

**ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA,  
SHRI RAM NATH KOVIND  
ON THE OCCASION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DAY**

**New Delhi, December 10, 2019**

1. I am honoured to be here among you on the occasion of the World Human Rights Day. We have gathered to commemorate a momentous day in human history. It was on 10th December, in 1948, that the whole humankind formally recognised that all of us are equal. I am glad to see the way the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) leads the country in celebrating the day, and spreading awareness about the human rights.
2. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) covers a wide range of social, economic, cultural, civil and political rights outlined in its Preamble and 30 Articles. They include the right to equality, freedom from discrimination, right to life, liberty, personal security, freedom from slavery and freedom from torture among others. The UN General Assembly proclaimed the document as a “common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations”.
3. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted around the time the Constituent Assembly was drafting our Constitution. Late last month we celebrated the 70th anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution. That day, in my address to the Supreme Court, I especially paid tributes to the women members of the Constituent Assembly. One of them was Hansa Mehta. A staunch disciple of Gandhiji, she was a member of the Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights. Coincidentally, she was also India’s delegate to the historic endeavour under way at the United Nations; the drafting of the Universal Declaration. Hansaben was part of the Human Rights Committee there. And she had an equally crucial role to play in both the defining documents. United Nations Secretary General António Guterres was right when he said last year that without Hansa Mehta of India, we would likely be speaking

of Universal Declaration of the Rights of Men rather than of Human Rights.

4. The very first article of the UDHR states: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” At the draft stage, this article spoke of all men being equal. As many of you know, it was at Hansaben’s insistence that the final version replaced ‘men’ with ‘human beings’. Her other intervention ensured gender equality in marriage under Article 16. In these efforts, Hansaben found support from the Chairperson of the Commission of Human Rights, Eleanor Roosevelt.
5. Mrs Roosevelt, the wife of the former United States President Franklin D Roosevelt, was later called the “First Lady of the World” for her contributions to the cause of human rights. I think we can do more to commemorate the visionary leadership of Hansaben Mehta in the field of human rights and gender equality.
6. We can make a beginning by asking ourselves if we, as a society, have lived up to her vision of equal rights and equal dignity of women. Unfortunately, a series of events in the recent past force us to think again. Incidents of heinous crime against women are reported from many parts of the country. This is not limited to one place or one nation. In many parts of the world, human rights of those who are vulnerable are flagrantly violated. Thus, the ideal way to commemorate the World Human Rights Day is for the whole world to introspect what more we need to do to live up to the letter and spirit of the sacred text of the Declaration.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

7. Along with such introspection, we should also undertake the task of reinterpreting the document and expanding the notion of human rights. All we need are empathy and imagination. I have in mind, for example, children and forced labourers. Or consider the plight of those put in jails, while they await trial for

a petty crime they might not have even committed. Of course, these issues deserve urgent attention to make a harmonious society compliant of the Human Rights Charter.

8. This introspection is indeed essential. But our understanding of the situation would be incomplete if we ignore the other side of the issue, which are duties. Gandhiji saw the rights and duties as two sides of the same coin. Our failings in human rights, as in the cases of violence against women, often stem from our failings in the other. Our national discourse has rightly focused on the all-important question of human rights. It can also make more space for consideration of our Fundamental Duties too.
9. There are challenges ahead, but I am confident we can meet them, because we have an ever-vigilant National Human Rights Commission. The Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993 led to the establishment of the national and state-level bodies for safeguarding and promoting human rights. The apex institution has completed a quarter century of its journey. It has lived up to the expectations by playing the role of a quasi-judicial watchdog without fear or favour.
10. The fact that almost all the recommendations made by the NHRC are accepted by governments and other public authorities is indicative of its credibility. It also reflects the trust that the citizens have placed in this remarkable institution. Since its inception, it has provided relief to thousands and set wrongs right.
11. I learn that apart from responding to hundreds of complaints it receives every day, the Commission also takes suo motu cognizance of reports of human rights violations with appreciable alacrity. The NHRC responds to and redresses violations of human rights by trying to organize relief, and ensuring corrective action from authorities.

12. I am glad to learn that the Commission has initiated Open Hearings to decide cases of atrocities against persons belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SCs) following the recommendations of the K. B. Saxena Report. Also, the Supreme Court of India has entrusted to the Commission the task of improvement in the condition of the institutions for the mentally ill. I am happy to note that the mentally ill now receive better care and protection thanks to the continuous monitoring by the NHRC.
  
13. The effective strengthening of the human rights at the ground level is, I believe, a collective task of the whole society. In this regard, the NHRC has done well in spreading awareness and joining hands with civil society to further the cause.
  
14. On the occasion of the World Human Rights Day, it is my pleasure to congratulate the Chairperson of the NHRC, its Members, and Special Rapporteurs, and Special Monitors. I extend my best wishes also to all state-level rights commissions and their heads and members.

Thank You,  
Jai Hind!