

**ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA,
SHRI RAM NATH KOVIND
ON THE OCCASION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DAY**

New Delhi, December 10, 2021

I am delighted to be here among you to celebrate the 73rd Human Rights Day. On this day in 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On that day, we can confidently say, humankind accomplished a higher stage in its moral evolution.

The Declaration spells out a series of rights and freedoms every single human being is entitled to. These are inalienable rights, dependent solely on the fact that each person belongs to humanity, irrespective of ethnicity, gender, nationality, religion, language and other divisions. With the Declaration, the global community made a formal recognition of basic human dignity though it has been part of our spiritual traditions for millennia.

The committee that drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights included representatives from around the world including India. As you know, it was Hansa-ben Mehta, a freedom fighter and a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, who made a highly significant contribution in rephrasing the draft Preamble of the Declaration.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Universal Declaration was an outcome of a human rights movement prompted by the Second World War. In India, meanwhile, it was the colonial rule that had prompted the demand for basic rights much earlier in our freedom struggle. It was way back in 1895 that the Swaraj Bill articulated human rights or fundamental rights in modern legal language as part of its vision of a constitution for India.

The notion gained traction with masses after 1931 when the Indian National Congress passed a resolution specifically devoted to fundamental rights. While this Karachi session of the Congress was

chaired by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the 'Resolution on Fundamental Rights and Economic Changes' was drafted with key suggestions from Mahatma Gandhi. The resolution noted that any constitution of India should provide "fundamental rights of the people" including freedom of speech and religion. Two months later, Gandhiji said that the resolution on fundamental rights was the most important resolution, and it showed what kind of swaraj he wanted to achieve. Further, the Father of the Nation noted [and I quote]: "That swaraj is the poor man's swaraj or Ramarajya. Rama symbolized justice and equity, Rama symbolized truth and charity." [unquote]

These ideals also inspired the framers of the Constitution. Moreover, the sub-committee on fundamental rights was headed by Sardar Patel. Another coincidence was that the sub-committee included among its members Hansa Mehta, who was also participating in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights around the same time. The Preamble of our Constitution stresses upon Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. To my mind, the four words beautifully sum up the whole range of human rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The human rights discourse is justifiably centred on rights, but in India we have always understood, as Gandhiji often reiterated, that rights and duties are two sides of the same coin. Moreover, rights of individuals are not held to be absolute but have to be aligned with social context. In the Constituent Assembly debates, Sardar Patel had insisted on a balance between civil rights and society's own rights for the sake of order. Dr B. R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Constitution, was also of the same mind. Responding at length to criticisms, he said [and I quote]: "What the Draft Constitution has done is that instead of formulating fundamental rights in absolute terms and depending upon our Supreme Court to come to the rescue of Parliament by inventing the doctrine of police power, it permits the State directly to impose limitations upon the fundamental rights." [unquote] It is this delicate balancing that has ensured the middle path for the Republic.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The theme of this year's Human Rights Day is 'Equality'. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration states, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Equality is the very soul of human rights. While non-discrimination is the first condition for absolute respect for human dignity, the world is beset with countless prejudices. They, unfortunately, hinder the full realisation of individuals' potential, and thus are not in the interest of society as a whole. Human Rights Day is the ideal occasion for us to ponder collectively and find ways to overcome such prejudices that only hinder the progress of humanity.

On this day, the world should also debate and discuss the 'Right to a Healthy Environment and Climate Justice'. The degradation of nature is leading to irreversible changes in climate and we are already witnessing its harmful impact. The world is waking up to the harsh reality, but it is yet to build the resolve to make decisive change. We owe it to our children that we save Mother Nature from the worst effects of industrialisation. The time is running out. I am glad that India has taken initiatives at home as well as at the recently held global climate conference, which will go a long way in restoring the health of the planet. Especially commendable is India's leadership in the International Solar Alliance and a series of measures to promote green energy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The humanity is grappling with the worst pandemic in the history. While the pandemic is not yet over, and the virus seems to be one step ahead of humankind, the world has so far responded to it by placing our trust in science and in global partnership. Though the pandemic affects the humanity universally, it is also seen that it has disproportionately devastating impact on the vulnerable sections of society. In this context, India, despite the obvious challenges, has been able to save millions of lives by adopting a policy of free and universal availability of vaccine. With the biggest vaccination exercise in history, the Government has also been able to provide protection against the virus to nearly a billion people. I congratulate doctors, scientists and all other 'Corona Warriors' for their heroic efforts to uphold people's Right to Life and Right to Health.

In this battle with this invisible enemy, there have been multiple setbacks. During some of the more difficult times, institutions of the government tried their best to respond to a situation for which no amount of preparation could have been sufficient. The National Human Rights Commission, with its deep concern for the rights of the vulnerable and marginalised sections of society affected by the pandemic, issued several advisories, which helped in improving our response. The NHRC has worked with other stakeholders including civil society, media and individual activists to strengthen human rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's occasion presents us with an opportunity to reflect upon what it means to be a human being, and our role in enhancing the basic dignity of humankind. Our rights are our shared responsibility. I congratulate Justice Shri Arun Kumar Mishra, all NHRC members, Special Rapporteurs, and Special Monitors on Human Rights Day. I also congratulate all state-level rights commissions and their heads and members. My best wishes to all of you.

Thank you,
Jai Hind!