

# Indian Secularism – A Case Study of Kumbh Mela

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**Abstract**—India is often described as a melting pot of religions, cultures, languages, castes, and ideologies. Despite periodic assertions of religious, ethnic, and linguistic identities, the unity and solidarity of the Indian nation have largely remained intact, demonstrating remarkable resilience against divisive forces. The constitutional commitment to a “sovereign socialist secular democratic republic,” as enshrined in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution, continues to command widespread faith, notwithstanding contemporary challenges.

This paper examines the evolving nature of Indian secularism through a detailed case study of the Mahakumbh Mela at Prayagraj. While the secular structure of the Indian polity has survived numerous critiques and stresses, recent developments—particularly the overt involvement of the state in promoting and facilitating large-scale religious congregations—have rekindled debates on the meaning and practice of secularism. The Mahakumbh, celebrated as the world’s largest religious congregation, provides a fertile ground to analyse the tensions and harmonies between religious revivalism, state neutrality, syncretic culture, economic development, environmental sustainability, and constitutional secularism.

The study argues that contemporary Indian secularism is witnessing a paradigmatic shift from a negative conception—where the state maintains strict distance from religion—towards a model of positive secularism that emphasises equal respect for all religions, albeit with discernible challenges. Through an analysis of socio-political, economic, administrative, and environmental dimensions of the Kumbh Mela, the paper highlights both the integrative and polarising potentials inherent in state-facilitated religious events in a plural democracy.

**Index Terms**—Positive secularism, pluralistic spiritual heritage, religious congregation, syncretism

## I. INTRODUCTION

India is designated as a melting pot of the world, inhabited by people of diverse religions, languages, cultures, castes, faiths, and ideologies. The

multiplicity of Indian society, sustained by a robust federal democratic polity, has drawn admiration globally. Despite recurrent assertions of religious, ethnic, and linguistic identities, the fundamental unity of the Indian nation has remained largely unchallenged. This resilience owes much to the collective efforts of Indian leadership and citizenry in sustaining a pluralistic political culture against fissiparous tendencies.

The constitutional proclamation of India as a “sovereign socialist secular democratic republic” reflects a foundational commitment to secularism. Although the term ‘secular’ was formally inserted into the Constitution by the 42<sup>nd</sup> Amendment Act of 1976, the essence of secularism had already been embedded in the Fundamental Rights, particularly Articles 25–28, guaranteeing freedom of religion and prohibiting religious discrimination.

In a regional context where neighbouring countries struggle to manage religious tensions despite relative religious homogeneity, India’s ability to preserve religious harmony amidst immense diversity remains noteworthy. Census data reveal India’s complex religious composition, with Hindus constituting approximately 79.8 per cent of the population, Muslims 14.2 per cent, Christians 2.3 per cent, Sikhs 1.7 per cent, Buddhists 0.7 per cent, Jains 0.4 per cent, along with smaller proportions of Adivasis, atheists, and others. This diversity renders secularism not merely a constitutional principle but a practical necessity for national integration.

## II. EVOLUTION OF SECULAR PRACTICE IN INDIA

Beyond constitutional guarantees, successive governments at the central and state levels have generally attempted to uphold India’s secular fabric by

curbing religious intolerance and bigotry. While communal riots and disputes—such as the Ram Janmabhoomi–Babri Masjid controversy—have periodically disturbed social harmony, administrative interventions have largely prevented these conflicts from escalating into existential threats to the secular polity.

For several decades after independence, the dominance of the Indian National Congress played a significant role in sustaining secularism. Functioning as an umbrella organisation, the Congress accommodated diverse political opinions and religious groups. Regional and Left parties, too, preferred mobilising support on caste, linguistic, or regional lines rather than overtly exploiting religious sentiments.

However, the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a major national political force marked a significant shift. Its ideological proximity to Hindu revivalist organisations raised apprehensions regarding the future of secularism. Although the BJP has not formally sought to dismantle the secular framework, the strategic mobilisation of religious identity in electoral politics has become increasingly visible. The electoral victory of Narendra Modi in 2014 marked a new phase wherein religion emerged as a more explicit tool of political mobilisation.

### III. THE KUMBH MELA AS A SOCIO-POLITICAL PHENOMENON

The ceremonial inauguration of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya by the Prime Minister and the extensive state patronage of religious events have intensified debates on the neutrality of the state. While secularism may be interpreted as equal respect for all religions, the public role of constitutional authorities in religious ceremonies raises questions about symbolic neutrality.

The Mahakumbh Mela at Prayagraj in 2025 epitomises these tensions. Celebrated as a once-in-144-years event associated with rare celestial alignments, the Mahakumbh attracted an estimated 60 million pilgrims over 45 days. Devotees thronged the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati, participating in royal and auspicious bathing rituals.

Despite extensive administrative preparations, tragic stampedes during the Mauni Amavasya bathing resulted in significant loss of life, exposing limitations in crowd management. Yet, these incidents failed to dampen popular enthusiasm, as pilgrims continued to converge on Prayagraj, Varanasi, and Ayodhya in massive numbers.

### IV. SECULARISM, SYNCRETISM, AND SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

Remarkably, the Mahakumbh concluded without any communal conflict. Millions of pilgrims congregated peacefully, transcending sectarian divisions. Local residents, irrespective of religious affiliation, collaborated to ensure the smooth conduct of the event. Reports highlighted exemplary acts of interfaith solidarity, including Muslim residents offering shelter, food, and medical assistance to Hindu pilgrims during crises.

The presence of foreign visitors from diverse faiths further underscored India's syncretic cultural ethos. These instances reaffirm the deep-rooted pluralism that continues to sustain Indian society despite political polarisation.

### V. ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSIONS

Economically, the Mahakumbh opened new avenues for religious tourism. Massive investments in infrastructure—roads, flyovers, accommodation facilities, transport hubs, and urban beautification—transformed the regional economy. Revenue generation reportedly exceeded initial projections, benefiting a wide spectrum of stakeholders beyond religious boundaries.

Conversely, environmental concerns emerged as a significant drawback. Questions regarding river pollution, waste management, and ecological disruption were raised by regulatory bodies and environmental activists. Reports indicated elevated faecal coliform levels in river waters during peak periods, along with air pollution caused by open burning of materials at bathing ghats. These challenges underline the need for environmentally sustainable governance of mega religious events.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The Mahakumbh Mela offers critical insights into the evolving nature of Indian secularism. It reflects a gradual shift from a negative conception of secularism—where the state maintains strict detachment from religion—towards a model of positive secularism emphasising equal respect for all faiths. However, the overt involvement of the state and ruling political establishments in promoting religious events risks blurring the line between facilitation and endorsement.

For India to sustain its secular democratic ethos, governmental engagement with religion must be exercised with restraint, balance, and inclusivity. Equal encouragement and facilitation should be extended to all religious communities, with the state maintaining symbolic neutrality. If managed prudently, India can continue to serve as a global exemplar of secularism rooted in pluralism, tolerance, and syncretic spiritual heritage.