

NATIONAL LEGAL LITERACY MISSION*

By today, the Indian Republic has lived 56 years of independence. We,

the people of India, gave ourselves the Constitution with a promise to secure to all its citizens Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. In 'Justice' the framers of the Constitution included social, economic and political justice. 'Fraternity' carried assurance for the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation. If the constitutional imperatives are to be implemented and the constitutional goals are to be achieved, we cannot afford to overlook the Preamble to the Constitution which emphasises the dignity of the individual as much as the unity of the nation. 'Dignity' is a word of moral and spiritual import, which implies an obligation on the part of the Government to respect the personality of a citizen and to create conditions in which every citizen would be delivered social, economic and political justice. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, in his closing speech in the Constituent Assembly on 25.11.1949, made it clear that Liberty, Equality and Fraternity form a trinity and one cannot be divorced from the other. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, stated, on the eve of freedom, that independence did not mean mere freedom from British Rule; it meant justice to all citizens of India and each one, getting his legitimate due.

India today continues to survive amongst paradoxical forces. We are proud of our accomplishments in the field of science and technology, social and economic reforms, education and prosperity. At the same time, the Indian society has yet, not fully got rid of adverse forces where poor continue to be poor and a sizeable section of Indian people continue to be illiterate and ignorant, and consequently, living below poverty line and subjected to all forms of exploitations. We are still a caste-ridden society and divisionary forces, based on language, religion and socio-economic factors, continue to haunt us. Conferral of 'one-man-one-vote' right is not by itself political freedom. The little man of India must be able to exercise his voting right, well-equipped with knowledge of whom to vote and then with full freedom to vote for his choice. The doors of the court are open to all but that by itself is not justice, so long as the weakest of the weak is not empowered enough to have access to justice. The core of the commitment of the Constitution to the social revolution, through Rule of Law, lies in the effectuation of the Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles as supplementary and complimentary to each other. Political democracy has to be stable. Socio-economic democracy has to become a way of life. On the economic plane, we shall have to get rid of the contradictions, failing which, generation of immense wealth also would not be able to eliminate exact poverty.

All the progress and prosperity, earned by us, post-independence, loses its value on account of rampant exploitation and injustice. Illiteracy and ignorance, force large masses of people, to tolerate social and economic inequalities. The goal of equality before the law continues to remain a myth or an illusion. Manifold problems arise causing a feeling of helplessness and despair. The legislation remains a paper tiger without teeth and claws, and at times, the justice delivery system of the country, too, feels frustrated. The benefits, which our systems, nurtured by democracy, are capable of delivering, fail to reach the lowliest amongst the low and the weakest amongst the weak.

The major hurdles, in the way of securing justice for all, are ignorance and illiteracy, apart from poverty. The Legal Literacy Mission aims at striking at the root of these malaise which afflict our masses. Ignorance is not innocence; it is a sin. We have to fight a battle against it. Today is the day, lit with one of the rays, assuring us of a bright future ahead. National Legal Literacy Mission is a project in which the three wings of governance namely, the Legislature, the Judiciary and the Executive have joined hands to reach out to the most marginalised and vulnerable sections of our society and tell them, what their rights are. If the democracy has to live, we shall have to learn the constitutional values. The State is obliged to secure the operation of legal system which promotes justice on the basis of equal opportunity. It is obliged to provide free legal aid and such other opportunities by which justice is promoted on the basis of equal opportunity for all.

The primary objective of the Mission is to rip apart the dark curtain of ignorance by the power of knowledge and by spreading awareness and information. The people are to be told what are their rights; what are the obligations of the State and other citizens towards them; what are the forums and means available for enforcing such rights and obligations and how poverty cannot come in the way of having free access to justice. It is a five-years, programme which proposes to launch a door-to-door campaign, reaching out to the remotest villages to educate the people and enlighten them into awareness. The target groups or beneficiaries on its prime list include women, children, minority communities, victims of militancy, crime, disasters and disease, child and bonded labour, landless farmers, downtrodden and tribals, especially, in the North-East, victims of sex exploitation, farmers hit by natural calamities such as drought and floods and so on. The Mission also proposes to sensitise the police, army and other organized forces which are prone to committing injustice and causing violation of human rights such as custodial torture. At the top of it, what the Mission proposes to achieve, is building of confidence amongst the sufferers of injustice by removing the feeling of despondency from their minds.

Today is the day of reminder, for all of us, of some of our fundamental duties. We have to respect the ideals of the Constitution. We have to promote harmony and common brotherhood transcending all religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities. We have to take, along with us, those who are lagging behind for historical or social reasons and, collectively, to strive towards excellence, in all spheres of individual and collective activity, so that we, as a nation, constantly rise to higher levels of endeavour and achievement and succeed in securing to the people of India, what we have resolved to give unto them.

The year 2005 is the 'Year of Excellence' in judiciary. A culture, based on values has commenced, imbibing itself into the justice delivery system and also the judges, in person. National Judicial Academy at Bhopal has, in this year, on having become functional, held 17 programmes of judicial training and education, matching any international standards. Planning, in the direction of introducing effective and modern alternate dispute resolution system in our country, has commenced. Hopefully, it will shortly take a concrete shape. An ambitious plan, for total blending of information technology in judiciary and for judicial reforms, is in the pipeline and the Central Government is releasing a fund of about Rs.1500 crores for the purpose. All these go into empowering the justice delivery system of the country. But its benefits must percolate down and be shared by one and all. This the National Legal Literacy Mission proposes to achieve.

On behalf of the Indian judiciary, I appeal to the nation through the enlightened citizens present here, representing different cross-sections of the society, to support this Mission in every possible way in which you can. The National Legal Aid Services Authority has a statutory status.

It has a vision, a mission and a passion for securing justice to all. It has an all-India network and functions under the patronage of Indian judiciary. Every Chief Justice of the High Court is an ex-officio patron of the State Level Authority and a senior judge, its Executive Chairman. They are present here today. The commitment of judiciary to this ideal, is already there and today we renew our pledge to further strengthen the same. The launching of this programme today, is happily coinciding with the 'Year of Excellence' in judiciary. I also appeal to the media – print and electronic – to play its role in propagating this movement and help it, in reaching the remotest corners of the country.

The road ahead is long and may be strewn with hurdles. Yet, a concrete creative step towards the empowerment of powerless is being taken, this day with the whole-hearted support of the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India. On behalf of the Indian judiciary, I wish the Mission all the best. I am confident that success will be ours.



* Key-note address delivered at launch of National Legal Literacy Mission 2005-2010, on 6th March, 2005, at Plenary Hall, Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi.