

The Conference Recommendations

HEALING THE WOUNDS
A Conference on Human rights and Minorities in India
August 15th, 2002
Gandhi Hall, Indian YMCA, Fitzroy Square, London, W1T 6AQ

We, the undersigned, who met at this conference, make the following statement:

We acknowledge with shame and anguish the sectarian violence of the past 6 months in Gujarat, which also symbolises the communal violence that has occurred at many different times and places in the last 55 years. It has shaken the very foundations of our democracy. What has happened can never be justified.

We stand at a defining moment in the history of India. Our responses, as individuals and communities deeply concerned for India, will shape the future of democracy and development there. We therefore condemn unequivocally all forms of communalism, from whichever side it comes, and all those who use violence as a means of expression. We express our sympathy and solidarity with all the victims of violence, from all backgrounds.

We re-affirm our commitment to the core values of the Indian constitution, which ensures for each citizen and community justice, equality, non-discrimination and secularism.

The causes of the recent violence are deep and complex. There are cultural, social, economic, political and moral factors. We recognise the need for analysis, reflection and soul-searching, so that they can be dealt with.

We are concerned at the role of the State and its organs in the recent violence. The State and central governments, particularly the political leaders, the administration and the police, have undeniably failed to protect the constitutional rights of citizens and ensure their safety and security. We are also concerned at some aspects of media coverage and the failure of many citizens and organisations to respond adequately. We recognise the dangers to democracy, freedom, equality under the law, and inter-communal harmony, unless these trends are checked and people, at all levels, are made immediately accountable.

We re-affirm the right of all to follow their conscience in matters of political and religious belief and practice, with freedom to choose and propagate their beliefs. We also recognise the limits of that freedom. We oppose any use of force or coercion to impose our will on others or pressurise them. This applies to people of all communities, however large or small.

We seek an India in which all Indians, of all cultural, ethnic, religious and other backgrounds are equally accepted, in which all Indians are committed to peace and justice, to truth and equality, to the principles of our democratic and secular State. This will be an India which all Indians can own with pride and in which they can build up a common sense of national belonging.

We gladly acknowledge the outstanding contribution of certain individuals, organisations and agencies that have intervened with great courage, honesty and personal sacrifice.

In order to strengthen all such efforts and re-build our civil society with strong institutions and values, both at the local and national level, we commit ourselves to encourage the growth of multi-religious and multi-cultural organisations and forums, where people of different backgrounds work together, communicate and build relationships that enable them to address issues and transcend differences.

To the Government of India

1. We call for accountability

Peace is built on justice. None of the perpetrators of injustice have been punished. The government must ensure, in keeping with its constitutional imperative, that violators of the law are identified and brought to justice speedily. It must also give assistance to those who seek justice.

2. We call for transparency and openness

The violation of the human rights of any citizen is not just an internal matter. As a member of the international community and a signatory of Human Rights Charters and Conventions, the government must not block those seeking to establish the truth, especially the human rights agencies. A democracy has nothing to hide. If wrong has been done - by whoever it may be - they need to face justice.

3. We call for freedom for the media

We call for inquiry into the roles of the media, the State intelligence and counter-insurgency agencies in spawning and exacerbating the atmosphere of religious intolerance, sectarian strife, fundamentalism and terrorism.

We also call on the media to stimulate genuine discussion by reporting impartially and by highlighting positive steps.

4. We call for economic regeneration

We deplore the calls for economic boycotts of people on a communal or caste basis. We urge practical steps by the government and business leaders, both in India and internationally, for economic regeneration, particularly among victimised or minority communities.

To the Diaspora

5. Establishing a coalition

We will work for the establishment of a coalition of NRIs who will work together for peace, justice, the protection of the rights of all communities (large and small), freedom of conscience and the re-building of civil society.

We recommend the coalition to take steps to constitute a Commission to monitor democracy, constitutional safeguards for minorities and protection of human rights in South Asia. The Commission should include internationally renowned scholars, constitutional experts, leaders of human rights agencies and peace activists.

6. Encouraging local groups

We will encourage local groups, from different communities, to meet and discuss these issues, both in India and the Diaspora, as steps towards the re-building of civil society.

As a step towards this we propose a conference of NGOs in India, which will be addressed by leaders from the different religious communities and from the government. This conference should be at the highest level and we should seek sponsorship from the United Nations. From this the message can be taken out to local communities, in cities, towns and villages.

7. Giving generously and responsibly

We urge Diaspora Indians and others to give generously to agencies that work for peace, justice and economic and educational regeneration. But they must also check how funds are used and ensure that they are not used to foster hatred and communal difference, or to recruit, train and support militants who are encouraged to use violence against other communities.

To all

8. Strengthening minority communities

We urge the leaders of minority communities to take steps to encourage education, economic enterprise and involvement in the life of the nation, so as to maximise opportunities for development. They need also to examine the causes of economic and educational backwardness, where it exists.

9. Peace in South Asia

Justice and security are based on peace. We call for steps towards peace in the South Asian region, for confidence-building measures, and a commitment to work to the ultimate goal of a nuclear-free South Asia.

[Signed by a majority of Conference delegates]