

2.2 Interpretation of Secularism in Indian context

In India, the term 'secularism' was introduced in the year 1976 of the 42nd Amendment of the constitution. Secularism means separating government from religion which means that the government of India should not follow or favor any particular religion rather every religion should be favored equally.

The historical roots of secularism in India

The concept of secularism in India has its roots in the country's struggle for independence from colonial rule. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar envisioned a secular and pluralistic society where all religions would coexist harmoniously.

Secular traditions are very deep rooted in the history of India. Indian culture is based on the mixing 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 off our Vedas and the various interpretations of the Upanishads and the Puranas clearly highlight the religious plurality of Hinduism.
- In12 Rock Edict, Emperor Ashoka made an appeal not only for the toleration of all religion sects but also to develop a spirit of great respect towards 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, Saint Kabir Das, Guru Nanak Dev, Saint Tukaram and Mira Bai etc.

- 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.
- However, Indian freedom movement was characterized by secular tradition and ethos right from the beginning.
- During Indian freedom movement, the liberals like Sir Feroz Shah Mehta, Govind Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale gave secular approach to politics. The constitution drafted by Pandit Moti Lal Nehru in 1928, had many provision on secularism as: ‘There shall be no state religion for the common wealth of India or for any province in the commonwealth, nor shall the state, either directly or indirectly, favour 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 India, the separation of religion from the state constitutes the core of the philosophy of secularism.
- Indian secularism is associated with the principle of “sarvadharmasambhava” that is “equal respect for all religion”.

Secularism and the Indian constitution

- The term ‘Secular’ was added to the preamble by the forty-second constitution Amendment Act of 1976.
- 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 equal opportunity to all citizens in matters of public employment and repeat 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.
- Article 26 states that 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 appreciate all the citizens to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood and to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture.
- There are some basic rights provided by the preamble of the Indian Constitution based on secularism in India, these are – Right to profess, Freedom of conscience, and the Right to practice.

If these rights are troubled by someone, it will be approved as a criminal offense and the person can be punished by the law. But the government of India provides reservations for the religious minorities to make them feel that they are not discriminated against. It is important to take care of religious minorities because it is generally seen that the majority tries to suppress the minorities. So, the government must stay neutral and to some extent help minorities so that they do not feel discriminated against. Secularism in India is important not only to provide peace and harmony within the country but also to provide a better and safer society for all.

Challenges faced

India consists of various cultures i.e. India is a culturally heterogeneous country. The separation or enmity between Muslims and Hindus was created by the British. They used the policy of divide and rule. Making this situation normal and

abolishing riots among Hindus and Muslims was the main challenge faced by secularism in India during post-independence.

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 mobilization of votes on grounds of ancient identities like religion, caste and ethnicity, have put Indian secularism in danger.
- One of the expressions of communalism is communal riots. In recent past also, communalism has proved to be a great threat to the secular fabric of Indian polity.