



Secularism: The Cornerstone of Indian Democracy

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Abstract

Secularism is a core principle of Indian civilisation, having played a vital role in bringing together people from diverse backgrounds – a defining characteristic of Indian culture. The success of Indian democracy relies heavily on this principle, as it upholds fundamental values such as justice, liberty, equality, and unity. Its role in integrating different segments of society and fostering a sense of national identity warrants recognition. However, some argue that secularism is no longer relevant in India. This research paper explores various aspects of secularism, beginning with its definition, nature, and scope within India. The second section examines the relationship between democracy and secularism, investigating how they interact. Lastly, the paper considers the growing threats to secularism, including the rise of majoritarianism in India.

Keywords: Theocracy, Mobocracy, Sarvadharm Sama Bhava, Dharmanirapekshata, Orientalism, Spiritualism, Homogeneity, Heterogeneity.

SECULARISM: THE CORNERSTONE OF INDIAN DEMOCRACY

Secularism is one of the core principles of Indian civilisation. It has played a vital role in promoting

unity within diversity, which is considered the hallmark of Indian culture and ethos. The success of Indian democracy is primarily attributed to the principle of secularism, as it upholds fundamental ideals such as justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. Its role as a unifying force in Indian democracy, by bringing together different elements of Indian society and fostering a spirit of nationhood, deserves wholehearted appreciation, despite occasional interruptions in its smooth functioning.

In India, secularism does not mean a strict separation between the state and religion, nor does it require a clear division between spiritual life and everyday activities. Its primary aim is to promote a harmonious blending of social, political, cultural, and religious components. The Indian interpretation of secularism is more influenced by Gandhi's philosophy of Sarvadharm Samabhava than by Nehru's concept of Dharmanirapekshata. Within this context, secularism signifies a psychological and emotional bond among the country's diverse communities, despite their varied religious, cultural, and traditional backgrounds. This form of secularism is rooted in a spirit of acceptance rather than conflict and depends on trust rather than suspicion. Contrary to the belief that secularism militates against religion, it actually offers a framework that supports all faiths, fostering their



growth and prosperity without favouritism towards any religion, race, or belief system. The principles of secularism are deeply embedded in Vedic ideals, such as Sarva Dharma Samabhava, Dharma Nirapekshata, and the universal concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which were disseminated by the Bhakti and Sufi movements.

Secularism and Indian Democracy

Before exploring why secularism is regarded as the foundation of Indian democracy, it is important to understand its necessity for India. Is it difficult to foster national unity among diverse communities without proper channels? Can India prosper without secularism? Would the nation have advanced and established its place in the global community without it? Answers to these key questions will confirm the significance of secularism in Indian democracy. Secularism is the core principle of a society where different religions and cultures coexist. It is essential in a context where religion influences all facets of life and where the same faith can instigate various socio-economic and cultural challenges. Secularism is crucial in a society threatened by fascist tendencies that endanger national harmony for narrow political aims. Ultimately, a civilisation must undergo transformation. Aurobindo Ghosh suggests that India is a living entity, with its strength rooted in its people. The essence of India's identity lies in its unity amid diversity. Secularism is the most effective way to foster national integration. No other constitutional principle can uphold justice, liberty, equality, fraternity, individual dignity, unity, and national integrity as strongly as secularism. India displays stark differences in religion, culture, and lifestyle. Without accommodating and reconciling frameworks like secularism, India's progress as a nation would be unlikely. A conflict similar to the Thirty Years' War, which pitted Protestants against Catholics in Europe, might have occurred here. Furthermore, prosperity—an aspect of peace—could have been compromised by chaos stemming from doubt, suspicion, fear, and pride.

Secularism has played a vital role in protecting and fostering India's democracy since the country gained independence seventy-five years ago. When leading Western constitutional experts refused to help in drafting India's constitution, fearing it would be short-lived, this very document has effectively guided Indian democracy for over seven decades. Despite being one of the most diverse countries in the world, India has thrived as a united society and nation. The principles of national integration and unity in diversity are deeply rooted in the Indian mindset, even though occasional attempts by misguided individuals have aimed to weaken the bonds of brotherhood among the country's people. Despite these challenges, Indian democracy has successfully upheld the constitutional principles outlined in the preamble, ensuring they serve the people of India.

Secularism is the foundation of Indian democracy, shaping rights, liberties, justice, and individual dignity in a unique way within the country. It is often called the 'sacred thread that connects the various gems of the Indian constitution'. This principle has ensured that Indian democracy does not slip into theocracy or mob rule. Secularism has consistently guided successive governments in fulfilling constitutional obligations without favouring any particular religion. Governments are required to uphold the dignity of every citizen, regardless of religion, race, caste, gender, colour, or place of birth. Whenever efforts have been made to dilute the spirit of fraternity, a vigilant civil society has opposed divisive forces. Over the years, secularism has effectively countered challenges from anti-social and anti-national groups by fostering unity among citizens. It has ingrained in the Indian mindset the belief that 'United we gain and divided we lose.'

Indian democracy fundamentally aims for the welfare and empowerment of its people. No government in India can ignore the importance of religion in achieving this goal, as nearly all policies seek to promote inter-religious or intra-religious



equality. In India, the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity must be understood in the context of the country's diverse religious landscape. Additionally, democracy involves eliminating harmful practices such as mastery and servitude, dominance and dependence, exploitation and oppression, as well as the stigma linked to majority and minority groups. Through accessible political offices, universal adult suffrage, regular elections, basic income schemes, and special measures for minorities and marginalised groups, Indian democracy strives to eliminate exploitation and build an egalitarian society where individual dignity is respected and upheld. Although India has much further to go, its achievements over the past seven decades are commendable. The policies based on need have fostered a sense of national unity and justice. Therefore, secularism means promoting an inclusive, welfare-oriented state where the government performs its duties impartially and without bias. In the Indian context, secularism envisions a state in the Aristotelian sense: "The state has come into existence for the good of the individual and continues for the best of the individual."

However, the role of the state in the lives of individuals and communities, especially in the personal sphere, has long been a subject of intense debate since the doctrine of secularism was incorporated into the constitution. There is considerable cacophony suggesting that secularism cannot work in a deeply religious society like India. It is also argued that it asks too much from the majority while expecting very little from the minority. As a result, this leads to reverse discrimination and the tyranny of minorities. These arguments are flawed and reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of various aspects of secularism. The first and most crucial point is that secularism is not an anti-religious doctrine; it is pro-religious because it aims to promote harmony and Sarvodaya for all religions. Implementing special measures to protect minorities should not be seen as a

compromise on the rights of the majority, but rather as a vital step toward the collective progress of everyone's rights, as no fundamental right can function in isolation. The entire chapter on fundamental rights should be viewed holistically, not as separate, disconnected parts. These protective measures are not meant to create minority tyranny but to prevent the excesses of the majority. True national unity and genuine development cannot be achieved when relationships between different communities are tainted by fear, doubt, suspicion, and mistrust. That is why Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam was right when he said that 'where there is righteousness in the heart, there is beauty in the character. When there is beauty in character, harmony exists in the home. When there is harmony at home, there is order in the nation, and when there is order in the nation, there is peace in the world.'

Social, political, and economic democracy will lose its significance if there is no secularism in India. Even justice, seen as the fundamental principle of any society, and individual dignity, regarded as the ultimate goal of every society, will become meaningless if they are separated from secularism. Today, India is recognised as the largest and most successful democracy, not because it is one of the fastest-growing economies or a military power, but because of the tolerance and mutual respect that define its cultural ethos. Indian culture has gained worldwide reverence through its philosophy of oneness, which promotes the concept of Vasudeva Kutumbakam. The successful functioning of India as a nation, despite significant differences in various social and cultural practices, remains a mystery to Western nations. India's democracy cannot survive without secularism, as secularism embodies the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice. Above all, it includes love, affection, care, respect, and compassion for others. It acts as a unifying force that bonds the diverse elements of Indian democracy, creating a dynamic power that drives its movement, speed, and momentum.



Secularism in the Indian context should not be limited to mundane and spiritual matters alone but should also extend to the realms of logic, reasoning, and scientific temper. Secularism means embracing modernism while moving away from outdated traditionalism and archaic conservative practices, which hinder the development of an organic society. It has played a vital role in resolving various inter-religious and intra-religious conflicts by encouraging rational thinking and sound reasoning. The discriminatory practices that once overshadowed Indian society have been eliminated. Since secularism views the individual as the fundamental unit of society, it believes that an informed individual can make a significant contribution to nation-building and national integration. Historically, secularism involved applying the golden mean of Aristotle or Buddha's Madhyama marga without allegiance to any particular ideology. It emphasises careful appreciation and critical evaluation of different value systems. It has liberated Indian minds extensively, broadened their perspectives, and stirred their inner selves. Without this, India might not have stood firm against anti-secular and anti-national forces that repeatedly threatened stability. The majority of the Indian people are passionate supporters of secularism. They focus on improving their daily lives; only a few distorted minds promote sinister ideologies for selfish gains. Nevertheless, India has consistently shown that it favours 'Mohabbat ki dukaan' rather than 'Nafrat ki bazaar.'

Secularism has played a significant role in helping Indian democracy reach new heights across various fields. It is often said that peace and development mutually support one another. They work together to maintain law and order, but at the same time, underdevelopment and marginalisation can lead to social unrest. No country can become great if internal conflicts tear its society apart and its people see each other as enemies. Social harmony and collective efforts have enabled India to excel in various fields, including the economy, military,

science, and technology. Challenges such as underdevelopment, regional disparities, poverty, hunger, and unemployment require long-term planning and increased financial investment. The success of these plans depends on the governance model and public response. Similarly, trust in the system largely depends on how well these welfare measures work. When inclusive development becomes the primary goal of most government policies, peace and stability are crucial in such a socio-economic environment. Therefore, in India, secularism not only urges the government to implement welfare initiatives for the betterment of citizens but also to create conditions that enable them to enjoy the benefits of these programmes. The slogans "Sabkha Saath" and "Sabkha Vikas," introduced by the Indian Prime Minister, clearly embody the principle of secularism.

Threat to secularism:

Secularism as an ideology and value system is in antithesis with fascism, authoritarianism, conservatism, and majoritarianism. Today, due to the rise of these aggressive forces, secularism in India faces serious challenges. The emergence of right-wing politics on one side and the growth of traditional and charismatic authority on the other have consistently threatened India's secular fabric. Efforts are underway to turn diversity into uniformity and heterogeneity into homogeneity. A narrow view that examines every issue through religion, caste, sect, or majority-minority lenses is deeply problematic. The ideology of 'us' versus 'them' is being promoted to demonise certain communities and serve narrow, malicious goals. Branding individuals based on their birthplace, caste, religion, and ethnicity, rather than their work and profession, is increasingly common. Superstitions, pseudoscience, and mystery-mongering are eroding logic, reasoning, and scientific temper. School and college curricula are frequently revised to disseminate biased and distorted ideologies. A greater focus is placed on duties rather than rights, and on community identity



rather than individual interests. The tendency to equate political leadership with the nation by constructing narratives that make them seem unquestionable and infallible has become a new trend in India.

Food, attire, conscience, and belief—once considered private matters—are increasingly portrayed as public issues, allowing the state to intervene more directly. Law and order are often ignored to make room for swift and sometimes harsh justice. Attempts to reform religion are dismissed as efforts to undermine religious freedom. Print, digital, and social media are effectively utilised to spread divisive ideas. Religion is becoming an essential factor in the electoral process. New ideas of patriotism and nationalism are being promoted to serve sinister motives. Hate speech and calls for violence against specific communities are spreading covertly. Machiavelli's historical approach, often criticised as too narrow and outdated, is used to tarnish historical figures and elevate controversial personalities as if they were genuine patriots. Public discourse is dominated by the Mandir and Masjid controversy, with ongoing efforts to rewrite history. Vote bank politics have reached alarming levels, with politics often conducted on the graves of the deceased without hesitation or remorse. False narratives are smoothly crafted to promote harmful agendas.

The key question here is why secularism has faced numerous challenges recently. Why have anti-social and anti-national forces become so powerful? Is it a failure of our cultural values, individual and social ethics? Have globalisation and technological advancement in contemporary India contributed to social unrest? The answer lies in the tendency to prioritise certain directive principles of state policy and fundamental duties over fundamental rights. The decline of democratic institutions is another main reason behind the rising challenges to secularism. The legislature has become less active in debating ways to tackle divisive tendencies. The dominance of the executive and the judiciary's

silence on key issues have facilitated the spread of harmful ideologies. The rise of crony capitalism, which promotes damaging ideas, also plays a part. Western culture, where individualism is highly valued, is making Indian society more selfish, short-sighted, insensitive, and impulsive. Unbalanced economic development leads to stark income inequality, poverty, unemployment, and limited opportunities, ultimately resulting in social unrest. Caste-based politics, politicisation of caste, and politicisation of religion have systematically blurred the boundaries between politics and religion, as well as between private and public spheres.

The grim depiction of the current state of Indian democracy and its overall influence on secularism can evoke both fear and concern. Questions will arise about how long divisive forces will continue to be involved in such damaging activities. Will secularism withstand the significant challenges posed by religion and ethnicity? The first key point is that every ideology has a limit; beyond that, it cannot function. The law of diminishing returns also applies in this case. Furthermore, change is inevitable. Every force has a counterforce, and every thesis has an antithesis. Love, affection, care, and compassion are at the heart of Indian civilisation. India is the only country in the world that demonstrates, through truth and non-violence, that freedom and liberation are possible. Every assault on secularism's principles will only end up in bolstering it further because a large segment of the people prioritise improving their lives over engaging in unnecessary controversy. The real India differs significantly from what some biased media constantly portray. Indian voters are mature enough to recognise what vote bank politics is and what the true motives of politicians are. A decent standard of living and a brighter future for their children matter more to them than religion and ethnicity. Today, people are more aligned with slogans like 'Bharat Jodo' than 'Bharat todo.' Therefore, secularism will continue to serve as a guiding principle and the spirit of Indian democracy in the future.



Secularism forms the foundation of Indian democracy, reflecting Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's assertion that we are Indians first and foremost. India's survival and progress as a nation and civilisation depend on this vital element. Unity in diversity exemplifies Indian democracy. Consequently, it is every Indian citizen's duty to protect and nurture the diverse culture and pluralism that underpin India's secularism.

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