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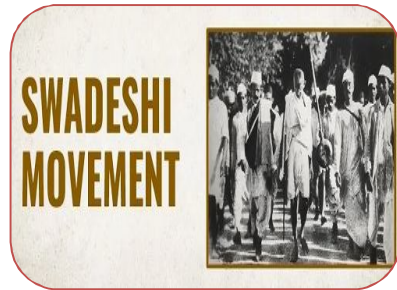
**THE EVOLUTION OF SECULARISM IN INDIA'S STRUGGLE FOR  
INDEPENDENCE: FROM SWADESHI TO FREEDOM**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The trajectory of secularism in India's struggle for independence reflects a complex interplay between cultural nationalism, inclusive politics, and resistance to colonial policies that sought to divide communities. Beginning with the Swadeshi movement of the early 20th century, secular ideals were interwoven with the assertion of economic self-reliance and indigenous identity, creating a unifying platform that transcended religious boundaries. Leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Rabindranath Tagore, and later Mahatma Gandhi redefined the nationalist discourse, integrating principles of mutual respect, interfaith cooperation, and civic equality into the independence movement. Over time, secularism evolved from an implicit ethos rooted in composite culture to an explicit political commitment embodied in the Indian National Congress's inclusive agenda, reinforced by responses to communal tensions and colonial strategies of division. By the time India approached freedom in 1947, secularism had emerged not only as a moral imperative but also as a foundational vision for the postcolonial state, aiming to safeguard pluralism amidst diversity. This evolution highlights how the independence struggle shaped the distinctive Indian interpretation of secularism—neither a strict separation of religion and state nor a theocratic order, but a framework for coexistence in a deeply diverse society.*



**KEYWORDS:** *Secularism, Indian Independence Movement, Swadeshi Movement, Religious Pluralism, Nationalism, Indian National Congress, Communal Harmony, Anti-Colonial Struggle, Gandhian Philosophy, Unity in Diversity, Colonial Divide and Rule, Freedom Struggle.*

**INTRODUCTION**

The idea of secularism in India is deeply intertwined with the nation's long and multifaceted struggle for independence. Unlike the Western notion of secularism, which primarily emphasizes a strict separation between religion and state, the Indian understanding evolved as a pragmatic and ethical framework for fostering unity amidst unparalleled diversity. During the colonial period, British policies often exploited religious differences through a calculated "divide and rule" strategy, intensifying communal divisions. In response, the early phases of the nationalist movement, particularly the Swadeshi movement (1905–1911), began to articulate a vision of national identity that sought to transcend religious boundaries while celebrating India's cultural richness. The Swadeshi movement, born out of opposition to the Partition of Bengal, was not only an economic campaign promoting

indigenous goods but also a social and political awakening. Leaders and thinkers of the period recognized that a united front across religions, castes, and regions was essential for resisting colonial rule. This vision laid the groundwork for a uniquely Indian interpretation of secularism—one that valued interfaith cooperation, mutual respect, and the integration of ethical and spiritual traditions into the public sphere without privileging any single faith. As the struggle advanced into the Gandhian era, secularism became more explicit in the political discourse. Gandhi's emphasis on *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* (equal respect for all religions) and his ability to mobilize diverse communities reinforced the idea that independence could only be meaningful if it ensured dignity and equality for all citizens, regardless of faith. The Indian National Congress, under his and later leaders' guidance, adopted an inclusive platform that rejected communal politics and sought to institutionalize unity in diversity as a guiding principle.

By the time of India's independence in 1947, secularism had transformed from an implicit ethos of cultural nationalism into a conscious constitutional and political commitment. This evolution was shaped by the lessons of the Swadeshi movement, the challenges of communal tensions, and the moral visions of leaders who understood that the future of a free India depended on safeguarding pluralism. The journey from Swadeshi to freedom thus charts not only the political emancipation of a colonized people but also the crystallization of secularism as an enduring pillar of the Indian republic.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

### Aim

To examine how secularism evolved as a political, social, and cultural principle during India's struggle for independence, tracing its development from the Swadeshi movement to the attainment of freedom in 1947.

### Objectives

1. To analyze the role of the Swadeshi movement in laying the early foundations of secular thought within the nationalist framework.
2. To explore the contributions of key leaders and thinkers—such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Rabindranath Tagore, and Mahatma Gandhi—in shaping the Indian interpretation of secularism.
3. To investigate how anti-colonial resistance fostered interfaith cooperation and collective identity beyond religious divisions.
4. To study the impact of British “divide and rule” policies on communal relations and nationalist strategies.
5. To trace the transformation of secularism from a cultural ethos to an explicit political and constitutional vision by the time of independence.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The evolution of secularism in India's struggle for independence has been examined through multiple historical, political, and sociological perspectives. Scholars such as Bipan Chandra and Sumit Sarkar have highlighted that the early nationalist movements, particularly the Swadeshi movement, provided a framework for inclusive political mobilization that transcended religious boundaries. The Partition of Bengal in 1905 is frequently identified as a pivotal event that brought the question of unity to the forefront, as leaders recognized that sustaining resistance to colonial rule required bridging communal divides. Studies on Rabindranath Tagore's writings, including those by Krishna Kripalani, suggest that his critique of aggressive nationalism was balanced by a call for cultural unity rooted in shared values across religions. Similarly, Bal Gangadhar Tilak's adaptation of Hindu festivals into mass political events has been discussed in historical works as a strategy that, while religious in form, aimed to create a broader nationalist consciousness.

The Gandhian period has been extensively studied as the phase when secularism became an explicit principle of political action. Judith Brown and Dennis Dalton have examined Gandhi's philosophy of *Sarva Dharma Sambhava*, noting how his campaigns against untouchability, his interfaith

dialogues, and his inclusive political methods reinforced secular ideals. The Indian National Congress, under Gandhi's leadership, increasingly positioned itself as a platform for all communities, with resolutions and manifestos explicitly rejecting communalism. Historians such as Mushirul Hasan and Gyanendra Pandey have analyzed the complex challenges posed by communal tensions during the independence movement, noting that while secularism was an aspirational ideal, it was constantly tested by events such as the Khilafat movement, Hindu-Muslim riots, and the debates around separate electorates. The British policy of "divide and rule" is a recurring theme in this scholarship, with researchers arguing that nationalist leaders' commitment to secularism was in part a strategic counter to colonial efforts to fragment Indian society. Works on the Constituent Assembly Debates, such as those by Granville Austin, indicate that the secular ethos forged during the freedom struggle significantly influenced the framing of independent India's constitutional principles. This literature collectively demonstrates that the period from the Swadeshi movement to independence witnessed the gradual crystallization of a uniquely Indian understanding of secularism—one that sought to harmonize religious diversity with the imperatives of national unity and democratic governance.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative and historical-analytical approach to examine the evolution of secularism during India's struggle for independence, with particular emphasis on the period from the Swadeshi movement to the attainment of freedom in 1947. The research is based primarily on secondary sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, archival documents, and memoirs of key political leaders. Historical texts by eminent historians and political thinkers have been consulted to trace the changing interpretations and applications of secularism within the nationalist discourse. Archival materials, such as speeches, letters, and resolutions of the Indian National Congress, have been analyzed to understand the explicit articulation of secular ideals in political platforms. Contemporary newspapers, political pamphlets, and periodicals of the time have been reviewed to capture the public reception and socio-political debates surrounding communal harmony and unity in diversity. The study also engages with biographical accounts and collected works of leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Rabindranath Tagore, and Mahatma Gandhi to assess their individual contributions to shaping secular thought.

A thematic analysis method has been employed to identify recurring patterns, ideological shifts, and strategic uses of secularism in various phases of the independence movement. By examining both the ideological underpinnings and the practical manifestations of secularism, the research seeks to highlight its transformation from an implicit ethos embedded in cultural nationalism to an explicit constitutional ideal. The methodology ensures a balanced consideration of both nationalist aspirations and the colonial strategies that influenced the trajectory of secularism during this period.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The concept of secularism in India did not emerge in a vacuum; it was shaped and reshaped by the socio-political challenges of the colonial period and the nationalist struggle against British rule. While secularism in the Western context often denotes a strict separation between religion and state, in India it evolved as a principle of equitable respect and coexistence among diverse faiths within a single political framework. The Swadeshi movement marked an early attempt to foster unity across religious boundaries, yet it also revealed the fragility of communal harmony in the face of divisive colonial policies and socio-religious tensions. Despite consistent calls for national unity from leaders and organizations, the independence movement had to contend with persistent communal divisions exacerbated by the British "divide and rule" strategy. The challenge lay in transforming secularism from an abstract ideal into a practical political strategy capable of mobilizing a plural society without alienating particular communities. While figures such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Rabindranath Tagore, and Mahatma Gandhi made significant contributions toward defining and promoting secular values, these efforts were frequently undermined by communal violence, demands for separate electorates, and competing visions of India's future.

The problem, therefore, lies in understanding how secularism transitioned from being an underlying moral and cultural ethos during the early nationalist period to a consciously articulated political and constitutional goal by the time of independence. This requires examining the interplay between inclusive nationalist movements, the pressures of communal politics, and the evolving strategies of both colonial authorities and Indian leaders. The question remains as to how these historical dynamics shaped the distinctive Indian interpretation of secularism that would later be embedded in the post-independence democratic framework.

## DISCUSSION

The evolution of secularism in India's struggle for independence reflects a continuous negotiation between cultural traditions, political pragmatism, and the demands of a plural society under colonial rule. The Swadeshi movement, emerging in response to the Partition of Bengal in 1905, provided one of the earliest platforms where economic nationalism intersected with inclusive political mobilization. While its emphasis on indigenous production and boycott of foreign goods was primarily an economic strategy, its social and cultural dimensions sought to unite Hindus, Muslims, and other communities under a shared nationalist cause. This phase demonstrated that secularism in India's freedom struggle was less about the exclusion of religion from politics and more about preventing religion from becoming a basis for political division. As the independence movement matured, leaders began to articulate more explicit visions of secularism. Bal Gangadhar Tilak's mobilization through cultural symbols, such as the Ganesh Utsav, aimed to inspire mass participation while maintaining a broad appeal that could be shared across communities. Rabindranath Tagore's writings and speeches offered a philosophical counterpoint, warning against narrow nationalism while advocating a cultural unity that respected religious diversity. These contributions reveal that early secularism was both strategic and moral, emerging from the recognition that India's strength lay in its composite culture.

The Gandhian era marked a turning point, as secularism became central to the political ethos of the Indian National Congress. Gandhi's doctrine of *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* emphasized equal respect for all religions and rejected sectarian politics. His leadership during mass movements such as Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience showcased an inclusive nationalism that sought to dissolve communal boundaries in pursuit of *Swaraj*. Gandhi's personal engagement with leaders of different faiths, his opposition to untouchability, and his advocacy for interfaith dialogue further reinforced secular principles as intrinsic to India's future. However, the struggle for secularism was not without setbacks. Events such as the Khilafat movement, while initially fostering Hindu-Muslim unity, eventually exposed the fragility of communal alliances. The rise of separate electorates, supported by colonial policies, institutionalized communal divisions and posed serious challenges to nationalist unity. Communal riots in the 1920s and 1940s underscored the gap between the ideal of secularism and the realities of political mobilization in a religiously diverse society. Leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru worked to embed secularism into the Congress's policy framework, framing it as essential for democratic governance in a postcolonial state.

By the time of independence in 1947, secularism had transformed from an implicit cultural value into an explicit political commitment. This transformation was both a product of and a response to the socio-political challenges of the freedom struggle. The Swadeshi movement had planted the seeds of inclusive nationalism, while the later Gandhian and Nehruvian approaches institutionalized secularism as a guiding principle for nation-building. This uniquely Indian model, shaped by historical necessity, envisioned a state that neither promoted nor discriminated against any religion, while actively fostering conditions for peaceful coexistence. In essence, the evolution of secularism during India's independence movement illustrates how political ideals can develop through the interplay of grassroots activism, philosophical vision, and the practical demands of governance in a diverse society. The journey from Swadeshi to freedom not only achieved political independence but also laid the ideological foundations for a secular democratic republic.

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## CONCLUSION

The evolution of secularism in India's struggle for independence was neither a sudden development nor a borrowed political doctrine, but a gradual and organic process shaped by the realities of colonial rule, the aspirations of a diverse populace, and the moral visions of its leaders. Beginning with the Swadeshi movement, the nationalist cause embraced an ethos of unity that sought to transcend religious boundaries while celebrating India's composite culture. Over time, this ethos matured into a consciously articulated political principle, particularly under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of Sarva Dharma Sambhava and the inclusive policies of the Indian National Congress. Despite the persistent challenges posed by communal divisions, colonial "divide and rule" strategies, and the tragedies of partition-era violence, secularism emerged from the freedom struggle as a foundational ideal for the new nation. It was envisioned not as a strict separation of religion and state in the Western sense, but as a framework of equal respect, protection of diversity, and the active promotion of interfaith harmony. This distinctively Indian interpretation of secularism reflected the lessons learned during the long fight for independence—that the survival and success of the nation depended on preserving unity in diversity.

The journey from Swadeshi to freedom thus represents more than political liberation; it marks the crystallization of a guiding principle that would shape India's democratic and constitutional identity. Secularism, forged in the crucible of anti-colonial struggle, remains both a legacy of the independence movement and a continuing responsibility for the Indian republic.

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