

Welcome Address of Shri Naseem Ahmad, Chairman, NCM

Hon'ble Union Minister for Minority Affairs, Dr. Najma Heptulla, Chief Guest & Speaker of the day, Shri Fali S. Nariman, my Member colleagues in the Commission, friends from the media, ladies & gentlemen, on this important occasion of Annual Lecture of the National Commission for Minorities, I, on behalf of the entire Commission fraternity, extend to you all a very warm welcome. We are grateful to each one of you for sparing your valuable time for this prestigious event.

Ladies & Gentlemen, India has always stood for intellectual freedom, freedom that has led to super-achievers. Our country has always honoured those who embraced intellectual striving and forged new ways of reform. It is with these considerations at the back of our mind that we have succeeded in getting the consent of Shri Fali S. Nariman, noted Jurist of international repute for delivering today's Annual Lecture. We are proud of his legal acumen, his untiring crusade for justice and for upholding human rights. He is a recipient of Padma Vibhushan award, a rare honour indeed. If I start giving details of his achievements, the positions held by him and honours conferred upon him, I will consume virtually the whole of this afternoon. In spite of constraint of time, I am tempted to quote one of the citations read in his honour while receiving the Justice Prize 2002 from Peter Guber Foundation : "**He has over many years given exceptional leadership in a legal community whose thinkers and doers have inspired the development of a creative jurisprudence that**

facilitates the binding together of a diverse nation, helps control the exercise of public power and seeks to enable the poor, minorities and the marginalized to claim their basic rights to human dignity."

Our delight has further been heightened by the august presence of our own Hon'ble Minister, Dr. Najma Heptulla Ji, whose presence amongst us on this occasion has further elated our ego. She has been our mentor and guide in what all we do in the Commission.

The Minorities Commission, established in 1978 (12.1.1978) under a Government Resolution, was brought under a parliamentary legislation fourteen years later (started functioning on 5th July, 1993) as the National Commission for Minorities. It is supposed to be an important constituent of the human rights enforcement mechanism in India.

India is a multi- religious society where, save occasional aberrations, mutual respect and inter-faith understanding guide various aspects of human relations. The Government of the day has an abiding faith in enforcement and protection of minority rights. These guarantees are essential in a democratic and pluralistic polity, because no democracy can long survive which does not accept as fundamental to its very existence the recognition of the rights of minorities. Adoption of certain special minority rights helps to remedy the disadvantages that minorities perceive or suffer, and in doing so promotes fairness, justice and equality. Special minority rights do not, therefore, constitute unfair privileges or invidious forms of discrimination, but rather compensate for unfair

disadvantages, and so are consistent with universal norms of equity. There is, therefore, no scope for anyone to form a view that the National Commission for Minorities Act, 1992 discriminates on ground of religion. The object and purpose for the establishment of the Commission is to provide a safeguard that would instil a sense of confidence in the notified religious minorities and it is in that context that the Commission is empowered to enquire into issues relating to development, protection of socio-economic rights and educational development among the minorities. The Commission cannot be regarded as a body which is constituted as an institution in aid of or for the protection of a religion, but it is an institution which has been created by an Act of Parliament to ensure that the minorities are able to realise their rights to development and freedom. The Commission is mainly mandated to monitor the safeguards for minorities provided in the Constitution and laws enacted by Parliament and the State Legislatures, and make recommendations for the effective implementation of safeguards for protection of interests of minorities by the Central or the State Governments. In short, the Commission always endeavours to protect the minorities' constitutional, legal and civil rights, and their liberty. It promotes ideals of constructive tolerance and a commitment to live and let live. Towards this end, the Commission holds weekly meetings, conducts hearings of cases and undertakes visits to violence affected areas and other places needing redressal of minority grievances. Since April, 2013 the Commission has held 61 weekly meetings, conducted 29 hearings and visited as many as 36 state capitals and districts.

In order to commemorate the setting up of the statutory Commission on 5th July, 1993, the Commission initiated annual lecture series. Annual NCM lecture is delivered by an eminent personality to generate interest among the public and to create awareness about specific issues concerning minorities, which have a direct bearing on overall socio-economic development of the country.

The Government of India through its various programmes and policies is taking steps to accelerate the growth of the country to ensure that no one is left behind in the process. For this, it is equally important that those belonging to deprived classes must feel themselves involved in the process of growth and inclusiveness. That inter-alia brings in the role of this Commission.

Ladies & Gentlemen, I do not want to stand any more between you and Shri Fali S. Nariman. The topic of today's lecture on "Minorities at Crossroads : Comments on Judicial Pronouncements" is highly relevant and appropriate in the present day context. Once again, I welcome you all on this momentous occasion.

Thank you, and Jai Hind.

Naseem Ahmad

Chairman

12th September, 2014

National Commission for Minorities