

19. SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENTS

Can you recall the main aspects of the Bhakti movement you read about in Class VII? You may recall that *Bhakti* saints criticised orthodoxy among both Hindus and Muslims and pointed out the oneness of God and equality of all human beings. These ideas were further strengthened in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Christian Missionaries and Oriental Scholars

Many Christian missionaries came to India along with the European companies to preach Christianity in India. They severely criticised the existing religious practices and beliefs and tried to persuade people to adopt Christianity. At the same time they also established many educational institutions, hospitals and charity services with the view of serving the poor and needy. This helped in spreading many new ideas among people.

Soon a lively debate ensued between the missionaries and leaders of Hinduism and Islam as each tried to defend their own religious ideas. Such debates helped people not only to understand each others ideas but also encouraged them to enquire into the original and basic tenets of their own religions. Several European scholars studied the ancient literature of India, translated them and published them as books. (Since they studied books of the eastern countries they were called 'Orientalists'.) Now these books are available for all to study.



William Jones



Max Muller

As the ancient Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Persian and Arabic books got translated into European languages, the rich and diverse cultural heritage of the country was recognized by all. This enabled the people with new ideas to reinterpret their own religions better.

The Europeans introduced printing press in India. It made possible the appearance of many newspapers and magazines. Books were also published in different Indian languages. This made books accessible to a large number of people at a very low cost. People could now carry on debates and discussions through these newspapers, magazines and books and easily reach out to large number of people.

Brahmo Samaj and Religious Movements of Bengal



Raja Rammohan Roy

Raja Rammohan Roy was born in Bengal in 1772. He was a great scholar of Sanskrit, Persian, English, and knew Arabic, Latin and Greek.

He also studied several religious philosophies like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Sufism. Having studied various religious books he was convinced that there is only one God and that worshipping of idols and making sacrifices were incorrect. He was convinced that all great religions had the same common beliefs and it was incorrect to criticise the religions of others. He also believed that we should accept a religious belief only if it is rational and if it is beneficial to people. He rejected the authority of priests and called upon people to study the original books of their religions. He published his ideas in magazines and books using the new technology of printing to reach out to maximum number of people.

In 1828 Rammohan Roy founded the *Brahmo Samaj* - an assembly of all those who believed in an universal religion based on the principle of One Supreme God. After the death of Rammohan Roy in 1833, the Brahmo movement was led by Devendranath Tagore and Keshav Chandra Sen. They popularised their ideas by lecturing all over India.

Keshav Sen's tour in Maharashtra led to the foundation of *Prarthana Samaj* in Bombay in 1867. It was started by R. G. Bhandarkar, a famous scholar and M. G. Ranade with ideas similar to *Brahmo Samaj*. Sen has also a major influence upon Kandukuri Veeresalingam who started reform movement in South India.

However, differences arose among the members of the Brahmo Samaj and they broke into smaller organizations often quarrelling with each other.

Keshav Sen eventually became a disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa who preached ardent devotion to goddess Kali.



Ramakrishna Paramahansa



Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda was a disciple of Ramakrishna and he set up the Ramakrishna Mission with two objectives
- to revive a reformed Hindu religion and to engage in social work and social service for national reconstruction.

He believed that Hindu religion was superior to all others. He emphasized the teachings of Upanishadas which were being translated and printed in large numbers. At the same time he wanted Hindu religion to get rid of ritualism, superstitions etc. and adopt some of the positive qualities of European culture like freedom and respect for women, work ethic, technology, etc. He wanted the Mission to set up hospitals, schools, orphanages and also work to bring relief in times of floods and famines.

- What were the similarities and differences between the views of Rammohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda?
- How do you think were the early reformers influenced by European culture and Christianity?
- In what way do you think printing helped in the spread of these new ideas?

Arya Samaj in Punjab



Swami Dayananda Saraswati

Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) was a social reformer who rejected the orthodox ritualistic Hinduism and became a wandering sanyasi.

He studied the Vedas and was convinced that they contained the true religion and he rejected all later additions to Hindu religion like many gods and goddesses, idol and temple worship and Brahmanic priesthood and caste system.

He advocated worshipping one Supreme God through simple rituals and recitation of Vedic mantras. He rejected all other religions as false religions and wanted Hindus who had converted to other religions to return to Hinduism based on the Vedas. He set up *Arya Samaj*, in 1875 to preach his ideas and also wrote a book, *Satyartha Prakash*, which was printed in large numbers and read widely by the educated class.

After his death in 1883 his followers in Punjab set up the Dayanand Anglo Vedic (DAV) School to educate children in modern subjects and at the same time keep them in touch with their religion and culture. Some years later there were differences within the *Arya Samaj* movement. Some people felt that they should only focus on teaching Vedic religion and not modern subjects and counter the influence of other religions. They set up Gurukul Kangri University in Haridwar.

- Compare the religious views of Rammohan Roy, Vivekananda and Dayananda, and point out the similarities and differences among them.
- If you had to choose between a DAV school, Gurukul School and a government run school, which one would you prefer to go to and why?

Reform and Education among Muslims

Just as the reformist Hindus had to struggle against the orthodox practices, so too reformist Muslims had to struggle against their orthodox religious practices. The suppression of the revolt of 1857 had created a lot of bitterness between Muslims and the British. Most Maulvis were opposed to English education as they felt that the teachings of modern science and philosophy were contrary to Islamic tenets.



Sir Syed Ahmed Khan

However, many Muslims like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) were convinced that the bitterness between Muslims and the British must end. In order to progress, Muslims should participate in government and get larger share in Government jobs.

This was possible only through modern education. Sir syed tried to modernize Muslim community and propagated his ideas through his writings in a journal.

Sir Syed started the Aligarh Movement for the spread of Modern education and social reforms among the Muslims. He was in favour of education of women and the abolition of *purdah*. He wanted to interpret Islam and bridge the gap between religion, modern science and philosophy. In 1864 Sir Syed promoted a scientific society which translated many scientific works into Urdu and published them. His greatest achievement was the establishment of the Mohammedan Anglo Oriental (MAO) College at Aligarh in 1875. It sought to teach English and science but in an Islamic atmosphere. In course of time, this became the most important educational institution for Indian Muslims. It later developed into the Aligarh Muslim University.

- You may have noticed that all the reformers tried to reinterpret the ancient religious books in order to defend their reformist ideas. Look at the examples of all the major reformers and see how they did this.
- Why do you think there was bitterness between Muslims and the British after 1857?
- Do you see any similarity between the DAV schools and the MAO college?
- Do you find any religious idea advocated by the above reformers which was not part of the *Bhakti* Movement?

Social Reforms and Women

Nowadays most girls from middle class families go to school, and often study with boys. On growing up, many of them go to colleges and universities, and take up jobs. Women are free to pursue different kinds of careers just like men. They can travel to distant places and take up work.

According to law, if they are adults, they can marry anyone they like, from any caste and community, or not marry at all and widows can remarry too. All women, like all men, can vote and stand for elections and take part in public life. Even though women still face discrimination, they can fight against them and assert their rights.

Two hundred years ago things were very different. Most children were married off at an early age of five or six years. Both Hindu and Muslim men could marry more than one wife. In some parts of the country, upper caste women were burnt along with the bodies of their dead husbands. This was called '*sati*'. The life of a widow who did not commit *sati* was one of hardship and ill treatment because people felt that such women were inauspicious and unprotected. They had to wear white saris and shave off their heads and not take part in auspicious activities. Women's rights to property were also restricted. Besides, most women had virtually no access to education. In many parts of the country people believed that if a woman was educated, she would not be under the control of her husband or in-laws.

This was not the same among all communities. Such treatment was more common in upper castes and powerful communities than in tribal societies and labouring communities.

Minimum Age of Marriage

In 1846, a law was passed to disallow marriage of girls below ten years. In 1891 this was raised to 12 years. In 1929, through the Sharada Act, the minimum age was raised to 14 years. The limit was raised in 1978 to 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys.

Reformers like Rammohan Roy wrote about the way women were forced to bear the burden of domestic work, confined to the home and the kitchen, and not allowed to move out and get educated. He began a campaign against the practice of *sati* and tried to show that the practice of widow burning had no sanction in ancient texts. By the early nineteenth century many British officials had also begun to criticise Indian traditions and customs. They were willing to listen to Rammohan and *sati* was officially banned in 1829. Another Bengali reformer, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar fought for remarriage of widows, especially child widows. Finally a law was passed allowing widow remarriage in 1855. Vidyasagar also fought against child marriage and the practice of men marrying many girls (polygamy). He was greatly involved in the movement for education of girls and despite severe opposition helped setting up schools for girls.

An observer described the first widow remarriage celebrated in Calcutta in 1856.

"I shall never forget the day. When Vidyasagar came with his friend, the bridegroom... the crowd of spectators was so great that there was not an inch of space... After the ceremony, it became the subject of discussion everywhere; in the bazaars and in the shops, in the streets, in the public squares, in students' hostels, in drawing rooms, and in distant village homes where even women earnestly discussed it among themselves."

Write a dialogue between supporters and opposers of widow remarriage.

- Why do you think it was important to get the government to pass laws for social reform?

Kandukuri Veeresalingam (1848- 1919)



Kandukuri Veeresalingam

Kandukuri Veeresalingam was a social reformer of Andhra region. He was born in an orthodox Telugu family in Rajahmundry.

Veeresalingam founded *Brahma Samaj* in Andhra Pradesh. He concentrated all his efforts and energies on the widow remarriage and abolition of child marriage. He was a strong advocate of women's education which was forbidden in those days. He started a school in Dhawaleshwaram near Rajahmundry.

Veeresalingam founded a number of journals and wrote a number of books in Telugu supporting social reform. He is called as the '*Gadya Tikkana*' for his writings in prose.

You would have noticed in the above descriptions that most of the people who fought for the rights of women were men. At that time very few women were educated and were not in a position to participate in public activities. We shall now read about some outstanding courageous women who fought for the rights of women in such conditions.

Savitribai Jyotirao Phule (1831–1897)



Savitribai Phule

Savitribai Phule along with her husband Jyotiba Phule, played an important role in improving women's rights in Maharashtra.

Jyotiba set up a school for girls of 'untouchable' castes in 1848 in Pune. He trained Savitribai to become the first woman teacher.

Despite severe opposition to educating lower caste girls, Savitribai continued to teach. After the death of Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai took over the responsibility of *Satya Shodhak Samaj*. She presided over meetings and guided workers. Savitribai worked relentlessly for the victims of plague, where she organized camps for poor children. It is said that she used to feed two thousand children everyday during the epidemic.

Isn't a woman's life as dear to her as yours is to you? ... once a woman's husband has died, ... what's in store for her? The barber comes to shave all the curls and hair off her head, just to cool your eyes. ... She is shut out from going to weddings, receptions and other auspicious occasions that married women go to. And why all these restrictions? Because her husband has died. She is unlucky: ill fate is written on her forehead. Her face is not to be seen, it's a bad omen.

- Tarabai Shinde, *Stripurush Tulna*, 1882 (Tarabai was an associate of Savitribai Phule)

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (1858 –1922)



Pandita Ramabai Saraswati

Ramabai was born in Maharashtra and her father educated her in Sanskrit scriptures despite orthodox opposition. After the death of her father Ramabai and her brother wandered all over India including Kolkata in Bengal. She came to be known as Pandita Ramabai Saraswati in recognition of her learning.

"Men behave with us women like they behave towards animals. When we make efforts to improve our situation it is said that we are revolting against men and that it is a sin. In fact, the biggest sin is to endure the ill deeds and not oppose them," said Ramabai.

Ramabai devoted her whole life to helping women, especially widows. She traveled alone to England and America, to learn about the women's organisations. On her return to India she started an *ashram* and school known as *Sharada Sadan* in Mumbai to educate widows. Women were taught many kinds of skills and vocations at this school so that they could stand on their own feet. It also provided housing, education, vocational training and medical services for many needy groups including widows, orphans and the blind. She often said that women bear everything silently because they have to depend on men and unless they became self-supporting they cannot assert their rights.

Education among Muslim women

From the early twentieth century, Muslim women like the Begums of Bhopal played a notable role in promoting education

among women. Another remarkable woman, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain started schools for Muslim girls in Patna and Calcutta. She was a fearless critic of conservative ideas, arguing that religious leaders of every faith accorded an inferior place to women.

As a result of the efforts of these social reformers, schools and colleges were opened for girls and many of them even became doctors and teachers. However, there were many people who strongly resisted these efforts to spread education among girls. They felt that if girls became educated, they would not remain under the control of their husbands and would not do household duties. Parents who were courageous enough to send their daughters to school were socially boycotted. Nevertheless, many families began opting for social change and slowly girls began to study in schools and colleges.

- Do you think today equal importance is given to the education of girls or do girls still face discrimination?
- What problems do girls face in getting educated which boys do not face?
- To what extent has the treatment of widows changed today?
- Do dalit girls and Muslim girls face special problems in education even today?

Social Reforms and Caste System

You have read about caste discrimination in the previous classes. The upper castes like Brahmins and *kshatriyas* treated the labouring groups at the bottom of the society as *shudras* or “untouchables”. They were not allowed to enter temples, draw water from the wells used by the upper castes, to learn to read or write or study scriptures. They were seen as inferior human beings whose only work was serving the upper castes. Rulers of those times enforced such caste discrimination by punishing those who did not follow the caste norms.

This began to change with the establishment of British rule in India. The British courts implemented the same laws for all. The Christian missionaries and the government opened schools where admission was given to all children irrespective of their caste background. The missionaries were particularly active in educating the children of lower castes who had till then been deprived of all education. Government service, especially in the army was now open to all and many people from castes considered low or untouchable. Many moved to the new emerging towns to find new kinds of employment. All this brought about changes in the position of the lower castes, who began to question caste based discrimination. Let us see how this happened and who were the people who led these movements for equality and ending the caste system.

No place inside the classroom

In the Bombay presidency, as late as 1829, some people were called untouchables and not allowed into even Government schools. When some of them pressed hard for that right, they were allowed to sit on the veranda outside the classroom and listen to the lessons, without “polluting” the room where upper-caste boys were taught.

1. Imagine that you are one of the students sitting in the school veranda and listening to the lessons. What kind of questions would be rising in your mind?
2. Some people thought this situation was better than the total lack of education for untouchable people. Would you agree with this view?

Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) and Satya Shodhak Samaj



Jyotiba Phule

Jyotiba Phule was born in Maharashtra and studied in schools setup by Christian Missionaries.

The turning point in Jyotiba's life occurred when he joined the marriage procession of his Brahmin friend and was insulted by the family members. On growing up he developed his own ideas about the discrimination in caste society and he set out to attack the claim of the Brahmins that they were superior to others. He proposed that *Shudras* (labouring castes) and *Ati Shudras* (untouchables) should unite to challenge caste discrimination.

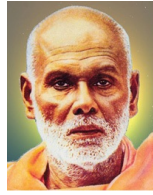
Jyotiba Phule founded *Satya Shodhak Samaj* to build a new society based on truth and equality. He and his wife, Savitribai Phule started a school for girls of the *Mahar* and *Maang* castes which were considered untouchable. They had to face the opposition of even their near relatives.

Phule wrote several books like “*Gulamgiri*”, attacking caste system which he equated with slavery. Phule and *Satya Shodhak Samaj* campaigned for special schools, colleges and hostels for the children of ‘low’ castes where the teachers too would be from ‘low’ castes. They conducted competitions in essay writing, debates and public speaking. So that they can gain confidence and self respect. They called upon the ‘low’ castes to conduct marriage and death ceremonies without the Brahmins.

- Do you think these demands are necessary even today?

- Why do you think he insisted on ‘low’ caste teachers to teach such students?

Narayana Guru (1856-1928)



Narayana Guru

Narayana Guru was a religious leader who preached the idea of “One *Jathi*, One God and One Religion for all”. His father was an ayurveda doctor and also ran a school for children in which Narayana also studied.

Narayana Guru called upon the Ezhava community to give up several aspects of their low caste status like making liquor and animal sacrifices. He set up temples where no caste discrimination would be practiced and very simple rituals would be followed without Brahmin priests. He even said that building schools for children was more important than building temples. Soon his followers increased to include people of other castes who were influenced by his scholarship and spirituality. Narayana Guru actively criticized caste system and called for end to all forms of caste discriminations.

- Compare the efforts of Narayana guru and Jyotiba Phule. What similarities and differences do you see between them?

Bhagya Reddy Varma (1888-1939)



Bhagya Reddy Varma

Several dalit leaders of Andhra Pradesh like Bhagya Reddy Varma worked tirelessly to make the dalit people aware of their plight and fight for their rights.

They were of the view that the dalits were the original inhabitants of the land who had been subjugated by force by Aryan upper castes. Hence they called upon Dalits to call themselves ‘*Adi Andhras*’. In 1906, Bhagya Reddy started “Jagan Mitra Mandali” to spread awareness among dalits by using popular folk arts. They set up schools and also persuaded the Nizam to allocate special funds for the education of dalits. They also led successful agitations against the practice of dedicating girls, especially dalit girls as *devadasis* or *joginis* to temples and forcing them into prostitution. As part of their campaign to fight Hindu caste system, they took keen interest in the teachings of the Buddha and promoted the adoption of Buddhism by Dalits.

- Recall the teachings of Buddha with regard to the caste system.
- How would the feeling that the dalits were the original inhabitants of Andhra have helped in boosting the confidence of the dalits?

Women and Dalits in Freedom Movement

Gandhiji encouraged women to participate in the non-cooperation movement and *satyagrahas*. His success in enlisting women in his campaigns, including the salt *satyagraha*, anti-untouchability campaign and the peasant movement, gave many women a new self-confidence and dignity in the mainstream of Indian public life. Women joined the national movement in large numbers. They hoped that they will enjoy equal rights with men when India became independent.

- Find out about some important women leaders of the freedom struggle – Kalpana Dutt, Aruna Asaf Ali, Captain Lakshmi Sehgal, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, etc.
- Did all women get the right to vote in independent India?

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956)



Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

Ambedkar was born in Maharashtra. His father who was employed in the army encouraged his children to go to school.

As a child Ambedkar experienced what caste prejudice meant in everyday life. In school Ambedkar and other untouchable children were segregated and given little attention or assistance by the teachers. They were not allowed to sit inside the class. Even if they needed to drink water somebody from a higher caste would have to pour it from a height as they were not allowed to touch either the water or the vessel that contained it. Overcoming numerous social and financial obstacles, Ambedkar became

one of the first dalits to obtain college education in India.

He went to America and England for higher studies. On his return to India he practised as a lawyer and as a teacher. In 1927, he began public movements for dalits rights to use public drinking water resources and to enter Hindu temples. In view of his role in mobilising the dalits, he was invited in 1932 by the colonial government to a conference on political future of India. He argued that the dalits should vote separately for dalit candidates to the legislatures. Even though the British accepted this recommendation it was opposed by Gandhiji. Finally an agreement was reached that there will be some seats reserved for dalits to which all could vote for.

He founded an Independent Labour Party to represent the interests of the dalits.

Around 1932 Gandhiji started a movement against untouchability. He called the ‘untouchable’ castes as *Harijans* or ‘People of God’. He wanted to ensure them equal access to temples, water sources and schools. This campaign was taken up by the Congress in a big way and helped to bring millions of Dalits into the national movement.

After independence in 1947, Ambedkar was invited to serve as the nation’s first law minister. Ambedkar was appointed as the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, charged by the assembly to write India’s new constitution. The text prepared by Ambedkar provided Constitutional guarantees and protections for a wide range of civil liberties for individual citizens, including freedom of religion, the abolition of untouchability and the outlawing of all forms of discrimination.

Ambedkar argued for extensive economic and social rights for women. He also won the Constituent Assembly’s support for introducing a system of reservation of jobs in the civil services, schools and colleges for members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Towards the end of his life he converted into Buddhism.

- What are the similarities and differences in the approaches of Gandhiji and Ambedkar towards dalits?
- Do you think dalits have equal access to temples, water sources and schools today? What problems do they still face?

Key words

1. Reforms
2. *Sati*
3. *Purdah*
4. Widow marriages
5. *Untouchability*

Improve your learning

1. Do you agree with “Western education and Christian Missionaries influenced the Social and Religious reform movement in India”? Why? AS₂
2. What was the importance of printing press in the development of reform movement? AS₁
3. The main idea behind religious reform was to end complex rituals, worshipping of many gods and idol worship. Do you think people have accepted these reforms? Explain. AS₂
4. Why do you think people like Ramabai paid special attention to the condition of widows? AS₁
5. Explain the role of Raja Rammohan Roy as a social reformer in India in 19th century. AS₁
6. What was the main concern of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in promoting English Education? AS₁
7. Different leaders thought of different ways in which the ‘untouchable’ castes can be made the equals of all others. Make a table with the suggestions of leaders like Phule, Bhagya Reddy Varma, Narayana Guru, Ambedkar and Gandhiji. AS₃
8. Why does caste remain such a controversial issue today? What do you think was the most important movement against caste in colonial times? AS₄
9. What did Ambedkar want to achieve through the temple entry movement? AS₁
10. How in your opinion were the movements of social reform effective in ridding Indian society of social evils? What social evils do you find today? Which reform movements should be started to combat them? AS₄
11. Create a posture that reflects girls education and its importance. AS₆
12. What qualities of Social Reformers you liked? Why? AS₆

20.UNDERSTANDING SECULARISM

Imagine yourself as a Hindu or Muslim living in a part of the United States of America where Christian fundamentalism is

very powerful. Despite being a US citizen, no one is willing to rent their house to you. How would this make you feel? Would it not make you feel resentful? What if you decided to complain against this discrimination and were told to go back to India? Would this not make you feel angry? Your anger could take two forms. First, you might react by saying that Christians should get the same treatment in places where Hindus and Muslims are in a majority. This is a form of retaliation. Or, you might take the view that there should be justice for all. You may fight, stating that no one should be discriminated against on grounds of their religious practices and beliefs. This statement rests on the assumption that all forms of domination related to religion should end. This is the essence of secularism. In this chapter, you will read more about what this means in the Indian context.

- Re-read the introduction to this chapter. Why do you think retaliation is not the proper response to this problem? What would happen if different groups followed this path?

History provides us with many examples of discrimination, exclusion and persecution on the grounds of religion. You may have read about how Jews were persecuted by Hitler in Germany and how several millions were killed. Now, however, the Jewish state of Israel treats its own Muslim and Christian minorities quite badly. In Saudi Arabia, non-Muslims are not allowed to build a temple, church etc. and nor can they gather in a public place for prayers.

In all of the above examples, members of one religious community either persecute or discriminate against members of other religious communities. These acts of discrimination take place more easily when one religion is given official recognition by the State at the expense of other religions. Clearly no one would wish to be discriminated against because of their religion nor dominated by another religion. In India can the State discriminate against a citizen on the grounds of their religion?

What is Secularism?

In the previous chapter you read about how the Indian Constitution contains Fundamental Rights that 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. In keeping with this idea of religious freedom for all, India also adopted a strategy of separating the power of religion and the power of the State. Secularism refers to this separation of religion from the State.

Why is it Important to Separate Religion from the State?

As discussed above, the most important aspect of secularism is its separation of religion from State power. This is important for a country to function democratically. Almost all countries of the world will have more than one religious group 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 tyranny of the majority could result in the discrimination, coercion and at times even the killing of religious minorities. The majority could quite easily prevent minorities from practising their religions. Any form of domination based on religion is in violation of the rights that a democratic society guarantees to each and every citizen irrespective of their religion. Therefore, the tyranny of the majority and the violation of Fundamental Rights that can result is one reason why it is important to separate the State and religion in democratic societies.

Another reason that it is important to separate religion from the State in democratic societies is because we also need to protect the freedom of individuals to exit from their religion, embrace another religion or have the freedom to interpret religious teachings differently.

- **Discuss in class:** Can there be different views within the same religion?

What is Indian Secularism?

The Indian Constitution mandates that the Indian State be secular. According to the Constitution, only a secular State can realise its objectives to ensure the following:

1. that one religious community does not dominate another;
2. that some members do not dominate other members of the same religious community;
3. that the State does not enforce any particular religion nor take away the religious freedom of individuals.

The Indian State works in various ways to prevent the above domination. First, it uses a strategy of distancing itself from religion. The Indian State is not ruled by a religious group nor does it support any one religion. In India, government places like law courts, police stations, government schools and offices are not supposed to display or promote any one religion.

The second way, in which Indian secularism works to prevent the above domination 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.

The third way, in order to prevent this religion-based exclusion and discrimination of 'lower castes', the Indian Constitution bans untouchability. In this instance, the State is intervening in religion in order to end a social practice that it believes discriminates and excludes, and that violates the Fundamental Rights of 'lower castes' who are citizens of this country. Similarly, to ensure that laws relating to equal inheritance rights are respected, the State may have to intervene in the religion-based 'personal laws' of communities.

The intervention of the State can also be in the form of support. The Indian Constitution grants the right to religious communities to set up their own schools and colleges. It also gives them financial aid on a non-preferential basis.

- In what way is Indian secularism different from that of other democratic countries?

Some of the above objectives are similar to those that have been included in the Constitutions of secular democratic countries in other parts of the world. For example, the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibits the legislature from making laws “respecting an establishment of religion” or that “prohibit the free exercise of religion”. What is meant by the word ‘establishment’ is that the legislature cannot declare any religion as the official religion. Nor can they give preference to one religion. In the U.S.A. the separation between State and religion means that neither the State nor religion can interfere in the affairs of one another.



The photo shows students taking the ‘Pledge of Allegiance’ in a government school in America

In the United States of America, most children in government schools have to begin their school day reciting the ‘Pledge of Allegiance’. This pledge includes the words “under God”. It was established more than 60 years ago that government school students are not required to recite the pledge if it conflicts with their religious beliefs. Despite this, there have been several legal challenges objecting to the phrase “under God” saying that it violates the separation between church and State that the First Amendment of the US Constitution guarantees.

There is one significant way in which Indian secularism differs from the dominant understanding of secularism as practised in the United States of America. This is because unlike the strict separation between religion and the State in American secularism, in Indian secularism the State can intervene in religious affairs. You have read about how the Indian Constitution intervened in Hindu religious practices in order to abolish untouchability. In Indian secularism, though the State is not strictly separate from religion it does maintain a principled distance vis-à-vis religion. This means that any interference in religion by the State has to be based on the ideals laid out in the Constitution. These ideals serve as the standard through which we can judge whether the State is behaving according to secular principles.

The Indian State is secular and it works in various ways to prevent religious domination. The Indian Constitution guarantees Fundamental Rights that are based on these secular principles. However, this is not to say that there is no violation of these rights in Indian society. It is precisely because such violations happen frequently that we need a constitutional mechanism to prevent them from happening. The knowledge that such rights exist makes us sensitive to their violations and enables us to take action when these violations take place.

- Can you think of a recent incident, from any part of India, in which the secular ideals of the Constitution were violated and persons were persecuted and killed because of their religious backgrounds?

In February 2004, France passed a law banning students from wearing any conspicuous religious or political signs or symbols such as the Islamic headscarf, the Jewish skullcap, or large Christian crosses. This law has encountered a lot of resistance from immigrants who are mainly from the former French colonies of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. In the 1960s, France had faced a shortage of workers and, therefore, had provided visas for these immigrants to come and work in the country. The daughters of these immigrants often wear headscarves while attending school. However, with the passing of this new law, they have been expelled from their school for wearing headscarves.

Key words

1. Fundamental Rights
2. Democracy
3. Tyranny
4. Personal Law

Improve your learning

1. List the different types of religious practices that you find in your neighbourhood. This could be different forms of prayer, worship of different gods, sacred sites, different kinds of religious music and singing. Does this indicate freedom of religious practice? AS₃
2. Will the government intervene if some religious group says that their religion allows them to practise infanticide? Give reasons for your answer. AS₁
3. Find out some examples of different views within the same religion. AS₁
4. The Indian State both keeps away from religion as well as intervenes in religion. This idea can be quite confusing. Discuss this once again in class using examples from the chapter as well as those that you might have come up with. AS₁
5. Read the paragraph under the heading ‘What is Secularism?’ and comment on it. AS₂

1. [Untitled-1](#)