



## **"India's Unique Brand Of Secularism: Challenges And Future"**

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**Abstract:** Secularism is a concept that has been widely debated and discussed in India. The country's unique brand of secularism has evolved over time and is distinct from the Western model. India's secularism is based on the principles of religious freedom in personal life and the exclusion of religion from public life. The goal of secularism in India is to create a society that respects and protects the rights of all individuals, regardless of their religious beliefs, and promotes equality and fairness for all. India's decision to adopt secularism was influenced by its diverse ethnic makeup, which it was believed was necessary for the survival of the Indian state. Secularism was intended to address the issue of religious and ethnic pluralism by uniting India and drawing inspiration from the concept of modernity. Despite this equality, secularism has confronted resistance both within and outside India. External challenges emanate from Pakistan, while internal challenges stem from religiously motivated ethnic groups, such as Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims, as well as specific regions within India, like Kashmir. These groups and regions pose a threat to secularism and federalism through their secessionist or separatist aspirations, which are partly rooted in religion but also have political, economic, social, and cultural implications for the affected regions.

**Key words:** Cultural Anthropology, Artificial Intelligence, Law, Armed Conflict, Economics, Communication, Education, Environmental Studies, History, Linguistics, Media and Communication, Psychology, Religious Studies, Philosophy, Social Anthropology

The issue of religion has frequently been a source of socio-political conflict in India, a country marked by rich multicultural diversity, but also characterized by inter-religious strife. Despite the absence of the term "secular" in the Indian constitution until the 42nd Amendment Act of 1976, the legal concept of secularism has existed in India since colonial times. India, with its unique sociocultural realities and political history, opted not to adopt the Western model of secularism upon gaining independence. Instead, it developed its own distinct form of secularism through its written constitution, subsequent legislation, and judicial decisions. This form of secularism has been influenced by a combination of constitutional ideals, social realities, and the passage of time. Since gaining independence, the Indian Constitution has worked to maintain national unity and social harmony by preserving a pluralistic society. Secularism that embraces both religious freedom in personal life and the

exclusion of religion from public life is widely accepted in India. India's secularism ensures that citizens can practice their religion freely without interference from the state, while also prohibiting the use of religion as a basis for public policy or decision-making. The goal of secularism in India is to create a society that respects and protects the rights of all individuals, regardless of their religious beliefs, and promotes equality and fairness for all.

The colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent brought about significant changes and restructuring in the societies it encountered. The colonial power was faced with the unavoidable task of controlling and integrating diverse people into the ruling structure. At this time, a public view of society had emerged that divided the people of India based on religion and caste as criteria for classification. The division of people by religion was consistent with Western-style secularism, which involved the separation of religion and politics and formed the basis of the administration of colonial states. This political stance resulted in rigid communalism, which divided Muslims from Hindus. This relationship between secularism and communalism in India has persisted even after independence and continues to pose challenges in the context of globalization. The objective of this paper is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the concept of secularism and its impact on India, as well as its challenges and future prospects.

In 1947, the nations of India and Pakistan emerged as separate entities following a protracted struggle against British colonial rule. While Pakistan established itself as a homogeneous state, India embraced a pluralistic nationalism that celebrated religious and cultural diversity. At the time of partition, India's population stood at 361 million, comprising 315 million Hindus, 32 million Muslims, 7 million Christians, 6 million Sikhs, 1 million Buddhists, 1 lakh Persians, and a small minority of Jews. India's decision to adopt secularism was influenced by its diverse ethnic makeup, which it was believed was necessary for the survival of the Indian state. Secularism was intended to address the issue of religious and ethnic pluralism by uniting India and drawing inspiration from the concept of modernity. This ideology was linked to nation-building and development for the new and modern India, and it was also intended to provide a new identity for Indians, supplanting traditional religious identities with a modern, secular "Indianness".

The collaboration between Jawaharlal Nehru, the progenitor of Indian secularism, and the Indian National Congress was aimed at formulating a strategy of containment. This strategy sought to establish a buffer zone between the state and religious fervor within society. Nevertheless, this strategy diverged from the Western notion of secularism, which posits that all religions ought to be allowed to flourish equally in India. Despite this equality, secularism has confronted resistance both within and outside India. External challenges emanate from Pakistan, while internal challenges stem from religiously motivated ethnic groups, such as Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims, as well as specific regions within India, like Kashmir. These groups and regions pose a threat to secularism and federalism through their secessionist or separatist aspirations, which are partly rooted in religion but also have political, economic, social, and cultural implications for the affected regions.

Secularism emerged during the Renaissance period in Europe, prior to the term's inception. This secular attitude developed in response to the medieval period's tendency to prioritize religious matters over worldly affairs. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines secularism as a doctrine that emphasizes morality based solely on the well-being of humanity in present life, without any consideration for belief in God or the afterlife. George Holyoake first coined the term in 1851 in response to the conflict between the Church and the state. The term "secularism" is derived from the Latin word "saecularis," which translates to "not concerned with religion," "not sacred," or "not monistic." Originally, secularism was used in the political context of the West to deny religion or religious considerations in state activities; however, it has since been extended to encompass a wider range of independent, non-religious perspectives.

Secularism, as explained by Achin Vinaik, entails a heightened sense of rationality in both thought and behavior. It is a multifaceted process that involves the gradual reduction of religious influence on the economic, social, and political aspects of human life. The Religion and Ethics Encyclopedia defines secularism as a movement that intentionally avoids religious references and aims to provide a theory of life and conduct. While it has some

positive aspects, secularism can also be considered negatively religious. As a political and philosophical influence, secularism has emerged as a result of various factors.

According to Partha Chatterjee, an Indian political scientist, three fundamental principles define a secular state. Firstly, the principle of liberty, which mandates that the state allows individuals to practice their religion as long as it does not infringe upon the fundamental rights that the state is responsible for safeguarding. Secondly, the principle of equality, which requires the state to treat all religions fairly and without favoritism. Lastly, the principle of neutrality, which mandates that the state should not show preference for any particular religion or belief system. Combined, these principles lead to the concept of the "wall of separation" in the constitutional law of the United States, which states that the state should remain separate from religious affairs and organizations. Smith also contributed to the idea of secularism. On the contrary, T.N. Madan interprets secularization as a gradual process of diminishing the sacred realm's prominence in various aspects of life, including intellectual, institutional, and material. The end result of this process is secularity, while secularism is an ideology that supports and promotes this historical development's progressive nature and its universality in every context. Dr. Radha Krishnan maintains that in India, secularism upholds equal standing for all religious convictions. According to him, granting special privileges or preference to a particular religion in national or international spheres would be a violation of democratic principles and not in the best interest of either religion or the government. Dr. V.P. Luthra elucidates the existence of three distinct systems in Western countries. In the first system, religion is considered a personal matter, and the state remains aloof. The United States of America implemented the first system of religious governance, in which a state-controlled church operates in several key ways. In this system, the state permits other religions to coexist and manage their own affairs without state intervention. The British government established the second system, in which the state controls a designated church while allowing other religions to function independently. This system of religious governance is characterized by the state's responsibility to oversee the affairs of all religions equally. This approach to religious governance is practiced in countries like the Netherlands and Indonesia, where the state ensures the freedom of all religions while maintaining its oversight role.

In Japan, the relationship between the state and religion seems to be characterized by secularism, similar to Western countries. Article 20 of the Japanese Constitution is indicative of this, as it guarantees freedom of religion while prohibiting the state from granting privileges or political authority to religious organizations. Additionally, the state and its institutions are expected to refrain from engaging in religious education and activities. In a seminar on secularism, the Chief Justice of India, Justice P.B. Gajendragadkar, highlighted the complexity of the term, noting its numerous connotations and internal contradictions that extend beyond its dictionary definition. Justice K. Ramaswamy also emphasized that secularism is an integral aspect of India's fundamental law and political system, designed to address the socioeconomic needs of all citizens and promote material and moral prosperity, as well as political justice. Secularism has often been attributed to Western nations by scholars of the Western world, but it is vital to acknowledge that other countries, such as Japan, have made significant contributions to this concept as well. In addition, it is crucial to recognize that secularism has not only been preached but also practiced for a considerable period of time. As an example, Emperor Ashoka, despite embracing Buddhism, never compelled his subjects to adopt his newfound religion.

Jawaharlal Nehru, a seasoned and knowledgeable statesman, acknowledged the importance of secularism in maintaining a strong and unified India. He believed that secularism would foster unity among India's diverse population, which includes multiple languages and cultures. Nehru argued that secularism was not about undermining or disregarding any religion, but rather about treating all religions with respect and conducting state affairs without any religious bias or prejudice. In India, citizens are free to practice their religion. For instance, Maulana Azad, who was both religious and Indian, was proud of his Muslim heritage and his Indian identity. He said, "I am a Muslim and I feel proud that I have inherited the glorious traditions extending over 1300 years. I am not prepared to allow any part of it to be lost with all of its sentiments. At the same time, I also possess another sentiment produced by the realities of my life. However, the spirit of Islam does not prohibit this. On the other hand, it directed me to do so. I feel proud that I am an Indian; I am a part of the indivisibly united nation of India."

The following statement, attributed to Jawaharlal Nehru, effectively communicates his deep comprehension of secularism: "Our Indian state is classified as secular, where religion is not merely tolerated, but instead fosters freedom of religion and conscience, including the liberty for those who may not adhere to any specific faith. This notion encompasses the principles of social and political equality." Our national leaders envisioned a contemporary India that embodies a higher synthesis of secular and social democracy, providing a structure for transforming the traditional society. Mahatma Gandhi significantly contributed to the development of the concept of secularism by explaining the relationship between the state and religion. While Gandhi did not wholly subscribe to the absolute doctrine of secularism, he consistently advocated for a secular state entirely separate from the religious concerns of the people. Mohandas K. Gandhi emphasized the inseparable connection between religion and politics, as he believed that religion was the ultimate source of value and was therefore intrinsic to social life, making politics a matter of public interest. Gandhi held the view that religion was more important than politics, and he believed that the separation of religion and politics in India was different from the separation of the state from the church in Christendom. While Gandhi advocated for the separation of religion and the state, his aim was to restrict the state's role to secular welfare and prevent it from interfering in the religious lives of the people. In his quest to promote Hindu-Muslim unity, Gandhi's untimely death ultimately occurred. During the early 20th century, various nationalist discourses existed in India, but Gandhi sought to unify them under the banner of "swaraj" (self-rule).

Jawaharlal Nehru played a pivotal role in shaping the relationship between the state and religion in India. Whilst Mahatma Gandhi advocated for the transformation of the individual to create an ideal society, Nehru believed that the establishment of suitable institutions was the most effective means of achieving the same goal. In Nehru's view, among modern institutions, the state was the key driver of social change. He envisioned an ideal state as democratic, socialist due to economic challenges, and secular due to cultural and religious diversity. Nehru's writings and speeches demonstrate his firm conviction that religion impedes the progress and changes inherent in human society. He believed that belief in supernatural agency leads to irresponsibility, and that emotions and sentimentality replace reasoned thought. Nehru was influenced by the experiences of European nations and Marxist thinking, which led him to believe that industrialization would diminish the impact of religion. The framers of the Indian Constitution sought to prevent the recurrence of the religious and communal strife that led to the partition of India by ensuring that such issues were not entangled with the affairs of the state. In this regard, they embraced secularism as a core principle, recognizing that economic issues were more powerful than nationalistic ones in fostering unity among diverse groups. The adoption of secularism can be attributed to several factors, including the desire to protect the rights of minority groups, promote social harmony, and establish a stable political environment. By keeping religion and communalism separate from political affairs, the Indian Constitution sought to create a more inclusive and equitable society, where all citizens could enjoy equal rights and opportunities, regardless of their religious beliefs. 1. The emergence of communal politics at the national level ultimately led to the partition of India, which emphasized the importance of secularism. To prevent such issues from arising in the future, the framers of the Constitution placed a greater emphasis on secular ideals. The Constitution established a democratic system that ensures equal rights for all citizens. If a country is home to people of different religions and the state favors one over the other or discriminates against a particular religion, it undermines the principles of equality among its citizens. Therefore, it is crucial for the state to remain neutral and treat all religions equally. Human rights are the foundation of democracy, and individual freedom is of utmost importance. Religious freedom is a fundamental aspect of individual liberty, and every citizen has the right to choose the religion they wish to practice. If a state imposes its will on an individual's religious beliefs, it undermines the democratic principles on which it was founded. The Constitution of India recognizes the importance of secularism and individual freedom, and it is the responsibility of all citizens to uphold these principles.

Donald Eugene Smith highlighted the complexity of granting special recognition to a particular religion in India due to the multitude of communal and religious groups present in the country. Our national identity is deeply rooted in secularism, and the core values of humanity have been shaped by the harmonious coexistence of various religions for centuries. Secularism symbolizes unity in diversity and the esteem for diverse beliefs. In India, secularism does not equate to being anti-religion; rather, it implies the equal respect for all religious factions,

regardless of whether they belong to the majority or the minority. The state refrains from showcasing any particular religion and discourages any form of bias against individuals or religious groups based on their beliefs.

The preamble to our constitution states that every citizen has the right to freedom of speech, religion, and worship. The 42nd amendment to the constitution in 1976 clarified the concept of secularism by adding the term "secularism" to the preamble. The inclusion of religious freedom in fundamental rights is the second foundation of a secular state. The constitutional assembly declared its commitment to establish India as an independent sovereign republic and to draft a constitution that guarantees social, political, and economic justice for all, as well as equal status and opportunities. The Constitution also provides protection for minorities, backward and tribal communities, and disadvantaged groups and discusses the role of religion in the state. The inclusion of religious rights in the Constitution was intended as a solution to the religious strife that plagued pre-independence India and led to the partition of India and Pakistan. The chapter on fundamental rights in a democratic society guarantees minority groups that their interests cannot be overruled by the majority. The provisions of Articles 25-28 in the Indian Constitution pertain to the freedom of religion. In accordance with the Directive Principles of State Policy, as urged by Nehru, Article 44 was incorporated to advocate for the implementation of a uniform civil code across India. Nehru, a prominent intellectual, sought to differentiate between law, social reform, and religion. He was an ardent proponent of the principles of the Enlightenment and comprehended the complexities of modernity better than anyone else in India. Nehru identified the establishment of a secular state in a religious society as the greatest challenge he faced during his tenure as Prime Minister. In his 1961 publication, three years prior to his passing, he made a profound statement about the concept of a secular state in India, emphasizing that although the idea of a secular state is widely debated, there is no Hindi word that accurately conveys its essence. Regrettably, some individuals mistakenly assume that secularism entails opposing all religions, which is not the case. Instead, it refers to a state that respects all faiths equally and provides them with equal opportunities. The Indian Constitution does not explicitly define what constitutes a secular state or provide guidance on how religion should be separated from politics and the state. Despite this, Jawaharlal Nehru offered a widely accepted approach to achieve this separation, although his ideas were not based on a firm legal foundation.

The Indian Constitution is anchored in the principle of secularism, which was introduced to the preamble by the 42nd Amendment Act. The Constitution's fundamental rights solidify India's secular nature. The secular composition of the Indian Constitution is an indispensable aspect that cannot be altered by any legislative measure. In the Bommai case of 1994, the Supreme Court upheld the validity of secularism as a fundamental element of the Constitution. Secularism can be divided into two categories: negative and positive. The negative concept of secularism, which is prevalent in the West, entails a complete separation between religion and the state. However, this concept is not applicable in India, where society is diverse and multi-religious. The positive concept of secularism, on the other hand, is reflected in the Indian Constitution. This concept involves treating all religions with equal respect and providing protection to them. Secularism is a vital component of India's fabric, and any state government that engages in anti-secular politics is vulnerable to action under Article 356.

The concept of secularism in India can be distilled as follows:

1. Indian citizens are endowed with the fundamental right to practice any religion, provided that it does not disturb public order, harm minorities, or compromise public health. Unlike in the West, where the state and religion maintain a separate relationship and do not interfere with each other, in India, neither interferes with the affairs of the other.
2. No one religion holds sway over Indian society, as every citizen is at liberty to practice, propagate, and profess any religion they choose. In contrast, in the West, Christianity is the most prevalent and reformed religion, and it holds a single dominant status in the state, transcending caste.
3. India's secularism aims to address intra-religious aspects and strive to eliminate any stigma associated with any religion within society. On the other hand, the West does not focus on the intra-religious aspects of Christianity, allowing religion to act on society without modification.

4. The Indian government often has to intervene in situations of inter-religious conflict because of the prevalence of multiple religions within the country. This is in contrast to the West, where Christianity is the dominant religion, and such conflicts are less common. 5. Unlike the West, India has a diverse religious and cultural landscape with multiple religions and linguistic minorities. As a result, the government must address the needs of both religious and linguistic minorities, as protected by Article 29.

6. The prominence of religious organizations in Indian politics is accentuated by the country's diverse religious landscape, as evidenced by the significant roles played by the Sangh and Hindu Maha Sabha within the BJP party. In contrast, religious bodies in the West generally have a relatively minor impact on national politics. 7. In stark contrast to the West, Indian states actively provide support to religious institutions.

### **Challenges before secularism in India**

After engaging in a thorough discussion regarding the nature and practical application of Indian secularism, it has become apparent which form of secularism the state follows. Indian constitutional secularism possesses two distinct characteristics: a) It extends respect to all religions, without being anti-religious in nature. However, this respect does not extend to accepting every religious practice. Instead, it involves both respect and criticism. b) Unlike the Western approach of strict separation, the Indian state maintains a principled distance from all religions. It cannot tolerate untouchability or permit personal laws to remain unchanged. Additionally, the state may decide to non-preferentially subsidize schools operated by religious communities. The state must make careful decisions regarding when to involve itself in religious matters, as these decisions can impact our commitment to freedom, equality, and fraternity. Maintaining constitutional secularism is not solely the responsibility of the government, but rather requires collective dedication from an impartial judiciary, scrupulous media, vigilant civil society activists, and attentive citizens.

Rajiv Bhargava posits that a significant obstacle confronting Indian secularism is the prevalence of party-political secularism, which is embraced by all political parties, including those commonly regarded as the most secular. This form of secularism has jeopardized its fundamental principles and substituted them with opportunism, as political parties establish alliances with religious groups solely to gain immediate electoral advantages. This approach has been subject to criticism for impeding freedom and equality-based religious reforms and for exacerbating communal violence. Regrettably, the political parties that are meant to be the bastions of democracy have demonstrated a disregard for critical thinking and have instead interpreted respect as entailing the making of deals with belligerent or orthodox factions of religious groups. This state, characterized by a political party that espouses both the majority and minority extremes, was ripe for domination by a dominant party, which was achieved by replacing the word "all" with "majority." The resulting government now displays no regard for minority religions, declining to censure the beliefs of the majority but instead irresponsibly demonizing others. This unethical and opportunistic practice disregards all boundaries, effectively eliminating any notion of principled distance. Rather than adhering to the principles of secularism, this so-called secularism is nothing more than a form of majoritarianism, which rejects "pseudo-secularism" without acknowledging its own equally unethical practices.

According to Bhargava, the secularism enshrined in India's constitution has been supplanted by secularism driven by political parties, without any opposition, media, or judiciary intervention. As a result, constitutional secularism is gradually eroding, despite the centuries-old pluralistic traditions that have deeply rooted the concept of secularism, which currently faces significant challenges. The state-led initiative to address interreligious issues and promote communal harmony has suffered a setback, and its progress has been severely impeded.

### **Future of Secularism in India**

The primary concern at present is how secularism ought to develop in a nation like India, where religious diversity is extensive and government decisions are frequently influenced by electoral concerns. Rajiv Bhargava has proposed some avenues to initiate conversations and promote the practice of secularism. To begin with, he

recommends shifting emphasis from a politically motivated initiative to a socially driven movement for justice. Secondly, this shift emphasizes intra-religious rather than inter-religious issues. By concentrating on these two aspects, deeper introspection and the emergence of multiple dissenting voices may result. This approach could aid in eradicating intra-religious injustices and fostering equality among the members of different religious groups. In Europe, secularism served as a tool to combat intra-religious oppression, which Nehru recognized and applied in India. He viewed secularism as a means of fostering civic friendship among religious communities and as an opposition to religiously based caste and gender-based oppression. This social secularism project aligns with India's reform movement, which emphasizes freedom and equality. While the current political project of secularism and its constitutional form may present setbacks, they can be transformed into opportunities to revitalize the social project of secularism. The collective effort of the younger generation could contribute to enhancing the social struggle for emancipation from unjust intra-religious practices. While inter-religious issues should not be entirely disregarded, focusing on creating a distance from mutual preoccupation can offer communities a chance to breathe. If feasible, individuals may consider exploring internal resources to develop innovative ways of harmonious coexistence.

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