

AN ENQUIRY INTO THE NOTION OF SECULARISM

APABRITA BHATTACHARYA

Introduction-

Secularism has emerged as a dominant socio-political ideology that had its origin in Western countries. George Jacob Holyoake, a British mender, introduced the term 'secularism' in the middle of the 19th century. For Holyoake, secularism is a study, the task of which is to foster goodness in our life. Being a distinctive approach, secularism seeks to provide a new way of life; where there is no space for any discrimination; instead, it is a solicitation for the right to practice one's religion without causing harm to others. It also advocates the treatment of being equal before the government and law. Giving preference to any religion is very toxic for society, which causes discrimination among different religions. That is why secularism seeks to unfasten religious faith from the social domain. The secular ideology has been cultivated worldwide by many thinkers, whose definition varies from person to person. Despite having diverse meanings, the notion of secularism enlivens men with a new thought about religion and the state. The relation between religion and state has been interpreted differently in the secular domain. In some countries, which proclaim to be 'secular,' the political ideologies of 'secularism' implies a complete separation between religion and state. On the other hand, some other secular countries proselytize religious uniformity and religious equality. Secularism as a socio-political doctrine does not allow religious interference in the state's social, economic, political, and educational issues. That is why one definition of 'secularism' holds:

Separation of religion from civic affairs and the state, and may be broadened to a similar position concerning the need to remove or to minimize the role of religion in the public sphere.¹

A glance at secular attributes-

Careful scrutiny of some of the definitions of secularism helps us identify some of its essential features. These are as follows:

1. Secular ideas seek to remove all kinds of discrimination, but never being anti-religious:

The secular ideology intends to isolate religion from the state and tries to remove religious intervention in the public domain. It does not imply that the idea of secularism has any negative connotation about religion. Secularism never repudiated the faith's existence; instead, it intends to free society from any domination. In a secular state, no religion can be adopted as official or state religion; that is why the definition of a secular state is the opposite of a theocratic state. There are multiple religious groups in society, but the dominations made by one group upon another or by some within the same group are not permissible. So, both inter-religious and intra-religious dominations stand in the way of making a secular society and hence these must be eliminated from a state.

2. Secular principles try to replace 'blind faith' with 'reason':

We all live in a society under the supervision of some religion, where some religious teaching halts our decision-making procedure. Religious rules and rituals have become a tradition, and we are sometimes obliged to obey this because of fear or environmental influences. Human beings are conscious of not doing any sinful acts. It is somehow injected into us that disobeying any religious sanction is sinful. Most people pray to God or the supreme spirit to get rid of the pain and distress they are experiencing and do this out of blind faith. In this case, secular principles differ from religion in that secularism does not grant or obey anything only because of faith; instead, it wants reason behind belief. A worldly person must be fearless, whom George Jacob Holyoake calls a 'Free thinker.' Both religious and secular principles address morality, but the difference is in their nature. Religious views or rules and regulations are static. Religious views are something pre-established like a rock mountain, where we are not allowed to make changes. On the other hand, secular principles advocate a process, which is a dynamic

process used for the welfare of human kind. These principles are like matter; we can give any shape or use it per human requirements. As secularism advocates adopting ‘reason,’ so from this, we can realize that the process of secularism is not only conceptual; it advocates experience, experiment, and practical analysis. Says George Jacob Holyoake—

Secularism encourages men to trust reason throughout and to trust nothing that reason does not establish—to examine all things hopeful, respect all things probable, but rely upon nothing without precaution which does not come within the range of science and experience.²

3. ‘Humanism’ is the primary identity of a person required in a secular society:

When we enunciate the word ‘religion,’ it automatically implies a view about some intangible thing, some supernatural power. The religious utterance indicates something that cannot be visualized and prescribes a life with complete uncertainty, i.e., the life after death. But the idea of secularism seeks to find peace in the existing energy, by giving everyone equal dignity and by doing well for human kind. So, promoting ‘humanism’ is one of the essential aspects of secularism. While talking about ‘humanism’ in the secular domain, it is important to talk about some humanistic approaches of some well-known thinkers. These humanistic approaches not only promote ‘humanism’ but also light the lamp of ‘secularism’. In this respect, we can remember the great spiritual thinker Swami Vivekananda, who emphasized the need for humanity. Swami Vivekananda was an adorer of divinity as well as an adorer of human beings. Social inequalities, poverty, etc always strike his mind. He was totally an advocator of universal brotherhood. He found the divinity which is present in every human being. The service for human beings is regarded as service for Shiva or God. That is why, held by this great espouser of spirituality, if we serve people properly, treating them exemplarily, it automatically implies service to God. By advocating universal brotherhood, he tried to unite all people irrespective of their religion, caste, sex, etc.

After talking about Swami Vivekananda’s humanistic approach, it is important in this domain to talk about another great humanist thinker —Rabindranath Tagore.

Rabindranath Tagore gives his full attention to the rational mind by giving importance to the entire humankind. He considers human beings as the highest living intelligence. Like Swami Vivekananda, Tagore also advocates the presence of divinity in the human soul. He considers God as the creator of the world. On the other hand, he also considers human beings who give or put such values and meaning in this world. So, for him, without serving human beings, no one can maintain the balance of the galaxy. Tagore puts his pain to value human existence in this world in his notable works like—*Sadhana* (1913), *Personality* (1917), *The Religion of Man* (1930). By discussing interpersonal relationships, Tagore unites men or humans with nature and all-pervading spirits.

Apart from the two great thinkers— Swami Vivekananda & Tagore—Mahatma Gandhi was another witness to the historical past. We can see the light of ‘humanism’ in Gandhian thoughts. Gandhiji was also very much concerned about human progress. His notion of ‘*Sarvodaya*’, advocates ‘Universal Uplift’ or ‘Progress of All’. By serving human beings, Gandhi wanted to achieve social harmony, peace, and moral order in world society. Through his theory of non-violence and other movements to achieve freedom he wanted to unite human beings irrespective of their religion. Gandhi was a believer in religious harmony. That is why he advocated ‘*Sarva Dharma Samanata*’; which means religious togetherness or equal respect for all coexisting religions.

On the other hand, when we focus on Western countries, we can see lots of thinkers who give importance to ‘humanism’. For example, the famous Greek philosopher Protagoras, by giving importance to human beings, says ‘man is the measure of all things’. The two hedonistic philosophers, John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham were very much concerned about the happiness of human beings. They in their own ways prescribe some utilitarian rules that indicate some goodwill and service for mankind. On the other hand, British reformer George Jacob Holyoake also gives importance to human welfare. By giving full attention to our present life, Holyoake asserts to bring the greatest happiness by serving human beings rather than any deities.

Here it can be said that humanism is a philosophical approach, which is concerned with human existence in our society. By giving importance to human beings, it focuses on the

goodness of human life. As a dynamic process, secular ideologies always try to bring happiness to human life by doing human welfare. All the great Indian and Western thinkers, who themselves are concerned about human dignity, try to do welfare by uniting human beings. Swami Vivekananda considers religious oneness or one ultimate reality. But he saw the presence of that reality only in human beings without discriminating against them. Rabindranath Tagore, in the Indian national anthem, puts a line- '*Bhārat Bhagya Bidhātā*'. Here Tagore tries to create a social blending among the people of the nation. And, he simply tries to make cultural and religious harmony. Mahatma Gandhi also advocates equal respect for all irrespective of their different religious beliefs. So, here we can say that both 'humanism' and 'secularism' are human-centric ideologies. These two principles always say about togetherness. In the *Bṛihadāranyaka* Upanishad, there is an utterance '*Sarve Bhavantu Sukhina*' that advocates the happiness, health, and non-suffering of people. Secularism tries to achieve the 'greatest happiness for the most significant number of people, and that is why Holyoake says

Secularism is the study of promoting human welfare by material means, measuring human welfare by the utilitarian rule, and making the service of others a duty of life.³

The secular principles advocate that we cannot judge a person based on their caste, creed, race, sex, etc.; instead, they can only be judged by their good or evil deeds. A secular society esteems a person's good intention, the intention of doing good for society, who is chasing some excellent object to have a peaceful community that gives them the vision of truth, love, and respect. In society, we carry with us some religious identities, i.e., Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, and many more, which differentiate people from one another. But, 'humanism' has been considered by secular ideas as the primary essence of humankind. So, if we are identified as 'human-being' not Hindu or Muslim or Christian, etc., then there is no room for any disparity in our society.

4. Rectitude is the leitmotif of all secular principles:

Secular principles always promote equal and fair treatment for all irrespective of religion, caste, race, sex, etc. The idea of secularism is not to brawl with religious faith; instead, it is a fight for people's rights, which they deserve. The secular principle demands the right to propagate irrespective of any consideration of religious faith. It also claims the right to be treated as equal, the right to have equal opportunities, the right to get fair justice, and the right to live a dignified life. The notion of secularism does not seek to compare different religious belief systems, though each has its different perception to experience the ultimate truth.

Secularism espouses a way where a person respects his/her religion; in the same way, he/she respects others' religion too. For this reason, mutual acceptance is required between religious groups regarding their spiritual practice. Religious liberty is one of the main things that secularism seeks to promote. French Revolution introduced and fought for freedom, equality, and fraternity, which secular ideologies adequately appreciated. We can say that these are integral components of secularism. We appreciate the need or importance of equality in different spheres of life. Giving equal opportunity means giving someone the chances they deserve or are capable of. To establish the idea of 'equality,' we must do away with different types of discrimination in our society. If people from different religious groups consider themselves as 'people of the same nation,' this feeling will teach them the lesson of unity and equality. In a secular society, no particular religion can be preferred as more important before the law; people get fair and equal treatment irrespective of their religious identity by the very law. In this regard, we can recall John Rawls, who talks about two principles of justice in his social contract theory. One such principle is liberty, which asserts equal freedom of conscience and equal democratic-rights, and another is the principle of equality, where he cites equal economic rights irrespective of race, sex, or religious background. By providing fair treatment and promoting equality, the idea of secularism tries to declare a battle against all forms of discrimination and oppression.

After discussing some essential characteristics of a secular state, it is important to consider another term called 'secularization.' Sometimes this term is used parallelly with the expression 'secularism.' Due to some misconceptions, some people use the word 'secularization' as a substitute form for 'secularism.' In reality, 'secularization' gives a new interpretation of secularism. Let us discuss the issue a bit more elaborately.

Understanding the term 'secularization':

Secularism as an idea has emerged as a philosophical doctrine. As we have seen, it is a kind of deliberation of thought proposed to make the distance between state and religion. On the other hand, secularization is a process of applying secular thinking in practical life. 'Secularization' is a process of change. The procedure of secularization changes a religious society into a secular one. The abandonment of religious superstitions in a community is the main aim of the transformation process of secularization. Religious superstitions are hostile to scientific as well as political, economic, and educational development. Secularization aims to reduce all the superstitious religious obstacles, which are considered stumbling blocks on the way to the secular evolution of society, by profound observation. In a theocratic state, where a particular religion gets all the attention and benefits, other religions are discriminated against and exploited mercilessly. To stop this kind of exploitation and maintain social equilibrium, we have to adopt the process of secularization. Secularism seeks to make changes in particular fields such as politics, education, etc. However, the process of secularization creates differences in the entire society. Sainen Debnath explains the task of secularization in the following way:

The task of secularization is both constructive and destructive. It is constructive in terms of fabricating the secular ingredients in the society conducive to the purpose of building a solid political system. It is destructive in wiping out the contents against secularism and the common outlook of peace in the society.⁴

By discarding some religious values, which dominate a state, the process of secularization does not deny the existence of the religion at all. Instead, it intends to make a reappraisal of some religious theories. The method of secularization wants to

resettle a religious society into an egalitarian society having no ecclesiastical or sectarian interference. The process also asserts that religious heads must not guide politics so that the escalation of political thought can become possible. Secularization does not want to make religion tight-lipped. It allows religion to give an opinion on social and political matters, and a person is free to choose any religious idea in his private life voluntarily. Still, in the public domain, without judging the depth and goodness of the opinion given by religion, a person cannot be allowed to accept it and make any social decision based on it. The process of secularization keeps all the goodness of some religious groups in the same row and unionizes them with neutral values. The differentiation procedure does not mean the total removal of spiritual values. It intends to erase irrational thoughts. In this regard, Kemal Ataturk's Turkey model of secularism is an example of the process of secularization. Kemal Ataturk's reformative goal of replacing religion and its laws with secular civil laws highlights the secularization process. It does not promote religion-based rules, which leads us to social biases but instead demands some ideology that causes social welfare.

A mutual understanding between different religious faiths is required to unite humanity. A secular state aims to provide neutral and tolerant behaviour towards other religious communities. Thus, tolerance is an essential component of a secular society. Let us discuss the importance of religious tolerance in the domain of secularism:

Secular ideas allow all religions on a compassionate ground:

Spiritual togetherness or co-existence is one of the essential features of a secular society. Here different religious groups have to cooperate under the same social shade. As different religious systems have dissimilar beliefs, the absence of mutual acceptance can cause conflict between them. One's religious view can differ from another, and there must be a probability of disliking others' way of thinking. So, in this domain, any religious group must be tolerant toward different faith without disrespecting the views of others. In this connection, we can remember a famous statement by Mahatma Gandhi about violent or intolerant behaviour: 'an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.' In the secular domain, this utterance means that if every religion has some negative,

disrespectful and intolerant attitude towards other religions, there will be chances for communal violence; the social balance and the equilibrium in the state will vanish. Being 'tolerant' is an attitude, and this attitude is a kind of positive attitude towards something or someone. Tolerant towards any religion means accepting some groups of religions to practice their religion without creating any disturbance. Every religion is searching for ultimate truth or absolute; some address the ultimate as 'God,' some as '*Isvara*,' some as 'Allah,' etc. But the fact is that, though the paths of every religion are unique, they have different religious symbols, and their means to reach the ultimate are various, but the supreme spirit is the same. If the religious groups realize this truth, there will be no space for disrespectful or intolerant behavior towards each other. In a secular society that promotes religious neutrality, cooperation between different religious groups to serve human well-being is impossible without tolerance. Being tolerant is an attitude towards someone having differing beliefs from us, but still, there is no feeling of being apart. It means treating different people on an equal footing. I have no right to interfere with others' religious beliefs, and I have no right to impose my thoughts on them so that I can adopt unprejudiced behavior towards them. T. M. Scanlon argues in his article 'The Difficulty of Tolerance' that,

Tolerance involves a more attractive and appealing relationship between opposing groups within a society.⁵

Toleration advocates welcoming or lenient behaviour towards others, and it can be justified by showing equal respect. In Indian history, we see Emperor Ashoka, in his 12th Rock Edict, was advocating for tolerance toward all religions. In modern times Swami Vivekananda also advocated the principle of religious acceptance and talked about religious equality. He says:

There never was my religion or yours, my national or your national religion, there never existed many religions, there is only the one. One infinite religion existed all through eternity and will ever exist, and this religion is expressing itself in various ways.⁶

But there are some allegations or criticism regarding the word 'tolerance.' It has been claimed that having a tolerant attitude towards any religion does not mean religious

equality; instead, it sometimes means giving or granting special rights to some particular groups. It is sometimes claimed that the tolerant attitude somehow addresses granting privilege to some communities. Despite these controversies, mutual understanding between different religious groups can make society conflict-free.

Nowadays, secularism has become a highly discussed concept throughout the globe and a matter of debate also. The participants of this discussion are from different fields, whether secular or anti-secular. Though the term 'secularism' has been interpreted in different ways, without knowing the insights of some disparate models, we cannot comprehend the actual saying of it. Let us discuss different ideologies of some countries that are considered to be secular:

Practising secularism in different ways:

Some countries, like India, the United States, France, Turkey, Mexico, and South Korea, are considered secular. Despite this, their secularism has distinct shades, as evident from the differences in their practices.

India is regarded as a secular nation, declared in the 42nd Amendment enacted in 1976. Despite this declaration, India has a historical past where the idea of secularism was somehow practised. In India, secularism does not imply a complete separation between the state and religion. Religious neutrality is the thing that makes the Indian model of secularism unique. In Ancient India, some incidents or references convey the practice of secularism even when the term was not invented. It has been claimed that we can observe the touch of secularism in our Indian holy scriptures like the Vedas and Upanishads. There is an utterance—“*Ekam Sat Viprā Bahudhā Vadanti,*”⁷ which advocates the adoration of the same absolute by different means or paths. It hints at the notion of equality between various religious thoughts. Apart from this, while talking about *Sanātan Dharma*, which asserts an eternal way of living, it is known for its most welcoming nature toward other religious beliefs. Different emperors of India practised secular ideas, notably – emperor Ashoka, whose 12th Rock Edicts promoted religious equality and tolerance. Like emperor Ashoka, emperor Akbar also practiced secular

beliefs by promoting equality between Hindus and Muslims. His '*Din-i-Illahi* [Divine faith], '*sulh-e-kul*' [peace and harmony between religions], and withdrawal of the Jizya tax promoted a secular spirit. After the ancient period, in the Medieval period, some great personalities, like Guru Nanak, Sant Kabir Das, Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, and Mira Bai—all by their Bhakti and Sufi movements united all religions and spread the essence of love and peace within the society.

It is interesting to note the view of the two great personalities, M.K. Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, about the notion of secularism. They represented a different vision of secular ideas. Gandhiji's notion of secularism intermingled with the notion of religious fraternity, respect, and most importantly, the notion of truth—which asserts truth is one, though the paths are many. On the other hand, Pandit Nehru advocated equal protection by the state for all religions. Pandit Nehru also cites religious tolerance, which can be attainable through economic development and scientific progress. In our Indian constitution, there are interpretations of secularism in Articles 14, 15, 16, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, and 51A. At the same time, discussing the idea of secularism in the modern era, some renowned personalities, like Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Rabindranath Tagore, held that by giving importance to 'humanity' we could strengthen the idea of secularism.

Although as per the Indian idea of secularism, there is no complete separation wall between religion and state, it maintains, according to Rajeev Bhargava, a 'principled distance.' Here a state can interfere in religious affairs to remove some cruel practices in exceptional situations. The Indian model of secularism opposes all kinds of oppression based on caste, creed, race, sex, religious belief, etc. It allows all citizens to practice their religion and teaches them to pay respect to others too. Treating people equally and giving everyone equal opportunities according to their capabilities is another important aim of Indian secularism. Although there are many criticisms regarding the actual application of secular ideas, the characteristics of the Indian model make it unique.

After discussing India's idea of secular ideology, let us focus on the secular ideologies practised by some Western countries. The application of the views of secularism by

western countries represents a different formulation of a state which is quite different from that of the Indian model. The policy of complete separation and religious non-encroachment in each other's periphery is the main aim of the western model of secularism. The social ostracism of religion can be seen in the West. Colonial exhibition of faith is not allowed in the West. It means people, except in their places of worship, are not authorized to carry their religious identity publicly. Religion is not permitted to be a supporting pillar by adding religious institutions. Some major Western countries that practice secularism are France, the USA, Mexico, Turkey, etc. In France, secular ideologies have developed since the French Revolution. Protecting civil rights is one of the core principles of the French model. By advocating the principle 'Laicite,' which means lay or ordinary people, France puts its profound influence on their secular ideologies. This ideology does not grant people to practice their religion in an open field or in the public domain. By the principle of 'Laicite,' French secularism tries to give importance to the ordinary citizens addressing themselves as equals by differentiating between their private and public life. Freedom from religion is the primary propaganda of secularism in France. As this model evolved during French Revolution, so the ideas of liberty, equality, and social justice were highly demanding aspects of it. They are advocating and adopting the principle of banning religious practice in the public sphere and preventing school students from wearing something that signifies their religious identity. So, wearing religious symbols like crosses, turbans, and burqas is prohibited in educational institutions. As a result, students can be treated as equals and consider themselves equal to others. It has been said that, like the Indian model of secularism, it also advocates equal respect for all religions and promotes religious pluralism.

When we look at secularism as practiced in the USA, we find that it follows the complete separation policy between state and religion. It tried to eliminate all types of religious coercion within the state. In this model, we can observe the absence of legitimacy regarding the principle of religious tolerance. 'Freedom from religion' is the main agenda of this model. It excludes all types of intervention of religion within law and

politics. Again, there are a few countries like Turkey and Mexico, where the religious state has been converted or transformed into a secular one by the secularization process.

Some debate about 'Secular' ideas:

After discussing the secular ideologies from different viewpoints, we can say that the different ideas of secularism, more or less, demands equality or harmony between people irrespective of their religious affiliation. It also advocates a fight against every type of discrimination and exploitation. However, it is essential to note that the idea of secularism loses its actual meaning when it is wrongly practiced or practiced with some ulterior motives. In the recent past, we have come across such a debate where it is alleged that what is done in the name of secularism is not done following the true spirit of the term. Instead, these are pseudo-secular practices. On account of this raising debate, it has become imperative to look at the concept itself newly. It has also brought an opportunity for us to examine the idea keeping in mind the current socio-political dynamics. John Stuart Mill in his *On Liberty* held that if there is no contra view, then even truth will become dead dogma. Hence a re-examination of the concept will bring forth some of its new dimensions to my mind. When actually the idea of secularism originated is a matter of mystery. However, from the literature, we come to know that American enlightenment thinkers felt its need and popularised it. When we talk about its necessity, it implicitly reminds us that the concept had some specific spatio-temporal need and origin. Hence, the determination of its socio-political dynamics is the *sine qua non* for its discussion. Such excavation needs a more extended discussion, and therefore, we are refraining from entering into deep delving here.

Conclusion-

In conclusion, it can be said that secular ideologies are intended to promote social harmony by giving equal respect to all religions. But in the case of its adoption, we have to face some general quarries. The fraternity among all citizens, human dignity, the actual interpretation of similar ideologies, a mutual understanding between different

religious beliefs, etc., have become the central curiosity in the mind of people, which they raise in the secular domain. To respond to the queries of people regarding the secular norm, secularism as a dynamic idea needs to be experienced by its practical application. To apply this concept, we must delve deeper into it by revisiting it.

¹ Galen, Luke. W: *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies*, Published in the United States of America, by Oxford University Press 2016, pp. 22-23.

² Holyoake, George Jacob: *THE PRINCIPLES OF SECULARISM*, LONDON: BOOK STORE, 282, STRAND; AUSTIN & co., 17, JOHNSON'S COURT, FLEET STREET, by LEGARE STREET PRESS 1871, p. 15.

³ Ibid, p. 13.

⁴ Debnath, Sailen: and *Secularism Western Indian*. ATLANTIC PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS (P) LTD 2010, 7/22, Ansari Road, Darya Ganj, New Delhi- 110002. P. 23.

⁵ Bhargava, Rajeev: *Secularism and its Critics*, published in India by Oxford University Press 1998, 2/11 Ground Floor, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110002, India, p. 61.

⁶ Vivekananda, Swami: *The Complete Works IV*. Published by, Advaita Ashrama, p.15.

⁷ *Rigveda, the Dirghatama's Sukta*, 9 1. 164. 460.

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