An Overview of Secularism and its Adoption Journey in India

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ABSTRACT

The Constitution of India is very unique anddeclares India as a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic and republic state. These words are written in none other than the preamble of the Constitution itself. Although the word 'Secularism' has not been defined anywhere in the Constitution of India, secularism plays a very important role in the context of the historical development of Indian polity. In fact, it is of uppermost importance, particularly in the context of the political realities on the ground as they exist today.In a pluralistic society such as ours which has a multiplicity of religions, beliefs and cultures, the survival of democracy is itself on edge, let alone the prospering of it if it is not based on the principle of secularism.

KEYWORDS

Secularism, Secular, Religion, India, State, Constitution.

INTRODUCTION

Secularism may trace its roots to the western part of the world. There used to be a tussle between the two institutions for power. The Kings or the Queens were treated as the representatives of the almighty God as God sent them to earth to rule the subjects. The Doctrine of Les Divine rulers were supreme administrators on the earth. The doctrine created controversy and competition between the Church and the State, which gave rise to 'Secularism'. When the Church was separated from the State, it put the State in the position of neutrality in religious matters and simultaneously, gave power to guarantee all its citizens a right to profess any religion, therefore attaining a definition as 'the principle of separation of religion from any political institution or system'.This has also resulted in giving off another meaning contradicting to the word 'Religious' which is why, this side of definition is taken as somewhat of a negative approach . As it is now perceived as a word opposite to the word religion, it is not so much of the case. Rather, than 'opposed to

religion', it should be taken as 'divorced from any religious activity'. Secularism refers to a set of principles concerning God's linkage or its absence.[1] However, this western definition of secularism is valid for only western societies because most of them are mono-religious i.e. having only one religion dominant.

Machiavelli's concept of Secularization of Politics

Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli was an Italian diplomat, politician, historian, writer and philosopher who lived during the time of Renaissance. He is best known for his work '*The Prince'* which was published in the year 1513.In his early years in Florence, Machiavelli witnessed the failure of a Dominican friar named Savonarola's experiment to rule the people with strict moral codes. Personal experiences compelled him to examine politics solely from the viewpoint of empirically measurable evidence or the observation of human behaviour, rather than from the perspective of an a priori theological or philosophical concept.Machiavelli intended to complete the process of secularization of politics, which in the early fourteenth century,was started by a famous Italian scholar,Marsiglio of Padua. Marsiglio started this in order to benefit the bourgeoisie. He accomplished this by liberating politics from the yokes of theology and ethics that had bound it for centuries. According to Middle Age tradition, in determining the direction of politics, Machiavelli did not accept the role of religion, especially Christianity. However, he was conscious of the great value of religion held in respect of social power, and thus tried to use religious feelings to reinforce political authority, as well as approving the practice of ancient Pagan rituals. Machiavelli, on the other hand, distinguished between private and public morality, and he tried to limit the application of private moral norms from entering the domain of politics.

Machiavelli was reacting to historical circumstances at the time. His effort to secularize politics served the needs of Europe's most radical class at the time – the bourgeoisie.

The term 'Secularism" was first propounded by a British writer George Jacob Holyoake in the year 1851. It is originated from a Latin word 'saeculum' which means the longest

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[1]T.N. Srinivasan (ed.), *The Future of Secularism* 162 (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, Fourth Edition/2014

fixed period of time which is almost equal to the lifespan of a human being. George Holyoake coined this term to express his views for encouraging a social order distinct from religion without ignoring or criticizing the same. Being an agnostic himself, Holyoake disputed of secularism being an argument against the religion Christianity. Rather than that, he asserted that secularism moreover encourages and fosters religion. He later wrote two books named, *The Principles of Secularism* in the year 1859, and *The Origin and Nature of Secularism* in the year 1896 to further lay out a foundation of modern secularism.

Secularism in Indian Context

The adjustment of the word 'Secularism' in India is quite different from the rest of the world. India is amongst the most religiously diverse nations in this world. Religions in India have co-existed and they have evolved cooperatively for many centuries.What we know, is that it was the utmost significance even during old times. The Indus Valley civilization, as have been found, was highly developed and must have taken thousands of years to reach that stage. It was, surprisingly enough, a predominantly secular civilization, and the religious element, though present, did not dominate the scene. It was clearly also the precursor of later cultural periods in India.[2]In ancient India, Hinduism was the primary religion. The Sanatan Dharma, another name of Hinduism, was basically open to grow as a comprehensive and broad religion by embracing different spiritual traditions and it continuously attempted to mingle them in a common mainstream. Islam and Christianity did not origin on the Indian soil, but they did evolve in it.As time went on, India was ruled by many foreign rulers and every foreigner that came brought his religion with him. Though, each ruler did rule India as a theocratic society, yet every religion present that time co-existed. There are few religions which were born in India as well, such as Jainism and Buddhism. The idea of secularism and the process of secularization are not exclusive to Hindus. Many sects have done it as well, but more as individuals.The effect of secularism was also very visible in the then education system of India as well. As stated in the book '*Discovery of India*' written by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Nalanda University, one of the most renowned universities which were known,

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[2]Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* 70 (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 6[th]edn., 1994)

was a hallmark of culture. It specialized in the postgraduate studies and attracted students form numerous places such as Japan, China, and even from Korea and beyond. Religious and secular subjects were taught here. The line between religious and secular knowledge was not strictly drawn. They overlapped and everything that seemed useful to life was the object of inquiry.[3]All of this combined created a unique type of secularism in India.

The present India is a combination of diverse beliefs, faith and worship, hence the western secularism ideology cannot be applied here.In India, the word is not used as something denoting anti-religion as well, but has been adopted as tolerance of all religions with a specific emphasis on the protection of minorities and the preserving communal harmony. As one of the former Prime Ministers, late Smt. Indira Gandhi has observed "Secularism is neither a religion nor indifference to religion but equal respect for all religions, not mere tolerance but positive respect…without it, there is no future for the nation"[4]. The Indian sense is primarily focused on ensuring that all religions are treated equally and to eliminate any discrimination against Indians based on their religion. This adaptation of secularism with a new definition was titled as 'Indianism' by a famous Indian political psychologist, AshisNandy, which does not hold any place in the Oxford English Dictionary. But, over the course of time and usage of the definition, it has gained respect in the worldwide stance. As stated in SayyidAbid Hussain's book, *National Culture of India*, Dr. SarvepalliRadhakrishnan pointed out that "Secularism does not mean irreligion or atheism or even stress on the universality of spiritual values which may be attained by a variety of ways"[5]. In simpler words, India recognizes all religions with equal status. Dr. Radhakrishnan further states that "We hold that no religion should be given preferential status, or unique distinction, that no one religion should be accorded special privileges in the national life, or international relations, for that would be a violation of the basic principles of democracy and contrary to the best interest of religion and government…..No group of citizens shall arrogate to itself rights and privileges which it denies to other. No person shall suffer any form of disability or discrimination because of his religion but all alike should be free to share to the fullest

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[3]*Id.* at p.115
[4]Dr. B.L. Fadia and Dr.KuldeepFadia, *Indian Government and Politics* 113 (SahityaBhawan, Agra, 12[th]edn., 2016)
[5]*Id.* at p.112

degree in the common life. This is the basic principle involved in the separation of the church and the state."[6]

Donald Eugene Smith, a professor of political science in the University of Pennsylvania, wrote in his book *India as a Secular State*, "The secular state is a state which guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion, deals with the individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion, is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion."[7]Another western writer, Harvey Cox has said that "secularism does not exclude any religion; on contrary, it breeds religious peaceful co-existence."[8]

But, to make things straight again and as mentioned above, the concept of secularism did not come to India as a western influence. The history of India suggests that the idea of secularism existed since a long time. The feeling and thinking which arose from the mingling of different communities and groups gave social, economic and political life a thrust. Due to all this, the Indian culture became a 'composite' culture, meaning, there's a mixture of variety of elements and groups present in one single society. There were also few movements such as the Sufi movement (from the fourteenth to sixteenth century), in which the unorthodox saints of Islam went through various religious texts of different religions, predominantly influenced by Hinduism, and provided a common path for both Islam and Hinduism. KhwajaMoinuddinChisti(1143-1234 A.D.), Nizam-ud-din Auliya(1235-1325A.D.) and Baba Farid-ud-din Ganj-i-Shakar (1176-1268A.D.) are some of the most strongly associated names form this movement. Another movement called as a Bhakti movement where some famous personalities such as Kabir, Ramanuja, Vallabhacharya, Guru Nanak and Sri Chaitanya preached the doctrine of devotion and love to realize the God. Both the movements played an impetus in the Medieval India in bringing the people of different sectors closer. These movements by the support of these personalities, helped in the growth and development of a composite culture in such great levels which were seemingly hard to achieve only through political and administrative ways.It is a well-known fact that the third monarch of the Maurya dynasty, great emperor

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[6]*Ibid.*
[7]D.E. Smith, *India as a Secular State* 4 (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1998)
[8]*Supra* note 4

Ashoka converted to Buddhism after witnessing the gruesome effects of Kalinga war. He wanted to spread Dharma and its meaning throughout his empire and hence, in furtherance of it, he erected pillars and edicts all over the subcontinent and also in place which in today's era, known in Afghanistan. In the year 1838, a British antiquary and a colonial administrator, James Prinsep, was the first person who deciphered these great edicts of Ashoka. These edicts were later found to be the first ever tangible evidences of Buddhism. In today's date, there are thirty-three inscriptions found in total. One of the edicts, most commonly called as Ashoka's Twelfth Major Rock Edict mentions the duties of tolerance towards the Dharma of others. Another very famous ruler existed in India during the medieval times who was celebrated as one of the most liberal and secular ruler is Akbar. He tried to promote solidarity by introducing many secular policies. His two major propagations, 'Din-e-Illahi' (Divine faith) and 'Sulh-i-Kul' (Peace with all), were both inspired by the spirit of secularism.

The spirit of tolerance has been a distinctive feature of secular attitudes and perspectives. And in order to be a genuine secular state, it must not only deny to be a theocratic State but also must not have any formal or legal alliance with any religion at all. The separation of religion-state, nonetheless, is a necessary supplement but not a sufficient element for a state to be secular. A secular state must be driven by values and goals that are drawn in part from non-religious sources. These objectives should include peace, religious freedom, freedom to escape oppression based on religion, discrimination and exclusion, and inter-religious and intra-religious equality.Partha Chatterjee, an Indian political scientist, has propounded three principles as the characteristics of a secular state. The first one is the principle of liberty, which demands that the state allow any religion to be practiced within the bounds of some other fundamental rights that the state must also secure. The second one is the equality principle, which states that the state does not favour one religion over another. The third one is the principle of neutrality, which is best described as the requirement that the state not to give preference to any religious individual over a non-religious one and which, when combined with the liberty and equality principles, gives effect to what is known as the 'wall of separation' doctrine in US constitutional law, i.e. the state should not involve itself in any sort of religious matters.

In the 20th century India, there were two major advocates, more so like forefathers of secular ideology who really did influence the idea of it in the Constitution of India. These two were,PanditJawaharLal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi. Although, both of them have different approaches towards this ideology, the conclusion of both the approaches is very identical.

Gandhi's Approach to Secularism

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was known to be a man of religion, as described by PanditJawaharLal Nehru himself. He called Gandhi "a Hindu to the innermost depths of his being."[9] In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi wrote; "I can say without the slightest hesitation and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means."[10] Yet, at other times, he still gave opinions contrary to what his earlier statements signified. To quote his exact words, ""If I were a dictator, religion and state would be separate, I swear by my religion, I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it. The state would look after your secular welfare . . . but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern!"[11] Mahatma Gandhi claimed that India as a state should undoubtedly be a secular state. This contradictions in his own statements can be due to the reason that Gandhi conceived of politics quite apart from the state, as occurring in the realm of daily personal interaction, not simply in the impersonal and bureaucratic sphere of statecraft.[12]Gandhi says that religion is a personal thing, a private matter. Religion, which is Dharma, seeking of truth, is a private process rather than a state activity. The individual conscience is central for Gandhi in every endeavor of truth-seeking…The "call of the individual conscience" is the main vehicle for accessing truth, and the practices of truth-seeking are to constitute a kind of systematic training of the individual will.[13] For Gandhi,religious communities aided or supplemented conscience's search for the truth.

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[9]Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* 365 (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1[st]edn., 1946)

[10]M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography* 615 (Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1948)

[11]M. Senthil Kumar and S. Rijesh, *Indian Society: For Civil Services Main Examination GS Paper I* 169 (Person Education, Delhi, 2[nd]edn., 2019)

[12]Farah Godrej, "Secularism in India; A Gandhian Approach" in Richard T. Ashcroft and Mark Bevir (eds.), *Multiculturalism in British Commonwealth: Comparative Perspectives on Theory and Practice* 151 (University of California Press, 1[st]edn., 2019)

[13]*Id.* at p.153

But, according to Gandhi in the political matters "any form of political association based exclusively and adherence to a particular religion was worse than undemocratic."Gandhi was concerned with the resulting atmosphere where religions were viewed as rivals attempting to obtain validity for arguments, there is an environment of animosity and polarization.In India at the turn of the twentieth century, there were opposing nationalist discourses, but Gandhi sought to bring them together under the banner of "swaraj" (self-rule). Gandhi was withstanding the modern liberal language of secularism and called it "parochialism claiming universal provenance."[14]However, it serves as a prophetic reminder that the liberal, secular state's language and functioning contradict the *anekantavda* hypothesis that all religions are also "real" routes. When the state declares what religion is, it creates a rivalry among abstract doctrinal truth statements, thus obstructing genuinely private religious practice in Gandhi's context.As culturally relevant concepts of "religion" and "neutrality" are transplanted into non-Semitic contexts, Gandhi's formulation of the idea of secularism can be read as a red flag about the violence inflicted by it.This is why Gandhi put emphasis on religious freedom to be present in India.

Nehru's Idea of Secularism

Another principle advocate of secularism was PanditJawaharLal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India. He was basically, the main architect of the state religion relationship in India. Nehru's idea of Indian secularism has to be bifurcated in two parts, first, which contains the components of political-economic order and second, the international situation which helped him reach to the idea of establishing the first one. Nehru was brought up as a sophisticated English gentleman since his father, Motilal Nehru was himself deliberately westernized and brought up his son in the same way. This resulted in Nehru not having any kind of direct access to the Indian culture and which is why he did not know any Indian language that well, let alone Sanskrit. Therefore, he approached the Indian society by working and involving deeply in the public affairs. This intellectual inadequacy led Nehru in an aggregationist view of Indian culture. Later, Nehru started professing himself as an agnostic. Nehru's secularism was hence, based on

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[14]Ajay Skaria, "Gandhi's Politics: Liberalism and the Question of the Ashram", 101 *SAQ* 960 (2002)

a commitment to scientific humanism tinged with a progressive view of historical change.[15]Although Indian society as a whole consisted of a diversity of cultures, customs, religions and languages, Nehru wanted it to become a single nation in unity. Also, despite the division of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, India still has a large Muslim population within its borders. Muslims and Hindus killed each other without any hesitation during the time of partition, and if India had been, say, a Hindu state, the living conditions of Muslims in India would have been difficult to guarantee as positive.

On April 9th, 1950, while inaugurating the Indian Council of Cultural Relations in New Delhi, Nehru said "One sees these nations being intimately moulded by the impulse that initially starts a civilization going on its long path. That conception is affected by other conceptions and one sees action and interaction between these varying conceptions….It simply cannot be, just as nobody can say that he belongs to one hundred percent, to a particular racial type, because in the course of hundreds and thousands of years unmistakable changes and mixtures have occurred. "So, culture is bound to get a little mixed up, even though the basic element of a particular natural culture remains dominant. If this kind of things goes on peacefully, there is no harm in it."

Pandit Nehru soon was celebrated as a leading champion of the concept of secular state. In Chester Bowles words, former American diplomat and Governor of the State of Connecticut, that the creation of India as a secular state might, in future, be accepted as 'one of the greatest achievements'[16].Nehru was highly averse to the intrusion of religious factors into politics. He is particularly concerned with transforming India from a caste-ridden society in which communalism is a major challenge to all of the ideals he holds dear to a national state that contains citizens of all religions and all sorts of opinion and fundamentally claims itself to be secular. Nehru, while giving a speech in Lok Sabha on

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[15]*Supra* note 4 at p. 114
[16]Chester Bowles, *Ambassador's Report* 104 (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1954)

September 17th, 1953, said, "Religion is all right when applied to ethics and morals but it is not good mixed up with politics"[17].

For Nehru, freedom was meaningful only when it furnished the path for economic growth. Similarly, for him, democracy was meaningful when it assisted in the economic and social equality and growth of the nation. He stated, while giving a shade of him being an agnostic that he has no interest in interfering in any person's belief, but he strongly objects into giving effort in making a complete structure of society solely on the basis of any religious sanction and authority. He desired a state which protects all religions and at the same time, does not favour any specific one of them or adopt any religion as a state religion. Nehru wanted a free India which should be non-communal, secular state. The government of a country like India with many religions that have secured great and develop following four generations, can never function satisfactorily in the modern age except on a secular basis.Jawaharlal Nehru really did boast about the fact that the Constitution of India was based on the concept of secularism and gave freedom to all religions. While addressing the annual convocation of the Aligarh Muslim University in the year 1948, he said, "India will be a land of many faiths, equally honoured and respected, but of one national outlook."[18]

So, to compare Gandhi's and Nehru's ideologies of secularism relating to India side-by-side, it can be concluded that both of them had different paths but the destination they reached were the same. When on one hand, Nehru believed in a more scientific and developing view and sawsecularism as a means to an end of economic and social development and equality amongst the citizens of India. On the other hand, Gandhi's secularism was based on the commitment of brotherhood of religious communities based on their respect for and pursuit of truth.[19]

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[17]Parliament Secretariat, *Parliamentary Debates: House of the People Official Report Vol. iv No. 32* (September, 1953)
[18]ErjaMarjutHänninen, *The Contest of Indian Secularism* (2002)(Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Helsinki)
[19]*Supra* note 4 at p.114

The Constituent Assembly on Secularism

After the gaining independence in the year 1947, India was ready and also, in need for a new set of regulations and laws, but more importantly, a set of commands and guarantees and rights as a supreme documented law of the land. In simpler words, it was time to formulate a Constitution for the nation and its people. This enormous task of formulating and drafting the constitution was given to the Constituent Assembly. Many famous scholars, politicians and thinkers were part of this Constituent Assembly.The Constitution was drafted in between the years 1946-49. It took the assembly almost 165 days of actual work to complete it. The most time of the Assembly was taken by the debates over the incorporation of the principle of secularism in the Preamble of the Constitution. The debates over this issue were quite acrimonious. The main contentions were, "How could a democracy represent a religious majority at the expense of the rights and freedoms of a minority?" Because, of course since religion was, for most Indians, a way of life and therefore essential to their identity, how could a people's state be founded on a kind of secularism contemptuous of religion. One's identity was not something which was easily changeable, and for these members, to forcibly replace religion as the basis of one's identity withthe state was an attack on the autonomy of individuals.[20]The debates about preamble were held in last sessions and started on October 17, 1949. Secularism, it has been argued, failed to stem the spread of communalism in India, because its marginalizing and contempt of religion bred a backlash on which communalism thrived. This article contends that this 'contempt for religion' was marginalized in the course of the secularism debates in the Constituent Assembly. The dominant position on secularism that a 'democratic' Constitution find place for religion as a way of life for most Indians triumphed over those who wished for the Assembly to grant only a narrow right to religious freedom, or to make the uniform civil code a fundamental right. These early discussions on religious freedom also highlight a paradox – it is precisely some of the advocates of a broad right to religious freedom who were also the most vociferous opponents of any political rights for religious minorities.[21]

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[20]ShefaliJha, "Secularism in the Constituent Assembly Debates, 1946-1950", 37 *EPW* 3176-3177 (2002)
[21]*Id.* at 3176

Therefore, at the end, when the Constitution of India was adopted, although the term 'secular' only appeared in Article 25(2)(a) of the Constitution, the essence and the spirit of secularism was lodged in various provisions of the Constitution, and also in the Preamble.

CONCLUSION

The idea of secularism existed since a very long time, as mutual respect over other's Dharma and culture was an understood principle of morality and sincereness. Even with the introduction of other religions and their inclusion in Indian society, this ideology existed. All this indicates to a greater extent that principles and virtues of secularism were always present in the minds and in the respective religious and spiritual teachings of the people here and the Indian way of life has always been one of peace, unity, and reverence for people of all faiths.Equal respect and non-concern in relation to religion, both of these positions were construed strictly by the Constituent Assembly while framing the Constitution of India. Today, we are inclined in the favour of the conception of a secular state that respects all religions equally, by giving the rem a new definition in terms of Indian Secularism. Although, with the advent of time and rise of religious extremism in India, the ideology is nearly on the stage of crumbliness and the spirit of Indian Constitution is in danger. What we need is a proper understanding of our cultural origins, which we can use as a guide to lead us forward rather than looking for direction elsewhere.

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