

# CIVICS

## Chapter 2: Understanding Secularism



## Understanding Secularism

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In India, any citizen can contest elections, or join the armed forces or the police, or own land, or win a scholarship, etc. irrespective of his/her religion. In simple terms, this is what secularism aims to do. Let us learn more about what secularism means and how it ensures that no religious community dominates another. We are proud to belong to a secular State.

#### SECULARISM

Secularism means keeping religion or religious beliefs apart from the governance of the State. (We have discussed the meaning of State in the preceding chapter.) In a secular country, the State does not interfere in religious matters and religion has no role to play in the governance of the country. All secular countries share the following elements.

#### NON-ALIGNMENT OF THE STATE TO ANY RELIGION

The State neither favours any particular religion, nor discriminates against any religion. In practical terms, this means that no one can be stopped from studying in a public institution, holding a public office, buying a house, running a business, or participating in or utilising anything that is run by the State on grounds of religion. Nor does anyone have an advantage in these matters because of his/her religion. The State does not impose any penalty on people for holding a particular religious belief. Nor does it grant favours to people for belonging to any particular religious community.

The State does not participate in any religious activities. For example, government offices and educational institutions do not celebrate religious festivals. They do not display any religious symbols either. The government does not promote any religion, for example, by setting up places of worship or publishing religious texts.

#### Know a Little More

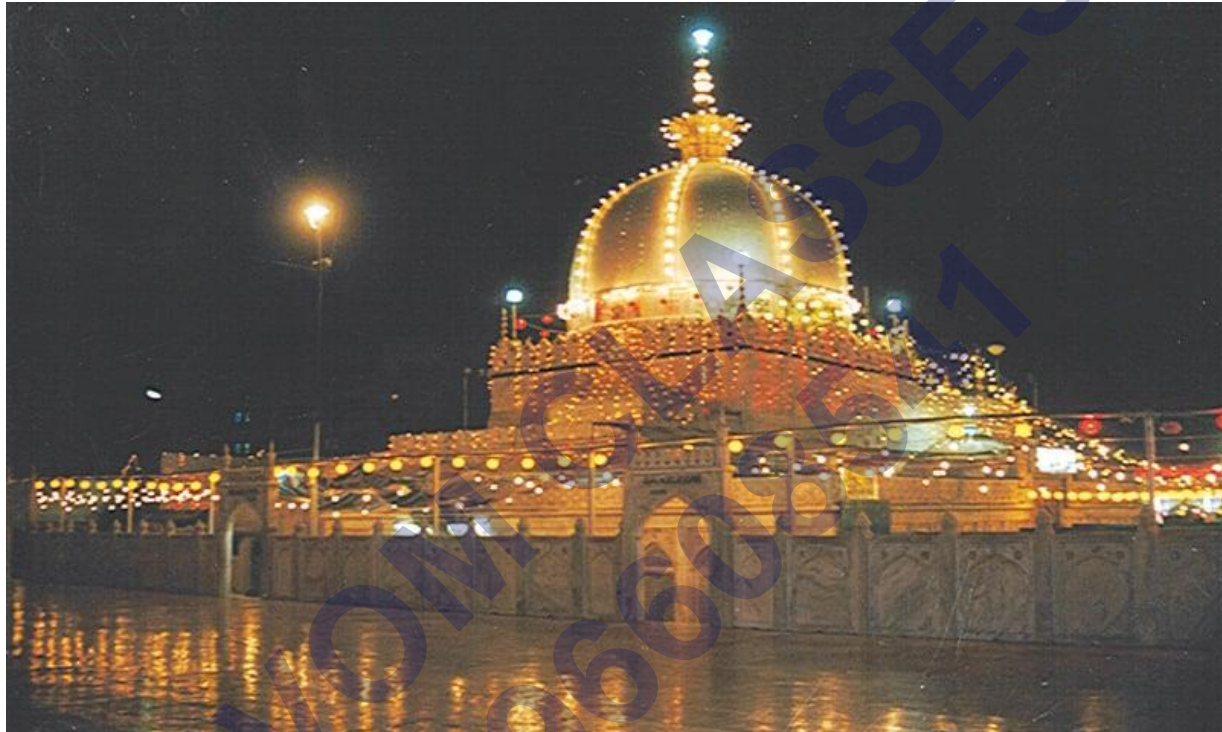
There are many countries in which the State is aligned to a particular religion. The degree of alignment, however, varies. A theocracy is a State governed by the clergy (priests). Iran comes closest to this. Its constitution requires the head of the State to be an Islamic cleric and no law can be passed unless it is in keeping with the Islamic laws. In other Islamic States, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, Islamic law (Sharia) is taken as the foundation for all laws, but the State is not governed by the clergy. In Costa Rica and Liechtenstein, there is a State religion (Roman Catholic), while in Italy and Argentina, the State gives special recognition to a religion (Roman Catholic).

Whatever be the degree of alignment, linking the State with religion often leads to a lack of

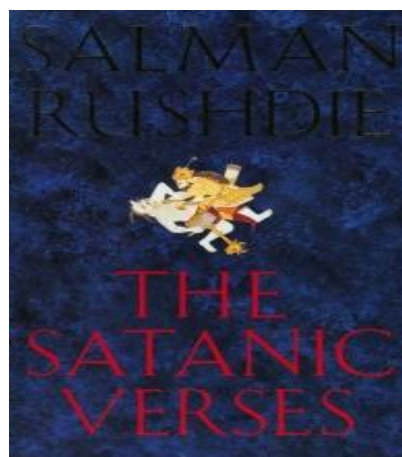
equality and freedom. In Israel, for example, Jews have the advantage of 'instant citizenship'. In Afghanistan, one may be punished for changing one's religion.

### Do you think democracy can exist without secularism?

Lastly, religion is an entirely personal affair. The State does not interfere and tell people how to or how not to practise their religion. People are free to belong to any religious faith they like and to convert from one religion to another.



However, there is a limit to the freedom people enjoy in this context. No one can do anything which is unlawful, or which harms others or the State in the name of religion. For example, no one can say that their religion forbids violence against living beings, so they will shut down any restaurant that serves non-vegetarian food.



In 1988, a book called *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie, a very well-known author, gave rise to widespread protests from Muslims all over the world. People felt that Rushdie had referred to the Quran as satanic verses and had insulted Prophet Muhammad. Though Rushdie denied this, he received death threats and many bookstores were burnt down for selling the book. The book was banned in India because it hurt the sentiments of Muslims.

## NO RELIGIOUS TEACHING

There is no religious teaching in any educational institution run by the State. This means students are not expected to learn religious texts, but it does not mean that there is no mention of

Q. Do you feel that in a secular country, an author has a responsibility not to write something that may hurt the sentiments of a religious community? Do you think violent protests are justified if people feel that a book, a film or a work of art puts down their religious beliefs?

Religion in textbooks. As you know, since the social sciences deal with the lives of people, they include the study of people's religious beliefs. No one is expected to have knowledge of religious teachings to qualify for any public office. Private institutions, however, are free to impart religious education and carry on other religious activities.

In 2004, France passed a law banning the wearing of conspicuous (clearly visible) religious symbols by students in government-run schools. The law-makers felt this was in keeping with the constitutional requirement of the separation of the State and religious activities. Many people, however, looked upon it as an interference with the right to religious freedom, especially in the case of Muslim girls, for whom wearing a head scarf is an expression of their religious belief.

### Discuss

Does the French law uphold secularism or is it against the spirit of secularism? Hold a class discussion.

## IMPORTANCE OF SECULARISM

The basic aim of secularism is to prevent anyone (whether the State, a group or an individual) from mistreating anyone else (group or individual) on grounds of religious belief. In particular, secularism aims to:

- Prevent one religious' community from dominating another
- Prevent one group within a religious community from dominating another
- Prevent the State from forcing the people to follow any particular religion or from taking away their religious freedom

This is important for any democracy because a democratic government is supposed to ensure that all citizens are treated equally irrespective of their religious belief (among other things). If the State were to promote a particular religion, people of that religious community could use the power of the State to deprive other communities of their rights. For example, they could have laws passed to stop other communities from owning land or from building places of worship. Some of these things do happen in non-secular States. Violence and other crimes against the 'other' communities are also often ignored because the police and the courts are controlled by the dominant community.

Sudan is a country in north-eastern Africa. In January 2011, the people of southern Sudan opted (by voting) to break away from northern Sudan. One of the reasons was that the Christians and tribals of the south felt that they were being treated 'unequally' by the government, which was controlled by the northern Muslims.

The example of Sudan should tell you how important secularism is for the existence of a multi-religious country like India. Differences will always be there between different religious communities. Also, there will always be a few people who will use the differences to arouse hatred and intolerance among people, as has happened on a few occasions in India. However, if the State is secular and the people have faith in its fairness towards all communities, the incidents die down instead of flaring up and threatening the country. Even these unfortunate incidents can be avoided if the spirit of secularism is truly adopted by the people and does not stop at the measures taken by the State.

## HOW INDIAN SECULARISM IS DIFFERENT

In the US and some other countries in the West, religion and the State are strictly separated. This is not the case in India, where the State can and does interfere in religious affairs. However, this 'interference' must be in accordance with the 'spirit of the Constitution'. In simple terms, the State can intervene if it feels that a certain religious practice is taking away the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. For example, by abolishing (doing away with) untouchability, our Constitution interfered in a Hindu religious practice to ensure equality for certain 'lower' castes. In 1956, a law was passed to give women the same rights over property as men. In this case, too, the State interfered in the customary practice among Hindus.

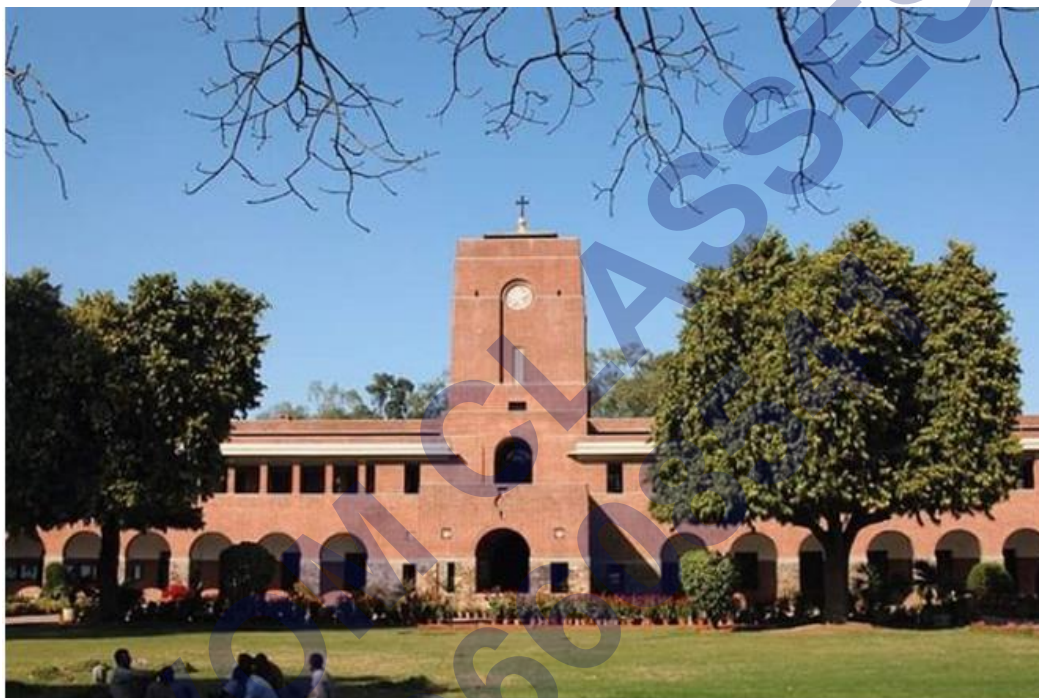
### Know a Little More

#### Threats to Secularism

- In 1984, armed mobs in North India attacked gurudwaras, and homes and business establishments owned by Sikhs. Thousands were killed or injured.
- In December 1992 and January 1993, hundreds of people died in what is known as the Bombay riots. Muslims and Hindus killed each other as a result of tensions between the two

communities after the Babri Masjid was broken down in Ayodhya.

- In 1999, Dr Graham Staines, an Australian missionary who worked among the tribal people in Odisha, was killed together with his two sons while they were sleeping in their station wagon. The Hindu fundamentalist gang responsible for his death said that Staines had been forcibly converting Hindus to Christianity.
- In 2002, a coach of the Sabarmati Express carrying Hindu pilgrims was set on fire by miscreants, killing 59 people near the Godhra railway station in Gujarat. In the riots that followed this incident, both Hindus and Muslims were killed.



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India is different in another way too. The State not only steps in to 'disallow' religious practices that deprive people of their democratic rights, it also 'allows' people to practice their religion the way they wish to. Thus, Sikhs are allowed not to wear a helmet while riding two-wheelers even though this is punishable in the case of other communities. This is because wearing a turban is a very important religious practice for Sikhs. Similarly, though the State keeps away from religion, the festivals of all religious communities are holidays to allow people the time to celebrate them. Religious minorities are allowed to run their own educational institutions. What is more, the government gives grants to help in the running of these institutions. Also, every religious community is governed by its own religious laws in 'personal' matters like marriage.

Thus, as the Supreme Court held in one of its judgments, Indian secularism means "equal feeling for all religions and not no feeling for any religion". The real spirit of Indian secularism is tolerance

and peaceful coexistence.

## Indian Secularism

The Constitution of India declares India to be a secular state. According to the Constitution, it is important because of the following reasons:

- In a secular state, one religious community is not able to dominate the other community.
- There may not be any cases of some members dominating other members of the same religious community.
- A secular state can neither enforce any religion on the people nor curb the religious freedom of any citizen.

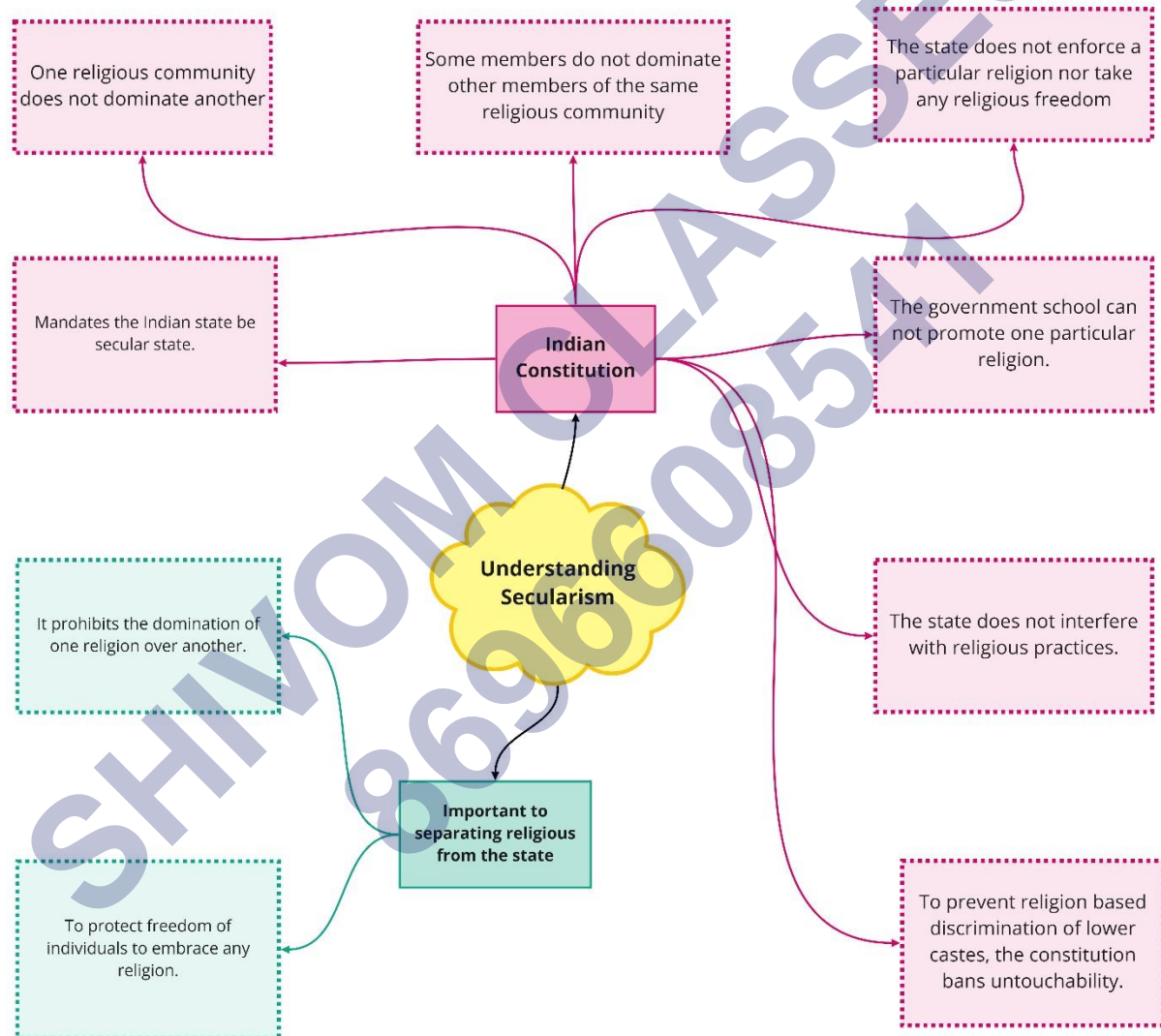
To prevent the domination of a majority community over the others, the Indian State follows certain guidelines which are enlisted in our Constitution. These are

- It has no official religion. It neither encourages nor discourages practice of any religion. For example, in government spaces like the court room, government schools and offices, no one can promote any religion.
- The Indian State respects the religious sentiments of all people. Thus, it follows a policy of non- interference in the religious practices of the people. For example, the State allows the Sikhs to not wear a helmet as wearing a pagdi is part of their religious practice.
- The Indian State also follows the strategy of intervention in cases where members of one community discriminate against members of the same religious community. For example, in order to prevent upper-caste Hindus from dominating lower-caste Hindus, untouchability has been abolished and no discrimination is allowed on the basis of caste or sect.
- By following the policy of intervention, the Indian State also guarantees the right to minority groups of establishing their own educational institutions and colleges. It also provides financial assistance to them.

### How is Indian Secularism Different from Other Democratic Countries?

While the Indian State follows the strategy of positive intervention, the American State strictly follows the policy of the separation of religion from politics and does not interfere in the religious activities of any religion. The same is the case with France. This is reflected in the French order of February 2004 when a law banning all students from wearing any religious or political signs or symbols (Islamic headscarf or Jewish skullcap) was passed. Many communities protested the law. However, in view of the law, students who persisted with wearing a head scarf were expelled from school.

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## Important Questions

### Multiple Choice Questions-

Question 1. Who were persecuted in Hitler's Germany?

- (a) Jews
- (b) Christian
- (c) Muslims
- (d) Hindus

Question 2. What is referred to as the separation of religion from the State?

- (a) Diversity
- (b) Fraternity
- (c) Secularism
- (d) Discrimination

Question 3. Which community in Indian society cannot be forced to wear Helmet as they wear Turban.

- (a) Muslims
- (b) Buddhist
- (c) Christians
- (d) Sikhs

Question 4. In which country most children in the government schools have to begin their school day reciting 'Pledge of Allegiance'?

- (a) France
- (b) India
- (c) UK
- (d) USA

Question 5. In which year and month France passed a law which banned wearing any conspicuous religious or political signs.

- (a) In Feb 2004
- (b) In Feb 2005
- (c) In Mar 2006
- (d) In Jan 2008

Question 6. In February 2004, which country has prohibited the wearing of conspicuous religious or political signs by the students?

- (a) France
- (b) India
- (c) America
- (d) None of these

Question 7. What is the status of U.S legislature in the matters of the religion?

- (a) Prohibit making new gender law
- (b) Prohibit making new reservation law
- (c) Prohibit making new religion law
- (d) None of these

Question 8. What was the names of the Muslim dominant former French colonies?

- (a) Tunisia
- (b) Morocco
- (c) Algeria
- (d) All of these

Question 9. What was the names of two non-secular countries?

- (a) Saudi Arabia
- (b) Israel
- (c) Both a and b
- (d) None of these

Question 10. Which one of the following is a fundamental right?

- (a) Right to freedom of religion
- (b) Right to property
- (c) Right to work
- (d) All of these

Question 11. Where do Christians go for prayer?

- (a) Temple
- (b) Church
- (c) Mosque
- (d) Gurudwara

Question 12. What happened in Hitler's Germany?

- (a) Several million people were killed

- (b) Bomb blast took place in Nagasaki
- (c) Assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi
- (d) All of these

Question 13. What does 'to force someone to do something' mean?

- (a) Coercion
- (b) Intervene
- (c) Interpret
- (d) None of these

Question 14. Indian Constitution contains

- (a) Fundamental rights
- (b) Discrimination
- (c) Unequality
- (d) All of these

Question 15. What could the tyranny of majority result in?

- (a) Discrimination
- (b) Coercion
- (c) None of the above
- (d) Both (a) and (b)

### Very Short:

1. What examples does history provide us on the grounds of religion?
2. What happened in the Jewish state of Israel?
3. How are non-Muslims treated in Saudi Arabia?
4. What does the term 'secularism' refer to?
5. What do you mean by 'freedom to interpret'?
6. Why cannot government schools celebrate religious festivals?
7. Why is Paramjit allowed to drive in pagri?
8. How is Indian secularism different from that of American secularism?
9. What is meant by 'principled distance'?

### Short Questions:

1. What is religion?
2. Name the major religions practiced all over the world.

3. What is secularism?
4. State the 4th point of the Fundamental Rights of the Indian constitution.
5. What are the three objectives of a secular State?
6. What are the other reasons for separating the power of the State from religion?
7. What do you understand from the statement 'freedom to interpret religious teachings differently' in context with the practice of untouchability?
8. What are the objectives of the Indian constitution that advocates secularism?

### Long Questions:

1. Why is it important to separate religion from the State? Explain with examples.
2. Explain with an example that in Indian secularism the State can intervene in religious affairs.
3. What is secularism?
4. Secularism is separating religion from the power of the state. Discuss why it is vital to separate the power of the state from religious practices.
5. In what different ways does the Indian State work to prevent religious domination?

### Answer Key:

### MCQ:

1. (a) Jews
2. (c) Secularism
3. (d) Sikhs
4. (d) USA
5. (a) In Feb 2004
6. (a) France
7. (c) Prohibit making new religion law
8. (d) All of these
9. (c) Both a and b
- 10.(a) Right to freedom of religion
- 11.(b) Church
- 12.(a) Several million people were killed
- 13.(a) Coercion
- 14.(a) Fundamental rights

15.(d) Both (a) and (b)

### Very Short Answer:

1. History provides us with several examples of discrimination, exclusion and persecution on the grounds of religion.
2. Muslim and Christian minorities were treated badly in the Jewish state of Israel.
3. In Saudi Arabia, non-Muslims are not allowed to build a temple, church etc. They also cannot gather in a public place for prayers.
4. The term 'secularism' refers to the separation of the power of religion from the power of the State.
5. Freedom to interpret' means an individual's liberty to develop his own understanding and meaning of the religion that one practices.
6. Government schools cannot celebrate religious festivals because it will be a violation of government's policy of treating all religions equally.
7. Paramjit is a Sikh youth and for him wearing a pagri is a very important part of his religion.
8. Unlike Indian secularism, there is strict separation between religion and the State in American secularism.
9. This means that any interference in religion by the State has to be based on the ideals laid out in the Constitution.

### Short Answer:

**Ans: 1.** Religion is the personal beliefs and practices relating to the divine. It is also people's beliefs and opinions concerning the existence, nature, and worship of the divine.

**Ans: 2.** Buddhism; Christianity; Hinduism; Islam and Judaism are the major religions practiced all over the world.

**Ans: 3.** Secularism is the belief that no one should be discriminated on the basis of the religion he or she practices. Every citizen, irrespective of which religion he or she follows, is equal in the eyes of the laws and policies that govern the Nation.

**Ans: 4.** The 4th point of the 'Fundamental Rights' is ...

(i) Right to Freedom of Religion

(ii) 'Every person has the right to practice, profess and propagate the religion of their choice'.

**Ans: 5.** The three objectives of a secular State are:

(a) One religious community does not dominate another.

(b) Some members do not dominate other members of the same religious community.

(c) The State does not enforce any particular religion, nor does it take away the religious freedom of individuals.

**Ans: 6.** People should have the freedom to leave the religion they have been practicing and join another religion. They should also have the freedom to interpret religious teachings differently. It is for these reasons that it is important to separate the power of the state from religion.

**Ans: 7.** Untouchability refers to the social practice of excluding a minority group (untouchables) by regarding them as “ritually polluted” and segregating them from the mainstream by social custom. According to the Indian constitution everyone has the freedom to interpret religious teachings in their own way. Similarly the Dalits who are called untouchables have the freedom to interpret religion in their own way. The Indian constitution has abolished ‘Untouchability’.

**Ans: 8.** The objectives of the Indian constitution that advocates secularism are... One religious community should not dominate another. Some members of a religious community should not dominate other members of the same religious community. The State should not enforce any particular religion nor take away the religious freedom of individuals.

### Long Answer:

**Ans: 1.** There are two main reasons why the separation of religion from the State is important:

(i) The first is to prevent the domination of one religion over another.

**Example:** Almost all countries of the world will have more than one religious groups living in them. Within these religious groups, there will most likely be one group that is in a majority. If this majority religious group has access to State power, then it could quite easily use this power and financial resources to discriminate against and persecute persons of other religions. This would violate Fundamental Rights.

(ii) The second is to protect the freedom of individuals to exit from their religion, embrace another religion or have the freedom to interpret religious teachings differently.

**Example:** We can give example of untouchability in Hindu religious practice. If state power were in the hands of those Hindus who support untouchability, then it would be a difficult task for anyone to abolish this practice.

**Ans: 2.** An important aspect of India secularism is that the State can intervene in religious affairs. We can prove this fact with an example of untouchability. It was a practice in which the members of the same religion, i.e. upper caste Hindus, dominated other members, i.e. lower caste people, within it. In order to prevent this religion-based exclusion and discrimination of lower castes, the Indian Constitution banned untouchability. In this instance, the State intervened in religion in order to end a social practice that it believed discriminated and excluded and that violated the Fundamental Rights of Lower castes.

**Ans: 3.** The Indian Constitution contains Fundamental Rights. These rights are very important because they protect us against State power as well as against the tyranny of the majority. The Indian Constitution allows individuals the freedom to live by their religious beliefs and practices as they interpret these. Thus, our Constitution gives religious freedom to all and to maintain it India adopted a strategy of separating the power of religion and the power of the State. Secularism is, in fact, the separation of religion from the State.

**Ans: 4.** Secularism is very essential for the smooth functioning of a democratic country. In today's world people go to other countries to work or do business. So you will find that people of different religions live in the same locality.

In the event of people of different religions living together in the same locality there is a possibility that people belonging to one particular religion being in the majority. If this majority has access to State power, there is likelihood that it will use it to discriminate and dominate the minority group which practices another religion.

In a secular democratic country any form of domination or tyranny, based on religion is in violation of the rights that a democratic society guarantees to each and every citizen irrespective of their religion. Therefore it is important not to allow any one religion, even though it may be the majority, to violate the fundamental rights of all citizens. If this right has to be maintained it is vital to separate the power of the state from religious practices.

**Ans: 5 .** Indian secularism works in various ways to prevent religious domination:

(a) It uses a strategy of distancing itself from religion. The Indian State is not ruled by a religious group. It also does not support any one religion. In our country, government places like law courts, police stations, government schools and offices are not supposed to demonstrate or promote any one religion.

(b) The second way in which Indian secularism works to prevent the domination of religion is through a strategy of non-interference. This means that in order to respect the sentiments of all religions and not interfere with religious practices, the State makes certain exceptions for particular religious communities. Just take the example of the Sikh community. For Sikhs, wearing a pagri is a very important part of their religion. The government cannot force them to wear a helmet while driving a two-wheeler.

(c) The third way in which Indian secularism works to prevent the domination of religion is through a strategy of intervention. Untouchability presents a good example where members of the same religion, i.e. upper caste Hindus, dominate other members, i.e. lower castes within it. In order to prevent this religion-based discrimination of lower castes, our Constitution banned untouchability. Here, the State intervened in religion in order to uproot a social practice that it believed discriminated and excluded, and that violated the Fundamental Rights of the people belonging to lower caste.