Chapter 8: Secularism

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Which of the following do you feel are compatible with the idea of secularism? Give reasons.
(a) Absence of domination of one religious group by another.
(b) Recognition of a state religion.
(c) Equal state support to all religions.
(d) Mandatory prayers in schools.
(e) Allowing separate educational institutions for any minority community.
(f) Appointment of temple management bodies by the government.
(g) Intervention of state to ensure entry of Dalits in temples.

(a) Compatible. Secularism is first and foremost opposed to inter-religious domination, and equally to domination within a religion.
(b) Not compatible. A secular state is neither theocratic nor has any formal, legal alliance with a religion; official religions, like Anglicanism in sixteenth-century England or Sunni Islam in Pakistan today, leave little room for dissent or equality.
(c) Compatible only if the support is even-handed and aimed at equality. The strict western model forbids aid to religious institutions, but the Indian state may engage positively, for example by assisting minority-run educational institutions, so long as no religion is favoured.
(d) Not compatible. Compulsory prayer gives a religious rationale to a public institution and ignores the freedom of those of other faiths or none.
(e) Compatible. The Indian Constitution gives religious minorities the right to establish and maintain their own educational institutions, which may receive state assistance.
(f) Doubtful. Indian secularism permits principled state intervention in religion, but government control of one community's temples while leaving other religions untouched would breach equal treatment; it is defensible only for reform or administration applied on the same principle to all.
(g) Compatible. This is state-supported reform against intra-religious domination, like the ban on untouchability.

Q2 Some of the key characteristics of western and Indian model of secularism have got mixed up. Separate them and make a new table.

Western Secularism:
- Strict non-interference of religion and state in each other's affairs (mutual exclusion).
- Less attention to community-based rights; little scope for minority rights.
- The individual and his or her rights are at the centre.
- Equality between individuals is stressed, with the focus mainly on intra-religious domination (equality between sects or within a religion).

Indian Secularism:
- State-supported religious reform is allowed, for example the ban on untouchability.
- Equality between different religious groups is a key concern.

- Attention to minority rights.
- Rights of both the individual and the religious community are protected.

The Indian model gives equal focus to intra-religious and inter-religious domination.

Q3 What do you understand by secularism? Can it be equated with religious tolerance?

Secularism is a normative doctrine that seeks a society free of both inter-religious and intra-religious domination. It promotes freedom within religions and equality between and within them. It opposes institutionalised religious domination but is not anti-religious. A secular state is neither theocratic nor formally allied to any religion, and it pursues ends such as peace, religious freedom and equality that are at least partly drawn from non-religious sources.

It cannot be equated with religious tolerance. Tolerance is compatible with domination: it may give everyone some space, but that freedom is limited, and it lets you merely put up with people you find repugnant. That is a virtue after a civil war, but not when people are struggling for equal dignity and respect in times of peace. Secularism demands more than peaceful coexistence; it requires equality, including equality within each religion, for example opposing caste hierarchies sanctioned by religion.

Q4 Do you agree with the following statements? Give reasons for supporting or opposing any of them.
(a) Secularism does not allow us to have a religious identity.
(b) Secularism is against inequality within a religious group or between different religious groups.
(c) Secularism has a western-Christian origin. It is not suitable for India.

(a) Disagree. Secularism promotes religious freedom and equality, so it protects religious identity rather than threatening it. It undermines only those forms of identity that are dogmatic, violent, fanatical, exclusivist or that foster hatred of other religions. The real question is whether what is undermined is intrinsically worthy or unworthy.

(b) Agree. Secularism opposes all institutionalised religious domination, both between religions (inter-religious) and within them (intra-religious). Indian secularism opposes the oppression of dalits and women within Hinduism, discrimination against women within Islam or Christianity, and threats a majority may pose to minorities.

(c) Disagree. Many things in India, from trousers to parliamentary democracy, are of western origin, but the deeper point is that secularism has both western and non-western origins. The western model is not a product of the Christian world, since western states became secular by challenging established religious authority. Mutual exclusion is not the defining feature of all secular states. India evolved its own variant, shaped by deep religious diversity and the idea of peaceful coexistence, so it is not a mere implant.

Q5 Indian secularism focuses on more than the religion-state separation. Explain.

Indian secularism is not limited to church-state separation, as western secularism largely is. It arose amid deep religious diversity and combines older traditions of coexistence with ideas of equality from western modernity. Its distinctive features are:
- It gives equal focus to intra-religious and inter-religious domination, opposing the oppression of dalits and women within religions as well as threats to minorities from the majority.
- It protects the religious freedom of communities as well as individuals. Individuals may profess the religion of their choice, and minorities have the right to maintain their own culture and educational institutions.
- It permits state-supported religious reform, such as the ban on untouchability and laws against child marriage and in favour of inter-caste marriage.

The state is neither theocratic nor does it establish any religion. Beyond that, it may either disengage from religion or engage with it, negatively to oppose religious tyranny or positively, as when it assists minority institutions, in order to promote peace, freedom and equality.

Q6 Explain the concept of principled distance.

Principled distance is the Indian state's approach to religion. It rejects separation as strict mutual exclusion, so the state is neither barred from engaging with religion nor required to do so. It neither establishes a religion nor is run by a religious order, and it decides how to relate to religion according to principles, namely peace, freedom and equality.

This allows flexible strategies. The state may keep away, as in the American style, where non-interference serves these values. It may intervene negatively against religious tyranny, as in banning untouchability. It may engage positively, as in giving minorities the right to run educational institutions that can receive state aid. It also supports religious reform without coercion, acting as a facilitator for liberal and democratic voices within each religion. Because it permits non-interference too, it is not excessively interventionist.