



After climate talks, nations gather to iron out a treaty to curb plastics

ECOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

CONTEXT: On December 1, representatives from 175 countries hoped to conclude an agreement to end plastic pollution — and potentially the production of plastic. The Intergovernmental Negotiations Committee (INC), so far held four round of discussions in Punte Del Este (Uruguay), Paris (France), Nairobi (Kenya) and Ottawa (Canada).

The Busan negotiations is likely adopting the text and set the ground for periodic meetings — akin to the annual climate Conference of the Parties (CoP) — to evolve a legally binding treaty to progressively weed out plastic. The historic Paris Agreement of 2015 agreed to limit emissions to keep temperatures from breaching 20 C at 21 CoP meetings.

There is global agreement that plastic pollution is a significant issue, with countries like India banning single-use plastics since 2022. However, many countries, especially petro-states or those with large plastic manufacturing industries, are reluctant to limit plastic production. Upcoming negotiations will focus on a 'non-paper' by INC Chair Luis Vayas Valdivieso, summarizing the common ground achieved in previous talks. During plenary discussions, India expressed willingness to accept the non-paper as a base text but opposed certain references to "primary plastic polymers."

The committee is expected to aim for resolution on four broad themes: plastic products, chemicals of concern as used in plastic products, product design, and production/supply and related aspects; plastic waste management, emissions and releases, existing plastic pollution, including in the marine environment, and just transition; finance, including the establishment of a financial mechanism, capacity building, technical assistance and technology transfer, and international cooperation; and implementation and compliance, national plans, reporting, monitoring of progress and effectiveness evaluation, information exchange, and awareness, education and research, according to a bulletin by the International Institute for Sustainable Development. A legal drafting group is expected to begin work on the initial and final provisions of the text before considering the substantive and operations aspects of the new treaty.

Cabinet approves next phase of Atal Mission

ECOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

CONTEXT: The Union Cabinet approved the continuation of the Atal Innovation Mission (AIM), implemented by NITI Aayog, with an enhanced allocation of ₹ 2,750 Cr. for the period till March 31, 2028.

The next phase of Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) is expected to further enhance India's global competitiveness in the innovation ecosystem. The continuation of AIM will directly contribute to creating better jobs, innovative products, and high-impact services across sectors. The Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) 2.0 will pilot new initiatives designed to fill gaps in the ecosystem.

Atal Innovation Mission (AIM)

The Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) is an initiative launched by the Indian government under the NITI Aayog to promote innovation and entrepreneurship across the country. The key features of the Atal Innovation Mission include:

- **Promotion of Innovation and Entrepreneurship:** AIM aims to foster a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, encouraging young people to engage in problem-solving through creative and innovative solutions.
- **Establishment of Atal Tinkering Labs (ATLs):** AIM supports the establishment of Atal Tinkering Labs (ATLs) in schools across India to provide a hands-on learning environment where students can experiment with new ideas and technologies like robotics, electronics, and 3D printing.
- **Atal Incubation Centres (AICs):** The mission encourages the creation of Atal Incubation Centres (AICs) to support

startups and entrepreneurs, providing them with the necessary infrastructure, mentorship, and funding to grow their businesses.

- **Mentorship and Guidance:** AIM facilitates mentorship and guidance for young entrepreneurs, helping them to navigate the challenges of innovation and business development. This includes collaborations with industry experts, academic institutions, and funding organizations.
- **Encouraging Research and Development:** AIM promotes research and development (R&D) activities to bring out innovative products and technologies that can benefit society and the economy.
- **Fostering Collaboration and Networking:** The mission supports networking among innovators, entrepreneurs, and investors to create a dynamic ecosystem of collaboration. AIM partners with various institutions, including educational and research bodies, to build a vibrant innovation ecosystem.
- **Support for Startups and Innovations:** AIM provides financial support to startups and innovative businesses, particularly in sectors like technology, education, healthcare, and manufacturing, helping them scale up and bring new products to market.
- **Incentivizing Innovation:** AIM organizes competitions and challenges to incentivize innovation among students, entrepreneurs, and startups. This helps in identifying and promoting cutting-edge ideas and solutions that can solve critical national challenges.
- **Focus on Inclusivity:** AIM ensures that its initiatives are inclusive, targeting not only urban areas but also remote and underserved regions, aiming to bridge the innovation gap across the country.

Through these initiatives, the Atal Innovation Mission aims to create an innovation-driven entrepreneurial ecosystem that can contribute significantly to India's economic growth and development.

Bhutan pitches Gelephu as biggest cooperative project

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

CONTEXT: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Bhutan PM Tshering Tobgay inaugurated the Global Cooperative Conference at Delhi's Bharat Mandapam complex.

At the first "Global Conference of the International Cooperative Alliance" in Delhi, Bhutan's Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay highlighted the upcoming Gelephu Mindfulness City as Bhutan's largest cooperative project. The 2,500-sq. km "Zero Carbon" city is being developed with India's support. Mr. Tobgay expressed gratitude to India for its guidance and assistance in the project's development and emphasized the importance of creating global financial institutions to support cooperatives. The conference, attended by nearly 3,000 delegates from 100 countries, was hosted by Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized that the current global situation presents a significant opportunity for the cooperative movement. He called for innovation and strategic policies to make cooperatives climate-resilient, linking them to the circular economy and promoting start-ups within cooperatives. Union Home Minister Amit Shah highlighted the government's efforts to improve prosperity through cooperation, especially for villages, women, and farmers. He mentioned that in three years, two lakh new Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS) would ensure every village panchayat in India has a cooperative society, with steps being taken to modernize and make PACS tech-enabled and economically viable.

Cooperative spirit

The Gelephu Mindfulness City, planned by Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, is envisioned as a hub for knowledge, technology, and finance, focusing on mindfulness, sustainability, and harmony. Every Bhutanese citizen will be both a shareholder and stakeholder in the city, embodying a cooperative spirit. Located near Assam, the city aims to attract investment and collaboration from India's private sector in infrastructure projects, including hotels, educational institutions, IT, and wellness centers. The King has visited India twice to discuss these plans and seek support.



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'Secular, socialist' to stay in Constitution's Preamble: SC

POLITY & GOVERNANCE



CONTEXT: A Bench of Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna and Justice Sanjay Kumar interpreted the word 'secular' denotes a Republic that upholds equal respect for all religions. 'Socialist' represents a Republic dedicated to eliminating all forms of exploitation—whether social, political, or economic”.

The order was based on a batch of petitions filed in 2020, challenging the validity of the inclusion of 'socialist' and 'secular' in the Preamble through the 42nd Constitution Amendment in 1976. The petitioners, who included BJP leader Subramanian Swamy, argued that the

insertions made with retrospective effect, that is from the date of adoption of the Constitution by the Constituent Assembly on November 26, 1949, amounted to a fraud on the Constitution. Besides, they argued that the word 'secular' was deliberately eschewed by the Constituent Assembly and the word 'socialist' fettered the economic policy choice of the elected government, which represents the will of the people.

The apex court, in its seven-page order, said the case was not worth a detailed adjudication as the flaws in the petitioners' arguments were manifest. Besides, the court found the motives of the petitions, filed nearly 44 years after such an insertion, "questionable". The court held that the Preamble was an inalienable part of the Constitution. Parliament had an unquestionable power to amend the Constitution under Article 368. Its amending extended to the Preamble. The court confirmed the retrospective amendment to the Preamble, saying the date of adoption would not curtail the power under Article 368. The court explained that the Constitution was a 'living document', and open to changes according to the needs of the time.

Though the Constituent Assembly was not sure about what 'secularism' should entail in India, the court said, over time, the nation has developed its own interpretation of the term, which has become a basic feature of the Constitution.

Central govt. announces ₹1,435-cr. PAN 2.0 project

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT: The Centre announced the ₹1,435 Cr. PAN 2.0 project to make the Permanent Account Number (PAN) a 'Common Business Identifier' for all digital systems of government agencies.

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved the PAN 2.0 project of the Income Tax Department with a financial outlay of ₹ 1,435 Cr. The project enables technology-driven transformation of taxpayer registration services and is aimed at ease of access and speedy service delivery with improved quality. The benefits of the project include single source of truth and data consistency; eco-friendly processes and cost optimisation; and security and optimisation of infrastructure for greater agility. The PAN 2.0 project resonates with the vision of the government enshrined in Digital India by enabling the use of PAN as 'common identifier' for all digital systems of specified government agencies”.

Currently, about 78 Cr. PANs have been issued, of which 98 % are to individuals.

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Return to action

ECOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

CONTEXT: After two extra nights of extended negotiations in Baku, the Conference of Parties (CoP) held at Baku adopted a text, which included a commitment to triple public finance for developing countries, raising the goal from \$ 100 billion annually to \$ 300 billion by 2035. In addition, countries pledged to work to scale finance from public and private sources to \$ 1.3 trillion per year by 2035.

The gap between the demanded \$ 300 billion in climate funding and the agreed-upon amount is significant, with the \$ 300 billion representing just 20 % of the original request. While \$300 billion is substantial, it could have been more impactful if it included public financing, technology transfers, or investments in infrastructure to help vulnerable populations adapt to climate change. Despite scientific evidence highlighting the dangers of rising carbon emissions, developed nations have failed to meet their responsibility in supporting effective climate solutions and have not deterred developing countries from pursuing fossil-fuel-based development. This shift reflects broader geopolitical changes and a decline in political will in the West.

Climate action is increasingly being framed as a competitive market issue rather than a global solidarity effort, with recent COP talks showing how climate negotiations have become entangled in trade conflicts. Political posturing and wordplay often took precedence over meaningful action. The upcoming COP in Brazil, set to return to the country that hosted the 1992 Earth Summit, could mirror past drama, especially with the potential return of a Trump presidency. As the climate crisis intensifies, it's crucial for the world to revisit the 1992 commitment and shift from empty promises to real, transformative action.

The Constitution still thrives, let it show India the way

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT: President Droupadi Murmu will address a special session of Parliament at the Central Hall of the old Parliament building on Tuesday to mark 75 years of the Constitution to be attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla.

The Union government plans to commemorate the Constitution's adoption with a special joint sitting of Parliament, likely filled with self-congratulatory speeches. However, the speech by B.R. Ambedkar on November 25, 1949, before the Constitution's adoption, should resonate deeply. Ambedkar emphasized that the success of a Constitution depends not just on its design but on the character of those implementing it. He noted that a good Constitution could fail if the people working with it are unfit, while a flawed Constitution could succeed if those in charge are capable. The Constitution's effectiveness, he argued, hinges on how it is applied by successive generations.

The lacunae that B.R. Ambedkar identified

Dr. Ambedkar emphasized the absence of two essential values in Indian society: equality and fraternity. He pointed out that while India's political system would offer equality (one person, one vote), social and economic inequality would persist due to the existing social structure. He questioned how long this contradiction would continue. Ambedkar also stressed the importance of fraternity, which refers to the sense of brotherhood and unity among all Indians. He argued that the caste system, religious divisions, and lack of shared nationhood hindered this fraternity. Ambedkar believed that liberty, equality, and fraternity were interconnected; without fraternity, the other two values would not thrive, and the country would require enforcement to uphold them.

What has changed

Seventy-five years after the Constitution's adoption, progress has been made in achieving its aims, particularly in equality. The abolition of untouchability and the implementation of affirmative action through reservations have advanced social equality, though challenges in achieving full social and economic equality remain. The demand for more opportunities and a caste census highlights ongoing struggles. As for fraternity, while caste, creed, and regional identities continue to influence politics, a stronger sense of national unity has emerged, evident in events like national sports support and responses to conflicts such as the Kargil war and Galwan incident, indicating a growing sense of nationhood.

While India's caste reservation system has advanced equality, it may have undermined the principle of fraternity, which was central to Dr. Ambedkar's vision for the Constitution. Ambedkar envisioned fraternity as a means to erode caste hierarchies, with the resources of the privileged used to uplift the disadvantaged. However, the extension of reservations to

OBCs, as argued by sociologist Dipankar Gupta, has politicized caste, treating it as a permanent political resource rather than working towards its elimination. This approach, as Gupta suggests, entrenches caste in public life rather than fulfilling Ambedkar’s goal of its eradication.

Highs and worrying lows

The debate over India's Constitution continues, but it is noteworthy that despite initial opposition from groups like the RSS and Jana Sangh, the Constitution has endured and evolved over 75 years with 106 amendments. However, many of the institutions it established have been weakened, with pressures on Parliament, the judiciary, and the democratic spirit. Dr. Ambedkar’s warning about the need for active custodianship of the Constitution remains relevant, as India faces challenges to its democratic principles. As Dr. Ambedkar stated, independence brings responsibility, and now, 75 years later, it is time for India to address its shortcomings and strengthen the Constitution's ideals.

Moral stain

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

CONTEXT: The ICC's decision to issue arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant over alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Gaza represents a significant diplomatic and moral blow for Israel, which has been involved in military actions against the Palestinian enclave for more than 13 months.

The ICC has issued arrest warrants for Israeli leaders Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant in connection with the October 7, 2023, attack on Israel. While two Hamas leaders, Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif, were also targeted, both have been reportedly killed. Netanyahu has rejected the warrants, calling them "anti-Semitic," and Israel’s ally, the U.S., has condemned the ICC's decision. The ICC lacks the ability to arrest the accused, and until their capture, no trial can proceed. However, the warrants could hinder Netanyahu and Gallant's international travel, as 124 countries bound by the Rome Statute are obligated to arrest them if they enter their jurisdictions. The ICC claims there are reasonable grounds to believe that both leaders are criminally responsible for causing mass starvation and targeting medical facilities in Gaza, where the ongoing conflict has led to significant civilian casualties and displacement.

The International Court of Justice has urged Israel to prevent genocide in Gaza, and the UN Security Council has called for a ceasefire, but Israel continues its military actions with U.S. support, leading to more deaths and suffering. The ICC arrest warrants for Israeli leaders Netanyahu and Gallant reflect growing global criticism of Israel’s actions, further isolating the country diplomatically. Although the warrants may not result in arrests, they highlight Israel's moral and international challenges. Ending the war and pursuing diplomacy would be in Israel's best interest.

The agriculture welfare schemes, farmer focus

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT: Farmers, who are the backbone of the State’s economy, were the focus of the promises and policies made by two alliances, i.e. the INDIA coalition and the NDA. The INDIA alliance’s decisive victory in the State has sparked much debates on voting patterns and the factors of influence.

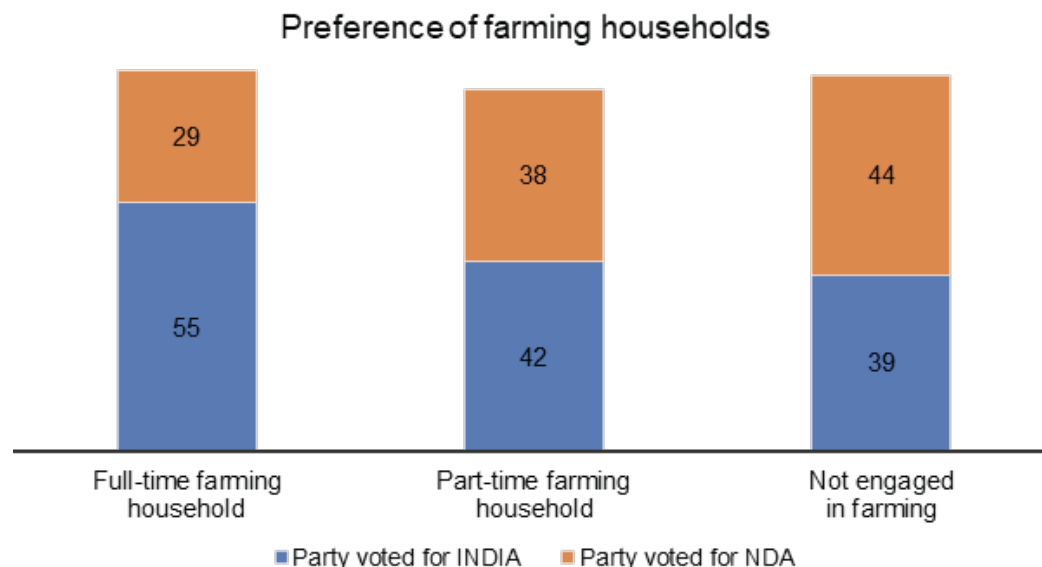


FIGURE: Column chart representation of the preference of votes by farming households in voting.

The Lokniti-CSDS survey explored farmers' views on agricultural welfare schemes and their impact on voting preferences. Full-time farmers showed greater satisfaction with state policies aimed at farming households, with 55 % favouring the INDIA alliance and 29 % supporting the NDA. Among part-time farmers, 42 % strongly supported the INDIA alliance, maintaining its lead over the NDA, but with a narrower margin of 4 %.

The welfare aspect

The data shows that beneficiaries of major agricultural schemes, including central government schemes like PM-KISAN, tended to favour the INDIA coalition over the NDA, suggesting no direct link between receiving welfare benefits and voting preferences. Among voters, 36 % benefited from PM-KISAN, while 26 % and 17 % benefited from PM-FBY and PM-KMY, respectively. However, a larger proportion of these beneficiaries voted for the INDIA coalition. The INDIA coalition receives nearly equal support from beneficiaries of state government schemes, such as 24 % of those benefiting from the Jharkhand Krishi Rin Mafi Yojana and 14 % from the Jharkhand Rajya Fasal Rahat Yojana. This suggests that the schemes have limited impact on farmers' voting behaviour in the state, as both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries show strong inclination toward the INDIA coalition.

On stubble burning and satellite data

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT: Delhi's air quality has struggled to recover from the severe pollution levels after Deepavali, despite the implementation of GRAP stage IV measures, the Supreme Court's intervention, and temporary actions by the Delhi government.

How are the fires counted?

Farm fires in nearby states, where farmers burn paddy stubble before the wheat-sowing season, are being blamed, although they are not the sole cause of the pollution. A controversy over accurately measuring the prevalence of these farm fires highlights the significant attention they are receiving. Farmers in Punjab and Haryana burn paddy stubble after harvesting rice to clear the fields for the next sowing season. This practice, though cost-effective and time-saving, contributes to air pollution in New Delhi, as winds carry the smoke and particulate matter from the fires to the city. The Indian government uses satellite data from NASA's Aqua and Suomi-NPP satellites to track these fires across the large farming area.

NASA launched the Aqua satellite in 2002, which is nearing the end of its designed lifespan. The Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) instrument onboard the Aqua satellite that tracks changes in the lower atmosphere, especially over land and the Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite (VIIRS) instrument onboard Suomi-NPP launched in 2011 are part of NASA's Earth Observing System. They pass over locations at 1:30 p.m. and 1:30 a.m. local time, capturing visible and infrared images to detect fires and smoke. Suomi-NPP's Ozone Mapping and Profiler Suite also helps track aerosol loads, aiding in the monitoring of smoke and air pollution.

What is the new controversy?

A senior scientist at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Centre reported 40% fewer farm fires than predicted in 2023, and that 2024 seemed to have the lowest number of fires in a decade. He suggested that efforts to reduce residue burning might be working or that farmers were burning paddy stubble after satellite overpass times, around 1:30 pm. Comparing data from Aqua, Suomi-NPP, and the South Korean GEO-KOMPSAT 2A satellites, he observed that smoke over Punjab and Haryana thickened after the Aqua and Suomi-NPP overpasses, implying later burning. Despite fewer fires indicated by the satellites, the air's aerosol levels remained consistent with previous years, suggesting the fires were happening later than the satellites detected.

Is the discrepancy real?

In 2020, the Indian government established the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) to address air quality issues in the NCR and surrounding areas. The CAQM has claimed that farm fires have decreased, despite evidence that farmers are timing their paddy stubble burning to avoid detection by NASA satellites. This issue was acknowledged in a March 7, 2024, meeting, where officials from the Haryana Space Applications Centre and National Remote Sensing Centre discussed farmers' awareness of satellite overpass timings. Additionally, the CAQM's claims about a 26.5% reduction in burnt areas in Punjab between 2022 and 2023 contradict data from the Punjab government and the Indian Agricultural Research Institute, which show an increase in burnt areas by 24 % and 15 %, respectively.

How is the government responding?

The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) was established to replace the Environmental Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority (EPCA) and was given more authority under the 2021 Act. However, it has faced criticism,

particularly from the Supreme Court, for failing to address air pollution caused by farm fires. The CAQM was expected to respond to allegations that it knew farmers were delaying stubble burning to avoid satellite detection. Despite claims by the CAQM that farm fires have decreased by 71 % in Punjab and 44 % in Haryana between 2020 and 2024, it has opposed the idea of retired judges overseeing efforts to combat stubble burning. In January 2024, the CAQM requested the NRSC to develop a standard protocol for measuring burnt areas, as current data is only available every five days from European Space Agency satellites.

Can Indian satellites help?

In a November 21 affidavit to the Supreme Court, the CAQM stated that ISRO plans to assess the usability of data from various satellites to track farm fires. ISRO experts believe satellites like INSAT-3DR (by India), GEO-KOMPSAT 2-AMI (South Korea), Meteosat-9, Feng Yun-4A/4B (China), and HIMAWARI-8 (Japan) cannot provide accurate fire counts, and their evaluation will take at least another month. The issue with INSAT-3DR is that its data resolution is too coarse. Although ISRO launched GISAT-1 in August 2021, its mission failed. ISRO also operates three RESOURCESAT satellites, with the RESOURCESAT 2A featuring improved cameras like LISS-3 (23.5 m resolution) and LISS-4 (5.8 m resolution), which provide better capabilities for detecting fires.

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) also operates three RESOURCESAT satellites, launched in 2003, 2011, and 2016, with similar payloads. Those in RESOURCESAT 2A have better features, however. The Linear Imaging Self Scanner (LISS) cameras 3 and 4, both of which 'see' in visible and near-infrared radiation; LISS-4 has a spatial resolution of 5.8 m and LISS-3, of 23.5 m. The Advanced Wide Field Sensor (AWiFS) camera detects similar radiation at an even lower resolution of 56 m.

The Constitution has always been secular both in spirit and in letter

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

On Constitution Day, November 26, 2016, Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh criticized the term "secularism," calling it the most misused concept in India. He claimed that the framers of the Constitution did not include "secular" and "socialist" because these values were already inherent in Indian civilization, suggesting of a misconception that secularism was only introduced during the Emergency. The framers of the Constitution crafted it against the backdrop of World War II and the Partition, both of which highlighted the dangers of divisive group identities. They aimed to create a republic that promised justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity for all, with a constitution that reflected these principles, providing reassurance to the diverse people of India.

A constitutional value

Secularism in the Indian Constitution is not just a matter of textual interpretation but a constitutional value aimed at managing India's diverse society while promoting national unity. The Constitution ensures equality and non-discrimination through various articles, such as Articles 14, 15, 16, and 325, and guarantees religious neutrality in state affairs, with provisions like Articles 27 and 28 protecting individuals from religious taxes or religious instruction in state-funded institutions. While the Constitution envisions equal treatment for all religions, it also includes specific provisions to regulate religious practices, such as Articles 17, 25(2)(b), and Article 48, which address issues like caste discrimination and cow slaughter. Overall, the Constitution upholds secularism by maintaining a neutral stance toward religion while regulating religious practices in a manner suited to modern society.

Debate over amendment

The original Indian Constitution, adopted on November 26, 1949, was not secular. The inclusion of the words "socialist" and "secular" in the Preamble by the 42nd Amendment in 1977 merely highlighted principles already embedded in the original text. The Preamble, drafted after the Constitution was approved, served as a mission statement of the republic's goals. During the Constituent Assembly debates on November 15, 1949, Professor K.T. Shah proposed including "secular, federal, socialist" in Article 1 to emphasize the secular nature of the state, citing the importance of preventing communalism and sectarianism. This discussion reflected a clear recognition of secularism as fundamental to the Constitution.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar rejected Professor K.T. Shah's proposal to include the words "secular, federal, socialist" in Article 1 of the Constitution. Ambedkar provided two reasons for his objection: First, he argued that the Constitution should not dictate specific social or economic policies, as these should be determined by the people according to changing

circumstances, preserving democratic freedom. Second, he deemed the amendment unnecessary because the socialist principles were already reflected in the Directive Principles of State Policy. Ambedkar's response focused primarily on economic aspects of the Constitution, leaving aside discussions on secularism and federalism, and emphasized that what was already included in the Constitution need not be reiterated.

Basic structure

In the Kesavananda Bharati case of 1973, the Supreme Court ruled that secularism is part of the Constitution's basic structure, and therefore beyond Parliament's power to amend. This was reaffirmed in the 1994 S.R. Bommai case, which dealt with the dismissal of BJP-ruled state governments after the Babri Masjid demolition. Despite this, the 42nd Amendment in 1977, during the Emergency, added the word "secular" to the Preamble, following Professor K.T. Shah's earlier suggestion. The 44th Amendment in 1978, after the Emergency, reversed many of the 42nd Amendment's changes but retained "secular" and "socialist" in the Preamble. The passage emphasizes that secularism is an integral part of the Constitution's basic structure and cannot be removed by any temporary parliamentary majority.



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