



THE PROBLEM OF PRINCIPLED DISTANCE: A NORMATIVE RECONSTRUCTION OF INDIAN SECULARISM

Surabhi Singha

Research Scholar, University of Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

This paper revisits the idea of principled distance as a central yet under-theorised concept in Indian secular thought. Moving beyond the binary between rigid separation and unbounded accommodation, the study argues that Indian secularism constitutes a distinctive normative framework grounded in context-sensitive yet principled engagement between state and religion. Rather than equating secularism with abstention, the concept of principled distance allows the state to intervene in, or support, religious practices when such engagement is justified by public reasons rooted in freedom, equality, and dignity. Through a qualitative and interpretive methodology grounded in normative political theory, the paper reconstructs principled distance as an ethical practice of public justification rather than as a descriptive account of policy. It critically engages with both liberal-separationist and postcolonial-genealogical critiques to clarify the internal architecture of the concept its understanding of neutrality as equal concern, its permissive stance toward differential treatment under conditions of historical inequality, and its insistence on public reason as a constraint on discretion. The paper develops a typology of engagement modes and a four-stage justificatory pathway identifying protected interests, ensuring accessibility of reasons, testing proportionality, and safeguarding internal dissenters to make the framework action-guiding. Analytically, the reconstruction demonstrates that principled distance is not a euphemism for flexibility but a disciplined method of reasoning about justice in plural societies. It thus transforms context-sensitivity from a weakness into a normative virtue grounded in reasoned respect. By rendering Indian secularism conceptually robust and normatively transparent, the paper positions it as a significant contribution to global debates on secularism, multiculturalism, and democratic justification under conditions of deep diversity.

| CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: | RESEARCH ARTICLE |
|---|------------------|
| Surabhi Singha Research Scholar, University of Delhi, India Email: singha.surabhi@gmail.com | |

Keywords: Indian Secularism; Principled Distance; Normative Political Theory; Public Reason; Equality; Recognition; Pluralism.

INTRODUCTION

Secularism has long occupied an uneasy position in political theory because it is simultaneously a normative project and a historically contingent settlement. In its classical European articulations, secularism crystallised through conflicts over ecclesiastical authority and the consolidation of modern state power, yielding doctrines of separation, toleration, and a “neutral” public sphere. Yet postcolonial and genealogical critiques have persuasively shown that these formulations are not universal templates but historically situated solutions that encode particular trajectories of state formation, religious organisation, and social conflict. Exporting them as normative benchmarks risks conceptual parochialism: what appears coherent as “separation” in one history can become normatively unpersuasive, or analytically unstable, in another. Indian secularism is precisely the site at which such instability becomes visible. It affirms equal citizenship and freedom of conscience, yet refuses a hard wall between religion and state; it constitutionally commits to non-discrimination, yet permits selective engagement with religious institutions through regulation, reform, and at times facilitative support.

This distinctive posture has generated a persistent double misreading. From a strict separationist standpoint, Indian secularism appears inconsistent because it does not treat religion as a domain that must be privatised or institutionally bracketed. Conversely, internal defences have sometimes relied on invocations of “context” and “pluralism” that do not adequately specify how context-sensitive governance can be disciplined by principle rather than degenerating into ad hoc discretion. These opposing readings are amplified in contemporary polemics, where secularism is alternately dismissed as a mask for majoritarian dominance or caricatured as an instrument of minority appeasement. What tends to disappear in this polarisation is the more theoretically demanding question that ought to organise scholarly inquiry: how should a democratic state justify its engagement with religion under conditions of deep diversity and entrenched social hierarchy, and what counts as “principled” in such justification?

It is within this problematic terrain that the idea of principled distance has emerged as the most influential conceptual attempt to capture Indian secularism’s normative distinctiveness. Principled distance rejects the equation of neutrality with uniform abstention and argues instead that the state may—and sometimes must—engage religion, so long as such engagement is justified by public reasons anchored in constitutional values and oriented towards liberty, equality, and dignity (Bhargava, 1998, 2010). Yet precisely because the concept is capacious, it is often deployed as a label rather than articulated as a doctrine with determinate criteria, a clear structure of reasons, and an operational grammar that can guide constitutional and policy reasoning. The wager of this paper is that principled distance can be defended as a coherent normative framework only if it is

reconstructed as a disciplined practice of public justification rather than treated as a descriptive gloss on fluctuating institutional behaviour.

Indian Secularism as a Theoretical Problem

Indian secularism becomes analytically difficult when it is treated as either (a) a defective approximation of separationist ideals, or (b) a culturally exceptional arrangement beyond normative evaluation. Both positions obscure the conceptual work that secularism must perform in a plural democracy. The first collapses the diversity of secular settlements into a single benchmark and then reads deviation as failure. The second immunises Indian secularism from critique by reducing it to “context,” as though context alone could generate legitimacy. A more rigorous approach is to treat Indian secularism as a normative project that confronts a distinctive configuration of pluralism: religion is embedded in associative life, social stratification often cross-cuts religious communities, and historical inequality shapes the capacity of citizens to exercise basic liberties. Under such conditions, the standard separationist response—abstention as neutrality—risks reproducing domination by leaving internal hierarchies intact and failing to protect vulnerable persons. Conversely, unbounded accommodation risks converting religious communities into quasi-sovereign units whose claims override constitutional commitments to equal citizenship.

The conceptual dilemma can be stated sharply: how can a secular state be context-sensitive without becoming arbitrary? This dilemma is not merely terminological. It is epistemic and moral because it concerns how public authority can be justified to citizens who do not share a comprehensive doctrine. If the state intervenes in religious practices, it risks appearing sectarian or paternalistic; if it refuses to intervene, it risks complicity in domination and exclusion. The familiar debate between “separation” and “accommodation” therefore misses the more fundamental question: what structure of reasons could make selective engagement legitimate, and what constraints ensure that engagement tracks constitutional values rather than partisan incentives?

This is the point at which principled distance becomes both promising and precarious. It is promising because it recognises that neutrality cannot be reduced to abstention in a society marked by unequal power relations. It is precarious because, without a clarified justificatory architecture, it can appear to license precisely the discretion it claims to discipline. In contemporary debates, the concept is often treated as a conclusion—this action is “principled distance,” that one is not—rather than as a method that explains how to move from constitutional values to justified forms of state engagement. The core problem, therefore, is not whether principled distance is rhetorically attractive, but whether it can be reconstructed as an intelligible normative standard capable of distinguishing legitimate engagement from unprincipled favoritism or abdication.

The Problem of Principled Distance

If principled distance is to function as more than a metaphor, it must overcome three interlinked deficits: conceptual ambiguity, justificatory under-specification, and institutional

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indeterminacy. Conceptually, “distance” must be clarified: it cannot mean estrangement from religion tout court, nor can it mean indiscriminate proximity to all faiths. It must refer to a calibrated relation whereby the state avoids identification with any comprehensive doctrine while retaining the capacity to engage religion for publicly justifiable ends. Justificatorily, “principled” must become more than an honorific. It must specify what reasons count, who bears the burden of offering them, and what constraints prevent selective engagement from becoming discretionary pragmatism. Institutionally, the framework must offer an operational grammar that can guide constitutional reasoning and policy design without collapsing into either rigid formula or unbounded discretion.

The central tension is thus between flexibility and constraint. The framework’s promise lies in its refusal of a one-size-fits-all separationist rule; its vulnerability lies in the possibility that “context” becomes a licence for ad hoc judgement. This paper reconstructs principled distance by treating it as a method of public justification rather than a mere description of outcomes. The question is not whether the state ever engages religion, but whether it can justify such engagement as consistent with equal citizenship, basic liberties, and dignity.

This reconstruction also helps respond to a familiar objection: that context-sensitivity is simply a euphemism for political expediency. The answer depends on distinguishing context as partisan contingency from context as morally salient structure. Principled distance, properly understood, is responsive not to the flux of political advantage but to stable normative features of cases—relative power, vulnerability, predictable patterns of harm—that any serious account of equal respect must consider. Moreover, it insists that departures from uniform treatment be articulated in publicly accessible reasons and subject to transparent review. In this way, discretion is transformed into a burden of justification. Where such reasons cannot be offered, or where they systematically ignore internal minorities, engagement fails not because it violates a separationist dogma but because it is unjustifiable to those subject to it.

Reconstructing Principled Distance as Public Justification

A reconstruction of principled distance can be rendered analytically usable by specifying both (a) its normative values and (b) its repertoire of engagement modes. The values most consistently implicit in the strongest formulations of the tradition include liberty of conscience, non-discrimination, anti-humiliation, capability expansion, and equal civic standing (Bhargava, 1998, 2010; Mahajan, 2002). These values define the ends that can justify state action touching religion. They also set limits: engagement that entrenches inequality, legitimates humiliation, or subordinates internal minorities violates the framework’s own rationale.

Correspondingly, “distance” must be treated as a calibration of engagement modes rather than a binary. The state may adopt positions ranging from disestablishment and withdrawal to accommodation, facilitative support, or regulatory intervention, depending on what constitutional goods are at stake. The point is not to normalise intervention, but to recognise that different contexts generate different moral demands. In some contexts, withdrawal may best secure equal standing; in

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others, intervention may be required to protect vulnerable persons or dismantle entrenched hierarchies. This plural repertoire makes the concept action-guiding without treating it as an algorithm.

To render the framework operational, the paper proposes a repeatable justificatory pathway, sized to constitutional reasoning. The first step is to identify the protected interest and the relevant harms: does the practice implicate liberty of conscience, equal standing, non-discrimination, or dignity? The second step is to test the accessibility of reasons: can the state justify its action by appealing to civic goods that all reasonable citizens can evaluate, rather than to confessional authority (Rawls, 1993)? The third step is proportionality: is the chosen measure necessary, and are there less restrictive alternatives that would secure the same civic goods with less intrusion into associative freedom? The fourth step is an internal-minorities check: does the measure predictably entrench or reduce domination within the group (Okin, 1999; Menon, 2012)?

This pathway does not eliminate disagreement, nor should it. Its function is to discipline disagreement by forcing contestation to occur at the level of reasons rather than slogans. It makes explicit what is often implicit: that secular legitimacy depends not on avoiding all contact with religion, but on whether coercive public power can be justified to citizens as free and equal. The reconstructed framework thereby clarifies why principled distance is neither mere accommodation nor disguised majoritarianism. It is a normative attempt to govern religious diversity through reasoned constraint, under constitutional commitments to equality and dignity.

Implications: Multiple Secularisms and the Indian Contribution

The reconstruction offered here also situates Indian secular thought within broader comparative debates about multiple secularisms. Secular regimes historically combine elements of disestablishment, accommodation, and regulation in varying proportions; what unifies them is not institutional uniformity but the ambition to govern religious diversity within modern political authority (Casanova, 2011; Stepan, 2011). Treating India as either an aberration or an imperfect copy misunderstands this comparative field. Indian secularism can be understood as a distinctive normative model that seeks liberal-democratic ends through calibrated engagement rather than strict abstention. Its contribution is to show that a democracy may have duties of engagement—protective, reformist, or facilitative—so long as such engagement is disciplined by publicly accessible reasons and oriented toward equal citizenship.

At the same time, genealogical critiques remain a salutary warning. Secular governance can reconstitute religion through regulation, defining permissible forms of religiosity and delegating authority in ways that are never neutral (Asad, 2003). The reconstructed account does not deny this; it takes it as a reason to insist on public justification, transparency, and review. Principled distance is defensible precisely to the extent that it acknowledges the regulatory power of the secular state and constrains it through reasons that can be contested in public.

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The analysis also underscores a crucial boundary: principled distance is not viable without institutional practices that sustain justificatory discipline. Constitutional adjudication, reason-giving, and transparent standards are not optional accessories; they are constitutive of what makes distance “principled” (Austin, 1966). Without them, the framework risks collapsing into the very discretionary pragmatism it rejects. Thus, the long-term value of principled distance lies as much in its demand for justificatory practices as in any particular settlement it yields.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology anchored in normative political theory and conceptual analysis to reconstruct “principled distance” as a defensible framework within Indian secular thought. Rather than treating secularism as a variable to be measured through policy outcomes, the study approaches it as a contested concept whose meaning is produced through arguments, justificatory practices, and theoretical disputes. Methodologically, the paper therefore prioritises the clarification of concepts, the reconstruction of justificatory logics, and the evaluation of normative coherence an approach that is standard in analytic and interpretive traditions of political theory when the object of inquiry is a political idea rather than an empirical programme (Rawls, 1993; Habermas, 2008).

The primary method employed is conceptual reconstruction, which proceeds by identifying the central claims, internal distinctions, and normative premises that constitute “principled distance” in the literature, and by refining them into an explicit structure of reasons. This involves reading the concept not merely as a descriptive label for India’s religion–state relations but as an ethical doctrine that claims to regulate permissible forms of state engagement with religion. The study reconstructs this doctrine by isolating its core components such as the redefinition of neutrality beyond strict separation, the permissibility of differential treatment under conditions of substantive inequality, and the insistence on public justification and by examining how these components are defended, qualified, and revised in theoretical debate (Bhargava, 1998, 2010; Mahajan, 2002). The aim is to produce what might be called a “best interpretation” of the concept: an interpretation that is faithful to the strongest arguments in the tradition while also making the framework sufficiently determinate to serve as a guide to reasoning.

A second methodological layer is interpretive contextualisation, which treats Indian secularism as an idea developed under historically specific conditions plural religious life, postcolonial state formation, and entrenched social hierarchies without reducing it to those conditions. This interpretive move is important because “principled distance” explicitly claims that context matters, but also insists that context must be filtered through principle. To avoid collapsing into sociological description, the paper uses contextualisation as a way to identify the morally salient features that secular theory must address such as domination, vulnerability, and the reality of internal hierarchies while maintaining the normative ambition of producing reasons that can be publicly defended to free and equal citizens (Asad, 2003; Chatterjee, 2004; Kaviraj, 2010).

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In this sense, the methodology is neither purely abstract nor purely empirical; it is a theory-driven form of interpretation that treats context as the site where principles must be specified rather than abandoned.

The corpus for analysis is constituted by key contributions in Indian secular theory and adjacent global debates on secularism, pluralism, and public reason. The Indian theoretical anchor points include arguments that articulate principled distance and its justificatory logic (Bhargava, 1998, 2010) and scholarship that foregrounds how equality, diversity, and discrimination complicate classical neutrality (Mahajan, 2002). These are placed in structured dialogue with major critical and postcolonial accounts that interrogate the secular as a historically produced form of governance (Asad, 2003), as well as writings that examine the mediation of popular claims and religious identities in postcolonial democratic life (Chatterjee, 2004; Nandy, 1998). To strengthen conceptual precision and avoid conceptual exceptionalism, the study further draws on comparative and theoretical debates on multiple secularisms (Casanova, 2011; Stepan, 2011), liberal multiculturalism and recognition (Kymlicka, 1995; Taylor, 1994), and liberal-democratic requirements of public justification (Rawls, 1993; Habermas, 2008). The method here is not to treat these texts as interchangeable authorities, but to use them as a comparative mirror to clarify what principled distance claims that separationist models cannot, and what genealogical critiques reveal that normative defences must confront.

Because the paper is theory-centred, it also specifies its standards of validity in theoretical terms. The reconstruction is evaluated through three criteria: fidelity, coherence, and action-guidance. Fidelity concerns whether the reconstruction accurately represents the strongest formulations in the tradition rather than caricaturing opponents or selecting only convenient claims (Bhargava, 1998, 2010). Coherence concerns whether the framework can hold together its central commitments substantive equality, liberty of conscience, non-domination, and plural respect without contradiction. Action-guidance concerns whether the concept can generate disciplined reasoning in hard cases by clarifying burdens of justification and permissible modes of state engagement, even when reasonable disagreement persists (Rawls, 1993). These criteria are particularly important for a concept like principled distance, which risks being dismissed as rhetorical unless it can be shown to constrain discretion through publicly reviewable reasons.

Finally, the methodology is explicit about scope and limitations. The study does not claim to provide a comprehensive empirical audit of Indian religion–state relations, nor does it adjudicate specific contemporary controversies. It treats empirical cases, where referenced, only as illustrative prompts for conceptual clarification rather than as evidentiary tests of causal hypotheses. This boundary is deliberate: the paper’s contribution is to strengthen the conceptual and normative infrastructure that any empirical or legal analysis would presuppose. At the same time, the article acknowledges that conceptual work is not value-neutral; it is oriented by a commitment to democratic justification, equal civic standing, and the protection of vulnerable persons within and across communities commitments that are widely defensible within liberal-democratic political

morality and constitutional theory (Rawls, 1993; Habermas, 2008). By combining conceptual reconstruction with interpretive contextualisation, the methodology aims to produce a theoretically rigorous account of principled distance that is both faithful to Indian secular thought and relevant to global debates on secularism under conditions of deep pluralism.

CONCLUSION

Any adequate conclusion to an inquiry into principled distance must return to the two suspicions that shadow Indian secularism: that its distinctiveness is merely a euphemism for inconsistency, and that its flexibility is indistinguishable from opportunism. The analysis in this paper has argued that both suspicions have force if principled distance is left at the level of slogan, but that neither is decisive once the concept is reconstructed as an ethical practice of public justification organised around determinable values and a limited repertoire of engagement modes. Read in this reconstructed way, Indian secularism does not present itself as a failed approximation of separationist ideals, nor as a *sui generis* cultural artefact immune to critique. It emerges instead as a demanding, but potentially coherent, attempt to reconcile three normative imperatives that are central to plural democracies: to protect basic liberties of conscience and association; to secure substantive equality under conditions of historical hierarchy; and to respect the associational spaces in which diverse ways of life are sustained.

The paper's central move has been to relocate the distinctiveness of Indian secular thought from institutional eccentricity to conceptual architecture. Against the view that neutrality must mean uniform abstention, principled distance redefines neutrality substantively as equal concern and non-domination, thereby legitimating differential treatment where it is necessary to repair background injustice or protect vulnerable persons. Against accounts that treat group claims as unproblematic bearers of recognition, the framework installs an internal-minorities check: state engagement that predictably entrenches the power of gatekeepers over dissenters within a community fails in its own terms. And against genealogical critiques that expose the secular as a hidden mode of regulation, principled distance insists that any state action touching religion be defended for publicly accessible reasons that appeal to civic goods freedom, equality, dignity rather than to the authority of particular doctrines. These three moves do not eliminate tension, but they do specify the terrain on which disagreements can be argued out without collapsing into accusations of mere bias or betrayal.

Analytically, the article has shown that principled distance can be rendered more than a metaphor by disaggregating it into a family of reasons and a modest justificatory pathway. The identification of key values liberty of conscience, non-discrimination, anti-humiliation, capability expansion, and equal civic standing anchors the framework in a recognisable liberal-democratic morality while allowing room for postcolonial and feminist insights about power and vulnerability. The typology of engagement modes disestablishment, accommodation, facilitative support, regulatory intervention, and withdrawal gives content to "distance" as a calibrated relation rather than a binary separation. And the proposed four-stage pathway locating protected interests and

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harms, ensuring the accessibility of reasons, testing proportionality, and applying an internal-minorities check offers a repeatable sequence through which officials and courts might organise their reasoning. None of these steps produces automatic answers; they are designed to discipline judgment, not to substitute for it. But precisely because they are public and contestable, they transform context-sensitivity from a cover for discretion into a normative demand to attend to morally salient features of cases.

At the same time, the reconstruction has brought into sharper focus the residual tensions and limits of the framework. Principled distance inherits the difficult task of balancing liberty, equality, and pluralism without a stable lexical ordering among them. This means that in some circumstances reasonable interpreters, applying the same schema, will diverge on whether a measure is justified. The framework addresses this not by promising unanimity but by raising the standard of disagreement: citizens and officials are now required to argue about which harms are most pressing, which alternatives are least restrictive, and how internal domination can be minimised, rather than trading unexamined intuitions about “tradition” or “sentiment.” There remains a risk, however, that the justificatory vocabulary may become the preserve of legal and intellectual elites, thereby reintroducing asymmetries of voice under the guise of public reason. If principled distance is to function as a genuinely democratic practice, its language and tests must be appropriatable by social movements, grassroots actors, and internal dissenters not only by courts and specialists. That is less a conceptual flaw than a political challenge, but it marks a clear boundary to what normative reconstruction alone can achieve.

The analysis also suggests that principled distance is best understood not as an Indian anomaly but as one articulation within a broader family of “multiple secularisms.” When set alongside separationist, establishmentarian, and accommodationist regimes elsewhere, its contribution lies in making explicit the thought that a democratic state may have duties of engagement towards religion duties to reform, to protect, or to enable so long as such engagement is disciplined by publicly shareable reasons and oriented towards securing the basic structure of equal citizenship. In that sense, the concept is at once locally rooted and potentially exportable: other polities grappling with deep diversity and entrenched inequality may find in the framework a set of questions and tests that are worth asking, even if their answers differ. This does not mean that principled distance can be uncritically universalised; its plausibility depends on background conditions, including constitutional commitments to rights and a political culture in which public justification has some purchase. But it does mean that Indian secular thought has more to offer global theory than an example of “incomplete” secularisation.

Finally, the conclusion to which the argument points is not that principled distance is a finished doctrine that only needs application, but that it is a promising normative project that demands ongoing refinement. Conceptual reconstruction here performs a double function. It exposes and rejects lazy invocations of “principle” where no reasons are given that could speak to all those subject to coercion. And it equips critics and defenders alike with a more precise set of

tools for evaluating particular claims: asking, case by case, whether the reasons offered honour liberty of conscience, reduce rather than exacerbate domination, respect the standing of internal dissenters, and do so by means proportionate to the harms at stake. If Indian secularism is to resist both cynicism and nostalgia, it will be by living up to this practice of justification rather than by clinging to any institutional formula. Revisiting principled distance, in the way attempted here, is therefore less about settling a debate than about reconstituting it on more demanding terms under which secularism is judged, not by its ability to suppress religious conflict, but by its capacity to make the exercise of public power answerable to those who live with deep and enduring difference.

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