



Delhi and Paris

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Delhi and Paris: A tale of two cities-Stirring reminders of the distance travelled and challenges ahead in securing human rights

- Paris flared — Paris, which the divine sun had sown with light, and where in glory waved the great future harvest of Truth and of Justice.
- Exactly 70 years ago, on December 10, 1948, the UN General Assembly met in Paris.
- Delegates from the world's many ends met at the hilltop Palais de Chaillot and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).
- Selected by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to represent India in the drafting exercise, Hansa Mehta from Gujarat brought to the exercise her own distinctive feminism.
- Seeing the draft Article 1, "All men are born free and equal in dignity and rights," Hansaben intervened to say the times had changed and the line should read, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."
- Roosevelt applauded and embraced the amendment.

Human beings

- In the post-Hitler, post-Hiroshima world that phrase meant more than any two could.
- The delegates to the Assembly nourished visions of a global transformation.
- But they could not have imagined that on the Declaration's 70th anniversary, Paris, the Declaration's birthplace, would be the venue of a flaming stir, with cars burning along the Champs-Élysées, bringing life in the French capital to a stop.
- The 'Yellow Vest' Paris riots which have shaken French President Emmanuel Macron's government are about much more than fuel price hikes, the immediate trigger.
- Following the stunning outburst, French Prime Minister Édouard

Philippe announced a six-month reprieve from the hike, only to be rebuffed by the protesters as “too little, too late”.

- If in the days preceding the 70th anniversary of the UDHR, Paris saw scalding fire, Delhi saw a scorching ire.
- The language used in Paris and Delhi has great similarities: business gets tax-cuts, agriculture gets diesel hikes.
- Factories get investments, farms do not even get minimum prices, affecting a human right described in Article 23 of the UDHR: “Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.”

Delhi's way

- Delhi, instead of being the target, became the very life, the soul, of the farmers' protest.
- But Paris's flare and Delhi's glare notwithstanding, the Declaration is under severe strain, globally.
- Primarily because governments are, literally, laws unto themselves and also because the UDHR, though it has become part of the constitution and laws of several countries which attained independence after it was proclaimed, is not legally binding.
- It stirs a nation's conscience, not its laws.
- Curbs on dissenters can be seen around the globe, from China to Brazil, from India through Egypt and Turkey to the U.S. Myanmar which says 'no room' to its own Rohingya disregards Article 14, and Pakistan which hounds out Asia Bibi disregards Article 18.
- Terrorism mutilates that most fundamental human right — to life.
- Torture, physical and mental, has been used through time and around the globe by states and non-state tyrants.
- India, no exception to the gross pattern, signed, during I.K. Gujral's prime ministership, the UN Convention Against Torture.
- But subsequent governments of India have refrained from ratifying it.
- Human rights violations are not a 'state-gone berserk thing' alone.
- Society violates it in India with vigour.
- Crimes against women, children in India seem unabating.
- The Indian woman, if she is Dalit, tribal or vulnerable in age or personal circumstance, is all the more at risk.
- The Sentinelese's reflexive act against the misguided tourist who beached on their quiet shore has scarcely been appreciated by the average Indian.

Rainbow on the horizon

- But this anniversary must not let grim facts obscure the 'rights rainbow' on the sky.
- The massive victory of the Left Front in Kerala's just-concluded panchayat elections, overcoming the right-wing lurch on Sabarimala, shows a silent majority's peaceable wisdom, and strength. Tomorrow, there will another unfurling of that rainbow.
- Paris, on December 10, 1948, liberated rights from state and social shackles which must stay liberated, and celebrated.

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