

# Indian Secularism: Non-Religious, Irreligious or Anti-Religious?

“First, Indian secularism cannot be anti-religious or irreligious, for the bulk of our people are deeply religious. Unlike in Christendom, where the word originated, secularism in India is not about pitting the state against the religious authority but about keeping matters of faith in the personal realm and matters of the state in the public realm. Second, in a nation of many faiths, where people take their faith seriously, secularism must be based on the principle of equal respect for all religions (and for those who choose not to follow any religion). As Nehru once said, ‘[Secularism] means freedom of religion and conscience, including freedom of those who may have no religion. It means free play of all religions, subject only to their not interfering with each other or with basic conceptions of our state.’” (Aiyar 2004: Confessions of a Secular Fundamentalist).

He further says,

“However, in regard to affairs of state, secularism translates not into equal involvement of the state in matters pertaining to each religion but rather the separation of the state from all religions. In secular India, the state must have no religion. For the state, whatever religion an Indian professes or propagates must remain a private and personal matter of the citizen. The state should concern itself not with religion but with protection for all, equal opportunity for all, equitable benefits for all. No religious community should be singled out for favours; no religious community should be subjected to any disability or disadvantage.” (Aiyar, Confessions of a Secular Fundamentalist, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2004)

Secularism is defined differently in different countries. Secularism is often used to describe the separation of public life and government matters from religions or simply the separation of religion and politics. Most of the so-called developed countries do not recognise religions, thus granting no special value to any particular religion. The beauty of India’s secularism lies in its taking a completely different course from them. India’s secularism means equal treatment of all religions by the state. With the 42nd Amendment of the Constitution of India enacted in 1976, the Preamble to the Constitution asserted that India is a secular nation. Though neither the constitution of India nor its laws define the relationship between religion and state, India recognizes each and every religion and seeks to give them equal respect. The citizens of India are allowed to enjoy their respective religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism etc. with full freedom.

Since Indian secularism gives every citizen right to fulfil his or her respective religious obligations, it will be futile to view this secularism as anti-religious or anti-Islamic.

In context of Muslims’ faith, Indian secularism does not prevent Muslims from fulfilling their basic religious obligations as mentioned in the Qur’anic verse which reads,

***“And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me” (51:56).***

Indian secularism gives Muslims full freedom to worship Allah Almighty. Yes they can fulfil all their religious obligations, acquiring Taqwa and achieving spiritual development. There is no one to stop Indian Muslims from performing acts of worship—five-time prayers, fasting, Hajj, Zakat, spiritual meditations, doing Zikr [remembrance] of Allah and attaining spiritual perfection.

A number of Islamic scholars and clerics regard secularism as compatible with Islam. For example, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, a professor of law at Emory University the author of ‘Islam and the secular state: negotiating the Future of Sharia’ says, “enforcing [Sharia] through coercive power of the state negates its religious nature, because Muslims would be observing the law of the state and not freely performing their religious obligation as Muslims” [Islam and the Secular State...Cambridge Harvard University press 2008]

The phrase “Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava” or “equal respect for all religions” is popularly thought to be a Hindu concept embraced by Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Gandhi. However some Hindu scholars do not accept it as a part of Hindu tradition. They attribute this phrase to Gandhi who used it first in September 1930 in his talks to his followers to quell divisions between Hindus and Muslims. However, majority of Hindus believe this phrase as one of the key tenets of secularism in India, wherein the state gives equal respect to all religions.

In his speech during the Iranshah Udvada Utsav, 2017 (a cultural festival of Parsi community), The Vice President of India M. Venkaiah Naidu said, “In fact, I have been saying that secularism was in the DNA of every Indian much before it was enshrined in the Constitution. ‘Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava’ epitomizes India’s secular ethos. India is a land of diverse cultures and religions,” He further said, “The secular foundations of the country must be strengthened further and any attempt to create differences in the name of religion by vested interests and religious extremists must be nipped in the bud,”.

Indeed secularism is indispensable in a multi-cultural and multi-religious country like India. Secularism is the beauty of India, mainly because it gives equal respect to all religions and that it is not anti-religious. It is therefore obligatory for the followers of all religions to develop this Indian secularism, for which they shall have to strengthen their peaceful coexistence. Apart from that, we Indians should impart such values to our students, children and people so that can avoid being brainwashed by any anti-Indian secular Muslim or non-Muslim groups.

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