

Welcome Speech*

by

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Mr. Vice-President, Ladies and Gentlemen: Before I say a few words on the subject of 'Law and Minorities in India' I wish to thank the Vice-President for having agreed to inaugurate the Seminar. I am glad that he happened to be free. I knew that if he was free he would grace this occasion because his first love, Law, still has a great hold on him. I also wish to thank all the participants for having contributed learned papers on the subject and attending the Seminar. Some of you have come from far off places, and I do hope you will find it worthwhile to have come.

Ladies and Gentlemen: The subject you are going to discuss is of supreme importance to India. We are a people with different religions, cultures, languages and scripts but with one aim—to march forward, all together, to a new era in which every Indian could well say, 'I am proud to be an Indian'.

It is with this object in view that our Constitution was fashioned. It makes all the necessary provisions for progress. It lays down all the guidelines for success.

The father of our nation, Mahatma Gandhi, had always acted on one principle, and taught it to us, that a just end does not justify all means. Means are as important as ends. It is not so in a totalitarian society. In such a society the end justifies all means. But our Constitution is framed on different lines, and happily so. One of the means which is prohibited is the sacrifice of the interests of the minorities and backward classes. According to some, unity of the nation may be strengthened if the language or script of some sections of the people is sacrificed. But this again is prohibited.

The constitutional way may be slow and occasionally irksome but fathers of our Constitution were thinking not only of material progress but of the dignity of every individual. They

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had set their sights not only on material values but also on moral values. How can you assure the dignity of every individual, as required by the Preamble to our Constitution, except by assuring him that, subject to certain permitted restrictions, he shall be able to pursue his religion, culture, language and script? How can you assure the unity of the nation except by assuring each section of the people that it is as important as the others?

In fact one may well compare our nation to a big Jumbo Jet flying through turbulent weather to a golden destination. For this flight every section of the people must be galvanised together as firmly as the various parts of the frame. The strength of the frame is equal only to the strength of the weakest section of the frame. One little crack, i.e., a disgruntled minority, would force the jet to the ground till the crack is repaired.

Ladies and Gentlemen: It is for you not only to ascertain the extent of the protection given to the minorities by our Constitution but also to locate the area where the protection is being denied not openly but covertly. Experience tells us that devious ways of breaching the fundamental rights are none too uncommon.

You will forgive me if I do not enter into a detailed discussion of the relevant articles of the Constitution. It seems appropriate that the Chief Justice of India refrains from expressing any opinion on controversial issues of law, which you will be discussing.

One thing troubles me. The exact content of the fundamental rights of the minorities can easily be settled by the courts. But, is the institutional protection of the courts enough? Would it be advisable to appoint a Vigilance Commissioner of Minorities to look into the complaints of the minorities?

In the end may I thank you all again.