

Debating Secularism in India

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Debating Secularism in India: History, Models, and the Road Ahead

Context:

Secularism has become a focal point in recent public and political debates, especially in light of discussions around the **Uniform Civil Code (UCC)**. The term is frequently questioned, both in terms of its **interpretation** and **implementation** within India's multi-religious society. Its role in ensuring **religious neutrality**, **minority rights**, and **constitutional equality** makes it a critical subject in Indian polity.

What is Secularism?

- **Secularism** refers to the principle where the **state remains neutral** in religious matters, does **not endorse any official religion**, and ensures **equal treatment of all citizens**, irrespective of their faith.
- It promotes **freedom of religion**, **non-discrimination**, and **separation between religion and state**.

Origin and Usage:

- The word '**secular**' comes from the **Latin term 'saeculum'**, meaning **a generation, era, or worldly time**.
- Initially, it was used to refer to **non-religious or worldly matters**.
- During the **Middle Ages**, Christians used it to distinguish **secular life from religious life**.
- In its **modern form**, the term was coined by **George Jacob Holyoake in 1851**.
- Secularism is now seen as a **product of rationalism and modernity**.

Importance:

- It guarantees **religious freedom**.
 - Prevents **state interference or dominance** in religious affairs.
 - Ensures **equal citizenship rights**, especially in diverse and pluralistic societies like India.
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Models of Secularism: Global Perspectives

England - The **Anglican Church** is the official religion, but the **state ensures equal rights** and **religious freedom**.

Ireland - The **preamble** mentions Christianity, but the **state cannot favor or discriminate** based on religion.

Greece - The **Orthodox Church** is dominant, yet **equality and religious freedom** are protected by the constitution.

Pakistan - **Islam is the state religion**, but minorities are given rights for **cultural and religious development**, and political **representation**.

Sri Lanka - **Buddhism is given primacy**, but **freedom to adopt any religion** is guaranteed, and **personal laws** are allowed for minorities.

India - The state has **no official religion** and follows the principle of **equal respect for all faiths**, reflecting its **multi-religious character**.

Western vs Indian Models of Secularism

Western Model:

- Embodies a **negative concept** of secularism.
- Advocates for **complete separation** of religion and state.
- Religion is **excluded from public affairs**.
- Followed in countries like the **United States** and **France**.

Indian Model:

- Based on a **positive concept**, known as "**principled distance**".
 - Allows the state to **intervene in religious matters** when necessary for **reform, equality, and minority protection**.
 - Seeks to balance **religious freedom with social justice**.
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Evolution of Secularism in India

Ancient Roots:

- Emperor **Ashoka's Rock Edicts** promoted **religious tolerance and coexistence**.
 - **Rock Edict 7** - Advocated that **all religions should reside everywhere**, promoting **self-restraint and purity of heart**.
 - **Rock Edict 12** - Discouraged **glorification of one's own religion** and **condemnation of others**.

During Freedom Struggle:

- **Secularism** was integral to the **Indian independence movement**.
 - **1928 Motilal Nehru Report** - Proposed **no state religion** and **no religious discrimination**.
 - **1931 Karachi Resolution** - Called for **state neutrality in religion**.
 - **1944 Hindu Mahasabha Constitution Draft** - Stated explicitly that there would be **no state religion**.

Post-Independence Developments:

- **Supreme Court in Kesavananda Bharati Case (1973)** held that **secularism is a part of the basic structure** of the Constitution.
- **42nd Constitutional Amendment Act (1976)** added the word '**secular**' to the **Preamble**.

- Then Prime Minister **Indira Gandhi** justified this inclusion to reinforce India's **commitment to social justice and religious equality**.
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Contemporary Challenges to Secularism

- **Political Misuse** - Growing use of secularism for **vote-bank politics** and **communal polarization**.
 - **Hate Speech and Intolerance** - Rise in **religiously motivated violence** and **hate speech**, affecting harmony.
 - **Public Misconceptions** - Misbelief that secularism gives **special privileges to minorities**.
 - In reality, it **ensures equal autonomy** for all religions and **prevents theocratic dominance**.
 - **Concerns over Inclusion in Constitution** - Ongoing debate on whether the term '**secular**' should remain in the Preamble.
 - Organizations like **RSS** have demanded a **review** of secularism-related provisions.
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Way Forward

- **Reaffirm State Neutrality** - The state must continue to **maintain neutrality** and **not promote any religion**.
- **Promote Religious Harmony** - Reinforce principles of **mutual respect and coexistence**, as reflected in **Ashokan ideals** and **constitutional values**.
- **Positive Secularism** - Encourage a model that ensures **respect for all religions**, without **favoritism or interference** by the state.