



1st Online Conference on Multidisciplinary Academic Research (OCMAR-2020), Australia.

Asia Pacific Institute of Advanced Research (APIAR)

www.apiar.org.au

HEARING THE VOICES OF STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF SECULARISM IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Shefali Pandya ^a, Farrah Kerawalla ^b
^{ab} University of Mumbai, Mumbai, India.
Corresponding Email: srpandya14@gmail.com

Abstract

Discrimination exists in overt or covert forms on account of religious identities of people all over the world since some people feel that their religion is superior to others. On the other hand, there are people and ideologies who believe that religion leads to radicalized thinking and behaviour in the India society. The concept of secularism first came about in the mid-seventeenth Century concepts of Enlightenment which were enshrined first in the Constitution of France following the French Revolution. Concepts such as secularism in a pluralist country like India take its own understanding. Hence, the researcher decided to undertake a phenomenological study of understanding the concept of secularism in terms of responses of students of higher education. The participants included in the study were 36 in number and covered diverse classes, subjects and faculties from under-graduate and post-graduate levels. The study revealed three major categories of secularism as comprehended by students in the Indian context, namely, (a) Respect for all Religions, (b) Equality, Tolerance and Absence of Discrimination and (c) Freedom. The study concluded that in order to sustain the spirit of secularism in India, it is imperative to pay attention to textbooks, other aspects of curricula, developing and implementing programmes aimed at enhancing secularism in students as well as the polity.

Keywords: Secularism, Equality, Tolerance, Absence of Discrimination.

1. Background

Discrimination exists in overt or covert forms on account of religious identities of people all over the world since some people feel that their religion is superior to others. On the other hand, there are people and ideologies who believe that religion leads to radicalized thinking and behaviour in the India society. The concept of secularism first came about in the mid-seventeenth Century concepts of Enlightenment which were enshrined first in the Constitution of France following the French Revolution. *“Democratic societies today are organized not necessarily around a civil religion, as Rousseau claimed, but certainly around a strong philosophy of civility, enshrining the three norms, which in contemporary societies are often expressed as 1. human rights, 2. equality and non-discrimination, and 3. democracy.”* (Taylor, 2012). Secularism is the belief that religion should not be involved with the ordinary social and political activities of a country.

Western Concept of Secularism

In the Western society, the concept of secularism defines the relationship between government and religion. It implies separation of state from the influence and functioning of all religious institutions. The state may restrain the rights of citizens if religion causes interference in the

functioning of the state. The emergence of the concept of secularism in the Western society in the 17th century, *“takes us out of the cosmic religious conceptions of order, establishes a new bottom-up view of society, as existing for the protection and mutual benefit of its (equal) members. There is a strong normative view attached to this new conception, which I’ve called the modern moral order”* (Taylor 2004). It enshrines basically three principles as follows (Taylor, 2012) :

- a) *The rights and liberties of the members,*
- b) *The equality among them (which has of course been variously interpreted, and has mutated towards more radical conceptions over time) and*
- c) *The principle that rule is based on consent (which has also been defended in more and less radical forms).*

Indian Concept of Secularism

In India, various religions are known to have co-existed since time immemorial even before the arrival of Islam in 12th century, the arrival of Mughals and subsequently the British. Though the predominant religion of India is Hindu, India also gave birth to three other religions such as Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism. It whole-heartedly welcomed Parsis from Iran more than 1000 years back. This suggests an inherently diverse, multicultural, secular and all-accepting character of the Indian society. However, the Indian concept of secularism is quite different from the one held by the Western society. In India, the concept of secularism is not limited to the issue of how different religious groups are to be treated. Rather, the essence of secularism in India lies in building a positive relationship between the state and religion. India has adopted the Gandhian approach to secularism comprising of “Sarva Dharma Samabhava” which means prohibiting discrimination on the basis of caste, creed and religion. Rabindranath Tagore also emphasised “Harmony in diversity” at cognitive, emotional and social levels, in short, respecting all religions. Secularism in India means that the state treats all religious groups equally without discrimination. The state does not interfere in matters concerning religions. The state gives financial aids to a religious institution and allows all-religions prayers in educational institutions as a mark of equal treatment. Although the law is the same for all citizens, certain personal laws with regards to marriage and property rights are different for every community. But they are all given equal consideration under the Indian Penal Code. In addition, Indian society is plagued with caste system which is extremely discriminatory in nature. Hence there is inter-religious and intra religious domination in the Indian society.

2. Statement of the Problem

Secularism is not the binary opposite of communalism. The contrary of communalism is religious harmony. Secularism is diametrically opposite of theocracy or the merging of two forms of power, namely, the religious and the non-religious. Theocracy, (which implies that priests rule the country in the name of God) does not fit into modern democratic thoughts. Due to its inherently complex, multicultural and diverse nature of the Indian society, it is essential to understand what constitutes the meaning of secularism according to the post-graduate students. This is necessary due to the fact that there is religious strife in the society. Students are the most important stakeholder of the higher education system. Hence, it is imperative to know and hear the voices of the educated youngsters (students) regarding their understanding about the concept of secularism.

3. Research Question

What do students understand by the term secularism through their lived experiences, perceptions and perspectives?

4. Methodology of the Study

The study adopted the phenomenological method which follows the qualitative approach focusing on the commonality of a lived experience within a group of students. Through this process, we attempted to construct the universal meaning of the term secularism as experienced and conceptualized by students of higher education institutions so as to arrive at a more insightful understanding of the phenomenon of secularism in the Indian context based on their perceptions, understanding and perspectives. “*Phenomenology is the first method of knowledge because it begins with ‘things themselves’*” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41). “*The phenomenological method is radically subjective in that it refers all meaning back to a transcendental subject that is the source of meaning*” (Bidney, 1989); its focus is on searching for the meaning and essence of experience rather than explanations. “*Perception is primary in phenomenology because it affords a direct experience of the events, objects and phenomena of the world*” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). He accentuated perception as “*the bedrock of human experience*” (Moran, 2000, p. 403). The research goal of the present study was to see the world in terms of our study participants’ perceptions of it. The study at hand is both descriptive and hermeneutic, transcending rigid boundaries. “*The philosophical underpinnings of Husserlian phenomenology are that of the lived, human experience and as such he sought to reinstate the human world as a foundation of science that brought justice to the everyday lived experience—the going to the things themselves*” (Dahlberg K, Drew N, Nystrom M. 2001). The transcendental phenomenology approach by Moustakas was an adaptation of Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology. It focuses on the participants’ descriptions for generating an essence of the lived experience.

5. Participants of the Study

The participants of the study included 36 students pursuing their higher education in greater Mumbai from different disciplines. In the study at hand, in order to understand the students’ understanding of the concept of secularism, the researchers adopted the purposive sampling technique. The participants of the study were students pursuing their higher education degree available on campus of University of Mumbai, Kalina Campus and other higher education institutions in Greater Mumbai in close proximity of the researchers. Convenience sampling technique allowed the researcher to save on time and invested in taking in-depth interviews of the 36 participants. This technique of sampling also proved to be cost-effective for the researchers. The researchers interviewed the participants based on their availability and accessibility.

The sampling criteria are divided into two parts, namely inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria refers to the characteristics or elements of the sample selected for the study. The inclusion criteria for the present study were as follows:

1. Students pursuing under-graduate degree and post-graduate degree across different disciplines were chosen for this study.
2. Higher education students belonging to different religions were chosen for this study.
3. Higher education students belonging to different socio-economic status backgrounds were chosen for this study.
4. Higher education students belonging to all genders were selected for this study.
5. Higher education students belonging to different media of instruction were selected for this study.
6. Higher education students belonging to age groups in the range of 17-30 years were chosen for this study.

7. Higher education students belonging to both private-aided colleges and departments and private-unaided colleges were selected for this study.

Exclusion Criteria

Exclusion criteria refers to the characteristics or elements of the sample not selected for the study. The exclusion criteria for the present study were as follows:

1. Research scholars pursuing their higher education were not selected for this study.
2. Higher education students pursuing diploma courses were not selected for the present study.
3. Students of schools of different boards were not selected for the present study.
4. Students of junior college were not selected for the present study.

6. Data Collection

The participants selected for the study comprised of thirty six students pursuing their undergraduate and post-graduate degrees and studying in higher education institutions situated in greater Mumbai. The participants comprised of thirteen (13) male students and twenty three (23) female students. The sample belonged to the age group of seventeen to thirty years. There were 17 under-graduate students and 19 were post-graduate students pursuing higher education across various disciplines included in the study. Classification of the participants was also done based on the religion they belonged to. The number of participants included 19 Hindus, 6 Muslims, 5 Christians, 1 Sikh, 1 Zoroastrian and 4 Buddhist students in the study. At the post-graduate level, there were 8 students from M.A., 4 from M.Sc., 1 from M.Com, 1 from M.Ed. and 2 from LLM. At the under-graduate level, there was 2 student from B.Com, 2 from BA/LLB, 1 from BA (Film making), 3 from BSc. 3 from B.Ed. 3 from BMS, 3 from BMM, 1 from BFM and 2 from BAF.

The researchers used an open-ended interview schedule in the study of understanding the concept of secularism as defined or comprehended by students of higher education. It comprised of a series of questions asked by the researcher orally to the sample of the study. The questions asked were open-ended in nature, where the participants responded freely on their thoughts about their lived experiences, perceptions, beliefs and understanding of the term secularism. The interview schedule was finalised after conducting a dry run. Each student was interviewed individually and the interview lasted for approximately 25-35 minutes.

7. Results

Data analysis reveals that three major categories emerged as follows :

a) Giving Respect to All Religions

It is pertinent to note that students have emphasised giving respect to all religions as an important characteristic of secularism. This is evident by responses of students such as “*One doesn't show any kind of disrespect to people from other religions or caste*”, “*Where all the religions are given equal respect and anybody is free to follow any religion*” and “*I think secularism basically means that you respect all the religions*”. Further, students have also stated that “*It means respecting each other's religion, diversity, culture, everything, “I feel that when people distinguish one another, he/ she does not belong to his/her caste or religion, they should realise we must not bring religion or caste in between but must respect one another as humans” and “Where there is no discrimination between any caste, religion, creed, gender everything”*”. Secularism today is in a state of crisis. Though it has not become irrelevant, it has been subjected to misuse and the society has too many expectations from it, ranging from caste or gender justice too as well as to the more important issue of national integration. It is important to note here that apart from religion, students have mentioned here terms such as diversity, culture, caste, creed and gender. This could be due

to the fact that India's plurality lies in the diverse languages, caste system, cultures, creed as well as acute form of gender discrimination. Indian students also emphasise that *"There should be humanity which is the highest religion"*. A few religious minority students have expressed their negative lived experience regarding secularism as voiced by one student as *"Just because you are a minority, you get insulted repeatedly. I have faced this. This is not secularism"*, *"I have experienced disrespect to my religion several times on account of what I wear, eat and pray. This is not done"*. Though some students opine that *"India is a country where all the religions are given equal opportunity and nobody is treated different from anyone"*, others reported that the term secularism in the Indian context is only on paper and not implemented in day-to-day practices. This is corroborated by a comment of a student who stated that *"So basically, in our constitution it is said that we are secular but they do not follow it. Basically, everyone needs to follow it. The term secular attitude means that people from all religions need to live together. So, I feel that when people distinguish one another, he/ she does not belong to his/her caste or religion, they should realise we must not bring religion or caste in between but must respect one another as humans. Caste and religion need to be kept at home. So, when it comes out in the society, between four people that is the time the word secularism is to be used."*

b) Equality, Tolerance and Absence of Discrimination

Secularism encompasses the principle of equality, or rather its delicate form, it incorporates absence of discrimination. This is true predominantly with reference to the inter-relationships between religious communities. Statements made by some students especially from the minority community on the basis of their lived experiences show that *"Often when I pray, people look at me as if I am committing a crime"* and *"I often feel that there is a subtle form of discrimination towards certain religions and caste at the time of job or admission interviews. Is this a secular country?"*, *"I believe in equality and all religions. We are not born with some stamps on our body with some religion. Secular attitude means that every religion is equal"*. Students' responses have also brought out concepts such as acceptance of all religions and castes and tolerance as important features of secularism in the Indian society. *"Attitude which is tolerable, an attitude of tolerance towards each religion everyone has to be treated on the same page without being partial to anyone"* and *"People around have become intolerant of others who do not belong to their own religion or caste. In a secular country, tolerance is important for all. After all, ours is a country with pluralism."* This feeling is supported by statements by other students who suggest that *"Everyone should be free to do anything according to their religion. The whole thing is about not interfering in other people's religion as long as it is directly not coming in your house. So whatever others do as long as it directly does not come in your way, then it's fine. You don't need to go out of your way to stop things that other religions might do"*. On the other hand, a student from the majority community felt very strongly that *"we are a secular country and our non-discriminating attitude has led to the majority community's suffering and reduction in its numbers in the population"*.

c) Freedom

The challenge to secularism especially in the Indian context has not come from its diversity or plurality of faith, culture or religion, but from different religious and caste groups that struggle for power. This also poses a challenge to democracy because denial of secularism propels issues about the rights and privileges of citizenship, and exposes the internal strife and conflicts between religion and the lack of voice, inadequate distribution of benefits such as education and job opportunities and recognition of uniquely diverse and distinctiveness of groups. Students emphasised that *"Basically, everyone has freedom to practice their own religion, whichever religion they want and you shouldn't discriminate anyone in anyway"*

because of their religion. Everyone has a right to practise their religion and everyone should be treated equally on the basis of religion". This is further substantiated by other students who opine that "Everybody in the country of India has the freedom to practise any religion" and "It means that you follow your own religion and let the other people follow theirs as well". However, a few students express their personal experiences by stating that "A secular country should allow freedom of faith. I feel that this is reducing these days." and that "Constitution is being flouted. We feel insecure. People have started losing jobs. We even feel like settling in another country where we feel secure. We are insecure about applying for a Government job. Minorities have lost their freedom. We are told to go to Pakistan. We are living under fear." Ideally, secularism does not prescribe people how to lead their lives, what to wear or eat or what to strive for. Secularism is the foundation or the guiding principle of our constitutional framework where people can pursue their faith, without bias or discrimination, and where the state does not discriminate between different religious/caste/gender/cultural groups.

In conclusion, it may be said that students have assigned meaning to the objective concept of secularism, that their valued, lived experiences are situated within a historical and social context of India which is essentially plural and multicultural in nature thereby leading to be multiple realities. Secularism in the Indian context, as revealed in the study at hand, implies respect for all religions, equality, tolerance and non-discriminating attitude as well as freedom of faith. The findings of the study do suggest internal conflicts amongst people on the basis of religion, caste and gender. Data also suggests an extension of the concept of secularism in the Indian context to include not only the equality of religions but also castes and gender. This is quite unique to the Indian society and hence gains significance. There is also a suggestion that there is a marked difference in the policy and practice of secularism in the Indian society and the State.

Findings of the present research using phenomenological methodology can be transferable to other settings if they illumine crucial aspects of the meaning of secularism that will reverberate with other students.

8. Educational Implication of the Study

Schools as well as colleges are essentially the agencies which need to develop and foster secular attitudes and the habit of coexistence in students so as to prevent social, political and economic conflicts amongst diverse sections of the Indian society so as to ultimately arrest the disintegration of the country. This could be done through textbooks, curricula as well as specially developed short-term programmes. Moreover, it is evident that politics is twirled with education. In such a scenario, the voices of the higher education students can have immense implications to the policy makers of education and the educational bureaucrats too. Thus, more than schools and colleges, they need fostering.

References

- i. Austin, G. (2008). *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation*. New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks (orig. pub. 1966).
- ii. Bargagliotti, L. (1983). Qualitative Modes of Inquiry. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, Volume 10, pp. 138-149.
- iii. Barry, B. (2001). *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- iv. Bhargava, R. (1988). "What is secularism for?" In : Bhargava, R., ed., *Secularism and Its Critics*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 486-542.
- v. Bhargava, R. (2005). India's secular constitution. In : Hasan, Z., E. Sridharan, and R. Sudarshan, ed., *India's Living Constitution: Ideas, Practices, Controversies*, London: Anthem Press, pp. 105–33.
- vi. Bidney, D. (1989). Phenomenological method and the anthropological science of the cultural-life. In : Natanson, M. *Phenomenology and the social sciences*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, pp.109-142.
- vii. Christophe J. (2004). "Composite culture is not multiculturalism: A study of the Indian constituent assembly debates," In : Varshney, A. ed., *India and the politics of developing countries: essays in memory of Myron Weiner*. New Delhi: Sage. pp. 126–149.
- viii. Dahlberg K., Drew, N., Nystrom M. (2001). *Reflective Lifeworld Research*. Lund : Student litteratur.
- ix. Das Acevedo, D. (2013). Secularism in the Indian Context. *Law & Social Inquiry*. Volume 38 (1), pp. 138–167,
- x. Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945/1962). *The Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- xi. Moran, D. (2000). *Introduction to phenomenology*. London: Routledge
- xii. Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- xiii. Taylor, C. (2004). *Modern social imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- xiv. Taylor, C. (2012). Secularism and Multiculturalism, In : Schultz, R., Singer, P., Taylor, C. & Warnock, M. (Eds.). *Values and Ethics for the 21st Century*. BBVA. pp. 77-102.