Chapter: Concept of Secularism

A. UNDERSTANDING SECULARISM

Introduction:

Secularism explains the relationship between the State and religion. It determines how the State treats different religions, protects individual religious freedom and deals with religious institutions and practices.

Why Are We Studying Secularism?

India is a society marked by religious diversity. Secularism helps us understand how constitutional democracy can protect freedom of religion while ensuring equality, non-discrimination, social reform and national integration.

Religious matters and non-religious matters

RELIGIOUS MATTERS	NON-RELIGIOUS MATTERS
Worship and rituals	Education
Religious leaders and institutions	Health
Religious teachings and scriptures	Economic activities
Places of worship and religious practices	Welfare and social reform
	Law and order

CONCEPTUAL INTERLINKAGES

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY
↓
SECULAR STATE
↓
FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE + EQUALITY / NON-DISCRIMINATION
↓
SOCIAL JUSTICE + HARMONY + EQUAL CITIZENSHIP

What Is Secularism?

DEFINITION

Secularism is the principle that the State does not establish or identify itself with any particular religion, treats people of different religions with equality, and protects freedom of conscience and religion.

Two broad approaches to secularism

WESTERN MODEL	INDIAN MODEL
Emphasises separation of the State from religious affairs.	Associated with Sarva Dharma Sambhava — equal respect for all religions.

Understanding the Indian Approach

The Indian model is not based on the idea that the State must remain completely detached from every religious matter in all circumstances.

The State may engage with or intervene in religious matters when required by constitutional objectives such as equality, public order or social reform.

KEY IDEA: Indian secularism combines equal respect and religious freedom with constitutionally justified State intervention.

B. DIMENSIONS OF A SECULAR STATE

A secular State is characterised by the following dimensions:

DIMENSION	MEANING
No State religion	The State does not adopt or establish an official religion.
Prohibition of theocracy	Political authority is not based on the rule or supremacy of religious clergy.
Equal treatment of religions	The State respects different religions and does not privilege one religion over others (Sarva Dharma Sambhava).
Separation of religious and secular activities	Religious matters are distinguished from secular aspects such as the administration and management of institutions.
Freedom of conscience and religion	Individuals are free to hold beliefs and profess, practise and propagate religion, subject to constitutional limitations.
Non-discrimination	A person should not be discriminated against on grounds of religion.

Religious Matters and Secular Activities

A religious institution may involve both religious and secular aspects. Worship and religious teachings are religious matters; aspects of institutional administration and management may involve secular activities.

The State may regulate secular activities associated with religious institutions and may undertake reform consistent with constitutional requirements.

KEY IDEA: Secularism does not always mean complete State non-intervention. The nature, purpose and constitutional basis of intervention are important.

C. SECULARISM IN THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION

Introduction:

The Indian Constitution establishes a secular framework through the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Duties. Together, these provisions protect religious freedom, equality, non-discrimination, minority interests and social harmony.

Constitutional Provisions Linked to Secularism

PROVISION	CONSTITUTIONAL SIGNIFICANCE
Preamble	Declares India to be a secular State.
Articles 14–15	Guarantee equality before law and equal protection of laws; prohibit discrimination on specified grounds, including religion.
Articles 25–28	Protect freedom of conscience and the freedom to profess, practise and propagate religion, subject to constitutional limitations; also deal with religious instruction and related matters.
Articles 29–30	Protect cultural and educational rights, including the interests and educational rights of minorities.
Article 38	Directs the State to promote a social order informed by justice and to minimise inequalities.
Article 51A	Includes the duty to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood transcending religious, linguistic, regional and sectional diversities.

CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AT A GLANCE

PREAMBLE — SECULAR STATE

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EQUALITY + NON-DISCRIMINATION — ARTICLES 14–15

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FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE + RELIGION — ARTICLES 25–28

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CULTURAL + EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS — ARTICLES 29–30

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SOCIAL JUSTICE + HARMONY — ARTICLE 38 + ARTICLE 51A

Why Is This Framework Important?

- Prevents the State from privileging a particular religion.
- Protects individual freedom of conscience and religion.
- Upholds equality and non-discrimination.
- Safeguards the cultural and educational interests of minorities.
- Promotes fraternity and harmony across religious differences.

Illustration: Freedom of Religion and Constitutional Limits

An individual may profess, practise and propagate religion under the constitutional protection of religious freedom. These freedoms are subject to constitutional limitations, including public order, morality, health and other provisions of Part III.

For example, a public-health measure applicable to gatherings may regulate the manner in which religious as well as non-religious gatherings are conducted.

KEY IDEA: The Constitution protects religious liberty while allowing reasonable regulation in pursuit of constitutionally recognised objectives.

VidyantIAS — RIGHT KNOWLEDGE. RIGHT DIRECTION. EVERY STEP.

D. EVOLUTION OF SECULARISM IN INDIA

The constitutional development of secularism can be understood through three important milestones:

YEAR	DEVELOPMENT
1949 — Constitution adopted	The word 'Secular' was not expressly included in the Preamble. However, the Constitution contained provisions reflecting secular principles.
1976 — 42nd Constitutional Amendment	The word 'Secular' was inserted into the Preamble.
1994 — S.R. Bommai v. Union of India	The Supreme Court affirmed secularism as a basic feature of the Constitution.

Secularism as a Basic Feature

The basic structure doctrine limits Parliament's amending power where an amendment damages or destroys the Constitution's basic features.

In S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994), the Supreme Court affirmed the constitutional importance of secularism and recognised it as a basic feature.

KEY IDEA: Secularism is a foundational constitutional principle, not merely a word in the Preamble.

E. KEY TAKEAWAYS

DIMENSION	QUICK REVISION
Meaning	Governs the relationship between the State and religion.
Western model	Emphasises separation of the State from religious affairs.
Indian model	Sarva Dharma Sambhava — equal respect for all religions.
No State religion	The State does not establish or identify with an official religion.
No theocracy	Political authority is not based on religious rule.
Equal treatment	The State must not privilege one religion over others.
State intervention	May be justified to pursue constitutional objectives such as social reform.
Religious / secular activities	Distinguish religious practices from secular aspects such as institutional administration.

Religious freedom	Articles 25–28 protect freedom of conscience and religion, subject to constitutional limitations.
Equality	Articles 14–15 support equality and non-discrimination.
Minority rights	Articles 29–30 protect cultural and educational interests.
Social harmony	Article 38 and Article 51A support justice, harmony and fraternity.
Evolution	1949: word absent from Preamble; 1976: inserted by 42nd Amendment; 1994: S.R. Bommai affirmed secularism as a basic feature.

QUICK REVISION FLOW

SECULAR STATE — NO STATE RELIGION / NO THEOCRACY

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EQUAL TREATMENT + FREEDOM OF RELIGION + NON-DISCRIMINATION

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CONSTITUTIONALLY JUSTIFIED REGULATION / SOCIAL REFORM

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SOCIAL HARMONY + SECULARISM AS A BASIC FEATURE

F. UPSC PRELIMS PRACTICE

Consider the following statements regarding the concept of secularism in India:

1. The Indian State must maintain an identical degree of distance from every religion in all circumstances.
2. The State may intervene in religious practices to pursue constitutional objectives such as social reform.
3. Indian secularism necessarily requires the complete separation of religion from politics.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

(a) 1 only
(b) 2 only
(c) 1 and 3 only
(d) 2 and 3 only

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