Indian Secularism Today: Revisiting Nehru's Secular Vision in Contemporary India

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This research article revisits the enduring legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru's secularism and its relevance in contemporary Indian society. Secularism is a principle that advocates for the parting of belief from government and public affairs. Secularism in India refers to the notion of keeping religion separate from the matters of the state and guaranteeing equal treatment for people of every religion. Nehru nourished secularism with the objective of ensuring respect for religious diversity, focusing on nation-building tasks. He strongly denounced the communalism of both Hindus and Muslims. The Contradiction of the concept and exercise of Indian secularism poses several problems in the current Indian society. Despite the Indian Constitution establishing a secular state, caste, religion, and sectarian politics continue to play a significant role in the country's socio-political landscape, threatening the core secular principles envisioned by the framers of the Constitution. The Indian concept of secularism is clearly reflected in numerous provisions of the Constitution. Hence, the paper examines the conceptual framework, the contribution of Nehru to religion and Secularism, and contemporary practices and concerns in Indian secularism. This paper relies on secondary sources for its data. The paper concludes by arguing that revisiting Nehruvian secularism remains crucial in addressing contemporary debates and issues surrounding current practices of Indian secularism.

Keywords: Indian Secularism, Nehruvian Secularism, Religious Pluralism, Religious Nationalism, Constitutional Secularism

Conceptualising Secularism

It is imperative to highlight that the conceptualization and application of secularism can contrast across different countries and regions based on historical, cultural, and political contexts. The word "secular" designates a 'state of not belonging to or being apart from religion'. A 'secular state' is "a state which guarantees freedom of religion, is not constitutionally linked to a particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion" (Smith, 1963). The concept of secularism was formulated by G. J. Holyoake in his work "Principles of Secularism" (1859) in its recent sense (Holyoake, 1859). It has sometimes been linked with 'anti-religion, atheism, and materialism'. In the words of Umakant Saxena, "Secularism is undoubtedly defined as an idea that upholds religious morality, tolerance, and fair space for spiritual autonomy and faith for all people of a nation, regardless of their race, caste, gender, citizenship, or other characteristics of birth"(Saxena, 1971). In the west, secularism is typically understood to mean the division of worldly and spiritual realms. The most widely accepted aspect of secularism is the segregation of state and religion, with the fundamental premise being that each stays inside its own domain of influence (Waterhouse, 1967). According to D. E. Smith "The concept of the secular state originally emerged in the West, rather than in Asia; however, certain aspects of the secular state have deep-rooted traditions in various Asian cultures" (Smith, 1963). The growth of Christianity produced a new type of linking between the state and religion. It denotes separating the domain of 'Society from the State' (Barker, 1976). The Indian state is secular in that its constitution ensures complete religious freedom for all individuals and groups, banning discrimination against any citizen solely on the grounds of religion, caste, or similar factors. Though the Nehruvian model of secularism was put to practice, there were threats to this concept even during this period.

While discussing the nature of secularism in plural societies, it is observed that countries like India, France, and Turkey adopt a form of secularism that emphasizes "freedom from religion," in contrast

to the American model, which is based on the principle of "freedom of religion.". Ahmet T. Kuru describes this as "assertive" secularism, noting that France and Turkey adopt a more proactive approach by actively seeking to exclude religion from the public sphere to ensure equality, whereas the United States takes a more passive stance (Kuru, 2007). In their article "Veiling, secularism, and the neoliberal subject: national narratives and supranational desires in Turkey and France," Banu Gokariksel and Katharyne Mitchell argue that secularism is a powerful governance tool rooted in historical practices but also used to advance neoliberal agendas. They highlight differences in the implementation of secularism in France and Turkey, linking these variations to each country's unique history and current economic policies (Gökarkisel & Mitchell, 2005). Despite significant differences in religiosity between France and Turkey, secularism functions similarly in both, demonstrating its role independent of the population's religious composition. However, the practical application of secularism in these countries has faced challenges due to complex social, political, and religious dynamics, which have affected efforts to promote diversity and pluralism.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and interpretive methodology, grounded in the traditions of political theory and historical analysis. It relies exclusively on secondary sources, including historical records, speeches by Jawaharlal Nehru, constitutional texts, judicial pronouncements, and scholarly literature on Indian secularism. Key sources include official documents such as the Constitution of India, Constituent Assembly Debates, and select Supreme Court and High Court judgments related to secularism, religious freedom, and minority rights. In addition, the study draws upon academic works by political scientists, historians, and legal scholars who have critically engaged with the themes of Nehruvian thought, Indian secularism, and communal politics.

The Trajectory of Indian Secularism

India stands as the world's largest democracy, with a great practice of secular multiplicity. The nation is home to a number of faiths and tribal religions that have managed to keep their footing

despite the effect of major religions for many years. India possesses one of the world's oldest civilizations. The ancient Indian state cannot be considered a secular state in the modern sense, as it was not entirely separate from religion. In Romila Thapar's investigation, "this period also witnessed religious tensions on a large scale, particularly between Shaivites and the Buddhists" (Varma, 1959). As Smith notes, "Various schools of thought propounded the concept of agnosticism, atheism, and materialism. Various religions were allowed to propagate their teachings, build their places of worship, and establish their respective ways of life." The religious beliefs of the medieval Indian state traversed from recognition to fanaticism. Spiritual forbearance and autonomy of devotion observed the state during the period of Akbar (Shakir, 1970). Historians remarked that, "The British policy of religious neutrality constitutes one of the key historical bases of modern India's secular state" (Gupta, 1970). British rule laid the basis for secularism but also fostered religious divisions to maintain control. Nationalist leaders leveraged religious sentiments for political goals, with both Hindus and Muslims highlighting their distinct identities. This led to the rise of community organizations practicing competitive communalism, fostering separatist tendencies that the British exploited to maintain control (Appadorai, 1971).

The affiliation between religion and politics changed in 1920 when Gandhi assumed leadership of the 'Indian National Congress', blending the two by asserting that "those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means." From 1934 to 1947, the freedom Movement saw significant changes, with some leaders gravitating towards socialism and secularism, distancing themselves from Gandhism. This led to the establishment of the 'Congress Socialist Party' in 1934. While Jawaharlal Nehru held a secular perspective, he was also influenced by socialist ideas, believing that secularism was essential for uniting India's diverse communities and religions, and a key element of modern democracy (Massey, 1991). The Nehru Report's section on Fundamental Rights stated that "everyone has the right to freedom of conscience and to practice their faith freely, subject to public order and morality". It also stated that there would be no official state religion, and the state would not

grant religious privileges or favor individuals based on their religious beliefs. Similarly, at the 'Karachi Session' of the INC in 1931, the right to religious freedom, conscience, and the state's impartiality towards religion were affirmed. In the 1932 Bombay Session, Congress reiterated its promise to defending the rights of minorities, comprising their culture, script, and language. This demonstrates that, even before independence, the Indian National Congress struggled to move beyond religious divisions.

Secularism in the Indian Constitution: The Contribution of Nehru

In January 1947, the Constituent Assembly adopted an Objective Resolution outlining the goals for the constitution. Notably, the terms "secularism" and "secular state" were not included in the Resolution. During debates on the Draft Constitution, members had differing views on secularism. One faction advocated for a 'Hindu State,' while the other supported the idea of a 'Secular State' (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1948). On April 3, 1948, Anantasayanam Ayyangar, a member of the Constituent Assembly, introduced a resolution calling for the elimination of communalism in India to promote democracy and national unity. The resolution stressed that no communal organization should be permitted to accept or reject members based on religion, race, or caste, unless it pertains to the community's authentic religious, cultural, social, or educational needs. During the debate, Nehru emphasized the dangers of communalism in politics, recalling the grave consequences it had caused in the past. He stated that the alliance of faith and politics, in the practice of communalism, was extremely dangerous and harmful to both the majority and minorities seeking advantages from it. He urged that there was no alternative but to reject such alliances (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1948). The resolution was subsequently adopted by the Assembly.

Brajeshwar Prasad from Bihar proposed that the Preamble should begin with the phrase: "WE THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having resolved to constitute India into a SECULAR COOPERATIVE COMMONWEALTH to establish a SOCIALIST ORDER and to secure to all its citizens." However, during the 1948 debate, Ambedkar

argued that since secularism was already inherent in the Constitution, including it in the Preamble would be unnecessary. Luthera has elucidated that the omission of the term "secular" was due to the fact that the framers of the Constitution did not envision India as a secular state in the strict sense of the term (Luthera, 1964). In November 1976, Parliament endorsed the 42nd Constitution Amendment Act, which refers to India as a "Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic."

According to Jawhar Sircar, India had two possible approaches to secularism: Gandhi's version, which was deeply rooted in religion and genuinely pluralistic, and Nehru's version, which was more resistant to religion in general (Sircar, 2020). The term "secularism" is explicitly mentioned in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution and is further reflected in various provisions, including Articles 25 to 30 and Part IVA, which were later added. Articles 25-28, 29-30, along with Articles 14, 15, 16, 17, 44, and 51A, collectively establish the secular framework of India (GoI, 1950). The right to freedom of religion is clearly enshrined in Articles 25, 26, 27, and 28 of the Indian Constitution.

Nehru's Vision: Shaping Indian Secularism for a Democratic Society

Nehru is considered a key architect of Indian secularism, with his vision of a religiously neutral state reflected in the Constitution of India. He envisioned a united nation where all individuals and communities could live peacefully as equals, and he strongly condemned the communalism of both Hindus and Muslims. In a letter to the Chief Ministers (heads of provincial governments) dated November 22, 1947, he warned: "The threat to us is not so much external as it is internal. Reactionary forces and communal organizations are attempting to undermine the foundation of free India" (Mukherjee, 2024).

The secularism advanced by Jawaharlal Nehru and enshrined in the Constitution is based on three main principles. First, it is liberal, addressing communalism through social welfare while ensuring religious neutrality and equality for minorities. Second, it is not absolute, meaning religious freedom is subject to public order, morality, and

welfare, with the judiciary determining the lawfulness of restrictions. Third, Nehru's secularism is dynamic and progressive, allowing religion to contribute to social welfare while enabling the government to modify personal laws for the national interest. Nehru established institutions and policies to ensure India's stability by maintaining a secular framework, detached from communal influences, to foster a pluralistic and liberal society (Rajasekhariah, 1987).

Nehru's definition of secularism was based on four key principles: First, it called for the 'separation of religion from political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of life, treating religion as a purely personal matter'. Second, it emphasized 'the dissociation of the state from religion'. Third, it guaranteed 'full freedom for all religions and promoted tolerance towards them'. Fourth, it advocated for 'equal opportunities for the followers of all religions, ensuring no discrimination or favouritism based on religion' (Rajasekhariah, 1987). Thus, Nehru was a distinctive statesman with a strong commitment to secularism. He was firmly opposed to superstitions, communalism, and religious fanaticism, always striving for his fellow citizens to adopt rational and secular attitudes.

Nehru's Perspectives on Religion

According to Nehru, religion is an inner development of an individual's personality, involving values, faith, morality, and belief, without a concrete definition. India, one of the world's oldest and largest civilizations, is a plural society, not homogeneous, but multi-racial, multicultural, multi-lingual, and multi-religious. Every religious community takes pride in its beliefs, and for Nehru, a secular nation means the state remains neutral towards all religions (Timir, 1994). Jawaharlal Nehru's belief in science was central to his vision for India's modernization. He saw science as a method of rational inquiry to address social and economic challenges and to combat superstition (Kochanek, 2000). This scientific outlook was closely tied to his concept of secularism, which emphasized rationalism and state neutrality among religions, rather than strict separation (Chatterjee, 1993). By promoting a scientific worldview, Nehru aimed to foster an inclusive, pluralistic society governed by reason and empirical evidence, supporting national unity amid religious diversity (Brown, 1994). His integration of science

and secularism sought both material progress and social cohesion based on equality. While he acknowledged that religion provides essential values for many people, he argued that it often impedes scientific advancement. Science, however, tends to neglect deeper values and the purpose of life. Influenced by the teachings of Lord Buddha, whose principles were based on a scientific approach, Nehru emphasized that "It is science alone that can solve the problems of disease, hunger, poverty, illiteracy, and the waste of vast resources in a rich country inhabited by starving people." He viewed organized religion as a reactionary force that hindered progress (Timir, 1994). Nehru's 'The Glimpses of World History' and 'Discovery of India' argued various aspects of secularism. In his Autobiography, Nehru describes religion as "probably consists of the inner development of the individual, the evolution of his consciousness in a positive direction. What the direction it will again be a matter of debate. But as far as I understand it, religion emphasizes this internal transformation and considers outward change as but the projection of this inner development" (Embree, 1993).

Nehru's Views on Secular State and Secularism

In a diverse country like India, which is home to numerous faiths and religions, true nationalism can only be fostered on the foundation of secularism. A secular state in India is one that respects all religions equally and provides equal opportunities for all, ensuring that the state does not affiliate itself with any particular faith. Secularism does not require individuals to abandon their religion; rather, it means that the state protects all religions without favoring one over the others, and it does not adopt any religion as the official state religion (Virender, 1999). Nehru's concept of secularism was deeply rooted in the Indian context and closely connected to his vision of a just society. He believed that organized religion, as well as a religious worldview, was inherently incompatible with democratic values. Nehru viewed religion through the lens of fundamental human values, where science was not just a tool for material progress, but a pursuit of truth and an effort to harmonize with nature, rather than simply control it. As such, Nehru was opposed to dogmatism and the intolerance often associated with rigid religious beliefs and the suppression of diverse opinions and ideas (Ahulwalia, 1978).

Nehru thought that the Western ideal of secularism, with its separation of state and church, was not suitable for India. In Indian context, secularism cannot be discussed without addressing communalism, as the two major religious communities, Hindus and Muslims, often fought for political and economic power. Nehru's secular vision aimed to create a society based on fairness and equality, going beyond a political doctrine to become a social, revolutionary force that embraced all religions and communities in India. For Nehru, secularism was not about irreligion or mere material wellbeing, but included spiritual values and ethical standards. As he stated, "Secular philosophy itself must have come from some background, some objective other than merely material wellbeing. It must essentially have spiritual values and certain standards of behaviors" (Luthera, 1964).

Nehru's idea of secularism primarily encompasses four key elements: Firstly, he envisioned a multi-religious India where all individuals, irrespective of their religion, have equal rights and responsibilities. Central to his idea of secularism was the allowing of equal position to all religions. Nehru argued that every community should have the freedom to practice its religious ceremonies, and no religion should be denied its rightful privileges simply because of the group it belongs to. For Nehru, religious freedom meant 'equal respect for all faiths and equal opportunities for everyone to practice their beliefs' (Smith, 1998). Secondly, Nehru's vision of secularism involved the state maintaining neutrality in religious matters. He was firm in his belief that the Indian government should not linked with any specific religion. Nehru strongly opposed the idea of Hindu or Muslim rule, emphasizing that the state should operate under the principles of "people's rule" and promote coexistence among different religions (Madan, 1997).

Thirdly, Nehru viewed secularism as a mind-set that communities needed to adopt. In a diverse country like India, he stressed the importance of fostering harmony and a sense of fraternity among various religious groups. He believed that the dominant community had a responsibility not to misuse its position in a way that could undermine the secular ideal (Timir, 1994). Nehru emphasized that

narrow-minded or aggressive behavior from the majority community could create fear among minorities, and he maintained that it was better to sacrifice personal interests or lose an election than to compromise on secular values. Lastly, Nehru advocated for the secularization of all aspects of social life. He recognized the strong influence of religion in areas like marriage, inheritance, and the law. Nehru believed that religiously sanctioned social structures should not dominate society and that the presence of separate laws for diverse religious groups was incompatible with a secular society. He aimed to introduce a 'uniform civil code' to apply to all Indians, regardless of religion or caste, through social legislation (Shabnum, 2007). Nehru's vision of secularism was a political framework where individuals were not subjected to social inequalities based on religious practices. Nehru fully concurred with Ambedkar that democracy would be hollow and ineffective in the face of widespread communalism. Therefore, only a secular state, grounded in equality and justice, could be truly suitable for Indian society. The Constitution of India reflects Nehru's philosophy of a religiously neutral state, which is characterized by three key features; Firstly, 'Indian secularism is liberal in the sense that Nehru sought to address communalism through social welfare politics, while maintaining religious neutrality and ensuring equality and freedom for all minorities in India'. Secondly, 'Indian secularism is not absolute but qualified, meaning that religious freedom for all is subject to considerations of public order, morality, and the welfare of citizens'. The state has the authority to impose limitations on the freedoms or rights granted under Article 25 of the Indian Constitution. However, it is the responsibility of the judiciary to assess whether such restrictions are in accordance with the spirit of the Constitution. Thirdly, 'Nehru's concept of secularism is both dynamic and enlightened', allowing religion to contribute to social welfarec (Ahulwalia, 1978). However, the government has the authority to modify or define the personal laws of any community, as it did with the Sikhs and Buddhists, in the broader interest of the nation. Thus, Nehru considered secularism to be the fundamental cornerstone of a modern democratic society. His concept of a secular state was a practical necessity for India, addressing the challenges posed by religious diversity, which threatened national unity, harmony, and social stability. It is not enough to merely

uphold the concept of a secular state as proclaimed by Nehru; we must also assimilate these ideals into our thinking and daily lives to build a truly unified nation.

Contemporary Debates and Practices of Indian Secularism

The keystone of Indian democracy, 'secularism' is a deeply contested concept, with two competing ideological perspectives emerging before and after independence. On one side, Jawaharlal Nehru advocated for 'the separation of religion and politics' through the principle of 'dharmanirpeksata'. In contrast, Mahatma Gandhi opposed this separation, championing the idea of 'equal respect for all religions' through the principle of 'sarva dharma samabhava'. The debate between two interpretations of secularism was a central issue during the Constituent Assembly and remains a key topic in academic discussions in India today. Many critics of Indian secularism argue that, given the profound influence of religion on the lives of the Indian people, the Western notion of secularism—defined as the separation of politics or the state from religion—is an alien, modernist imposition that is incompatible with Indian society. The most significant contemporary challenge to Indian secularism comes from Hindu nationalist forces, as well as influential academic voices like Ashis Nandy, T. N. Madan, Partha Chatterjee and others. Since the mid-1980s, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the "Sangh Parivar" have been insisting on a distinction between their own "positive secularism" and the "pseudo-secularism" of the Congress. According to T. B. Hansen, the ideologies of Hindutva and "positive" or "true" secularism ultimately promote the principle of Hindu majoritarian rule. Meanwhile, Nandy argues that Nehruvian secularism, which advocates the separation of state and religion, was imposed on the Indian populace as part of a broader modern, Western framework of scientific progress, nation-building, national security, and development. Nandy contends that, in terms of public morality, Indian statecraft could benefit from the teachings of Hinduism, Islam, or Sikhism, but these religions have little to learn from the Constitution or state secularism practices. His critique of secularism challenges the Western state-centered model, which, according to Nandy, was adopted by India's Westernized intellectuals (Nandy, 1998).

In examining the recent shift in the ideological expression of Hindu nationalism, Chatterjee highlights that its current advocacy for "positive secularism" serves dual purposes. Firstly, it seeks to counter claims of being anti-secular, and secondly, it provides a sophisticated rationale for promoting intolerant actions by a modern, positively secular state. This approach justifies interventions against religious, cultural, or ethnic minorities in the name of "national culture" and a uniform, homogenized concept of citizenship (Chatterjee, 1998). According to Chatterjee, the secularism model adopted by India's westernized elites in post-independence India led to the exclusion of indigenous alternatives to Western secular modernity. Vanaik, on the other hand, critiques Nandy's proposal to replace the secular state and secular public morality with a religion-based public morality of tolerance, calling it dangerous. Vanaik argues that traditional beliefs and practices undermine the secular state and hinder the democratization of society. He asserts that the root cause of religious communalism lies in religion itself (Vanaik, 1997).

The concept and practice of secularism in India have been strongly criticized by Hindu fundamentalists. They argue that secularism has been the driving force behind appeasing minorities, especially Muslims, and further claim that the Constitution is anti-Hindu and should be amended. Since the 1980s, India has witnessed the rise of majority communalism. Achin Vanaik aptly highlights the threat posed by Hindu fundamentalism, stating, "India cannot become an Islamic state; it can certainly become a Hindu state." (Vanaik, 1997). The BJP and its allies advocate for the concept of a Hindu Rashtra, viewing it as the sole solution to the challenges facing Indian society and the only path to achieving true secularism. Golwalkar stated that "the foreign nationalities in Hindustan must either adopt Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion, must entertain no idea other than the glorification of the Hindu religion and culture, or they may stay in the country wholly subordinate to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment, not even citizen's rights" (Sharma, 2002). Hasan Suroor (2022) presents contrasting perspectives on secularism and attempts to explore the concept of a secular Hindu

state in his work 'Unmasking Indian Secularism: Why We Need a New Hindu-Muslim Deal'. Hindu nationalists regarded India as a majoritarian state rather than a multicultural one, and they held that because Hindus made up the majority of the population, Hinduism represented Indian identity. In Jocelyne Cesari's 'We God's People: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism in the World of Nations' (2021), Cesari illustrate how nationalist movements shape secularism as a political ideology that governs the relationship between religion and politics. Ali Zaheer's work, (2016), 'Secularism Under Siege: Revisiting the Indian Secular State' The recent trends and challenges to Indian secularism are clearly depicted in the ongoing political landscape. It is evident that the government has increasingly used textbooks and institutions as central tools for political communication. Since 2014, vigilante groups have been targeting Muslims and other marginalized communities. Several incidents have occurred where Muslims were killed in different states under the suspicion of cow slaughter, and Christian priests and nuns have also faced harassment. This has created a climate of fear and insecurity among minority communities. The BJP's pursuit of a Hindu nationalist agenda has alienated religious minorities, particularly Muslims, leading to tensions and concerns about their rights and safety (Murali, 2022). Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia Director at Human Rights Watch, stated that authorities in several Indian states are engaging in acts of violence against Muslims as a form of summary punishment.

We have several references to cite, such as the abrogation of Article 370, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and the Hijab issue. Ram Puniyani's Indian Nationalism versus Hindu Nationalism (2016) examines the agenda of Hindutva and analyzes its impact on the basic rights of marginalized communities in India. Throughout the year, numerous attacks on religious minority communities have been reported, including murders, assaults, and intimidation. According to the USCIRF Annual Report 2023, religious freedom in India has significantly worsened. In 2022, the Indian government suppressed critical voices, particularly those of religious minorities, through harassment, investigations, imprisonment, and prosecution under laws such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), the Foreign

Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), and the Sedition Law (USCIRF, 2023). The ongoing violations have resulted in the escalating suppression of religious freedom and the creation of a hostile and violent environment for religious minorities, human rights advocates, academics, journalists, and others who speak out against such abuses (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Hate speech, mob lynching, and other serious crimes targeting minorities have become commonplace in the country. The Hindu right-wing discourse in India has consistently emphasized the glorification of myths, often citing flagrant pseudo-scientific claims as evidence. It serves as an alternative method to foster sectarian sentiments based on perceived historical superiority.

According to a report released by Human Rights Watch, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made Islamophobic remarks in 110 out of the 173 speeches delivered during the recent Lok Sabha election campaign (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Similarly, the Amnesty International has urged the Indian government to repeal its abusive and discriminatory laws and policies targeting Muslims, Christians, and other minority groups. In 2024, the government enacted three new criminal laws—the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinayam (BSA), which replaced the Indian Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Indian Evidence Act. These new legislations significantly expand police powers, raising serious concerns about potential infringements on rights related to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, and fair trial. According to a report by the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS), India experienced an 84 percent rise in communal violence in 2024, with 59 communal riots recorded compared to 32 in 2023. The report, *Hegemony and Demolitions: The Tale of Communal Riots in India in 2024*, emphasized that hate speeches with communal undertones were employed to deepen religious polarization and attributed part of the surge in violence to a state-promoted environment of impunity (Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, 2024). Religious and legal experts have criticized the new Waqf Amendment Bill as a direct challenge to India's secular framework. Historically, India has adhered to a non-interventionist approach in the management of religious trusts,

which forms a vital component of its secular ethos. However, the introduction of the Waqf Amendment Bill signals a departure from these secular principles, raising concerns about increased state involvement in religious affairs (The Indian Express, 16 March 2025). The United Christian Forum (UCF) reported 834 incidents of violence against Christians in India in 2024, marking a notable increase from 733 cases in 2023, averaging over 67 incidents per month. Many of these incidents were reportedly linked to allegations of forced religious conversions, with Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh identified as hotspots, recording 191 and 158 incidents respectively. The UCF report highlighted systemic issues, including allegations of police complicity and the misuse of anti-conversion laws to target Christians (United Christian Forum, 2024). Supporting these claims, a separate report by the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), titled *Criminalising Practice of Faith*, documented cases of police inaction or complicity, underscoring systemic discrimination. Congress party, which is supposed to be committed to the Gandhian-Nehruvian ideals and the values of the freedom movement, is also guilty of diluting the Nehruvian secularism for party politics. The party should realise it is an ideological war-Nehruvian secularism Vs political Hindutva (Ramachandram, 2024).

Reassessing Nehru's Secularism: Relevance in the Contemporary Indian Society

Nehru's secular vision inspired him to create a society based on justice and equality in a deeply religious country like India. Nehru himself acknowledged that finding an appropriate term for "secular" was challenging. His secularism was characterized by freedom of religion or irreligion, the absence of a state religion, and equal respect for all religions. Various articles in the Indian Constitution reflect the secular nature of the state. The Constitution guarantees individual religious freedom, protects religious denominations, ensures equality of citizenship, provides equal opportunities in public services, prohibits discrimination in educational institutions, and disallows communal electorates. Though there are provisions for reserved seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, there are no special taxes for promoting religion or religious instruction in state-run educational

institutions. According to Chandhoke, Nehru's idea of secularism, or "dharmanirapekhta," emphasized that the state should be free from religious influence in its policies and decisions. However, Nehru also believed that, in the Indian context, religion could not be completely separated from the political and public spheres (Chandhoke, 2004). Indian secularism is deeply connected to the constitutional values of democracy and fundamental rights. Nehru's secular ideal is crucial for India because it governs the relationship between the state and various religious groups based on the principle of equality, ensuring that the state does not discriminate against any religion.

According to Bharghav, the features that make Indian secularism distinctive include its multi-value character, which upholds religious liberty, equality, peace, and tolerance. The Constitution recognizes and respects community-specific rights, acknowledging the diversity within India. It also maintains a principled distance, meaning that while the state and religion are separated at the level of goals and institutions, this separation is not rigidly enforced at the policy and legal levels. Indian secularism uniquely combines an active hostility to certain aspects of religion with a deep respect for its other dimensions, balancing the need for social harmony (Bharghav, 1998). Furthermore, it addresses both intra-religious oppression and inter-religious domination, ensuring a more inclusive and just society. Hence Nehruvian model of secularism occupies a distinct place and becomes relevant in contemporary Indian society.

The Supreme Court of India has played a pivotal role in interpreting and reinforcing the secular character of the Indian Constitution through landmark judgments over the decades. These rulings have clarified the constitutional principles relating to religious freedom, state neutrality, and the limits of religious interference in governance. 'Keshavananda Bharti VS State of Kerala', 1973, 'S. R. Bommai vs Union of India', 1994, 'Aruna Roy vs Union of India', 2002, 'M. Ismail Faruqui vs Union of India', 1994, 'Dr. Pravin Togadia vs State of Karnataka', 2004, 'Rajesh Himatlal Solnki vs Union of India', 2011, 'Abhiram Singh vs. C D Commachem' (2017) etc are some of them. In 'Keshavananda Bharti vs. Union of India' case, it was ruled that "secularism is a basic component of our Indian

Constitution, and that no law can restrict this freedom". Similarly, the Supreme Court of India, in 'S. R. Bommai vs Union of India' (1994) case, declared that "if religion is utilized for political objectives and any political party employs religion to further its political agenda, the State's neutrality will be undermined. Politics and religion shouldn't be combined". In Abhiram Singh vs. C.D. Commachem (2017), the Court dealt with hate speech and religious intolerance, reiterating that secularism requires the state to protect citizens from inflammatory or divisive religious rhetoric. It reinforced that the freedom of expression does not extend to speech that threatens secular harmony.

Critical Estimate of Nehru's Idea of Secularism

Jawaharlal Nehru is credited with institutionalizing secularism in post-independence India, envisioning a state that maintained neutrality toward all religions. However, critics have highlighted inconsistencies in its implementation. While the Hindu personal laws were reformed through the Hindu Code Bill (1955–56), similar reforms in Muslim personal laws were deferred. This selective approach fostered perceptions of state partiality, undermining the principle of religious neutrality (Smith, 1963; Bhargava, 2008). The state's intervention in Hindu religious practices, particularly through the Hindu Code Bill, has also drawn criticism. Although progressive in terms of gender justice, the exclusive focus on Hindu laws suggested a double standard. Akeel Bilgrami and Ashis Nandy argue that such selective reform contradicted the ideal of equal treatment and led to resentment among communities (Bilgrami, 2014; Nandy, 1994).

Another area of concern was the state's inability to prevent communal violence, especially during and after Partition. Despite Nehru's strong opposition to religious extremism, outbreaks of violence in regions like Punjab and Bengal exposed the state's limited capacity to uphold secular ideals. Christophe Jaffrelot notes that these failures weakened public trust in the secular state and fueled communal politics (Jaffrelot, 2003). Nehru's emphasis on minority rights has also been interpreted as political appeasement. Critics like Arun Shourie argue that such policies encouraged "vote bank politics," where electoral support was sought on religious rather than civic lines. This approach arguably deepened communal divides rather than fostering integration

(Shourie, 1996). Unlike the American model of a strict church-state separation, Indian secularism followed a model of "principled distance," allowing state engagement with religious institutions when deemed necessary. While theoretically flexible, this often resulted in blurred boundaries where the state continued funding religious institutions and managing temples, raising questions about true secular governance (Bhargava, 2008).

A deeper critique comes from the cultural disconnection of Nehruvian secularism. Ashis Nandy argues it was an elitist, state-centric ideology that ignored the social role of religion in daily life. This attempt to privatize religion alienated large segments of the population and failed to build a grassroots secular culture (Nandy, 1994). Consequently, communal groups were able to mobilize religious identities more effectively than the state could promote pluralism. Christophe Jaffrelot points out that the lack of a mass-based secular movement left Indian society vulnerable to religious polarization (Jaffrelot, 2010). This vacuum contributed to events like the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992, reflecting the fragility of a secularism not rooted in public consciousness. As Mushirul Hasan notes, Nehru's secularism failed to become a shared civic value, making it fragile during political or social crises (Hasan, 1997). Despite its visionary foundation, Nehruvian secularism has been criticized for its selective application, cultural elitism, and limited ability to curb communalism in practice.

Conclusion

Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of secularism, defined by pluralism, tolerance, and equal respect for all religious communities, remains a foundational pillar of India's democratic and constitutional framework. Despite significant challenges posed by rising religious nationalism, identity politics, and communal tensions, Nehruvian secularism continues to serve as a vital principle for maintaining India's unity in diversity. Critics, particularly Hindu nationalists advocating for a Hindu Rashtra, reject secularism as a solution to India's societal challenges, and Hindu vigilantism has increasingly threatened the secular fabric of the nation. Although the Constitution guarantees fundamental rights, including freedom of expression and religion, these rights have been

under sustained attack, and discrimination based on faith undermines India's core democratic values of freedom, equality, and justice.

While Nehru's secularism faces many obstacles in contemporary India, it remains essential for promoting social harmony, justice, and democratic governance. There is an urgent need to revisit and strengthen Nehru's secular vision by reinforcing constitutional safeguards and ensuring the effective implementation of legal protections for all religious communities. Civil society must be empowered to foster dialogue, tolerance, and grassroots advocacy for secular principles. Furthermore, integrating secularism into educational curricula can cultivate a culture of critical thinking, respect for diversity, and commitment to constitutional values among future generations. Through a combination of robust legal frameworks, active civil engagement, and education, Nehru's vision of secularism can be revitalized to meet present-day challenges and uphold India's enduring commitment to unity in diversity. Only through such a renewed, collective dedication can India safeguard its pluralistic heritage and continue to thrive as a vibrant democracy.

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