

SHRI A.R. ANTULAY, MINISTER OF MINORITY AFFAIRS: Greatly respected hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh Ji, hon. Minister for HRD, Shri Arjun Singh Ji, hon. Home Minister, Shri Shivraj Patil Ji, hon. Chairmen, Vice-Chairman and members of the National Commission for Minorities, distinguished participants and friends,

At the outset, I must thank hon. Prime Minister for sparing his invaluable time in attending the Inaugural Session of this Conference, as has been just indicated in his speech by the Chairperson.

He attaches so much importance to this Conference invests its deliberations with a special significance. It is a signal of the importance our Government attaches to issues affecting the minorities.

The National Commission for minorities has been working closely with the State Commissions. Alas! Many of the States have not yet thought it fit to have their own Commissions because they think it is a waste of energy, time and money. This is the first Conference organized by the newly constituted Commission. We are fortunate in having persons of vast experience, knowledge and dedication as Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Members of this Commission. Naturally, we expect a lot from the Commission

A Conference such as this is extremely useful for considering issues relevant to the minorities and for developing constructive approaches for the resolution of problems facing them. I hope that the States which have yet to set up State Minorities Commissions would do so soon so that the interest of the minorities in those States receive adequate attention. As you all know, the creation of Ministry of Minorities Affairs is a demonstration of the commitment of our Government. Prime Minister, thanks to you and to the Chairperson, Shrimati Sonia Gandhi that our Government is committed to the welfare of the minorities and to the protection of the rights enshrined in the Constitution. All thanks are due to UPA Chairperson and the Prime Minister. It is our mandate to see that the minorities are neither put at disadvantage nor discriminated against; that they feel

safe and secure, that their lives and properties, more than property their life, are safe in a democratic polity. But, unfortunately, we cannot say with emphasis or with little credence that it is so at the moment. Though 57 years have elapsed after Independence, their life is always at the mercy, unfortunately, of the anti-social elements, which unfortunately cannot be controlled by the State Governments. Under Constitution, State is the custodian of the law and order though the Hon. Home Minister can direct and we too can monitor. I would put life, liberty, employment, trade, commerce and education at the height of what can be done for the minorities in the country.

The creation of this Ministry, as I said earlier, is a demonstration of the commitment of our Government. It is our mandate to see to it that the minorities are neither put at disadvantage nor discriminated against. As I have emphasized, that they feel safe and secure, especially in life and that they get a fair and reasonable share of the fruits of our developmental efforts. As India moves on to a higher growth path, it becomes even more important for us to ensure that those who are lagging behind do not get left behind but participate in and share equally in our progress. Equitable and inclusive growth is the touchstone on which the quality of economic progress has to be judged – whether it be between regions, groups or communities. If our Government succeeds in this endeavour, as it is committed to under the sagacious leadership of Hon. Sonia Gandhiji and our esteemed prime Minister, we would have made India that much stronger. If one part of body is under paralysis the entire body is affected and it cannot move. Likewise, if minorities, who are almost 20 per cent of the population of India, are backward, country can never move or aspire to go forward. So, it is in the interest of policy, democracy and the nation that the minorities are looked after. They are given the sense of security and are made equal partners in whatever endeavour is made at the State level as also in the Centre.

We, in the Ministry are conscious of our responsibility of ensuring that the minorities, who constitute nearly a fifth of our population and who are integral

components of the rich and varied mosaic that is India, participate equally in this process and get their due share.

As you are all aware, hon. Prime Minister's new 15 Point Programme for the welfare of the Minorities has already been announced. The programme focuses on enhancing opportunities for education of the minorities, giving them an equitable share in economic activities and employment, improving their condition of living and preventing and controlling communal riots, which is the most important in my view and I believe in view of all human beings. An important aim is to ensure that the benefits of various Government schemes flow equitably to the minorities and a certain proportion of development projects are located equitably in minority concentration areas. As such, the programme provides that, wherever possible, 15 per cent of the targets and outlays under various schemes should be earmarked for the minorities. This programme continues to give utmost emphasis on the maintenance of communal peace and harmony and ensuring a reasonable representation of minorities in Government, including the public sector. The success of the programme is contingent, to a large extent, on the cooperation of the States. Hon. Prime Minister has already taken the trouble of writing to all the Chief Ministers, eliciting their cooperation. This itself signifies the importance we attach to the successful implementation of this programme. We also propose to monitor the programme very closely. In fact, the progress has to be reviewed by the Committee of Secretaries, it has been so decided, every six months and a report submitted to the Cabinet. We have asked the States to put similar arrangements in place.

Minorities in our country constitute, as I said earlier, about a fifth of the total population. Nearly three quarters of them are Muslims. It is a matter of grave concern to us that minorities in general and Muslims in particular are lagging behind other communities in respect of many socio-economic indicators. Such conditions breed discontent and disenchantment and make people vulnerable to the blandishments of disgruntled and anti-social elements of society. In the

changed security environment, it is important and critical that such pockets of discontent are transformed quickly into areas of hope and success. We certainly need to think of area specific programmes to be implemented in a mission mode. The nation has much to gain from such intervention. I would like to share with you that we have been engaged in the task of identifying such areas that deserve focused attention and our exercise is nearing completion.

It has been our endeavour to see that all the annual reports of the National Commission for Minorities along with the Action Taken Memorandum on them, are placed before Parliament at the earliest. It is a matter of some regret that though twelve reports were submitted since 1994, only three could be placed before Parliament before this Ministry was formed. Parliament has given priority to this Ministry and I am glad that you have created this Ministry. We have already placed one Report in May last and we propose to place the rest before the end of this financial year. We have gained valuable insight from this exercise.

As you are aware, a key to successful intervention is to initiate action before the situation becomes unmanageable and uncontrollable. It is fortunate that our Government has appointed both a Commission and a High level Committee, consisting of very eminent persons to look into a wide spectrum of issues relating to the minorities and Muslims in particular. Their reports are expected shortly and would provide invaluable inputs in the formulation of appropriate strategies, policies and programmes for the betterment of the minorities in the country.

We are fortunate that the Ministry of Minority Affairs has come into existence before the beginning of the Eleventh Five Year Plan. This gives us an opportunity to make an assessment of the needs of minorities and provide suitably for them in the forthcoming Plan. I must thank the hon. Prime Minister for already having advised the Planning Commission to adequately provide for the schemes relating to minorities.

I am deeply concerned by the manner in which some States have handled the rehabilitation of families displaced by communal riots. Even the Central funds

have not been used properly. The National Commission for Minorities has studied some cases and found that the displaced families are still living in squalor in relief camps and concerned agencies appear totally unconcerned. There is, therefore, an urgent need to address such situation. Apart from the Government, civil society and the media also have to play a considerable role in this. They could provide vital information and first hand understanding of the needs of communities, an independent assessment of the adequacy or otherwise of the Government action and the need for the Central and State Government to do more. Non-Governmental organizations working closely with minority communities can be a source of valuable insight into such dynamics and play a pivotal role, in partnership with Government, in improving the social and economic conditions of the minorities.

I look forward to the deliberations of this Conference. All those gathered here have vast experience, great understanding and deep wisdom of all the problems of minorities and their recommendations would be valuable, in fact, invaluable in formulating our plans. I wish the Conference all success.

Jai Hind.