



Secularism and Scientific Temper: A Critical Analysis of Their Interplay in Society

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Abstract

Secularism and scientific temper are two intertwined concepts that play crucial roles in shaping modern society. This study critically analyzes the interplay between secularism and scientific temper in the Indian context. It explores the historical roots of rationalism, humanism, and skepticism in India, and examines the constitutional framework that enshrines secularism as a fundamental principle. This paper defines secularism as the separation of religious matters from worldly affairs and highlights the Indian judiciary's commitment to upholding secular principles. It also delves into the concept of scientific temper, which emphasizes empirical inquiry, reason, and the application of scientific methodologies to understand and address human challenges. This paper argues that a scientific temper is essential for fostering a secular mindset and combating religious dogmatism, irrationality, and discriminatory practices. It concludes that cultivating a scientific temperament among the general population is the most effective approach to safeguard secular values and promote equality, individual autonomy, liberty, and harmonious coexistence in a diverse society such as India. This paper underscores the importance of confronting religious extremism and communal tensions that threaten national cohesion and unity and emphasizes the role of scientific thinking in achieving this objective.

Keyword: Secularism, Scientific Temper, Rationalism, Humanism, Skepticism

Introduction

India is renowned not only for its spiritual and religious heritage but also for its rich traditions of rationalism, humanism, and skepticism. The nation has a long-standing history of fostering intellectual curiosity and advocating social reform. As the birthplace of influential figures such as Buddha and Mahavir, and philosophical schools including Lokayat and Sankhya, India has consistently promoted critical thinking. During the medieval period, reformers such as

Swami Basaveswara, Sant Tukaram, and Sant Kabir challenged oppressive social structures. The modern era witnessed an acceleration of social progress, spearheaded by prominent reformers including Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Mahadeo Govind Ranade, Periyar E.V. Ramaswami, Shahu Maharaj, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Concurrently, the struggle for political independence has facilitated the modernization, secularization, and advancement of humanist ideals. Figures such as GORA, Abraham T. Kovoov, Basava Premananda, Joseph Edamaruku, and Dr. Narendra Dabholkar played pivotal roles in promoting rationalism and skepticism. These diverse movements collectively created a favorable environment for the adoption of secularism within the Indian context.

What is Secularism?

In contemporary society, there is a prevalent misconception regarding secularism. Conventionally, it is interpreted as not being religious or spiritual. The concise Oxford Dictionary defines 'Secular' as "related to worldly matters, not spiritual or sacred." This definition implies that secularism pertains to terrestrial affairs and material existence. Consequently, religious practices and beliefs are not expected to influence material aspects of human life. This term does not indicate religiosity or irreligiosity. Governmental contexts signify the separation of a state or organization from religious foundations. Dr. D. E. Smith attempted to define secularism in the Indian context as follows:

"The Secular State is a State which gives individual and corporate freedom of religion, is not Constitutionally connected to a particular religion, nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion"

This definition emphasizes that a secular state grants religious freedom to individuals and entities, maintains no constitutional ties to any specific religion, and neither promotes nor hinders religious practices.

A secular state ensures religious freedom for individuals and organizations, treats citizens equally regardless of their religious affiliation, and refrains from constitutional ties or the promotion of any specific religion. The fundamental principle of secularism is the separation of religious matters from other worldly activities by confining religion to personal beliefs and practices. Worldly affairs should be guided by pragmatic considerations rather than supernatural or sacred influences. While secularism does not oppose personal faith, such beliefs do not impede human progress or engender social discord. This concept permits individual religious convictions, provided that they do not interfere with societal well-being or precipitate conflicts within communities.

Secularism and Constitution of India

The Indian Constitution embodies the principle of secularism. This principle has been embraced by all Indian citizens, irrespective of their social or religious background. The Constitution confers citizenship and fundamental rights to all individuals in India without discrimination based on caste, religion,

or language. Furthermore, it established India as a welfare state based on the principles of social justice.

Religious freedom is guaranteed to all Indian citizens under Article 25 of the Constitution. This provision ensures that every individual possesses an equal right to freedom of conscience and the ability to profess, practise, and propagate religion. However, this religious freedom is not absolute and may be subject to limitations due to public order, morality, health, and other fundamental rights. The government possesses the authority to regulate secular activities associated with religious practices and implement social welfare and reform measures, such as facilitating access to Hindu temples for all individuals. This implies that, while individuals are granted religious freedom, the state retains the capacity to intervene in religious matters for greater public interest.

The Indian judiciary has consistently demonstrated its commitment to uphold secular principles. In the notable case of *S. R. Bommai V. Union of India* (AIR 1994 SC 1918), the Supreme Court affirmed that secularism is fundamentally ingrained in the Indian Constitution. Within this ruling, Justices Sawant, Kuldip Singh, and Pandian collectively state:

"These provisions implicitly prohibit the establishment of a theocratic state and prevent it from identifying with or favoring any particular religion. The state must treat all religions equally. Regardless of the state's stance on religion, it must not interfere with secular activities. Indeed, the intrusion of religion into secular matters has been strictly prohibited. The state's tolerance of religion does not transform it into a religious or theocratic entity."

The Supreme Court, in the *Ayodhya Case* (AIR 1995 SC 605), defines secularism as follows:

"The Constitutional framework explicitly ensures religious equality for all individuals and groups, irrespective of their beliefs, emphasizing that the state itself does not possess an official religion".

The Supreme Court of India, in its landmark *Keshvananda Bharati Case* ruling (AIR 1973, SC 1461), established secularism as a fundamental aspect of the nation's constitutional framework. In the Indian context, secularism denotes that the country is not governed by religious principles, the government does not endorse any particular faith, religious elements are maintained separately from state affairs, and citizens are not subjected to discrimination based on their religious beliefs.

The term "Secular" was officially incorporated into the Constitution's preamble through the 42nd Amendment. Prior to this, the word appeared in Article 25(2), which granted the state authority to regulate or restrict any "Secular activity" associated with religious practices. An endeavor to define secularism as "Sarva Dharma Sambhav" was proposed in the 44th amendment. However, this attempt was unsuccessful, as it received approval from the Lok Sabha but was rejected by Rajya Sabha.

Substance of Secularism

Based on the preceding analysis, it can be concluded that the fundamental principles of secularism in the Indian context are as follows:

1. In secular government, individuals possess the right to adopt, practice, and disseminate their religious convictions.
2. The state did not discriminate among individuals on social and political matters based on their religious affiliations.
3. The government maintains a position of neutrality regarding religion. It neither endorses nor confers preferential treatment on any specific faith or belief system.
4. In our nation, religious practices permeate all the aspects of social conduct. In this context, the government may enact legislation aimed at promoting social welfare and implementing reforms.
5. The government possesses the authority to regulate or restrict any non-religious activities, including economic, financial, and political matters associated with religious practices.
6. The state possesses the authority to regulate or restrict religious practices or activities that potentially jeopardize public order, morality, health, and other fundamental rights. This power may be exercised when such practices or activities are deemed potentially detrimental to societal well-being or individual liberty.

What is the Scientific Temper?

Skepticism and humanism have a substantial historical presence in India, consistently emphasizing the significance of inquiry. The concept of "Scientific temper," as it is currently understood, was initially articulated by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in his seminal work *Discovery of India* (1946). Nehru characterized it as "a way of life, a process of thinking, and a method of acting and associating with one's fellows."

Following India's independence, the emphasis on industrialization has facilitated the advancement of science and technology. India pioneered the incorporation of "Scientific temper" development, alongside humanism and a spirit of inquiry, as a fundamental duty for all citizens in its constitution under Article 51 (A)(h), thereby becoming the first nation globally to implement such a provision.

In 1980, a symposium of scholars and intellectuals convened in Coonoor to deliberate the State of Scientific Temper. Their discussions culminated in "A statement on Scientific Temper," which was subsequently published in 1981. According to this statement, a scientific temper is characterized as a cognitive disposition that necessitates a specific perspective and behavioral pattern. It possesses universal applicability and should permeate society as the dominant value system, significantly influencing our approach to political, social, economic, and cultural educational issues.

Scientific tempers encompass the acceptance of several premises, including

- a. Scientific methodologies provide a systematic approach to knowledge acquisition.
- b. The application of scientifically derived insights facilitates comprehension and resolution of human challenges.
- c. Extensive application of scientific methods in all domains of life, including ethics, politics, and economics, is essential for human progress and survival.
- d. Knowledge obtained through scientific methods should be regarded as the most accurate representation of the truth available at a given time, whereas information contradicting such knowledge should be critically examined. Furthermore, it is imperative to periodically re-evaluate the fundamental principles underlying current knowledge.

The concept of scientific temper posits that knowledge is acquired through empirical methodologies, including observation, experience, and experimentation. A scientific approach entails the acceptance of ideas based on the robustness of available evidence. Consequently, scientific temperament encompasses observation, reasoning, inference, drawing, verification, and conducting experiments. This approach contrasts with metaphysical perspectives.

Scientific Temper encompasses more than merely acquiring knowledge through scientific methods for material objectives. This represents a cognitive approach that shapes our perspectives, values, and decision-making processes. This paradigm asserts that scientific methodologies are the most efficacious means of comprehending physical and social environments and addressing related issues.

The fundamental principles of scientific temper include a willingness to question and be questioned as well as an inquisitive disposition. It promotes the notion that human endeavors, rather than supernatural forces, shape events and encourage skepticism towards claims of the supernatural. Furthermore, scientific tempers emphasize the reason-based "value of life," which incorporates qualities such as humility, autonomy, precision, and courage. This approach is instrumental to challenging superstitions, biases, and inequitable practices.

This scientific perspective does not entirely dismiss all religious aspects. It primarily challenges dogmatic elements of religion, which are often non-universal and specific to particular faiths. Dogmatic aspects, such as supernatural powers, miracles, and revelations, lack empirical evidence.

In 2011, there was an initiative to re-evaluate the 1981 scientific temper statement. This was prompted by a significant increase in public expression of religious and sectarian identities, the proliferation of irrational cults, and the promotion of obscure practices, religiosity, and the utilization of religious symbols.

Secularism and Scientific Temper

Secularism evolved through a protracted process of development and conflict. It does not oppose religion, but firmly asserts that religious beliefs and practices remain distinct from the practical aspects of life. For instance, the educational and political spheres should remain uninfluenced by religious doctrines and ecclesiastical authorities. While secularism safeguards an individual's right to embrace, exercise, and disseminate their chosen faith, it also upholds the government's authority to intervene in or regulate religious activities for the sake of societal well-being or advancement.

Secularism involves distinguishing between citizenship and religious affiliation. Individuals are viewed as citizens of a nation, rather than members of a religious community. In the context of citizenship, all people are accorded equal status, with each representing a unit of secularism.

Secularism ensures autonomy in various domains, including science, philosophy, politics, economics, and culture, through the influence of religious authority. It aims to establish an independent state within defined borders by acknowledging legal tolerance and safeguarding diverse thoughts, beliefs and expressions in society. The objective is to promote comprehensive development for all segments of the population by restructuring social order based on democratic and egalitarian principles.

Secularism extends beyond merely tolerating other faiths, while adhering to one's own religious doctrines. This necessitates a more proactive approach from individuals to challenge religious dogmas, irrational beliefs, and discriminatory practices.

Scientific temper is synonymous with secularism. A secular mindset necessitates that state activities be guided and evaluated through reason, empirical evidence, and experimentation. Citizens are expected to embrace rationality, utilizing reason as the foundation for knowledge that enables them to overcome the constraints of natural phenomena and their physical and social environments progressively. This rationality also serves as the basis for human ethical development and justifies the principle of equality that underpins both democratic and socialist ideologies.

To establish a democratic society, it is imperative to confront all forms of irrationality, injustice and inequality. The scientific approach offers the most reliable methodology for combating the various forms of dogmatism that emerge from scientific practice, as the scientific method is considered the sole means of acquiring knowledge. Scientific thinking promotes skepticism towards faith-based truths, leading to the rejection of religious dogma and irrationalities, which aligns with the fundamental concept of secularism.

A scientific perspective on life is fundamental to secularism, which is a key aspect of scientific thinking. At present, the proliferation of religious extremism and communal tensions poses a significant threat to secular values.

These extremist and divisive forces jeopardize national cohesion and unity, creating a substantial risk of harmonious coexistence. The principles of secularism, including liberty, egalitarianism, self-determination, diverse thoughts, beliefs, and expressions, are under considerable pressure. In a diverse society such as India, which is characterized by a multitude of religions and cultures, secularism serves as a unifying force. To safeguard secular values, it is imperative to confront dogmatic religious influences. The most efficacious approach to achieving this objective is to foster scientific thinking among the general population.

Conclusion:

Secularism and scientific temper have been inextricably linked. Secularism advocates equality, individual autonomy, liberty, and harmonious coexistence. To realize these ideals, it is imperative to cultivate a scientific mindset for every individual. A scientific approach emphasizes empirical inquiry and relies on knowledge obtained through scientific methodologies, which are grounded in observation, practical experience, and experimentation. Establishing a truly secular society is unfeasible without challenging religious dogmas and irrational beliefs. In this pursuit, fostering scientific temperament is the most efficacious and reliable approach.

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