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Magsaysay Awardee for Peace

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Honorable President Shri Ram Nath Kovindji,

Let me at the outset congratulate you on assuming office as the 14th President of the Republic of India.

The Armed Forces of India – of whom you are the Supreme Commander, have a different and special relationship with their President and I was especially struck by your unambiguous reference to the fact that it is your duty to “protect the Constitution and uphold its values.”

Yes, you are now every Indian’s President, and I deeply appreciate that you have pledged to work for the oppressed and downtrodden. In your acceptance speech you spoke of your own experience of poverty and exclusion and have pointed out that it was your commitment to the spirit of service, in the great traditions of our country that has brought you from your village of Paraunkh, to Rashtrapathi Bhavan in the capital. You have also stated *that* “my election to the post of President reflects the greatness of Indian democracy”, and stressed that you will “serve the Nation in the spirit of 'Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah' (May all be happy)”.

Like you, we in the armed forces too are also sworn to defend our Country and also to protect and defend the Constitution of India. And it is on this important aspect sir, that I, as one of the senior most retired servicemen in the country, would like to share some of my thoughts and concerns with my Supreme Commander today.

I am proud to have served my country for nearly 45 years in uniform. I retired as the Chief of the Naval Staff on 30 September 1993, after joining the first course of the Joint Services Wing - the forerunner to today's NDA. I too come from a humble background – my grandfather was a village postman in the small South Indian town of Palghat, and our family joined many of those who migrated from a rural area to then Madras- and eventually to Bombay and finally to Delhi. It was also there I was personally witness to the terrible violence and savagery of partition and proud to also see men like my father, shelter his good friend Ghulam Mohammed and his family in our home – telling the mobs baying for his blood that they would have to kill him first. These were the formative years as I grew up – a child of Independence.

In many ways, my life in the service parallels our trajectory since Independence. The compelling reason that attracted many of us to join the services in those days was the powerful motivation that we would be laying the foundation and helping to build this new, free and independent country.

Although the country has achieved a lot and made progress in certain areas, in many others we have remained backward, and stuck in our age old blind beliefs, regressive social mores, and in recent times have allowed the forces of religious hyper nationalism to endanger the fundamental constitutional provisions and promises of a tolerant, equitable nation where there would be dignity for all and freedom of thought, speech and expression. I fear our Constitution is under attack and faces grave threats from the forces that have been let loose.

Sir, we in the Defence Forces are a microcosm of India. We have people of all faiths, denominations, castes and creed to make up our very professional military force. We work as a team, do not discriminate or shower largesse on any one class, caste or community, and in the Navy especially, believe in the age old saying that “We swim or sink together”. The emphasis in the Services has always been on inclusiveness and camaraderie.

Alas these values and traditions, built and nurtured over nearly seven decades, are today threatened as never before.

The increased intolerance at all levels, the shocking assault and treatment of our minority communities – especially Muslims, the growing tendency to take the law into their own hands by lynch mobs and Gau Rakshaks – and the continuing impunity with which your own community, Dalits, as also OBCs, Adivasis and women, are targets of physical, sexual and verbal abuse and attacks brings no credit to our proud heritage and tradition.

The age old principles of dignity and respect for all, have almost totally given way to a barely concealed right to those with money and power to do as they will – and corruption in all these many forms has increased across the board.

While in uniform we are governed by our respective Army, Navy and Airforce acts to which Servicemen have to conform. One foregoes the Fundamental Rights enshrined in the Constitution. However this is not so with retired personnel who revert to their primary role as citizens.

Sir, I feel it is important to point out that during my nearly 25 years in retirement I have engaged with a large number of issues and struggles of the people of this land. I was part of a seven year long struggle to save farmers including myself, being evicted thanks to SEZ; Muslims,

Dalits and Adivasis targeted as either terrorists, anti nationals or Maoists; the indiscriminate application of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and the trampling of all norms to protect environment. To add to all of these has been the increasing use, by this and earlier regimes, to be quick to use the allegation of sedition and label people, including myself, as anti-national merely for expressing dissent or a point of view which is different from the mainstream – be it on nuclear matters, or promoting dialogue for peace with our neighbours, including Pakistan. I have on several occasions pointed out that the hydra headed monster of religious intolerance is causing permanent damage to our plural, syncretic and secular democracy.

Last week I watched with deep distress a dalit woman and Bezwada Wilson, a recent Magsaysay award winner like me, spoke of the continued indignity of their lives as manual scavengers. And every day we are reading and hearing of unwarranted attacks on our Muslim and even Christian minority. It would be tragic if we allowed all the struggles of our freedom fighters to undertake this unique task of building a secular, plural and rainbow nation of faiths, creeds, communities, languages and gender, to end up in an un-democratic, intolerant, Hindu Rashtra kind of structure, when our neighbours are striding in the opposite direction – be it Bangla Desh, Nepal or Sri Lanka.

India has always followed the path and shown the way towards non violence and tolerance – essential pre-conditions for Peace in our region. People still speak of our contribution to the dynamic idea of Panch Shila . We are looking to you Sir to use this historic mandate and extraordinary opportunity of being the second Dalit to occupy the highest office in the land, to steer this nation away from the narrow path of violent hyper nationalism towards the concept of Dharma and Righteousness in the grand tradition of all our Saints, Sufis and Gurus. I believe that the President and Supreme Commander is in a unique position to wield his power and authority wisely and creatively.

As the Supreme Commander and President – you have it in your hands to outline and chart a totally new direction for our people and to advise the Prime Minister and his cabinet accordingly. You have only to call on the millions of foot soldiers, the women and the men who are yearning to see a very different India, to work with you to realise the vision of all those women and men who have contributed to building our vast and amazingly rich and plural heritage.

As a former Service Chief, I can confidently say that the spirit of service and camaraderie and a nationalistic impulse which is tolerant and inclusive, still obtains in our armed forces. If you show the way and give the call – believe me our years of discipline because of which we have honoured the principle of civil control over the military and have never

veered towards any kind of Military takeover as in our neighbourhood – we veterans are ready to contribute towards national development in the best sense of that word. Let us always remember though that civil authority does not mean civil service or bureaucratic control. As Supreme Commander you also have the privilege of ensuring that the genuine demands of the service and ex service men and women are studied and honoured .

We are inhabiting an India where there is growing discrimination, and also growing alienation of our youth and unrest in the temples of learning – our universities. There is also growing fear and insecurity. And given that our comrades in the armed forces - our sailors, airmen and jawans – come from villages and towns across the country – they cannot but be affected deeply by what they are seeing around them. Their morale and self esteem is constantly under threat. How does a sergeant in the Air Force feel when his own father, Mohammed Akhlaq is made a target of utterly irrational mob behavior and killed – merely on the suspicion of keeping beef in their home?

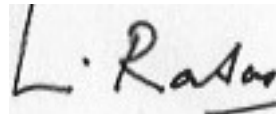
In the long run this will affect their own professional performance and therefore our National Security.

I have written several letters over the years to several Presidents, and Prime Ministers, sharing my thoughts and fears. Some have responded and some have not. I believe it is not just our right, but our responsibility as senior citizens who have held the highest positions in the country, to bring some of our observations and concerns to you and it is in that spirit that I write this letter.

I look forward to hearing from you Sir- and also to meeting you when I next travel to Delhi. I have every reason to believe that you will rise to the occasion as our Supreme Commander and will not fail us in this critical hour.

With highest regards,

Jai Hind



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