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# SECULARISM IN INDIA: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

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## **Abstract**

Secularism in India is a multifaceted and evolving concept shaped by the country's long-standing religious diversity and its colonial and post-colonial experiences. Unlike the Western model, Indian secularism does not imply a strict separation between religion and state; instead, it seeks to maintain principled distance, ensuring equal respect for all religions while safeguarding individual rights. Historically, the roots of secular thought can be traced to ancient pluralistic traditions, the Bhakti–Sufi movements, and reformist efforts during the colonial period that emphasized social equality and religious tolerance. The framers of the Indian Constitution institutionalized secularism by guaranteeing freedom of religion, prohibiting discrimination, and promoting a unified civic identity. However, the practice of secularism in India faces significant challenges, including rising religious polarization, politicization of identity, communal violence, and debates on personal laws and minority rights. Contemporary discourse also grapples with balancing cultural autonomy and universal democratic values. This paper examines the historical development of Indian secularism, explores its constitutional foundations, and analyzes the major challenges confronting it today, highlighting the need for renewed commitment to pluralism and inclusive governance.

**Keywords:** Secularism, Communal Conflicts, Inter religious harmony, Fundamental Rights, Humanism.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The term "secularism" is frequently used in India and occasionally occurs in mainstream or social media. Secularism refers to the act of upholding religious neutrality, characterized by the absence of an official state religion and the absence of bias or support towards any one religion. It also involves respecting all religions with equal respect and honor. The inclusion of secularism in the Indian constitution was a direct response to the increasing dissent, unhappiness, and prejudice among the population, which posed a threat to the nation's unity and integrity. The 42nd Amendment to the Indian Constitution was ratified on December 18,

1976 as a response to the increasing influence of fundamentalist and communitarian inclinations. This amendment incorporates the terms "socialism" and "secularism" into the constitution. <sup>1</sup>Despite the constitution's explicit reference of secularism, the general population of the country holds deep-seated sentiments of communalism and fundamentalism. The abhorrent views of the individuals persist despite efforts to counteract them through the implementation of the DPSP, fundamental rights, and other constitutional requirements, as well as through various other measures, etc. Secularism and communalism are fundamentally different, and secularism has been ineffective in preventing communalism from jeopardizing the unity of the nation.<sup>2</sup>

To investigate the responsibilities of both citizens and the government in maintaining national peace and promoting the growth and advancement of communal solidarity among the general populace. The term "secularism" in English refers to the state or individual's rejection and apathy towards religion or religious considerations. It originates from the Latin word "saeculum," which denotes an era or the prevailing spirit of an era that advocates for the state's freedom from religion or religious interference. The treatment of religion Secularism is undeniably a matter of personal belief that should be separate from the political, social, cultural, educational, and economic aspects of existence. It represents a collection of principles and beliefs that are distinct from religion. Public schools should incorporate the concept that religion should be kept separate from politics or matters concerning the state. The duty does not lie with another individual. It is incorrect to merge religion with the Church, Temple, Mosque, or any other site of worship. This refers to a system of social and political philosophy that advocates for or endorses a certain religious belief. Machiavelli presented a compelling argument for the separation of politics, ethics, and religion. Religion and ethics encompass the sacred elements of human faith and belief, promoting the purification of the body and mind via the practice of a spiritual life rooted in honesty, truthfulness, and mental simplicity. This is because politics revolves around the implementation of strategic plans, the practice of diplomacy, and the acquisition of positions of authority. When an individual assumes a position of authority, they tend to become dishonest and corrupted.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R.N.Agraval., National Movement and Constitutional Development in India. Metropolitan Book Co. Ltd., Delhi 5th End., 1965.

<sup>2</sup> Ayub, A.S., Secularism in socialism, democracy and secularism, National book trust of India, Ministry of Education, Delhi, 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Attar Chand, Nehru Socialism and New Economics Order Vol.4, Deep and Deep Publications, New Delhi, 1980.

However, the country's fundamental principle of unity in diversity facilitates the progress of the national integration process towards its goal, as the Indian Sub-Continent is inhabited by numerous social groupings. India has embraced the secularist ideology since achieving independence. Secularism was absent from the original Indian constitution upon its ratification. The 42nd Amendment to the Indian Constitution was enacted on December 18, 1976, with the purpose of addressing the growing discord, discrimination, and division within the nation.

Articles 25 through 29 recognize the fundamental human right to freedom of religion, which protects the ability of every person to openly express and practice their own religious beliefs and worship. India differs from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other Islamic nations in that it does not have an official state religion. The opening words of the Indian constitution, "We, the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic Republic," signify the inclusion of the entire population of the country, regardless of factors such as caste, creed, religion, tribe, or gender discrimination. Only individuals who adhere to the Islamic faith are eligible to hold the office of head of state, and the constitutions of Islamic nations are founded upon the principles of Islam (Allah). In contrast to the constitutions of Islamic and other nonsecular regimes, which express loyalty to Allah or God, so weakening and subjugating the entire population, the Indian constitution is committed to the people and prioritizes their well-being. India's secularism has thrived within the confines of both the State and the individual. State secularism encompasses the principles of impartiality and non-preference towards any religion, as well as the absence of an officially recognized religion. However, in certain Indian contexts, secularism is defined as "Sarva Dharma Samabhava," which means honoring all religions with equal reverence.<sup>4</sup>

## THE HISTORY OF SECULARISM IN INDIA

India possesses a lengthy and affluent legacy of secular customs. Indian culture is a fusion of several religious and social movements. In ancient India, Santam Dharma (Hinduism) was transformed into a universal religion via the deliberate integration of several spiritual traditions into a unified mainstream, along with a remarkable level of tolerance towards these traditions. An exemplary demonstration of the religious diversity within Hinduism can be observed through the various interpretations of the four Vedas, the Upanishads, and Puranic literature.

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<sup>4</sup> Ratilal Panchand Gandhi v. State of Bombay AIR 1954 SC 388

Ashoka, who ruled from the 3rd century B.C., was the first prominent leader to pledge that the government would not discriminate against any specific religious group. Ashoka's 12th edition of the Rock advocated for tolerance and the cultivation of profound reverence for all religious communities. He implored individuals to refrain from ridiculing different faith sects. He urged individuals from various religious backgrounds to write exceptionally well. The proclamation of religious tolerance issued by Ashoka over 2,300 years ago is highly revered in India as a significant societal ideal. Ashoka's secularism is one of the distinguishing features that sets Indian culture apart from other civilizations. Religious tolerance and harmony were upheld with the arrival of Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, and subsequently Christianity in India. During the Middle Ages, Indian Sufi and Bhakti communities fostered a sense of unity and love among many communities. The aforementioned movements were spearheaded by Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, Baba Farid, Guru Nanak Dev, Saint Tukaram, Sant Kabir Das, and Mira Bai. Due to their significant role in the construction of a composite culture, none had the audacity to critique them. Guru Nanak's statement, as quoted by Rizvi (2005), that "there is no distinction between man and man, therefore there is no Hindu and no Musalman" exemplifies the principles of secularism. The notion of religious tolerance was widely disseminated with the immense assistance of Mughal emperor Akbar. Secularism greatly influenced his teachings of Din-e-Illahi (divine religion) and Sulh-e-kul (peace with all).<sup>5</sup>

The majority of Mughal emperors adhered to liberal and tolerant ideologies. Mansingh, a Hindu, commanded Akbar's army. There were a total of forty thousand Rajput warriors, out of which around five hundred were Hindu Sardars. During the Shahjahan era, Hindus accounted for twenty-four percent of the Sardars. Under Aurangzeb's rule, Hindus accounted for thirty-six percent of the Sardars. He appointed Raja Jaswant Singh, a member of the Rajput community, as the leader of Afghanistan. The individual named Raghunathdas served as the initial prime minister and remained in this role until his demise. Some nationalist Hindu leaders have falsely portrayed the Muslim rulers as being more hostile towards Hindus than they truly are.

However, Muslims Nur Khan and Siddhi Halal held positions as Sardars during the rule of Chatrapati Shivaji. Hakim Singh Suri led the troops of Ranapratap Singh (Tara, 1991). The Indian liberation movement played a significant role in reinforcing and shaping the secularist attitude. In the initial stage of the Indian independence movement, liberals like Govind Ranade,

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<sup>5</sup> Shabnum Tejani (2008). Indian secularism: a social and intellectual history, 1890- 1950. Indiana University Press. p. 9. ISBN 978-0-253-22044-8.

Gopal Krishn Gokhale, and Sir Feroz Shah Mehta commonly adopted a secular approach to politics. The Brahma Samaj, founded by Sri Raja Ram Mohan Roy, and the Arya Samaj, headed by Swami Dayanand Saraswati, have consistently shown tolerance towards all other religions and have never displayed hostility towards any of them. However, they made efforts to eliminate the myths that had been gradually eroding Hinduism. The 1928 constitution, written by Pandit Moti Lal Nehru, the esteemed chairman of the Nehru Committee, includes a secularism clause that states, "India and its provinces shall not have an official religion, and the state shall not provide any special treatment or impose any restrictions based on religious beliefs or status." The two preeminent secularists in contemporary India were Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhiji embraced secularism as he believed in the mutual assistance of religious communities in their pursuit and adherence to the truth.

However, Pandit J. L. Nehru's secularism was founded on a dedication to scientific humanism, limited by a perspective on the future course of history. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru has fervently supported the concept of a secular state. India's emergence as a secular state is considered one of his most significant accomplishments. In addition, he had particular concerns about the transformation of India into a "national state" that embraces individuals of diverse political beliefs and religions, and is essentially a secular state. This is in contrast to a "caste-ridden society" where communalism poses a significant danger to the principles he cherished. The principle of the separation of church and state is the fundamental basis of secularism in contemporary Indian society. Given the evolution of Indian politics throughout time, the term "secular" carries distinct implications. It is crucial considering the present political climate we are in. In the Indian context, the term "secular" denotes the acceptance and respect for many religious beliefs. In a secular state, no individual or group possesses overt privileges in either domestic affairs or any form of international diplomatic engagement.<sup>6</sup>

It is unjust for any group to seek special advantages and rights while denying them to other citizens. Individuals should not encounter prejudice or restrictions in their everyday lives based on their religious beliefs; every person is entitled to the highest level of liberty. According to Das (1991), D.E. Smith's explanation of secularism in India suggests that the secular state ensures both individual and collective freedom of religion, treating individuals as citizens regardless of their religious beliefs. It does not aim to endorse or interfere with any religion,

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<sup>6</sup> Makarand R Paranjape (2009). *Altered Destinations: Self, Society, and Nation in India*. Anthem Press. p. 50. ISBN 978-1-84331-797-5

and it does not have any constitutional affiliation with a specific faith. Rizvi (2005) identified three separate yet interconnected interactions between the state, religion, and the individual in India's secular state, following a comprehensive analysis. The categories are as follows: (i) individuals and their religious beliefs; (ii) individuals and the governing body; and (iii) individuals and the intersection of religious beliefs and the governing body. Considering the freedom of choice in a secular society, where citizens are permitted to select their own religion or opt for no religious affiliation, it becomes apparent that there is no variable that influences the connection between religion and the individual. The state is prohibited from violating an individual's freedom of conscience. The state-individual link is an independent variable that is objectively established in accordance with specific constitutional requirements. Therefore, it is essentially incorrect for religion to obstruct this type of societal involvement. The state and the religious community have the prerogative to determine the manner in which they enforce their own laws. Both parties are obligated by the Indian Constitution to maintain a reasonable separation from each other. However, the state has complete authority to regulate and mediate religious conflicts. Even before 1950, there has been secularism in India, which operates under the guise of appreciation for the diversity of civilizations.<sup>7</sup>

The idea was established in that year, even before the Indian chronicles started. The origins of this theological teaching can be traced back to the Vedas, the exact dates of which are still a matter of controversy. But Hinduism is not an oppressive regime; it is a philosophy. The Indian Constitution protects centuries of rights, including the ban on the Indian State nationalizing or advancing any religion, which are the outcome of harmonious, exclusively Hindu processes within the Indian mind over hundreds of years. Hinduism's core belief—that all religions are sacrosanct and that no religion or sect should be more important than any other—was enunciated in the Constitution. The soul of a sick religious person is worth no less than the soul of a member of a religious group.

It is based on the Hindu notion that there is a fundamental resemblance among all natural entities. Before Marx asserted that "the people are the religion," there were numerous distinct religions that ruled the globe. Religion has always been the most significant element in the lives of many Indians. The Hindu cycle and fabric, along with the religion's universality, are connected to India's history. Hindus wrote about a variety of topics, including their own

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Ann Tétreault; Robert Allen Denemark (2004). *Gods, guns, and globalization*. Lynne Rienner Publishers. p. 127. ISBN 978-1-58826-253-0.

interpersonal relationships and the relationship between God and mankind. Even in those uncommon situations where someone is consumed with mystery and anxiety about the unknown.

## **CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF SECULARISM**

India is a large country full of residents of various castes, creeds, religions, and sociocultural origins. Additionally, the population of this nation is diverse. Secularism has always been a philosophical phenomenon that is ingrained in our political structure, despite the fact that the word is not mentioned in the Constitution. Despite the fact that the secularism on which the Indian Constitution is based is fundamental, its applicability in modern India is in doubt because of the growing role played by religion in the societal construction of ethnic and communal identity, which encourages political mobilisation.

In India, ideologies of the person and the group continue to be greatly influenced by caste, religion, and regional divisions. Secularism has been a fundamental component of Indian democracy for more than 70 years, but its boundaries and uses are still up for debate.<sup>8</sup> However, this does not imply that the state should stay apolitical towards religion. Secularism actually means that the state should not have its own religion and that no one could declare the state to be a theocracy. The word "secular" was added to the Constitution in order to express the lofty principles of socialism, secularism, and national integrity.

People can recognize the necessary conditions for human progress in all areas and cultures, including social progress, thanks to secularism. Modern secularism has, however, also been associated with the subjective idea of modernity, which is significant from a personal perspective. Undoubtedly, secularism and modernity go hand in hand, but many people think that the fundamental ideal of respect for all faiths has not been realised in social reality.<sup>9</sup> This goal is to investigate the definition and idea of secularism in relation to the Indian Constitution. In the paper, it is also discussed to what degree India upholds the secularist ideal.

In addition to the foregoing, the discussion has focused on the judiciary's involvement in the interpretation of secularism. The legislative amendment's impact on the country's secularist

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<sup>8</sup> Shetreet Shimon & Chodosh, Hiram E. Uniform Civil Code, Oxford University Press, 1st edition 2015 ISBN: 978-0-19-807712-1 Page No. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Ebenstein, Great political Thinker 3rd Edition Oxford and IBH 1969 p. 257-258.

ideology and practises is also examined in this essay. In order to complete this job, a doctrinal methodology was used. The materials used in this essay are both primary and secondary. The initial Indian constitution, created on January 26, 1951, did not incorporate the term secularism. Secularism was explicitly included in the Constitution as a fundamental concept, even though it was initially excluded. Given that Independent India had transformed into a democratic country, it did not necessitate explicit mention.

Nevertheless, upon its ratification in 1976, it was incorporated into the Preamble of the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution. Secularism was established as a crucial element of the Constitution following the Bhommai judgment by the Supreme Court. The Indian Constituent Assembly also discussed the provisions of Articles 25–30 of the Constitution, which support secular values and protect the rights of religious minorities. During the discussions on October 17, 1949, several questions were raised. These included the inclusion of the term "secularism" in the Indian Constitution, the desired nature of India as a secular state in a religiously diverse nation, whether the state's detachment from religion was sufficient evidence of secularism, whether a secular state necessitated a secular society, and whether the equal respect for all religions by the state indicated the presence of secularism in India.<sup>10</sup>

There was disagreement within the Constituent Assembly regarding these matters. In the end, the assembly concluded that the phrase "secular" should be excluded from the Preamble. Nevertheless, every member of the Constituent Assembly agreed that India ought to be established as a secular state. The majority of individuals agreed that in order for society to progress towards democracy, the separation of religious institutions and governmental authorities was an essential requirement. Shefali Jha provides a list of three contrasting viewpoints on secularism that were deliberated in the Constituent Assembly. She labels the first argument as the "No concern theory of secularism." The proponents of this argument asserted that the government should not possess any jurisdiction over religion. Given that religion is a matter of personal importance, it is imperative to maintain a clear separation between the state and religion, seeing them as distinct domains of private and public affairs. People have the freedom to express their beliefs in their own lives. An individual's recognition by the state as a citizen should be based on their status as a citizen, rather than their affiliation with a specific religious belief. The primary advocates of this perspective were M. Masani,

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<sup>10</sup> Bhavya Gupta, "SECULARISM AS AN IDEOLOGY: A GLOBAL AND INDIAN PERSPECTIVE," SSRN Electron. J., 2018.

K.T. Shah, and Tajamul Husain. The second line of reasoning also advocated for the separation of religion and state. However, their rationale was exactly the inverse of the previous one. This argument posited that religion is an infallible system of truth, in contrast to the previous argument which asserted that religion is a matter of individual belief and should not be interfered with by the government. Membership in a specific religious group would undermine religion rather than enhance the power of the government. In a democratic state, policy should not be subject to the caprices of ever-changing majorities.

The "Equal Respect Theory of Secularism" proposed by Shefali Jha argues that since religion played an important role in Indian society, the state should treat all religions equally while remaining neutral. K.M. Munshi was the foremost advocate of this topic. The speaker stated that it was necessary for us to develop a distinctively Indian form of secularism. Religion and politics He maintains that India cannot have a state religion or a clear separation between the church and the state. From this standpoint, it is argued that secularism, which belittles religion, is not suitable as the basis for a nation-state. The absence of conflict between different religions would be ensured if the state allowed the practice of religion in public spaces, given the majority of religions promote the value of tolerance. Jaya Prakash Narayan asserts that the root cause of communal conflict lies not in religion itself, but rather in the manipulation of religion for social, political, and economic objectives.<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Secularism has different meaning to different people living in different times, in its modern form, was expounded in the West. The modern concept of secularism in India has borrowed some of its elements from the Western concept and transplanted them in the Indian soil. Hence, socio-political cultural climatic change has caused some problems for the growth of secularism in the Indian context. The concept of Secularism is essentially of western. It is a product of struggle between the State and the Church. It was propounded by the church as an assertion of its independence in its religious affairs from the control and regulation by the state. Its constitutional and institutional manifestation is the separation of the State and the Church. It was George, Jacob Holyoke, who for the first time coined the term and explained the meaning of the word "Secular" stating that it has no connection with religion; it is concerned only with the worldly things, no relation to the church or religious rule. It was to him a non-religious

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<sup>11</sup> O. Khalidi, "Hinduising India: Secularism in practice," *Third World Q.*, 2008, doi: 10.1080/01436590802528614

term. Though the Principle of Secularism is defined as a theory which has no concern with Religion, God and another World (i.e. Swarga). History indicates that Secularism was a movement against religion, God, Dogma etc. It signifies the separation of the State and Church. Secularism need not necessarily has conflict with religion. In recent time, a new understanding of Secularism has been emerging. Secularism does not mean any faith in religion or philosophy of life. It merely indicates a spirit of tolerance and understanding of the other person's religious belief. This spirit of Secularism is an outlook of life. It ensures a peaceful existence of all people, professing diverse religious or faiths.

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