

**ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA,
SMT DROUPADI MURMU
ON THE OCCASION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DAY CELEBRATION
ORGANISED BY THE NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION**

New Delhi, December 10, 2022

I am glad to be participating in the Human Rights Day celebration organised by the National Human Rights Commission. It is an important occasion for the whole of humankind, as it was on this day in 1948 that the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, also known as UDHR.

The adoption of the UDHR was a landmark event in world history. Today, there is a high degree of awareness about the concept of human rights. The principle of equality underpinning it has been widely accepted. But nearly 75 years ago, the world was a bit different. A large number of human beings were treated as less than equal. The advent of modernity, it seemed, had dispelled the clouds of the dark ages, but the sun of progress was yet to shine everywhere. At that point, the world leadership got together, drafted this milestone document, and proclaimed that each of us, as a human being, is entitled to basic rights.

Today, we fail to understand why something as simple as basic dignity could be denied to someone solely on the basis of their race, religion, gender or language, or where and in which group they were born.

Any mention of the UDHR is bound to remind us of the incomparable contribution made by an Indian to its drafting. Hansaben Mehta, as you know, was India's representative to the UN Human Rights Commission. When the very first line was drafted as "All men are born free and equal", it was Hansaben who suggested changing it to "All human beings are born free and equal". A minor correction, with

major implications. She was a disciple of Gandhiji and widely participated in the freedom struggle, which, I think, explains her refined sensitivity.

Yet, progress towards equality has been a slow journey in many places. The text of the UDHR is said to have been translated into more than 500 languages, which makes it the most translated document in history. Still, when we consider the sad developments that keep taking place in many parts of the world, we wonder if the declaration has been read at all in some of those languages.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The fact remains that human rights are a work in progress around the world. At home, however, we can take solace in the fact that the National Human Rights Commission has been making the best possible efforts to spread awareness about them. Now in its 30th year, the NHRC has done a commendable job of protecting as well as promoting human rights. It also participates in various global forums for human rights. India is proud of the fact that its work has been appreciated internationally. It has been enjoying the 'A status' accreditation with the global network of National Human Rights Institutions called GANHRI.

It is highly notable that the NHRC has been pro-active in taking up redressal in a range of issues, from child labour and bonded labour to health and mental health, disability and elderly persons, women, children, LGBTs and more. During the Covid-19 pandemic, I am told, a team from the NHRC visited a hospital to ensure no one was denied admission and treatment. It also prepared and issued advisories to ensure all human rights were respected in the authorities' response to the pandemic.

In addition, the Commission also promotes research on these and other matters. It has supported research on, for example, the criminal justice system. I had an opportunity last month to share my views on the plight of undertrial prisoners. In that case, and also in many other

cases, I believe, our intentions are always noble, yet they need to be followed up vigorously to give positive results.

That is why developing sensitivity and sympathy is the key to promoting human rights. It is essentially an exercise of the faculty of imagination. If we can imagine ourselves in the place of those who are treated as less than human, it will open our eyes and compel us to do the needful. You might have heard of the so-called 'golden rule', which says: Treat others as you would like them to treat you. That sums up the human rights discourse beautifully.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today is the beginning of the worldwide, year-long celebrations of the 75 years of the UDHR. The United Nations has chosen 'Dignity, Freedom and Justice for All' as the theme of the year 2022. That is close to the ideals expressed in the Preamble of our Constitution. What do we mean by 'Justice'? The Preamble explains it is "Justice, social, economic and political". I have said before that we should strive to expand the notion of justice. Over the past few years, the world has suffered from a high number of natural disasters caused by unusual weather patterns. Climate change is knocking on the doors. People in the poorer nations are going to pay a heavier price for the degradation of our environment. We must consider the environmental dimension of justice now.

The challenge of climate change is so enormous that it forces us to redefine 'rights'. Five years ago, as you know, the High Court of Uttarakhand held that the Ganga and Yamuna rivers have the same legal rights as human beings. But why stop at only two rivers? India is a land of sacred geography, with countless holy lakes, rivers and mountains. To these landscapes, the flora and fauna add rich biodiversity. In old times, our sages and seers saw them all as part of a universal whole, along with us. So, just as the concept of human rights exhorts us to consider every human being as no different from us, we should treat the whole living world and its habitat with respect.

I wonder what would the animals and trees around us tell us if they could speak. What would our rivers say about human history and what would our cattle say on the topic of human rights. We have trampled on their rights for long, and now the results are before us. We must learn – rather re-learn – to treat nature with dignity. This is not only a moral duty; let us remember it is necessary for our own survival too.

I congratulate the NHRC and the State Commissions, all members and officials associated with them, as well as the human rights activist community around the world on the Human Rights Day. I thank the NHRC chairperson, Justice Arun Kumar Mishra, for granting me this opportunity to share my views with you all. My best wishes to you.

Thank you,
Jai Hind!