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Understanding Secularism

People living in large societies follow different religions. Almost all countries of the world have citizens following different religions. But the number of people following various religions differ. Followers of a particular religion might be in a majority, while others might be in a minority. As number is important in a democracy, the majority community is likely to dominate the minority community. The interests and aspirations of the minority are likely to be subjugated to those of the majority. The State is also likely to side with the majority community. People belonging to minority communities might be discriminated against by the government. History is full of such examples of discrimination, exclusion and persecution on the grounds of religion. Under Hitler's Germany, lakhs of Jews were killed and they fled to other countries. At present, Muslims, Christians and other minorities are treated badly in the Jewish State of Israel. The government follows policies of discrimination against the minorities. In many Islamic countries, followers of other religions are persecuted and prosecuted. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, non-Muslims are not allowed to build a temple, a church or a gurudwara. They cannot celebrate their religious festivals publicly. This is because in Saudi Arabia, Islam is given official recognition by the State at the expense of other religions. But in a democratic country like India, followers of all religions are treated equally as the State does not recognise any particular religion. All religious communities are treated equally. They have been given full freedom to follow, practise and propagate any religion they like. It is their Fundamental Right. This is because India is a secular State. The power of religion and the power of the State stand separated. Secularism refers to this separation of religion from the State.

SECULARISM

Secularism is a word which has its origin in western countries and relates to the separation of the church from the State. It gives the State a position of neutrality between different religions, while at the same time guaranteeing all citizens the right to profess any one of them. In some ways, the word 'secular' is used as a contrast with the word 'religious'. Broadly speaking, it is used not as opposed to religion but as divorced from all religions, having nothing to do with the conduct of State affairs. In India, the word has been used not in an anti-religious sense, but in the sense of treating all religions on an equal footing and ruling out discrimination against any citizen on the ground of his religion.



We have the right to follow, practise and propagate any religion.

Secularism is 'tolerance of all religions with special emphasis on the protection of minorities and preservation of communal harmony'. The essence of secularism, however, rests on two basic principles: (i) Separation of religion from politics (ii) Acceptance of religion as purely and strictly private affairs of individuals having nothing to do with the State. As rightly pointed out by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, "Secularism does not mean irreligion or atheism or

even stress on material comforts. It proclaims that it lays stress on the universality of spiritual values which may be attained by a variety of ways." According to another scholar, "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."

As rightly observed by our former Prime Minister, late Mrs Indira Gandhi, "secularism is neither a religion, nor indifference to religion, but equal respect for all religions, not merely tolerance but positive respect ..."

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO SEPARATE RELIGION FROM THE STATE

A. As we have discussed, modern large societies are multi-religious societies. People following different religions live together. Within various religious groups, there is one group which is in a majority whereas others are in minority. As we know, in a democracy, people elect their representatives on the basis of adult franchise to rule on their behalf. Therefore, it is quite likely that representatives belonging to the majority religious community form the government and have access to State power. The State power might be utilised to discriminate against the people of minority communities. This is against the spirit and ideals of democracy which guarantees equal rights to all the citizens. The tyranny of the majority could result in discrimination, coercion and even killing of religious minorities. Armed with power and authority the majority could prevent minorities from practising and propagating their religion. The State could even pass laws banning other religions or excluding them from aid, grants and several other favours available to the majority religious group. Moreover, all democracies grant certain basic rights to all citizens. All democracies seek to establish social and economic equality. In our country, these rights have been granted in the form of Fundamental Rights. If the religion were not separated from the State, it would be impossible to create an egalitarian society.

Therefore, to prevent the tyranny of the majority and violation of the Fundamental Rights, it is necessary to separate religion from the State.

B. The second important reason which has led democratic governments to separate religion from

the State is the freedom of religion. In keeping with the ideals of democracy, all citizens are granted the right to follow any religion, change their religion and embrace any other religion. Citizens of the same religious community are also given freedom to interpret their religious scriptures as per their opinion and belief. The orthodox section of people choose to follow the religious dogmas and rituals very strictly while the liberal section of the same religious community prefer to ignore them. Let us take the example of casteism in Hinduism. Untouchability was practised by caste Hindus. They treated members of the Scheduled Caste as impure and avoided touching them. Article 17 of the Indian Constitution abolished the practice of untouchability as it was against the fundamental principles of democracy. If the State power were in the hands of those Hindus who support untouchability, it would have been quite difficult to abolish or ban such an inhuman practice. This would have negated the ideals of a democratic State. The pressure from the majority community would have prevented the State from discontinuing such a practice. The members exercising State power might have argued that Hinduism sanctioned the practice of untouchability. It is, thus, very important to separate government and religion to allow freedom to interpret religious teachings.

WHAT IS INDIAN SECULARISM?

Students have to bear in mind that secularism is not an exotic concept planted in India from the west. It grew out of its past history of wide and general movement in thoughts and feelings. The Sufi and Bhakti movements in Medieval India gave a tremendous impetus to the process of bringing the people of various communities closer. Even in Ancient India, Ashoka preached and practised religious toleration. The Constitution drafted by Motilal Nehru in 1928 had a specific provision regarding secularism.

Jawaharlal Nehru had been a leading champion of the concept of the secular State. "Religion is all right," he had said, "when applied to ethics and morals, but it is not good if mixed up with politics."

Secularism : its basic outlines in the Constitution : Explaining the secular character of the Indian Constitution, the Supreme Court said, "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 agnostic and

the atheist. It eliminates God from the matters of the State and ensures that no one shall be discriminated against on the ground of religion.”

1. **Preamble** : The word ‘secular’ did not occur at first in any article of the Constitution or its preamble. It was added in the preamble by the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution in 1976.
2. **No State Religion** : There shall be no ‘State religion’ in India. It follows from this that
 - (a) the State will not compel any citizen to pay taxes for the promotion or maintenance of any particular religion or religious institution.
 - (b) No religious instruction shall be provided in any educational institution wholly provided 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.
4. **Freedom to manage religious affairs** : Every religious community has the right to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes.
5. **Equality before the Law** : 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 extent. It prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Article 16 guarantees

equality of opportunity to all citizens in matters of public employment.

6. **Cultural and Educational Rights** : Article 29 of the Constitution guarantees all communities the right to preserve its distinct language, script or culture. 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.”

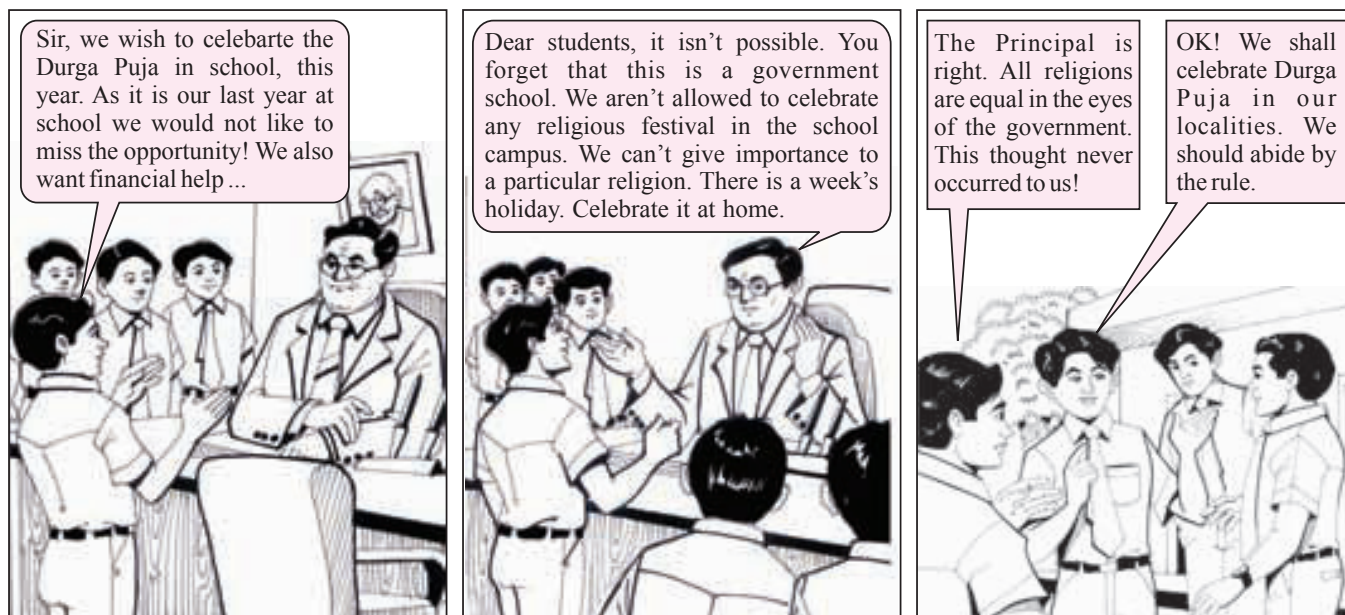
HOW THE INDIAN STATE FUNCTIONS AS SECULAR

The Indian State functions in various ways to carry out the mandate of the Constitution.

1. It uses a strategy of distancing itself from religion. Neither the central nor the state government is formed only by the representatives of a particular religious group. The State does not support any one religion. The legislature, executive and judiciary are not supposed to promote or discourage any one religion. In other words, courts, police stations, government offices and schools cannot promote or discriminate against particular religious group.

The following storyboard explains this fact.

In a Government Senior Secondary School in Madhopur, students wanted to celebrate Durga Puja. Some of the senior students approached the principal



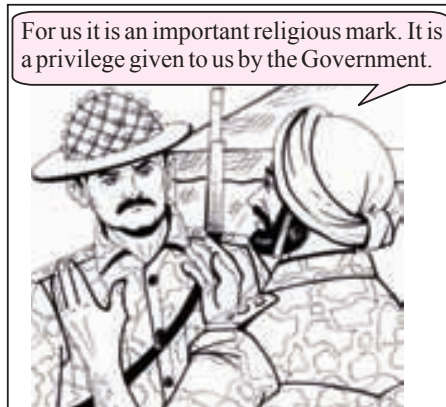
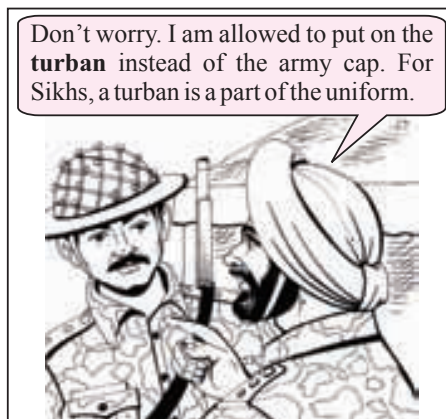
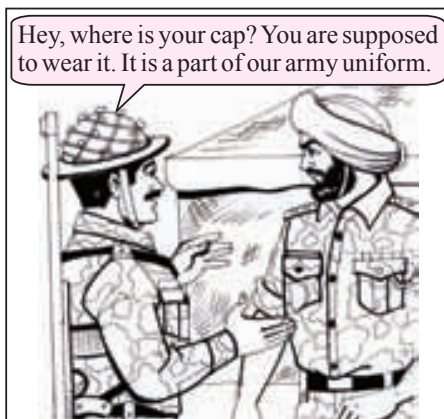
In the given storyboard, the Principal did a right thing by refusing permission to students to celebrate the Durga Puja. It is a Hindu festival. It would have been a violation of government's policy of treating all religions equally.

One of the main reasons why government declares most religious festivals as public holidays, is to enable people to celebrate the festivals at home.

- Another way in which the State practises secularism is through the policy of non-interference in the religious affairs of any community. The State respects the religious sentiments of people of every religion. For example, it makes arrangements to facilitate pilgrimage to holy places and take out religious processions, without any prejudice or discrimination. The State also makes certain exceptions for the benefit of a community.

The following storyboard explains this concept:

In a military cantonment, two young Army recruits are talking. One is putting on the Army cap, another is a Sikh soldier wearing a pugri on his head.



In the given storyboard, the Sikh soldier does not wear the Army cap. In the Armed Forces, Sikh soldiers are allowed to wear *pugri* or turban as a part of the uniform. This is because the Indian state recognizes the fact that wearing a pugree is an important religious practice of Sikhs which needs to be respected.

- The third way in which Indian secularism works is through the strategy of intervention. We have, earlier, discussed the practice of untouchability by which 'lower caste' Hindus were considered untouchable by 'upper caste' Hindus. The State intervention was necessary to ban such a social practice which violated the Fundamental Right of 'lower castes' who are citizens of the country whose Constitution does not allow any kind of discrimination. Similarly, the State may also intervene to ensure the right of inheritance of members of a particular religious community. In fact, not long ago, the government passed the Hindu Amendment Act, 2005 giving Hindu

women the right to inherit agricultural land of their fathers.

Sometimes, the State also seeks to establish 'positive' intervention. It grants permission to religious communities to set up their own schools and colleges. It gives them financial aid and other benefits. It is a part of the Fundamental Rights of the communities. All religious communities have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER SECULAR COUNTRIES

The objectives of Indian secularism are similar to those of other secular democratic countries. However, there is a slight difference between Indian and western conception of secularism. The mainstream

western conception of secularism means mutual exclusion of State and religion for the purpose of protecting values such as individual freedom and citizenship rights of individuals. Mutual exclusion means that religion and State must be strictly separated. Both religion and State must stay away from the internal affairs of one

another. The State must not intervene in the domain of religion and likewise, religion should not dictate State policy or influence the conduct of the State.

For example, the U.S. Constitution prevents the legislature from making laws “respecting an establishment of religion” or that “prohibit the free exercise of religion.” It means that the legislature cannot declare any religion as the official religion. They cannot give preference to any one religion. There is a complete separation of State and religion. Neither of them can interfere in the affairs of one another. However, Indian secularism differs from the western conception of secularism, as practised in Europe and in the United States of America. As against complete separation between religion and State in Europe and the U.S., in Indian secularism the State can intervene in religious affairs. As we have seen, our Constitution intervened in the religious practices of Hinduism to abolish untouchability.

Children in a government school in the U.S.A. are required to take a ‘pledge of allegiance’ which includes the words ‘under God’. There have been many legal challenges objecting to the phrase ‘under God’ as it violates the secular principle of the Constitution of the U.S.A.

At the time of framing of the Constitution, conditions in India were different and to respond to the challenges they posed, the makers of the Constitution had to work out an alternative conception of secularism. They departed from the western model in two ways and for two different reasons.

(i) Rights of religious communities – As several religious communities existed in India, the inter-community equality was as necessary as equality between individuals. This was because a person’s

freedom and self-respect was dependent on the status of his/her community. Therefore, the Indian Constitution grants equal rights to all religious communities, such as the right to establish and maintain their educational institutions. Freedom of religion in India means the freedom of religion of both individuals as well as communities.

(ii) State’s power of intervention – In India, religiously sanctioned customs such as untouchability deprived individuals of the most basic dignity and self-respect. Such customs (like untouchability) were so deeply rooted that without active State intervention, there was no hope of their dissolution. The State simply had to interfere in the affairs of religion. Thus, the State may help or hinder religious communities depending on which mode of action promotes values such as freedom and equality.

Thus, in Indian secularism the separation between religion and State meant maintenance of a principled distance vis-a-vis religion. That means the State can intervene or abstain from interference, depending upon which of these two would better promote the ideals laid out in the Constitution – the ideals of liberty, equality and social justice. On the basis of these ideals, we can judge whether the State is functioning according to the secular principles. Though the term ‘secular’ was not initially mentioned, the Indian Constitution has always been secular. The Fundamental Rights guaranteed by the Constitution are based on the secular principles. In spite of this, there are violations of Fundamental Rights and secular ideals in our society. However, in case of violation, an individual or community can move the High court or the Supreme Court for restoration of their rights.

Points to Remember

- The Indian Constitution allows individuals the freedom to live by their religious beliefs and practices.
- Secularism refers to separation of religion from the State.
- It is important to separate religion from the State because—
 - (a) the tyranny of the majority could result in discrimination, coercion and at times even the killing of religious minorities.
 - (b) of violation of the Fundamental Rights of minorities.
 - (c) We need to protect the freedom of individuals to exit from their religion, embrace another religion or have the freedom to interpret religious teachings differently.
- According to the Constitution, only a secular State can realise its objectives to ensure the following—
 - (a) that one religious community does not dominate another.

- (b) that some members do not dominate other members of the same religious community.
- (c) that the State does not enforce any particular religion nor take away the religious freedom of individuals.
- The Indian State works in various ways to prevent the above domination—
 - (a) it uses a strategy of distancing itself from religion.
 - (b) through a strategy of non-interference.
 - (c) through a strategy of selective intervention.
- Unlike the strict separation between religion and the State in western countries and in the U.S., in Indian secularism the State can intervene in religious affairs.

Glossary

COERCION	: To force somebody to do something.
EGALITARIAN SOCIETY	: Society based on equal rights for all.
INTERVENTION OF THE STATE	: State's efforts to influence a particular matter in accordance with the principle of the Constitution.
PUGRI	: Turban, a kind of headgear, worn as a symbol or mark of a the Sikh community.
TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY	: To discriminate against and persecute persons of the minority communities.

TIME TO LEARN

TASKS FOR SA

A. Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)

1. Which of the following statements regarding secularism is incorrect?
 - (a) It emphasises equal respect for all religions
 - (b) It emphasises 'atheism'.
 - (c) It means tolerance of all religions and discrimination against none.
 - (d) It means religion has nothing to do with the conduct of State affairs.
2. By which constitutional amendment, the word 'secular' was added to the Preamble of Indian Constitution?
 - (a) 42nd Amendment, 1976
 - (b) 44th Amendment, 1978
 - (c) Both of these
 - (d) None of these
3. Which Articles of the Constitution guarantee cultural and educational rights?
 - (a) Art. 17, 19
 - (b) Art. 29, 30
 - (c) Art. 14, 15
 - (d) Art. 20, 21
4. What can one do if one's Fundamental Rights are denied?
 - (a) One can do nothing
 - (b) One can move the Lower Court
 - (c) One can move the High Court or the Supreme Court
 - (d) One can approach the Speaker of the Lok Sabha

B. Match the following

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Majority community | (a) Sikhs |
| 2. Minority community | (b) to force someone |
| 3. Coercion | (c) abolition of untouchability |
| 4. State intervention | (d) separation of religion from State |
| 5. Secularism | (e) Hindus |

C. Fill in the blanks with the words given below :

1. The Indian Constitution allows individuals the freedom to live by their _____ beliefs.
2. In _____, non-Muslims are not allowed to build a temple, church, etc.
3. The Indian Constitution mandates that the Indian State be _____.
4. Unlike the strict separation between religion and the State in American secularism, in Indian secularism, the State can _____ in religious affairs.
5. The Indian Constitution guarantees _____ rights that are based on secular principles.

D. Short answer type questions.

1. Why is it important to separate religion from the State? Give reasons.
2. How does the Indian State work to prevent inter-community and intra-community domination?
3. What is the difference between 'western' secularism and Indian secularism?
4. Define secularism.
5. In India, can the State discriminate against a citizen on the grounds of his religion?

E. Long answer type questions.

1. Will the government intervene if some religious group says that their religion allows them to practise infanticide? Give reasons for your answer. **[HOTS]**
2. Find out some examples of different views within the same religion.
3. 'The Indian State maintains a principled distance vis-a-vis religion.' Discuss. **[Value Based Question]**

TIME TO DO

TASKS FOR FA

F. Project

Write a detailed project report on the topic, "Indian secularism: theory and practice."

G. Debate/discussion

Organise a debate in the class on the following topics:

1. "Whether students should be allowed to wear religious symbols and marks while attending school."
2. "Whether all religious festivals should be celebrated in schools."

H. Assignment

1. Write an essay on 'Secularism' describing your view on various features of secularism.
2. What does the U.S. Constitution say about secularism? Find out and discuss.

LIFE SKILLS

Jawaharlal Nehru once observed, "Religion is all right when applied to ethics and morals, but it is not good if mixed up with politics."

Do you agree with the above statement? Discuss with your teacher and friends. Explain your views.