



SPEECH

by

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(Former Chief Justice of India)
Chairperson, NHRC

on

“Human Rights Day, 2014”

Organized

by

National Human Rights Commission

at

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Hon'ble Speaker, Lok Sabha, Smt. Sumitra Mahajan, Members of the NHRC, Chairpersons and Members of other National Commissions and State Human Rights Commissions, Officers of the Central and State Governments, Representative of the UNIC and other UN agencies, Diplomats, Members of the Media and Civil Society, Distinguished Invitees, Officers and Staff of the NHRC, Ladies and Gentlemen,

2. I am grateful to the Hon'ble Speaker for having spared her precious time to grace this occasion. In a public life spanning over three decades, Smt. Mahajan has scaled unprecedented heights of accomplishment and has set an example for all women of the country. She holds the unique distinction of being the only woman Member of Parliament to get elected eight consecutive times from the same constituency (Indore). She has handled very important responsibilities in the government. She has been an active parliamentarian and has served on various important parliamentary committees. Her presence today is a source of inspiration for all of us and is indicative of her concern for and commitment to human rights.

3. On behalf of NHRC, I extend a warm welcome to all of you on this solemn occasion. *Human Rights Day*, as is widely known, signifies the adoption of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. The Declaration is an embodiment of the aspirations of people across the world for ensuring equality, dignity and peaceful coexistence. The NHRC has been observing this day each year with a view to renew and reiterate its unwavering commitment to the cause of human rights of the people of this country.

4. Since its establishment on 12 October 1993, the Commission has consistently striven to ensure the protection of civil and political rights as well as economic, social, and cultural rights. The Commission has also made significant contributions to mainstreaming a human rights-centered approach in the government policy and programmes as well as creating human rights awareness and sensitization among public authorities and civil society.

5. For the realization of economic, social and cultural rights, the Commission has taken important initiatives on the issues of

right to health, education, rights of women, children, persons with disabilities and displaced persons, among others. Simultaneously, the Commission has endeavoured to promote human rights culture in the country by taking up with concerned authorities, the introduction of human rights education in the school and university curriculum.

6. It is also involved in promoting human rights education and creating awareness generation on human rights by organizing programmes for various sections of society. These programmes are especially focused on government officials, police and security forces, field functionaries, representatives of educational institutions and members of civil society so as to encourage them to make a rights-based approach central to their work and activities. During 2013-14, the Commission approved 131 training programmes on human rights and related issues, of which 108 training programmes were successfully organised. The Commission also continues to organise its coveted month-long Summer and Winter Internship Programmes for University students from across the country.

7. Furthermore, several seminars/conferences on human rights issues are being regularly organized. During 2013-14, the Commission organized National Conferences on issues like *manual scavenging and sanitation, mental health workshop, silicosis, leprosy, juvenile justice, and prison reforms*. The NHRC is particularly concerned about the rights of women, given the increase in the instances of violence against women in recent times.

8. Recently, NHRC, India made a written submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). An oral statement was also made by the Commission before the Committee, highlighting among other things, the high incidence of trafficking of women and girls, poor girl child and maternal health, widespread misuse of diagnostic techniques leading to a skewed child sex ratio, as well as the gender gaps in school enrolment.

9. Enquiring into complaints from citizens of the country whose rights have been infringed and the investigation of issues of which the NHRC has taken *suo motu* cognizance, is an important activity of the Commission. There has been a

surge in the number of complaints received by the Commission over the years, which has steadily grown from 496 complaints in the year of its establishment to 98,136 fresh cases in the financial year 2013-14, with action having been completed in 92,292 cases. The phenomenal increase in the number of complaints is indicative of the growing awareness of their rights among the people as also their growing faith in the Commission to obtain the required relief.

10. Apart from recommending punitive action against the guilty public servants, the Commission has recommended crores of Rupees as relief to victims and their next of kin. During 2013-14, the Commission recommended payment of interim relief in 443 cases amounting to Rs.151.953 million by concerned responsible government agencies. It is indeed, also satisfying to note that in almost all the cases, the Government authorities have complied with our recommendations for providing relief and initiating punitive action against errant officials.

11. The Commission also sends its own investigation teams to make spot enquiries. Last year, in 19 cases, the NHRC sent out

its own investigation teams for enquiries. These included enquiry into relief and rehabilitation and measures for the riot-affected people of Muzzafarnagar in Uttar Pradesh. The reports and recommendations of its teams, based on their field enquiries, were subsequently sent to the State Government for implementation.

12. Despite its limited resources, it has been a constant endeavour of the Commission to make itself more accessible and reach out to people from all walks of life, including those living in the remotest parts of the country. The NHRC has accordingly, been holding **Camp Commission Sittings** in state capitals and other cities to ensure speedy disposal of human rights cases.

13. It has also been holding **Open Hearings**, on complaints pertaining to atrocities or denial of rights to persons belonging to Scheduled Castes. During the past year, the Commission organized its Camp Sittings and Open Hearings in Chhattisgarh, Manipur, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and most recently, in Chandigarh to hear pending cases from Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and the Union Territory of Chandigarh.

14. During these Camp Sitzings and Open Hearings, Commission holds detailed meetings with the government officials, media and local NGOs working on various human rights concerns in these States. Such instances also serve the purpose of sensitizing the government officials on human rights issues. At the same time, the Commission is able to assess on ground, the human rights situation.

15. In addition, the Commission has also been undertaking visits to prisons, *anganwadi* centres, primary schools, and primary healthcare centres, among others, to assess their condition and identify the effectiveness of the various **Flagship Programmes** of the Government on the ground, so as to see the availability of basic services to the common people. The Commission is assisted by Special Rapporteurs, appointed for this purpose.

16. The NHRC uses the full range of its instrumentalities to monitor the responsiveness of public servants to human rights concerns. It has constituted a number of **Core Groups** of experts on various important subjects. It consults these Core Groups on key human rights issues, such as, disability, healthcare, mental health, right to food, protection and welfare

of elderly persons and Silicosis. The NHRC, India also has a **Focal Point for Human Rights Defenders**, who can be approached round the clock in the event of potential or extant threats to the personal life or liberty of human rights defenders in the discharge of their work.

17. Having evolved a **stringent reporting system and guidelines**, the Commission, in 2013-14, continued to monitor custodial deaths and rapes, deaths in alleged fake encounters etc. as well as living conditions in prisons, with special attention to aspects of over-crowding, medical care for prisoners and the sensitization of prison staff to the rights of inmates. The Commission continued to stress the need for systemic reforms within the police and in prisons.

18. To further strengthen human rights protection within the country, the Commission has also written to State Governments regarding the establishment of **State Human Rights Commissions** where these do not exist as yet and to strengthen those that are already functioning. So far, **24 States** have set up State Human Rights Commissions.

19. To create human rights awareness, the Commission continues to bring out various publications such as its monthly newsletters and annual journal, both in English and Hindi. It is also trying to get important human rights conventions translated into regional languages so as to spread the message of human rights far and wide.

20. At the International level too, the Commission continues to play an active role. The NHRC, India is an `A' grade Accredited NHRI and member of the International Coordinating Committee (ICC) of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, and a Founder Member of the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions (APF).

21. In 2014, the Commission successfully hosted two important international meetings in New Delhi, including the *Asia Pacific Forum Master Trainers' Meeting and Human Rights Educators' Workshop* as well as the *19th Annual Meeting of the Asia Pacific Forum of NHRIs*. A key aspect of the 19th Annual Meeting of the APF was the adoption of the APF Strategic Plan 2015-2020 as well as detailed discussions on the implementation of the *APF Action Plan on Women and*

Girls' Human Rights in the Asia-Pacific, on which the NHRIs of India, Jordan and Mongolia made presentations.

22. The phenomenal range of activities of the Commission has been aimed at the protection of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. It has directed its efforts for the eradication of the abhorrent practices of bonded and child labour and manual scavenging as well as protection of the rights of children, women, and other marginalized sections of society. The Commission has also undertaken work in areas such as the right to health, food, and education, and the rights of the differently-abled and elderly.

23. The Commission regards the government and civil society as indispensable partners in the fight against human rights violations and key to building an energetic and vibrant democracy. Governments must make certain that the policies and programmes devised by them have a strong human rights component to ensure a truly beneficial and equitable utilization of national and human resources. As for members of the civil society, it is the duty of each individual to respect the rights of

the 'other', particularly those who are most vulnerable to the vagaries of social and economic forces.

24. On this significant day therefore, let us pledge to re-dedicate ourselves to achieve a just and equitable society through upholding the principles and ideals enshrined in our Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for the protection and promotion of human dignity and the inviolable rights of all citizens of the country.

Thank you.
