



Government of Tamilnadu

Department of Employment and Training

Course : TNPSC Group I Mains Material
Subject : Modern History of India and Indian Culture
Topic : India: a secular state

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INDIA: A SECULAR STATE

Introduction

- The term “Secular” means being "separate" from religion, or having no religious basis. A secular person is one who does not owe his moral values to any religion. His values are the product of his rational and scientific thinking.
- Secularism means separation of religion from political, economic, social and cultural aspects of life, religion being treated as a purely personal matter.
- It emphasized dissociation of the state from religion and full freedom to all religions and tolerance of all religions. It also stands for equal opportunities for followers of all religions, and no discrimination and partiality on grounds of religion.

Secularism in the History of India

- Secular traditions are very deep rooted in the history of India. Indian culture is based on the blending of 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 of four Vedas and the various interpretations of the Upanishads and the Puranas clearly highlight the religious plurality of Hinduism.
- Emperor Ashoka was the first great emperor to announce, as early as third century B.C. that, the state would not prosecute any religious sect. In his 12th Rock Edict, Ashoka made an appeal not only for the toleration of all religion sects but also to develop a spirit of great respect toward 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, Sant Kabir Das, Guru Nanak Dev, Saint Tukaram and Mira Bai etc.

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- In medieval India, religious toleration and freedom of worship marked the State under Akbar. He had a number of Hindus as his ministers, forbade forcible conversions and abolished Jizya. The most prominent evidence of his tolerance policy was his promulgation of ‘Din-i-Ilahi’ or the Divine Faith, which had elements of both Hindu and Muslim faith. That this was not imposed upon the subjects is obvious from the fact that there were few adherents to it. Along with this he emphasized the concept of ‘sulh-i-kul’ or peace and harmony among religions. He even sponsored a series of religious debates which were held in the ‘Ibadat Khana’ of the Hall of Worship, and the participants in these debates included theologians from amongst Brahmins, Jains and Zoroastrians.
 - Even before Akbar, Babar had advised Humayun to “shed religious prejudice, protect temples, preserve cows, and administer justice properly in this tradition.”
 - 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.
 - In accordance with this policy, the British partitioned Bengal in 1905. Separate electorates were provided for Muslims through the Indian Councils Act of 1909, a provision which was extended to Sikhs, Indian Christians, Europeans and Anglo Indians in certain provinces by the Government of India Act, 1919.
 - Ramsay MacDonald Communal Award of 1932, provided for separate electorates as well as reservation of seats for minorities, even for the depressed classes became the basis for representation under the Government of India Act, 1935.
 - However, Indian freedom movement was characterized by secular tradition and ethos right from the start. In the initial part of the Indian freedom movement, the liberals like Sir Feroz Shah Mehta, Govind Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale by and large pursued a secular approach to politics.
 - The constitution drafted by Pandit Motilal Nehru as the chairman of the historic Nehru Committee in 1928, had many provision on secularism as:
 - ‘There shall be no state religion for the commonwealth of India or for any province in the commonwealth, nor shall the state, either directly or indirectly, endow any religion any preference or impose any disability on account of religious beliefs or religious status’.

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- 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.

Secularism and the Indian Constitution

The term 'Secular' was added to the preamble by the **Forty-Second Constitution Amendment Act of 1976**, (India is a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic, republic).

It emphasize the fact that constitutionally, India is a secular country which has no State religion. And that the state shall recognise and accept all religions, not favour or patronize any particular religion.

- While **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 equality of opportunity to all citizens in matters of public employment and reiterates 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**, 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.
- **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.

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- **Article 51A** i.e. Fundamental Duties obliges all the citizens to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood and to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture.

Questions:

1. Analyse the secularism in the history of India.
2. Examine – Secularism and the Indian Constitution.

