

# Perceptions of Secularism in India

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**Abstract:** *The aim of the present study was to conduct a survey on the perceptions of the people about the practice of secularism in India. The Government of India passed the Citizenship Amendment Act in December 2019. The amendment is viewed with doubt by certain sections of the society for its discriminatory approach towards citizenship on the basis of religion. The researcher used a self-prepared questionnaire to conduct a survey among the adult population of the Delhi NCR through random sampling. The data collected was analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The findings of the study revealed that the respondents believe that India is a secular country in practice and the government is committed to protecting religious minorities but the government's interference in religious matters is perceived as an agenda for short-term political gains.*

**Keywords:** Secularism, Religion, Citizenship Amendment Act

## 1. Introduction

Secularism literally means the indifference to or dismissal of religion or religious contemplations. However, in the political and social spheres, many definitions and concepts of secularism can be found. The term secularism is derived from the Latin word 'saeculum' which means a period of long duration or age. It is most commonly termed as the separation of religion from affairs of the state. Nevertheless, it is subject to different interpretations all the time. Some states considered 'constitutionally secular' are the United States of America, Turkey, France, South Korea, India, and Mexico. However, each of the States follows a unique model of secularism.

According to Kosmin, secularism can be classified into two categories namely "Hard Secularism" and "Soft Secularism". This relates to attitudes towards modes of separation of the secular from the religious and the resulting relationship between them (B. A. Kosmin, 2006). Secularism existed as a philosophical concept and has deep historical roots. However, the term was coined by the British writer, George Jacob Holyoake in 1851. The term was introduced to promote the separation of religion and state without actively dismissing religious beliefs.

The western concept of secularism is based on three main ideas: separation of state from religion, freedom of religion, and equal citizenship. The western model prohibits formulating any public policies with religious implications. The Indian model of secularism differs eminently from the aforementioned western conception. India does not separate religious matters from the state. The Indian constitution allows interference of the State in religious affairs to guarantee fundamental human rights to the citizens. Some of the matters in which the State had to interfere were the constitutional abolishment of untouchability, opening up of *Hindu temples* to the 'lower caste' etcetera (Smith, 2011). According to the Indian constitution, there is no official state religion in India, schools that are wholly owned by the state cannot mandate religious instruction, and tax-payers money cannot be used to support any religion (Smith, 2011). Mahatma Gandhi wrote in 1927 that he longed for an India which was "wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another."

The Government of India passed the *Citizenship Amendment Act* in December 2019. It provided a pathway for Indian citizenship to persecuted minorities in neighboring Muslim dominant countries who arrived in India before December 2014. This was the first time any bill passed by the parliament had overtly religious sentiments, thus being a catalyst for controversy. The amendment was criticized for discrimination on the basis of religion. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) called it "fundamentally discriminatory", adding that even though India's "goal of protecting persecuted groups is welcome", this should be carried out in a "robust national asylum system". The amendment caused large-scale protests in the national capital region as well as some states, largely by the youth of the country. The northeastern states primarily Assam saw violent demonstrations as the citizens were concerned about their political rights being taken away due to the passing of the bill.

### 1.1 Need

India is a diverse country with people belonging to various religions. After the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act, certain sections of society felt that this act did not protect the rights of the minority as enshrined in the constitution. There were widespread protests in various parts of the country particularly the capital city Delhi, this prompted the researcher to conduct a survey to understand the perceptions and attitudes of the people towards secularism in India.

### 1.2 Objective

- 1) To study the perception of secularism among the general population.
- 2) To study the practice of secularism in India.
- 3) To study the faith of the citizens in the government in safeguarding the minorities.

### 1.3 Tools

Self-prepared online questionnaire on secularism.

1.4 Sampling

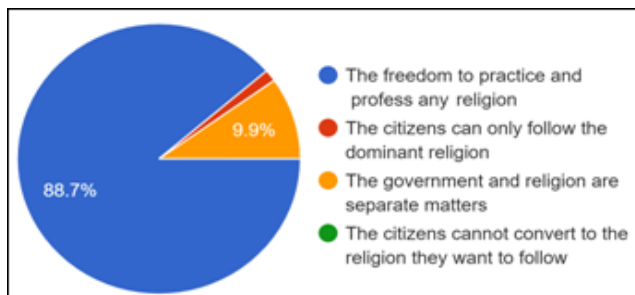
The present study was conducted through an online survey on 71 adults in the National Capital Region (Delhi, Gurgaon, Noida).

2. Analysis and Interpretation of data

Given below are the graphical representations of a few questions

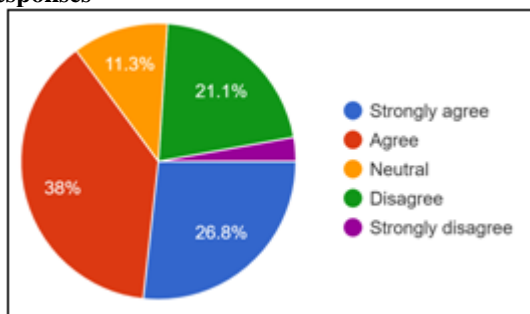
1) What do you understand by the India model of secularism?

71 Responses



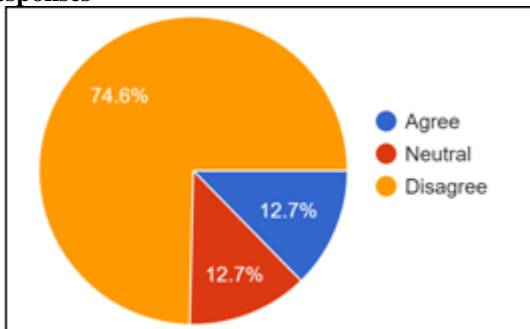
2) Do you agree that India is a secular country in practice and only in principle?

71 Responses



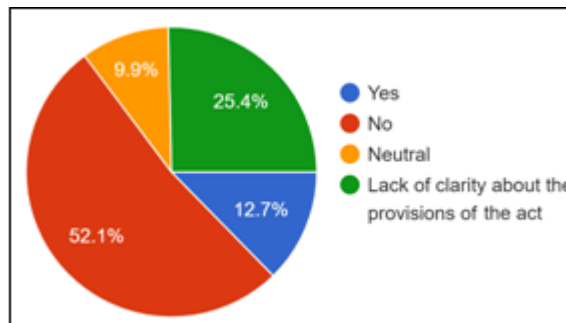
3) Most of the countries have a state religion, should India have a state religion too?

71 Responses



4) Do you think Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed by the NDA government goes against the principles of secularism?

71 Responses



3. Concept of Secularism

- The data analysis of the question about the Indian model of secularism and figure 1 shows that 88.7% of the respondents believed that secularism implied freedom to practice and profess any religion, 9.9% said that government and religion are separate matters, and only 1.8% of respondents felt that in India the citizens can only follow the dominant religion. The data analysis shows clearly that the majority of the respondents understood secularism as the freedom to practice their religion.
- The analysis of the data represented in the question, is there a gap between the ideals of secularism listed in the constitution and its implementation in society? and figure 9 shows that 85.9% of the respondents agree with the statement saying that there is a gap between the ideals of secularism in the constitution and its implementation. However, 14.1% disagreed with the same. Following the previous question, figure and question 10 show various statements the respondents feel are the reasons for the aforementioned “gap”. 59% believe the reason is the mindset of the people followed by 19.7% pointing out the negligence of the executive. 13.1% found flaws in the law-making of the legislature. Only 8.2% felt that there is a lack of judicial review of laws and principles. Based on the data gathered the majority of the respondents feel that the gap between the aspirations of the constitution and their implementation is due to the narrow mindset of the people.

Understanding Of Secularism In India

- Figure 2 shows responses to the question whether India is a secular country in practice and not only in principle, the responses gathered on a 5 point degree showed that the majority of the people (40.6%) agreed with the statement. However, 17.2% of the respondents countered that view by disagreeing with the same. 29.7% strongly agreed while 9.4% of the respondents had neutral views. Only 3.1% strongly disagreed with the same. The data analysis shows that the majority of the respondents agree that India is a secular country in practice.
- Analysis of question and figure 3 shows that the majority (55.7%) of the people agreed with the statement “The Government protects religious minorities”. While some (32.9%) believed that governments only protect religious minorities in a few situations. 8.6% of the respondents did not agree with the statement and only 2.9% had neutral views towards the same. The data analysis of the responses indicates that the majority of the sample

believes that the government does protect religious minorities.

- Figure 5 shows the graphical representation of the responses gathered for the question “Most of the countries have a state religion, should India have a state religion too?” 74.3% of the respondents disagreed with the above-given statement. 12.9% agreed with the same and 12.9% of respondents had neutral views towards the same. The data analysis concludes that the majority of respondents do not want an official religion in India for the sake of maintaining the country’s secular nature.
- Analysis of question and figure 6 shows that 42.3% of the respondents believed that secularism is an essential aspect for ensuring the freedom of citizens. While 36.6% feel that secularism and freedom of citizens are separate issues. Only 21.1% of the respondents believe that secularism cannot ensure the freedom of citizens. The majority confirms that the freedom of citizens to profess, propagate and practice any religion is guaranteed by the principles of secularism.
- Figure 7 shows the responses to the question “Do you think the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed by the NDA government goes against the principles of secularism?” The citizenship amendment act was a highly debated and controversial Act that received criticism, for people felt that its provisions went against the principles of secularism. 52.1% of the respondents feel that the Act does not go against secularism. 25.4% were not clear about the provisions of the act. 12.7% of the respondents believed that it was not a secular approach, and 9.9% didn't have any strong opinions on the aforementioned. It was noted that the majority of the respondents who were in support of CAA belonged to the age group 45-60 and those opposing the act ranged from 20 to 35 years of age. A possible conclusion can be drawn that political ideology and the understanding of secularism varies from generation to generation.

#### Practice of Secularism In India

- The analysis of the question about the practice of secularism in your daily life is as follows; Most of the respondents practiced secularism in their daily life by respecting every religion. They responded that they don't discriminate against anyone on the basis of their religion in any aspect of life. However, certain differing views were also observed, some respondents stated that they don't necessarily practice secularism in their everyday life. The data analysis of the responses gathered shows that the majority of the people practice secularism in their daily life.
- The analysis of the question and figure 11 show that 66.2% of the respondents believe that the government interferes in religious matters with an agenda in mind, while 22.5% stated that religion and government are separate matters and are independent. 9.9% feel that religious institutions seek interference from the government and only 1.4% believe religions disapprove of the interference by the government. Based on the analysis it can be inferred that more than half of the respondents presume that governments only interfere in religious matters with an agenda.

- The respondents were asked to share their experiences wherein they were faced with discrimination directed towards their religious practices or those of their acquaintances. Many respondents did not face any prejudice in these matters. However, some responses clarified that islamophobia is very prevalent in Indian society. Some of the responses showed that people belonging to minority communities were beaten up for practicing their religion. Many people belonging to Islam aren't considered prospective employees solely because of their religion. It can be concluded that people from minority religions face discrimination because of their religious identities.

#### 4. Conclusions

The data analysis showed clearly that the majority of the respondents understood secularism as the freedom to practice their religion. The majority of respondents responded that the gap between the principles of the constitution and their implementation is caused by the narrow mindset of the people. Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents agree that India is a secular country in practice, there is no need for official religion and the government is committed to protecting religious minorities. The political aspirations, ideology, and understanding of secularism differ from generation to generation. The younger generation is more demanding of their rights and identities. In general, the sample practices secularism in their daily life. Based on the analysis it can be inferred that more than half of the respondents presume that governments interfere in religious matters with an agenda for short-term political gains.

#### 5. Implications

India is a diverse country with many religions, some of which are in majority in certain regions, while others are in minority in terms of numbers. Our Constitution lays down the principle of secularism in our preamble and guarantees fundamental rights to all the citizens. So when the government tries to bring in some reforms, great care should be taken to uphold the values of the constitution, lest it may lead to misunderstandings among the minorities which has the possibility of turning violent.

#### 6. Suggestions for Further Research

- This research could be extended to different states across the country
- The sampling could be made diverse by including different age groups, different backgrounds, in both rural and urban areas.

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