimacy for the Hindutva movement.

Retrospectively, it is now apparent from the Sachar report (2006) <sup>10</sup> that there is widespread evidence of Muslim backwardness and suffering across regions and classes. Long before the publication of the Sachar Report (2006), there was the Gopal Singh Panel Report (1983), which made similar claims about Muslim backwardness. In fact, during the 1980s and the 1990s, these data from Gopal Singh Panel Report (1983) were available when the Ayodhya movement was gaining momentum. Unfortunately, they were absent in the national public debate. This was perhaps the most spectacular failure on the part of secular intellectuals and political elites who failed to confront the appeasement allegation against Muslim community with these data.

From the secular side, there were mainly two counter-arguments: appeasement, one argued, of Muslim conservatives and fundamentalists; and the other argued, rather helplessly, that it was a natural obligation of a majority population towards a vulnerable religious minority. Now data showing enormous socio-economic backwardness make it obvious that the Hindutva allegation was indeed a false campaign, a case of concerted rumour mongering. By the time the empirical facts against the appeasement campaign came before the country, Hindutva forces had extracted large political capital from it - almost laying a concrete political foundation, on which it now stands as India's largest political party. For more than a quarter century, this campaign has contributed to the creation of various forms of polarisation in India's public debate, and generated deep animosity resulting in various forms of discriminatory tendencies against Muslims.

This campaign has also impacted the discourses on secularism. In scholarly discourses, the debate on secularism has mainly revolved around the place of religion in Indian society. Perry Anderson makes a very interesting observation when he notes, "Indian secularism is Hindu confessionality by another name."(Anderson 2012:142). However, there was a regular campaign about the flawed practice of Indian secularism during the Ayodhya movement. The Hindu right chose to attack these practices by drawing a distinction between *positive secularism* and *negative secularism*. It characterised the politics of minority rights of secular regimes from the Left front governments in West Bengal and Kerala to Congress (I) governments at the Centre and various States, or various non-Congress governments such as the National Front (NF) government led by V. P. Singh or non-BJP regimes as negative secularism.

Amazingly, little evidence of positive secularism was seen during the BJP-led NDA regime (1998-2004) in New Delhi, or in any of the States it rules such as Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana or Maharashtra. Even in the context of coalition politics, the BJP was able to expand considerable space for majoritarian politics and undermine secular politics.

One prominent instance was its attempt to bring about major changes in the content of textbooks to propagate its own version of history and demonisation of minority/Muslims. <sup>11</sup> The current controversy surrounding Tipu Sultan and Aurangzeb are thus an extension of the campaign against secular history, whose recent genesis could be easily traced to the politics of December 6. <sup>12</sup>

## The politics of symbolism

One major shortcoming of India's politics of secularism has been the symbolic politics that the secular parties often practice. With the rise and co-option of Muslim faces such as Sahnawaz Hussian, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, among others, the BJP succumbed to similar kind of symbolic politics. In recent years, its attempt to have Najma Heptulla, M. J. Akbar, and other Muslim faces are part of a similar strategy, which I also would like to describe as politics of elite making. On this issue, it is obvious that the BJP is not a "party with difference."

Over the years, the discussions over positive or negative secularism disappeared from the vocabularies of Hindutva votaries, particularly from the BJP's manifestos. The most visible spectacle of the absence of these languages was seen in 2014 national election campaign during which BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi, unleashed the most fierce and unprecedented onslaught on the idea of secularism confirming the doubts in his secular ideological make up that Nitish Kumar had raised at the time of Modi's coronation as party candidate.

What is interesting to note is that the key player of Ayodhya movement from the BJP side was L. K. Advani who - along with Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi, Ashok Singhal, Vishnu Hari Dalmia, Vinay Katiyar, and Uma Bharati - was arrested on December 8, 1992. In 2013, when the debate over Modi as Prime Ministerial candidate took place, the arguments by Nitish Kumar, Pavan Varma and others about L. K. Advani appeared as if December 6 was much smaller event as opposed to the Gujarat 2002 riot. This shift in the narrative among secular political elites does suggest considerable ambiguities about their understanding of secularism itself.

Post- 2014, a new pattern of politics has emerged in India – signalling vulnerabilities of its religious minorities. Most interestingly, the concerted resistance to this is now led by artists and intellectuals, quite a unique episode in modern Indian history. What is now argued as the protest against the "rising intolerance" is in fact a unique form of intellectual resistance identical to those witnessed against Indira Gandhi during the Emergency years. These patterns of politics of intolerance and its resistance could be traced to the politics of December 6, 1992.

Romila Thapar in her recent book, *The Public Intellectual In India* (2015), makes a very important point regarding the reason for such a resistance, when she notes:

"The ultimate aim is to engage the public in thinking about the present and the kind of society in which people want to live, and ultimately and inevitably, what this will mean for those who will of course come after us as citizens." (Thapar,2015:153)

The central motivation of the Hindutva ideology is to argue for the absence of any legitimate ground for minority rights in a society. Accordingly, an attempt to describe the population as majority and minority is indeed an attempt to divide the society because under a comprehensive understanding of citizenship all are equal. Thus, the claim for minority rights as distinct set of rights is indeed a disturbing one, as it asks for a separate place, challenging the notion of equality embedded in citizenship. This is a typical explanation of majoritarian argument about minority rights. In this too, the politics of December 6 has made a significant contribution to the rise of similar arguments in Indian context. Not surprisingly, advocates of majoritarian arguments often deplore the arguments of minority rights as minoritism or appeasement.

## December 6 and party politics

Furthermore, it is crucial to reflect on what December 6 has done to Indian political developments, especially in the domain of party politics. Though the resistance against the BJP in 1996 was indeed substantial, this resistance by secular political parties began to dilute in course of time, leading to the emergence of two rival political formations such as the NDA and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). This bipolarity that represented India's new coalition politics has undermined the secular politics that was triggered by December 6 and the rise of hardline Hindutva in more ways than one. The failure of the United Front (UF) government led by Deva Gowda (1996-98) was triggered by a power struggle inspired by personal ambitions among top leaders - similar to the power struggle among top leaders of Moraraji Desai government (1977-79) in the post-Emergency period. It shows that secularism as ideology has a rather limited capacity to keep the flock together. The politics of anti-Congressism and the politics of anti-secularism played their own part in the creation of these major blocks in Indian politics and consequently undermining the negative consequences of the politics of December 6.

After the isolation that the BJP suffered in its attempt to form the government in 1996, it realised it could only fulfil its ambition to run the country by moderating its position. A close scrutiny of its positions in national and State politics make it amply clear that its hardline agenda invariably lurks in the background and its ideological self-restraint has been more of a strategic one. In these new political circumstances, parties like Janata Dal (U), leaders like Sharad Yadav, Nitish Kumar and others, found anti-Congressism as greater ideological obstacle to overcome and found it comfortable to side with a relatively compromised BJP, especially under an accommodative personality like Atal Bihari Vajpayee than the Congress party.

One would argue that it was anti-Congressism that encouraged these parties such as the Janata Dal (U), Telugu Desam Party, and others to move towards the BJP than its Hindutva ideology or its anti-secular position. Subsequently, joining of leaders like Farooq Abdullah or Mamata Banerjee and a few others with the NDA increasingly created the impression as if the damage committed by the demolition of Babri Masjid on December 6 to India's social fabric was indeed not very central to the idea of India as formulated by its founding fathers.

At another level, a powerful argument has emerged about Hindutva politics, which is that it is too weak an ideological force to dent a structurally diverse society like India. Given that the Ayodhya movement had given electoral benefits in north India, there were lazy formulations about the potential of Hindutva forces and their electoral appeal in south India.

The general argument runs that what works in north India would never work in south India, mainly because there are sharp regional differences in Hindu society. However, the BJP's march in Karnataka proved it completely wrong, and by forming the government in Jammu and Kashmir as a coalition partner, the BJP has now understood that politics of polarisation arising out of the Ayodhya movement has been electorally rewarding enough for it to stand as a nationally major political force. Empowered by the 2014 election results, the BJP - particularly the RSS at this point, does consider *Hindu Rashtra* a feasible dream.

Why is it that the politics of polarisation of the Ayodhya movement failed to unite the secular political elites as an enduring political entity? Moreover, how has this polarisation contributed to Muslim politics? The most robust evidence of secular conduct that Indian Muslims have given over the years is by their voting behaviour, which has been very secular. This has never changed - even after the politics and violence of December 6. In the heartland of Uttar Pradesh, Muslim voters chose to shift their loyalty from the Congress party to other secular parties such as the Samajwadi party (SP) or the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

“Muslim voters would always prefer a reasonably credible secular party than a Muslim party in any part of India”

It is true that Muslim parties such as All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) in Assam or All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM), Hyderabad, managed to create a base for themselves in their own regions; but they have failed to enlarge their social bases to the national level. The failure of the AIMIM to open an account in the recent Bihar Assembly Election or the lukewarm response it received in Maharashtra only indicate that Muslim voters would always prefer a reasonably credible secular party than a Muslim party in any part of India. But the fringe elements in the Muslim community did react differently. The Babri Masjid demolition and the Gujarat riots in 2002 often find mention by the activists of organisations such as SIMI (Students of Islamic Movement of India) or Indian Mujahiddin (IM).

Often, these organisations are supported by outside forces such as Pakistan that seek to take advantage of India's disgruntled groups. Pakistan's strategy is not limited to Muslims. Other communities such as Sikhs or various social groups of North Eastern region were also mobilised by outside forces to challenge the Indian state. All in all, there is a very slim evidence of Indian Muslims moving out of their traditional secular conduct and embracing violence as part of its new language in Indian democracy.

In other words, the politics of polarisation has had a negligible impact on Indian Muslims, and that attitude remains the same in the larger context of war on terror in India, in which Muslims youths have suffered a great deal and often thrown in jails owing to the biased nature of India's law and order machinery. Shabnam Hashmi's edited volume, *What it Means to be a Muslim in India Today* (2011) has a credible account of this menace inflicted by Indian state.

On December 6, 2013, I went over headlines after headlines of Indian national English dailies and I did not notice a single headline or report on December 6 or its relevance in modern India. This absence of reporting on December 6 has been happening for past several years in India's mainstream media. Why? Why has December 6, that understandably has the most significant impact on India's multi-culturalism and secularism - remained a subject of limited or even no interest for mainstream media for past few years? Just wondering could it ever be possible for the U.S. media to ignore 9/11? One would plausibly argue that the Indian media is not adequately sensitive to consequences arising out of the politics of December 6. To conclude, it is not just the media but every institution and individual in India that needs to reflect on the events and politics of December 6 - not just to sense the direction of India's political wind; but also the storm it could create to alter the future of Indian democracy.

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## Footnotes:

1. <sup>^</sup> Fotedar (2015)
2. <sup>^</sup> See a report, "[Ayodhya and Narasimha Rao](#)" FRONTLINE, April 5, 2013. He disclosed this in a book he wrote in Telugu. He was one of Rao's close confidantes for many decades.
3. <sup>^</sup> For a complete list, see Jaswant Singh, (2008:10-12)
4. <sup>^</sup> For a detailed analysis of this, see Sarvepalli Gopal (1992)
5. <sup>^</sup> Supreme Court has now stayed the verdict of Lucknow bench of Allahabad High Court in 2010 that wanted the site to be divided into three parts and has asked parties concern to maintain status quo.
6. <sup>^</sup> "[Yogi Adaitvanath compares Shah Rukh Khan to Hafiz Saeed](#)," *The Hindu*, November 4, 2015; Also see report, "[Assam Governor P B Acharya says Muslims are free to go to Pakistan, Bangladesh](#)" *Indian Express*, November 23, 2015.
7. <sup>^</sup> See Jyotirmaya Sharma (2006)
8. <sup>^</sup> See report, "[VHP Claims Ghar Wapsi is a Huge Success](#)" *New Indian Express*, July 05, 2015.
9. <sup>^</sup> See report, "[Dadri Lynching: How Events Unfolded](#)," *The Hindu*, November 12, 2015.
10. <sup>^</sup> For a detailed discussion on Sachar report and Indian Muslims, see Rehman( 2010).
11. <sup>^</sup> For a longer discussion, see Martha Nussbaum(2007).
12. <sup>^</sup> For an insightful analysis of Tipu Sultan and why he was painted as a barbaric king by British, see Dalrymple (2015)

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