



# Need imaginative leadership to build culture of human rights

**T**WENTY five years is too short a period to judge the performance of an organisation in a country of the size and diversity of a continent. But by celebrating its Silver Jubilee, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has attempted to assert its existence and relevance as a human rights watchdog in India.

PM Narendra Modi on October 12 praised the organisation for its role in nation-building and for becoming the voice of the deprived.

In 1993, when the PV Narasimha Rao government took the initiative to set up a national human rights body, India was under tremendous pressure from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch for alleged rights violations in the Northeast and Jammu and Kashmir.

Besides creating our own human rights watchdog, the move was aimed at blunting western criticism of India's poor records in protecting human rights as the issue was being used to embarrass New Delhi at various forums.

Twenty five years on, situations have changed and India is no longer a diplomatic push over. Now it needs the NHRC more for protection of human rights than dealing with criticism by foreign governments and organisations.

The NHRC has accom-



## OBITER DICTA

BY SATYA PRAKASH

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plished a lot since its inception. During the current year it has received 66,188 complaints till September. The fact that it received more than a lakh complaints each in 2013, 2014 and 2015 and over 96,000 and 82,000 in 2016 and 2017, respectively, is testimony to people's growing faith in the NHRC.

It has made notable positive contributions in the fields of prison reforms, issuing guidelines on custodial deaths and rapes and making interventions in certain cases.

Its efforts have also been recognized at the international level as it retained its 'A' status of accreditation with the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) for the fourth consecutive term of five years.

The 'A' status is conferred only on national human rights bodies fully compliant with the UN-mandated Paris prin-

ciples after a rigorous review process every five years.

But unfortunately, the NHRC seems mostly busy issuing notices to various authorities for lapses. It's time for it to work towards building a culture of human rights in India which can enhance its acceptance among the masses.

Before TN Seshan took over as Chief Election Commissioner in 1990, people thought the Election Commission was a government department. Similar was the case with the Comptroller and Auditor General of India before Vinod Rai assumed office in 2008. The two men changed people's perception and established the independence of EC and CAG as constitutional bodies.

Though the NHRC as a statutory body has limited powers, an imaginative leadership can make the NHRC all the more relevant.

What is needed is taking rights discourse to schools, colleges, government departments and building partnerships with human rights organizations. There are several issues such as lack of jurisdiction over Jammu and Kashmir and its composition which lacks representation from the civil society. NHRC Chairman Justice HL Dattu had once described the watchdog as a "toothless tiger". It's high time the NHRC is given more powers to enforce its orders.