

THE CONCEPT OF SECULARISM: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: India is a multi-religious and culturally varied society. India is a land of religions, language and customs. Many religions are flourished here from long time, which have their own beliefs and traditions. The number of invasions and incursions from Aryans to Mughals added to religions, linguistic and cultural pluralism. British colonialism also contributed to its religious and cultural multiplicity. Thus Indian society became more and more complex with every invasions and incursions. No other society of the world is as multi-cultural and multi-religious like Indian society. There are the Aryans, the non-Aryans; the Dravidians, the Huns, the Afghans and the Mughals have all merged into Indian soil. Indian society is well known for wisdom and great thoughts. Secularism is an important aspect of Indian society for these it is also well-known in the world. In India secularism means that all religions can peacefully coexist without any discrimination. Indian constitution included the word 'secularism' in the 42nd amendment act in the year 1976. The Preamble to the constitution asserted that India is a 'secular' nation. The meaning of a secular state is that it does not prioritize any one religion for the country and its people.

Keywords: secularism, concepts, features, history of secularism, philosophy, India

Introduction: The term 'Secularism' means being 'separate' from religion or having no religious basis. This separation means that the state shall not interfere and influence the religious groups and vice-versa. Religion is open to all and is given as a personal choice to an individual without any different treatment to the latter. It means the separation of religion from political, economic, cultural and social aspects of life. Religion is treated as a purely personal matter. It stands for no discrimination and partiality on grounds of religion and equal opportunities to follow all religions. Secularism calls for a doctrine where all religions are given equal status recognition and support from the state. It can also be defined as a doctrine that promotes separation of state from religion. The 'Secularism' is akin to the Vedic concept of 'Dharma Nirapekshata' i.e. the indifference of the state to religion. Secularism is one of the foundations of independent India. Secularism in India means the separation of religion from state. It ensures the citizens with right to expression along with religious freedom that is they are free to follow any religion of their choice. No entity can force a certain religion on a citizen of a truly secular state. India should not have any legal or formal alliance with any religion. The state should be separated from religious institutions. The state should not be providing any aid to religious institution. The state cannot enforce any particular religion on anyone. All religions are treated equally under the eyes of the law. People have the freedom to follow and practise any religion. People celebrate the festivals of all religions. In a secular state people of different cultures and religions live in harmony and peace, obeying same rule of law. Secularism is very essential for a nation to progress without having internal problems, more so in religiously and culturally diverse country as India.

Objectives of the study: The objectives of the study are: ■ To study the concepts of secularism; ■ To understand the definition of secularism; ■ To analyse the history of secularism; ■ To study the philosophy of secularism; ■ To analyse the secularism and the Indian Constitution.

Methodology: The present study is based on secondary data. The secondary data has been collected from various books, journals, newspapers, Government report and internet etc.

Concept of Secularism: Secularism means the separation of religion from political, economic, social and cultural aspects of life, religion being treated as a purely personal matter. The term 'secular' means being 'separate' from religion or having no religious basis. It provides 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. The word 'secular' was added in the preamble by the 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1976 (HansRaj, 2002). Secular state is one which does not have a religion of its own and treats all religions equally. All the religions are equally respected in India. There is no domination of one religious community over other communities. The constitution grants religious

freedom to all people. India is called a secular state because it does not have any state religion and people are free to practice any religion of their choice. Someone who is not religious or has no religious convictions is referred to be 'secular'. Religion is open to everyone and is provided as a personal decision to each individual without any discrimination. It's similar to the Vedic concept of Dharma Nirapekshata or the state's apathy for religion. Secularism is a concept that provides all religions equal status, respect and support from the state. It can be defined as an ideology that advocates for the separation of state and religion. A secular person is someone who does not hold religious moral principles. Secularism advocates for religious non-discrimination and partiality as well as equal access to all religions. It is based on equal respect for all religion. Secularism means separation of the state, politics and non-religious areas of life from religious and religions being treated as a purely personal matter (Chandra, 2008).

Features of Secular State of India: ●Indian state treats all religions on equal footing. ●Indian state neither interferes with nor promotes any religion. ●It permits individual and collective freedom of religion to all citizens. ●It views all individuals as citizens with equal rights and not as members of any particular religion. ●It are not against any religion. ●It functions in a way independent of religion. ●It allows religious education in some educational institutions run and managed by minorities subject to certain conditions.

Review of literature: Secularism in the History of India: The tradition of secularism is inhibited in the deep roots of the history of India. Indian culture is based on the blending of various spiritual traditions and social movements. Secularism in Ancient India: Before the arrival of Islam in the 12th century followed by Mughal and colonials, Indian religions are known to have coexisted and evolved together for many centuries. 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 Puranas and the Upanishads clearly highlight the religious plurality of Hinduism. Emperor Ashok was the first great emperor to announce as early as the 3rd century BC that the state would not prosecute any religious sect. Ashok in his 12th Rock Edict appealed not only for the toleration of all religious sects but also to develop a spirit of great respect toward them. The quest for religious toleration and coexistence of different faiths continued even after the advent of Jainism, Buddhism and later Islam and Christianity on the Indian soil. The people in ancient India had freedom of religion and the state granted citizenship to each individual regardless of whether someone's religion was Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism or any other.

Secularism in Medieval India: In medieval India, the Sufi and Bhakti movements restored the secular character of Indian society. They spread the different facets of secularism like tolerance, a sense of brotherhood, universalism, harmony and peace in society. The leading lights of these movements were Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, Baba Farid, Saint Kabir Das, Guru Nanak Dev, Saint Tukaram and Mira Bai (APJR Journal). Religious toleration and freedom of worship marked the state under Mughal emperor Akbar in medieval India. Number of Hindus worked for him as his minister, he abolished the Jizya tax and forbade forcible conversions. The promulgation of 'Din-i-Ilahi' or the Divine Faith is most prominent evidence of his tolerance policy. Din-i-Ilahi had elements of both Hindu and Muslim faith. The construction of Ibadat Khana (house of worship) in Fatehpur Sikri was done to nurture religious harmony by allowing different religious leaders to express their opinions in the same place. The participants in this assembly included theologians from amongst Brahmins, Jains and Zoraastrians. He emphasized the concept of 'Sulh-i-Kul' or peace and harmony among religions. The remarks of Guru Nanak when he says that 'There is no Hindu and no Musalman as there is no distinction between man and man', give support to the roots of secularism (Rizvi, 2005).

Secularism in Modern India: India came into control of the East India Company and the British Raj after Aurangzeb. British East India Company pursued the policy of divide and rule even then the spirit of secularism was strengthened and enriched through the Indian freedom movement. The policy of 'divide and rule' to some extent contributed to communal discord between various communities. The partition of Bengal in 1905 took place in accordance with this policy. Through the Indian Councils Act of 1909 separate electorates were provided for Muslims. The provision was extended to Sikhs, Indian Christians, Europeans and Anglo-Indians in certain provinces by the Government of India Act 1919. However the Indian freedom movement was marked by secular tradition and ethos right from the start. The formation of Indian National Congress in 1885 with secular values united the people from all sects and took the freedom movement on a constructive and successful path. Nehru gave a detailed report (1928) which called for the abolition of the separate electorate to found a secular state. 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.

Indian Philosophy and Secularism: Indian philosophy of secularism is related to 'Sarva Dharma Sambhava' (literally it means that the 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 model of secularism is adopted by Western Societies where the government is totally separate from religion (i.e. separation of Church and State). India does not recognize any religion as official nor does it owe allegiance to any particular religion. 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. There is neutrality in religion India does not intercept the affairs of any specific religion. It respects all religions on par with one another. It assures religious freedom to the members of all religions. Citizens are free to choose and abide by their religions. Indian secularism is a means to address religious plurality and is not an end in itself. It sought to achieve the peaceful co-existence of different religions.

Secularism and Indian Constitution: Indian constitution has elaborated the principle of secularism in great detail. It specifies that the state should refrain from either penalizing or favouring any of its people on religion considerations. India adopted secularism to facilitate the promotion of religious tolerance and cultural co-existence (Majid, 1985). Various provision of the Indian constitution clearly incorporates the basic principles of secularism. With the 42nd Amendment of the constitution of India (1976) the preamble to the constitution asserted that India is a 'secular' nation (Ghosh, Peu 2017). The meaning of a secular state is that it does not prioritize any one religion for the country and its people. Institutions started to recognize and accept all religions enforce parliamentary laws instead of religious laws and respect pluralism. Article 14 and Article 15: The former grants equality before the law and equal protection of the laws to all while the later 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): Equal opportunity to all citizens in matters of public employment and reiterates no discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth and residence. Article 25: 'Freedom of conscience' that is all persons have equal right to freely profess, practise and propagate religion. Article 26: Every religious group/individual has the right to establish and maintain religious and charitable institutions and to manage its own affairs in matters of religion. 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 institution. Article 29 and Article 30: Provides for the cultural and educational right to the minorities. Article 51A: 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 (Mahapatra, 2020).

Importance of Secularism: Secularism is one of the most important achievements of any democratic country. India is a country comprising of various religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism etc. Secularism is one of the most important achievements of independent India as it has ensured equal treatment of people in all aspects regardless of their caste, religion, beliefs etc. After the colonial struggle and their concept of Divide and Rule, our foundations and unity among different religious groups were shattered. The inculcation of secularism in the constitution brings along many other fundamental rights of the citizens of the country such as the right to expression and religious freedom. India being home to people of a large number of religions, it is more prone to religious conflicts and other political and social damage. Secularism here ensures the proper and fair functioning of the government meanwhile providing all the religious groups with the rights to practice the religion of their choice and express their opinions and beliefs freely without fear or hesitation.

There have been certain instances in history where the majority groups have tried to establish their dominance over various minority groups and sometimes also on the government. The implementation of secularism has kept this issue in check by working independently from the religious groups and giving out equal freedom to all the religions and castes. Secularism also has some threats and barriers but it is the responsibility of the secular state to work tirelessly with the goal of achieving peace and understanding among all the religious prevailing and allow the harmonious working of the governmental organisations meanwhile providing fundamental rights to all the citizens irrespective of their caste, religion, beliefs etc.

Conclusion: It can be concluded that for a diverse country like India, introduction of secularism is indeed a blessing as people can express their opinions freely and can openly profess or practice the religion of their choice. India is one of the 96 secular nations that provide equal protection to all religions. It encourages and assists its citizens in adhering to a religion and its practices. However, there are instances when it is necessary to intervene and implement beneficial reforms for the betterment of society. The importance of various culture and traditions of different religious in the peculiarity of the country should have to be discussed properly. Each individual should be careful subject to law, regardless of gender, religion, majority or minority status etc. So the young generation should be trained about the ideology. Secularism in the true sense is a belief system that separates religion from state and its civic affairs. No religion is given special status in India as a state. There is no such thing as an Indian state religion. Secularism is a fundamental principle of the Indian Constitutions basic structure. India advocates secularism by granting equal religious freedom to

all religions. It stands for all citizens right to freedom. At last since, India has been declared a secular state by its written constitution, therefore it is the responsibility of every Indians to stand by and believe in this declaration.

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