

# Imparting Twin Values: Secularism and Human Rights

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## Abstract

*The present paper has been written with the objective of providing a mechanism to impart the twin values of Secularism and Human Rights. Secularism and equal protection of human rights constitute two important elements of any liberal democratic state. India is a multi-religious, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic nation. The religious and cultural differences existing in Indian society, sometimes lead to biases, stereotyping, discrimination and at the severest level even take the form of riots. In the face of such complex, diverse, plural nature of Indian society, education for human rights and secular values becomes of paramount importance so that learners can transcend the religious, cultural boundaries and imbibe universal human values. In this light, this paper proposes a perceptual model of curriculum interfacing Secular and Human Rights perspective with the intent of providing a framework to inculcate the twin values of Secularism and Human Rights among learners.*

## Introduction

Values play an important role in terms of regulating and providing direction to human behaviour and action. Prof. R.K. Mukherjee (1969) defined values as “socially approved desires and goals that are internalized through the process of conditioning, learning or socialization and that become subjective preferences, standards and aspirations.”

The Constitution of any country helps in providing the baseline for working out the framework of values to be nurtured in citizens. The values reflected in the Indian Constitution are: sovereignty, socialism, secularism, democracy, republican character of Indian State, justice, liberty, equality, fraternity, human dignity and the unity and integrity of the Nation. In the context of religious and cultural plurality of India, secularism and protection of individual rights are seen as great constitutional values.

## **Why to Impart Values Through Formal Education**

Formal education and societal needs are seen as intricately connected. One of the important tasks of education is considered to be the transmission of cultural values. Education is expected not only to pass on values to the future generations but also to act as an agent of social change and shape or change society on desired lines. Unfortunately, the present system of education is characterised by an overemphasis on the cognitive domain which leads to the lopsided development of learners. Echoing this concern, different commissions and committees from time to time have emphasized the importance of inculcating values among the learners.

The Education Commission of 1964-66 emphasized “education and national development”, and pointed towards the need to inculcate “social, moral and spiritual values” among the learners. The National Policy on Education (1986) observed, “India’s political and social life is passing through a phase, which poses the danger of erosion to long-accepted values.” Discussing the essence and role of education, it pointed out, “Education has an acculturating role. It refines sensitivities and perceptions that contribute to national cohesion, a scientific temper and independence of mind and spirit- thus furthering the goals of socialism, secularism and democracy enshrined in our Constitution.” It made a case for promoting “values such as India’s common cultural heritage, egalitarianism, democracy and secularism, equality of sexes, protection of the environment, removal of social barriers, observance of the small family norm, and inculcation of scientific temper.” It advocated value education and expressed concern over “the erosion of essential values and an increasing cynicism in society”. It further observed, “In our culturally plural society, education should foster universal and eternal values, oriented towards the unity and integration of our people. Such value education should help eliminate obscurantism, religious fanaticism, violence, superstition and fatalism.”

The UNESCO Department for Intercultural Dialogue and Pluralism for a Culture of Peace pleaded for “Spiritual Convergence” and proposed to promote dialogue among the different religious and spiritual traditions in a world where intra and inter-religious conflicts have become the order of the day (January 2000). It observed “that it is from early childhood that children should be introduced to the discovery of “otherness”, and to the values of tolerance, respect, and confidence in the “other” that will bring about a change of behaviour and attitudes towards others. The introduction of specific teaching of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, through the adequate pedagogical tools, is conceived as a means to foster reciprocal

knowledge of shared values contained in the message issued by religious and spiritual traditions, which can be considered as a common spiritual and cultural heritage” (NCF 2000).

The National Curriculum Framework, 2005 puts emphasis on peace education and views peace as having the capacity of providing a “comprehensive value framework” for resolving conflicts in a world characterized by intolerance and violence. It maintains “Education must be able to promote values that foster peace, humaneness and tolerance in a multicultural society.” The framework points toward the “need to reiterate the mutual interdependence of humans” and also the “need to reaffirm our commitment to the concept of equality, within the landscape of cultural and socio-economic diversity”.

In Indian context of our commitment to secularism and protection of inalienable rights of individuals, education for these values becomes of paramount importance in order to transcend the boundaries of religion and culture for internalizing universal human values.

It here becomes important to understand the concept of secularism, human rights and their related values.

### **Secularism: Genesis and Meaning**

If we look into the genesis of secularism, this concept emerged in the western countries. It emerged as resistance to the institutionalization of religion and oppressive practices of the Church. Since then, this concept has evolved and witnessed a lot of transition. The fluid and dynamic nature of secularism has resulted in its different interpretations which exist theoretically and in practice as well. While sometimes it is viewed in complete contradiction with religion or “anti-religion”, sometimes it is seen in the context of separation of religion from politics amounting to state’s indifference towards religion. These two interpretations carry in themselves a negative connotation.

Secularism in the Indian context assumes an altogether different meaning. Unlike west, where the concept is viewed mainly in terms of “separation”, secularism is seen in a positive light in Indian context. Here, it does not only mean indifference of state towards religion but rather treating all religions equally. It is viewed more in the sense of “sarva dharma sangam” which means having equal respect for all religions.

### **Secular Values**

It is interesting to note that the original Constitution did not carry the word Secular. It was inserted by the 42<sup>nd</sup> constitutional amendment act in

1976. Secularism as a value, however, is reflected in our Constitution at various instances. It finds explicit mention in the Preamble and mentioned implicitly in the Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Duties. The preamble promises “to secure to its citizens: justice, social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and opportunity” and commits to promote “fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation”. The preamble therefore, articulates the values of equality, freedom, justice, human dignity and fraternity. Article 14 recognizes equality as an important value and provides for equality before law and equal protection of law. Article 15 provides for prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth; reiterating the value of equality and human dignity. Article 16 and 17 further emphasize the value of equality. Article 16 provides for equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to public employment. Article 17 abolishes untouchability. Articles 25 to 28 provide for freedom of religion and form the core values of secularism. Article 29 provides for protection of interests of minorities. Article 30 provides right to all minorities whether based on religion or language to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. Articles 29 and 30 safeguard the linguistic and cultural liberty of minorities inducing a sense of security in them. Given the multi-lingual, multi-cultural, multi-religious nature of Indian society, articles 29 and 30 hold an important place in the Constitution. Article 44 stresses the value of equality and justice and provides that the state shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India.

The values which can be said to be intrinsic to the concept of secularism are: religious tolerance, human dignity, human freedom, co-existence of cultural groups, human welfare, separation of religion and politics, justice and equality, rationalism and scientific temper.

### **Human Rights: Meaning and Genesis**

Apart from secularism, protection of human rights forms an essential feature of liberal democratic states. Human rights in the simplest term refer to those rights which a person has because he or she is a human being. Human rights have universal nature and all human beings are equally entitled to human rights irrespective of their nationality, residence, caste, colour, creed, sex, religion, language, or other considerations. International human rights law provides the standards for the governments to make laws in order to protect individuals and groups against violence, exploitation or any atrocities. Human

rights are grounded in morality and strive to protect the dignity of individuals to provide them a sense of worth. UN Office of High Commission for Human Rights describes human rights as: universal and inalienable; interdependent and indivisible; equal and non discriminatory; both rights and obligations.

The idea of human rights in India during the ancient period can be seen in the religious texts such as Vedas, Mahabharata, and Ramayana. Manusmriti carried the idea of legal rights. Arthshastra elaborated on the idea of civil and legal rights.

The idea of human rights echoed throughout the Reformation, Renaissance movement in the works of scholars such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. Some of the important movements and documents that paved the way for human rights include: Magna Carta, American Bill of Rights, French revolution and the Formation of the United Nations. In 1945, many countries of the world came together to form United Nations and in 1948 United Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted. The Declaration consists of 30 articles. It along with International Covenant on civil and political rights (ICCPR), and International Covenant on economic, social and cultural rights (ICESCR) is sometimes referred to as International Bill Of Rights.

## **Human Rights Values**

Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides the core values of human rights. Article 1, stresses the value of human dignity. It reads:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

Article 2 puts emphasis on the basic values of equality and non-discrimination and forbids “distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” Articles 3 to 21 reflect the value of freedom in the form of civil and political rights. Article 22 to 27 emphasize the values of equality and justice in the form of economic, social and cultural rights.

Human Rights values in Indian Constitution are reflected in Preamble, Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy. Articles 14 to 18 provide for equality as an important value. Articles 19 to 22 encompass the value of freedom. Articles 23, 24 provide for rights against exploitation. Articles 25 to 28 provide for freedom of religion as an important value. Directive Principles constitute values in the form of ideals and goals putting obligation before the nation to achieve them.

The values which can be said to be embedded in Human rights are: Human Dignity, Human Freedom, Rule of Law, Equality and Justice, Human Welfare, Sustainable Development, Co-existence of Cultural Groups, Economic Prosperity.

## **Interface between Secularism and Human Rights**

The concept of secularism and human rights do not exist in compartments independent of each other, and there is a constant interplay, synergy and interdependence between these concepts and the values embedded in them. In order to impart human rights and secular values among learners, it is important to appreciate and understand the interface between the values intrinsic to these concepts which can help in developing a framework for inculcating secular human rights perspective among the learners.

Theorists and practioners commonly assume that the concept of human rights is secular (Freeman, 2004) and this can be traced to the overlapping historical roots of human rights and secularism. History of both secularism and human rights can be traced in Renaissance, Reformation movement. The oppression at the hands of institutionalized religion led to the protestant reformation movement in which the supremacy of the Church was challenged and religious liberty, toleration, respect for human dignity were emphasized. Establishment of Secular States in Europe provided religious freedom to the individuals and created a conducive environment for providing fundamental rights of liberty and equality to all individuals. From the historical experiences, it becomes evident that both secularism and human rights are inseparably linked.

Some of the core components which can be said to be common in secularism and human rights can be described as follows:

- zz **Human Dignity:** Genesis of both secularism and human rights can be traced in the recognition and respect for human dignity.
- zz **Human Freedom:** Human freedom constitutes another core component of secularism and human rights. Both emphasize the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which are essential for the free existence of an individual. Freedom of belief, opinion and expression form the essential conditions for overall development of human beings.
- zz **Equality and justice:** Human rights and secularism are based on equality and equal respect for all individuals and rule out any kind of discrimination based on race, caste, gender, religion or any other consideration. Human rights are based on the philosophy that everyone

is born free and equal in dignity and rights. In a liberal democracy, based on the principles of secularism and human rights, all individuals are considered equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law. Equality of opportunity and treatment are essential conditions for creating a just and humane society. Both secularism as well as human rights emphasize equity and believe in “treating like people alike”.

- zz **Human Welfare:** Overall aim of both secularism and human right is the protection and enhancement of human welfare.
- zz **Coexistence of cultural groups:** Human rights as well as secularism aim at mutual respect and peaceful coexistence of different cultural groups.

### **Studies Related to Secularism and Human Rights**

Many studies have been conducted in the area of Secularism and Human rights in the educational context. The studies conducted in the area of secularism (Awari, M & Bhandarkar, S, 1998; Gupta B.S. 1980; Masih, 2004) point towards the fact that there is an enormous need to overhaul the curricula by making it secular through bringing required changes in textbooks, co-curricular activities and teaching-learning practices happening inside a classroom. It is important to make all the stakeholders of education to understand the true idea of secularism and how it should be practised in educational set-up. The focus should be on providing platform to all the learners who come from different socio-cultural background and providing them appropriate provisions of expressing themselves. The educational set-up should be such that it is inclusive as well as reflects the multi-cultural and multi-lingual ethos of the nation.

The studies conducted in the area of human rights education (Claude, 1996; HREA, 2005; IIDH, 2008) point towards an increase in the popularity of Human Rights education. A study conducted by Lothar Mueller in 2009 revealed that it is the emotional or the affective domain which plays an important role in effective dissemination of human rights education. From the studies conducted in the area of human rights education (Branson & Torney-Purta, 1982, Torney-Purta, 2004, Müller, 2002), it can be said that human rights cannot be taught by merely focusing on the cognitive domain. Democratic classroom climate, cooperative learning strategies and student involvement are indispensable for establishing a human rights perspective based curriculum and to internalise the values of human rights among students.

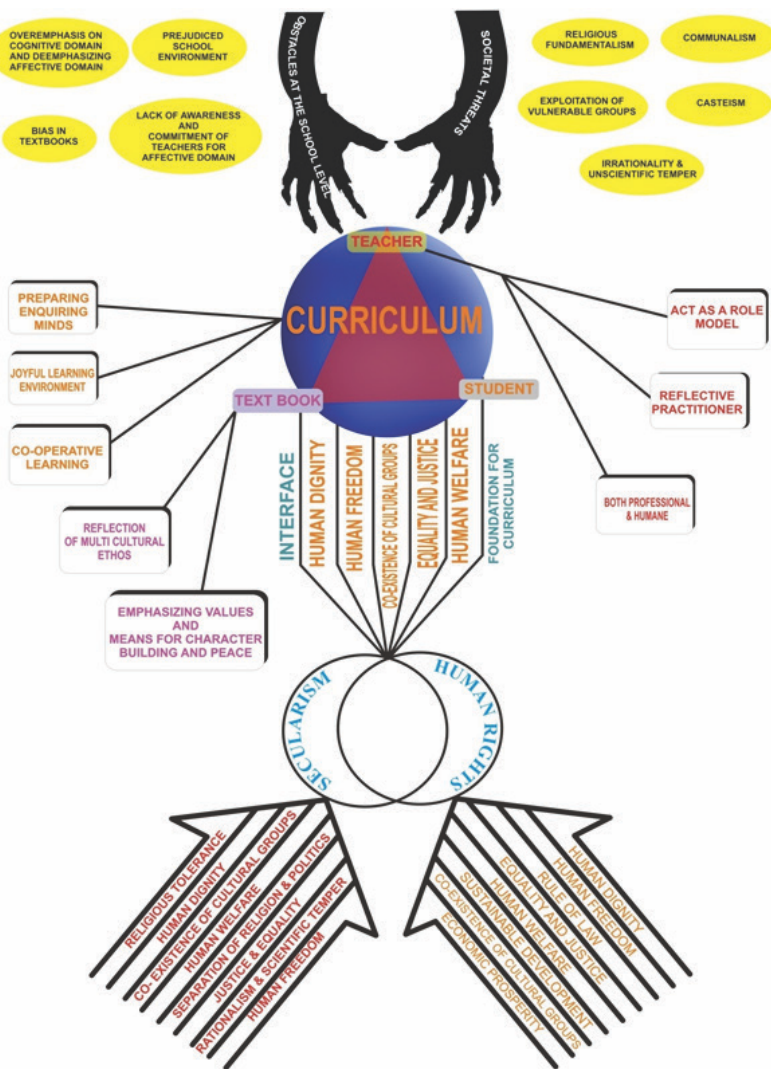
## **Curriculum Interfacing Secularism and Human Rights Perspective: Perceptual Model**

On the basis of theoretical and empirical literature, a perceptual model has been proposed for curriculum interfacing Secularism and Human Rights perspective. It may help to provide mechanism of imparting secular as well as human rights values through curriculum. The common core elements interfacing Secularism and Human Rights would provide the foundation for such curriculum. It is here important to look at the components of secularism and human rights.

Based on the prior discussion, the core elements/ values of secularism can be identified as:

- zz Religious Tolerance
- zz Human dignity
- zz Co-existence of cultural groups
- zz Human welfare
- zz Separation of religion and politics
- zz Justice and equality
- zz Rationalism and scientific temper
- zz Human freedom





**CURRICULUM INTERFACING SECULARISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE : PERCEPTUAL MODEL**

The core elements/ values which are embedded in the concept of Human Rights can be identified as:

- zz Human dignity
- zz Human freedom
- zz Rule of law
- zz Equality and justice
- zz Human welfare
- zz Sustainable Development
- zz Co-existence of cultural groups
- zz Economic prosperity

A close look at the components of secularism and human rights reveals that they have five core components in common. The interface between Secularism and Human Rights, as has been discussed earlier, leads to these following common core elements:

- zz Human dignity
- zz Human freedom
- zz Co-existence of cultural groups
- zz Equality and justice
- zz Human welfare

The curriculum interfacing secular and human rights perspective thus, would be based on human dignity; human freedom; co-existence of cultural groups; equality and justice; and human welfare. Curriculum does not only mean a list of subjects to be taught in the classroom but it has to be viewed in terms of the all the experiences that a student receives in the school. Thus these core components are to be viewed in totality.

The curriculum based on these core components will aim at **preparing enquiring minds**. Enquiring mind students are able to look at things critically and they have a better understanding of the forces which play an important role in shaping and affecting their lives. Such a curriculum will be based on **joyful learning environment** where the students can express themselves freely without any kind of fear, stress, trauma or anxiety as also has been emphasized by NCF 2005. Students belonging to different religious, lingual, cultural backgrounds will have full participation in the teaching-learning

process without fear of humiliation or punishment. There will be emphasis on **cooperative learning** activities. The interaction between student, teacher and textbook will reflect secular as well as human rights values. Text books will emphasize **multicultural ethos** and no particular culture would be promoted over others. The teacher will act as a **role model** reflecting secular and human rights values. The teacher will be a **reflective practitioner** who critically analyses his/her actions and encourages the students also to reflect on their actions. The teacher will be both **professional and humane**. The teacher will be mindful of the needs of the learners and will have empathy towards the learners.

However, some challenges may come from the societal as well as the school level which the curriculum needs to tackle. The societal threats may include: religious fundamentalism, communalism, exploitation of vulnerable groups, casteism, irrationality and unscientific temper. The obstacles at the school level may include: bias in textbooks, lack of awareness and commitment of teachers for affective domain, prejudiced school environment; overemphasis on cognitive domain and neglect of affective domain. These issues should be addressed both at the level of policy making as well as the transactional stages. The teachers should be trained to respect the dignity of the learners and to adopt an unbiased approach in order to effectively inculcate the values of secularism and human rights among the learners.

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