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THE CRUX OF INDIAN SECULARISM - GANDHIAN UNIVERSALISM AND THE SECULAR STATE

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Dharma,
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Abstract

Gandhian secularism views the state as religiously neutral, protecting all faiths equally, while emphasizing that religion is a personal matter for spiritual growth, not political power. It promotes sarva dharma samabhava (equal respect for all religions), advocating for a pluralistic India where different faiths coexist harmoniously, fostering an inclusive culture rooted in ethics, tolerance, and unity, rather than a separation of religion from public life. Unlike Western models that often advocate for a strict separation or even secularization (removal of religion from public life), Gandhi sought integration of ethical values from all religions into public life and governance, viewing religion as essential for a moral society, not a hindrance. In essence, Gandhi envisioned a secular India that wasn't anti-religious but rather religiously tolerant, emphasizing universal ethics and mutual respect over dogma, making it a unique model for multicultural societies. Key Principles of Gandhian Secularism comprise of a) State Neutrality: The state should be secular, ensuring freedom of religion for all citizens without showing preference or promoting any single faith, b) Religion as Personal: Religion is a private, spiritual pursuit, separate from statecraft, though deeply intertwined with morality and ethics, c) Sarva Dharma Sambhava: Equal respect and tolerance for all religions; no religion holds a monopoly on truth, leading to mutual respect, d) Unity in Diversity: A vision for India where all communities (Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsis, etc.) belong equally and



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	live together, forming a composite nation, e) Spiritual Politics: While separating the state from religion, Gandhi believed politics should be guided by spiritual and ethical principles (dharma) for the welfare of all (Sarvodaya), f) Interfaith Harmony: Encouraging dialogue and understanding between faiths, not conversion, to build bridges and reduce conflict, as seen in his friendships and public prayers.
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1. INTRODUCTION

India despite the pervasive importance of Hinduism is secular. Much of this credit for this must unquestionably go to the leadership which Mahatma Gandhi gave to congress during the struggle against British rule and to the subsequent ascendancy of Nehru, a declared agnostic. Yet it remains unlikely that modern India would be a secular state, if it were not for the tradition of tolerance so fundamental to Hinduism. As we have seen earlier that Hindu society as a whole has historically displayed tolerance towards religious minorities (Ghosh,2000:29). It is no accident that a community of sun-worshipping Parses, originally from Persia with strange and to most Hindus probably repugnant ways of disposing their dead, should have been permitted in peace to establish themselves as a prosperous community in India. Indeed, the small community of Jews in Cochin, on the western seaboard of India, received for several centuries' substantial hospitality with grant of land, from the Hindu rulers in the area, to suffer certain persecution including the destruction of their synagogue with the arrival in the fifth century of the Portuguese.

Thus India, though always loyal to her religion Hinduism, welcomed non-Indian religions. There is no evidence of the persecution of any of these alien faiths. Their numbers quietly pursued their own cults, small but significant elements in the religious life of the coastal cities, while the great bodies of Hindus were scarcely aware of the alien faiths, and in no way antagonistic to them. This capacity for toleration contributed to the characteristic resiliency of Hinduism, and helped to assure its survival. Hinduism, a broad-minded tolerant religion with secular ideal is the flow of India's life. It never tried to convert non-Hindus into Hinduism (ibid). For the Hindus, all forms of worship are valid just as all manifestations of gods and goddess are worthy of worship. Despite the overwhelming allegiance of over 82% to Hinduism, there exist so many religious communities, some of them substantial, pursuing their various faiths in abundant freedom. The Hindu temple may be the most evident symbol of religious India (Beteille, 1994:559). But there are symbols too in the hundreds of thousand mosques churches and Jain temples, Buddhists viharas, Sikh gurudwaras Jewish synagogues Zoroastrian fire temples and the Towers of Silence in Bombay where the Parses leave their dead.

2. RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND SECULAR ETHOS

India always remained India and centuries of Muslims influence could not penetrate deep enough so that it might lead to the entire transformation of Indian society and polity. Hinduism suffered greatly when the ragged Muslim conquerors reduced temples to rubble, putting hundreds of thousands of Hindus to the sword and forcibly converted the survivors to Islam. (Ghosh,2000:32) Despite so many conquests, so much battles and plunders, so many forcible conversions to Islam



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the gated of Hinduism were never surrendered. India stood firm in her basic philosophy of life in her tolerance, concept of universal brotherhood, in her humanness and her spirit of secularism of 'live and let leave'. It is resignation thought to Hinduism, with tolerance that is the part of it, has a natural genesis; the genesis is all of Indian history, a record written not only into the stances of multitude of monuments, but in the faces of the Indian peasantry. If Indians exhibit a generic resignation and tolerance (Smith,1967:231), these are the final attributes of self-defense.

Secularism in India is as old as Indian history itself. Even before the birth of Christ, Emperor Asoka propagated secularism and invited men of all faiths into his court. He strictly prohibited any discrimination against persons of any faith rather than his own (ibid:234). The keynote of Asoka's rule was humanity in internal administration and the abandonment of aggressive war. In accordance with the humanitarian ethics of Buddhism he followed the doctrine of ahimsa, then rapidly spreading among religious people of all sects, banned animal sacrifices. Akbar (ibid :56) liberated himself from orthodox Muslim rule and too firm personal command of his court and its policy. His unique achievement was based on his recognition of the pluralistic character on Indian society and his acceptance of the imperative of Hindu co-operation if he hoped to rule the empire for any length of time. Akbar, first of all decided to woo the Raj puts, marrying the Hindus, abolished the pilgrim tax (paid only by the non-Muslims) and curtailed restrictions from Hindu pilgrim travelling to worship at sacred spots throughout India. Akbar participated in the Govardhan puja function and the royal palace used to be illuminated during Diwali and holy. He made rakhi bandhan, a national festival. Shivaji rose in revolt against the religious bigotry of Aurangzeb but he never offended Muslim religious susceptibilities (ibid). He strongly prohibited desecration of mosque and molestation of captured Muslim women. The Bhakti and Sufi movements especially with the influence of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Bengal, Ramananda and Kabir in Uttar Pradesh, Mira Bai in Rajasthan, Tukaram and Namdev Trilochan and Paramananda in Maharashtra, Vallabha Swami in Telengana, Sadhana in Sind worked out to bring about a rapprochement between Hindus and Muslims. The chief protagonist of this understanding between Hindus and Muslims was Kabir who described himself as "the child of Rama and Allah". While the Muslim conquerors had tried to destroy non-believers and their places of worship, the Sufi leaders welcomed the Hindus and embraced them as brothers (Pandya,1993:3-9). Though many lower caste Hindus who were denied of their rights in the society by the upper caste Hindus were converted to Misaims, which is not a forced conversion. In food, dress, custom, speech, music, in fact everything except the place of worship, the two communities become identical in spite of the communal forces which tried to disintegrate India's unity (ibid:12).

Hence, we should rightly opine that India shows an excellent example of religious tolerance. Gandhian secularism, rooted in Sarva Dharma Samabhava ("equal respect for all religions"), views India's secularism as inclusive, not separationist like the West, recognizing religion's value while demanding state neutrality and promoting harmony (Chandoke,1991:12). Gandhi saw religion as a path to truth, not conflict, advocating for unity through equal regard for Hinduism, Islam,



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Christianity, etc., aiming to build a strong, pluralistic nation where faiths coexist, emphasizing truth lived over doctrinal claims, fostering mutual respect for a unified India (Madan,1997:235). Core Principles of Gandhian Secularism includes a) Equal Respect (Sarva Dharma Samabhava): The core idea that all religions hold equal value and deserve equal respect, fostering communal harmony, b) Inclusivity, Not Separation: Unlike Western secularism (separation of state and religion), Indian secularism embraces all faiths; the state doesn't promote one or reject religion but treats all with equal consideration, c) Religion as Moral Compass: Gandhi viewed religion as a source of ethics, truth, and human welfare, essential for national unity, not a tool for division, d) Beyond Doctrine: He emphasized truth lived (conscientious action) over truth professed (doctrinal belief), respecting the spirit of each faith rather than promoting one specific set of beliefs, e) Unity in Diversity: A vision of India as a garden with diverse flowers, all contributing beauty and fragrance, woven into one nation. Gandhi's idea of secularism aims to prevent disintegrative forces that hampers unity and integrity of the country. Hence key aspects of his secular principles (ibid: 238) are a) a response to communalism that developed during the anti-colonial struggle to unite Hindus and Muslims against British rule, countering sectarian divides.

According to Gandhi the state should protect all religions equally, ensuring freedom for all communities to flourish, as reflected in constitutional provisions like equal protection of law (Article 14). Gandhi's spiritual commitment is indebted in the idea of achieving universal brotherhood among the Indians living together. For Gandhi, it was a deep spiritual conviction, not just a political tactic, a path to achieving universal brotherhood. In essence, Gandhian secularism is a unique Indian model where the state facilitates religious pluralism, upholding the principle that all paths to truth deserve equal honor, contributing to a strong, morally grounded national identity (Nigam, 2006:14).

3. GANDHI'S VIEWS OF GOD AND RELIGION

Gandhi made a clear distinction between god and religion. For him, they were fundamentally different entities and could at best address each other and could never come on a common platform. The reason for this, he stated was that god was perfect and religion (Madan, 1971:56), being man's humble attempt at understanding this divine perfection, was necessarily imperfect.

Gandhi believed God is one and he variously equated him to love and truth. However, for him leading a godly life was more important than debating about the true nature of God. The poor and the downtrodden were for Gandhi the living representatives of God on earth, and even a little work for the amelioration of their troubles was a more pious act than performing a thousand rituals by spending millions. The influence of a number of religions can be seen in Gandhi's understanding of God. Gandhi read the scriptures and doctrines of all major world religions with great interest and finally arrived at a conclusion that they are all 'more or less' the same. The phrase 'more or less' was a term he systematically used because he thought that no religion could grasp God in its entirety (Bharucha,1991:167-180) . They were all equal in their imperfection, which is why Gandhi never foresaw a future where there will be a single religion preaching a single God. He



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knew that geographic, climatic and demographic conditions influenced the way the inhabitants of a region envision god, and there can never be a single way in which god will be understood, because these conditions will never be the same across the world. For Gandhi that was not even that important. In *Hind Swaraj* (1946), Gandhi expressed his view eloquently when he said:

Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as we reach the same goal? In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals (ibid: 182).

Despite his belief in one God; Gandhi never entertained any hope of a single world religion, as that would be a fantasy. Gandhi believed this fantasy to be not only simplistic, but potentially dangerous as well, as it could lead to various coercive measures to succumb people to it. His pointed criticism triggered against the missionary practices introduced by the British has its origin to the same belief. Gandhi upheld tolerance (Kaviraj, 2013:89) and had a lasting faith in non-violent co-existence of all religious schools. Gandhi was critical of the term 'tolerance' as he thought it was patronizing, as if the one who uses it has a firm belief in the superiority of his own faith and was magnanimous enough to allow other faiths to exist under his confirmed superiority. This to Gandhi (Gandhi, Collected Works) was an error. His particular brand of secularism was based on mutual respect. He believed they were 'branches of the same majestic tree'. Gandhi believed all religions ultimately described only attributes of God but never his being. It was the fault of the limitation of human understanding and imagination, and not of any particular faith.

Religious practices for Gandhi were equally vacuous if not meant for the general good and betterment of society (Raghavan, 1983:72). Leading a humble life with a strong belief in God was more of a religious duty for Gandhi than to undertake elaborate rituals. He put great stress on prayer, non-violence and celibacy as ways of spiritual enlightenment and believed that salvation was the ultimate goal of life.

4. GANDHI'S SECULARISM AND INDIA

Gandhi's secular theories took on a special significance in the particular context of the Indian national movement. Indian society has been traditionally plagued by the evils of caste and creed-based discrimination. The caste-oriented stratification of the Indian society (Mehta, 2010:70) has hindered all chances of national unification from the early days of Indian society. The situation was complicated by the presence of various religious groups within the country, who were not ready to compromise any ground to reach a platform of commonality (Bilgrami, 2003:35). The traditional rhetoric of the religious and the self-styled spiritual preachers fueled these divisions more often than not. It was a great pain for Gandhi that India's age-old tradition of religious tolerance was not being maintained when it was more needed. What particularly disturbed him was the realization that it would be impossible to organize any nationwide movement against the common opposition of the British oppressors, if society continues to remain divided on religious grounds. Secularism for Gandhi was an absolute necessity to bring about any form of constructive and all-encompassing political movement (Godrej, 2011:19).



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Gandhi preached his ideals of secularism and religious tolerance across the length and breadth of the country. He showed his consolidation to the Muslim leaders through the support that Congress extended to the Khilafat movement (Mehta, 2010:52). Gandhi wrote extensively on the need of secularism in India, and made speeches to the same effect all over the country. It was not the easiest of tasks for Gandhi. The British were bent upon implementing the policy of divide and rule, and it took its worst form after the declaration of separate elections for the different communities in the declaration of the Government of India Act in 1935. Indian National movement has always been plagued by communal tensions, and haunted it till the very end (Gandhi, Collected Works). Gandhi's monumental efforts at bringing together the various communities in India were not fully realized. The British policy of 'divide and rule' had its effects, and the demand for a separate Muslim nation was fast gaining currency. Gandhi was hurt, but he realized his helplessness. Even at the intense riots on the eve of Indian independence, Gandhi was on the roads trying to unite the warring communal factions. Even his death can in many ways be related to his life-long commitment to secular principles (Bharghav, 1998:8).

5. GANDHIAN UNIVERSALISM AND THE CONCEPT OF SECULAR STATE

This approach to the secular state is clearly revealed in Gandhi's statements on the proposal to partition India and create a Muslim state. Gandhi's religious convictions were of course in line with the Hindu tradition. In 1928 he declared, "After long study and experience, I have come to these conclusions, that (1) all religions are true, (2) all religions have some error in them, (3) all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism. My veneration for other faiths is the same as for my own faith". Because all religions are true, Gandhi was convicted that a state based primarily on adherence to a particular religion was worse than un-democratic. It was a negation of truth (Beteille, 1994:559-566).

In 1940s, Gandhi readily admitted that if eighty million Muslims insisted on the partition of India, nothing could prevent it. This was the political aspect of the problem, and it had to be recognized (ibid: 560). But the more important religious aspect was that "at the bottom of the cry for partition is the belief that Islam is an exclusive brotherhood and anti-Hindu". Gandhi thus opposed the partition proposal on religious grounds and called it "an untruth". "Partition means a patent truth. My whole soul rebels against the idea that Hinduism and Islam represent two antagonistic cultures and doctrines. To assent to such a doctrine is for me denial of god (Pandya, 1993:8-9). For I believe with my whole soul that the god of the Koran is also the god of the Gita, and that we are all, no matter by what name designated children of the same god". The proposal for the creation of the Muslim state, Pakistan was the logical culmination of religious exclusivism, and ran directly counter to Gandhi's deepest convictions (Ayyub, 1968:167-70). Furthermore, Gandhi's conception of the spiritual nature of true religion made him reject any form of state support for religion. "We have suffered enough from state aided religion and a state church", he wrote in 1948. "A society or a group which depends partly or wholly on state aid for the existence of its religion does not deserve, or better still, does not have any religion worth the name" (Buultjens, 1956:566).



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The state must be so organized that all religions can peacefully coexist. In order to ensure this, the function of the state must be non-religious, and the state must deal with people as individual and not as members of religious communities. Gandhi raised the question,” what conflict of interest can there be between Hindus and Muslims, in matter of revenue, sanitation, police, justice, or the use of public convenience? The difference can only be in religious usages and observances with which a secular state (Madan, 1997:235) has no concern”. The capacity of the state for serving the people,” stops short of the service of the different faiths, and the services it can render apply to all irrespective of their faiths”.

Hindu tolerance is far more than an intellectual abstraction expounded by Radhakrishnan and Gandhi. It is indeed a living tradition which has contributed vitally to the establishment of a secular democratic state in India. There is a doctrinal assertion of the essential oneness of all religions, to which may educate Indians (and not only Hindus) subscribe as a self-evident truth. More important however, is the general attitude of “live and let live” toward all manifestations of religious diversity. The ancient tradition, Hindu in its origin, is an integral part of the Indian way of life which is shared by all communities (Chandhoke, 1999:11). But so far as India is concerned we can say with pride and glory that it is the main trait of our ancient civilization, that we have been steeped in it for thousands of years. In other countries differences of thought and action led to mutual warfare and bloodshed but in India they were resolved in a spirit of compromise and toleration.

While the social attitude of tolerance is an unmixed asset, the proposition that all religions are equally true and ultimately the same have significant limitations as theoretical foundation for the secular state (Kaviraj, 2013:89).

First, the theory will not be acceptable to those Muslims, Christians and others who believe that there are elements of ultimate uniqueness in their respective faiths. Any theory which cannot be broadly shared by the members of the minority communities is of limited usefulness.

Second, the theory is itself an unverifiable religious dogma, and any attempt on the part of the state to propagate it would come into sharp conflict with the basic principles of the secular state. Radhakrishnan hence opined,” Indian state follows absolute neutrality, but at the same time preserves unity of all religion”.

Third the assertion that all creeds are equally true can lead, paradoxically to a kind of religious tolerance. A group of Christians made the following observations:” The assumption that all religions are true in different ways leading to the same goal is claimed to be the true basis of tolerance”.

Lastly, the proposed basis for a secular state which we will consider here places no limitation on the religious functions of the state except that of equal treatment to all religions. A system in which a state Department of Religion Affairs distributed large grants to all religions and exercised vast powers of control over their internal affairs would also be in perfect accordance with this principle. And if India’s government is to be an institution integrated with her people’s life, if it is to be a



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true democracy and not a superimposed western institution staged in Indian dress, religion must have an important and recognized place in it, with impartiality and equal reverence for all the creeds and denominations prevailing in India. This would be historically consistent with the peaceful revolution brought about by our Nation's father. While the theory of Hindu tolerance (Ghosh, 2000:29-32) has these weaknesses as a theoretical basis, its significance should not be underestimated. A theory which has strong roots in the indigenous thought and culture of India, as this one has, is an invaluable asset in creating a deep sense of acceptance of the secular state. Intellectually, psychologically and religiously, the theory is a powerful one in developing the broad-based conviction that secularism belongs in India.

6. CONCLUSION

Gandhi's basic approach to secularism in India was derived not only from abstract principles and ideals; his insight into the processes of secularization was derived from his empirical view or insight into the complexity of the Indian social structure. Gandhi had a dynamic and not a static view of the Indian social structure. He recognized from the point of view of reconstruction of the Indian polity not the primacy of the religious divisions but the existence of multi-religious, regional economics, societies and cultures in a country of sub-continental dimensions like India. Again, in Gandhi's view "the division between classes and masses" is more basic than the division between Hindus and Musslamans. Gandhi's Ramrajya is an idealized expression of a society free from "the division between the classes and the masses", it was a peasants' Utopia and not a Hindu Raj (Parekh, 2009:135-65).

The concept of secularism as defined above by Gandhi constitutes the bedrock of Indian nationalism. It evolved in and through the national struggle for political independence and it was ultimately incorporated and embodied in the Constitution of the sovereign republic of India. The upholding of secularism then became the constitutional obligation of the Indian nation-state. It is clear that Indian secularism grew not in the process of direct encounter and clash with religion as in the West. Secularism in India grew as an integrative concept, transcending religions on the one hand and tapping the unifying forces promoted by the secularization process within the religions of India themselves on the other. Indian secularism is the fruit jointly of Religious Reformation and Modern Enlightenment in the Indian context (Parekh, 2003:18). The thoughts of Gandhi provide a bridge between these two major thought-streams in modern India. One of the major connecting links between these two epoch-making thought currents is the idea of social equality. Indeed, Indian secularism acts as a bridge between religions in a multi-religious country via the secular concept of equality.

7. AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

The writers affirm that they have no connections to, or engagement with, any group or body that provides financial or non-financial assistance for the topics or resources covered in this manuscript.



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8. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

9. PLAGIARISM POLICY

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Roy Krishna (2026). *The Crux of Indian Secularism - Gandhian Universalism and the Secular State. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(1), 49-58.

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