

HON. PRIME MINISTER: Janab K Hamid Ansari Saab, the Chairman of the National Commission for Minorities, Members of the National Commission for Minorities, my esteemed Cabinet colleagues, Shri Arjun Singh, Shri Shivraj Patil and Shri A.R. Antulay, Chairperson and Members of the State Minorities Commission, distinguished ladies and gentlemen: It is my great pleasure in welcoming you to this annual Conference of State Minorities Commission. I am happy to note that the National Commission for Minorities has organized this Conference with the State Commissions to strengthen interaction with them for diagnosing the key-felt needs of the minorities; identifying solutions for those problems on a holistic basis and facilitating the focus of Government action on the needs and concerns of our minority communities.

Friends, it is a matter of common knowledge that the source of India's strength and vitality lies in its immense diversity. The founding fathers of our Constitution were well aware that management of Indian pluralism will not fit into the classical federal model reflected in the American Constitution of 1776. After months of debate in the Constituent Assembly, the Drafting Committee of our Constitution led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar sought to assimilate the best features of different constitutions of the world with the needs and aspirations of Indian people and the primary requirement of preserving the unity of the country. The product of this unique evolutionary process in the Constituent Assembly is our Constitution inter-weaving the characteristics of the Indian pluralism.

The Constitution places a pre-eminent emphasis on the values of liberty and justice, on treating all citizens as equal before law and on safeguarding the rights of the minorities and the oppressed. We derive our existence as a political community from the Constitution, which we, the people, gave to ourselves and, in the process established the Republic of India. It is because we are a Republic, and not a mere democracy, that we are enjoined to nurture and indeed celebrate, our linguistic, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity and to ensure that our citizens do not suffer from want and indignity. Though the Indian tapestry of traditional

multiculturalism nourished by many centuries of assimilative forces has been subjected to occasional fissures, the most diverse nation on earth has been able to overcome those crises and use the innate strength of Indian Republic to uphold the dignity and integrity of its people.

In September this year, I invited the attention of the Chief Ministers to the new 15-Point Programme drawn up for the welfare of the minorities. I have emphasized the need of a mechanism to monitor the implementation of the schemes for their welfare. At the national level, a Committee of Secretaries would do that and submit a report to the Cabinet. The Chief Ministers have been urged to put in place a similar mechanism so that the new 15-Point Programme receives due attention at the highest level. It is essential that communal peace and harmony should be maintained and the minorities get a fair share in the Central and State Governments jobs. The Indian State has the solemn obligation to protect the life and liberty of all citizens, particularly those belonging to the minority communities. Those who seek to disturb communal peace and harmony must be dealt with firmly. Those who are affected by communal riots must be provided with effective relief and rehabilitation assistance. There should be regular monitoring about the effectiveness and adequacy of such assistance.

Ladies and gentlemen, over the years, a large number of developmental schemes had been introduced to address specific problems relating to education, health, employment and shelter for the poor and the under-privileged. Most of these programmes were either area-specific or had defined target groups. Naturally, the poor and the under-privileged amongst the minorities are included in the target groups and are entitled to an equitable flow of benefits to them under these programmes. However, available evidence does not inspire confidence that the benefits of these schemes have flowed equitably to the eligible sections amongst the minorities.

The main factor responsible for socio-economic backwardness of the minority communities, particularly the Muslim community is the lack of access to

the common school system. This is particularly true in the case of Muslim girls. During the current plan period and the next plan period, we must ensure that concrete schemes for setting up of secondary and higher secondary schools in the blocks and districts having predominantly Muslim population are implemented for the Muslim girls. Widening of access of Muslim girls in professional education, particularly medical and engineering courses should be a priority area of educational programmes. We have to provide minority youths the skills which will enable them to get their legitimate due in employment both in the public sector and the private sector.

We have already taken a decision to upgrade the status of the National Commission for Minorities to a Constitutional body and a Bill to this effect has been introduced in the Lok Sabha. We hope to enact this Bill in the coming winter session of the Parliament. The Commission has to be given adequate powers to investigate into the complaints. Its finances and manpower base will also be expanded in order that it can play a more proactive role for the benefit of the minority communities. We are also trying, as Mr. Shivraj Patil has mentioned, to enact a comprehensive legislation to tackle all aspects of communal violence and also to bring out a new Police Act. I am informed that the National Commission for Minorities has given its suggestions on these matters to the concerned central agencies. These will receive our careful consideration.

Undoubtedly, India must remain a nation where pluralism and socio-religious variety are respected. In a pluralistic society like ours, national identity cannot be adjudged by any litmus test simply showing cent percent homogeneity because unlike many other monoracial, monoreligious and monolingual countries, a cent percent homogenous society had never existed and does not exist in India. This nation does not belong to any single race, least of all to any group of religious extremists. It belongs to a mosaic of religiously, linguistically and culturally varied communities and we celebrate that diversity. Let us therefore create an environment where all Indians can strive for equitable share in our nation's

prosperity transcending the religious frictions. Let us once again dream as did the great martyrs of Indian freedom movement and work for systematic reconstruct of our multi-racial polity and society.

While rituals, theologies and institutions might vary from religion to religion, the basic religious values are common in all the religions, the basic values in one religion are complementary to the other.

Dialogue is the only way to promote better understanding between various religious communities.

With these words, I thank the National Commission for Minorities and the State Minorities Commissions and hope that they will succeed in their effort to protect the rights of our minorities, suggest measures for their socio-economic progress, promote the cause of communal harmony and thereby strengthen the secular foundations of our Republic.

I wish the Conference all success