

Minority Rights Day 2013

And

Presentation of Minority Rights Day Award

To

Fr. Ajay Kumar Singh

Address of

Chief Guest

Somnath Chatterjee

On

5 July 2013

National Commission for Minorities

Lok Nayak Bhawan

New Delhi.

Respected Mr. Rahman Khan, Distinguished Chairperson and Members of the National Commission for Minorities, Respected Father Ajay Kumar Singh, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I feel greatly honoured to have been invited by the distinguished Chairperson of the National Commission for Minorities to be the Chief Guest at this function to mark the Minority Rights Day and to present this year's Minority Rights Day Award to Fr. Ajay Kumar Singh.

I take this opportunity to felicitate the National Commission for Minorities for their very thoughtful initiative of celebrating the Minority Rights Day every year. It is indeed an important occasion to remind ourselves that critical issues like the welfare and protection of the minorities, their meaningful involvement in policy-making, their access to the benefits of progress and development and the constitutional provisions for their rights, safety and security are taken care of by the State and its agencies.

It is indeed heartening that ever since its inception, the National Commission for Minorities has been functioning purposefully to monitor the constitutional and legal safeguards which are available to the minorities and to make recommendations for their welfare. I congratulate the Commission for its commendable initiatives towards mainstreaming the interests of the minorities. I am confident that this statutory institution will ensure that our brothers and sisters belonging to the different minority groups are not deprived of their legal and constitutional rights on the basis of religious, cultural or any other considerations.

I would also like to heartily compliment Fr. Ajay Kumar Singh, the widely respected Priest from Kandhamal in Odisha, which was the hot-bed

of anti-Christian violence in 2008, for his tireless endeavours in the cause of the weak and the destitute, which have fetched him encomiums from far and wide. He has been wholeheartedly involved in coordinating efforts for communal harmony, justice, peace and compassion in a very sensitive and turbulent region in Odisha, where his is a house-hold name. He has been writing regularly on issues concerning the Dalits, tribal and minority rights and is helping to create societal awareness on those crucial concerns. Needless to say, these are all very important issues, in which we have to invest our collective energies so as to progress further as an inclusive society.

India's famed vision of 'Unity in Diversity' has been one of our greatest strengths. Our minorities constitute an important segment of our population. It is the collective endeavour and shared objectives of our people, irrespective of their religious and cultural affiliations, that has made India a vibrant democracy, even accounting for some aberrations and imperfections in our democratic polity.

Our long history has been a constant reminder of the country's multireligious and multiethnic social fabric. India has verily been a melting pot of many cultures and civilizations down the millennia and virtues of religious tolerance and mutual respect have been considered the most preferred ideals in India since time immemorial.

In modern times, our national leadership drew inspiration from the secular streams and ideas that have been the hallmark of our national ethos and values. Our Freedom Struggle is an epic saga that stands out as a testimony to the composite and inclusive beliefs of our nation and its people. The Founding Fathers of our Republic chose to give unto ourselves a Constitution which is premised on secular foundations, rather than a

religion-centric parchment, in which the State does not promote any religion but which has equal and equidistant relations with all religions, and is committed to none.

Our Constitution has been path breaking in that under Part III on Fundamental Rights, citizens, irrespective of their religious denominations, have been extended, among others, the right to equality- equality of opportunity in matters of public employment and freedom to manage religious affairs. Further, prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth has been expressly provided. Articles 29 and 30 specifically underscore protection of the interests of minorities and their rights to establish and administer educational institutions.

After more than six decades of the working of our Constitution, there naturally arises the question: Have we been able to fulfill the constitutional duty that was put on us to ensure equal progress of all, irrespective of their religious identities? If we look at the 2001 Census figures, it is seen that 18.4 per cent of our population comprises religious minorities. In terms of actual numbers, this will be a huge population. That being so, we need to recognize the fact that despite the safeguards provided in the Constitution and the laws in force, there is a strong feeling of under-representation and even discrimination among sections of our people, particularly those belonging to the minorities.

Our national institutions should make every effort to ensure a feeling of unity among all our citizens. This becomes particularly significant in a country which still has to confront feudal and patriarchal approaches to basic issues. We should try to ensure our civil society's active engagement in achieving better results in minority welfare by providing favourable and

non-discriminatory conditions for our minorities.

Political parties, too, have a crucial role to play in mainstreaming minorities. Ideas such as participatory decision-making and constant dialogue with minorities will lead to a better understanding of their rights in a democratic polity. There is also a demand that the National Commission for Minorities should be given a constitutional status so as to make it more effective.

Another important measure that may be taken is to create parliamentary oversight bodies to monitor the consistency of actions taken by the Executive regarding the rights of various religious and cultural groups. In this context, I wonder whether it is the appropriate time to consider setting up of a Parliamentary Committee on Minorities, just as we have a Parliamentary Committee on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and the recently constituted Parliamentary Committee on Other Backward Classes.

On the economic front, there is a feeling that the benefits of development and the economic reforms process have not percolated to all segments of the minorities. We must also look at human development indicators like literacy, education, healthcare, mortality rates, employment opportunities, etc. in respect of the minority populations. Some of these issues have been highlighted in various reports, including the Justice Sachar Committee Report, which needs revisiting. It is in this background that the demand for creation of an Equal Opportunities Commission needs to be looked into.

It is an irony that though we have constitutional mandates, constitutional and statutory bodies and progressive legislations to promote

minority rights, a large number of instances of violations of their rights are reported, very often. Every instance of such violation of rights or denial of rights is a blot on our country and its constitutional scheme. While every organ of the State - Legislature, Executive and Judiciary - has to play a proactive role in addressing this serious issue, it is also necessary to sensitize the law enforcement agencies to be fully conscious of their responsibility in safeguarding the rights of the minorities.

That is why today's function assumes added significance, bringing together, as it is, all of us to celebrate the Minority Rights Day and to felicitate the Award winner Fr. Ajay Kumar Singh. I heartily compliment the distinguished Members of the Jury for the outstanding choice they have made for this year's Award. I trust that Fr. Singh's selfless service and laudable endeavours will inspire many others to tread the difficult path of compassion, charity and benevolence, so that we reach out adequately to the marginalized segments of our population.

I also wish the National Commission for Minorities all success in its efforts to enable issues relating to our brothers and sisters belonging to minority communities get proper national attention for satisfactory solution, consistent with our constitutional goals and mandate.

Thank you.