

UNIT 21 MULTI RELIGIOUS SOCIETY: THE SECULAR PRINCIPLE

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21.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to make you understand the meaning and the nature of secularism and the problems that it faces in the Indian context. After studying this unit you should be able to :

explain the rise of secularism in the west and its nature

identity the secular traditions in India before independence

describe how secularism was adopted as a value in India

identify the problems in the path of secularism, and

suggest measures to overcome them.

21.1 INTRODUCTION

India has always been the home of a wide variety of religious faiths. Perhaps, there is no other society that is as multi-religious as Indian society. The co-existence of a vast variety of faiths, some of which have been quite different from one another, has been a shining example of religious pluralism, and tolerance, a characteristic for which this country has been justly famous.

This is not to say that Indian society has been completely free from religious tensions and friction. But when one surveys the vast panorama of Indian history, extending over three thousand years or more, evidence of bitter religious conflicts and wars is not substantial. Even the advent of Muslim conquests led to no great religious warfare. Muslim rule in India, notwithstanding some intolerant rulers, was on the whole, characterised by religious harmony rather than discord. (On the other hand, in this very period Europe had been in the grip of bitter religious conflicts.) British rule which followed Muslim decline, initially, saw a continuation of the Indian tradition of religious tolerance and co-existence. Hindus and Muslims fought alongside of each other in the first war of Independence, in 1857.

By about the beginning of the twentieth century the situation began to change. Economic and political competitiveness, unleashed by the process of modernisation introduced by the British, began to sow seeds of religious discord. Within a short span of about half-a-century communal tensions and violence seized Indian society. Parties like the Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League successfully communalised Indian politics. India's liberation from colonial rule, in 1947, was ironically, accompanied by one of the worst blood paths in human history. Events leading to partition, as well as the partition itself, led Hindus and Muslims into much bitterness and hostility. For once it seemed as if the tradition of religious co-existence, had been destroyed forever.

Yet, just two years after partition, when free India's first ever constitution was framed, the national leadership, under Nehru's inspiration and guidance, decided to declare India a "Secular State; that is, a state in which all religions and citizens irrespective of their faith would be treated equally impartially." In framing the Constitution, the bitterness of communal prejudice and antagonisms of the recent past were cast aside. India decided to follow a secular path and remain a multi-religious society guaranteeing freedom of religions, common citizenship and equality before law to all its citizens.

In the light of this history and tradition, it is important to know that what factors impelled India to prefer becoming a secular state? And, how is Indian secularism influenced by India's unique historical, political and cultural experiences? Also, the need to fully understand and appreciate the importance of secularism in contemporary India has become critical today, for as recent evidence suggests, Indian society is tending to move increasingly in the direction of Hindu revivalism and Muslim and Sikh fundamentalism. This is contrary to what the founding fathers of our constitution wanted. In this unit you will know about these developments and their effects.

21.2 SECULARISM IN THE WEST

The word secularism was first coined by George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906) in 1851. In English, the word is derived from the Latin Saeculum which literally means "this present age." It

is also one of the Latin words for World, and for a long time secular meant “worldly” in contrast to “religious” or “sacred”. However, much before the formal coining of the term by Holyoake, the process, or rather the struggle, for secularisation had already been launched in western society.

21.2.1 Emergence

In Europe and England, from very early times, the Catholic Church had exercised almost total authority over all aspects of life. By virtue of their tremendous power, those exercising religious authority, beginning from the Pope and downwards, had become very oppressive. Kings and commoners were equally victims of their oppression. Both of them, therefore, struggled to get rid of the control of Church from affairs of the state, as well as routine everyday life. Religion and religious authorities were opposed because these had become the main justification and instrument of oppression. Due to this experience, religion, in Western society was confronted with a powerful challenge from forces that wanted to free political and social life, including matters pertaining to every-day life, from the control and interference of religious authority. The forces that set themselves in opposition to the Church and its power came to be known as secular, while the struggle, and process, which eventually, led to the decline of religious authoritarianism, and instead, replaced it with a rational and scientific outlook, has been termed 'Secularisation'.

Most fundamentally, secularism is concerned with affairs of this world only, and with improving the human condition and promoting human welfare in this life. Accordingly, the secular outlook and ideology de-emphasises the importance and role of religion to matters that are outside the realm of faith, and after life.

Secularisation, in the western world, led to the dilution of westerns attachment to religion and religious outlook on matters relating to state and society. One important consequence of this trend was that various social institutions, particularly the economy and polity came to be increasingly guided by rational considerations, rather than by religious injunctions. Along with this development, religion ceased to function as the sole integrative force in European societies. Instead, a secular ideology like nationalism gradually emerged as the principle on which societies and their members began to get integrated.

For the individual, the development of secularism meant more personal freedom and choice to think, to belong, and to act. At a period of human history in which modern science had not yet developed, and human life had been guided by traditions, superstitions and blind faith, the insistence of some bold and committed thinkers to stamp out these non-rational elements, and instead base human thought and behaviour on reason was nothing short of a revolution.

21.2.2 Spheres of Religion and Secularism

The reduction of the pervasive role of religion has led many people to believe that religion and secularism are antithetical and hostile to each other. Strictly speaking, this is not quite correct. Rather than being antagonistic, the relationship between the two is mutually exclusive. The primary concerns of religion (as is well known) are faith in some divine being and after-life. With these, state is not concerned and it would gladly leave such matters to religion.

In view of the differing spheres of religion and secularism, Lauer has observed, “along with secularisation, religion may still flourish and may continue to function as a source of justification

for man's morality, affording him some transcendent meaning to his existence." Thus, it is not quite proper to view secularism and religion as an "either/or" situation; to quote Lauer again "secularisation involves the change of religion, not its disappearance." This position, however, should not make us lose sight of the fact that there is, to an extent, an inbuilt tension between religion and secularism. As Mackee has this world, due to which mans understanding of his society is no longer, primarily in religious terms." Secularism, he further adds, is "a turning away from other worlds, and towards this one." Having pointed out that religion and secularism are not necessarily opposite of or inimical towards each other, it may be added that this mistaken notion of their "inevitable" hostility arises out of the fact that superstitions, meaningless rituals and dogmatic beliefs, which really, are, far removed from religion, are mistakenly identified with religion. As S. Gopal has indicated, if religion is concerned with the "higher things of life," there should be no conflict between the two.

Before bringing this discussion to an end, one final point concerning secularism needs to be made. It is that in the ultimate analysis, secularism is an attitude, and a mental approach, which, apart from emphasising the supremacy of reason and scientific thinking, also emphasises the equality of all human being and holds that every individual is as good as another. Indeed, here there appears to be a common meeting point, and religion and secularism seem to be two sides of the same coin.

Check Your Progress 1

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with the model answers given at the end of this unit.

1) Fill up the blanks

- a) In the west secularism resulted from a struggle to get freedom from the oppression of.....
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- b) Religion is concerned th.....
world whereas secularism concerns
..... world.

2) Are religion and secularism inimical to each other?

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21.3 SECULARISM IN INDIA

In the preceding section, it has been seen that in the west secularism was coincident with the process of reducing and eliminating the pervasive influence of religion from this worldly life. In this context, “secular” has been equated with “non-religious.” In India, however, secular and secularism have been used in the context of the state only. As such, in our country, one only hears of the secular state, never of secular society. This is partly because in India the concerns of secularism have been vastly different from those in the west. Indian secularism has primarily been conceived of as the antithesis of communalism.

21.3.1 Secularism and Indian Tradition

It has already been pointed out that in the west the development of secularism was the outcome of the conflict between the Church and the State, including the common people. Indian society does not have any record of such oppression by organised religious authority. In both Hinduism and Islam, neither the Brahmins nor the Muslim Ulema have ever been able to function as an organized official clergy, and wield effective power in the lives of the people. Thus both during pre-Muslim times there has been no history of serious conflict between religious authority and the king or people. Secondly, even at the inter-group level, until modern times, Indian Society generally has had a tradition of religious co-existence.

Even during Muslim rule, Islam was not proclaimed as the official religion of the state, and barring some exceptions, Muslims rulers had followed a policy of tolerance and co-existence. In course of time, Hindus had come to occupy various positions in the administrative machinery, and Muslim policy, on the whole, was one of “live and let live.” Subsequently, when the British occupied India they too maintained an attitude of neutrality insofar as the religious life of the various communities was concerned. Further, the British also introduced the concept and practice of equality before law, whereby all citizens came to enjoy equal rights, irrespective of caste and creed. This had not been the case in pre-British India. Thus, apart from the earlier historical tradition of religious co-existence, British rule introduced two important elements, - namely, state neutrality towards religion, and equality before law. These served as fore-runners of the modern secular state in India.

21.3.2 Secularism and National Movement

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the British had abandoned their earlier neutrality, and adopted their well known policy of divide and rule, due to which Indian political life became dangerously communalised. National leaders, with a vision, were apprehensive that religious disharmony would not only thwart the freedom struggle but would also create a problem for the country, when freedom would be eventually achieved.

To counter this unhealthy cleavage, Nehru took a pre-emptive step in the 1931 session of the Congress, held in Karachi, by incorporating in the resolution on fundamental rights, clauses asserting that every citizen of India would enjoy freedom of conscience, and the right to profess and practice any religion; that all citizens were equal before the law; that no disability would be attached to citizens in regard to public employment and in the exercise of any trade or calling, on grounds of creed, caste or sex; and that the state would observe neutrality in regard to all religions. This, according to S. Gopal was “ The first breakdown in concrete sense of the concept of secularism in the Indian Context and formed the basis of relevant articles in the Constitution, many years later.”

At the time of the passage of this resolution, the demand for Pakistan had not yet appeared on the Indian political horizon. Unfortunately, Nehru's pre-emptive action bore little fruit in terms of controlling Hindu Muslim divisiveness, which ultimately culminated in the partition of the country.

Independence saw Indian partitioned also. Therefore, contrary pulls existed in the fulfilment of earlier commitments. On the one hand, was the fact that Pakistan had come into existence purely on the basis of a deliberately promoted religious conflict, and that, its creation was accompanied by one of the worst massacres in human history. On the other hand, was the fact that Gandhi, Nehru, and other Congress leaders, had always dreamt of a united Indian in which nationalism and economic development would transcend religious differences. These leaders had never accepted Jinnah's thesis that religion could be the basis of statehood. But the ideals for which the national leaders had struggled were pushed into the background, during the partition riots by insane mobs whose passions had been inflamed by the communalist forces.

If Pakistan was to be an example, there was a good case for Indian also to become a theocratic Hindu state, particularly when eighty-five per cent of its population comprised of Hindu. But standing firmly against the insanity of those difficult days, Nehru and his colleagues stuck steadfastly to the commitment they had made in 1931, and opted to declare Indian as a secular state - thought the formal inclusion of the word "secularism" in the Preamble of the Constitution was effected only in 1976.

21.3.3 Importance of Secularism for India

The decision to make India a secular state, which, against the backdrop of the upheavals of Partition may appear to be enigmatic, was influenced by several sound considerations.

Firstly, the freedom struggle, as initiated and conducted by the Indian National Congress, had operated in terms of the secular ideology of non-religious nationalism. No compromise was made on this point even in the darkest days of Hindu-Muslim antagonisms, attendant on the Pakistan movement. Indeed, as Partition became inevitable, leaders like Gandhi and Nehru became even more resolute in their commitment to non-communalised nationalism. Therefore, any deviation from the objective of establishing a secular state would have been the very negation of the ideal which the nationalist leaders had always espoused. A declaration of India as a Hindu state would have provided justification to Jinnah's two nation theory.

Secondly, apart from ideological considerations, there was also an importance pragmatic consideration. India had always been the home of a vast variety of religious communities and sects; after independence, this multi-religious composition of the country remained unaltered. In fact, sizeable numbers of Muslims opted not to migrate to Pakistan but to pin their fate and destiny with the rest of the country. The long tradition of inter-communal co-existence had given faith and confidence to Muslims, and others that they could continue living in this country in peace and honour. Thus for this pluralism also, a secular state became essential.

Above all these, there was the tragic assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948. This gruesome tragedy shocked Hindus and non-Hindus alike, and impressed upon all Indians that separation of politics and religion was the best safeguard of their hard won freedom. It was realised that, if this separation was not effected, communal divisiveness would lead the country to disaster. In the interests of a strong and prosperous nation internecine conflicts had to stop.

Thus, India's historical traditions, as well as its immediate political exigencies, following independence, supported the case for the Indian polity taking a secular direction. Accordingly, the Constitution which was adopted in 1950, includes several articles that have given the Indian state a definite secular character.

21.4 INDIAN CONSTITUTION : BASIS OF SECULARISM

Having briefly considered the circumstances under which the decision to make India a secular state occurred, it is now time to become familiar with the provisions of the Constitution, which are supportive of principle of secularism, and which reflect the secular base and character of the Indian state.

Article 15.1 of the Constitution lays down that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion. Article 16 provides equal opportunity for all citizens in matters of employment under the State. Further, it prohibits discrimination or ineligibility on grounds of religion. Article 25 gives all persons freedom of conscience and right to profess, practice and propagate religion. It can make laws for regulating or restricting economic, political or secular activity associated with religion. Especially, it can throw open Hindu religious institutions to all classes of Hindus.

All religion denominations have a right to establish and maintain institutions and to own and manage property for religious purposes. The state can not compel any one to pay taxes to promote or support a particular religion.

Government educational institutions cannot provide religious instruction. Government and aided educational institutions, cannot deny anyone admission on grounds of religion. Nor can they compel anyone to take part in religious instruction or prayer.

Religious minorities have a right to establish educational institutions and the State cannot discriminate against them on that ground in granting aid. The constitution specially rejects communal electorates.

It may be pointed out that the religious freedom of individuals and groups as well as neutrality on the part of Indian state is not absolute but is of a restricted nature. The freedom of religion is subject to public order, morality and health. This indicates that the state has the right to interfere in religious affairs which seem to be warranted in the Indian context - for religious practices such as 'Devadasi' human sacrifice and untouchability needed to be banned.

This restriction is also reflected in article 25 (2) (a) which empowers the state to regulate and restrict any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice. Further, Article 25 (2) (b) provides for social welfare and reforms. State intervention is also indicated in the constitutional directive of striving to evolve a Uniform Civil Code.

In matters pertaining to Hindu Society, state interference in religious matters has been justified on the ground that Hinduism lacks an ecclesiastical organisation to bring about any reforms from within. Moreover, this initiative and action was needed to evolve a Uniform Civil Code.

In view of these provisions in India, the term secularism is interpreted to imply that the state will not identify itself with any one religion, but be equally friendly towards, or equidistant from, all religions. Operating on this principle of neutrality, the Indian state is expected to prevent and contain inter-group conflict, and, at the same time, wield together the large variety of competing, and at times conflicting, multiple religious communities, that characterise our society, into one nation. This kind of secular policy, it is expected, would promote among all citizens a national identity that would rise above various religious identities, without, however, negating the latter. Concretely, this implies that in their public life, all citizens, and especially state functionaries, will maintain a separation between their rights and duties, on the one hand, and their beliefs and practices, on the other. The reasons for the differing interpretations of secularism in India, and the west, are the differing historical, political and social conditions in which secularism has emerged in India.

Check Your Progress 2

- Note :** i) Use the space given below for your answers.
ii) Check your answer with the model answers given at the end of this unit.

1) Why is the Indian tradition favourable to secularism?

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2) Fill up the blanks.

a) To counter religions divisiveness the 1931 session of the Congress at Karachi included in its resolution on fundamental rights.

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b) The word secularism was included in the Preamble of the Indian constitution. In

3) Mention two reasons that made Indian leaders choose to make India a secular state.

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21.5 JAWAHARLAL NEHRU'S OUTLOOK ON SECULARISM

The story of India's choice in favour of becoming secular state cannot be completed without mention of the pivotal role played by Jawaharlal Nehru in implanting and nourishing the seed of secularism in our country. Nehru's concept of secularism, however, was not limited to making secularism merely a principle of state policy. In fact, Nehru was equally, if not more, committed to the development of an all pervasive rational and scientific outlook that would permeate all aspects of our life. To this extent, Nehru's idea of secularism was closer to the western model, and the declaration of India as a secular state was for him, only one of the steps in the secularisation process.

Till the end of his life, Nehru struggled to promote secularism in India, along democratic lines. Given his charisma, which enabled him to exercise an emotional sway over India's people, he could have used coercive methods to spread secular thoughtways and practices, as Kemal Anaturk had done to secularise Turkey's Islamic state and society. But being essentially a liberal democrat, he eschewed authoritarian methods. Instead, he pinned his faith in economic development and hoped that once this became the prime concern of our people, religious differences would automatically recede into the back-ground, and common economic concerns would unite different groups.

However, due to our slow rate of economic development and population Explosion, there has been a perpetuation of economic deprivation of large segments of the population. Social and psychological conservatism has continue to coexist alongwith economic stagnation. Consequently, little dent if any, has been made in the ignorant, superstitious and obscurantist outlook of a substantial number of our people. The religion-traditional world-view has continued even among several educated people in urban areas. Several towns and cities have become theaters of communal violence and focal points of religious fundamentalism. A good deal of money in the urban areas is being spent on rituals and ceremonies that have little relationship with rationality and scientific knowledge.

People just perform these thoughtlessly, as a matter of habit. Thus, Nehru's hope and faith that economic development and modernisation would be the solvent of intercommunity differences, and would lead to a secularised outlook are, for the present, far from being attained.

It is also possible that in a religiously pluralistic society like ours, people like to cling to religion more closely and more devoutly since it is a source of their identity. Also, since the passing away of Nehru in 1964, no other leader has tried to promote a secular world-view with the same zeal and commitment that he had. There is also a view that there is something deep rooted about Hinduism and Islam, or about the larger Indian culture, in which secularism, as a principle of rational and scientific world-view will always remain a western transplant and never really become an organic part of our society and culture. Obviously, it is difficult to reach any conclusion on these points with any certainty. Instead, the better thing we can do here is to turn towards and examination of the factors that thwart the realisation of the secular deal.

21.6 PROBLEMS IN THE PATH OF SECULARISM

It has been explained above that as understood in the Indian context, secularism is a somewhat restricted phenomenon limited only to the functioning of the Indian state. In India, secularism is neither conceived nor expected to interfere with the hold of religion in most sectors of life. The result of this policy has been that, contrary to expectations around the time of our independence,

religion and religiosity continue to exercise a powerful influence in the daily life of many, or most, Indians.

Thus, God-men and miracle performers have large followings. Faith in horoscopes and astrologers remains strong; rath yatras and religious processions attract mammoth crowds. Now, even the government controlled electronic media gives considerable coverage to religious events, and also permits telecast of purely religious programmes. Given these developments, the question naturally arises as to how a rational and scientific outlook will develop in India, if the interpretation of secularism in our society is confined merely to the limited formula of religious neutrality, or ‘Dharma Nirpekshita’, on the part of the state. There are also problems that beset the proper function of our state along secular lines.

21.6.1 Problem of Uniform Civil Code

The best point to begin is with the vexed issue of the uniform civil code, which the founding fathers of our constitution wanted to eventually apply to all citizens. A uniform civil code, it was felt, was essential to help forge a national identity and bring about the integration of members of all religious communities into one bond of common citizenship. In its absence, citizens of this country would always remain divided, since they were all governed by their respective personal laws, which are rooted in the various religions. Following Independence, it was hoped that this step would be taken to usher in a secular society.

But in the last forty years, no progress has been made in the evolution of a uniform civil code. Today, its adoption appears to be more problematic than it was at the time when the constitution was framed. The Muslim minority compelled the Government, in 1986, to enact legislation concerning maintenance of divorced women which it felt was closer to its Personal Law, and therefore, religiously more acceptable. Modern secular considerations, and the opinion of those Muslims who took a secular position, were given no cognizance by the Government.

Similarly, other minorities like Christians, too, have given some indications that would render the formulation and enforcement of a uniform civil code an impossibility of course, the fact needs recognition that since India follows the path of liberal democracy, no government can legislate on any vital issue without the consent or concurrence of the affected groups and communities. This constraint is particularly great in sensitive legislation like religious laws. Such limitations indicate that the path leading to a truly secular society in India is strewn with numerous hurdles.

21.6.2 Politics and Religion

After the experience of Partition, and other events surrounding it, it was expected that politics in India would steer clear of religion. This expectation has been belied in as much as all our political activities are heavily laden with communal, caste or other parochial considerations. To worsen matters, religious or caste divisiveness is exploited for political gains. There is evidence to show that even communal riots are engineered with political objectives in view. These strategies have tragically prevented the development of a non-religious and non-communal approach to elections and the conduct of other political affairs, which basically are civil and secular matters.

Further, the unbridled communalisation of our political strategies, has set into motion a vicious circle of action and reaction on the part of various religious communities. To the extent that the

political system is compelled to bend itself before the pressures exerted by religious-political forces, a truly secular state cannot come into existence, leave alone a secular society.

The responsibility of undermining India's limited secularism falls upon the shoulders of the leaders of the post-Nehru era, many of whom are not intellectually liberated. Due to their neo-traditional orientation, these leaders are lacking in true commitment to the secularisation of Indian society, not only in terms of developing non-religious outlook but also in terms of developing a rational and scientific temper. This failure of the leadership has thwarted the progressive separation of religion and politics in India.

21.6.3 Cultural Symbols and Secularism

There is yet another danger secularism faces in India. Hinduism, the religion of the vast majority, is also a sort of a "national" religion in the sense that it is confined to the boundaries of this country (with Nepal, of course, being an exception). Consequently, for most, if not all Hindus, Hinduism gets identified with nationalism and national culture.

Several majority-minority misunderstandings originate from such perspectives. Thus, many public rituals and ceremonials, like bhoomi puja, breaking of coconuts on inaugural or auspicious occasions, performing of aarti and applying of tilak to distinguished guests are perceived by Hindus as cultural or nationalistic expressions, but to non-Hindus these are manifestations of Hindu culture. Such rituals are performed even on state functions and, therefore, create unnecessary misgivings about the neutrality of the state.

Therefore, a state which avowedly has to treat all religions alike must be very cautious in the promotion of "Indian" values and culture, lest, under the garb of "Indian" it is really Hindu values that get promoted. Considering of course, that the pre-ponderant majority of the people are Hindus, it may be granted that, to a great extent, the cultural symbols of Hinduism will be equated with, and treated as "Indian". But this does not justify a total exclusion of the symbols and cultural items of minorities by a state which is expected to be equi-distant from all religions.

The confusion between "Hindu" and "Indian" has largely arisen because in the last forty years, the cultural dimensions of secularism have been totally neglected. We have, therefore neither attempted to develop a composite Indian culture based on a true amalgam of all religious sub-cultures, nor have we developed a new culture based on secular values, with emphasis on secular symbols. Of course, this was not an easy task but efforts too have been lacking.

Due to the limited interpretation of secularism, as being confined to state policy only, the religious identities and other sub-cultural differences of Indian citizens have continued to remain strong. In societies where such distinctions are emphasised, groups and communities remain distanced from one another.

In India, one repercussion of this distance has been that for a large majority of our masses such concepts as common citizenship, equality before law and equality of opportunity have remained were abstractions. As a result, the Constitutional guarantees of non-discrimination of any citizen in the matter of employment and education cannot be fully translated into action. To quote Imtiaz Ahmad, "communal consciousness is sharply developed and the outlook of people is clouded by communal world-view ..." Hence, the possibility of communal biases entering into the processes of recruitment to jobs and educational institutions is undoubtedly present.

21.6.4 Minority group Perceptions

There may be no discrimination in law or even by state functionaries. But the psychological insecurity of minorities is such that they perceive themselves to be the targets of discrimination. Sociologically, **perception** of discrimination is as detrimental as **actual** discrimination for members of minority groups and affects their motivation, aspirations and achievements. It was, indeed with good reasons Nehru had observed that the test of Indian secularism lay not in what the majority thought, but now the minority felt.

Apart from education and jobs, prejudice and discrimination are perceived as operating in the matter of intergroup violence and conflict. There is now ample evidence to show that at times the administrative machinery of the state does not operate impartially at the time of communal riots; those responsible for ensuring law and order act in non-secular way, and tend to victimize members of minority groups.

Admittedly, inter-group prejudice and discrimination are a legacy inherited from British rule and the Pakistan movement. But sincere efforts to develop a secular outlook would have enable our people to rise above parochial consideration and get integrated into a common bond of Indianess.

It is difficult to achieve secular deals through the strategy of secularism being declared as a principle of state policy only, and allowing religion to continue its domination on all aspects of our national and public life. Actually, for the success of the secular state itself, the widespread permeation of a secular world -view is a precondition. In the west also, the secular state was the culmination of the process of secularisation. Imtiaz Ahmad has pertinently observed that on account of the unique and radical decision to make Indian a secular state, unusual energy and efforts were needed to promote secularism. There was need to consciously and systematically discourage and curtail the anti-secular tendencies dominating our society.

21.7 MEASURES TO PROMOTE SECULARISM

The question that we now face is, what may be done to promote a rational and scientific world view?" A secular state," S. Gopal has stated, "can be strongly founded in a secular society and this implies changing the people's outlook" For Nehru, improvement in people's economic condition would push religion into the background. But as we have already seen, this hope has been belied in India.

The other alternative is education, which according to some is a more important solvent than perhaps even economic improvement. Let us therefore examine the role of education in facilitating secularism.

21.7.1 Education

Today, the world over, education is considered to be the best agent for promotion of rational and scientific values and attitudes. While a total faith in education's modernising role may be somewhat exaggerated, the states that are in the process of nation-building rely considerably on it to modernise the out-look and world-view of their population.

Unlike in the past, when education was anchored in **pathshalas, gurukuls** and **madrasahs**, that emphasised religio-traditional learning, modern education is supposed to provide scientific knowledge and superior technical skills. At the same time, it directly or indirectly, also influences the mind of the learners, especially of those who are in the younger generation. Since young minds are receptive to new ideas and values, education has its greatest impact on young people. Also, the young have questioning minds and are critical enough to evaluate what is taught to them. Hence, faith is placed in them that they will usher in changes in society.

In India, our hopes of building a secular society, therefore, largely rest upon the million of school and university students, who are today being exposed to modern science, rationality and humanism.

However, the extent to which success will be achieved in secularising the outlook of the younger generation will depend on several other factors as well. The educational system functions in a specific socio-cultural milieu, and is, therefore, influenced by it.

Earlier, in this unit, it has been pointed out that the Indian Constitution has made some specific provisions to impart a secular character to our educational system.

Thus the secular approach of the state, insofar as prevention of any discrimination in education against minorities is concerned, is quite evident. However, these steps do not guarantee that the content of education, which ultimately is more vitally linked with the dissemination of values, would be necessarily such as to be conducive to imparting secular values and attitudes. But, fortunately, there exist mechanisms and agencies to take care of this also. Thus, such bodies as the National Council for Educational Research and Training prepare text-books for schools which emphasise values that are consistent with our secular ideals. Furthermore, from time to time, books are examined by experts to ensure that lessons likely to promote negative feelings about any group are not allowed to continue. Complaints, in this regard, from any quarter, are given serious attention and lapses that may have crept in are checked and removed. These are important measures to ensure dissemination of knowledge and values that are free from prejudices and biases against any group of community in our society. Apart from this, frequent seminars and conferences of experts are organised to see how values and attitudes that constitute the positive and constructive aspects of our national heritage, and which promote secularism, can be transmitted through education. This step also ensures that the content of our education is not devoid of any values at all; education without values is soulless and leads the learners nowhere.

Recognising the importance of education in promoting a rational and scientific temper, the National Policy on Education 1986, has addressed itself to the task of fostering certain universal values which are oriented towards the unity and integration of our people. It has also taken cognizance of the fact that through education we must fight and eliminate such evils as obscurantism, religious fanaticism, violence, superstition and fatalism. The categorical recognition in our education system, of these problems has, for the first time, drawn formal attention to conditions that thwart the development of a secular society in India.

One other secular dimension of education that has received special emphasis in the policy document is “Education for Equality.” According to the new policy seeks to remove disparities and equalize educational opportunities by attending to the specific needs of those who have been denied equality so far. The new emphasis will particularly benefit such weaker sections as women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and other minorities. Women’s education is particularly crucial in the secularisation process because the individual’s early socialisation takes

place largely through mothers; as such the values which the individual inculcates are generally those received from the mother. Uneducated mothers cannot be expected to transmit rational and scientific values; it is mostly through enlightened mothers that the base of a modern and secular social order can be constructed in our society. One may, therefore, reasonably expect that as Indian women become educated and emancipated, profound changes are likely to occur in Indian society, in the near future.

21.7.2 Voluntary Agencies

Mere education is not enough to promote secular attitude among people, if the society continues to be in the clutches of obscurantism, superstition and fundamentalism. Movement for social reform will have to be organised and public opinion mobilised. Minorities should be encouraged to participate in the mainstream of national life. Social reform is a spirit of social justice, and equality must pervade all section of the population. Religion should not be allowed to hinder the spread of these values. The work of voluntary agencies and associations (e.g. women's movement), Science for the Peoples Movement are as important in this regard as state action.

These efforts, hopefully, will go a long way in enabling Indian society to make a big leap towards secularisation. When this happens, education can rightfully claims its contribution in this important endeavour.

Check Your Progress 3

- Note :** i) Use the space given below for your answers.
ii) Check your answer with the model answers given at the end of this unit.

- 1) Write five lines on Nehru's concept of secularism.

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- 2) What are the problems in the path of secularism in India?

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- 3) How can education promote secularism?

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21.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed the nature of secularism in India - its evolution, its differences from secularism in the west : it problems and dilemmas, and the role of education in spreading secularism in Indian society.

It was pointed out that the founding fathers of the Indian Constitution had a clear vision of India as a secular state. They had laid down specific provisions and guarantees to ensure freedom of religion, equality of opportunity and equality before law for all citizens in the hope that once these were assured, Indian society will become secular. To a large extent, these guarantees and assurances have not simply remained printed words of the Constitution, but have been translated into reality. Thus, Indian citizens are free to profess, practice and propagate the religion of their choice, conduct separate educational institutions and so on. State policies, in all respects, are non-discriminatory. There is a non-communal electorate and the highest office of the state is open to members of the minority communities, as well. In broad terms, the state in India is a good example of secularism in action.

But, it was also pointed out that, as yet, the secular principle has not reached the point of perfection. We have failed to produce a uniform civil code; communal violence, religious fundamentalism and revivalism are on the ascendant. In many state functions, the cultural symbols of the majority group are being increasingly promoted as “national culture” creating misgivings in the minds of members of minority groups. Thus, our conclusion was that it is difficult for a secular polity to function in a society which is not entirely secular. It was, therefore, argued that sticking close to a very restricted interpretation of secularism is not quite the proper way to promote secularism. In fact, this dissonance between the limited sphere of the polity and the wider society has put a tremendous strain upon the process of national integration and nation-building.

To reduce the strain, it is necessary to promote a truly rational and scientific world view, in Indian society. The role that education can play, in this task, was examined and it was pointed out that through various policies, the educational system is taking Indian society in the direction of secularism.

21.9 KEY WORDS

Authoritarianism : A system in which unquestioned obedience to authority has to be rendered.

Devdasi: A woman attached to the service of a temple and who, therefore, does not have a private life; a public woman.

Ecclesiastical: of religious organisation.

Emancipation: Freedom from bondage.

Fundamentalism: An ideology which advocates going back to a life strictly according to the word of the holy books.

Interneccine: Mutually destructive.

Obscurantism: Faith in age old beliefs.

Plurality: Co-existence of many cultures or ethnic groups.

Theocracy: A state based on religious laws.

21.10 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

Smith, D.E.; 1963, *India as a Secular State*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Luthera, V.P.: 1960, *Concept of Secular State and India*, O U.P., Delhi.

21.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS/EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) a) Clergy
 b) Spiritual, Temporal
- 2) Strictly speaking this is not quite correct. Religion and secularism have different spheres but religion can co-exist with secularism as it affords some transcendent meaning to man's existence, the notion of hostility between religion and secularism arises because superstitions rituals, etc., are identified with religion which secularism seeks to remove etc. See Sub-section 21.2.2.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Whereas in the west secularism was the outcome of conflict between Church and the State including common people, Indian society does not have any record of such oppression by organised religious authority. Indian society had a tradition of religious co-existence, etc. See Sub-sec. 21.3.1.
- 2) a) Clauses asserting that every citizen of Indian would enjoy freedom of conscience and the right to profess and practice any religion, etc. See Sub-section 21.3.2.
 b) 1976 by the 42nd Amendment.
- 3) For pluralism, a secular state was essential. Tragic assassination of Gandhi reinforced the belief that politics could be separated from religion. See Sub-section 21.3.3.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Nehru wanted scientific and rational outlook to permeate all aspects of life, in this sense. Nehru's idea of secularism was closer to the western model. Declaration of India as a secular state was only one of the steps in secularisation process. See

section 21.5.

- 2) Secularism in India is a phenomenon limited only to the functioning of the state. It does not interfere with the hold of religion in most spheres of life. Problems in the path of secularism are many - no uniform civil code, interlocking of politics and religion, etc. See section 21.6 and Sub-section 21.6.1, 21.6.2, 21.6.3 and 21.6.4.
- 3) States in the process of nation building rely on modern education, which lays emphasis on scientific knowledge and superior technical skills, to modernise the outlook and world view of their population. Bodies such as N.C.E.R.T. in India emphasise values which are consistent with secular ideas. See sub-section 21.7.1.