Secularism

drishtiias.com/printpdf/secularism-1

About

- The term "Secular" means being "separate" from religion, or having no religious basis.
- A secular person is one who does not owe his moral values to any religion. His values are the product of his rational and scientific thinking.
- Secularism means separation of religion from political, economic, social and cultural aspects of life, religion being treated as a purely personal matter.
- It emphasized dissociation of the state from religion and full freedom to all religions and tolerance of all religions.
- It also stands for equal opportunities for followers of all religions, and no discrimination and partiality on grounds of religion.

Secularism in the History of India

- Secular traditions are very deep rooted in the history of India. Indian culture is based on the blending of various spiritual traditions and social movements.
- In ancient India, the **Santam Dharma (Hinduism)** was basically allowed to develop as a holistic religion by welcoming different spiritual traditions and trying to integrate them into a common mainstream.
- The development of four **Vedas** and the various interpretations of the **Upanishads** and the Puranas clearly highlight the religious plurality of Hinduism.
- **Emperor Ashoka** was the first great emperor to announce, as early as third century B.C. that, the state would not prosecute any religious sect.
    - In his **12th Rock Edict,** Ashoka made an appeal not only for the toleration of all religion sects but also to develop a spirit of great respect toward them.
- Even after the advent of **Jainism, Buddhism** and later **Islam** and **Christianity** on the Indian soil, the quest for religious toleration and coexistence of different faiths continued.
- In medieval India, the **Sufi and Bhakti movements** bond the people of various communities together with love and peace.

- The leading lights of these movements were **Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, Baba Farid, Sant Kabir Das, Guru Nanak Dev, Saint Tukaram and Mira Bai** etc.
- In medieval India, religious toleration and freedom of worship marked the State under **Akbar**. He had a number of Hindus as his ministers, forbade forcible conversions and **abolished Jizya**.
    - The most prominent evidence of his tolerance policy was his promulgation of **'Din-i-Ilahi'** or the Divine Faith, which had elements of both Hindu and Muslim faith.
    - That this was not imposed upon the subjects is obvious from the fact that there were few adherents to it. Along with this he emphasized the concept of **'sulh-i-kul'** or peace and harmony among religions.
    - He even sponsored a series of religious debates which were held in the **'Ibadat Khana'** of the Hall of Worship, and the participants in these debates included theologians from amongst Brahmins, Jains and Zoroastrians.
- Even before Akbar, Babar had advised Humayun to "shed religious prejudice, protect temples, preserve cows, and administer justice properly in this tradition."
- The spirit of secularism was strengthened and enriched through the Indian freedom movement too, though the British have pursued the **policy of divide and rule**.
    - In accordance with this policy, the British **partitioned Bengal** in 1905.
    - Separate electorates were provided for Muslims through the Indian Councils Act of 1909, a provision which was extended to Sikhs, Indian Christians, Europeans and Anglo-Indians in certain provinces by the Government of India Act, 1919.
    - Ramsay MacDonald Communal Award of 1932, provided for separate electorates as well as reservation of seats for minorities, even for the depressed classes became the basis for representation under the Government of India Act, 1935.
- However, Indian freedom movement was characterized by secular tradition and ethos right from the start.
    - In the initial part of the Indian freedom movement, the liberals like Sir Feroz Shah Mehta, **Govind Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale by and large pursued a secular approach to politics**.
    - The constitution drafted by Pandit Moti Lal Nehru as the chairman of the historic **Nehru Committee in 1928,** had many provision on secularism as: 'There shall be no state religion for the commonwealth of India or for any province in the commonwealth, nor shall the state, either directly or indirectly, endow any religion any preference or impose any disability on account of religious beliefs or religious status'.
    - **Gandhiji's secularism** was based on a commitment to the brotherhood of religious communities based on their respect for and pursuit of truth, whereas, **J. L. Nehru's secularism** was based on a commitment to scientific humanism tinged with a progressive view of historical change.

- At present scenario, in the context of Indian, the separation of religion from the state constitutes the core of the philosophy of secularism.

Philosophy of Indian Secularism

- The term 'secularism' is akin to the **Vedic concept of 'Dharma nirapekshata'** i.e. the indifference of state to religion.
- This model of secularism is adopted by western societies where the government is totally separate from religion (i.e. separation of church and state).
- **Indian philosophy of secularism is related to "Sarva Dharma Sambhava"** (literally it means that destination of the paths followed by all religions is the same, though the paths themselves may be different) which means equal respect to all religions.
- This concept, embraced and promoted by personalities like Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi is called **'Positive secularism'** that reflects the dominant ethos of Indian culture.
- India does not have an official state religion. However, different personal laws - on matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, alimony varies with an individual's religion.
- Indian secularism is not an end in itself but a **means to address religious plurality** and sought to achieve peaceful coexistence of different religions.

Secularism and the Indian Constitution

- There is a clear incorporation of all the basic principles of secularism into various provisions of constitution.
- The term 'Secular' was added to the preamble by the **forty-second constitution Amendment Act of 1976,** (India is a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic, republic).
  It emphasise the fact that constitutionally, India is a secular country which has no State religion. And that the state shall recognise and accept all religions, not favour or patronize any particular religion.
- While **Article 14** grants equality before the law and equal protection of the laws to all, **Article 15** enlarges the concept of secularism to the widest possible extent by prohibiting discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.
- **Article 16 (1)** guarantees equality of opportunity to all citizens in matters of public employment and reiterates that there would be no discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth and residence.
- **Article 25** provides 'Freedom of Conscience', that is, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practise and propagate religion.
- As per **Article 26,** every religious group or individual has the right to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes and to manage its own affairs in matters of religion.
- As per **Article 27**, the state shall not compel any citizen to pay any taxes for the

promotion or maintenance of any particular religion or religious institution.

- **Article 28** allows educational institutions maintained by different religious groups to impart religious instruction.
- **Article 29** and **Article 30** provides cultural and educational rights to the minorities.
- **Article 51A** i.e. Fundamental Duties obliges all the citizens to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood and to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture.

Indian vs. Western Model of Secularism

Over the years, India has developed its own unique concept of secularism that is fundamentally different from the parallel western concept of secularism in the following ways:

- As per the western model of secularism, the "State" and the "religion" have their own separate spheres and neither the state nor the religion shall intervene in each other's affairs.
- Thus, the western concept of secularism requires complete separation of religion and state.
- However, in India, neither in law nor in practice any 'wall of separation' between religion and the State exists.
- In India, both state and religion can, and often do, interact and intervene in each other's affairs within the legally prescribed and judicially settled parameters.
- In other words, Indian secularism does not require a total banishment of religion from the State affairs.
- As per the western model, the state cannot give any financial support to educational institutions run by religious communities.
- On the other hand, Indian model has chosen a positive mode of engagement.
- In India, the state provides all religious minorities the right to establish and maintain their own educational institutions which may receive assistance from state.
- In the western model, State does not intervene in the affairs of religion till the time religion is working within the limits of the law.
- On the other hand, in Indian secularism, state shall interfere in religion so as to remove evils in it.
- India has intervened by enforcing legislation against the practices of sati or widow-burning, dowry, animal and bird sacrifice, child marriage, and preventing Dalits from entering temples.
- In western concept of secularism, religion is relegated entirely to the private sphere and has no place in public life whatsoever.
- The western model prohibits any public policy to be drafted on the basis of religion therefore; state is absolutely distanced from the religious activities and practices of its citizens.

- In India, state has the policy of setting up Departments of Religious Endowments, Wakf Boards, etc. It is also involved in appointing Trustees of these boards.

Threats to Secularism

- While, the Indian Constitution declares the state being absolutely neutral to all religion, our society has steeped in religion.
- Mingling of **Religion and Politics** that is mobilisation of votes on grounds of primordial identities like religion, caste and ethnicity, have put Indian secularism in danger.
- **Communal politics** operates through communalization of social space, by spreading myths and stereotypes against minorities, through attack on rational values and by practicing a divisive ideological propaganda and politics.
- Politicisation of any one religious group leads to the **competitive politicisation** of other groups, thereby resulting in inter-religious conflict.
- One of the manifestations of communalism is **communal riots**. In recent past also, communalism has proved to be a great threat to the secular fabric of Indian polity.
- Rise of Hindu Nationalism in recent years have resulted into mob lynching on mere suspicion of slaughtering cows and consuming beef.
- In addition with this, forced closure of slaughterhouses, campaigns against 'love jihad', reconversion or ghar- wapsi (Muslims being forced to convert to Hinduism), etc. reinforces communal tendencies in society.
- Islamic fundamentalism or revivalism pushes for establishing Islamic State based on sharia law which directly comes into conflict with conceptions of the secular and democratic state.
- In recent years there have been stray incidences of Muslim youth being inspired and radicalized by groups like ISIS which is very unfortunate for both India and world.

Way Forward

- In a pluralistic society, the best approach to nurture secularism is to expand religious freedom rather than strictly practicing state neutrality.
- It is incumbent on us to ensure value-education that makes the younger generation understands and appreciates not only its own religious traditions but also those of the other religions in the country.
- There is also a need to identify a common framework or a shared set of values which allows the diverse groups to live together.
- The prerequisites to implement the social reform initiative like Uniform Civil Code are to create a conducive environment and forging socio-political consensus.