



# SECULARISM DEBATE IN INDIA

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*Abstract* Thinkers of Western Europe were concerned with the question of what is the relationship between State and Church. There is conflict and debate of the relation between the two. St. Thomas Aquinas Augustine Machavelli are concerned about their political philosophy to the Church State Controversy of the mediaeval period. St. Thomas Aquinas came out with “Two Swords theory”. He says that Church and State are two Swords of God both have specific spheres and activity. The Church said it is an institution of God. It wants the State to come under its control. State on the other hand argues that how to lead a good life, process required is its space, so there was conflict between two. India is perhaps the only society where there has been a great deal of discussion about secularism. Like most of the ideas secularism also one idea that was produced in terms of our encounter with the West.

*IndexTerms* India, secularism, Sarvadarma Samabhava

## INTRODUCTION

India is perhaps the only society where there has been a great deal of discussion about secularism. Like most of the ideas secularism also one idea that was produced in terms of our encounter with the West.

Secularism is something related to this world and this worldly something pertaining to this world. It is an idea talk's best way to live in this world. It talks about how to best organise socially, politically and economically.

The church state controversy was the pre-history for the emergence of secularism in Europe. The history of Europe during the medieval time in terms of defining the Sphere of Church and State. How far and to what extent Church and State interfere. It is defining the Sphere of Church and that of the state.

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T.N.Madan, major critic of Secularism in India, said that we don't have in India something called two swords theory. There is no clearly defined sphere of state and religion and in the absence of two swords theory the theory of secularism is not operating in India. There is a close linkage between secularism and modernity. Therefore criticsers criticise secularism on the terrain of modernity. Secularism is a modern ideology and they consider modernity dangerous. So they reject secularism.

The idea of scientific temper, Idea of rationality, belief in knowledge that science gives, science gives most appropriate knowledge and scientific temper become a vibrant kind of principle in secularism both in India and West. Ashis Nandy says India needed not scientific temper but humanistic temper. Scientific rationality as the core principle of human progress there is a great deal of positivism, great deal of modernity that became points of contestation in India. As a result of those historical developments, controversy

There are two kinds of debate on secularism.

1. First debate 1960s debate
2. Second debate 1990s debate (contemporary)

The first debate emerged after 20 years of Indian experience of secularism. Indian nationalist discourse is religiously embedded discourse. So the presence of secularism is theoretically different in its European counterpart.

In European history, the nation-state created its space versus the over-power of the presence of the church. So there was some kind of counter opposing church and nation-state. More you become secular you are more to the nation state and less to the church. So the most important paradigm of secularism is religious neutrality. So there is a demarcation line between religion and secularism

Unlike Western European history of secularism, secularism in India does not emerge in conflict situations between religion and state. The emergence of the nation-state of India is the result of semi-religious discourse. Much of the discourse of Indian freedom, nationalist discourse is semi-religious. Ganesha-chaturthi by Thilak is religious. Hindu cultural nationalism from Savarkar to Deen Dayal is religious discourse. There is a great deal of religiosity. So therefore secular perspective did not evolve along with conflict with religion.

Nationalist discourse is implicitly Secular because Secularism is more common sense than intellectual . Nationalist leaders knew that India is a multi-religious society, multicultural. There are different traditions, different communities, and different cultural practices. There is a necessity to give representation to all these religious identities. It is more common sense that we have to live with differences. So India has to be a combination of different traditions. Secularism came to us as a common sense to resolve conflicts peacefully. We have to protect if not promote the differences. Secularism is a product of common sense. This commonsense goes through the constituent assembly, draft constitution of India.

## Second debate 1990s debate (contemporary)

1990s debate much more substantive debate much more theoretical debate. It raised all kinds of questions, all kinds of problems. There are people who dismiss secularism. There are people who appreciate secularism. And there are people who want to rebuild secularism

1990s debate much larger and comprehensive debate.

Rajeev Bhargava in his book “Secularism and its critics” argues four major criticisms are raised against secularism in India. This book puts together the most important contemporary writings in the debate on secularism. It addresses urgent questions, including the relevance of secularism to non-Western societies, and the question of minority rights.

1. Secularism is an alien ideology –It is not our ideology. It is not developed by our history. The first criticism is by Ashis Nandy and T.N.Madan.
2. Secularism is hostile to believers --religious beliefs that is an ideology that refuses to accept God.
3. Secularism creates an artificial dichotomy between religion and politics.
4. There is a theoretical difference between secularism, an idea of neutrality and affirmative action.

To Rajeev Bhargava, there are four criticisms raised at different times. All the 4 criticisms of secularism are comprehensive; each one of them has many dimensions.

### 1 Secularism is an alien ideology

The first criticism is by and large raised by Ashish Nandy and T.N.Madan. Ashish Nandy wrote, “Anti-secular Manifesto”. T.N.Madan wrote, “Modern myth and locked minds” Ashish Nandy says that secularism is not our own ideology. It is superimposed on us. It is an alien ideology. Ashish Nandy never used the term western to condemn secularism. He says it is something which is not a product of our own experience. Ashish Nandy says secularism is not authentic; he rejects secularism on the basis of authenticity.

Ashish said with the colonial encounter of India lots of things came to India. Certain things are internalised by Indian and domesticated. To him democracy is internalised and domesticated so we have Indian democracy and it is not with secularism. Because the idea of democracy is actually independent of science and technology. Democracy in itself does not contain the elements of science and technology, advantage of science and technology may help democracy.

Ashish argues secularism is an idea generated by science and technology. All secularists are scientific and not superstitious. so a great deal of arrogance to science is worked with secularism. Secularism does not recognise the role and function of religious values of religion India was able to sustain as a society because there is an idea of religious tolerance. So India does not need the idea of secularism to learn how to live and let others live. Before secularism we knew how to respect other religions. There are lots of conflicts in India, there were class conflicts, gender conflict but there was no religious conflict. Indians have nothing to

learn from secularism. Secularism does not teach religious tolerance. It talks about religious neutrality. Secularism says religion is private and politics is public. More importantly secularism is a particular type of modernity that came to India through colonial advancement and secularism claims superior to others. Ideologies of India people never internalised the idea of secularism in 100 to 200 years. So this is alien.

It is part of Western Modern Paradigm of knowledge. It is product of West. We in India higher values than secularism. Indians unsuccessfully tried to internalise the values of secularism in India. In his work “Illegitimacy of Nationalism” he argues nationalism along with secularism. Secular Nationalism developed in the West perpetrated violence, so he critics developmental state in India.

Madan wrote, “modern myth and locked minds” wherein he gets into detailed study of different religions and how religion evolved and he says that there is a peculiar situation that is the intervening character of religion and politics in India.

In the West church and state controversy is able to draw a clear line between two. This does not apply to India. In Indian religion and politics are interdependent, interlocked, interlinked and intervened. This is because we do not have two sword theory. Madan’s plea is we don’t have two swords theory in religion traditions in India are at the same time political traditions. So interdependence of religion and politics is a distinct situation in India and therefore secularism which comes and tells two distinct spheres of religion and politics does not make sense in India.

Like Ashis, Madan also gets back to religious tolerance and co-existence in India. Religious tolerance and co-existence is not something which is articulated, it is inbuilt of tradition.

## 2 Secularism is hostile to believers

A part of this argument is shared by Nandy and Madan. Secularism which begins to argue scientific rationality because secularism is an idea produced out of science and rationality. Religion is more faith than rationality. Religion is more to do with passion, belief, faith, trust and impulse and therefore secularism might be seen as hostile to religious believers. Secularism says that only science and rationality is truth and science has a convenient way of pushing religion into the margin.

Rajeev Bhargav said the church state model of secularism is against religious believers and there are other models of secularism which are quite not hostile to religion if not complementary to it. There are other models of secularism.

- Agnostic forms of secularism
- Atheistic forms of secularism

There is a possibility of pursuing secularism much much differently from scientific rationalism. The argument secularism is hostile to religious beliefs is partial, it applies only one kind of secularism and there are other creative secularism which is not hostile to religious beliefs although not friendly

### 3. Secularism creates artificial dichotomy between religion and politics

Secularism says religion is private and politics is public. There is a clear demarcation line between religion and politics. And people point out this is complicated in particular in post colonial countries, where there is no church state controversy. Institutions of religion and institutions of politics in India are interlinked.

In the West religion is restricted to private affairs. There has been a great deal of privacy associated with religion in non-Western societies. but in India religion is public. Politics and religion are interconnected but we draw artificial lines between religion and politics. All secularists somewhere draw this line.

In India there is a problem in drawing a line between two that they are interlinked. There is a lot of mobility between these two spheres and therefore it is not easy to establish autonomy of these two spheres. Rajeev Bhargav makes distinction between two kinds of secularism:

1. Substantive secularism
2. Procedural secularism

There are many varieties of substantive secularism depending on how we locate values and order values. There are varieties of substantive values, interlinkage of values, even loading of values. That is one kind of secularism.

Another kind of secularism is procedural secularism; it talks about certain practices of secularism and certain procedural requirements of secularism. Rajeev Bhargav says that this procedural dimension of

secularism is quite logistic- How can we live with differences. It is possible only with the set of good conduct.

Rajeev Bhargava says much of secularism in India in constituent assembly debate and policies of state on secularism is more a procedure and not so much of theory. So whole range of critics on secularism is miss directed. It was procedural secularism attempted partly in constitutional deliberation and pursuit of state policies. In 50 years secularism represented the state rather than society; secularism became a super imposed ideology to society.

3. There is a theoretical difference between secularism, an idea of neutrality and affirmative action.

Partha Chatterjee says , if secularism stands for religious neutrality, the state shall be neutral to different religions. Affirmative action expressed in Indian constitution through reservation policy is opposite to secular state because policy of positive discrimination is a proactive role of the state to settle social political economical and cultural equality and the state becomes active in the social and political life of people. Secularism says the state must be neutral and shall keep itself away from affirmative action.

Rajeev Bhargava says there is a great deal of discourse and reflectivity as far as the Indian state is concerned.

Deliberations in the constituent assembly and post independence period secularism have certain connections. At the time the Indian state considered neutrality not a core principle of secularism.

Bhargava says neutrality is not the central point of secularism in India. So as against substantive secularism he said it is procedural secularism

Indian state is not equal-distance but principled-distance. Which means whenever intervention is required the state intervenes. Certain communities need to be helped and the interest of the certain communities safeguarded and promoted. So a proactive role is needed in terms of eradicating political, economical and cultural injustice. So depending upon circumstance, the state interferes. So it is not neutrality but principled distance is core principle of Indian secularism

It is “sarvadharmā samabhava” and principled distance is part of Indian secularism. So Indian state is never religiously neutral.

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