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Q19

Are tolerance, assimilation and pluralism the key elements in the making of an Indian form of secularism? Justify your answer.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · GS I · 15 marks · Social Empowerment, Communalism and Secularism
Social empowerment, communalism, regionalism and secularism.

Core demand of the question

- Are tolerance, assimilation and pluralism the key elements in the making of an Indian form of secularism? Justify your answer
- **Give a clear yes with ranking:** pluralism and principled coexistence over forced assimilation
- Keep a 15-mark length

Revision summary

Indian secularism grew from living with many faiths, not from a revolutionary church-state wall.

Tolerance is the ethic of restraint; it was always imperfect.

Constitutional pluralism in **Articles 25-28** and minority rights is the legal core.

Civic assimilation into one citizenship is needed; creedal assimilation is not.

The Indian form is principled coexistence, still tested by communal politics.

Introduction

Indian secularism did not grow as a strict wall between church and state in the European revolutionary sense. It grew as a public ethic of living with many faiths, and tolerance, pluralism, and a limited assimilation are indeed its working parts, though not as equals.

Body

Tolerance as a historical base

- **Ashokan dhamma**, bhakti-sufi sharing of shrines, and Akbar's **sulh-i-kul** taught that the ruler should not make one cult the only lawful path.
- **Social tolerance was always uneven:** it coexisted with hierarchy, conversion conflict, and riot. The inheritance is a norm, not a perfect past.
- The national movement's claim to a composite people, and **Gandhi's** equal respect, put tolerance into modern politics before 1950.

Pluralism in the Constitution

- **Articles 25** to 28, **minority educational rights**, and personal-law plurality recognise that India is many religious publics, not one official church.
- **The 42nd Amendment's word 'secular' (1976) named a practice already in the text:** the state may regulate religion for equality, yet it may also aid all faiths rather than starve them.

- Festivals, languages, and pilgrimage in the public calendar are pluralism as lived culture, which a French-style laïcité would thin out.
- Courts' 'essential practices' doctrine is a clumsy tool, but it shows the Indian state walking into religion to keep a plural peace, not standing wholly outside.

Assimilation: use and danger

- Assimilation, as sharing a civic language, a vote, and a common criminal law, is a key element of one citizenship.
- Assimilation as melting all faiths into a majority custom is not Indian secularism; it is majoritarian absorption, which the Constitution's minority rights reject.
- Tagore's and Nehru's 'unity in diversity' asked for a civilisational conversation, not for the erasure of the smaller voice.
- Therefore assimilation is a civic, not a creedal, element.

Justification of the ranking

- **Yes:** tolerance (daily restraint), pluralism (legal and cultural many-ness), and civic assimilation (one Republic) are the key elements of the Indian form.
- The distinctive Indian stress is principled distance plus pluralism, not the American wall and not Ottoman millet frozen in time.
- Communal violence and majoritarian campaigns show the form is incomplete; they do not prove that another model was the real Indian design.

Flow diagram

Tolerance restraint -> Indian secularism
 Plural rights many faiths -> Indian secularism
 Civic assimilation -> Indian secularism
 Creedal melting -> Not the model
 Indian secularism -> Articles 25 to 28

Conclusion

Indian secularism is made of tolerance, pluralism, and a civic assimilation into equal citizenship. Pluralism and restraint are the heart; faith-melting assimilation is not. The justification is constitutional text plus a long, uneven civilisational practice of many paths under one state.

Facts & figures

Sulh-i-kul

Akbar's ethic of peace with all, often cited as a pre-modern public tolerance.

Articles 25-28

Constitutional religious freedom and the state's limited power to regulate.

42nd Amendment, 1976

Inserted 'secular' into the Preamble, naming a practice already in the 1950 text.

Ashokan dhamma

Early imperial teaching of restraint among sects.

Minority educational rights

Article 30 protection that refuses full cultural melting.

Gandhi's equal respect

National-movement ethic that all faiths share the public square.

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