



E-ISSN: 2664-603X  
P-ISSN: 2664-6021  
IJPSG 2024; 6(2): 251-255  
[www.journalofpoliticalscience.com](http://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com)  
Received: 05-07-2024  
Accepted: 13-08-2024

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## The fragile balance: Challenges to secularism in India

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2024.v6.i2d.394>

### Abstract

This article examines the concept of secularism, particularly its interpretation and practice in India. Unlike the Western model that emphasizes strict separation, Indian secularism uniquely permits state involvement in religious matters to promote equality and social justice. The constitutional mandate for secularism is crucial in maintaining harmony within India's diverse society. However, challenges such as communalism, political exploitation of religion, judicial inconsistencies, radicalization, and rising intolerance threaten this fabric. State policies often blur governance and religion, complicating the secular framework. The article suggests strengthening secularism through interfaith dialogue, impartial governance, social reforms like the Uniform Civil Code, and secular politics. Additionally, combating extremism, protecting minority rights, and enhancing constitutional literacy are vital. Education plays a pivotal role in fostering mutual respect and reducing prejudices, ultimately enabling India to uphold the delicate balance of secularism essential for its unity and social cohesion.

**Keywords:** Secularism in India, constitutional secularism, religious pluralism, communalism and secularism, politicization of religion

### Introduction

Secularism is vital to India's identity, representing the separation of religion from state affairs and ensuring equal treatment for all faiths. Unlike the Western model of strict separation, Indian secularism allows state involvement in religious matters to promote social justice and equality. This unique approach aims to foster harmony among diverse communities while addressing challenges such as rising communal tensions and political exploitation of religion. As intolerance and radicalization increase, it is crucial to examine India's secular framework. This article explores the constitutional foundations of secularism in India, the current challenges it faces, and strategies to strengthen its principles, thereby safeguarding the unity and social cohesion of this diverse nation.

### Materials and methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine the challenges confronting secularism in India. It begins with an extensive literature review, utilizing academic publications, legal documents, and government reports to articulate the constitutional framework of secularism and its real-world implications in the Indian context. Key sources include the Constitution of India, significant Supreme Court rulings, and policy documents that highlight the state's interaction with religious practices.

Thematic analysis is employed to uncover essential patterns and trends concerning communalism, the political manipulation of religious sentiments, and the influence of education and social reform in advancing secularism. Additionally, the study incorporates case studies to provide concrete examples of the challenges faced by secularism, enhancing the depth of the analysis. By synthesizing findings from the literature and case studies, this research aims to deliver a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies surrounding secularism in India and to propose actionable strategies for its revitalization in today's socio-political environment.

### 1. Secularism

#### 1.1. What is Secularism?

The foundation of "Secularism" was laid by Gorge Jacob Holyoake in the year 1851 while leading a socio-political movement started by him with Charles Bradlaugh and others. G.J.

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Holyoake used the term secularism to set out his ideology where social and industrial ethics, which were once shaped by the fundamental tenets of religion, would now be grounded in reason and closely linked to the welfare of people in this life. A modern secular state is one that ensures equality among its citizens, treating everyone fairly without regard to their religious beliefs or practices. In such a state, no specific religion is endorsed as the official state religion, and the government remains impartial in religious matters.

In India, the idea of secularism closely resembles the Vedic principle of "Dharma Nirapekshata," which signifies the state's neutrality toward religion. The Indian Constitution adopts a proactive and constructive stance on secularism, guaranteeing equal respect and protection for all religions. Secularism in the vision of Mahatma Gandhi was grounded in a commitment to the unity of religious communities, emphasizing their respect for and quest for truth. In contrast, Jawahar Lal Nehru whose idea of secularism was rooted in scientific humanism, infused with a forward-looking perspective on historical development.

### 1.2. Constitutional mandate of secularism in India

Secularism is a key characteristic of the Constitution, with its fundamental principles incorporated throughout various provisions. The term "Secular" was included in the Preamble by the Forty-Second Amendment Act of 1976, which declared India to be a sovereign, socialist, secular, and democratic republic. This highlights that, constitutionally, India has no official state religion. The state acknowledges and respects all religions equally, without favouring or endorsing any specific faith. The Indian Constitution encompasses several provisions within Part III (Fundamental Rights), Part IV (Directive Principles of State Policy), and Part IVA (Fundamental Duties) that capture the essence of secularism. In pivotal cases such as "Kesavananda Bharati vs. State of Kerala" (1973) and "S.R. Bommai vs Union of India" (1994), the Supreme Court asserted that secularism is a core element of the Constitution's basic structure. The Fundamental Rights articulated in Articles 14, 15, 16(1), 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, and 30 promote secularism by prohibiting all forms of discrimination and ensuring equality before the law. These articles safeguard the freedom to practice and propagate any religion while protecting the educational and cultural rights of minority groups. Additionally, Article 51A, which pertains to Fundamental Duties, obligates every citizen to foster communal harmony, promote a spirit of brotherhood, and appreciate and preserve India's rich and diverse cultural heritage.

Many religiously sanctioned social practices are oppressive due to their illiberal and non-egalitarian nature, depriving individuals of dignity and self-respect. Indian secularism supports liberal and egalitarian values by reforming these practices through state intervention. Indian secularism aligns with the concept of state-supported religious reform. Some examples can be sighted as follows - the Constitution banning untouchability, the government enacting laws abolishing child marriages, and most recent amendment of Triple Talaq Act, etc. A two-judge bench of the Supreme Court also stated that the State "must be guided by the profound realization that Bharat is a secular nation dedicated to ensuring fundamental rights for all groups, as outlined in the Constitution."

### 1.3. Why is Secularism relevant in India?

The reality of plurality is undeniable. As individuals existing within a shared world, we engage with a reality filled with rich and complex diversity. Among this complexity, we encounter a wide spectrum of religions. The experience of otherness, in its many forms and shades, is both inevitable and unavoidable. Religion, as a key element of individual identity and group formation, plays a significant role in shaping social divisions. These divisions become more pronounced in heterogeneous societies, where the impact of religious differences is more visible and perceptible. Secularism is vital for protecting diversity, fostering unity, and ensuring fundamental rights within a democratic framework. It promotes mutual respect among various religions living together harmoniously, prevents the predominance of the majority religion, and provides the state with the authority to act in the best interests of all individuals.

We Indians are fortunate to have a remarkable model of unity in diversity. Our nation has shown an extraordinary ability to accept and cultivate diversity. This diversity illustrates that there is no single way to define what it means to be Indian. India has always been a refuge for diversity, boasting a rich tradition of harmonious living within a dynamic multicultural society. This openness to otherness is a quality we share with Asia, a continent vibrant with a multitude of cultures, varied religious traditions, languages, and socio-political realities. Our country is characterized by immense diversity. The diversity that stems from our geography is mirrored in our history and validated by ethnographic studies. Thus, Indian culture is inherently one of multiplicities and differences. It can be said that our nation not only tolerates these differences but actively protects, nurtures, and celebrates diversity.

## 2. Challenges to Secularism

Most countries around the world host populations with diverse religious beliefs and ethnic backgrounds, leading to the presence of religious and ethnic minorities. Modern states often attempt to unify these groups under a central political authority. However, these minorities often resist such efforts, fearing that political integration could endanger their distinct identities. When force is applied to enforce these policies, it frequently provokes resistance and sometimes violence.

Similarly, while the Indian Constitution upholds complete religious neutrality, society remains deeply rooted in religious practices. As a result, significant challenges continue to threaten the preservation of secularism in India.

### 2.1. Communalism

The rise of communalism has significantly obstructed the development of genuine secularism in India. Communalism poses a threat to secularism by dividing communities. Communal politics functions by communalizing social spaces, perpetuating myths and stereotypes against minorities, undermining rational values, and employing divisive ideological propaganda. A significant manifestation of communalism is the occurrence of communal riots. Recently, communalism has continued to represent a substantial threat to the secular fabric of Indian politics.

Regarding the causes of Hindu-Muslim riots, Gandhi stated, "In my opinion, the riots are due to the idiocy of both

communities" (Harijan, September 2, 1947). Concerning Hindu-Muslim unity, he expressed that "only when the Hindus and Muslims shed their fear and mutual suspicion can unity of heart come" (Harijan, January 26, 1947).

Ali Asghar Engineer, a prominent writer on Hindu-Muslim riots in India, asserts that communal conflict is largely unrelated to religion itself but rather stems from its manipulation by politicians for their vested interests. He does not blame either Hindus or Muslims as communities for the outbreak or escalation of communal riots. Instead, he points to politicians on one side and the economic competition between Hindus and Muslims on the other as the key factors responsible for these eruptions. According to Engineer, minor disputes are exploited by unscrupulous politicians, who are willing to sacrifice human lives to gain political advantage from these conflicts without hesitation. The Delhi riots of 2020 stand as a vivid illustration of communal violence in India.

## 2.2. Politicisation of Religion

In India, one pervasive element throughout its history, albeit in varying degrees, is the use of religion for political purposes and aspirations. Religion has consistently served political ends, while politics has often reciprocated by supporting religious agendas. Religion has never been able to fully separate itself from politics, nor has politics been able to completely eliminate religious influence. Consequently, the politicization of religion can be observed in both overt and subtle forms at all stages of Indian history. Political parties in India have frequently exploited religion and caste to advance their interests, significantly undermining secular values. The increasing intrusion of religion into politics poses a major challenge to the secular state. Election candidates are often chosen based on religious affiliations, and voting patterns frequently reflect religious sentiments. This blending of religion and politics, characterized by the mobilization of votes along primordial identities such as religion, caste, and ethnicity, endangers Indian secularism. The politicization of any single religious group tends to provoke competitive politicization among other groups, leading to inter-religious conflict. The Constitution designates India as a "Sovereign Secular Socialistic Democratic Republic," yet in recent years, the political landscape has seen a notable politicization of religious life.

In recent years, Hinduism has been politicized for specific political objectives, primarily focused on protecting Hindu interests and advocating for the creation of a Hindu Rashtra. The activities of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliated organizations are often central to discussions about the politicization of Hinduism. The RSS operates politically through various front organizations, including the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh, and Vidarthi Parishad. In recent times, it has also utilized broader platforms such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Over time, the RSS has developed a well-defined ideology and organizational strength, explicitly promoting Hindu nationalism. Its primary goals include establishing a Hindu Rashtra and enhancing the overall glory of this vision. Regardless of the reasons behind the rise of fundamentalism within Hinduism, there is a clear trend toward its politicization as a strategy for gaining power. However, the attitude of average Hindus toward these developments is important. Through the democratic

process, they have demonstrated a commitment to upholding the noble traditions of tolerance and hospitality inherent in Hinduism, as well as the secular foundation of the nation.

The Telegraph (U.K.) reports that Modi has exploited religious tensions to consolidate power, promising to build a Hindu temple on the site of a historic mosque. This rise of Modi and his Hindu nationalist party has raised alarms, as noted by The New York Times, about the potential discrimination that members of minority religious groups may face if the Bhartiya Janata Party comes to power. Additionally, the Financial Express cites concerns from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom regarding the BJP's and Modi's close association with Hindu nationalist organizations and their adherence to the Hindutva ideology, which considers non-Hindus as foreign to India.

In 2022, a writ petition was filed in the Supreme Court seeking a ban on political parties that utilize names and symbols with religious connotations. The petition argued that such practices are often motivated by the intent to garner votes based on religious affiliations. This move reflects growing concerns about the politicization of religion in electoral processes and the need to uphold the principles of secularism in Indian democracy.

## 2.3. Religious Intolerance

Religious intolerance is increasingly prevalent, highlighted by the recent riots in Delhi that were driven by religious divisions. A concerning incident in Haryana further exemplifies this trend: a Class 12 student was chased for 25 kilometers and killed after being mistaken for a cattle smuggler, reflecting the significance of cows in Hindu culture. The essence of secularism lies in promoting harmony among diverse social groups and resisting forces that undermine societal unity. In a diverse nation like India, where various religions and cultures coexist, secularism plays an essential role. Indian secularism, rooted in ancient traditions, embraces multiple faiths, sects, and communities, fostering a spirit of tolerance and mutual accommodation. This inclusive ethos is crucial for maintaining social cohesion and nurturing a culture of peaceful coexistence.

Gandhi believed that the issue of music played before mosques was as contentious for Muslims as cow slaughter was for Hindus. To foster communal harmony, he appealed to both communities to respect each other's feelings and sensibilities. He urged them to refrain from actions that could hurt one another's sentiments and advocated for a spirit of cooperation and accommodation, emphasizing the importance of "give and take" to promote mutual understanding and respect.

Swami Vivekananda, one of the most influential monks and advocates of Hinduism, articulated his inclusive view of spirituality by saying, "I accept all the religions that have existed in the past and honour them all; I worship God in every form they present. I will go to the mosque of the Muslims, enter the Christian church to kneel before the crucifix, and visit the Buddhist temple to seek refuge in Buddha and his teachings."

## 2.4. Radicalisation: Conversions and Islamic Fundamentalism

**2.4.1. Conversions:** A significant perspective on religious conversions focuses on the idea that individuals may be

subjected to mind control or brainwashing, leading them to adopt a completely different mindset. It is evident that many conversions involve an ideological shift from one belief system to another. However, this process often occurs subtly, making it difficult for the convert to recognize the manipulation at the moment. Individuals may only realize the extent of this influence after their conversion, potentially leading to regret once they begin to feel that the new religion does not align with their beliefs. By then, they are often deeply entrenched in their new circumstances. There are various types of converts, ranging from those who fully adapt to their new faith to those who remain ambivalent about their decision. Some may harbour ongoing doubts about their new religion, participating in rituals and learning beliefs only half-heartedly. Others may find that, despite their conversion, they lack the capacity to continue on this new path and eventually revert to their original faith. The effectiveness of mind control in these conversions is difficult to quantify. Additionally, practices like reconversion or Ghar Wapsi - where Muslims are pressured to convert to Hinduism - further exacerbate communal tensions within society.

#### 2.4.2. Islamic Fundamentalism

In recent years, there have been isolated incidents of Muslim youth being inspired and radicalized by groups like ISIS, which is unfortunate for both India and the world. This rise of Islamic fundamentalism or revivalism seeks to establish an Islamic State based on sharia law, directly conflicting with the principles of a secular and democratic state. Such radicalization poses a significant threat to the secular fabric of the nation.

#### 2.5. Weakening of Judiciary

Several analysts have highlighted a deterioration in the Supreme Court's position as a counter-majoritarian force since 2014, citing its reluctance to challenge the executive and legislative branches. Even more troubling is the court's perceived alignment with the government on many significant issues.

Ajit Prakash Shah, a former chief justice of the Delhi and Madras High Courts, has criticized the judiciary's performance since the BJP government assumed power, claiming it has reached "disappointing lows." He pointed out that the judiciary no longer fulfils its role as the chief protector of freedoms, with the courts, especially the Supreme Court, acting as "mute spectators" to the indiscriminate and often violent suppression of dissent.

Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a leading analyst of Indian democracy and the judicial system, has characterized this era as one of "judicial barbarism." He examines the decline of the Supreme Court through four main lenses: first, its evident reluctance to take on cases that challenge significant government policies; second, its inadequate defense of civil liberties; third, its tendency to support the government or ruling party in politically sensitive matters; and fourth, the arbitrary behaviour of certain judges, who seldom rule against the government, along with questionable methods in bench formation and case allocation.

On September 28, 2018, the Supreme Court made a controversial yet progressive ruling by permitting women of all ages to enter the Sabarimala shrine in Kerala, thus overturning longstanding religious traditions. However, in response to significant backlash from the BJP and other

groups, the Court, in a 3-2 decision, opted to refer broader issues related to the verdict - such as the extent of judicial intervention in religious matters and discrimination against women in various religions - To a larger bench, contrary to its own jurisdictional principles.

Another pivotal ruling came regarding the disputed site in Ayodhya, which Hindus regard as the birthplace (Janmabhoomi) of Lord Ram and where a mosque was demolished in 1992. This ruling is considered one of the Supreme Court's most significant decisions in recent years. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement has played a crucial role in the BJP's ascent since the 1990s. On November 9, 2019, five months into Modi's second term, the Supreme Court issued its verdict on this protracted legal battle that spanned seven decades. In a unanimous decision, the five-judge bench awarded the disputed land to a trust for the construction of a temple, thereby fulfilling a central objective of the BJP's Hindu nationalist agenda, which has featured prominently in its election manifestoes for the past thirty years.

A most recent example that raises concerns about the integrity of the judiciary involves the Chief Justice of India (CJI) and the Prime Minister being seen in a personal context, which has garnered significant media attention. This situation underscores the troubling intersection between the judiciary and the executive, as their close association can lead to perceptions of bias and compromise the independence of judicial processes. The media's role in amplifying this narrative further complicates the public's trust in the judicial system, highlighting the need for greater transparency and accountability to safeguard the integrity of India's legal framework.

All these examples illustrate how the degradation and weakening of the Supreme Court and the judiciary undermine the fundamental principles of secularism and equality in our country.

#### Results

This study identifies critical insights into the concept of secularism and its application in India, emphasizing both its historical development and the challenges it faces today.

Secularism, introduced by George Jacob Holyoake in 1851, shifted moral values from religious foundations to reason and public welfare. In India, secularism aligns with the Vedic notion of "Dharma Nirapekshata," reflecting the state's neutrality toward all religions. The Constitution enshrines this principle by ensuring equality and religious freedom through several provisions, including the Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles. The inclusion of the term "secular" in the Preamble via the Forty-Second Amendment (1976) underscores India's commitment to religious impartiality. The judiciary has reaffirmed secularism as part of the Constitution's basic structure, notably in *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* and *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*.

Despite these constitutional safeguards, several challenges undermine secularism. Communalism remains a significant threat, with events like the Delhi riots of 2020 exposing deep social divisions. The politicization of religion by political parties further erodes secular values by fostering divisions for electoral gains. Religious intolerance and radicalization - seen in conversions, Ghar Wapsi, and Islamic fundamentalism - heighten communal tensions, jeopardizing the harmony that secularism seeks to preserve.

Additionally, the judiciary's perceived alignment with the executive, evident in recent verdicts such as the Ayodhya and Sabarimala cases, weakens its role in upholding secular principles.

### Discussion

The findings reveal that while the Indian Constitution provides a strong framework for secularism, practical implementation remains challenging. India's model of secularism is unique, balancing respect for all religions with state intervention to reform regressive practices. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru approached secularism differently, but both emphasized unity and rational governance.

One of the key challenges to secularism in India is communalism, where political actors manipulate religious sentiments for electoral benefits, leading to social fragmentation. The increasing overlap of religion and politics undermines democracy and intensifies inter-religious conflicts. Addressing this requires fostering interfaith dialogue and promoting inclusive governance to counterbalance divisive tendencies.

Strengthening the judiciary's independence is equally crucial for safeguarding secularism. The judiciary must actively protect civil liberties and remain impartial, ensuring that it does not align with the government or political interests. Judicial decisions that uphold secular principles will reinforce trust in the Constitution and foster communal harmony.

Finally, education, social reforms, and secular policies are essential for strengthening the secular fabric. Promoting a culture of mutual respect, addressing religious extremism, and safeguarding minority rights are vital steps toward an inclusive society. Secularism is not just a constitutional mandate but a necessary condition for maintaining India's rich diversity and democratic framework.

### Conclusion

India's unparalleled diversity, with over 4,000 communities encompassing varied religions, languages, and cultural practices, reflects the essence of its pluralism. As Amartya Sen aptly remarks, "In our heterogeneity and in our openness lies our pride, not disgrace." Religious discord, whether within the same faith or across different religions, must not be attributed to religion itself but to individuals pursuing their own agendas. History shows that peaceful coexistence among diverse religious communities is achievable. Therefore, the real challenge lies in addressing religious fundamentalism without undermining the essence of any faith.

Secularism plays a pivotal role in ensuring equality, safeguarding religious freedom, and fostering communal harmony. It requires the state to remain neutral toward all religions, empowering individuals to practice their beliefs without fear or discrimination. Strengthening secularism through education, social reform, and inclusive policies is essential for maintaining India's pluralistic identity and reinforcing its democracy. Promoting mutual respect through education, advancing reforms such as the Uniform Civil Code, and encouraging minorities to engage fully in national life will foster unity.

Communal politics must give way to secular governance that promotes religious tolerance and addresses extremism through decisive, inclusive action. Protecting minority rights

- ensuring equal access to education, employment, and protection from violence - remains crucial for building an equitable society. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi rightly stated, "Welfare without discrimination is true secularism." Since independence, India has made significant progress in fostering a secular society. However, secularism is not merely an end but a dynamic process - one that embraces diversity, respects differences, and nurtures the peaceful coexistence of all faiths. Only through a sustained commitment to these values can India continue to thrive as a democratic and inclusive nation.

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