Secularism Reconsidered: Gandhi, Ambedkar, And The Normative Foundations Of Indian State

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Abstract:

The idea of secularism in India has long been described as foundational and fundamental, distinct from both the American doctrine of separation and the French model of laïcité. Yet the normative foundations of Indian secularism remain debatd. Was Indian secularism shaped primarily by the ethical pluralism of Mahatma Gandhi, who envisioned religion as a moral force in public life? Or was it fundamentally structured by the constitutional vision of B. R. Ambedkar, who insisted on state neutrality and minority safeguards? This article undertakes a comparative normative analysis of Gandhi and Ambedkar to interrogate and analyse the philosophical and constitutional foundations of Indian secularism. Through textual analysis of primary writings, Constituent Assembly Debates, and constitutional provisions, the paper argues that while Gandhian pluralism shaped the moral vocabulary of Indian public life, it was Ambedkar's theory of constitutional morality that institutionalized secularism as state neutrality. Indian secularism, therefore, reflects a structural Ambedkarite framework blend with Gandhian ethical idioms. However, the tension between moral community and constitutional state remains unresolved, producing contemporary contradictions in secular practice. The article concludes by suggesting that the sustainability of Indian secularism depends upon reaffirming constitutional morality over majoritarian moral claims.

Keywords: Secularism, State Neutrality, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Constitutional Morality, Indian Democracy, Religious Pluralism

Introduction:

Secularism remains one of the most debated concepts in modern political theory. In Europe, it emerged as a response to religious wars; in the United States, as a constitutional guarantee against establishment; in France, as militant laïcité. In India, however, secularism developed within a deeply religious and plural society during anti-colonial struggle and constitution-making. Unlike Western trajectories, Indian secularism was not conceived as strict separation but as principled state engagement with religion.We can argue western model of secularism is largely negative in nature whereas Indian model is positive in nature.

As Rajiv Bhargava identified two important principles of Indian secularism, firstly principle distanced model and situational engagement of the state with the religion.

Yet a crucial theoretical question persists: What are the normative foundations of Indian secularism?

The two most influential architects of modern Indian political thought—Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar—offered sharply different conceptions of religion, politics, and state authority. Gandhi saw religion as inseparable from politics, grounding political action in moral truth,even he advocated

spiritualisation of politics. Ambedkar, in contrast, treated religion as a potential site of oppression requiring constitutional regulation and state neutrality.Even Ambedkar argued religion may become a hindrance towards the goal of social justice,

This article argues that Indian secularism cannot be understood without examining and analysing the intellectual debate between Gandhi's ethical pluralism and Ambedkar's constitutionalism. While Gandhian thought shaped the cultural and ethical discourse of tolerance, it was Ambedkar who provided the institutional and constitutional architecture of secular democracy.

The central thesis advanced here is:

Indian secularism is structurally Ambedkarite in its constitutional perspectives rhetorically Gandhian in its moral and ethical imagination.

Literature Review:

Indian secularism has long been a subject of intense scholarly debate, largely because it does not fit neatly into familiar Western models of church–state separation. Instead, it emerged from India's unique historical experience of colonialism, deep religious diversity, and social hierarchies such as caste. Scholars broadly agree that Indian secularism is not simply about excluding religion from public life, but about managing religious diversity in a way that preserves equality, freedom, and national unity. Yet there is far less consensus on its normative foundations—particularly the philosophical ideas that shaped it. In this context, the contrasting yet intertwined contributions of Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar have become central to contemporary rethinking of Indian state neutrality.

Early constitutional scholarship tended to view secularism primarily through the lens of institution-building. Granville Austin famously described the Indian Constitution as a "seamless web," where secularism was embedded alongside fundamental rights, social reform, and democratic governance. From this perspective, secularism was less an explicit doctrine and more a structural principle implicit in guarantees of religious freedom, equality before law, and minority protection. While this approach remains influential, critics note that it often overlooks the deeper ideological disagreements between Gandhi and Ambedkar about the role of religion in public life.

A major theoretical intervention came from Rajeev Bhargava, who proposed the idea of "principled distance" to explain the distinctive nature of Indian secularism. According to Bhargava, the Indian state does not maintain strict separation from religion; instead, it engages with religious institutions when necessary to uphold equality or reform discriminatory practices. This framework has been widely adopted because it captures the flexibility of the Indian model. However, some scholars argue that it underestimates how state intervention can be shaped by political majorities and power relations, especially in periods of heightened religious nationalism.

Sociological critiques further complicate this picture. Ashis Nandy challenged the assumption that secularism is inherently progressive, arguing that it is a product of Western modernity imposed on a society with its own traditions of religious coexistence. For Nandy, popular religiosity in India often allowed for pluralism more effectively than elite, state-driven secularism. While his work opened important debates, critics—particularly those influenced by Ambedkar—argue that such views risk romanticizing tradition and ignoring the lived realities of caste oppression and exclusion.

Similarly, T. N. Madan famously described secularism in India as an "impossible dream," given the pervasive role of religion in social and political life. Rather than rejecting secularism outright, Madan questioned whether liberal expectations of privatizing religion were sociologically realistic in the Indian context. His argument prompted scholars to distinguish more carefully between secularism as a normative ideal and secularism as an empirical social condition.

Within this broader debate, Gandhi's vision of secularism is often seen as ethical rather than institutional. His idea of sarva dharma sambhava—equal respect for all religions—rested on the belief that moral and spiritual values should guide politics. Gandhi did not advocate a theocratic state, but he also rejected the strict separation of religion and politics. For him, religion functioned as a source of ethical restraint and

interfaith harmony. Scholars sympathetic to Gandhi highlight his emphasis on tolerance and moral self-discipline, while critics warn that such a framework lacks safeguards against majoritarian moral dominance in a Hindu-majority society.

Ambedkar's understanding of secularism stands in sharp contrast. His writings and constitutional interventions place individual rights, legal equality, and social justice at the center of state neutrality. Ambedkar viewed religion—particularly Hinduism—as deeply implicated in sustaining caste hierarchy, making state intervention essential rather than optional. His emphasis on constitutional morality, enforceable rights, and minority protection has been widely recognized as foundational to Indian secularism. For Ambedkar, neutrality did not mean passivity; it meant actively dismantling religiously sanctioned inequalities.

Recent scholarship increasingly reads Indian secularism through the tension between Gandhi's vision of a moral community and Ambedkar's vision of a constitutional state. Some argue that Gandhi addressed harmony at the level of society, while Ambedkar provided the institutional framework necessary to protect the vulnerable. Others suggest that Gandhi's approach, while ethically rich, required Ambedkar's constitutionalism to prevent domination and exclusion. Contemporary debates over personal laws, religious freedom, and majoritarian politics have made this foundational tension newly relevant.

Overall, existing literature falls into three broad strands: constitutional-institutional analyses, sociological critiques of secular practice, and normative engagements with Gandhi and Ambedkar. Yet few studies place Gandhi and Ambedkar in sustained dialogue to reconstruct the moral foundations of Indian state neutrality. This article builds on that gap by treating Indian secularism not merely as a constitutional arrangement, but as a contested normative project shaped by two divergent visions of democracy, justice, and the relationship between religion and the state.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework:

This study adopts a comparative normative political theory approach, combining:

- Textual analysis of primary works

- Examination of Constituent Assembly Debates

- Doctrinal constitutional interpretation

- Comparative secularism theory

Primary sources include

1. Gandhi's Hind Swaraj
2. Articles of Young India
3. My experiments with truth
4. Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste
5. Pakistan and Partition of India
6. Debates of Constituent Assembly

The theoretical framework engages:
- Liberal constitutionalism
- Communitarian ethics
- Constitutional morality
- Minority rights theory

The analysis is interpretive rather than empirical, focusing on conceptual reconstruction.

Conceptualizing Secularism: Competing Models:

Before examining Gandhi and Ambedkar, it is necessary to clarify what secularism means.

1. Western Models:

Western model of secularism is rooted to treaty of Westphalia (1648).It advocated religious freedom and tolerance from the clutches of churches. However it achieved success only after the arrival of modernity and Renaissance during the phase of Industrial Revolution.
But different countries follows different models of secularism.

American model of secularism is based on the 'wall of separation between the church and the state.'It got constitutional backing after first amendment(1791).It prohibits the government from favoring any religion or establishing an official faith while ensuring passive neutrality. The main features of American secularism is separation of church and state, passive neutrality, privacy of religion, no official state religion.

The French model of secularism known as laicite , is a foundational principle of the French republic that demands the strict removal of religious influence from the public sphere. It got formalised by the 1905 law on the separation of the churches and the state. The core idea of laicite is public sphere neutrality, unlike the private sphere where religion is permitted, public institutions must remain religiously neutral.

2. State Neutrality:

The state neutrality model of secularism is followed by India. Its relatively modern ,evolving in nature. However it is complex in nature. Here the state has no official religion and state maintains neutrality among the religion. The rights and liberties of the Minorities are constitutionally safeguarded. Another important feature is freedom to practice religion. Even it is enshrined in the Constitution of India (Article 25-28).

Indian secularism is more practical than the French laicite. The former allows it citizens to practice their religion publicly without any hindrances. It's is based on the core idea of 'Sarva Dharma Sambhava'.It empowers the religious minority against the majoritarianism. It helps to build the tolerance and strengthens 'unity and integrity' of the nation.

Gandhi's Ethical Secularism:

"I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. I believe that they are all God-given." - Mahatma Gandhi
Mahatma Gandhi cherished all the religions. For him all the religions were equal. Hence he took inspirations from the religions. Gandhiji always advocated 'Sarva Dharma Sambhava ' for enriching the diverse traditions India. It later inspired Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru to formalise 'unity in diversity '.

Taking inspiration from Goapal krishna Gokhale, whom Gandhiji considered as his political mentor , Gandhiji advocated spiritualisation of politics. He articulated that no person can live without religion peacefully. It is the religion which prevents the people from becoming the beast. Hence Gandhiji's secularism is founded on the bedrock of Ethics and integrity. The main features of Gandhian Secularism is illustrated below:

1.Religion as Moral Foundation of Politics:

For Gandhi, politics divorced from religion is immoral. Religion meant not sectarian dogma but universal moral law (dharma). His famous formulation—"those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means"—captures this stance. These moral instances which originated from the religion acts comprehensively for a huam being. It encourage tolerance and unity among the people.

2. Sarva Dharma Sambhava:

Gandhi advocated equal respect for all religions, not state indifference. His secularism was dialogical and spiritual rather than institutional. It is based on the idea of tolerance and mutual respect. It further encourages diversity and preserves liberties of the people.
However, equal respect presupposes moral harmony among communities. It does not sufficiently address structural inequalities embedded within religious practices.

3. Idea of Reforms:

Though traditional ideas deeply influenced Mahatma Gandhi's political philosophy but he was not orthodox in spirit. He was inspired from all the religions but at the same time advocated necessary Reforms to counter the evil practices. For instance Gandhiji supportedcthe core spirit of Varna system of Hinduism but he equally condemned untouchability in practice.

Limitations:

Gandhi opposed untouchability but defended varnasystem. In reality it was difficult to separate the idea from the practices. His reformist approach relied on moral persuasion rather than structural transformation. As a result moral persuasion was limited and highly restricted. Theoretically it helped to transform the minds of the people but at the grassroot level actual orthodox practices witnessed little impact.

Thus, Gandhian secularism prioritizes:
• Interfaith harmony through dialogue and moral transformation
• Ethical self-restraint and moral training
• Moral community and civic participation

But it does not articulate a robust theory of state neutrality. As a result,secularism faces practical problems during the phase of implementation.

Ambedkar's Constitutional Secularism:
"Freedom of mind is the real freedom. A person, whose mind is not free though he may not be in chains, is a slave, not a free man". - DR B.R Ambedkar

Ambedkar's life was not simple. Throughout his life he fought for the cause of social justice. He articulated blind imitation of the religion in a human can erode the rationality. Ambedkar was a victim of untouchability and caste based discrimination. It created an identity crisis not only for him but for his community as a whole. He argued due to negative aspects of the Hindu religion, people are the victims of caste based discrimination and untouchability. Further majority religious groups suppress the rights and liberties of the minorities. It further threatens the idea of multi cultural living.

For dealing with this issue, Ambedkar advocated Constitutional Secularism. It must be guaranteed through fundamental rights to the citizens. Unlike Gandhian idea of moral transformation, Ambedkar knew for achieving long term success legal support to this moral idea is required. The core principles of Ambedkar's Constitutional Secularism are illustrated below:

1. Religion as Social Power:

Ambedkar viewed religion not merely as moral faith but as social structure. Religion is one of the integral part of the human being. People cannot live without religion. Hence it is impossible to completely separate the religion from socio-political affairs. Si the most pragmatic step is to regulate the religion under the umbrella for the Constitution.

2. State Neutrality and Minority Safeguards:

For a diverse country like India, Ambedkar advocated Indian state shouldn't have any religion as it's official religion. He articulated state should be neutral in the religious affairs.

Similarly in a diverse communitarian country like India, majority may dominate the minority. So he articulated Indian democracy must be based on majority rule but to be executed only through the minority rights.

3.Constitutional Morality:

Ambedkar introduced the idea of constitutional morality—adherence to constitutional principles over social morality. It is the most important normative tool to maintain the constitutional supremacy. Social morality may infringe rights and liberties of the individuals level actual orthodox practices witnessed little impact.

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Limitations :

While Ambedkar's ideas were progressive and ahead of his time but it faced a practical challenges. Most of these constitutional-legal reforms lacked rigorous implementation. Similarly conflict between personal and community rights was another challenge. Most of the Constitutional Secularism requires judicial reinterpretation.

Gandhi and Ambedkar: A Comparative Normative Analysis of secularism :

For Mahatma Gandhi, secularism wasn't a legal contract; it was a matter of the heart. He lived by the phrase Sarva Dharma Sambhava, which essentially means "equal respect for all paths." Gandhi couldn't imagine a world where politics and religion were separate because, to him, religion was what made a person ethical and compassionate.
He looked at India like a large, multi-generational family. He believed that if people truly understood their own faith, they would naturally love their neighbor's faith too. His secularism was built on trust and persuasion. He didn't want the government to force people to be fair; he wanted to inspire them to be better. He believed that if you changed a person's heart, social justice would follow naturally. To Gandhi, the state should be like a wise parent—not interfering in every argument, but ensuring every child felt equally loved and safe.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had a much more painful and realistic view of what "tradition" meant for the person at the bottom of the ladder. Having faced the cruelty of the caste system firsthand, he didn't share Gandhi's romanticized view of religious harmony. To Ambedkar, religion wasn't just a spiritual journey; it was often a system of power used to keep people oppressed.

His version of secularism was a protective shield. He didn't trust a "change of heart" because he knew that hearts could be stubborn and cruel. Instead, he wanted the power of the Law. For Ambedkar, a secular state had to be a "referee" that was ready to step in and blow the whistle the moment religious traditions violated someone's dignity or equality. He wanted a clear line between what you believe in your home and how you treat people in the street. His secularism wasn't just about peace; it was about liberation.

When we compare them, we see a beautiful, if tense, balance. Gandhi was the idealist who wanted us to be our best selves through love; Ambedkar was the realist who wanted to make sure we were protected even when we were at our worst.

If Gandhi provided the "warmth" that allows different religions to live together in one neighborhood, Ambedkar provided the "walls" that ensure no one is bullied inside that neighborhood. Indian secularism survived because it took Gandhi's hope for brotherhood and anchored it to Ambedkar's demand for justice. They might have argued bitterly in their time, but today, they function like two lungs of the same body—one providing the spirit, the other providing the structure.

The Indian Constitution: Whose Vision Prevails?

Although the word "secular" was added by the 42nd Amendment, secular principles were embedded earlier like right to freedom of religion(Article 25-28)and Prohibition of discrimination in thr name of religion (Article 15).

Constitutional features reflect Ambedkar's approach:
*   No state religion and state's neutrality in the religious affairs
*   Fundamental rights with equal priority to minorities

- Special attention to Minority protections
- Abolition of untouchability

Gandhi's influence appears culturally and spiritualy, but the constitutional-legal framework aligns more closely with Ambedkar.

Contemporary Relevance:

In the modern world, secularism is often treated like a cold legal contract. However, for India, it was always intended to be a living, breathing way of existing together. To understand its relevance today, we have to look at the two men who shaped its conscience.

Mahatma Gandhi saw secularism through the lens of the heart. For him, religion wasn't something to be hidden away; it was a source of moral courage. His philosophy of *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* (Equal Respect for All Religions) is more relevant now than ever. In an age of social media echo chambers, Gandhi's secularism asks us to do something radical: not just to "tolerate" our neighbor, but to actively find beauty in their faith. It is the idea that my neighbor's prayer doesn't diminish mine; it enriches the air we both breathe.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, however, provided the mind and the backbone. He knew that "tradition" could often be a mask for cruelty. For Ambedkar, secularism wasn't just about keeping the state and temple apart; it was about dignity. He reminded us that a society isn't truly secular if a person is still judged by their caste or if a minority lives in fear. His vision remains our modern North Star: ensuring that the law protects the individual from the "tyranny of the majority."

The Friction: Why It's Hard to Stay the Course

Despite these beautiful foundations, the "human" element often gets messy. Several real-world hurdles stand in our way:

The "Us vs. Them" Trap: We are increasingly seeing people as labels—Hindu, Muslim, Dalit, Christian—rather than as fellow citizens. This polarization makes Gandhi's "heart-centered" harmony feel out of reach.

- **Politics of Identity:** Instead of focusing on shared needs like healthcare or education, political narratives often exploit religious identity to win votes, turning our faith into a battlefield.
- **The Shadow of the Past:** Historical grievances are often revived to justify modern-day distrust, making it difficult for younger generations to start with a clean slate.
- **Social Isolation:** In many cities, we live in "ghettos" or gated communities where we rarely interact with people who believe differently. It is easy to fear what you do not know

Critical Evaluation:

- Neither Gandhi nor Ambedkar alone suffices.Both have tremendous contributions but for a true secular state , the ideas of both equally requires
- Gandhi offers ethical pluralism without structural guarantees. Ambedkar offers institutional safeguards but limited dialogical spirituality.
- A synthesis may be necessary, but constitutional supremacy must prevail.
- Only constitutional recognition wouldn't be sufficient without achieving social plurality
- Hence the priority should be constitutional supremacy along with ethical pluralism, social integrity and moral transformation

Conclusion:

Secularism in India is not a derivative Western transplant but a product of intense intellectual contestation. Gandhi envisioned a morally plural society grounded in spiritual tolerance. Ambedkar envisioned a constitutional democracy grounded in equality and legal safeguards.

This article has argued that Indian secularism is structurally Ambedkarite though morally articulated in Gandhian idiom. The future of Indian democracy depends not on majoritarian moral claims but on the preservation of constitutional morality.

Reconsidering secularism through Gandhi and Ambedkar thus reveals not merely historical disagreement but an ongoing normative struggle at the heart of Indian democracy.

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