

Secularism

[UPSC Notes]

What is Secularism?

The meaning of Secularism is being separate from religion or having no religious basis.

- It also means that all religions are given equal status, recognition, and support from the state.
- It can also be defined as the doctrine that promotes the separation of state from religion.
- No discrimination and partiality should be given on the basis of religion.
- The 42nd Amendment of the Indian Constitution (1976) states that India is a 'Secular' nation. Due to this the institution started to accept all religions, and enforce parliamentary laws.
- A secular person is one who does not own his moral values to any religion.
- India is a secular country which means it gives equal status to all religions.

Features of Secularism

The features of Indian Secularism are as follows:

- Equal respect and recognition of all religions by the state.
- No interference in the functions of any religion by the state.
- No discrimination by the state based on religion,
- There is no official religion in India
- As per Article 25 of the Indian constitution, an individual has the right to practice, profess and propagate any religion in India.

History of Secularism

Secularism is very deep-rooted in Indian History. Let's take a look at Secularism during the ancient, medieval, and modern periods.

Secularism in Ancient India

India had various religions, and they have co-existed and evolved together for centuries.

- The development of the four Vedas and interpretations of the Upanishads and Purans highlight the concept of Secularism in Hinduism.
- In ancient India, Hinduism was allowed to develop as a holistic religion by welcoming various spiritual traditions.
- There are many temples built in ancient times that show the coexistence of different religions and faiths.

- Emperor Ashoka was the first emperor to announce that the state would not prosecute any religious sect.
- Secularism in India is not a new concept at all, and it is as old as the Indus Valley Civilization.
- The quest for the coexistence of different religions continued even after the appearance of Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, and Islam on Indian soil.
- In ancient India, people had freedom of religion, and the state granted citizenship regardless of religion.

Secularism in Medieval India

Bhakti Movements and Sufi restored secularism in India in the Medieval period. They spread the positives of Secularism such as brotherhood, tolerance, peace, universalism, and harmony in society.

- The leaders of these movements were Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, Guru Nanak Dev, Baba Farid, Kabir Das, Mira Bai, and Saint Tukaram.
- Religion toleration and freedom of worship marked the state under Akbar. The evidence of his tolerance policy was this promulgation of Divine Faith, which had elements of both Hindu and Muslim faith.
- Another example was the construction of Ibadat Khana where different religious leaders were allowed to express their opinions.
- Akbar had several Hindus as his ministers as well.

Secularism in Modern India

After Aurangzeb, India came under the control of the East Indian Company and the British Raj, and in this period Secularism was strengthened through the freedom movement of India.

- The 'Divide and Rule' policy contributed to communal discord between various communities. Separate electorates were provided for the Muslims during the British Raj, through the Indian Councils Act of 1909.
- The separate electorates further extended the principle of communal representation.
- But the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 with secular values helped to unite the people from all sects.

Secularism in India

The term 'Secularism' is first reflected in the Preamble of India. In India, Secularism is similar to the Indifference of State to religion.

- The government is separate from the religion
- Philosophy of India Secularism is related to 'Sarva Dharma Sambhava', and this concept is promoted by personalities like Mahatma Gandhi and Vivekananda.
- India doesn't have an official state religion. However different personal laws on matters like divorce, marriage, inheritance, and alimony vary with one's religion.
- Indian Secularism is all about achieving the peaceful coexistence of various religions.

- India respects all religions on par with one another.

Secularism in the Indian Constitution

The term 'Secular' was added to the preamble by the 42nd Constitution Amendment Act of 1976. It states the fact that constitutionally, India is a secular country without any state religion. And it also says India shall accept all religions and not favor any particular religion.

- Article 14 and 15- Article 14 grants equality before the law, and protection of all laws to all religions, and 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of race, religion, sex, caste, or place of birth.
- Article 16 (1)- guarantees equal opportunities to all citizens in case of public employment and states there won't be any discrimination based on sex, religion, caste, descent, birthplace, and residence.
- Article 25- provides 'Freedom of Conscience
- Article 26- every religious group has the right to maintain and establish institutions for religious purposes.
- Article 27- the state won't compel any citizen to pay extra taxes for the maintenance or promotion of any religious institution or religion.
- Article 28- allows educational institutions maintained by different religious groups to impart religious instruction
- Articles 29 and 30 provide educational and cultural rights to the minorities.
- Article 51 A- obliges that all citizens of India promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood to value and preserve the rich heritage of the composite culture.

Secularism and Article 25 of the Constitution of India

The Constitution of India guarantees six fundamental rights to its all citizens, and one of these rights is freedom of religion. Article 25 provide

- Freedom of Conscience
- Right to Practice any Religion
- Right to Propagate any Religion
- Right to Profess any Religion

Article 25 covers religious beliefs, and religious practices as well. And these rights are available for citizens and non-citizens as well.

Threats to Secularism

As we have mentioned above, the Indian constitution is absolutely neutral to all religions. However, there are a few factors that have put Indian Secularism in danger.

- Communal politics spread myths and stereotypes against the minorities

- The politicization of any one religious groups is also one of the major factors behind the inter-religious conflict.
- Communalism has proved to be a big threat to Secularism in the recent past,
- Rising Hindu Nationalism in recent years has also created various problems.
- Additionally forced the closure of slaughterhouses, campaigns against 'love jihad', and reconversion reinforces the communal tendencies in India.
- In recent years Muslim youth being inspired by the groups like ISIS is a very unfortunate event for both India and the world.

Indian Secularism vs. Secularism in the West

Over the years India has created its own concept of Secularism which is different from the western concept of Secularism.

Indian Secularism	Secularism in the West
All religions get equal protection from the state	State is separate from the religious groups or institutions functioning.
There no no clear demarcation between religion and state in India	Here Secularism refers to the complete separation between religion and state
Provides partial financial support for religious schools	Western model doesn't give financial support to any religious institution
Rights of religious community and individuals are protected	Focus given to the Individual rights
The role of religious bodies are big and contribute to Indian politics	The role of religious bodies is small in national politics.
No one religion dominates Indian society	Christianity is the most reformed and single dominant religion in the state.

Secularism - Way Forward

The best way to nurture secularism is to expand religious freedom rather than practicing state neutrality. There is a need to identify a shared set of values that allows diverse groups to live together. Education is the best way to educate the younger generation about the value of their own religious traditions and also other religions in the country.