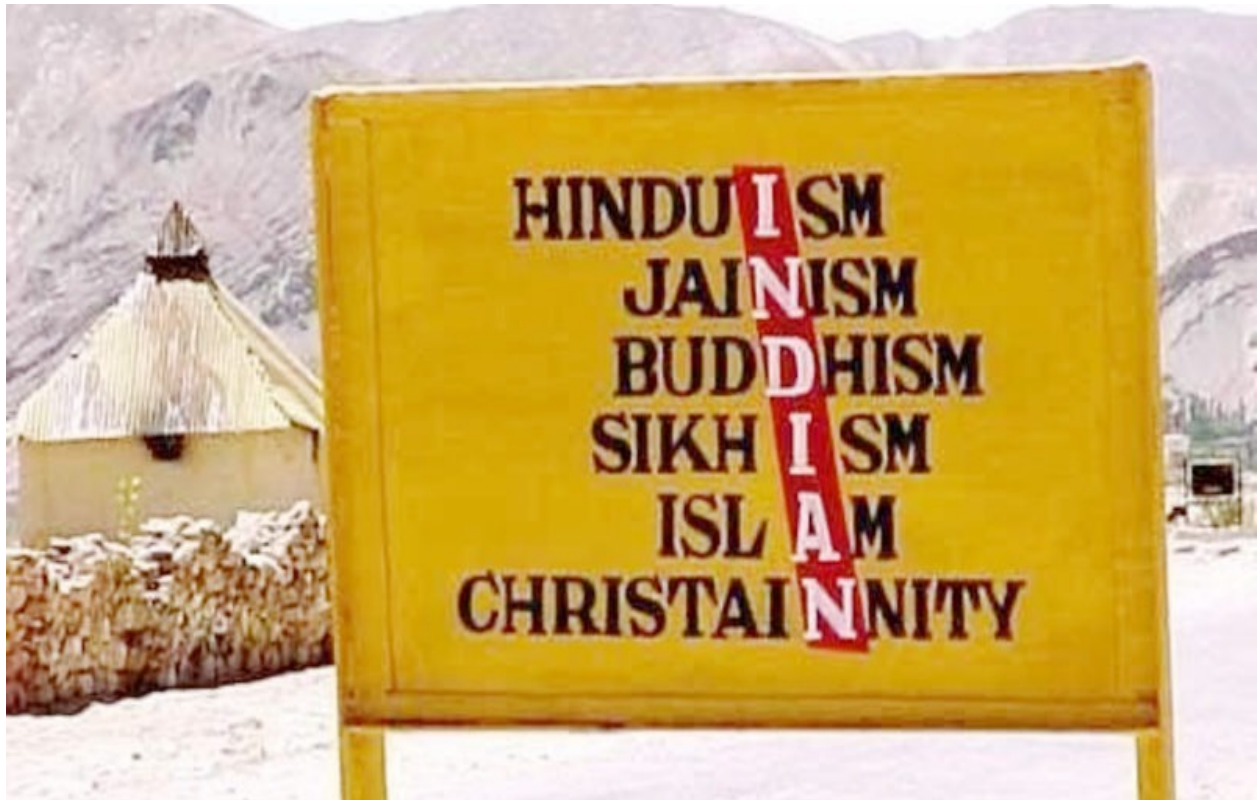




## The future of Indian secularism



### Context:

- The participation of Prime Minister in the ground breaking ceremony of Ayodhya Ram Temple has revived the debate on Secularism.

### What is Secularism?

- Secularism means separation of religion from political, economic, social and cultural aspects of life, religion being treated as a purely personal matter.
- It emphasized dissociation of the **state from religion** and full freedom to all religions and tolerance of all religions.
- It also stands for equal opportunities for followers of all religions, and no discrimination and partiality on grounds of religion.
- A secular person is one who does not owe his moral values to any religion. His values are the product of his rational and scientific thinking.

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## Why is India's Secularism unique?

- India's Constitutional secularism is marked by at least two features.

### 1. Critical respect for all religions:

- Unlike some secularisms, India's secularism is not blindly anti-religious but respects religion.
- Unlike the secularisms of pre-dominantly single religious societies, India's Secularism respects not one but all religions.
- Indian philosophy of secularism is related to "**Sarva Dharma Sambhava**" which means that destination of the paths followed by all religions is the same, though the paths themselves may be different. It essentially means equal respect to all religions.
- However, given the virtual impossibility of distinguishing the religious from the social, as B.R. Ambedkar famously observed, **every aspect of religious doctrine or practice cannot be respected**. Respect for religion must be accompanied by critique.

### 2. Principled Distance from all religions:

- The Indian state abandons strict separation but keeps a principled distance from all religions.
- This means that State must intervenes whenever religious groups promote communal disharmony and discrimination on grounds of religion (an inter-religious matter) or are unable to protect their own members from the oppressions they perpetuate (an intra-religious issue).
- For instance, it cannot tolerate untouchability or leave all personal laws as they are.
- Thus, State has to constantly decide when to engage or disengage, help or hinder religion depending entirely on which of these **enhances our constitutional commitment to freedom, equality and fraternity**.
- Secularism is not only a project of civic friendship among religious communities but also of opposition to religion-based caste and gender oppressions.

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## What are the challenges with India's Secularism?

- Opportunistic distance (engagement or disengagement), mainly opportunistic alliance with religious communities, particularly for the sake of immediate electoral benefit
- Political parties have bizarrely interpreted 'respect' to mean cutting deals with aggressive or orthodox sections of religious groups at times igniting communal violence.
- Principled intervention by State in one religion is viewed as discriminatory treatment by fringe sections of society leading to Politicisation of Secularism
- Politicisation of any one religious group leads to the **competitive politicisation** of other groups, thereby resulting in inter-religious conflict.
- India's constitutional secularism cannot be sustained by governments alone but requires collective commitment from an impartial judiciary, a scrupulous media, civil society activists, and an alert citizenry.

## Way Ahead:

- There is need to shift focus from a politically-led Secularism project to a socially-driven movement for justice.
- Second, a shift of emphasis from inter-religious to intra-religious issues, without completely ignoring inter-religious issues.

## Conclusion

- Indian secularism is not an end in itself but a **means to address religious plurality** and sought to achieve peaceful coexistence of different religions.