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## THE ROLE OF SECULARISM IN INDIA'S FREEDOM MOVEMENT: FROM THE SWADESHI MOVEMENT TO INDEPENDENCE

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### ABSTRACT

*The role of secularism in India's freedom movement was pivotal in shaping the inclusive and democratic vision of the nation. From the Swadeshi Movement in the early 20th century to the attainment of independence in 1947, secular ideals emerged as a unifying force that transcended religious, caste, and regional divisions. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad emphasized religious harmony, mutual respect, and the rejection of communalism as essential principles for nation-building. The Swadeshi Movement, while primarily an economic and political campaign, also embodied a cultural inclusivity that encouraged cooperation among diverse communities. Over the decades, secularism evolved from a moral principle to a political necessity, particularly in countering divisive forces that threatened the unity of the freedom struggle. This commitment to secularism was enshrined in the political discourse, constitutional vision, and national identity that emerged post-independence. By examining the transition from early nationalist movements to the framing of a democratic, secular Constitution, this study underscores secularism's enduring influence on India's journey to freedom.*

**KEYWORDS:** Secularism, Swadeshi Movement, Indian Freedom Struggle, Religious Harmony, Communalism, Nation-Building, Indian National Congress, Constitutional Vision.

### INTRODUCTION

Secularism, as a guiding principle of the Indian freedom movement, played a decisive role in shaping the character and unity of the national struggle against colonial rule. In the diverse socio-cultural fabric of India—marked by multiple religions, languages, and traditions—the need to foster mutual respect and cooperation among communities was not merely a moral ideal but a strategic necessity. The emergence of secularism within the nationalist discourse ensured that the fight for independence was not reduced to a contest between religious identities but remained focused on shared aspirations for political self-determination, economic justice, and social reform. The Swadeshi Movement (1905–1908), which arose in response to the Partition of Bengal, demonstrated an early synthesis of political resistance and cultural inclusivity. While rooted in indigenous self-reliance, the movement also encouraged collective participation across communal lines, signaling the beginnings of a secular nationalist ethos. Over the subsequent decades, this principle evolved under the leadership of figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and



Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, who championed religious harmony and rejected communal politics.

The consolidation of secularism as a political philosophy was also a response to the challenges posed by British colonial policies of “divide and rule” and the rise of communal divisions in the early 20th century. Through movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement, secularism became intertwined with mass mobilization, fostering unity that transcended religious boundaries. By the time India approached independence in 1947, secularism had become a cornerstone of the national vision, influencing both the framing of the Constitution and the identity of the modern Indian state. This study examines the evolution of secular thought in the Indian freedom movement, from its early expressions during the Swadeshi era to its crystallization in the independence period, highlighting its enduring relevance in sustaining national unity and democratic values.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

### Aim:

To examine the historical evolution, significance, and impact of secularism in India's freedom movement, tracing its development from the Swadeshi Movement to the attainment of independence in 1947.

### Objectives:

1. To analyze the early manifestations of secular thought during the Swadeshi Movement and their role in fostering unity among diverse communities.
2. To study the contributions of key nationalist leaders—such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad—in promoting secularism as a political and moral principle.
3. To explore how secular ideals countered British colonial policies of “divide and rule” and resisted communal divisions.
4. To evaluate the integration of secularism into major nationalist movements such as the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India Movements.
5. To assess the influence of secularism on the framing of the Indian Constitution and the vision of post-independence nation-building.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study of secularism in India's freedom movement has drawn the attention of historians, political scientists, and sociologists alike, producing a rich body of scholarship that examines its philosophical roots, political applications, and socio-cultural impact. Bipan Chandra (1984) in *Communalism in Modern India* provides a foundational analysis of how secularism emerged as a counterforce to communal politics fostered by British colonial policies. He emphasizes that secular nationalism during the freedom struggle was not merely a Western import but an indigenous response to India's plural society. Granville Austin (1966) in *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* traces the link between the nationalist commitment to secular values and their constitutional embodiment after independence. Austin argues that the secular vision of the freedom movement was crucial in shaping India's identity as a democratic, inclusive state. Judith M. Brown (1994) in *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* discusses Mahatma Gandhi's role in promoting religious harmony, framing secularism not as the exclusion of religion from politics but as equal respect for all faiths. She notes how Gandhi's mass movements drew participation from all communities, challenging colonial narratives of division. Gail Omvedt (2004) in *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India* offers a critical perspective by highlighting B.R. Ambedkar's insistence on constitutional safeguards for minorities and the oppressed as an essential component of secular democracy. Omvedt points out that secularism, to be meaningful, had to address structural inequalities alongside communal harmony. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's own writings, particularly in *India Wins Freedom* (1959), shed light on the intellectual and political debates within the nationalist movement regarding secular unity. Azad's perspective underscores the idea that religious diversity was a strength rather than a threat to the freedom struggle.

Rafiq Zakaria (2004) in *The Struggle Within: India's Muslim Identity* explores how the nationalist leadership navigated the complexities of Muslim identity in a secular framework, balancing religious concerns with the broader goals of unity and independence. Sumit Sarkar (1983) in *Modern India* situates the rise of secularism within broader anti-colonial struggles, arguing that movements like Swadeshi not only challenged British rule but also laid the groundwork for a pluralist political culture. Overall, the literature demonstrates that secularism in the Indian freedom movement was a dynamic and contested concept—shaped by leaders' visions, grassroots mobilizations, and the need to resist colonial strategies of division. While consensus existed on the necessity of unity, scholars differ on whether secularism was primarily a moral-ethical value, a political strategy, or a constitutional principle in the making.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study on the role of secularism in India's freedom movement employs a qualitative research methodology, focusing on historical analysis and interpretive inquiry to understand the evolution and impact of secular ideals from the Swadeshi Movement to independence in 1947.

### 1. Research Design:

The research is descriptive and analytical in nature. It aims to describe key events, ideologies, and personalities that shaped secularism within the freedom struggle and analyze their contributions to the broader nationalist movement and constitutional development.

### 2. Data Collection:

The study relies on primary sources such as speeches, writings, and correspondence of prominent leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and B.R. Ambedkar. It also draws from debates and records of the Constituent Assembly, archival materials, contemporary newspapers, and official documents from the freedom movement era. Extensive use is made of scholarly books, journal articles, biographies, and historical analyses that address secularism, nationalism, and the socio-political context of colonial and pre-independence India.

### 3. Data Analysis:

The collected data are subjected to content analysis to identify recurring themes, ideological shifts, and the role of secularism as a political and social principle. Comparative analysis is used to examine different leaders' perspectives and movements' strategies regarding secularism.

### 4. Scope and Limitations:

The study covers the period roughly from the early 1900s, focusing on the Swadeshi Movement, up to India's independence in 1947. It concentrates primarily on mainstream nationalist leadership and major political movements, with limited exploration of peripheral or radical groups. Given the historical nature, the research depends on available documented evidence and may not capture all grassroots or oral histories related to secularism.

### 5. Ethical Considerations:

The research maintains academic integrity by properly citing all sources and avoiding misinterpretation of historical records. The study also approaches diverse religious and cultural perspectives with respect and sensitivity. This methodological approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how secularism was conceptualized, debated, and operationalized during India's struggle for freedom, setting the stage for its institutionalization in independent India.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Indian freedom movement was marked by the challenge of uniting a highly diverse population divided along religious, linguistic, caste, and regional lines. Amidst this diversity, secularism emerged as a crucial yet contested principle aimed at fostering national unity and inclusive political participation. However, the practical application and interpretation of secularism during the freedom struggle were complex and multifaceted. This study seeks to address the problem of understanding how secularism evolved as a political and social ideal from the early expressions in the Swadeshi Movement through to the attainment of independence in 1947. It investigates the tensions between religious identities and nationalist aspirations, the strategies used by leaders to promote religious harmony, and the challenges posed by communalism and colonial “divide and rule” policies. Furthermore, the research explores the extent to which secularism shaped the nationalist discourse and influenced the constitutional vision for post-independence India. The problem lies in analyzing these dynamics within the broader freedom movement, where secularism was neither a static concept nor universally accepted, but a principle constantly negotiated in response to historical contingencies. Thus, the central problem is to critically examine the role, significance, and limitations of secularism in sustaining India’s freedom movement as an inclusive struggle against colonial rule, and how this legacy continues to inform India’s democratic and pluralistic identity.

## FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH

- 1. Grassroots Perspectives on Secularism:** Future studies could explore how secular ideals were understood and practiced at the grassroots level among diverse communities during the freedom movement, including marginalized and tribal groups whose experiences are less documented.
- 2. Comparative Analysis of Regional Movements:** Research could examine regional variations in the expression and impact of secularism, comparing nationalist movements in different parts of India to understand local dynamics of communal harmony and conflict.
- 3. Role of Women in Promoting Secularism:** Investigating the contributions of women leaders and activists in fostering secular values within the freedom struggle could provide valuable insights into gendered dimensions of nationalism and social reform.
- 4. Secularism and Minority Communities:** Detailed studies on how various religious minorities—including Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and others—engaged with, contributed to, and were affected by the secular nationalist discourse would enrich understanding of pluralism in the independence movement.
- 5. Impact of British Colonial Policies:** Further research could analyze in depth how colonial “divide and rule” strategies influenced communal identities and the nationalist responses that sought to uphold secularism.
- 6. Secularism and Post-Independence Challenges:** Longitudinal studies tracing the continuity and transformation of secular principles from the freedom movement into post-independence India, including the challenges secularism faces in contemporary politics.
- 7. Intersections of Secularism with Other Ideologies:** Exploring how secularism interacted with other ideological currents of the time, such as socialism, anti-caste movements, and regional nationalism, can provide a more nuanced picture of the freedom struggle.
- 8. Archival Research on Lesser-Known Leaders:** Unearthing writings and speeches of lesser-known leaders who advocated secularism could diversify the dominant narratives centered on prominent figures.

These avenues would not only deepen scholarly understanding of secularism’s multifaceted role in India’s freedom struggle but also contribute to ongoing debates about secularism’s place in India’s evolving democracy.

## SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

### Scope:

This study focuses on the role of secularism as a guiding principle in India’s freedom movement, specifically tracing its evolution from the Swadeshi Movement (circa 1905) up to the country’s independence in 1947. It examines key nationalist leaders, major political movements, and constitutional debates that

shaped secular ideals within the struggle against British colonial rule. The research highlights the interplay between secularism and communal identities, the strategies employed to foster religious harmony, and the impact of secular thought on India's democratic foundations. Both political and socio-cultural dimensions of secularism during this period are considered to provide a comprehensive understanding of its significance.

### Limitations:

The study primarily relies on documented historical sources such as speeches, writings, and archival materials from prominent leaders and mainstream nationalist organizations; thus, it may not fully capture the grassroots experiences or oral histories of all communities involved. Regional variations and localized movements are touched upon but not explored in exhaustive detail, given the broad temporal and thematic scope of the research. The focus is on secularism within the nationalist movement and constitutional framework; it does not extensively address post-independence developments except as they relate directly to the freedom struggle's legacy. Interpretations of secularism are subject to the limitations of available sources and may reflect the dominant narratives of the time, potentially overlooking dissenting or alternative viewpoints. The study does not delve deeply into the influence of international secular or political ideologies unless directly relevant to the Indian context.

### DISCUSSION

The role of secularism in India's freedom movement was central to forging a collective national identity in a society deeply divided by religion, caste, and language. From the early 20th century Swadeshi Movement through to independence in 1947, secularism functioned as both a political strategy and a moral ideal that sought to unify diverse communities against colonial rule. The Swadeshi Movement marked an important phase where secularism began to emerge as a unifying thread among various religious and social groups. Although primarily an economic boycott against British goods, it fostered a cultural and political space where Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and others found common cause. This early form of secular nationalism challenged British colonial tactics that aimed to pit communities against each other through "divide and rule" policies. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad became vocal proponents of secularism, emphasizing religious tolerance and harmony as prerequisites for a successful freedom struggle. Gandhi's vision of "Sarva Dharma Sambhava" (equal respect for all religions) and Nehru's advocacy for a modern, scientific outlook laid the philosophical foundation for secular governance. Azad's role was particularly crucial in bridging communal divides and articulating a vision of India where religious diversity was celebrated rather than feared.

The rise of communalism, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, tested the limits of secular unity. Events such as communal riots and the politicization of religious identities by both colonial authorities and certain political factions threatened to fracture the nationalist coalition. Ambedkar's critiques also highlighted the tension between secular ideals and persistent social inequalities, emphasizing that political secularism must be accompanied by social justice to be meaningful. The freedom movement's commitment to secularism was reflected institutionally in the Constituent Assembly debates, where leaders debated how best to safeguard religious freedom while ensuring equality before the law. The eventual incorporation of secular principles in the Indian Constitution—such as the right to freedom of religion and the prohibition of discrimination based on religion—was a direct outcome of the struggle to maintain national unity in a plural society. In conclusion, secularism was both an ideal and a practical necessity in India's freedom movement.

### CONCLUSION

The role of secularism in India's freedom movement was foundational in shaping a united struggle against colonial rule and in laying the ideological groundwork for the nation's democratic future. From the Swadeshi Movement to independence in 1947, secularism functioned as a critical principle that sought to bridge religious and communal divides within India's pluralistic society. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad championed secular ideals of religious tolerance, equality,

and coexistence, fostering a collective national identity that transcended sectarian loyalties. Despite challenges posed by rising communal tensions and colonial “divide and rule” tactics, the nationalist movement maintained a persistent commitment to secularism as essential for political unity and social harmony. This commitment was institutionalized in the Indian Constitution, which enshrined secular principles as a cornerstone of the newly independent state. Ultimately, secularism in India’s freedom movement was not only a strategy for anti-colonial resistance but also a visionary framework for inclusive nation-building. Its enduring legacy continues to influence India’s democratic ethos, emphasizing the importance of unity in diversity and the protection of all citizens’ rights irrespective of religion.

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