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Politics Term Paper

Secularism in India

The definition of **secularism** according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is 'indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations'. Secularism has been a topic that has sparked off many debates regarding its finer nuances and aspects. Most of the experts in field of political science are unsure of what secularism actually means. It has been under debate since a long time that does it mean 'erecting a wall' between state and religion and devaluing religion altogether? (secularism- Nita Chandhoke) A number of times, it has been a question, if secularism is actually contradictory to the idea of minority rights. Secularism in India has been a topic under question always, since India is a country of many religions and different religious sensibilities.

The idea of secularism reached India from the west. So it would give us a good understanding of secularism if we are able to delve a little into the origin of secularism. It has become commonplace to describe Western society as secular society (A short history of Secularism - Graeme Smith). Smith argues here, that secularism is not the end of Christianity nor does it reflect the reluctance of people to believe in God. The rise in secularism could be seen with the decline in the authority of the church. The Bishops, the different priests would definitely be consulted, but their opinion was just one of the many opinions people received. With the emergence of universally accepted scientific laws and rules, people began observing that most religious ideas didn't have much universal appeal like war, homosexuality etc. The author observes that religion is still a dominating force in a large number of places in the world, like the Middle East, Latin America, Africa and so on. In the places, where people didn't consider religion the centre of their decisions and motives, secularism began emerging. The states stopped endorsing a particular religion and begun giving more freedom to the people to take their own decisions not influenced by any religious motives.

The idea of secularism in India can be explained to a layman by stating a few of the features of secularism. A secular state can be defined as one in which the state doesn't endorse any particular religion. The people of the state cannot be discriminated on the basis of religion and they must be allowed to follow and practice their religion without any hindrance from the side of the state. One also needs to understand that a secular state isn't one where religion is totally absent or people become anti-religious. Religion is definitely present in the lives of people, but it

is not the governing aspect of their lives. It is one of the many aspects that can influence a person's decisions.

Religion began losing its value in people's lives, because there were many things that could not be explained by religion. Rational people began giving more importance to things that could explain various unexplained phenomena, mainly science. Now that states did not require religion to establish their authority through religion, the state can focus on the development in different sectors and not just the religious one.

A number of scholars have argued that the very idea of secularism is very flawed. There are many arguments that have been put forward. According to these, secularism is necessary, but implementation is faulty. There are many instances, when religious practices cannot be differentiated from cultural ones. Secularism might be the defence of minorities. Secularism might even lead to alienation of minorities. Often the idea of secularism might be mistaken as trivialisation of faith. The state needs to follow a stance of strict non-interference. This is a good concept theoretically, but is very difficult to implement in reality. Secularism may be perceived as the state taking an equidistant stance. A simple example may be that there are state holidays provided for certain religious occasions, but none for others. Secularism is necessary, it is an ideal concept in theory, but almost impossible to implement in real life governance. Afterall, one cannot deny the fact, that religious bonds are much stronger than any other cultural or socio-economic ties.

A question that may occur in the minds of people is that, how much of secularism has actually been implemented in India? Is it only a theoretical concept that cannot be implemented in a multi-religious country or is it something that has been implemented faultlessly in the past?

We can point to numerous instances in the past, where we can see that religion and polity has been merged into one or cases, where policy making has been influenced by religion. India as a so-called secular country has witnessed something that even countries like Indonesia, Pakistan haven't witnessed, the leader of a religious organisation being sworn in as the chief minister of a state (<https://thewire.in/politics/india-secularism-religion>). We cannot deny that the election of such a person into the office of highest power in the state, will bring in colours of religion into the rule. Triple talaq, a part of the Muslim personal law, has been in debate for quite some time. Ignoring it's humanitarian and other implications, we do see it as an infringement upon a personal religious law. Highlighting other incidents, all over the country, in 2002, there had been massive riots in Gujarat between the Hindus and Muslims. The violence was perpetrated by right wing Hindu groups, targeting the Muslim population. According to Amnesty International, there were around 2000 (most of them being Muslims) people who had lost their lives in the riots. Some of the perpetrators of the crime had been arrested, but nothing had been done by the existing BJP government to provide justice to the victims. This clearly shows the religious bias

that the existing government had.

(<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/84000/asa200012005en.pdf>). Bringing to light another incident that shows the absence of secularism in India, the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992. We can truly call a state secular when the policy making units, that is, the political parties, do not have any religious affiliations. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad demanded the construction of a temple in Ayodhya, the birthplace of Ram. This was supported by the BJP. Some of the workers of the sangh attempted an attack on the mosque. This caused the involvement of the paramilitary forces too and resulted in the death of a few sevaks (workers of the sangh). This caused the BJP to withdraw support from the central government which caused the existing government to collapse and thus re-elections had to be conducted. This is simply proof of the fact that the leading political parties are not secular and hence the governments are also truly never secular. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demolition_of_the_Babri_Masjid)

We also notice a common trend in the Indian scenario, the policy of appeasement. We often see that religious minorities are appeased in order to simply secure votes from them. This policy of appeasement has been carried out since colonial India. In recent time, the Haj subsidy has been removed, which according to the government is bringing to an end, an era of appeasement. The amount used as subsidy (Rs. 250 crore annually), must be used for actual upliftment and not for a sense of

entitlement. (<https://www.firstpost.com/politics/govt-scraps-haj-subsidy-not-revolutionary-but-aim-to-end-appeasement-in-favour-of-empowerment-is-evident-4307315.html>)

These along with the Christian riots in Odisha, prove that India is a secular state according to the Constitution of India, but its implementation has not been very effective.

Secularism might often lead to alienation of some community or the other. When a community is present in a large population, it's often noticed that that community that is present in a large number tends to dominate decision making and other policy making. The minorities obviously feel isolated and alienated. Secularism promotes the idea of equality of religions or the idea of neutrality. Most decisions are taken to satisfy the majority of the population, and hence it may happen that the minority is alienated. No matter what decision is taken, it is sure to be beneficial to one community and not beneficial to another. The actual goal of any government should be the upliftment of the people and especially the minorities. They must be given a chance to prosper. However, once the idea of the state being neutral comes in, the minorities do not get a chance to be elevated from their current social and/or religious status. In an extremely diverse and multi-religious country like India, it is especially hard to implement. The prospect of appeasement of minorities also isn't an ideal way to make sure minorities are getting their due upliftment. It doesn't actually cause upliftment, but leads to a sense of entitlement, which causes further communal disharmony.

A number of people have observed that upon attaining independence, the great diversity of India has been ignored. Even though constitutionally, everyone is equal, it is barely so in practice. (<http://www.mcrg.ac.in/PP29.pdf>) Emphasising on nation building, the policy makers

forgot taking into account the diversity of the nation. The more they tried to establish equality on all grounds, they ended up creating greater barriers between the various communities. The claims made by religious, cultural and tribal minorities became sharper. This further led to majoritarian assertions. The sense of suppression, deprivation and alienation continued growing and began establishing a religious renaissance which has a strong socio-cultural component which began questioning the secularist and modernist ideologies that are being practised right now. It is imperative that the ideas of nation building that have been followed till now are re-looked into. This will ensure that it is just not minority appeasement but also overall development of the nation on the socio-economic front.

One can draw conclusions from various readings that secularism is extremely hard to implement in a country like India. The population is so diverse that often the satisfaction of one group leads to the dissatisfaction of another. This also happens because most reforms or policies are always executed in India keeping political motives in mind. If the policies are for overall development and growth, then the nation can prosper better. However due to faulty implementation of secularism and the certain ambiguities in its foundation, there will always be the debate as to whether secularism is an ideal form for a society or not. We can conclude by saying that secularism does have some ambiguous characteristics and some utopian ones too, if implemented without personal and political gains in mind, it might be a popular model in states that have almost equitable distribution of religions. However, in India, it will always remain a challenge to execute secularism to its full potential without causing further 'divide and rule' in an already divided population.