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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Living With Difference: Secularism as Everyday Practice

 **INDIAN EXPRESS**

13 July 2026

SOCIAL ISSUES

GS1

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Living With Difference: Secularism as Everyday Practice

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THE LIFT LINE

India is not secular chiefly because a document says so, it is secular because millions of ordinary people, in markets and neighbourhoods and workplaces, have quietly agreed to live next to difference, and it is that agreement, not the clause, that a politics of fear puts at risk.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Indian secularism is often debated as a matter of constitutional theory, the meaning of the word in the Preamble, the reach of Articles 25 to 28, the state's relation to religion. But the more durable reality is sociological. Religious plurality in India is managed, day after day, through coexistence: shared festivals, mixed neighbourhoods, common workplaces and the countless small accommodations of ordinary life. This lived secularism is a civic achievement, and it is more fragile than it looks. A politics that manufactures panic over **demographic** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/demographic/>) or religious difference, that treats the presence of another community as a threat rather than a fact of a plural society, corrodes the habit of coexistence on which social peace rests. The editorial makes the case, in a strictly constitutional and ethical register, that fraternity is not a slogan in the Preamble but a practice that must be renewed.

GS Paper 1: Indian society and its diversity; the role of communalism, regionalism and secularism; and the factors that sustain social cohesion.

GS Paper 4: ethics and human values, in particular the civic virtues of tolerance, empathy and compassion toward fellow citizens.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the word “secular” inserted into the Preamble by the Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976; the fundamental right to freedom of conscience and the free profession, practice and propagation of religion under Article 25; the freedom to manage religious affairs under Article 26; Articles 27 and 28 on freedom from compelled religious taxation and religious instruction in wholly state-

funded institutions; the idea of “principled distance”, the Indian model in which the state keeps a considered, non-uniform distance from all religions rather than a strict wall of separation; fraternity as a constitutional value in the Preamble; and the fundamental duty under Article 51A(f) to value and preserve the rich heritage of the composite culture. For **Mains**, argue that Indian secularism is a distinctive model of accommodation rather than exclusion, and that its survival depends as much on civic virtue as on constitutional text.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Western template of secularism drew a wall between church and state, keeping religion out of the public sphere. India adopted something different. Its founders faced a society of many faiths, deeply woven into public and cultural life, and chose not separation but even-handed engagement. The state does not profess a religion, does not discriminate on the ground of faith, and yet may act with respect to religious communities, reforming a practice here, protecting a right there, keeping what scholars have called a principled distance from each. This is why India can have both freedom of religion under Article 25 and state intervention to open a temple to all castes: the model accommodates religion rather than banishing it.

Beneath the constitutional architecture runs the deeper current of a composite culture, centuries of shared language, music, food, craft and festival across communities, which Article 51A asks every citizen to value and preserve. It is this lived inheritance, more than any clause, that has allowed a society of extraordinary religious diversity to hold together. And it is precisely this inheritance that a politics of communal suspicion erodes, by teaching citizens to see a neighbour first as a member of a feared group and only second as a fellow citizen.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Secularism is a practice before it is a principle

The Constitution can guarantee the right to worship, but it cannot legislate the willingness to live alongside those who worship differently. That willingness is produced in daily life, in the shared bus, the mixed classroom, the common marketplace, and it is sustained by habit and mutual familiarity. When politics replaces familiarity with fear, the constitutional guarantee remains on paper while the social reality that gave it meaning quietly frays.

Two models of managing difference

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FEATURE	WESTERN STRICT SEPARATION	INDIAN PRINCIPLED DISTANCE
State's stance	Wall between religion and state	Even-handed engagement with all faiths
Religion in public life	Kept private	Present, protected and accommodated
State intervention in religion	Generally avoided	Permitted for reform and equality
Underlying social basis	Individual conscience	Composite culture and coexistence
What holds it together	Legal separation	Fraternity and mutual accommodation

The Indian model asks more of its citizens than the Western one, because accommodation requires an active virtue that separation does not: the readiness to share public space with difference rather than to privatise it out of sight.

The politics of panic is the real threat

The danger to Indian secularism is less the honest disagreement about the state's relation to religion than the **deliberate** (<https://ujjayi.com/vocab/deliberate/>) cultivation of panic, the framing of another community's numbers, faith or presence as an existential threat. Such panic is corrosive precisely because it works on the lived layer, not the legal one. It does not need to amend a single article to do its damage; it only needs to persuade neighbours to distrust one another. Against it, the constitutional answer is fraternity, the assurance of the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation that the Preamble names, and the ethical answer is empathy, the disposition to see the other as a fellow bearer of the same rights and the same fears.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Read secularism at two levels and keep them distinct. The constitutional level is the text, Articles 25 to 28, the Preamble, the fundamental duties, and it settles the rules. The civic level is the practice, the everyday coexistence that gives the rules life, and it settles whether the rules hold. A society can have flawless constitutional secularism and failing civic secularism at the same time, and it is the second that ordinary people actually live in. The transferable rule for your GS1 and GS4 answers: constitutional guarantees set the floor, but social cohesion is built above it by civic virtue, tolerance, empathy and the daily willingness to accommodate difference, and no clause can substitute for that willingness once it is lost.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

plural society of many faiths -> founders choose accommodation, not a wall: principled distance -> constitutional layer built: Articles 25 to 28, secular Preamble, Article 51A
 composite culture -> civic layer runs beneath: shared festivals, mixed neighbourhoods,

daily coexistence -> politics of panic frames difference as threat -> the civic layer, not the legal one, begins to fray -> neighbours taught to distrust neighbours -> constitutional answer: fraternity and the dignity of the individual -> ethical answer: tolerance and empathy as civic virtues -> outcome: secularism renewed as practice, social cohesion preserved

WAY FORWARD

- ① **Defend the civic layer, not only the legal one.** Recognise that social cohesion is sustained by everyday coexistence, and protect the shared public spaces, schools, markets and neighbourhoods, where familiarity across communities is built.
- ② **Teach the composite culture.** Use education, in the spirit of Article 51A, to transmit the shared inheritance of language, art and festival across communities, so that plurality is experienced as heritage rather than threat.
- ③ **Hold the constitutional line on equal citizenship.** Uphold Articles 25 to 28 and the guarantee of non-discrimination without fear or favour, so that no community's rights depend on its numbers or its popularity.
- ④ **Answer panic with fraternity and empathy.** Meet the politics of communal fear with the constitutional value of fraternity and the ethical virtue of empathy, insisting that a fellow citizen's faith is a fact of a plural republic, not a danger to it.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has asked about the distinctive nature of Indian secularism, communalism as a threat to national integration, and tolerance and empathy as ethical values. This editorial brings the sociological and the ethical together, which is exactly the composite treatment the examiner rewards across GS1 and GS4.

Practice question: “Indian secularism survives as a lived practice of coexistence more than as a constitutional abstraction.” Examine, and discuss the civic virtues necessary to sustain social cohesion in a plural society. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: *The Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com/>), *Constitution of India* (<https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/pdf1/Preamble.pdf>)

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