



Exit, Intervention, and Inequality: Understanding Secularism and Social Justice in India

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Abstract

Secularism is regarded as a remedy for the challenges of accommodating religious diversity while ensuring peaceful coexistence and social justice. Since ensuring social justice requires state intervention, it is perceived as inconsistent with secularism. However, scholars like Bhargava and Chandhoke do not perceive mild state intervention as inconsistent with secular values, but rather as a distinctive feature of Indian secularism. Whereas in a liberal secular framework, tolerance is considered to be the core value that discourages state intervention in religious affairs. Melidoro holds that liberalism's primary objective is to protect diversity rather than to establish equality or justice. He argues that the state should refrain from intervening in comprehensive doctrines—liberal or illiberal—and instead ensure that individuals can exercise their right to exit oppressive social structures. He considers exiting an oppressive community as sufficient for peaceful coexistence. This paper challenges Melidoro's claim, arguing that in the Indian context, due to the caste system, the exit right is insufficient. The rigid social structure of caste makes it difficult for individuals to truly escape oppressive conditions, even after leaving their communities. To support this argument, the paper examines B.R. Ambedkar's arguments on conversion as a form of exit, alongside his strong advocacy for state intervention to protect marginalized groups. Through this inquiry, the paper evaluates the limitations of the liberal neutrality approach and argues for a context-sensitive model of secularism that recognizes the necessity of ensuring peaceful coexistence as well as social justice.

Keywords: exit right; liberalism; secularism; social justice; tolerance