Secularism

Mains: GS1 *– Salient features of Indian Society | Secularism*

GS2 *– Indian Constitution-features, amendments, significant provisions and basic structure | Comparison of the Indian constitutional scheme with that of other countries.*

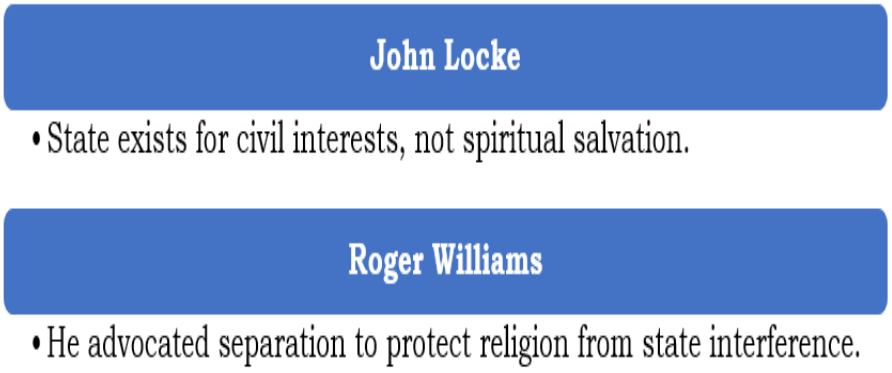
Why in the news?

Secularism is seen frequently in news due to debates over its interpretations and implementation of Universal civil code (UCC).

What is secularism?

- **Secularism -** It is the principle where the ***state remain distant, maintains neutrality towards all religions***, ensuring no official state religion and equal treatment of all citizens regardless of faith.
- **Origin -** The word secular is derived from the ***Latin term saeculum***, meaning "a generation," "a human lifetime," "an era of time," or "a century."
- **Usage** – Initially, it is used to denote *worldly or temporal matters*, as opposed to religious or spiritual ones.
- In the middle ages, it was used by Christians to refer to matters not related to the church or religious life.
- The term in its modern sense was coined by the British writer George Jacob Holyoake in 1851.
    - Secularism seen as a product of modernity and rational thought.
- **Importance** - It guarantees *freedom of religion, non-discrimination*, and separation of religious institutions from state affairs.

What are the various models of secularism practiced?



- **England** - Anglican Church is official, but equal rights and religious freedom are protected.
- **Ireland** - Preamble references Christianity, but state cannot favor or discriminate based on religion.
- **Greece** - Orthodox Church is dominant, but equality and freedom of religion are constitutionally guaranteed.
- **Pakistan** - Islam is state religion, minorities have rights to practice and cultural development, with provisions for representation.
- **Sri Lanka** – Buddhism given foremost place, but freedom to adopt any religion is protected, and minorities follow personal laws.
- **India** – It emphasizes on *no official state religion*, equal respect for all faiths, reflecting the country's diverse and multi-religious context.

Indian model	Western model
• It embodies *positive concept* advocates for positive intervention into religious affairs.	• It embodies *negative concept,* by strict separation from the religion. • For example, *US and France.*
• It is a ***model of "principled distance,"*** where the state may engage with or intervene in religious matters. • It is to ensure equality, reform, and protection of minority rights.	• It is a ***strict separation between religion and state,*** often excluding religion from public affairs.

How the concept of secularism evolved in India?

- **Historical roots -** *Ashoka's influence over religion* through his edicts promoted religious tolerance and coexistence.
  - **Rock Edict 7** - All religions should reside everywhere, promoting self-control and purity of heart.
  - **Rock Edict 12** - Prohibited glorification of one's religion and condemnation of others.
- **Freedom struggle -** Secularism was a guiding principle during India's independence movement.
  - **1928 Motilal Nehru Committee** – It proposed no state religion, no preference or disability based on religion.
  - **1931 Karachi Resolution** – It emphasised state neutrality in religious matters.
  - **1944 Hindu Mahasabha Draft** – It explicitly declared no state religion.
- **Supreme Court** – In the *Kesavananda Bharati case (1973)*, it had held that ***secularism is a basic structure*** of Indian Constitution.
- **Constitutional amendment** – The word *secular was added through 42nd constitutional amendment act in 1976*.

In 1976, the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi justified the ***inclusion of the word 'secular'*** *that it would reinforce India's commitment to social justice and religious equality.*

What are the contemporary challenges?

- **Political misuse** - Rise in communal politics and attempts to reinterpret secularism for political gain.
- **Hate speech** – It increase in religious intolerance and hate speech against minorities.
- **Misconceptions** - Some people believe that secularism grants special privileges to minorities.
    - In reality, it prevents state domination over religion and promotes autonomy for all.

> ***Theocratic state*** *is relating to or denoting a system of government in which priests rule in the name of God or a god. In theocratic states, there is excessive state control over religion, which undermines religious autonomy.*

- **Dissent over its inclusion in Constitution** - There are ongoing discussions on the inclusion of 'secular' in the Preamble.
    - Organization like RSS calls for review of secularism provisions.

What lies ahead?

- **Reaffirming neutrality** - State may remain neutral and not endorse any religion to ensure safeguard of all religions.
- **Promoting tolerance** - Emphasizing coexistence and respect for all faiths, as rooted in Ashokan and constitutional ideals can be helpful to maintain harmony over various religions.
- **Positive secularism** – The state may encourage a model that respects all religions without state interference or favoritism.

Reference

The Hindu| Secularism

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