

CUET · POLITICAL SCIENCE · CLASS XI · CODE 323

# Secularism

CUET unit: Indian Constitution at Work / Political Theory —  
Secularism

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## Snapshot

- Defines secularism as a normative doctrine that opposes both inter-religious AND intra-religious domination, and seeks to realise a society free of religiously grounded oppression.
- Distinguishes a theocratic state from a secular state; clarifies that mere separation of religion and state is necessary but not sufficient for being secular.
- Contrasts the Western (mainly American) model of "mutual exclusion" with the Indian model of "principled distance".
- Surveys five major criticisms of Indian secularism: anti-religious, Western import, minoritism, interventionist, vote-bank politics, and the "impossible project" charge.
- High-value CUET zone — definitions, model comparisons, Nehru/Ataturk contrasts, and "principled distance" are repeatedly examined.

## Detailed Notes

### 2.1 Core concepts

Indian secularism rests on a paradox — every party professes it, yet it is beset by doubts from clerics, religious nationalists, politicians, activists and academics. Even though almost every political party "swears by" secularism, "all kinds of anxieties and doubts beset secularism in India" (NCERT Overview, p. 111). Five guiding questions follow: what does secularism mean, is it a Western implant, is it suitable for societies where religion exercises a strong influence, does it pamper minorities, and is it anti-religious? The aim is to appreciate the importance of secularism in a democratic society like India and to grasp the distinctiveness of Indian secularism.

Secularism is defined not by separation of state and religion alone but by the substantive value it protects: opposition to all forms of institutionalised religious domination. The first of these is **inter-religious domination**, where members of one religious community target members of another. Three "starkest" examples illustrate this: more than **2,700 Sikhs were massacred in Delhi and many other parts of the country in 1984** and their families feel the guilty were not punished; **several thousand Hindu Kashmiri Pandits have been forced to leave their homes in the Kashmir valley** and have not been able to return for more than two decades; and more

than **1,000 persons were killed during the post-Godhra riots in Gujarat in 2002**, with surviving family members unable to return to their villages (NCERT §8.1, p. 112). What unites these examples is "discrimination in one form or the other... in each case members of one community are targeted and victimised on account of their religious identity." Secularism "is first and foremost a doctrine that opposes all such forms of inter-religious domination" (NCERT §8.1, p. 112).

But this is "only one crucial aspect" of secularism. An equally important dimension is its opposition to **intra-religious domination**. Religions seldom treat their male and female members equally; sections of Hinduism have faced persistent discrimination — **dalits** have been barred from entering Hindu temples, and in some parts of the country Hindu women cannot enter temples. When religion is organised, "it is frequently taken over by its most conservative faction, which does not tolerate any dissent." Religious fundamentalism in parts of the US has become a "big problem" and endangers peace inside and outside the country; many religions fragment into sects which leads to sectarian violence and persecution of dissenting minorities (NCERT §8.1, p. 113). Thus "religious domination cannot be identified only with inter-religious domination"; it also takes the conspicuous form of intra-religious domination, and "as secularism is opposed to all forms of institutionalised religious domination, it challenges not merely inter-religious but also intra-religious domination" (NCERT §8.1, p. 113).

This makes secularism a **normative doctrine** that "seeks to realise a secular society, i.e., one devoid of either inter-religious or intra-religious domination. Put positively, it promotes freedom within religions, and equality between as well as within religions" (NCERT §8.1, pp. 113–114). This raises the question of what **kind of state** is necessary to realise these goals — addressed in §8.2 on the secular state.

A **theocratic state** is one governed directly by a priestly order. The Papal states of medieval Europe and, in recent times, the Taliban-controlled state lacked separation between religious and political institutions and are "known for their hierarchies, and oppressions, and reluctance to allow freedom of religion to members of other religious groups." If we value peace, freedom and equality, religious institutions and state institutions must be separated (NCERT §8.2, p. 114). But mere non-theocracy is **not** sufficient: "many states which are non-theocratic continue to have a close alliance with a particular religion." Sixteenth-century England favoured the Anglican Church; today Pakistan has Sunni Islam as its official state religion. Such regimes "may leave little scope for internal dissent or religious equality" (NCERT §8.2, pp. 114–115).

Hence "to be truly secular, a state must not only refuse to be theocratic but also have no formal, legal alliance with any religion. The separation of religion-state is, however, a necessary but not a sufficient ingredient of a secular state." A secular state must be committed to principles and goals at least partly derived from non-religious sources — peace, religious freedom, freedom from religiously grounded oppression, discrimination and exclusion, as well as inter- and intra-religious equality (NCERT §8.2, p. 115). Two such conceptions exist: the mainstream Western (American) and the alternative Indian.

The **Western (American) model** is introduced in §8.3. All secular states are neither theocratic nor establish a religion; but in the most commonly prevalent conception, "inspired mainly by the American model, separation of religion and state is understood as **mutual exclusion**: the state will not intervene in the affairs of religion and, in the same manner, religion will not interfere in the affairs of the state. Each has a separate sphere of its own with independent jurisdiction" (NCERT §8.3, p. 115). No policy can have an exclusively religious rationale, and no religious classification can be the basis of any public policy. Similarly, the state cannot aid any religious institution — it cannot fund religious schools, nor can it intervene against religious practices like the denial of priesthood to women. If a religious institution forbids women from becoming priests, "the state can do little about it. If a religious community excommunicates its dissenters, the state can only be a silent witness" (NCERT §8.3, p. 116). Religion, on this view, is a private matter, not a matter of state policy or law.

This common Western conception interprets liberty and equality in an **individualist** manner — liberty of individuals, equality between individuals. There is no scope for the idea that a community has the liberty to follow practices of its own choosing; little scope for community-based or minority rights. Most Western societies were marked by religious homogeneity (except for the presence of the Jews), so they "naturally focused on intra-religious domination" while issues of inter-religious equality and minority rights "are often neglected" (NCERT §8.3, pp. 116–117). Finally, "this form of mainstream secularism has no place for the idea of state-supported religious reform" — a feature that "follows directly from its understanding that the separation of state from church/religion entails a relationship of mutual exclusion."

This contrasts with **Kemal Ataturk's secularism** in Turkey, in the first half of the twentieth century. Ataturk's secularism "was not about principled distance from organised religion; instead it involved active intervention in, and suppression of, religion." Determined to put an end to the **Khalifa** institution, Ataturk modernised Turkey aggressively: he changed his own name from Mustafa Kemal Pasha to Kemal Ataturk ("Father of the Turks"); the **Fez**, the traditional cap worn by Muslims, was **banned by the Hat Law**; Western clothing was encouraged for men and women; the Western (Gregorian) calendar replaced the Turkish calendar; and **in 1928 the new Turkish alphabet, in a modified Latin form, was adopted** (NCERT box "Kemal Ataturk's Secularism", p. 116). This raises a pointed question: can one imagine a secularism that does not give one the freedom to keep one's name, wear one's clothes or use one's language?

The **Indian model** (§8.4) is fundamentally different. Indian secularism "does not focus only on church-state separation and the idea of inter-religious equality is crucial to the Indian conception." What makes Indian secularism distinctive? First, it "arose in the context of deep religious diversity that predated the advent of Western modern ideas and nationalism." There was already a culture of inter-religious tolerance in India, but tolerance is "compatible with religious domination" — it may allow some space to everyone but such freedom is usually limited, and it allows putting up with people one

finds deeply repugnant: "a great virtue if a society is recovering from a major civil war but not in times of peace where people are struggling for equal dignity and respect" (NCERT §8.4, pp. 117–118). The advent of Western modernity brought "hitherto neglected and marginalised notions of equality in Indian thought" to the fore, focusing on equality within the community and replacing hierarchy with inter-community equality. As a result, Indian secularism took on a distinct form as an interaction between pre-existing diversity and ideas from the West.

Indian secularism differs from mainstream Western secularism in three ways. First, Indian secularism "resulted in equal focus on intra-religious and inter-religious domination" — it opposes oppression of **dalits** and women within Hinduism, discrimination against women within Indian Islam or Christianity, and the threats a majority community might pose to the rights of minority religious communities. Second, "Indian secularism deals not only with religious freedom of individuals but also with religious freedom of minority communities" — an individual has the right to profess the religion of his/her choice, and "religious minorities also have a right to exist and to maintain their own culture and educational institutions." Third, "since a secular state must be concerned equally with intra-religious domination, Indian secularism has made room for and is compatible with the idea of state-supported religious reform." The Indian Constitution bans untouchability; the state has enacted several laws abolishing child marriage and lifting the taboo on inter-caste marriage sanctioned by Hinduism (NCERT §8.4, pp. 118–119).

This raises an obvious question: can a state initiate or support religious reforms and yet claim to be secular? The secular character of the Indian state is established by the fact that "it is neither theocratic nor has it established any one or multiple religions." Beyond that, India has adopted "a very sophisticated policy in pursuit of religious equality" — allowing it either to disengage from religion in the American style, or to engage with it if required. The Indian state may engage with religion **negatively** to oppose religious tyranny (the ban on untouchability) and **positively** to grant religious minorities the right to establish and maintain their own educational institutions, which may receive assistance from the state (NCERT §8.4, p. 119). All these "complex strategies" can be adopted by the state to promote peace, freedom and equality.

Indian secularism cannot be captured by the phrase "**equal respect for all religions**". If by this is meant peaceful coexistence or inter-religious toleration, that is not enough because secularism is much more than mere coexistence. If it is meant as equal **respect** for every religion and its practices, then there is "ambiguity that needs clearing." Indian secularism allows for **principled state intervention** in all religions; "such intervention betrays disrespect to some aspects of every religion. For example, religiously sanctioned caste-hierarchies are not acceptable within Indian secularism. The secular state does not have to treat every aspect of every religion with equal respect. It allows equal disrespect for some aspects of organised religions" (NCERT §8.4, p. 120).

Nehru's secularism also contrasts with Atatürk's. **Nehru** described secularism as "**Equal protection by the State to all religions**", responding to a student who asked what

secularism meant in independent India — a secular state, Nehru said, is one that "protects all religions, but does not favour one at the expense of others and does not itself adopt any religion as the state religion" (NCERT box "Nehru on Secularism", p. 117). Nehru did not practise any religion, nor did he believe in God, but his secularism did not mean hostility to religion — "in that sense Nehru was very different from Ataturk in Turkey." Nehru was not in favour of complete separation between religion and state: "a secular state can interfere in matters of religion to bring about social reform." Nehru himself played a key role in enacting laws abolishing caste discrimination, dowry and **sati**, and extending legal rights and social freedom to Indian women. On one thing Nehru was always firm and uncompromising: secularism for him meant complete opposition to communalism of all kinds; "for him it was also the only guarantee of the unity and integrity of India" (NCERT box, p. 117).

**§ 8.5 Criticisms of Indian secularism.** The **anti-religious** charge is rebutted: secularism is against institutionalised religious domination, not religion itself; it protects religious freedom and equality and so protects religious identity — though "it does undermine some forms of religious identity: those which are dogmatic, violent, fanatical, exclusivist and those which foster hatred of other religions" (NCERT §8.5, pp. 120–121). The **Western-import** charge: even Western secularism is not purely Christian, since Western states became secular by challenging the control of established religious authority over social and political life; "the idea of separation can be interpreted differently"; India's variant has both Western and non-Western origins, drawing on Church-state separation in the West and peaceful coexistence of religions in India (NCERT §8.5, p. 121). The **minoritism** charge is rebutted by two analogies. The train-compartment example imagines four passengers — one a smoking addict, one a non-smoker, the other two mild smokers; if the non-smoker has asthma, voting to allow smoking would harm his fundamental interest, so "when it comes to fundamental interests, voting as a democratic procedure is inappropriate. A person has a prior right to the satisfaction of his or her significant interests... The most fundamental interest of minorities must not be harmed and must be protected by constitutional law" (NCERT §8.5, pp. 121–122). The staircase/ramp analogy further illustrates that providing a ramp for differently-abled film-goers is not a special privilege but equal access; "the lesson is that minority rights need not be nor should be viewed as special privileges" (NCERT §8.5, pp. 122–123).

The **interventionist** charge — that secularism interferes excessively in the religious freedom of communities — is rebutted on the ground that Indian secularism follows the **principle of principled distance**, which also allows for non-interference; "interference need not automatically mean coercive intervention." Personal-law reform poses a dilemma: should family-law matters be seen as community-specific rights protected by the Constitution, or as instances of intra-religious domination because they treat women unequally? Such conflicts "are part and parcel of any complex doctrine but they are not something we need to live with forever. Personal laws can be reformed in such a way that they continue to exemplify both minority rights and equality between men and women. But such reform should neither be brought about by State or group

coercion nor should the state adopt a policy of total distance from it. The state must act as a facilitator by supporting liberal and democratic voices within every religion" (NCERT §8.5, pp. 123–124). The **vote-bank politics** charge is partly conceded: in a democracy, politicians are bound to seek votes; the wrong only occurs when the welfare of the minority group is sought "at the cost of the welfare and rights of other groups" or when a group is mobilised as a single monolithic unit, which distorts electoral politics, fosters "minority appeasement", lets political parties neglect substantive issues for emotive ones, and "exacerbates social division" (NCERT §8.5, pp. 124–125). Finally, the **impossible-project** charge: that secularism cannot work in societies of deep religious difference. In answer, Indian civilisation shows coexistence is realisable; the Ottoman Empire is "a stirring example"; and with globalisation Europe, America and parts of the Middle East "are beginning to resemble India in the diversity of cultures and religions which are present in their societies" — "these societies are watching the future of the Indian experiment with keen interest" (NCERT §8.5, p. 125).

## 2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Secularism	A normative doctrine that opposes all forms of institutionalised religious domination — both inter- and intra-religious.	113
Secular society	A society devoid of either inter- or intra-religious domination; promotes freedom within religions and equality between as well as within religions.	113– 114
Theocratic State	A state governed directly by a priestly order, lacking separation of religious and political institutions (Papal states, Taliban-controlled state).	114
Established religion	An official state religion (e.g., Anglican Church in 16th-century England; Sunni Islam in Pakistan).	114– 115
Secular state	A state that refuses to be theocratic and has no formal, legal alliance with any religion AND is committed to ends partly derived from non-religious sources.	115
Inter-religious domination	Discrimination/persecution by members of one religious community against another (1984 anti-Sikh massacre, Kashmiri Pandits, post-Godhra Gujarat 2002).	112
Intra-religious domination	Discrimination within a religion (e.g., against <b>dalits</b> , women, dissenting sects).	113
Mutual exclusion (Western model)	State and religion stay strictly out of each other's affairs; no state aid to religion and vice versa; no state-supported religious reform.	115
Principled distance (Indian model)		119, 123

Term	Definition	Page
	The state may engage with or disengage from religion depending on whether intervention promotes peace, freedom and equality.	
Personal laws	Laws on marriage, inheritance and family matters governed differently by different religions; site of the personal-law reform dilemma.	123
Vote-bank politics	Mobilisation of a social group to vote en masse as a monolithic unit for a candidate/party; distorts electoral politics when it harms others' rights.	124
Minority appeasement	Wrongful pandering to a minority by political parties at the cost of other groups' rights or equality of all citizens.	124–125
Anti-religious charge	Criticism that secularism is hostile to religion — as confusing opposition to religious domination with opposition to religion.	120
Western-import charge	Criticism that secularism is a Western concept; rebutted by noting that the idea of separation can be interpreted differently and India has its own peaceful-coexistence inheritance.	121
Minoritism charge	Criticism that secularism gives special privileges to minorities; rebutted by the train-smoker and ramp/staircase analogies.	121–123
Interventionist charge	Criticism that secularism interferes excessively with religious communities; rebutted by the principled-distance reply.	123
Impossible project	Criticism that secularism cannot work in religiously divided societies; rebutted by Indian and Ottoman examples and the global trend.	125
State-supported religious reform	Distinctively Indian feature — constitutional ban on untouchability, laws abolishing child marriage, lifting the taboo on inter-caste marriage.	119
Hat Law (Turkey)	Ataturk-era law banning the <b>Fez</b> as part of his aggressive modernising secularism.	116
Khalifa	Institution in Turkish public life that Ataturk was determined to abolish.	116
Equal protection by the State to all religions (Nehru)	Nehru's definition of secularism — protect all religions, favour none, adopt none as state religion.	117
Equal disrespect	Phrase to convey that Indian secularism allows principled state intervention against (e.g.) caste hierarchy — not "equal respect" for all aspects of every religion.	120

## 2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

- **Kemal Ataturk's Secularism box** (p. 116): Hat Law banning the **Fez**; Western clothing encouraged for men and women; Gregorian calendar replacing the Turkish calendar; new Turkish alphabet in a modified Latin form adopted in 1928; name change from Mustafa Kemal Pasha to Kemal Ataturk ("Father of the Turks").
- **Nehru on Secularism box** (p. 117): "Equal protection by the State to all religions"; key contrast with Ataturk's hostile approach; Nehru not in favour of complete separation; supports state interference for social reform but is opposed to communalism of all kinds.
- **Train smoker analogy** (pp. 121–122): four passengers, smoker addict vs. asthmatic non-smoker — illustrates that majority voting is inappropriate when fundamental interests are at stake; minority rights protect such interests.
- **Staircase/ramp analogy** (pp. 122–123): a ramp for differently-abled film-goers is not a special privilege but equal access — minority rights work the same way.
- **France-vs-India hijab cartoon** (p. 118): two students discuss the French ban on religious markers (turbans/veils) in educational institutions vs. India's permission; illustrates principled distance.
- **Gazetted holidays table** (p. 126, dates given for 2019): Republic Day, Maha Shivaratri, Holi, Mahavir Jayanti, Good Friday, Buddha Purnima, Id-ul-Fitr, Id-ul-Zuha (Bakrid), Independence Day, Janmashtami, Muharram, Mahatma Gandhi's Birthday, Dussehra, Diwali, Milad-un-Nabi, Guru Nanak's Birthday, Christmas Day — used to illustrate Indian secularism's accommodation of multiple faiths.
- **Process chart of secular-state requirements**: refuse theocracy → no formal alliance with any religion → pursue ends from non-religious sources (peace, religious freedom, equality) → choose between mutual exclusion (American) and principled distance (Indian) → if principled distance, may engage negatively (ban on untouchability) or positively (aid to minority educational institutions).

## 2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- "Secularism = separation of religion and state" is INCOMPLETE — separation is necessary but not sufficient. The state must also be committed to non-religious ends (p. 115).
- "Indian secularism = equal respect for all religions" is REJECTED — Indian secularism allows "equal disrespect for some aspects" (e.g., caste hierarchies) (p. 120).
- **Nehru ≠ Ataturk**. Nehru did not believe in God but was not hostile to religion; Ataturk's secularism was actively suppressive of religion — banning the **Fez**, replacing the calendar, changing the alphabet (p. 117, p. 116).
- A non-theocratic state is **not automatically secular** (16th-century England had an established Anglican Church; modern Pakistan has Sunni Islam as state religion) (pp. 114–115).

- **Principled distance ≠ mutual exclusion** — it allows both engagement and disengagement depending on the values served (p. 123).
- Minority rights ≠ special privileges (ramp analogy) — they protect fundamental interests just as a ramp gives equal access (pp. 122–123).
- **State-supported religious reform** is a distinctively Indian feature — Western mainstream secularism has "no place" for it (p. 117).
- The three inter-religious examples are **1984 anti-Sikh massacre, Kashmiri Pandits, post-Godhra Gujarat 2002** — NTA distractors may invent other years.
- The new Turkish alphabet was adopted in **1928** (not 1923 or 1930).
- **Hat Law** banned the Fez; the Fez is the cap, not a robe — distractor sometimes inverts.
- The Ottoman Empire is cited as a "stirring example" of coexistence — NTA may confuse with Mughal Empire.
- Vote-bank politics is wrong **only** when it sacrifices others' welfare or builds a monolithic group identity — it is not wrong **per se** to seek a group's vote (p. 124).

## 2.5 Key concepts / events / examples table

#	Source / Event / Thinker	Key concept	Page
1	1984 anti-Sikh massacre	Example of inter-religious domination — more than 2,700 Sikhs killed in Delhi and elsewhere	112
2	Kashmiri Pandit exodus	Inter-religious domination — Hindus forced out of the Kashmir valley for over two decades	112
3	Post-Godhra Gujarat riots (2002)	Inter-religious domination — more than 1,000 killed; survivors unable to return	112
4	Dalits barred from Hindu temples	Example of intra-religious domination within Hinduism	113
5	US religious fundamentalism	Cited as example of conservative-faction takeover of organised religion	113
6	Papal states / Taliban	Examples of theocratic states lacking separation of religious and political institutions	114
7	16th-century England (Anglican Church)	Non-theocratic state with established religion — not truly secular	114–115
8	Pakistan (Sunni Islam as state religion)	Contemporary example of established religion	115
9	American model	"Mutual exclusion" — state and religion strictly out of each other's affairs; no state aid to religion; no state-supported religious reform	115–117
10	Kemal Ataturk (Turkey)		116

#	Source / Event / Thinker	Key concept	Page
		Aggressive modernising secularism — Hat Law banning Fez, Gregorian calendar, new Turkish alphabet (1928)	
11	Jawaharlal Nehru	"Equal protection by the State to all religions"; opposed to communalism of all kinds	117
12	Indian Constitution — ban on untouchability	Example of state-supported religious reform (negative engagement)	119
13	Aid to minority educational institutions	Example of positive engagement under principled distance	119
14	Ottoman Empire	Historical example used to rebut the "impossible project" charge	125
15	Globalisation of Western societies	Cited as a contemporary trend bringing Western societies closer to India's diversity	125

## Practice MCQs

## PYQ Alignment

This chapter is high-yield in CUET Political Science (UG) papers — typical questions test the difference between the Western and Indian models, the meaning of "principled distance", Nehru's vs. Ataturk's conception, examples of state-supported religious reform, and rebuttals to the criticisms of Indian secularism (minoritism, vote-bank politics, anti-religious charge). Expect 1–2 statement-based and 1 match-the-following question from this chapter each year.