

**ADDRESS BY THE HON'BLE PRESIDENT OF INDIA
SMT DROUPADI MURMU
ON THE OCCASION OF INAUGURATION OF
28TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AND BIENNIAL
CONFERENCE OF ASIA PACIFIC FORUM OF NATIONAL HUMAN
RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS**

New Delhi, September 20, 2023

I am really happy to inaugurate the annual general meeting and biennial conference of the Asia Pacific Forum on Human Rights. When it comes to human rights, I get inspired to talk about this concept which is ever evolving, dynamic and quite close to my heart in my public life. As humankind grows morally and spiritually, the definition of human rights gets further evolved.

What gives me immense satisfaction is the fact that this concept is deeply rooted in Indian civilisation. The world saw the first glimpse of it when, after massive destruction caused by the two successive World Wars, the United Nations General Assembly came up with a formulation “all men are born free and equal” as the beginning of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). It was then India’s representative, Hansaben Mehta, a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and freedom fighter, who suggested changing it to “all human beings are born free and equal”. Her change of one word expanded the notion of rights.

Mahatma Gandhi’s life and thoughts were also critical in shaping the draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He influenced the human rights discourse. It was under his influence that the notion of human rights came to be expanded from basic necessities of life to dignity of life as well. As many of you know, on June 7, 1893, Gandhi was robbed of his dignity when he was thrown out of the first class compartment of the train at Pietermaritzburg in South Africa on account of racial discrimination. He was a changed man then and went on to inspire millions to fight for their rights and dignity.

Similarly, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar too was an ardent champion of human rights. He taught the depressed classes to stand for their rights and live with dignity. He also led from the front in shaping the Constitution of India which is not only aligned with the modern concept of rights, liberty and justice but also deeply rooted in the Indian ethos that sees the world as one family– “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”, the echo of which resonated during the recently concluded G20 Summit.

Our Constitution adopted universal adult franchise right, since the inception of the Republic, and enabled us to usher in numerous silent revolutions, in the field of gender justice, and protection of life and dignity. We ensured a minimum of 33 percent reservation for women in local bodies’ elections. What is more, in a pleasant co-incident, a proposal to provide similar reservation for women in the state assemblies and national Parliament, is taking a shape now. It will be the most transformative revolution, in our times for gender justice.

Over the years, the government has also launched a number of ambitious schemes to ensure basic facilities like housing, toilets, education and health facilities and thus protect the dignity of the poor. I come from a background where I know how privation, poverty and illiteracy make life miserable, with economic and social disparities which are no less violative of human rights as any other form of discrimination.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Asia Pacific Forum for Human Rights comprises 26 nations of the region. Most of the nations that formed this grouping are historically and culturally inter-connected. Many of them share heritage and values that combine to make this region distinctly different from the rest of the world. These member nations have coordinated with one another to improve the living conditions of human beings. Since 1996, when this Forum was formed, the group of countries has travelled reasonably far together to achieve its objective. But we still have a long way to go.

Here, I would like to draw your attention to the historical experience of India with democratic values and individual rights. Much before the western world got acquainted with the concept of equal human rights through Magna Carta, a revered sage and philosopher from southern India, Basavanna, promoted the concept of individual liberty and equality. He created an assembly of people which was called “Anubhava Mantapa” where people irrespective of their class and gender would participate and determine their collective fate. Similarly, the concept of a Republic may appear modern but nearly 2,800 years ago, India had the world’s first people’s representative government in Vaishali. I am referring to history only to point out that India and other nations of this Asia Pacific Region are civilisationally protectors of human rights. We are also ready to learn from the best practices in other parts of the world to improve human rights which, I believe, is an ongoing project. This Forum has a great role to play in evolving an international consensus through deliberation and consultation with human rights institutions and stakeholders all over the world. And, I know that all of you are doing it in right earnest.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was just looking at the list of the conferences this Forum had held in the past. What is particularly pleasing is that in the post-pandemic phase, you are holding this Conference in person after a gap of three years. I am told that the Conference is being attended by nearly 100 foreign delegates. Let us ponder for a moment the causes of the pandemic and natural disasters that have been taking place all around us. Let us also ponder over the challenges of climate change that have been threatening the very existence of the planet.

Human beings are as good a creator as a destroyer. According to scientific studies, this planet has entered the phase of sixth extinction where man-made destruction, if not stopped, will be the undoing of not only the human race but also the other lives on the earth. In this context, I would urge you not to treat the issue of human rights in isolation and pay equal attention to nursing Mother Nature which is deeply wounded by the indiscretions of human beings. In India, we

believe that every particle of the universe is a manifestation of divinity. Let us rekindle our love for nature to conserve and enrich it before it is too late.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am happy to know that this Conference has been organised in such a manner as to take a holistic view of human rights whose realisation would ensure good lives for all human beings. More than the codified law, it is a moral obligation of the international community to ensure human rights in every sense of the term. I am told that the Conference would have three business sessions that would cover international agreements like Paris Principles and Universal Declaration of Human Rights which provide the basic framework to deliberate upon and coordinate with human rights institutions all over the world. It gives me immense pleasure to learn that one session is exclusively devoted to the topic of environment and climate change which will have serious bearing on human rights of the people of the poor nations. I am sure that the Conference will come out with a comprehensive declaration that will pave the way for betterment of humanity and the planet.

In the end, I will refer to the very empowering mantra, “Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah (May all be happy)”, which is the logo of the NHRC, to wish you all success. I once again thank NHRC Chairperson, Shri Justice Arun Mishra Ji, for inviting me to this Conference.

Thank you,
Jai Hind!
Jai Bharat!