

## [The Secular State Issue](#)

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# The Secular State Issue

## Politicians Campaign For a Hindu India

India's bloodiest election in history is over. Hinduism itself shared a lot of headlines, though polls ranked it only the third most important election issue, after the country's rising prices and on-going political instability. The Bharatiya Janata Party raised the banner of Hindutva, which loosely translates as "Hindu consciousness," and succeeded at becoming the country's second most powerful political party. A Hindu revival of sorts swept across India. Bumper stickers appeared proclaiming, "Say proudly, 'I am a Hindu.'" The scuppie - "saffron-clad yuppie" (itself originally from "young urban professional") - incarnated in the Bombay business community. A "scuppie" is one who actually acknowledges his Hindu religiosity amongst business peers, however little he might be putting it in to practice. Opponents charged that Hindutva was nothing more than a repackaged communalism aimed at oppressing India's minorities.

Part and parcel of the Hindutva campaign was the call for the declaration of a Hindu state and the abandonment of the principles of secularism as presently enshrined in India's constitution. If and when this happened, Hinduism would become the state religion in two countries, India and Nepal, with a total population of 900 million. Such a major change would leave 91 secular countries (with a combined population of 700 million), 30 atheistic (1.5 billion before the changes in Russia and Eastern Europe), 44 Christian (325 million), 28 "religious" (520 million, mostly Christians), 23 Islamic (376 million), 4 Buddhist (67 million) and 1 Jewish (4 million). India alone presently accounts for 56% of the world's people living under a secular government.

Secularism, claimed the Hindu politicians, was the demon to be exorcised from independent India. Unfortunately, getting rid of the demon could be a difficult, perhaps impossible, task. Secularism is much more than a handful of guidelines built into a nation's constitution. It is at once a philosophy (almost a religion for the

non-religious), a guiding principle for lawmakers and judges and a inescapable sociological trend that follows in the wake of industrialization, urbanization and improved education. The accompanying sidebar from the highly respected Encyclopedia of Religion edited by Mercia Eliade provides remarkable insight into what is happening to India, even though it is based entirely on the experience of western nations.

To grasp the present situation in India, one must understand the Indian constitution, which grants favored treatment to minority religions, then the impact of secularization in its broadest sense upon the general population and finally how this applies to the present political situation and cry for a Hindu state.

Is India truly secular now? One central principle of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's new India was equality for all Indians regardless of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. A second was secularism. In the legalistic sense secularism means separation of religion and state, especially with regard to public education. In another more invidious sense, secularism - which translates literally as "worldly-ism" or "profane-ism" means "a system of doctrines and practices that disregards or rejects any form of religious faith and worship." This is not the concept of secularism which India intended to adopt, but many say it did.

According to a biography by B.N. Pandey, Nehru insisted on "total separation of state from religion: there was to be no official state religion, no provision for religious instruction in state schools and no taxes to support any religion. Nehru was even opposed to inserting in the constitution any religious symbol or the name of a Hindu God, which the orthodox Hindus demanded as consolation."

BJP leader L.K. Advani addressed this issue when he said, "I am fighting against the attitude of politicians and political parties [opposed] to anything that is associated with Hindus. [They have an] allergy to it and their idea is that if you cherish this allergy, only then are your secular credentials proved."

The reality of India's constitution and implementation is not separation of religion and state. There is not equality in the sense of one civil code for all citizens, but significant differences depending on religion. The minority religions are relatively free of government interference, while Hinduism is not. There are many historical

reasons for this; reasons dismissed by critics as "appeasement" and recognized by others as necessary concessions in the formation of the country.

An examination of the constitution pinpoints the difficult areas. Article 25 (1) states, "All persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion." Article 25 (2) drastically modifies this: "Nothing in this article shall...prevent the State from making any law...regulating or restricting any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice." It is under this provision which the state governments have taken over complete financial management of most of the Hindu temples in India, but none of the Muslim mosques or Christian churches.

Regarding religious schools, article 30 (1) states, "All minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice." Hindus do not have the right to establish Hindu religious schools. The Ramakrishna Mission, Satya Sai Baba and the Arya Samaj have all filed for or received status as "minority religions" to prevent government takeover of their schools.

The third area regarding equal laws for citizens was stimulated when the Muslim Women's Protection Bill was passed a few years ago. This instituted the traditional Islamic Shariah law regarding marriage, specifically the right of men to divorce their wives simply by repeating "I divorce you" three times and the right to have up to four wives. Hindu critics claimed this undermined the concept of a uniform civil code for all Indian citizens. This particular bill also attracted criticism as contrary to the UN Declaration on Human Rights as it applied to women. Even many Muslim countries have not tried to enact Shariah law, including India itself during 500 years of Muslim rule. Recently Moammar Gadhafi of Libya criticized Sudan for a move in that direction, saying religion and politics should be kept separate. King Hussein of Jordan just signed into law a national charter that rejects Islam as Jordan's sole legal basis and also extends more rights to women. Pakistan too has modified the Shariah law with regard to polygamy and divorce.

In India's post-independence scramble for a unified nation, she did not achieve equal rights for religions, nor a uniform civil code. This inequality is at the root of much of today's demand for a Hindu state.

## Secularization as antireligion

The sidebar below explains the complex forces comprising the single concept of secularization. The author defines it quite succinctly as the departure of the supernatural from people's lives and the consequent metamorphosis of religion into social service units. In India this can be seen in the reduction of religiousness amongst the general population, particularly in the urban areas. It is also evident in the evolution of Hindu religious institutions towards community service and away from predominantly practicing and teaching religion and religious techniques, a trend which dates back at least a hundred years.

Secularization reveals itself in the comments of BJP officials. One BJP member of parliament told India Today, "We don't want our ranks filled with sadhus. For us, temples and masjids are just brick and mortar, they are merely symbolic of our fight against pseudosecularism. All of us in the BJP do not see Ram as a symbol of God. Many do not even worship in temples." Advani describes himself as "religious in the essential sense of piety (not) in the ritualistic sense. I won't claim that I go to temple daily or do my pujas daily."

At the same time, the BJP is eager to use sadhus as vote-getters. "A sadhu is the best political worker you can ask for," says BJP vice President K.R. Malkani. "He travels long miles, meets scores and people and can subsist on almost no food or clothing. Above all, he will not emerge as a rival politician!"

This is the impact of secularization on society - the reduction of places of worship to ordinary buildings, and of religious leaders to minions of the political process. It is not at all limited to Hinduism, but has occurred to every religion in the world, including Islam. The declaration of a Hindu state does not address this far greater social issue. The true Hindu renaissance must come from the application of the eternal truths of Hinduism to modern man in his modern condition. The urban Hindu must relearn religion in a profound manner, reject the religion-denying secularist philosophy taught in western-oriented schools and return spirituality to the central place it occupied in his forefather's lives.

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