

**Lok Sabha Secretariat
Camp: Bhopal**

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**LOK SABHA SPEAKER SMT. MEIRA KUMAR INAUGURATES
PRESIDING OFFICERS' CONFERENCE**

The Hon'ble Speaker, Lok Sabha, Smt. Meira Kumar, inaugurated the 74th Conference of Presiding Officers of Legislative Bodies in India today at a solemn function held in the Chamber of the Madhya Pradesh Vidhan Sabha. The Speaker, Madhya Pradesh Vidhan Sabha, Shri Ishwardas Rohani, delivered the Welcome Address at the inaugural function.

At the outset, the Conference passed a Condolence Resolution expressing its deep sense of grief and sorrow at the sad demise of several Speakers and Deputy Speakers who at one time or another were members of the fraternity of Presiding Officers. The Conference also placed on record its sincere appreciation of their valuable contributions to the development of the country as also to the enrichment of parliamentary system.

In her Address, the Lok Sabha Speaker and Chairperson of the Conference, Smt. Meira Kumar drew the attention of the delegates to the increase in the number of women in the Fifteenth Lok Sabha. She observed that it was notable that the present Lok Sabha has 59 women members, which is the highest ever representation of women so far.

Recapitulating some of the important parliamentary developments since the last Conference held in Chandigarh in September 2008, Smt. Kumar recalled the Resolution adopted by the Fourteenth Lok Sabha condemning the terrorist attacks at several public places and prominent hotels in Mumbai in November 2008, which stated, *inter alia*, that India

should not cease her efforts until the terrorists and those who had trained, funded and abetted them were exposed and brought to justice. She hoped that Legislative Bodies would work towards the realization of the objectives of this Resolution in letter and spirit. In this regard, she referred to the passage of the National Investigation Agency Bill, 2008 by the Parliament during the Fourteenth Lok Sabha, which paved the way for setting up the National Investigation Agency at the Central level with the mandate to investigate and prosecute not only the offences affecting the sovereignty, security and integrity of the nation and our friendly relations with foreign countries but also the offences under the relevant Acts enacted to implement international treaties, agreements, conventions and resolutions of the United Nations, its agencies and other international organizations.

Highlighting the role of Parliament to make laws for strengthening the social fabric of our democracy through provisions of equal opportunity, Smt. Kumar lauded the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 and hoped that the new law would be able to address the problem of increasing number of drop-outs from schools, especially in respect of those belonging to the disadvantaged and vulnerable sections of the society. She further added that the Parliament had passed the Constitution (One Hundred and Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2009 to further extend the provision for reservation of seats in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the Anglo-Indian community for the next ten years, as they have not been brought at par with other sections of society.

On the procedural front, Smt. Kumar referred to her initiatives to amend the procedure relating to the *Zero Hour* and *Rule 377* of the *Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha*. She also mentioned that the Fifteenth Lok Sabha had reconstituted the five Parliamentary Forums, one each on Water Conservation and Management; Youth; Children; Population and Public Health; and Global Warming and Climate Change, which were constituted during the Fourteenth Lok Sabha. All these initiatives have been undertaken to provide a platform to the members of Parliament to have focused and meaningful discussions on critical issues facing the country and to enable them to effectively raise such issues on the floor of the House as also in the meetings of Parliamentary Committees and Forums, she added. She also hoped that the Presiding Officers of the State Legislatures might also consider constituting such Forums for the benefit of their members.

Dwelling upon the importance of maintaining the heritage character of the Parliament House Building, Smt. Kumar said that she had recently constituted a Joint Parliamentary Committee on Maintenance of Heritage Character and Development of Parliament House Complex which would be entrusted with the responsibility to formulate policies, guidelines and programmes on conservation, restoration, rehabilitation and maintenance works in the Parliament House Complex in accordance with the standard conservation principles and procedures. She further stated that she had constituted a Standing Technical Committee under the chairmanship of the Secretary-General, Lok Sabha, consisting of, among others, famous architects, artists and other experts in the field to assist the JPC on Heritage.

Recalling the 20th Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of the Commonwealth in New Delhi in January 2010, Smt. Kumar expressed the feeling that the hosting of the Conference for the third time in India was certainly a recognition of the strength and vitality of India's parliamentary democracy. She added that the Conference gave an opportunity to the Presiding Officers of the Commonwealth Parliaments and Legislatures to come together to discuss issues and to exchange views in acquiring a deeper perspective into the problems and challenges faced by them in conducting parliamentary proceedings. She said that meaningful discussions were held on different themes, *viz. the Role of Speaker as a Mediator; Use of Technology in the Parliamentary Context; and the Role of Speaker in the Administration of Parliament*. Besides other things, the Conference was instrumental in evolving unanimity that the Speaker's role in safeguarding the pride and prestige of Legislative Bodies is pivotal and the trust he/she enjoys is central to the administration of Parliament, the smooth functioning of which could be ensured through the adoption of ICTs and other technologies without compromising the sanctity of the Chamber as a debating forum, she added.

Referring to the first topic for deliberation during the ongoing 74th Conference, *viz. Self-Assessment by Legislature for Enhancing its Relevance*, Smt. Kumar said that there was a general disquiet about the gradually declining standards of our Legislatures in the performance of their duties. Debates and discussions, considered to be the hallmark of democracy, were often marked by disruptions, confrontations and various non-democratic alternatives. In this backdrop, it had become imperative that all Legislative Bodies across the country make self-assessment with regard to their functioning in the realization of the urges, aspirations and the expectations of the people, she emphasized.

Speaking on the second topic, *viz. Creation of Smaller States – A National Perspective*, Smt. Kumar observed that, of late, there had been demands for carving out new States from the existing bigger ones as also for the creation of the Second States Reorganization Commission. She hoped that the Conference would discuss this issue in the national perspective.

As regards the third topic, *viz., The Role of Speaker in the Administration of Legislature*, Smt. Kumar said that the Speaker has been constitutionally vested with definite powers in the running of the House from both administrative as well as legislative angles, and as such his or her role in the administration of the Legislature forms the bedrock of the entire legislative functioning. Observing that the representational and legislative functions of the modern Legislatures have substantially diversified and increased, Smt. Kumar said that the Conference of Presiding Officers assumes considerable significance, for it gives an appropriate platform to the Presiding Officers of the Legislatures across the country to share and learn from one another's experiences in making the working of their respective Houses more productive and useful.

Earlier, in his Welcome Address, Shri Ishwardas Rohani, Hon'ble Speaker, Madhya Pradesh Vidhan Sabha, said that Presiding Officers have great responsibility in meeting the expectations of the masses at large. In this regard, he felt that, while they have to fulfill the rising expectations of the people, they also have to evolve effective rules of procedures to run the House without inviting allegations of prejudice, discrimination and injustice. He lamented that, though the Chair derives strength from the House and runs the House in a neutral and unbiased manner, the decisions of the Chair are sometimes not given the due respect.

Referring to the expanding jurisdictions of the Legislatures owing to constitutional amendments and new laws being enacted, Shri Rohani pointed out that Legislative Bodies have now greater responsibility with regard to public welfare. Dwelling upon the duty of the Presiding Officer to resolve the precarious situations in case of encroachment of constitutional boundaries, Shri Rohani said that the Presiding Officer has to maintain the decorum and dignity of the House, whereby the expectation and assurance of the masses is sustained.

Highlighting the role of Presiding Officer in management of the proceedings of the House, Shri Rohani said that he has to rely on his knowledge, experience, intelligence and conscience to take decisions legitimately. He added that a Presiding Officer sometimes finds himself

alone and his impartiality on certain decisions questioned. In the light of such experience, the Conference of Presiding Officers assumes greater importance as it provides a common platform to the Presiding Officers to evolve such procedures and rules through consensus which help them to effectively run the House and to strengthen parliamentary democracy.

The Inaugural Ceremony was attended by the Presiding Officers and Secretaries of the Legislative Bodies in India and several other distinguished guests.

Earlier in the day, Smt. Meira Kumar was given a Guard of Honour on her arrival at the ceremonial gate of the Vidhan Sabha Bhawan.

Subsequently, the Lok Sabha Speaker inaugurated an Exhibition titled *Democracy in India: From Past to Present*, organized by the Parliamentary Museum and Archives (PMA) Division of the Lok Sabha Secretariat in collaboration with the Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity (DAVP) and another Exhibition titled *Development of the State*, organized by the Madhya Pradesh Vidhan Sabha Secretariat. The Exhibitions have been put up near the Central Hall of the Madhya Pradesh Vidhan Sabha Bhawan.

After the inauguration of the Conference, the Business Session dwelt at length on the agenda item *Self-assessment by Legislature for Enhancing its Relevance*, with the Speaker, Lok Sabha, and Chairperson of the Conference, Smt. Meira Kumar, in the Chair.

Shri K. Rahman Khan, Deputy Chairman, Rajya Sabha, in his speech, read out by Shri Charles Pyngrope, Speaker of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, said that a vibrant legislature is the hallmark of a healthy democracy and that it must assess its own performance periodically in order to maintain its lasting relevance. While carrying out an appraisal of its functions, it is in the interest of strengthening parliamentary democracy that such an assessment evaluates the efficacy of available rules, procedures, norms and conventions, he added. He also felt that there is a greater challenge is to assess the quality of Legislature's functions since there is no universal benchmark for quality assessment of its work and output.

Besides Shri K. Rahman Khan, Deputy Chairman, Rajya Sabha, a large number of Presiding Officers also participated in the lively discussion on the topic.