

Concept of secularism, its components & importance in a democratic society of India

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Abstract

The term “Secular” refers to being “separate” from religion or having no religious base. Secularism term means separation of religion from political, economic, social and cultural aspects of life. Thus religion is only a purely personal matter. It provides full freedom to all religions and tolerance of all religions. It also stances for equal opportunities for followers of all religions. So, no discrimination and partiality on grounds of religion. The philosophy of secularism in the west based on the principle of separation of state and religion. It merely focuses on the rights of a citizen to follow the religion of their choice. India secularism supports the fair and equal treatment of all religions and treats them all as one under the law. But the Indian government has not correctly been separated from religions. While making sure also that no religion has a special favor in a way unfair to the other groups. People belonging to various religions live in India. Secularism is important in the country because: Secularism allows the people of various religions live peacefully without any fear of the majority. It safeguard democracy by limiting the powers of the majority. It ensures harmony in the nation. In absence of secularism, religious persecutions may take place which may result in dissent, conflicts or even a civil war. The principle of secularism protects the rights of the minorities.

Keywords: Secularism, Inter Religious, Intra Religious, freedom, Liberty, Equality, Gender, multi faith, discrimination.

Concept of Secularism

Though Jews faced discrimination for centuries throughout Europe, in the present state of Israel, Arab minorities, both Christian and Muslims, are excluded from social, political and economic benefits available to Jewish citizens. Subtle forms of discrimination also continue to persist against non-Christians in several parts of Europe. The condition of religious minorities in the neighbouring states of Pakistan and Bangladesh has also generated considerable concern. Such examples remind us of the continuing importance of secularism for people and societies in today's world.

Inter-religious Domination

In our own country, the Constitution declares that every Indian citizen has a right to live with freedom and dignity in any part of the country. Yet in reality, many forms of exclusion and discrimination continue to persist. Consider three most stark examples:

- More than 2,700 Sikhs were massacred in Delhi and many other parts of the country in 1984. The families of the victims feel that the guilty were not punished.
- Several thousands of Hindu Kashmiri pandits have been forced to leave their homes in the Kashmir valley; they have not been able to return to their homes for more than two decades.

- More than 1,000 persons, mostly Muslims, were massacred during the post-Godhra riots in Gujarat in 2002. The surviving members of many of these families could not go back to the villages in which they lived.

What do these examples have in common? They all have to do with discrimination in one form or the other. In each case members of one community are targeted and victimized on account of their religious identity.

Intra-religious Domination

Some people believe that religion is merely the 'opium of the masses' and that, one day, when the basic needs of all are fulfilled and they lead a happy and contented life, religion will disappear. Such a view comes from an exaggerated sense of human potential. It is unlikely that human beings will ever be able to fully know the world and control it. We may be able to prolong our life but will never become immortal.

However, religion has its share of some deep-rooted problems. For example, one can hardly think of a religion that treats its male and female members on an equal footing. In religions such as Hinduism, some sections have faced persistent discrimination. For example dalits have been barred from entering Hindu temples. In some parts of the country, Hindu woman cannot enter temples. When religion is organized, it is frequently taken over by its most conservative faction, which does not tolerate any dissent.

Thus religious domination cannot be identified only with interreligious domination. It takes another conspicuous form, namely, intra-religious domination.

Secular State

Perhaps one way of preventing religious discrimination is to work together for mutual enlightenment. Education is one way of helping to change the mindset of people. Individual examples of sharing and mutual help can also contribute towards reducing prejudice and suspicion between communities. It is always inspiring to read stories of Hindus saving Muslims or Muslims saving Hindus in the midst of a deadly communal riot. But it is unlikely that mere education or the goodness of some persons will eliminate religious discrimination. In modern societies, states have enormous public power. How they function is bound to make a crucial difference to the outcome of any struggle to create a society less ridden with inter-community conflict and religious discrimination. For this reason, we need to see what kind of state is needed to prevent religious conflict and to promote religious harmony.

The Western Model Of Secularism

All secular states have one thing in common: they are neither theocratic nor do they establish a religion. However, in most commonly prevalent conceptions, inspired mainly by the American model, separation of religion and state is understood as mutual exclusion: the state will not intervene in the affairs of religion and, in the same manner, religion will not interfere in the affairs of the state. Each has a separate sphere of its own with independent jurisdiction. No policy of the state can have an exclusively religious rationale. No religious classification can be the basis of any public policy. If this happened there is illegitimate intrusion of religion in the state. Similarly, the state cannot aid any religious institution. It cannot give financial support to educational institutions run by religious communities.

This common conception interprets freedom and equality in an individualist manner. Liberty is the liberty of individuals. Equality is equality between individuals. There is no scope for the idea that a community has the liberty to follow practices of its own choosing Secularism.

Finally, this form of mainstream secularism has no place for the idea of state supported religious reform. This feature follows directly from its understanding that the separation of state from church/ religion entails a relationship of mutual exclusion.

The Indian Model Of Secularism

Sometimes it is said that Indian secularism is an imitation of western secularism. But a careful reading of our Constitution shows that this is not the case. Indian secularism is fundamentally different from Western secularism.

Indian secularism does not focus only on church-state separation and the idea of inter-religious equality is crucial to the Indian conception. There was already a culture of inter-religious 'tolerance' in India. However, we must not forget that tolerance is compatible with religious domination. It may allow some space to everyone but such freedom is usually limited. Besides, tolerance allows you to put up with people whom you find deeply repugnant. This is a great virtue if a society is recovering from a major civil war but not in times of peace where people are struggling for equal dignity and respect .

It should be clear by now why the complexity of Indian secularism cannot be captured by the phrase "equal respect for all religions". If by this phrase is meant peaceful coexistence of all religions or interreligious toleration, then this will not be enough because secularism is much more than mere peaceful coexistence or toleration. If this phrase means equal feeling of respect towards all established religions and their practices, then there is an ambiguity that needs clearing. Indian secularism allows for principled state intervention in all religions. Such intervention betrays disrespect to some aspects of every religion. For example, religiously sanctioned caste-hierarchies are not acceptable within Indian secularism. The secular state does not have to treat every aspect of every religion with equal respect. It allows equal disrespect for some aspects of organized religions.

Comparison with Western secularism

In the West, the word secular implies three things: freedom of religion, equal citizenship to each citizen regardless of his or her religion, and the separation of religion and state. One of the core principles in the constitution of Western democracies has been this separation, with the state asserting its political authority in matters of law, while accepting every individual's right to pursue his or her own religion and the right of religion to shape its own concepts of spirituality. Everyone is equal under law, and subject to the same laws irrespective of his or her religion, in the West.

In contrast, in India, the word secular does not imply separation of religion and state. It means equal treatment of all religions. Religion in India continues to assert its political authority in matters of personal law. The applicable personal law differ if an individual's religion is Christianity, or Hindu. The term secularism in India also differs from the French concept for secularity, namely *laïcité*. While the French concept demands absence of governmental institutions in religion, as well as absence of religion in governmental institutions and schools; the Indian concept, in contrast, provides financial support to religious schools and accepts religious law over governmental institutions. The Indian structure has created incentives for various religious denominations to start and maintain schools, impart religious education, and receive partial but significant financial support from the Indian government. Similarly, Indian government financially supports, regulates and administers the historic Hindu temples, Buddhist monasteries, and certain Christian religious institutions; this direct Indian government involvement in various religions is markedly different from Western secularism.

The components of the secularism scale is given below.

- **Religious Aspect** : It is a term used across several religions and in theology to describe a particular manifestation or conception of a deity or other divine being. Depending on the religion, these might be disjoint or overlapping parts, or methods of perceiving or conceptualizing the deity in a particular context.
- **Religious Freedom, Liberty & Equality** : Secularism seeks to defend the absolute freedom of religious and other belief, and protect the right to manifest religious belief in so far as it does not

impinge disproportionately on the rights and freedoms of others. Secularism ensures that the right of people to freedom religion is usually balanced by the right to be free from religion.

Liberty as a political or governing policy thus consists of balancing of each individual's ability to behave as they wish against others' freedom to do the same. The goal is to achieve an equality of liberty for everyone, with everyone attaining as much freedom as possible. We all share hospitals, schools, the police and the services of native authorities. It is essential that these public services are secular at the purpose of use in order that no-one is underprivileged or denied access on grounds of non secular belief or non-belief.

- **Secularism Protects Both Believers and non-Believers :** Secularism seeks to ensure and protect freedom of religious belief and practice for all citizens. Secularism isn't regarding curtailing non secular freedoms; it's regarding guaranteeing that the freedoms of thought and conscience apply equally to all or any believers and non-believers alike.
- **Secularism Protects Free Speech and Expression :** Religious people have the right to express their beliefs publicly but so do those who oppose or question those beliefs. Religious beliefs, ideas and organizations must not enjoy privileged protection from the right to freedom of expression. In a democracy, all ideas and beliefs should be open for discussion.
- **Separation of Religion from State :** The separation of religion and state is the foundation of secularism. It ensures that non secular teams do not interfere in affairs of state, and makes positive the state does not interfere in non secular affairs.
- **Secularism is about Democracy and Fairness :** In a secular democracy all citizens are equal before the law and parliament. No religious or political affiliation provides benefits or disadvantages and non secular believers are voters with identical rights and obligations as anyone else.
- **Children and Education :** Secular education is a system of public education in countries with a secular government or separation between religion and state.
- **Scientific Orientation:** Scientific orientation is a tendency to understand the world on the basis of the role of evidence and verification rather than in terms of the wisdom of past. The relationship between science, or science and technology, and this general principle of secularism may be examined at two levels: first from the standpoint of the nature of the activity of science itself, and secondly (related to the first) from the viewpoint of the connection between science and society; that's, the means during which science is suffering from social forces and therefore the manner during which science influences society.
- **Involvement in a multi-faith society :** We live in a multicultural and multi-faith society; a diversity that is both enriching and challenging. Religious and cultural traditions can be used to justify intolerance, discrimination and violence and can give rise to a lack of understanding or rejection. But equally, they will nurture a way of which means, strengthen identity, bring individuals along, inspire them to figure for justice, and promote peace.

India is considered a secular country as per the 42nd Amendment of the Constitution of India enacted in the year 1976. It means that the people of India have freedom to live by their religion beliefs and practices, and the state treats all individuals as equal citizens regardless of it. In other words, India does not have an official state religion.

Importance of secularism in a democratic society of India

People belonging to various religions live in India. Secularism is important in the country because:

- Secularism allows the people of various religions live peacefully without any fear of the majority
- It safeguard democracy by limiting the powers of the majority

- It ensures harmony in the nation. In absence of secularism, religious persecutions may take place which may result in dissent, conflicts or even a civil war.
- The principle of secularism protects the rights of the minorities

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