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Q10

What are the challenges to our cultural practices in the name of secularism?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2019 · GS I · 10 marks · Social Empowerment, Communalism and Secularism
Social empowerment, communalism, regionalism and secularism.

Core demand of the question

- What are the challenges to our cultural practices in the name of secularism?
- Identify those challenges without rewriting the idea of Indian secularism as a slogan
- Keep the answer within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Indian secularism should protect many faiths, not erase cultural practice.

Uniformity and a rushed civil code can make minorities feel that custom is on trial.

Court reform of gender in religion is needed but can look selective.

Public-order rules on ritual can be safety or they can be majoritarian squeeze.

Vote-bank defence of every custom is the other misuse of the same word.

Introduction

Indian secularism, in the Constitution, is meant to keep the state from a theocratic religion and still let communities practise faith. In politics, the word is sometimes used to police, freeze, or shame cultural practices, which creates real challenges for everyday custom.

Body

Uniformity pressed as secularism

- A hard reading of uniformity can treat festivals, dress, food, and personal law as problems for a single public code, even when **Articles 25** to 30 protect religion and culture.
- Demands for an immediate Uniform Civil Code, without trust, make Muslim, Christian, and tribal custom feel targeted rather than reformed by their own members.
- School and office rules on food, prayer, or clothing can shrink living practice in the name of a neutral space that is not equally neutral for all.

Reform, courts, and essential practice

- Gender justice inside faith, as in debates on triple talaq, Sabarimala entry, or the **essential religious practices test**, pits constitutional rights against temple and community custom.
- The challenge is not that reform is wrong; it is that court or statute can look like one community's culture being named backward while another's is named heritage.
- Cow, loudspeaker, and procession disputes show how public-order secularism can become a daily limit on ritual, sometimes fairly for safety, sometimes as majoritarian pressure.

Misuse from more than one side

- Vote-bank talk can freeze a practice against internal reform by calling every critique an attack on secularism.
- Majoritarian politics can also use secularism to mean that minority visible culture is extra, while majority custom is the nation's default.
- Both uses hollow out the older Indian idea of sarva dharma sambhava and equal respect.

What a fair secularism would do

- Protect practice that does not violate dignity and public order, and support reform that comes with women's and Dalit voices from inside the community.

Flow diagram

Forced uniformity -> Pressure on custom
Gender justice courts -> Pressure on custom
Majority or vote-bank misuse -> Pressure on custom
Articles 25 to 30 -> Equal respect reform
Equal respect reform -> Fair secularism

Conclusion

The challenge is the use of secularism either to flatten cultural practice into one code or to shield every custom from justice. Constitutional secularism has to defend both freedom of practice and the equal rights of those inside the practice.

Facts & figures

Articles 25-28

Freedom of religion, including practice and the state's power to regulate social reform.

Articles 29-30

Rights of groups to conserve culture and of minorities to run educational institutions.

Essential religious practices test

Judicial tool that decides which customs the court will treat as core faith, and which it will reform.

Sabarimala litigation

Case on women's entry that showed the clash of temple custom, equality, and public secular argument.

Triple talaq ruling and law

Supreme Court and later statute on instant talaq, a flashpoint of personal law, gender, and secular reform.

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