



Challenges of Secularism in Contemporary Indian Politics

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Abstract

Secularism in contemporary Indian politics remains a vital yet increasingly contested constitutional principle aimed at ensuring equality, religious freedom, and social harmony in a diverse society. This study examines the evolving nature of Indian secularism, highlighting its distinct model of “equal respect for all religions” in contrast to the Western notion of strict separation between religion and state. It provides an overview of Indian political structure and explores how factors such as caste, religion, and regional identities influence governance. The paper critically reviews existing literature to understand the growing challenges to secularism, including politicization of religion, communal polarization, and the rise of majoritarian ideologies. It further analyzes recent trends such as the use of religious identity in electoral politics, increasing communal tensions, mob vigilantism, and the impact of digital misinformation. Legislative debates like the Uniform Civil Code and laws such as the Citizenship Amendment Act are also examined for their implications on secular values. The study concludes that secularism in India is an evolving and fragile concept, requiring stronger institutional mechanisms, inclusive policies, and societal awareness to uphold democratic principles and maintain unity in diversity.

Keywords: Secularism, Indian Politics, Communalism, Majoritarianism, Religious Nationalism, Electoral Politics, Uniform Civil Code, Social Harmony

Introduction

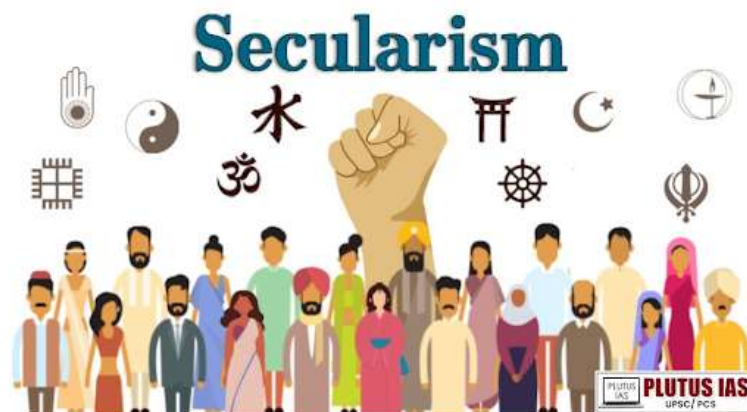
Secularism in contemporary Indian politics is a foundational constitutional principle aimed at ensuring equality, religious freedom, and peaceful coexistence in a diverse society, where the state maintains equal respect for all religions rather than strict separation. However, its practical realization faces significant challenges in the present context. The rise of majoritarian ideologies and the promotion of religious nationalism have raised concerns about the marginalization of minority communities and the weakening of state neutrality. Simultaneously, the increasing politicization of religion and the use of communal identities in electoral politics have intensified polarization, often shifting focus away from development-oriented governance. Recurring instances of communal tensions and violence further highlight the fragile nature of inter-community relations. Debates surrounding issues such as the Uniform Civil Code, minority rights, and personal laws add complexity to the secular framework, as they involve balancing equality with religious autonomy. Moreover, the rapid spread of misinformation through media and social platforms exacerbates divisions, while judicial interpretations of secularism sometimes create ambiguity. These factors collectively indicate that secularism in India remains an evolving and contested concept, requiring continuous effort to uphold democratic values and social harmony.

Research Objectives

- To analyze the concept and evolution of secularism in India within the framework of contemporary politics.
- To examine the major challenges to secularism, including politicization of religion, communalism, and majoritarianism.
- To evaluate the impact of legislative, social, and digital factors on the practice and sustainability of secularism in India.

Concept of Secularism

Secularism is a fundamental principle that ensures the separation of religion from state affairs, promoting a system where the government remains neutral and treats all citizens equally regardless of their religious beliefs or absence of faith. It emphasizes that religion is a personal matter and should not be imposed or controlled by the state, thereby safeguarding individual freedom of belief, practice, and expression. A key feature of secularism is the absence of any official state religion, ensuring that public policies and governance are free from religious bias. It also upholds non-discrimination by guaranteeing equal rights and opportunities to all individuals, irrespective of their faith. In the Indian context, secularism is often understood as “*Sarva Dharma Sambhav*”, meaning equal respect for all religions, where the state may intervene when necessary to promote social justice and reform. This differs from the Western model of secularism, which advocates a strict separation between church and state. Thus, secularism plays a crucial role in maintaining harmony, protecting diversity, and strengthening democratic values in a pluralistic society.



Overview of Indian Politics

Indian politics functions within the framework of a sovereign, socialist, secular, and democratic republic established by the Constitution of India in 1950, making it the world’s largest democracy. It follows a parliamentary system in which the President serves as the constitutional head of state, while the Prime Minister is the head of government, exercising executive authority. The system is federal in nature, ensuring a division of powers between the central and state governments, thereby accommodating regional diversity within national unity. The legislature is bicameral, consisting of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, and

representatives are elected through regular, free, and fair elections conducted by the Election Commission of India. Indian politics is characterized by a multi-party system, where national and regional parties, coalition governments, and alliances such as the NDA play crucial roles. Factors like caste, religion, region, and socio-economic conditions significantly influence political behavior. Recent trends include the rise of regional parties, coalition dominance, and dynastic politics. Despite challenges like corruption, polarization, and communalism, Indian politics remains dynamic, participatory, and deeply rooted in democratic principles.



Review of Literature

1. Agrawal, R. (2024): This study examines the fragile nature of secularism in India by highlighting the growing tensions between constitutional ideals and political practices. It discusses how communalism, majoritarianism, and identity-based politics are weakening secular values. The paper emphasizes the role of political parties in exploiting religious sentiments for electoral gains and analyzes the resulting polarization in society. It concludes that secularism in India is under strain and requires stronger institutional commitment and societal awareness to maintain democratic balance.

2. Hanumanthappa, D. G. (2024): This article provides a comprehensive overview of the evolution of secular politics in India, tracing its roots from the freedom struggle to contemporary times. It highlights key challenges such as communalism, political misuse of religion, and the rise of identity politics. The paper also evaluates the relevance of secularism in modern India, arguing that despite challenges, it remains essential for national unity and democratic stability. It calls for policy reforms and inclusive governance to strengthen secular values.

3. Ghosh, C. (2024): The paper explores India's unique model of secularism, focusing on its principle of equal respect for all religions. It critically examines the challenges posed by political interference, religious nationalism, and social divisions. The study also discusses future prospects, suggesting that secularism must adapt to changing political and social conditions. It emphasizes the importance of education, legal safeguards, and institutional neutrality to preserve secularism and ensure harmony in a diverse and pluralistic society.

4. Ahmed, S. (2024): This article analyzes the balance between constitutional principles and real-world challenges to secularism in India. It highlights issues such as communal tensions, legislative controversies, and the politicization of religion. The study argues that while the Constitution guarantees religious equality, its implementation faces obstacles due to socio-

political factors. It stresses the need for stronger governance, judicial consistency, and public awareness to uphold secular values and maintain social cohesion in contemporary Indian politics.

Challenges to Secularism in Contemporary Indian Politics

Secularism in contemporary Indian politics is undergoing a significant transition, shaped by the complex interaction between electoral strategies, religious identities, and legislative actions. Unlike the Western model of strict separation between religion and state, Indian secularism is based on the idea of “principled distance,” allowing state intervention to ensure equality and social reform. However, in recent years, this approach has been increasingly criticized for becoming selective and, at times, aligned with majoritarian sentiments. The rise of religious nationalism, growing politicization of communal identities, and erosion of trust among communities have posed serious challenges to the constitutional vision of equal respect for all religions. These developments indicate that secularism in India is not static but an evolving and contested concept, deeply influenced by contemporary political realities.

Key Challenges to Secularism in India

1. Politicization of Religion and Electoral Gains: The increasing use of religion in electoral politics remains one of the most pressing challenges to secularism. Political parties often mobilize voters based on religious identities, using symbols, narratives, and emotional appeals to consolidate vote banks. Majoritarianism, which prioritizes the interests of the majority community, has become a dominant political strategy in many regions. This trend diverts attention from governance and development issues, weakening the secular foundation of the political system. Surveys suggest that a large proportion of citizens consider religion an important factor in political decision-making, further complicating the implementation of secular governance.

2. Communalism and Polarization: Communal tensions continue to challenge social harmony in India. Religious polarization, often fueled by inflammatory speeches, misinformation, and media narratives, leads to mistrust between communities. In recent years, communal conflicts have shifted from large-scale riots to more localized and systemic forms of violence, including targeted attacks and social boycotts. Such developments undermine the spirit of coexistence and weaken democratic values.

Table: Communal Violence and Polarization (2023–2025)

Metric	2023 Data	2024 Data	2025 (Early/Projected)	Trend/Context
Communal Riots	32	59	~28	Sharp rise in 2024 (approx. 84%), followed by decline but shift to localized conflicts
Deaths in Riots	—	13	~4	Minority communities disproportionately affected

Metric	2023 Data	2024 Data	2025 (Early/Projected)	Trend/Context
Mob Lynchings	13	13	14	Persistent threat with continued incidents
Epicenter States	Maharashtra	Maharashtra	Maharashtra / Uttar Pradesh	Higher intensity in western and northern regions
Trigger Events	Local disputes	Religious events (e.g., temple ceremonies)	Mixed triggers	Strong correlation with religious gatherings and festivals

3. Politicization of Religious Festivals: Religious festivals such as Ram Navami, Ganesh Chaturthi, and Bakri Eid are increasingly becoming politically sensitive events. Processions and public celebrations, which traditionally symbolized cultural harmony, are now sometimes used to assert dominance or mobilize communities. These events often act as flashpoints for communal clashes, reflecting the growing overlap between religion and politics.

4. Rise of Majoritarianism and Minority Insecurity: The rise of religious nationalism has intensified concerns regarding the marginalization of minority communities. The growing association of national identity with a single dominant religion can create a sense of exclusion among minorities, particularly Muslims. This perceived insecurity affects their participation in public life and weakens the inclusive character of Indian democracy.

5. Mob Lynching and Vigilantism: Incidents of mob lynching and vigilantism, often linked to issues such as cow protection or interfaith relationships, have emerged as serious threats to secularism. These acts not only violate the rule of law but also reflect the breakdown of state neutrality. The persistence of such incidents indicates challenges in ensuring legal equality and protection for all citizens.

6. Legislative and Judicial Contentions: Several laws and policy debates have generated controversy regarding their compatibility with secular principles. The Citizenship Amendment Act, anti-conversion laws in various states, and the ongoing debate over the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) are viewed by critics as potentially discriminatory toward certain religious groups. Similarly, judicial decisions sometimes face criticism for inconsistency or delays, which can create ambiguity in the interpretation of secular values.

7. Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Debate: The UCC, mentioned in Article 44 of the Constitution, aims to establish a common set of personal laws for all citizens. While supporters argue that it promotes equality and national integration, opponents believe it may undermine cultural and religious diversity. This debate highlights the inherent tension between uniformity and pluralism in a secular state.

8. Social Conflicts and Historical Legacy: India's secular fabric has been repeatedly tested by major communal incidents such as the Babri Masjid demolition, the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, and the Godhra train burning. These events continue to influence contemporary politics by shaping public perceptions and inter-community relations, highlighting the fragile nature of secularism in practice.

9. Marginalization in Public Spheres: Studies have indicated that certain minority communities remain underrepresented in government institutions, law enforcement, and administrative services. This underrepresentation contributes to a sense of exclusion and raises concerns about equal opportunities and inclusive governance.

10. Hate Speech and Digital Communalism: The rapid expansion of social media has amplified the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and communal propaganda. Digital platforms often accelerate polarization by creating echo chambers and reinforcing biases. This “digital communalism” poses a new and evolving challenge to secularism in the modern era.

Conclusion

Secularism in contemporary Indian politics remains a vital yet increasingly challenged principle that underpins the nation’s democratic and pluralistic framework. While the constitutional vision promotes equality and respect for all religions, its practical implementation is hindered by rising majoritarianism, politicization of religion, communal polarization, and legislative controversies. The growing influence of identity-based politics, coupled with misinformation and digital communalism, has further strained inter-community relations and weakened state neutrality. Additionally, debates over issues like the Uniform Civil Code reflect the ongoing tension between unity and diversity. To preserve secularism, there is a need for stronger institutional mechanisms, impartial governance, judicial clarity, and increased public awareness. Ultimately, sustaining secular values is essential for ensuring social harmony, protecting minority rights, and strengthening India’s democratic fabric.

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