

# Gandhian Secularism: A Need for Democracy

**Rishu Mishra**

M. A. 2nd year in Political Science (Student), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 110067

## **Abstract:**

Secularism as an idea developed around dark ages in Europe where churches and state power were conflicting to each other. There after feudalism and absolutism made people more suffered and tired from the one sided rules of religion and personal benefits of churches. 15th to 16th century's philosophers and scholars became a panacea for common people as they addressed their natural rights and liberty as to not pay unnatural taxes regulated by orthodox churches. So as a solution and to counter churches power they separated state power and religious power where civil rights were linked to state and not to church. State don't have to intervene on the matter of religion and its vice versa as a result religion become a complete private affairs. In India religious exploitation were not the same as in Europe here instead of religion, a subset of religion as caste locally known as jati become the source of exploitation. On the name of hierarchy it promotes blood purity and sectarianism. In mediaeval time bhakti movement tried best to harmonise societal differences but failed to improve widow conditions and sati practice on several parts of India. Unfortunately British made this caste hierarchy as permanent by unregulated and illogical purposes of caste census. As a culture Indian have a larger believes on religion and its practices and its philosophy as every religion has. While Gandhi much focused on its philosophical ideas and purposes rather than its social practices. We will see here how he elaborated religion and its inherent goals for mankind and what he expect from a state to make a harmonious society.

**Keywords:** Swaraj, Secularism, Cultural nationalism, Anasakti, Self-rule

Gandhi's belief on religion was like as a tactic to pull people together and here his behaviour had duality as a politician and as a philosopher. As a politician he admitted that religion can play a crucial instrument to guide a State as how to make policies which should be valid on moral ground. As a philosopher he promoted religion for individual's own self – realisation and his duty towards universe so that people can live in a harmonious society regardless their own particular religion, gender or community. His idea on religion was keep changing which was accepted by him as he said if I have made contradictory statement regarding my former and letter then reader should accept my letter statement. He often use to say about the diversity of a religion as religion is all about a diverse idea for diverse people. And if we trace the The history of any religion per se hinduism it has many sects and people believed in those different sects respectively and we are seeing these sects because of the differences in idea which initiated a debate among different scholars like Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya etc. Means even in religion there is a evolution as science and what science did in past they debated from particular to general idea and made theories. For Gandhi secularism not promoted as same as promoted in Europe because he did not excluded religion from social, economical and political life but he just regulated these aspects in a moral life. Even for him one religion should not conflict to another as he said I hate if hindu people are thinking about a hindu nation as it would be an exclusive idea and harmful for a harmonious society and the same if muslim seek

for separate nation then that would also be harmful idea for unity. So what they need to they should live together for one nation. [ Gandhi. (1909) *Hind Swaraj*. The International Press Natal South Africa]. When we check secularism on the ground of social harmony we found that historically It's quite enough to solve the conflict among heterogeneous society as state policies will be neutral to religion affairs but this is not seen in British era because that state was not a well defined state but they were colonial rulers even for their own purposes they made some communal policies and now see in India the first revolt on the base of religion as Sanyasi revolt in 1770-77 here hindu sanyasi and muslim faqir came together and revolted against British policies and law as these laws interfered on their social practices. Historians who searched communal history in India they found Mopalla revolt on early step but they forgot to think more than religious it was administrative revolt which was made by then colonial rulers. Apart from these revolt after independence there were many communal violence but these were constructed violence and not rooted to our society as these violence benefitted politics. Gandhi knew this by his experiences that in India communal ideas are not sue genesis but they are made by either State Or by Political organisation.

To well understand secularism let us discuss what religion is? And how it works in society to bound people together. Every religion must articulated with four things first is an intended philosophy as a knowledge which every religion has maybe It's on a form of human liberation or fraternity but it has a philosophy. Second every religion has some social laws that people followed just to show that they are the part of one particular religion. Third every religion is coherent with ritual practices , these practices are seen in society as festivals ,tribal rituals and others rural practices which bound them together. Forth is every religion has morality which force people for self realisation to serve humanity. Gandhi much focused on first and forth which are philosophy and morality for him philosophy is knowledge and that knowledge should be spread to common people so that they also can understand the basic part of their religion and knowing the knowledge is not sufficient for changing the society for this morality must be inherent to the people's mind otherwise how they can implement their true knowledge. Morality or Gandhian ideas are not utopia but It's a hard work [ Parel, Anthony. (2016). *Pax Gandhiana*, Chapter 4. Oxford university press ]. People think It's very hard to follow these idea so they call it as utopia or impracticable and they moved to rituals of a religion and social practices and from here conflicts started among various communities and sects. Gandhi much focus to realise the philosophy or virtues of a religion so that people can connected to each other which can help to mobilise people against British slave rule.

As we know Indian secularism is an umbrella type secularism where all religion come together for state policies which we developed by a lot of discussion in constituent assembly and by understanding our social nature. Even this type of secularism was not new but rooted in Indian society from centuries ago. In Mahajanpada period states were in their secular form and called as Ganrajya but tragic part started when monarchy destroyed these secular states. Gandhi as a critical traditionalist understood the glory of Indian past and he advocated to revive those past which were true on the basis of rationality and morality. Was this a utopian thought? Isn't it what we seem it's hard to follow we think It's impractical. Today time those who criticise secularism , say It's a Western idea but for Gandhi it has nothing to do with indigenous or western, if any idea is well suited for our society then what's problem to follow that idea. The same If one think secularism is an elite type of idea then again let suppose if It's an elite idea then what's problem to follow if these ideas are well suited for a diverse country and for this sake if I say Constitution itself is an elite idea then it doesn't mean I should not follow Constitution as these provisions are made for masses and sometimes their interests intended and sometime.

In course of time secularism heated with the debate that religion is a private affairs or it's a public affairs

in Europe it was completely private affairs just because state was separated to religion or church. For Gandhi's practice of religion there is no difference between private and public as he believed on experiment with truth so what he practiced in private he wrote those rituals publicly because for him this experiments with truth can't be hide. As we know Gandhi was keep experimenting by his own life as practice of brahmacharya. Brahmacharya can be followed through controlling the desire in two ways first is by avoiding the source of desire as Ramkrishna Paramhans and Vivekananda followed, they went through a ascetic life even in initial phase of his meditation Vivekananda never looked a girl just to avoid those feelings which hurdles the notion of brahmacharya. The second method to control desire is to enter in the source of desire and defeat this through strong determination and no doubt Gandhi followed the later. Gandhi consciously devoted for Gita as a philosophy and not as historical text for him let's forget who wrote Gita or who was Krishna? For him the philosophy or knowledge of Gita only matters and he said anasakti which is selfless action is the core value of Gita. Gandhi proposed the true meaning of religious text as he advocated Gita promoted non-violence rather than violence which is generally understood by common people he said if Krishna is saying to Arjuna to go war then It's not a symbol of violence because Krishna was keep saying to not fought war for desire wealth or power but for justice. And even if it is violence then it is better than cowardness. Gandhi in his whole life criticised the modern state at that time as he saw modern state as a war creator for power and wealth even colonialism was all about the desire of wealth and power.

For secularisation of education Gandhi worked a lot although he agreed philosophical books should be taught to children so that also can be aware to take a moral decision and to developed their own thought. Gandhi told that Geeta should be taught in schools as optional and not as compulsory manner. He said this because he was advocating a secular type of education despite of having a larger belief on Geeta or hindu philosophy he did agreed to include these mythological books as Ramayana or Mahabharata as part of syllabus in schools just because to ensure the freedom for others choices. [1937, on Vardha congress committee]. On his proposal of Nai Talim on 29th January 1948, just one day before his death he feared for communal violence as he failed to stop the whole violence among hindus, muslims and sikhs and again advocating for harmonious society and a well developed secular education for future so that original teaching of all religion like philosophy and morality can be taught in India. In constituent assembly on the matter of secularism Ambedkar said It's not necessary to write this word directly in Constitution but on the course of time people themselves will believe on these type of thinking so they neither formulated secularism nor defined it. And as a result, historically secularism was started to use in Indian politics to counter right wing politics and so on. In any action there must be a reaction and secularism now criticised by another side and seen as against to freedom of religion. In the lack of proper developed idea on secularism Indian people could not understood the real meaning of secularism and either they pulled it or pushed it in both cases they become unfamiliar to brought secularism in root of the society. So secularism in India limited to only intellectuals and not well spread on ground level. In Nehruvian era Gandhi's personality used for their own political benefits but did not used Gandhi's thought to run a state even on the ground of secularism Nehru and Gandhi had a lot of differences. But both were equally concerned regarding minority basically religious minority and there freedom in India. From time to time state interfered in religion as a private affairs but is this sufficient to develop a secular order in society I think no because state maybe reformed Indian society when it was critically needed but it failed to give a permanent solution where everybody can think rationally and guide to state policies what Gandhi hoped for India's future. Gandhi saw Hinduism as a culture where all people perform their rituals and attain

salvation. For him seva, sadbhavna and karuna are the virtues of human life which can transcend human energy to higher stage.

A religion must confess the idea of liberation and because Gandhi believed only in philosophy and Morality of religion that is why he did not admitted to criticise hinduism as a whole for its hierarchical nature of social order. And he definitely promoted the idea of reservation of dalit but didn't agreed to give a separate electorates for them and now here he conflicted many social reformers like Periyar and Ambedkar. Gandhi was familiar with the existed hierarchy within hinduism and he tried best to resolved these issues by deliberation and not by any kind of separation which can affect harmonious society but was he right? For this answer We have to listen Ambedkar who replied to Gandhi as Ambedkar asked what kind of harmony we have, in hinduism upper caste and lower caste are separated by a blood ship line we don't have inter-dinning system, we don't have inter-marriage system so what harmony we have. He further said if people are separated to each other since centuries and in elections which come after five years can we established this harmony just by putting them a single and by common elections for all since their mind don't have such commonality so how can we form this commonality by sacrificing the interests of our Dalit people. These ideas of Ambedkar became a wave for the revival of dalitality. For the liberation of dalit Ambedkar criticised whole hinduism and said Varna system is mother of caste system. It's not a division of labour but division of labourers [ Ambedkar,(1936) *Annihilation of caste*]. As a solution Ambedkar advocated for social reformers rather than political reforms but what he said, was this not followed by Gandhi I guess Gandhi well followed Ambedkar's idea of social reform but method was different and in later phases Ambedkar changed his idea on first social reform now he practically fighting for political power for dalit which was sensible as he thought if dalit will capture the very powerful institutions like politics than it would be easy to operate a social reform as after all social reforms come into society by political power.

So let's think why and how Gandhi's idea of sadbhavna and karuna failed during communal violence among sikhs, hindus and muslims the reason behind this was hidden in the history we see communal and nationalism ideas in India developed together even both were like step cousin to each other. In 1909 in London when Savarkar was pursuing his studies and Gandhi was involved in the Indian diaspora community there. Their meeting was reportedly brief and did not lead to any significant collaboration or alignment of their views as their ideology were different. By this meeting Gandhi aware the difference between hindus and muslims and tried to took them together. From khilafat movement Gandhi knew the fact that both religion are intolerable to each other. But still he did not aware that after the declaration of direct action day by Jinnah people will be uncontrollable for him, he followed his old technique like fasting to stop these violence but he failed. After Noalhali people gathered in Bihar and more lacks people killed in mobbing, Nehru in one letter asked to Gandhi, should I use Air defence (air strike on ground to scattered people) in Bihar then Gandhi replied it was a job of British era [Nehru,( 1988). *An old bunch of letters*, (ed.) Oxford university publication]. Gandhi believed in equal respect for all religions Gandhi believed in the intrinsic worth of every individual's religious beliefs and practices. He advocated for a society where all religions are treated with equal respect and dignity, without any discrimination or favouritism by the state or society.

His one of most influence was in promoting Spiritual Pluralism. So Gandhi's secularism acknowledged the diversity of spiritual paths and encouraged mutual understanding and appreciation among people of different faiths. He viewed religion as a deeply personal and subjective experience that should be respected and celebrated in its various forms. Mahatma Gandhi's spiritual pluralism is a foundational aspect of his

philosophy, deeply intertwined with his principles of nonviolence, truth, and the pursuit of justice. Gandhi's concept of spiritual pluralism emerged from his profound belief in the unity of all religions and his understanding that diverse paths can lead to the same ultimate truth. At the core of Gandhi's spiritual pluralism was his conviction that all religions possess intrinsic value and represent different expressions of humanity's quest for the divine. This belief guided his interactions with people of various faiths and his approach to social and political issues. Gandhi rejected the notion of religious exclusivity and instead embraced inclusivity and tolerance. He emphasized the importance of understanding and respecting the beliefs of others, regardless of their religious affiliation. For Gandhi, genuine spiritual progress involved recognizing the humanity and dignity of every individual, irrespective of their religious background. Central to Gandhi's economic and spiritual was based on the concept of trusteeship which he referred to as sarvodaya. He envisioned a society where every individual could freely practice their religion and contribute to the common good. Gandhi believed that fostering harmony among different religious communities was essential for achieving social cohesion and national unity. Gandhi was much committed to his idea of pluralistic consciousness and he was tried to know from all religion but privately he was committed to hinduism. He engaged in dialogue with leaders of various faiths, including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and others. Through these interactions, Gandhi sought to promote understanding, tolerance, and cooperation among different religious communities.

For an Ethical Governance Gandhi envisioned a state that was guided by moral and ethical principles, rather than narrow religious or political interests. He advocated for a decentralized system of governance where power was vested in the hands of the people, promoting participatory democracy and grassroots empowerment. One of Gandhi's key principles of governance was the idea of trusteeship, which proposed that you are an owner of your property but you should not act like an owner. Gandhi believed that economic inequality was a significant barrier to social harmony and advocated for a more equitable distribution of wealth and resources. Gandhi advocated for a decentralized form of government that empowered local communities and promoted grassroots participation in decision-making. He believed in the importance of Swaraj, or self-rule, at the village level, where people could actively participate in shaping their own destinies and solving local problems. One of the Gandhian S. N. Agarwal proposed Gandhian formula of Constitution where individual will be on centre and these individuals will elect a direct Local Government which later will indirectly elect state level of government and then central government [ S. N. Agarwal, (1946). *Gandhian Constitution for free India* ]. Assembly denied these proposal and after a long debate by K. M. Munshi and other article 40 added in Constitution for village panchayat. Was this Gandhian structure of Government secular in nature this answer lied in Gandhi's own writing where he said individual has full capacity to be good person by Hriday parivartan (changing the heart soul).

After a longer rule of congress we see on 1989 onwards coalition government started and as a result Indian politics become more diverse and umbrella politics made this country more secular as now regional aspects became on central panel One challenge posed by coalition politics to Indian secularism is the phenomenon of identity-based politics. Parties representing specific religious or cultural groups may seek to advance their community's interests within the coalition, potentially at the expense of secular ideals. In pursuit of electoral gains, some parties have engaged in divisive rhetoric or pursued policies favoring particular religious groups, undermining the principle of equal treatment for all citizens. Moreover, coalition governments often rely on the support of regional or ethno-religious parties with specific demands related to their constituencies. While accommodating these demands may be necessary for maintaining the coalition, it can also lead to policies that prioritize communal interests over secular principles. This trend

has raised concerns about the erosion of India's secular fabric and the potential marginalization of religious minorities. On the other hand, the coalition era has also presented opportunities to strengthen secularism through dialogue and negotiation. In diverse societies like India, coalition governments necessitate cooperation and compromise among different groups, fostering a culture of pluralism and tolerance. By accommodating diverse viewpoints and interests, coalition politics can promote inclusivity and address the needs of marginalized communities, thereby upholding the spirit of secular governance. In this coalition era one major Gandhian formula of local government implemented by 73rd amendment act of constitution. The impact of local government in Indian secularism was it changes the meaning of Secularism now regional identities become the more important than religious affairs.

After a long time in 2014 India got a majoritarian government and from that time to now Indian secularism has again changed its nature but no doubt Gandhi's own personality not diluted by this right wing government as we in Swachhh Bharat Abhiyan, Gandhi's spectacle portrayed but what about his idea. This reflects his belief in the imperfections of democracy but also its superiority compared to alternative systems. Actually democracy is not just a system or a form of government but it itself is an ideology which consists with constitutionalism, liberalism, and secularism. From monarchy to democracy, this transition is not completed without mentioning the core value of religion here even in India where heterogeneous society lived under one umbrella of democracy just because it entails the features of inclusiveness, partiality and representative accountability. So what changes have changed the meaning of secularism, these are cultural nationalism and vote-bank of majority. So what alternative can be put to resolve the threat of Secularism. Can Gandhian idea help us? Today time religion is no more as an empire or land-owning method but It's a psychological sentiment where people don't care their property but they care their religion identity. Gandhi proposed the civic nationalism where people can live together regardless their religion, caste or gender. That idea can counter one of threat that's vote banking but what about other threat of secularism which is cultural nationalism.

In India culture is dominated as It's heritage and even Indian treat religion itself as a culture here I'll not make any difference between 'dharma' and 'religion' although there is a lot of differences like one of sociologist Yogendra Singh describes Dharma is a righteous way of conduct and religion is just a belief what we follow as an identity. As it was said in starting that Gandhi himself believed in philosophy and morality of religion which simply mean he is also saying about inclusive dharma where all can live under the umbrella of civic nationalism and can follow their faith. Gandhi much focused on civilisation rather than culture he was completely against to British civilisation For Gandhi, civilization was not merely about material progress or technological advancement; it was fundamentally about the moral and spiritual evolution of humanity. He believed that true civilization could only be achieved when individuals and societies embodied values such as compassion, empathy, and selflessness. In his view, a civilization that prioritized material wealth and power over ethical conduct was inherently flawed and unsustainable. Moreover, Gandhi's idea of civilization was intricately linked to the concept of swaraj or self-rule [Hind Swaraj, by Gandhi, 1909]. Gandhi's call for swaraj encompassed not only political independence from colonial rule but also economic self-sufficiency and moral autonomy.

Secularism itself is a solution for one country as it saves a nation from diversity conflicts and It's an instrument for State to control over masses and this is why western States used this secularism to control churches and masses. Gandhi as a philosopher and politician used this soft secularism (where religion seen as seva, sadbhavna or karuna) to stand with masses and to motivate them from freedom. This secularism as an instrument always have been used by State (except some theocratic state) to ensure peace and

harmonious society so why current Modi Government using the technique of cultural nationalism rather than secularism? This answer is very complex and multifaceted and we can't say surely that current Modi Government don't follow secularism. Nowadays statesman don't use his or her direct power to shape an ideology but through some institutions and communication actors. In this time shaped situations Gandhi can be seen as a mediator between secularism and cultural nationalism.

### Conclusion:

We have seen a larger Gandhian perspective of secularism and its beneficial points from which we can save both cultural heritage and secularism. Whenever Gandhi saw a communal conflict he either confessed both or took a side of minority this reason become the incompetence of Gandhi's personality as another side doubted on his intention but Isn't it a state or judiciary also does the same thing. Indian state itself is the best reformer of religion whether its constitutional provision of uniform civil code or from Triple talak to Sabrimala cases in all these time Indian executive and judiciary did the best job. But identity politics a majoritarian attitudes often surpassed a harmonious value. If we put individual on a centre and made the policies for him or her then I think that would be the best purposes of democracy what Gandhi followed in his Swarajist method of self-rule.

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