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**9.1 INTRODUCTION**

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“Sarva Dharma Samabhava” is a unique concept of Indian secularism which emerged in independent India under the impact of Gandhian thought, rooted in Hindu culture and tradition. The term ‘Sarva Dharma Samabhava’ in Hindi, India’s dominant language, means literally equal respect for all religions. It evolved in the course of state formation in postcolonial India and is often taken as an Indian philosophical contribution to political thought. The idea is quite distinct from the western concept of secularism, which advocates the total separation of state from religion in place of treating all religions equally.

While in Yervada Jail in Pune in 1930, Gandhi often dwelt upon the concept of “Sarva Dharma Samabhava” in his letters to the inmates of his Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad. Always inclined towards the goal of Hindu-Muslim unity and peace, Gandhi relentlessly sought ways for achieving such unity. His problem was how to generate a secular social space in a society where religion constituted a basic part of mass belief and behaviour (Rao,1989).

**Aims and Objectives**

This Unit would enable you to understand

- Gandhi's views on religion and his respect for all religions
- The nature of religious pluralism and secularism in India
- The impact of Gandhi's secularism on India.

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**9.2 GANDHI'S VIEWS ON RELIGION**

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Gandhi's attitude to religion holds a key to the understanding of his life and thought. Gandhi believed that the function of religion was to unite rather than divide people. Gandhi's strongest bond with Hinduism came from the Gita which he called his “spiritual dictionary” and which had the greatest influence on him (Nanda, 1995, p.13). Two fundamental influences on him from the Gita came from the words *aparigraha* (non-possession) and *samabhava* (equability). However, Gandhi had a strong rational and sceptical streak which made his religious philosophy, though grounded in Hinduism, deeply humanist and cosmopolitan. Gandhi's Hinduism was captured in a few fundamental beliefs: in the supreme reality of God, the unity of all

life, and the value of ahimsa (love) as a means of realizing God (Nanda, 1995, p. 17). He believed that the real test of spiritual progress was the extent to which one could translate one's beliefs in workaday life. What cannot be followed in day to day practice cannot be called religion.

In his days in South Africa, Gandhi had made a comparative study of religions whereby he was impressed by the underlying unity of all religions. From thereon he continued to emphasise the need for co-existence and tolerance between the adherents of different faiths. The various religions were 'as so many leaves of a tree'; they might seem different but 'at the trunk they are one.' God, Allah, Rama, Narayan, Ishwar, Khuda were descriptions of the same Being. God's grace and revelation were not the monopoly of any race or nation; they descended equally upon all who waited upon God. He held that no religion was absolutely perfect. All are equally imperfect or more or less perfect.

In his article 'Why I am a Hindu', written in 1927, Gandhi wrote that he found Hinduism to be the most tolerant of all religions... Its freedom from dogma gives the votary the largest scope for self-expression. Not being an exclusive religion, it enables the followers of that faith not merely to respect all the other religions but... to admire and assimilate whatever may be good in other faiths. Non-violence is common to all religions, but it has found the highest expression and application in Hinduism... Hinduism believes in the oneness not of merely all human life but in the oneness of all that lives (Young India 21 October 1927, quoted in Nanda, 1995, p.21). While he stressed individual judgement and conscience, he- at the same time- stressed co-existence and toleration in relations with the followers of other religions.

Gandhi believed that all people had a right to practise any religion they chose to identify with and that form of worship should not be dictated by the state. Himself a staunch Hindu, he believed that different faiths represented different paths converging on the same point, Truth. There is a religion which underlies all religions. Hence in the event of conflicting counsels from different religions, Gandhi held that Truth is superior to everything, and that which conflicts with it is to be rejected just as what conflicts with non-violence should be rejected. Similarly that which conflicted with Reason must also be rejected. Thus Truth is the religion which underlies all religions. Rationality of thought was paramount for Gandhi. He envisioned a non-violent society in which all decisions were based on consensus, arrived at by rational discussion in which each strove to look at the subject in question from the standpoint of others. This underlay his belief in religious pluralism and mutual respect and toleration which was the core of his secularism. He believed that in a multi-religious society, toleration is bound to be the guiding principle for all organised religions. This was the core of the Gandhian perspective of Indian secularism, that of 'Sarva Dharma Samabhava' meaning 'equal respect for all religions.'

In this sense, Gandhi was a deeply religious person who was ardently devoted to the search for truth which to him was the religion which underlay all religions. Experimentation and religion combined in his thought and life. It was this combination of religiosity and modern humanistic outlook in him that was constantly reflected during the course of the struggle for independence and won him the support of the masses. He tirelessly called for a Hindu-Muslim-Sikh-Christian unity based on a pluralistic theism with the core concept of Truth as ultimate and one.

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### **9.3 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND SECULARISM**

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Gandhi acknowledged the multi-religiosity and cultural diversity of India when he stated in *Hind Swaraj* that India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. It was the religious pluralism which Gandhi advocated, than anything else, that greatly affected the development of secularism in India. Gandhi's religious pluralism is well expressed in his own words: 'My position is that all religions are fundamentally equal. We must have the same innate respect for all religions as we have for our own'. He advocated not only mutual toleration but also equal respect. It required that Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians be willing to respect all religions as equally right. It is pluralism, which regards all religions as the same and all gods as variations of the One, which underlies his concept of secularism.

It could be said that Gandhi spoke of secularism from the perspective of religion, and religious pluralism in keeping with polytheistic Hinduism. Thus, it can be said that Gandhi played a very important role in transmitting a pluralist picture of secularism among the Hindus. Gandhi's religious policy, therefore, was different in the sense that inter-faith relationships and religious harmony were based on the equality of all religions rather than a separation of religion from the state. Within this framework, to be secular in politics was not to abjure one's religion altogether, but only to abjure the religious use of political, legal institutions like the government (Rao, 1989, p.33).

Gandhi's religious quest not only moulded his personality but also shaped his political techniques with which he confronted racialism in South Africa and colonialism in India. While Gandhi's advocacy of mutual tolerance and respect between different religions originally arose from his study of comparative religion, it had a practical aspect too which found expression in his leadership of struggles against racial, social and political injustice with adherents in these struggles belonging to all the major religions. Gandhi was aware of the gulf between the Hindus and Muslims, the two major communities in India and the great need for toleration. However, Gandhi's secular perspective has not been non-controversial. He has been accused of exploiting religion to rouse the masses or of using Hindu symbols which eventually contributed to the communal polarisation leading to the division of India.

#### **Religion and Politics**

Gandhi was often accused of mixing religion with politics. But he repeatedly clarified his meaning of religion thus: "Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion, which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which ... leaves the soul restless until it has found itself." (Young India, 12 May 1920, quoted in Nanda, 1995, p.24). Thus he spoke of religion which was not the Hindu religion but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature. He alone is a true devotee of God who understands the pains and sufferings of others. The divinity of man manifests itself according to the extent he realises his humanity, i.e., his oneness with his fellow men. Thus Gandhi's religion was almost akin to humanism.

Gandhi claimed that his religion was his politics and his politics was his religion. While affirming that for him there was no politics without religion, he explained that this was 'not the religion that hates and fights, but the universal religion of Toleration. In 1940 he reiterated that 'religion should pervade every one of our actions,' but added, 'here religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe... This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It does not supersede them but harmonizes them'. Thus Gandhi's concept of religion had little in common with that which generally passes for organised religion: dogmas, rituals, superstition and bigotry. Gandhian religion was simply an ethical framework for the conduct of daily life which included not only the domestic and social spheres but also the political sphere. Gandhi did not and could not accept the commonly accepted view of politics as a game of expediency taking precedence over morality. Satyagraha, Gandhi's non-violent mode of struggle for fighting against social and political oppression, was rooted in morality and had no place for untruth, secrecy, hatred and, above all, violence. It supported suffering at the hands of the oppressor rather than inflicting on him based on the abiding belief in the possibility of a change of heart of the enemy.

Gandhi saw the basic strategy of a non-violent struggle as different from that of a violent one. It was not about the use of a superior force or of overwhelming the enemy by the force of numbers but to generate those processes of introspection and rethinking that would make it possible to arrive at a readjustment of relationships between the contending parties without generating hatred and violence. Non-violence was the central issue and it was not to be compromised at any cost. Utter failure rather than a compromise with non-violence was preferable. It called for the utmost discipline of non-violence.

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#### **9.4 HUMANISM AND UNIVERSALISM**

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Gandhi's religious outlook was thus imbued with deep humanism and universality. His concept of 'Ram Rajya' which he occasionally used to describe the goal of Indian freedom struggle, was simply a concept of an ideal polity free from inequality, injustice and exploitation.

In furtherance of his belief in religious tolerance, Gandhi's prayer meetings were held not in temples but in the open symbolising religious harmony in that they included recitations from Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Parsi and Buddhist texts. Thus while Gandhi used the Hindu symbols and the saintly idiom, his message was always moral, humanist and cosmopolitan.

Gandhi's steadfast opposition to the Partition was well known. While personally he was deeply religious, he said that he would have opposed any proposal for a state religion even if the whole population of India had professed the same religion. He looked upon religion as a personal matter. Gandhi gave his whole hearted approval to the resolution on fundamental rights passed by the Karachi Congress which affirmed the principle of religious freedom and declared that 'the State shall observe neutrality in regard to all religions', a doctrine which found a firm place in the Constitution of independent India even after the bitter partition of the country based on religion campaigned for relentlessly by the Muslim League. Thus despite his wholly religious grounding in Hinduism, Gandhi worked to establish a secular State (Fischer, 1951, p.430).

Gandhi tried to invoke his religious values into Indian nationalist politics without letting it descend into communalism. However, despite being wholly opposed to all forms of communalism and partition his use of the Hindu symbols and saintly idiom has raised doubts about their having unwittingly contributed to both. Thus Gandhi's political practice of combining Indian nationalism, with the pluralistic and religious features of the Indian society and culture has not been entirely free of problems and controversies.

His openness towards other faiths no doubt underlined his belief in the policy of religious tolerance. He was a strong votary of building trust between different religions. In this context he even believed that it was important that Hindus gained the trust of Muslims by backing their sectional demands. This led him to support the establishment of separate electorates for Muslims in 1909 and later the Khilafat, the secular credentials of which has been controversial in that it has been seen as a support to the Muslim clergy which was reactionary and divisive alienating Muslim secularists like Muhammad Ali Jinnah. At times Gandhi also courted Hindu nationalist organisations like the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha though he was a staunch opponent of the institution of untouchability.

Thus Gandhi's attempt to forge communal harmony in his style has ironically not been without contrary effects. Despite his indisputable belief in secularism and equality of all religions, communal divide continued and remained rooted in post colonial India (Hardiman, 2003).

The Gandhian view of secularism stressing *sarva dharma samabhava* tried to achieve simultaneously the retention and abolition of the religious category. It tries to retain it insofar as it accepts the religious commitment of individuals and groups at the level of privatised behaviour but it expects at the same time the suspension of this identity in so far as public domain of inter communal community is a political necessity of a multi religious nation (Rao, in Shakir, p.30).

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## **9.5 IMPACT OF GANDHI'S SECULARISM ON INDIA**

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The Constituent Assembly was unanimous in that India was a secular state. However there were conflicting views and perceptions about what 'secular' meant. One view was that secular meant that state should have nothing to do with religion. Another view was that all religions should be treated with equal respect approximating to the Gandhian view of '*sarva dharma samabhava*'. However, despite these differences of the way 'secular' should be understood, there is agreement on the view that the state should be secular and not based on any particular religion while at the same time it does not deny the place for religious faith in the country. The view of equal respect for all religions is different from the European view of secularism which is independent of religion.

The Gandhian secular perspective is clearly reflected in the Indian Constitution founded on the principle that a secular state should not support any particular religion. But at the same time citizens were free under the Constitution to receive spiritual education of their faiths. Thus a secular state did not necessarily mean that it is anti-

religion. Secularism has meant that all citizens of the country are free to follow and propagate their faith. In practice, it has meant equal respect for all religions and freedom for all religions to grow.

Indian secularism based on Gandhi's concept of sarva dharma samabhava thus found a unique shape in the Indian Constitution and polity. As D.E. Smith put it, "To most Indians secular means non-communal or non-sectarian but it does not mean non-religious." It is not a separation of state and religion but rather not privileging any religion, a 'no preference doctrine' which, in political practice, meant that no special privileges be granted to any one religion. This translated into equal treatment of all religions and at the same time a separation of state from religion in that the State does not have any religious identity.

The complexity of the political practice of such a concept is reflected somewhat in the Indian Constitutional provisions for the freedom to practice and propagate one's faith, and the right of the religious minorities to establish and manage their educational institutions. The retention of religious personal laws has further added to this complex nature of Indian secularism. This has led to the charge of pseudo-secularism and minority-ism against the Gandhi-Nehru concept of secularism.

The idea of a secular state based on the concept of the equal treatment of all religions with a minimalist policy in regard to religious affairs internal to a community took shape in the course of the nationalist movement under the influence of Gandhi. The political practice of secularism in a multi-religious country like India, however, suggests the theoretical possibility of secularisation and religious toleration conflicting with each other sometimes. While the separation of the state and religion has been recognised in the Indian Constitution which clearly states that there shall be no official state religion, no religious instruction in state schools and no taxes to support any particular religion; in practice however, the State has become entangled in the affairs of religion in numerous ways (Chatterjee, 1997). In political practice, the politics of post-independent India made it easy to combine the advocacy of secularism with the practice of communalism.

Thus the Indian Constitution reflected a Gandhian position on secularism as not a divorce of religion from the State but one that gave equal treatment to all religions. The Indian concept of secularism meaning equal respect for all religions is a combination of liberalism and tolerance. This was a product of the Indian freedom struggle which was a struggle for democracy based on equality of all citizens without discrimination including on the basis of religion. The Indian Constitution guarantees such equality without discrimination through Articles 14, 15, 16 and 25. While Articles 14, 15 and 16 guarantee equality and equal treatment without discrimination, Article 25 provides equal rights to all citizens to follow or propagate any religious faith and freedom of conscience. Thus the Indian Constitution provides for equal opportunities and equal protection under the law for all citizens and is against religious discrimination. It guarantees equal status and equal opportunities for all citizens irrespective of their religion. This is further amplified in Article 29 and 30 which recognises and guarantees the right of religious minorities to establish and manage educational institutions.

Thus the secular state in India is premised on the principles of liberty, equality and neutrality. The principle of liberty is reflected in the constitutional position on the freedom to profess, practice and propagate any religion of one's choice. The principle of equality implies that the State not give preference to one religion over another. The principle of neutrality requires that the State not give preference to the religious over the non-religious and that the state not involve itself with religious affairs or organisations. However, the political practice of this concept of secularism has not been free of contradictions and anomalies. A glaring example of this is the contradiction between the principle of equality and uniform civil code and the retention of religious personal laws (Chatterjee, 1998, p.362). Similarly, the separation of state and religion in that there shall be no official state religion, no religious instruction in state schools, and no taxes to support any particular religion has also been compromised. The state has become entangled in the affairs of religion in numerous ways under Article 25 of the Indian Constitution which permits extensive state intervention in matters connected with religion in the interest of social reform.

The relationship between religion and politics and its linkage with communalism has been an abiding issue in Indian politics and it has been both the cause and effect of what could be called an Indian version of secularism. Despite being a devout Hindu, Gandhi was essentially secular and struggled for Hindu-Muslim unity all his life. His secularism was sought to be an effective bulwark against communalism and fundamentalism and its practice was sought to approximate to secular ideals of justice, equality and humanist universalism in a pluralist society and culture as that of India. However, such a concept of secularism is seen to have unwittingly contributed to an unanticipated assertion of communal identities during the nationalist movement sometimes bordering on communalism. The quest for a new national identity during the colonial phase often found expression in the appeals to religious loyalties such as in the political practice of Swami Dayanand and Tilak. Gandhi's use of religious symbolism like that of the ideal of Ram Rajya could be perceived to have sharpened the religious divide though not intended.

Gandhi viewed Indian civilisation as not only plural but pluralist where plurality was a desirable end. Intolerance had no place in Gandhi's secularism which was inclusive and was based on pluralism. No religion contained all of the truth. All religions were a way of approaching the truth and truth could be found only through religious tolerance. He applauded the Indian folk culture which was inclusive and in which one could see the sharing of each other's cultural and religious life (Parekh, in Copley, p.378).

The politics of post-independent India made it easy to combine the advocacy of secularism with the practice of communalism, so much so that some began to view secularism and communalism as two sides of the same coin (Beteille, 2000, p.198). On the whole, secularism is still an unsettled issue. There is disagreement about what the secular state implies—whether it implies a severe aloofness from religion, a benign impartiality toward religion, a corrective oversight of it or a fond and equal indulgence of all religions. But there seems to be general agreement that public life is not to be guided by religious doctrines or institutions (Galanter, 1989, p.237).

On the question of whether or not Indian nationalism was compromised by the presence of large numbers of Muslims in India, Gandhi stated in *Hind Swaraj* that:

“India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it...If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in dreamland. The Mahomadens also live in dreamland if they believe that there should be only Muslims in India” (Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol.10, p.270. Quoted in Hardiman, p.159). Conflict based on the hatred of one religious group for another was considered by Gandhi as a negation of all that he defined as ‘religion’.

He paid special attention to the two issues that affected Indian nationalism most – the Hindu-Muslim conflict and the linguistic conflict. Gandhi sought to adapt modern nationalism to two principles of Indian Civilisation—Unity in Diversity and assimilation of disparate elements which he believed would make India a genuinely multi religious and multilingual nation (Parel in Baxi & Parekh,1995, p.76). In an effort to free religion of the evil of sectarianism, Gandhi made an important distinction between religion as organisation and religion as ethics and spirituality. Underlying all organised religions there is a universal ethic and spirituality which teaches the unconditional love of God and the neighbour. At the same time religion as organisation is a means to retain identity and as such is legitimate. But it follows that organised religions ought to practice toleration towards each other. Hind Swaraj teaches that there are good religious reasons for practicing toleration (Parel, 1997, p. iv)

While Gandhi’s life was dedicated to Hindu-Muslim unity towards achieving a secular political practice, paradoxically he fell victim to Hindu-Muslim communalism. Gandhi never lost faith in reason and humanity of the common people who he believed readily shared in each other’s religious and cultural lives. However, the sense of difference among the religious communities bordering sometimes on communalism did not disappear after Independence despite the policy of sarva dharma samabhava, equal treatment of all religions. On the other hand the post independence political process seemed to only strengthen the difference and divide (Beteille, 2000, p.197).

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## 9.6 SUMMARY

The concept of sarva dharma samabhava found its apt advocacy through Mahatma Gandhi. It was his humanistic and pluralistic approach that made Gandhi see the merits in all religions and preach to the mankind the efficacy of respecting others’ faiths. Gandhi’s ideas were not understood in the right sense and it is this narrow minded approach that made him a victim of communal divide and difference. To reiterate what Parel said, Gandhi genuinely wished that India should emerge as true multi-religious and multilingual nation with harmony and tolerance. In this age of deep communal divide, Gandhi’s ideas are worth revisiting and inculcate some of the moral and spiritual values he stood for all through his life. Sarva Dharma Samabhava, in this context, is the need of the hour not only for our nation but also across the world.

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## 9.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What are the views of Gandhi on religion? What did religion mean to him?
2. ‘Religion is pluralistic and humanistic’. Analyse this statement in your own words in the contemporary universal context.



3. Gandhi's secularism had a profound impact on the post-independent India. Discuss at length.

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### **SUGGESTED READINGS**

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