

Secularism in India

Meaning and Interpretation of the Concept

A. Secularism as the separation of state and religion-

- The state shall not concern itself with religious beliefs, practices and institutions
- The state shall not be associated with a particular religion
- the state shall permit freedom of conscience
- The state shall not discriminate between citizens on the basis of their religious beliefs.

B. Secularism as equality of all religions

- No official religion of the State
- No discrimination on the grounds of religion

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Historical Context

By the 1920s, at the very time when Mahatma Gandhi set out to forge a major mass movement that could take on colonialism, the politicization of religious identities, whether in the form of the Muslim League or that of the Hindu Mahasabha, could have hampered the project of building a pan-Indian freedom struggle.

Mahatma Gandhi looked for a principle that could bind people who subscribed to different faiths together, and which could weld them into a mass movement. This principle he found in the doctrine of *sarva dharma sambhava*, which can be read as 'equality of all religions' or 'all religions should be treated equally'

On the other hand, for Jawaharlal Nehru, secularism meant something else altogether. Nehru's preferred notion of secularism was that of *dharma nirpekshata*, or that the state would not be moved by religious considerations in enacting policy

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Historical Context

Later on, Nehru's understanding of secularism also came much closer to the notion of **sarva dharma sambhava**. Nehru, who by that time had become India's first Prime Minister, made this clear on various occasions. First, **secularism did not mean 'a state where religion as such is discouraged. It means freedom of religion and conscience, including freedom for those who may have no religion.** Second, for Nehru, the word **secular was not opposed to religion.**

“It is perhaps not very easy even to find a good word for 'secular'. Some people think that it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct. What it means is that it **is a state which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities; that, as a state, it does not allow itself to be attached to one faith or religion, which then becomes the state religion.**”- Nehru

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Historical Context

For Nehru, the concept of the secular state thus carried three meanings:

(a) freedom of religion or irreligion for all,

(b) the state will honour all faiths equally,

and (c) that the state shall not be attached to one faith or religion, which by that act becomes the state religion.

The creed of secularism therefore discouraged fears that one group had the right to stamp the body politic with its ethos, even if it is in a majority. Conversely, a religious group would not be disprivileged in any way even though it happened to be in a minority. In effect, the meaning that secularism acquired in the Indian context added one more dimension to the generic concept of secularism: not only the recognition of faith, but the equal treatment of all faiths.

The former Chief Justice of India P.B Gajendragadkar interpreted secularism as (a) the state does not owe loyalty to one religion; (b) it is not irreligious or antireligious; (c) it gives equal freedom to all religions; and (d) that the religion of the citizen has nothing to do in the matter of socio-economic problems.

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Historical Context

D.E. Smith (1963) suggested that the liberal democratic theory of secularism carries three connotations:

- (a) liberty and freedom of religion,
- (b) citizenship and the right to equality, non-discrimination, and neutrality,
- and (c) the separation of state and religion.

In India, argued Smith, the first two principles have been incorporated into the Constitution both as the basis for secularism, and as important constitutional values in their own right. However, the right of the state to intervene in the affairs of religion have deeply compromised these two principles. The core of the problem of Indian secularism, argued Smith, lies in the non-separation of state and religion. Therefore, he concluded that India has some, but not all, the features of a secular state.

On the other hand, V.P. Luthera (1964) argued that since the wall of separation between religion and the state does not exist in India, the country is not and cannot be secular

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Provisions in Constitution

Article 14: Equality before Law

Article 15: No discrimination on the grounds of religion

Article 16: Equal opportunity to all

Article 25: Freedom of Conscience (to freely profess, practice and propagate religion)

Article 26: Right to establish and maintain religious institutions

Article 27: No tax on promotion of religion or maintain of religious institutions

Article 28: Allow educational institutions maintained by different religious groups to impart religious instruction; Freedom from Attending Religious Instruction

Article 29: Protection of Interests of Minorities

Article 30: Right of Minorities to Establish and Administer Educational Institutions

Multiculturalism

Approaches

- Integration

Integration: Encouraging minority groups to participate in mainstream society while preserving their cultural identity

- Assimilation

Assimilation: Minority groups adopt the culture and norms of the dominant group, often losing their distinct identity.

- “Melting Pot”

“Melting Pot”: Blending of different cultures into a single, unified culture where individual identities are merged.