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## UNIT 9 SECULARISM\*

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## 9.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objectives of this unit are to acquaint you with some crucial issues about secularism in India. After reading this unit, you will be able:

- To explain the meaning of secularism and secularization;
- To explain the issues related to secularism;
- To streamline main arguments in debate on secularism in India;
- And after comparing this unit with unit 10, to underline differences between secularism and communalism.

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## 9.1 INTRODUCTION

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Secularism is one of the most crucial issues in the current political scenario in world. Yuval Noah Harari, the author of *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* includes secularism among 21 most urgent issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In India too, secularism has been at the core of academic, popular and political discourse. Some questions are often raised about secularism: about its relationship with religion, state and other institutions, faith, religious communities, place of individual, democratic values such as freedom and equality about religion, and ethical values. This unit will discuss secularism in the light of these questions.

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## 9.2 WHAT IS SECULARISM?

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The central issue in secularism is religion. Secularism in a society implies that the religious supremacy of a community does not lead to discrimination and persecution of religious minorities. The meaning of secularism depending on the extent of relationship religion has with the attributes mentioned above, i.e, relationship with religion, state and other institutions, faith, religious communities, place of individual, democratic values such as freedom and equality about religion, and ethical values. There are three meanings of secularism according to different

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perspectives: one talks about relationship between the religion and the state; two, is about the possibility or impossibility of applicability of secularism in India; and the third is about equal respect to all religions or *sarva dharma sambhav*. These perspectives have been reflected in the debate within the Constituent Assembly, popular and academic discourse in India. As you will read in this unit, the debate on secularism in India, in the Constituent Assembly, and academic discourse has involved these three meanings to varying levels.

According to Rajiv Bhargav success of secularism depends on certain factors. These are democracy and independence of the state from pressure of classes and ethnic groups in society which again depends on presence of state. Democracy depends on pacification of politics, i.e. peaceful competition or competition without violence. In fact, secularism is associated with values which are linked with democracy and equal citizenship. Yuval Noah Harari underlines that in a secular society, people belonging to different faiths – Hindus, Christians, Muslims, and atheists follow certain ethical codes. These ethical codes are enshrined in the values or secular ideals such as truth, compassion, equality, freedom, courage, and responsibility. For secularists, truth is different from belief, and there is no single source as custodian of truth. Compassion implies a “deep appreciation of suffering”, to reduce sufferings in the world in best possible way. Since sufferings are universal, the commitment to truth and compassion result in commitment to equality. The search for truth can be achieved with freedom to think, investigate, and experiment. Courage includes value to fight biases and oppressive regimes, to admit ignorance and “venture into unknown”. Responsibility means to not rely on higher power to address problems facing societies, no divine power needs to be credited for it. The developments result from knowledge of human beings themselves and their compassion.

According to DE Smith, Secularism can prevail in a secular state. What is secular state? In DE Smith’s model in *India as a Secular State*, a secular state can be identified by its dealing with three subjects: exclusion of state in relationship between individual and the religion (religious liberty); relations between individual and state in which religion is excluded (individual as citizen); and state neutrality. In Smith’s perspective, India had prospects of success of democracy: characteristics of secularism are present in Hinduism. However, there have been challenges in consolidation of secular state in India: caste and community loyalties which could easily turn into communal rivalry and conflict. Gallenter finds Smith’s critique of Indian secularism unconvincing: countering Smith, he contends that Indian state departs from principles of secularism by giving subsidies to religious schools and bodies, promoting Hinduism, and compromising its secular credentials. For him, precondition for a secular state to succeed lies in presupposing a normative conception of religion with capacity to judge and evaluate religion. In his opinion, the compromise in India on secularism, could be visible in the Constituent Assembly the debate on religious liberty (right to religious worship, religious practice, whether the state should recognise only linguistic minorities or linguistic minorities as well); on citizenship (universal civil code, religion-based political reservation); and on state neutrality (whether the state should give instructions to the state aided schools).

Akil Bilgrami contests the notion of secularism as merely state’s neutrality and equidistance from different religions. Bilgrami rejects this notion and provides

an alternative notion. He argues secularism does not emerge in all historical contexts. It emerges in some historical contexts. It emerges where there is threat of “majoritarianism”. It can also emerge in the contexts which are not fully modernist. Secularism is different from secular and secularisation. Secularism is a political doctrine. A person may remain secular simultaneously retaining his/her religious identity.

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### 9.3 SECULARISM IN INDIAN CONSTITUTION

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Indian constitution did not include the word secularism when it commenced on January 26, 1951. Although secularism was not mentioned in the Constitution, the fact that Independent India became a democracy, secularism was implied in it as a cardinal principle, a fait accompli, not needing its mention. But it was incorporated in the Preamble of the Constitution by 42<sup>nd</sup> Constitutional Amendment in 1976. Later, the Supreme Court ruled in the *Bhommaji* judgement that secularism is a basic feature of the Constitution. Besides, provisions in Articles 25-30 protecting the rights of religious minorities in the Constitution emerged from debate in the Constituent Assembly of India: these signify values of secularism. The questions whether word secularism should be included in Indian Constitution, what kind of secular state India needed to become (“a secular state in a religious country”), whether separation of state from religion was a testimony for secularism, whether a secular state was contingent on a secular society or whether state that respects all religions equally meant presence of secularism in India, were discussed on October 17, 1949. The opinions on these questions were divided in the Constituent Assembly. Finally, the assembly decided to not include the word secular in the Preamble. However, there was an agreement among all members of the Constituent Assembly to establish India as a secular state. And most of them agreed that separation of religion and state was related to democratisation of society.

Shefali Jha identifies three alternative arguments on secularism which were debated in the Constituent Assembly. She terms the first argument as “no concern theory of secularism”. The proponents of this argument argued that religion should not be concern of the state. Religion is a private affair and there should be separation between religion as a private affair and the state (public affair). People have liberty to practice religion as a private affair. The state should recognise an individual as a citizen not as a person from a religion. The principal representative of this argument were K.T. Shah, Tajamul Husain and M. Masani. The second line of argument also suggested that religion and state should be separated. But their argument was just opposite to the first argument. While the first kind of argument contended religion was a personal matter for the state to intervene, this argument suggested that religion was a system of absolute truth. Association of religion would not weaken the state but would demean religion. Whims of the majorities which keep changing should not be allowed to have a say in a democratic state. The third theory which Shefali Jha describes as “Equal Respect Theory of Secularism” argues that since in India religion was the most important part of people’s life, the state should respect all religions equally along with maintaining a distance from religions. The most vocal advocate of this argument was K.M. Munshi. He argued “we had to evolve a characteristically Indian Secularism”. In his opinion, India can not have a state religion; nor can a rigid

line be drawn between the religion and the state. In this view a people’s state can not be founded on a kind of secularism that is contemptuous of religion. Since most religions preach tolerance, if the state allows public sphere to religion it would not lead to inter-sectarian strife. Jaya Prakash Narayan argued that it was not religion but use of religion for social, economic, and political purposes that leads to communal violence.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 1**

**Note:** i) Use the space below for your answer.

ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of the unit.

1) What is secularism?

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2) What were main points in debate on secularism in the Constituent Assembly?

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**9.4 “ANTI-SECULARISM”**

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The points in debate on secularism which were discussed in the Constituent Assembly and in the 1950s were discussed in the debate on the theme which occurred later. One such debate represented a term which came to be alluded to as “anti-secularism”. Like an argument given in the Constituent Assembly, advocates of anti-secularism are not opposed to secularism per se. What they are opposed to is the notion of secularism which suggests separation between religion and the state. They are critical of both communal-fundamentalist (Hindutva) and secularists. According to the advocates of anti-secularism, since India is a religious society, religion and the state can not be separated. They consider the notion of separation of religion and the state a western notion, which is not applicable to a religious society like India. Roots of real secularism can be traced in Indian traditions, which have been tolerant. Secularism can be achieved by equal respect for all religions (*Sarva Dharma Sambhava*). The main advocates of anti-secularist perspective are Bhikhu Parekh, T.N. Madan and Ashis Nandi. Especially, Madan considers secularism as a “gift of Christianity”, and Nandi has “an anti-secularist agenda” to critique secularism. According to Achin Vanaik, they focus on six general themes regarding Indian society: modernity, understanding of culture, civilisation, religion and Hinduism, past and present; secularism and secularisation;

particularism and universalism, individualism and communitarianism; and neo-Gandhianism. While they share common point that state should respect all religions equally and Indian tradition has been a tolerant tradition, they have differences.

Rajiv Bhargava argues that the notion of secularism needs to be reconceptualised or re-imagined. Instead of focusing on state-church relationship the following is needed: (i) secularism should be focused as a response to deep religious diversity; (ii) diversity must be understood as enmeshed in power relations; hidden potential of religion-related domination must be understood; (iii) the two moves can help us to view secularism as a response to institutionalised religion (inter-and intra-religious) domination: secularism is not against religion; and it is opposed to institutionalised religion-based domination; (iv) and, only by maintaining principles distance a secular state can show critical respect to all religions and philosophical world views. He explains Indian secularism in terms of the notion of principled distance. He states “the idea of principled distance entails a flexible approach to the issue of state’s inclusion or exclusion of religions, and to the issue of engagement with or disengagement from religion, which at the level of law and order depends on the context.” He classifies secularism into two kinds: political and secular.

According to some scholars (Smith, Tambia) secularism, secularism in India is facing crisis. There are external and internal factors responsible for this. External factors include - breakdown of Congress, increasing centralisation of power of the state, and secessionist movements in the 1980s- in Punjab and Kashmir and implementation of Mandal Commission Report. Internal factors include – totalising world-view of which secularism is a part (Madan and Nandi), and demand for equidistance which can not be met by any state (Chatterjee).

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## 9.5 SECULARISM AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS

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Secularism and secularisation are two inter-related concepts. But in the academic and political discourse, it is the former which has received more attention. Several articles published in *Economic and Political Weekly*(Vol. 58, No. 50 Dec. 14, 2013) discuss the notion of secularisation and its relationship with secularism, and several related aspects with reference to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It is about the nature of relationship about rights of religious groups and individuals within them. It is also about ethics or morality.

Secularisation means absence of influence of religion on public policies and social relations. But it does not negate religion itself. It is about how religion is the basis of favour or discrimination. It is about modernisation and modernity. Secularisation must be “collective normative project”; whereas secularism in Europe was not “launched as a programme of collective action” (Rajiv Bhargava). Using notion of secularisation, Joya Chatterjee explains how that following the partition, both India and Pakistan followed policy of secularisation, which was partial. Both got busy in addressing non-religious issues of partition-affected families: rehabilitation of the refugees. However, the secularisation was partial. It was a limited secularisation which did not permeate lower parts of state machinery.

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## 9.6 LET US SUM UP

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Secularism has broadly two meanings: one, separation of religion from the state; and two, equal respect to all religions by the state or *sarvadharmasambhav*. Originally, the Preamble of the Constitution did not mention the word secularism. It was inserted into the Preamble by the 42<sup>nd</sup> Constitutional Amendment. The Constituent Assembly discussed whether secularism should be mentioned in the Constitution. There were three broad arguments in the Constituent Assembly: One argument suggested that since religion was a personal affair, there was no need to discuss it; Second argument contended that there should be separation between religion and that state; and, the third argument stated that the state should respect all religions equally or there should be *sarva dharma sambhav*.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

**Note:** i) Use the space below for your answer.

ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of the unit.

1) What are the main arguments of anti-secularists?

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2) What is the difference between secularism and secularization?

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3) What is meant by the notion of principled distance?

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## 9.7 REFERENCES

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## 9.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Secularism denotes relationship between religion, state, institutions, social groups and individual. There two notions of it: One, suggests a distance between religion and the state or equal distance or request to all religions by the state; another, talks about the relationship of religion with communities and individuals about democratic values such as freedom and equality, and morality.
- 2) In the Constituent Assembly, there were three types of arguments on secularism: One, the state should not interfere in religious matter; two, state and religion should be separate because religion is higher than the state/ beyond the scope of the state; and three, the state should pay equal respect to all religions.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) The anti-secularists argue that secularism which preaches distance between religion and state is western context. In a country like India where religion is an essential aspect of like, religion and state can not be delinked. The real secularism can be traced in Indian traditions, which is marked by tolerance. True secularism can be achieved by following the principle of *sarva dharma sambhav* (equal respect to all religions).
- 2) Secularism denotes distance between religion and the state or equal respect to all religions. Secularisation denotes absence of the impact of religion on the state policies about social groups. It is also about how moral or ethical values shape attitudes about followers of different religions.

- 3) The idea of principled distance is propounded by Rajeev Bhargava. It denotes a flexible approach to state's engagement or disengagements with religions, and to their inclusion or exclusion by the state. The level of engagement, exclusion or inclusion depends on context, nature, and current state of religions.



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