

**SHRI M. HAMID ANSARI:** Mohtaram Wazir-e-Azam Saheb, hon. Members of the Council of Ministers, distinguished guests,

This indeed is a signal honour. It is the first occasion in 28 years that the Commission has been privileged to welcome the Prime Minister. The gesture itself is significant: *dair ayad, durust ayad*. Today we focus on the *durust* part of it. It signifies a purpose, suggests an approach, indicates a willingness to hear – in this case, a cry in which anguish and expectations alternate – and to redress.

When the Minorities Commission was established, through a Resolution of the Government in 1978, its stated purpose was to safeguard the interests of minorities. At the time of the NCM Act of 1992, the Statement of Objects and Reasons said that it would infuse confidence among the minorities. The purpose on both occasions was to safeguard rights and to reassure. This indeed was the intention of the Constitution-makers. Sardar Patel urged the minorities to trust the good sense and the sense of fairness of the majority. Jawaharlal Nehru called it an act of faith for all, and particularly for the majority, to ensure behaviour that is generous, fair and just. These perceptions were amply reflected in the Constitution. Why then the felt need to reassure? What was it that was not done? What was done that should have been avoided? The answers are disconcerting. They need to be addressed and not evaded.

The Minorities, Prime Minister, are assets and not liabilities. They reflect an important aspect of the Indian reality. They constitute 18.4 per cent of the population. Every sixth Indian, therefore, belongs to a religious minority. Credible data shows that considerable sections of the minorities remain marginalized in terms of socio-economic development. The pace of progress of the minorities thus inevitably impacts on the all-round progress of the country. The minorities need assurance of physical security, of life with dignity, and of equality of treatment at the hands of the agents of the State. They stand in need of accelerated development, and of carefully calibrated affirmative action direction at achieving

it so that they can attain substantive equality and contribute in full measure to the national effort.

Attitudes in segments of our society aggravate the problem. Some tend to consider the minorities as a bothersome nuisance; some others would wish to assimilate them to the point of extinction. Unreasonable attitudes induce irrational reactions. Both sets of perceptions promote intolerance and harm national cohesion in a plural, secular and democratic polity. A corrective effort is imperative and the State has to take the lead in the matter.

The Common Minimum Programme of the Government, Prime Minister, reflects awareness of these issues. The new 15-Point Programme and your recent pronouncements, are expressive of a desire to apply correctives. These commitments have been widely welcomed.

The critical question, however, is of implementation. Given past experience, the need of the hour is to supplement the official monitoring machinery with a civil society mechanism at Central and State levels. Such a step would also help generate public awareness of minority questions, an awareness that is sadly lacking as is evident from the absence of debate within the Parliament and in the Media.

The country has traveled a considerable distance in enforcing the human rights of individual citizens; a similar endeavour in regard to minority rights needs to be made since both form part of the charter of rights. Furthermore, and in the age of globalization, national standards of minority rights need to move in step with international norms.

The National Commission for Minorities has now functioned for 13 years, under the Act of 1992. The present Commission, constituted in March 2006, has investigated matters relating to rights of minorities in a number of States. These include Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. However, the human and financial resources given to it are inadequate for the totality of tasks

assigned to it by the Act. Experience shows that its monitoring responsibility cannot be discharged adequately unless it is equipped with an instrumentality of the type given to the NHRC and the Commission for Scheduled Castes. It is our hope that the Constitution (Amendment) Bill, aimed at giving constitutional status to the National Commission, would rectify these practical deficiencies.

The situation with regard to the State Minority Commissions is worse. More than half of the States do not see the need for them; others treat them either as a part of the administrative machinery or as outcasts. Even in regard to the National Commission, the approach of the State Governments tends to be evasive. This is a disturbing trend since, in the final analysis, effective protection of minority rights as of human rights is to be ensured on a day-to-day basis at the local and State levels.

Your presence here today, Prime Minister, sends a powerful message of reassurance to the minorities of the country and to the civil society. My colleagues and I, in the National Commission, as also all those present in the audience, are grateful to you for this. Thank you.