

## Interpretation of Secularism: A Psychological Perspective

Dr. Vinay Kumar Singh<sup>1\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Postgraduate Students collected data, did statistical analysis and gave some interpretation of the as a part and parcel of their Dissertation Work for the final degree. Obviously, they don't have the knack and ability to go in for in-depth interpretation of the results. Present research endeavour has taken up their unpublished data and tried to interpret the same with the recent literature available on Psychology of Secularism. The study was carried out on 150 persons from urban area of Rae-Bareilly district but none of them were below the age of 20 years and above the age of 50 years. A "3x2" factorial design was formulated for present study which facilitate the selection of equal number of respondents on the basis of their caste and sex. Secular Attitude was measured by using "Secular Attitude Scale" (MSSAS), developed and standardized by Mehra and Sinha (1992). The means, standard deviations and two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were computed and finding suggests that (1) only mean value of general and SC/ST castes differ significantly; (2) the main effect of caste make significant difference so far secular attitude is concerned; and (3) male and female both respondents share similar view on secularism.

**Keywords:** *Secular Attitude, Caste, Sex*

Today, "secularism" word in India is used very frequently not only by leader but, also by a common man in every walk of the life. The word "secular" was later included in the preamble of the Constitution through the 42nd Amendment Act of 1976 (Rajaraman, 2007). But there is no precise meaning and exact definition of it's in our country. The Indian ideal of secular state is reflected only through the Sanskrit phrase "Sarva Dharma Sambhava" which means the equal respect and acceptance of all religion. India is a vast country where people of different religions, castes and sects live together. This is the reason that application of secularism in India is a complex and challenging problem for government as well as for other organizations. Establishing a balance between ensuring religious freedom and maintaining social harmony is a delicate task and needs alertness in its implication. Chadha (2023) noted that secular model practiced in India since independence has been criticized for several inconsistencies, including allegations of minority appeasement.

Secularism is a principle that advocates for the separation of religion from government or public institutions. In secular system, religious beliefs and practices are considered private matters and the government is expected to remain neutral in matters of religion. This implies

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Feroze Gandhi College, Rae-Bareilly (U.P.), India

\*Corresponding Author

Received: August 15, 2024; Revision Received: October 19, 2024; Accepted: October 23, 2024

© 2024, Singh, V.K.; licensee IJIP. This is an Open Access Research distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License ([www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0](http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0)), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any Medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## Interpretation of Secularism: A Psychological Perspective

that government policies, laws and decision-making should not be based on religious considerations and individual should be free to practice their own religion or no religion at all without facing discrimination (Galen, 2016; Bullivant and Lee, 2016; Shook, 2017; Berlinerblau, 2021). Durkheim (1915) defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things”.

In 1851, British writer George Holyoke coined the term “secularism”. Frustrated with the contentious nature of “atheism”, he aimed to articulate a viewpoint promoting a life guided solely by naturalistic (secular) principles (Holyoake, 1896). Importantly, this perspective did not entail outright rejection of religion, fostering the possibility of collaboration with believers. Holyoake’s introduction of “secularism” represents a deliberate choice to emphasize a way of life grounded in earthly considerations, while maintaining openness to cooperation with those holding religious beliefs (Shook, 2017). Rawls (2011) in his influential work “A theory of Justice” argues that the term secularism cannot adequately capture the idea of a tolerant democracy treating all life stance groups equally.

Secularism is often seen as a fundamental aspect of a democratic society promoting the idea of equal rights and freedoms for individuals regardless of their religious beliefs (Copson, 2019). It aims to create a level playing field where people of different faiths as well as those with no religious affiliation can coexist peacefully and contribute to the common good without any group imposing its beliefs on others through government authority (Smith, 2017).

It is important to note that the interpretation and implementation of secularism can vary in different countries and context. In a study (Madra, 2015) found that Turkish secularism employed “restrictive intervention”, permitting state interference to shape a unified national identity. On other hand Indian secularism embraced “emancipative intervention”, attempting to foster a national identity while preserving cultural and religious diversity. Secularism, as a philosophical concept, intertwines with political philosophy and the philosophy of religion. Rooted in naturalism and materialism, it rejects the consideration of immaterial or supernatural elements, favoring a focus on the material universe (Roznai, 2017; Farman, 2013).

In contemporary times, well-known moral philosopher like Derek Parfit (1984) and Peter Singer (2018) along with the field of bioethics, are often described that the right action is the one that maximizes overall happiness or well-being. Singer (2018) argues that secular ethics provides a common ground for ethical discourse among people with diverse religious backgrounds.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, secularism in political philosophy took on new dimensions and defined as “a common ground for all life stance groups, irrespective of religious or atheistic; to thrive in a society that upholds freedom of speech and conscience”. But some scholars and conservative politicians viewing secularism as antithetical to religion, perceiving it as an attempt to replace religious values with atheism or nihilism (Berlinerblau, 2012).

The psychology of secularism involves understanding the cognitive, emotional and social factors that contribute to individuals adopting secular perspective. The main aim of the present study was to develop insights into how secularism is perceived and practiced by the people belonging to different castes as well as male and female in Indian society; particularly in Rae-Bareilly district.

## Interpretation of Secularism: A Psychological Perspective

### *Objectives of the Study:*

Objectives of the present study were:

- To compare the secular attitude of different castes i.e. General, Other Backward Class (OBC) and SC/ST.
- To compare the secular attitude of male and female.

### *Hypotheses:*

The hypotheses were as follows:

- People of General, OBC and SC/ST castes will differ significantly on the basis of secularism.
- Male and female also will differ significantly on the basis of secularism.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Sample and Design*

It was a field study and 150 respondents were selected randomly from urban area of Rae-Bareilly district. The age range of the respondents was 20 years to 50 years. The sample was stratified on two bases, (1) three major Caste categories, namely General, OBC and SC/ST and (2) Sex, namely male and female. The State Government's notification on caste was the operational criteria. Thus, a "3x2" factorial design was formulated for present study which facilitates to select equal respondents (25) in each cell.

### *Measure*

Secular attitude of the subject was measured through the Mehra and Sinha (1992) "Secular Attitude Scale" (MSSAS). Secularism has been conceptualized as an attitude which composed of multiple dimensions. It has four broad elements viz; (1) secular attitude and religion, (2) secular attitude and equality, (3) scientific temper and rationality; and (4) secular attitude and identity. The scale consists of 35 items. The respondent was to give his/her rating for each of the item on a 5-point Likert type of rating scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Split-half reliability coefficient of the scale is 0.93 while Cronbach's alpha for the scale is 0.95.

### *Procedure:*

All respondents were approached individually by the researcher and were requested to participate in a survey research. After establishing good rapport, they were told that their responses would be kept confidential and would be used only for research purpose. They were requested to read the instruction carefully and seek clarification; if any. They were also requested to put information about themselves in the space provided on the cover page of the scale. The scoring was done as per guidelines given in the manual.

## **RESULTS**

The means, standard deviations and two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were computed to analyze the data. The obtained results given below are tabulated in a manner that findings can be interpreted systematically and obviously.

## Interpretation of Secularism: A Psychological Perspective

**Table-1: Means & Standard Deviations of Different Groups and Total Sample**

Sex / Caste Category		General (N=50)	OBC (N=50)	SC/ST (N=50)	Total (N=150)
↓	→				
<b>Male</b> (N=75)	<b>M</b>	104.48	108.40	113.96	108.95
	<b>σ</b>	13.48	13.95	13.59	14.31
<b>Female</b> (N=75)	<b>M</b>	108.64	107.72	111.44	109.27
	<b>σ</b>	11.52	11.34	10.86	11.43
<b>Total</b>	<b>M</b>	106.56	108.06	112.70	<b>109.11</b>
	<b>σ</b>	12.84	12.85	12.49	<b>12.91</b>

Table-1 indicates that male respondents who belongs from SC/ST castes are more secular (M=113.96,  $\sigma$ =13.59) followed by OBC (M=108.40,  $\sigma$ =13.95) and General (M=104.48,  $\sigma$ =13.48) castes. In the case of female respondents who belongs to SC/ST castes show more secular attitude (M=111.44,  $\sigma$ =10.86) than General (M=108.64,  $\sigma$ =11.52) and OBC (M=107.72,  $\sigma$ =11.34) castes.

**Table-2: Post-hoc Analysis for Multiple Comparisons across Different Categories**

Category	Mean Difference	Remarks
General ↔ OBC	(- / +) 1.50	NS
OBC ↔ SC/ST	(- / +) 4.64	NS
General ↔ SC/ST	(- / +) 6.14	.05

Table-2 reveals that the mean value of General & OBC, and OBC & SC/ST do not differ significantly. But the mean value of General and SC/ST differ significantly. The difference value is statistically significant on .05 level of confidence.

**Table-3: Mean Difference as a Function of Caste**

Variable	Caste			F (2, 144)	Remarks
	General (N=50)	OBC (N=50)	SC/ST (N=50)		
Secularism	106.56	108.06	112.70	3.14	.05

**Table-4: Mean Difference as a Function of Sex**

Variable	Sex		F (1, 144)	Remarks
	Male (N=75)	Female (N=75)		
Secularism	108.95	109.27	.02	NS

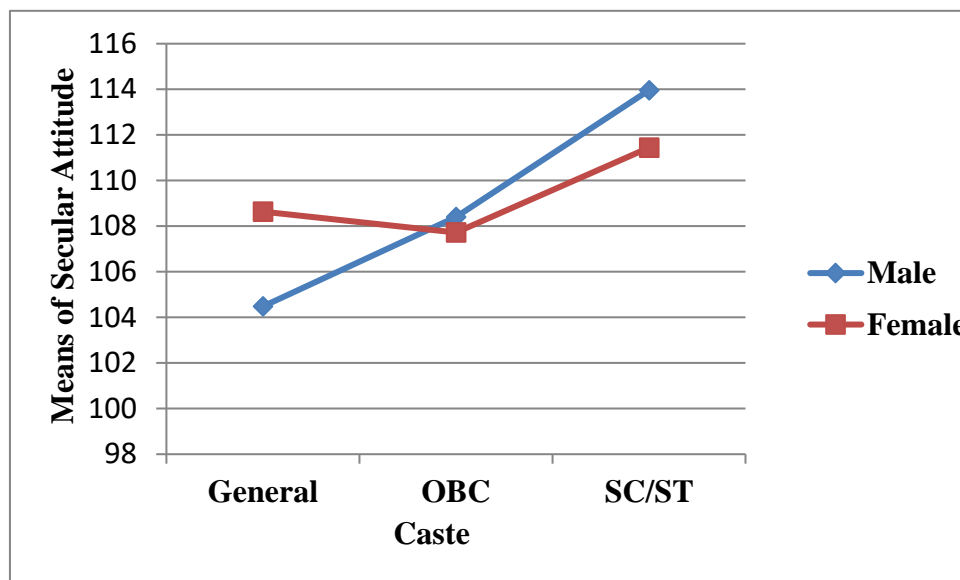
Table- 3 & 4 show the result of main effects of Caste and Sex on secularism. The mean value of General, OBC and SC/ST castes are 106.56, 108.06 and 112.70, respectively (Table-3). The value of  $F = (2, 144) = 3.14$  is statistically significant on .05 level of confidence. This means respondents belonging to SC/ST castes are more secular followed by OBC and General. Thus, it can say that general people show more faith towards their religion than others religion. The finding of the study substantiate the proposed hypothesis no. 1 which states that people of General, OBC and SC/ST castes will differ significantly on the basis of secularism.

In the context of the sex of the respondents', we find the mean value of male and female 108.95 and 109.27, respectively (Table-4). But the value of  $F = (1, 144) = .02$  is not

## Interpretation of Secularism: A Psychological Perspective

statistically significant. It means the visible difference between male and females are due to chance, rather than representing meaningful differences. Thus, the proposed hypothesis no.2 is rejected which state that male and female will differ significantly on the basis of secularism.

**Figure-1: Mean Difference in the Perception of Secular Attitude as a Function of Caste and Sex**



The result relating to the interaction effect of caste and sex give an interesting overview about secularism (Figure-1). Female respondents related to general castes are more secular than their male counterpart. But we see a different picture in the context of SC/ST castes. Male of SC/ST castes show more secular attitude than their female counterparts. The value of  $F = (2, 144) = .91$  is not statistically significant.

## DISCUSSION

There are many factors which affect our thinking and give a shape to our day-by-day behaviors. Keeping this view in the mind this study was planned. The major variables of this study were secular attitude, caste and sex. Secular attitude was considered as dependent variables and others as independent variables. The results obtained in the study provide intriguing insights into how caste and sex influence secular attitudes of the people of the Rae-Bareli district in India.

The foundational principles of the secularism support the separation of the religion from the government and freedom for individuals to practice their beliefs without any discrimination (Galen, 2016; Bullivant and Lee, 2016; Shook, 2017; Berlinerblau, 2021). The higher secular attitude among General caste females might indicates a movement towards more progressive and egalitarian beliefs among women in this category. We can say that it is possibly due to greater educational opportunities and broader exposure to religious and cultural narratives in India.

In the present study we have found a significant difference among General, OBC and SC/ST respondents' secular attitudes. The higher secular attitudes of SC/ST individuals suggest a stronger alignment with the emancipative aspects (Madra, 2015) of secularism. It reflects that in the present Indian society historically marginalized communities strive for equal

## Interpretation of Secularism: A Psychological Perspective

treatment and recognition. This also, is in agreement with past studies such as Rawls' (2011) emphasis on a tolerant democracy where all groups are treated equally and Berlinerblau's (2012) concern about the misconception of secularism as antithetical to religion.

In contrast, the lack of a significant difference between male and female respondents so far, their secular attitudes suggests that gender may not be a major factor in influencing secular perspectives in present Indian society. This finding supports the idea that secularism is a universal principle that can transcend gender, focusing instead on broader issues of equality and justice (Compson, 2019). This also substantiates Madra's (2015) findings on Indian secularism which suggest an emancipative intervention approach to foster a unified national identity while respecting cultural and religious diversity.

The interaction effect of caste and sex reveals that this combination does not significantly impact secular attitudes. This means that secular attitude of the respondents is influenced more by socio-cultural factors such as caste rather than their sex.

### CONCLUSION

It is clear that caste system in Indian society is practiced and shapes almost every aspects of the social life. Male and female both respondents regardless of their background, equally support secular values. The findings of this study will encourage future research to explore additional factors that play an important role in shaping secular attitude, as well as the broader implications for secularism in a multicultural society like India.

### REFERENCES

- Berlinerblau, J. (2012). "Secularism is not Atheism". *The Huffington Post*.
- Berlinerblau, J. (2021). *Secularism: The Basics* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Routledge. ISBN 9780367691578.
- Bullivant, S. & Lee, Lois, eds (2016). "Secularism". *A Dictionary of Atheism*. Oxford University Press.
- Chadha, S. (2023, November 3). Understanding secularism in India. *Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>.
- Copson, A. (2019). *Secularism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780198747222.
- Durkheim, E. (1915). *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Farman, A. (2013). "Speculative Matter: Secular Bodies, Minds and Persons". *Cultural Anthropology*, 28(4): 737-759. doi: 10.1111/cuan. 12035.
- Galen, L. W. (2016). *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies*. Oxford University Press, Pp. 22-23.
- Holyoake, G. J. (1896). English Secularism: A Confession of Belief. *Library of Alexandria*. ISBN 978-1-4655-1332-8.
- Madra, A. (2015). Interventionist Secularism: A Comparative Analysis of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (1923-1928) and the Indian Constitutional Assembly (1946-1949) Debates. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 54(2): 222-241. <https://doi.org/10.1111/Jssr.12192>.
- Mehra, A. & Sinha, D. (1992). *Manual for Secular Attitude Scale (MSSAS)*. National Psychological Corporation, Agra (India).
- Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and persons*. Oxford [Oxfordshire]: Clarendon Press. ISBN 978-0-19-824615-2.
- Rajarajan, R. (2007). Secularism in Indian Politics: Theory and Practice. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 68, No.2, Pp. 403-412.

## Interpretation of Secularism: A Psychological Perspective

- Rawls, J. (2011). *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition*. Columbia University Press, Pp.457. ISBN 978-0-231-52753-8. OCLC 948824118.
- Roznai, Y. (2017). "Negotiating the Eternal; The Paradox of Entrenching Secularism in Constitutions". *Michigan State Law Review*.253. Social Science Research Network, pp. 324. SSRN 2982275.
- Shook, J. R. (2017). *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*. Oxford University Press, Pp. 10.
- Singer, P. (2018). *Animal and Ethics*. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
- Smith, J. M. (2017). "Secular Living: Many Paths, Many Meanings". In Zuckerman, Phil; Shook, John R. (eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*. Oxford University Press.

### **Acknowledgment**

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

**How to cite this article:** Singh, V.K. (2024). Interpretation of Secularism: A Psychological Perspective. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(4), 547-553. DIP:18.01.050.20241204, DOI:10.25215/1204.050