

**BIRTH OF SECULARISM AND SOCIAL
CHANGE IN INDIA**

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INTRODUCTION

Secularism is a sign of modernity, plurality, co-existence, rationalism and developing with a fast growing multicultural society. One of the fundamental changes which in Indian society have to undergo is to pass out from a sacred Society to a secular society. This is a part of change which an agricultural society, that is traditional, has to make when it changes to a modern industrial society. The concept of secularism as embodied in the Constitution of India cannot be viewed in the sense in which it is viewed in the West, but in the context of the following provisions of the Constitution: the Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience, freedom to profess, practice and propagate religion and also freedom to establish religious institutions and manage or administer their affairs. It prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion and equality to all by providing for equality before law and equal protection of laws, prohibiting discrimination with regard to places of public importance and providing for equal opportunity in matters of public employment.¹

¹ Secularism in India –a brief study by kamaluddin Khan lecturer, Patna law college, Patna university.

SECULARISM (MEANING AND DEFINITION)

What is secularism?

When a country's government has a policy of practicing an indifference towards any religion of its people, it's referred to as secularism. When government groups attempt to keep religious groups or bodies, or even philosophies from influencing the policies put in place by the government, we call that secular politics.²

The word secular is derived from the Latin word 'sacularis' which meant, among other things, 'that which belongs to this world, non-spiritual, temporal as opposed to spiritual or ecclesiastical thing'. It is a form applied in general to the separation of state politics or administration from religious matters, and 'secular education.' is a system of training from which religious teaching is definitely excluded.

English dictionaries define - "secularism" as the quality of "having no concern with religion or spiritual matters". But they also describe it as "a system which seeks to interpret and order life or principles taken solely from this world." Therefore, secularism in the political sphere refers to the freedom of the state to deal with the affairs of the world without interference from any religious authorities.

According to the Random House Dictionary - 'secular' is that which pertains "to worldly things that are not regarded as religious, spiritual or sacred". The Encyclopaedia Britannica gives a similar definition.³

²www.ncte.india.org/pub/human/chapg.htm

³ CONCEPT OF SECULARISM IN INDIA Posted on March 27, 2013 by admin.

In other words, secularism is mainly interpreted in present day studies as “the neutrality of the state in regard to religion.”

What is implied by this definition is that man’s political life has no relevance to his religious life. Another word derived from ‘secularism’ is ‘secularisation’ which means historical processes and movements which imply a change from religious and supernatural to natural and this-worldly purposes. It mainly meant that the state does not follow any religion.

BIRTH OF SECULARISM

One of the fundamental changes which the Indian society has to undergo is to pass out from a "sacred society" to a "secular society". This is a part of the Change, which an agricultural society that is traditional, has to make when it changes to a modern Industrial society. It is a well-known fact that members of the Indian society, irrespective of creed to which they belong, are highly religious in their outlook. Historically, India has been a land with powerful religious sects. So, Religious tolerance has been one of the traditional social values in the country, since without it any ordered society in the country would have been Impossible.

Asoka was the first great emperor to announce that the state would not persecute any religious sect, as early as third century B.C⁴. He asked people to become proficient in the scriptures of other religions. The religious tolerance expressed by Asoka more than 2,300 years ago has been one of the cherished Indian social values though there were religious persecutions now and then.

Asoka's secular outlook is one of the landmarks not only of Indian civilization but also of the human civilization itself.

Another great landmark in the development of the secular outlook in human civilization is the declaration by **Jesus Christ** "Render to Caesar the thing that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

The two other aspects of secularism may be traced to modern times with the renaissance and reformation in Western Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and to the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

⁴ Social change in India by Kuppuswamy .page no.560-561

The Industrial Revolution emphasized science and technology, the growth of knowledge and its application to the problems of life, leading to increased productivity as result of the construction of machines and the use of energy from sources other than the human and the animal.⁵

The East India Company followed the social values of tolerance among the various religious groups in India and non-interference in their affairs. When it obtained the grant of Diwani in 1765, which marked the beginning for its political power in India, the Company maintained strict neutrality which was dictated by prudence as well as by commercial interests even though the Christian missionaries were eager that the Company should support them in their proselytizing work. The Company's administrators were also influenced by the liberal political principles of Edmund Burke.⁶

The Western-educated Indians, who established the Indian National Congress in 1885, were secular in their outlook and continued to follow the leadership of Rammohan Roy in their social and political outlook.

Mahatma Gandhi was very secular in his outlook and was responsible for many fundamental changes in Indian society like-

- The abolition of untouchability,
- The breaking down of the barriers between the various castes, and
- The promotion of equality among the sexes, he was deeply religious in his outlook.

However, his religious outlook was basically tolerant towards all religions.

Though 85 per cent of the population of India consisted of the followers of Hinduism, the Indian Constitution adopted a secular outlook because of the tradition of religious

⁵ Social change in India by Kuppuswamy. page no.560-561

⁶ Social change in India by Kuppuswamy. page no.560-561

tolerance from the time of Asoka, the tradition of a secular outlook among the members of the new middle classes who in the 19th century were eager to establish a secular democracy in the country based upon the principles of liberalism, the humanistic outlook of great Indian leaders, and finally the intense desire to usher in a new economy by industrialization so that the standard of living of the masses of people can be raised. All these four trends of the Indian society are expressed in unequivocal terms in the.

Indian Constitution adopted by the Constituent Assembly in 1950. This is the reason why a "tradition-bound, caste-ridden and authoritarian society" like India adopted secularism as a basic principle of the Indian State and Indian society.

Donald Smith defines a secular: State as one "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 to promote or interfere with religion."⁷

In the beginning of the Preamble of the Indian Constitution the word *secular* was inserted in the 42nd amendment:

"We, the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a Sovereign 'Socialist' Secular Democratic Re-public and to secure to all its citizens..."

This amendment is intended merely to spell out clearly the concept of secularism in the constitution. There is no mysticism in the secular character of the state. Secularism is neither anti God nor Pro-God, it treats alike the devout, the antagonistic and the atheist. The state can have no religion of its own. It should treat all religion

⁷ Social change in India by Kuppuswamy. page no.562

equally. The state must extend similar treatment to the church, the Mosque and the temple.

In a secular state, the state is only concerned with the relation between man and man. It is not concerned with the relation of man with God. It prohibits discrimination against members of a particular religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. India, therefore does not have an official state religion.

Every person has the right to preach, practice and propagate any religion they choose. The government must not favour or discriminate against any religion. It must treat all religions with equal respect. All citizens, irrespective of their religious beliefs are equal in front of law.

THE BASIC OUTLINES OF THE SECULARISM ARE ENSHRINED IN THE FOLLOWING ARTICLES OF THE CONSTITUTION:

1. Preamble:

It is true that the word 'secular' did not first occur either in Article 25 or 26 or in any other Article or Preamble of the Constitution. By the Constitution (42nd Amendment) Act, 1976, the Preamble was amended and for the words 'Sovereign Democratic Republic' the words 'Sovereign, socialist, secular, Democratic Republic' were substituted.

2. No State Religion:

There shall be no 'state religion' in India. The state will neither establish a religion of its own nor confer any special patronage upon any particular religion.

The state will not compel any citizen to pay any tax for the promotion or maintenance of any particular religion or religious institution (Article 27). No religious instruction shall be provided in any educational institution wholly run by state funds.

3. **Freedom of Conscience:**

Every person is guaranteed the freedom of conscience and the freedom to profess, practise and propagate his own religion, subject only:

1. To restrictions imposed by the state on the interest of public order, morality and health (so that the freedom of religion may not be abused to commit crimes or antisocial acts, e.g., to commit the practice of infanticide, and the like);

2. To regulations or restrictions made by state relating, to any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice, but do not really related to the freedom of conscience;

4. **Freedom to Manage Religious Affairs:**

Individual to profess, practise and propagate his religion, there is also the right guaranteed to every religious groups or denominations:

5. **Cultural and Educational Rights:**

Under Article 29 and 30 certain cultural and educational rights are guaranteed. Article 29 guarantees the right of any section of the citizens residing in any part of the country having a distinct language, script or culture of its own and to conserve the same. Article 30 provides that all minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice”.

Although the term secularism was not in the original text of the Constitution, secularism was a subject of animated discussion when the Constituent Assembly look up for consideration the provisions dealing with the freedom of religion.

It guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion by Articles 25, 26 and 30 of the Constitution. It deals with the individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion according to Articles 14, 15 and 16. Further, it is not constitutionally connected with any particular religion nor does it seek to promote or interfere with any particular religion. Provisions of the Constitution and some of the laws passed do interfere with the religious customs and practices the Hindus. Similarly, the various laws of social reform passed before independence and after independence are specific illustrations of state intervention. Similarly, the laws enabling the state Governments to set up departments of religious endowments to administer the temples also illustrate the State intervention in religious matters.⁸

The basic problem of Indian society is the promotion of a humanistic outlook so that poverty and suffering in any individual is not tolerated and those individuals who are better off exert themselves to render help to those who are steeped in poverty,

⁸ Social change in India by Kuppaswamy. page no.563

ignorance and superstition. Another basic problem facing the Indian society is the improvement of the standard of living the masses in the rural areas and in the slums of the cities by increasing productivity with the help of science and technology. Secularism in the context of economic development involves the abandonment of the concepts of cyclical time and cosmic causation and their replacement by the notions of linear time and physical laws and natural causation. This will help man to develop the confidence and ability to master the environmental forces, physical as well as social, and abandon the tendency to appeal supernatural forces or the propitiation of occult powers.

SOCIAL CHANGE IN INDIA:

Secularization has made great impact on Indian society. The modern family is secular in attitude. Marriage also has become a civil contract rather than a religious sacrament. It can be broken at any hour. The authority of religion over conditions of marriage and divorce has markedly declined. Inter-religious marriages are increasing in number. The traditional concept of purity and pollution has declined. No purificatory rites are done today, if a person comes into contact with a person of low caste. Restrictions imposed by caste system on interdining have disappeared. The restrictions imposed on widow have gradually come to an end. The Right of worship was granted by god for man to worship as he pleased . There can be no compulsion in law of any creed or practice of any form of worship. ⁹Under the impact of westernization the educated youth tries to find out scientific explanations to the numerous traditional family rituals. The position of girls and women stands changed under the impact of secularization, earlier girls were not allowed to step out of the house and society was totally male dominated. But secularism has introduced the ideals of equality and liberty. Now many girls can enter careers. The employment of large number of women in pursuits like army and police is indeed a revolution from the social viewpoint. It appears that women who so far were the backbone of family will soon cease to be so. Widow Remarriage has been made legal. Traditionally it was regarded that purity and impurity were associated with day-to-day life. The traditional ideas of purity have given place to rules of hygiene. The taboos of the society based on caste structures have been rejected by the modern generation. The concepts of pollution and purity have both weakened and become less pervasive. There is now free social intercourse. The Indian caste structure has lost its rigidity. Any caste can

⁹ Cantwall v. Connecticut,(1931) 310 u.s 295

now follow any occupation. The place and role of the Brahmin have diminished. The restrictions on feeding and eating no longer exist. The Indian society is now more open. Another significant field where the influence of secularization can be seen is regarding the position of monastic heads who have influential friends in the political sphere. The religious figures like Dharendra Brahmachari and Chandra Swami have influenced decision-making. The Hindu Saints and Sadhus have played an important role in the Ayodhya issue which is more a political than religious issue. The study of the changing role of monastic heads and other religious figures in modern Indian society would be a valuable contribution to the literature on secularization.¹⁰

Secularization has affected the notions of pollution and purity in Hinduism.

Though untouchability persists in the rural areas, it may be stated that, in general, the notion of pollution does not operate in the Hindu society today. Similarly, the traditional ideas of purity have given place to rules of hygiene. Further, many of the religious festivities have now become secularized as, for example, the Dussehra festivities in Mysore and New Delhi and other places. Festivals like Ganapathi and Ramnavmi have now become cultural festivals celebrated with musical programmes for over a week on each occasion.

In spite of the directive principles of State policy and in spite of the changes that have taken place in the social and cultural spheres, it must be recognized that people have not yet become secular in their outlook.

¹⁰ www.yourarticlelibrary.com/essay/secularization-has-made-great-impact-on-india.

THE VARIOUS ASPECTS OF INDIAN SOCIAL LIFE MOST AFFECTED BY THE PROCESS OF SECULARIZATION ARE AS BELOW:

A. SOME LEGISLATION HAS PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN BRINGING ABOUT SOCIAL CHANGE.

- i. THE UNTOUCHABILITY OFFENCES ACT 1955 was passed by the parliament in accordance with the provisions of Art 35 of the Indian constitution. It made the practice of untouchability a cognizable offence punishable under law.
- ii. HINDU MARRIAGE ACT WAS PASSED IN 1955 enforcing monogamy and permitting judicial separation and divorce. The Hindu women was also resented the second marriage by a man when the first one was alive.

The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 could bring about a number of social changes. The act abolished all caste restrictions as necessary requirement for marriage.

Intercaste marriage are now allowed. Hindus of all castes have the same rights with respect to marriage and enables the registration of marriage . It enforces monogamy making both the sexes equal in marital affairs. It provides equal rights for both to get judicial separation and divorce on legal grounds. It treats various sets of people such as Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, Veera Shaivas, Harijans and many others as Hindu. Thus it paved the way for bringing about a uniform civil code for all the citizen of India.

- iii. In the same way, the HINDU SUCCESSION ACT OF 1956 could attain success. The act confers for the first time absolute rights over the property

possessed by a Hindu Woman. Both the sons and daughters get the right of inheritance of property because of this Act. The act removes prejudice against women getting the property of the father. Since public opinion is in favor of women enjoying equal rights and opportunities, the act could be enforced easily.

- iv. THE HINDU ADOPTION AND MAINTENANCE ACT OF 1956 has been a step towards the upliftment of the status of women. It permits of a son or a daughter. It makes the consent of the wife necessary for adopting a child. It also gives the right to the widow to adopt.
- v. In the Same way, the DOWRY PROHIBITION ACT OF 1996 which made the giver as well as receiver of dowry punishable also has become ineffective.

B. INCREASING MOBILITY:

In India caste system prevents the mobility of the people from one occupation to another. But the new class system has encouraged social mobility. Further, legal compulsion has also encouraged social mobility and social change.

According to Prof. S.C. Dubey, "An excellent example of social change by legal compulsion is provided by the abolition of untouchability by law in India. In a favourable social climate legislation can be a potent instrument of social change." Changes in the marriage institution: In India, the institution of marriage has undergone a tremendous change. Formerly people used to observe endogamy as regards. The 'caste' and exogamy as regards the gotra'. But due to the impact

of modern races, the endogamous restrictions are gradually declining. Among educated people, there are number of instances of the inter- caste marriage. ¹¹

C. CASTE SYSTEM:

The traditional Hindu society was divided into four castes. The untouchables were not included in the four-fold division of the society. On the basis of the concept of purity and pollution, social distance was maintained between the four castes. If a high caste person came in contact with a person of low caste, he became polluted and impure. Many actions are regarded as impure; in particular if a high caste person does actions reserved for the low castes, he will get stained by impurity. Similarly, the sentiment of untouchability is linked with this feeling of impurity. As a result of the process of secularization, the traditional concepts of purity and pollution have declined in these aspects.

D. NON BRAHMINS CAN BE APPOINTED AS PUJARI IN TEMPLE.

In a judgement ¹² far reaching consequences the supreme court has held that Brahmins do not have monopoly over performing puja in a temple and said that a non-Brahmin can be appointed as pujari if he is properly trained and well versed with rituals.

E. RESTRICTION OF INTERDINING:

In traditional Hindu society, many restrictions were imposed on the high caste people regarding interdining. If a person of a high caste started eating meat and

¹¹www.ncte.india.org/pub/human/chag.htm

¹²N Aditya. Travancore Dewaswom Board 2nd (sup)NSC 35 38

drinking wine, he became impure and had to undergo purificatory rites. Due to secularization, restrictions on dining have disappeared.

F. OCCUPATIONAL PURITY:

Traditionally, some occupations were regarded as pure and some as impure. For example, those castes which worked with their hands were regarded as impure because they had to touch dirty things. Therefore, high caste people were forbidden to do dirty works so that they may not become impure. The traditional idea of purity and pollution associated with occupation has declined. Now people of all castes are taking to all types of occupations.

G. MARRIAGE CEREMONY:

Traditionally Hindu marriage was regarded as a religious sacrament and a person could enter into matrimony only after going through certain rituals. Now as a result of the process of secularization, the institution of marriage is no longer regarded religious. On the one hand, some people are getting married through the court and on the other hand, even those persons who are getting married through Vedic rites have cut down the elaborate marriage rites and rituals as a result of secularization.¹³

H. TO START A BUSINESS:

Traditionally, it was considered necessary to rites and rituals before a person started any business. Now as a result of the process or Secularization these rites and rituals as ceremonies connected with the starting of business have come to a decline.

¹³ Secularism in India –a brief study by kamaluddin Khan lecturer, Patna law college, patna university.

I. STATUS OF WOMEN:

Traditionally it was regarded that a woman should follow the wishes' of her husband because he was equal to God. As a result of the conception of Pati Parmeshwar the wife ate only when her husband had eaten and slept only when her husband had' slept. Now, owing to secularization, these rules are no longer followed. Both the structural and cultural change provided equality of opportunity to women in education , employment and political participation.

J. RELIGIOUS RITES:

Sandhya and Upasna: It was the duty of every householder to perform puja five to seven times in the day and only then his day became reasonably good. As a result of secularization, the daily worship has been cut short and some people do no worship at all.

K. FOREIGN TRAVEL:

Previously foreign travel was prohibited on grounds of religion and the concept of purity and pollution played an important role in hindering foreign travel. As a result of the process of secularization, this is no longer so and hose people who go abroad have no longer to undergo purifactory rites to become ritually clean..¹⁴

¹⁴Secularism In India -- A Brief Study - By Kamaluddin Khan

L. THE CONSTITUTION (44TH AMENDMENT) ACT 1978 INSERTED A NEW DIRECTIVE PRINCIPLE IN ARTICLE 38 OF THE CONSTITUTION.

Article 38 of the Constitution asserts that the State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people.

Article 39 asserts that the citizens, men as well as women, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood and that children of a tender age are not forced to enter a vocation unsuited to their age or strength.

Article 41 requires the State to make Effective provisions for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement.

Article 43 requires the State to secure a living wage and a decent standard of living for all the citizens.

Article 45 requires the State to provide compulsory education to all children until they complete the age of 14 years.

Article 46 requires the State to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people. All these clearly show the concern of the Constitution for the welfare and well-being of children as well as adults, manifesting the humanistic outlook.

Article 48 of the Constitution directing the State to prohibit cow slaughter and Rules passed by the State Governments banning the slaughter of animals and the sale of meat on certain days looked upon as sacred by the Hindus and prohibiting the playing of the band while a procession passes by a mosque etc..

M. NOISE POLLUTION IN THE NAME OF RELIGION IS NOT ALLOWED:

In Church of God v. K.K.R.M.C Welfare Association¹⁵

The supreme court has held that in the exercise of the right to religion freedom under Article 25 and 26 no person can be allowed to create Noise Pollution or disturb the peace of the others.

N. FORCE CONVERSION NOT ALLOWED :

Right to propagate ones religion does not give to any one to forcibly convert any person to ones religion . Forcible conversion of any person to ones own religion might disturb the public order hence could be prohibited by law.

O. FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN INDIA.

In National Anthem case¹⁶

The supreme court held that no person can be compelled to sing the National Anthem if he has genuine, Conscientious religious obligation . there is no legal obligation in India for a citizen to sing the National Anthem.

¹⁵ AIR 2000 SC 2773

¹⁶ 1984 SCC 615

CONCLUSION

Thus it can be seen that the rites and rituals connected with the life cycle of an individual 'are undergoing important changes. We are moving from religiosity to a secular way of life. Changes are taking place in the status of widows, marriage institutions and attitude towards education etc.

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