

No citizen is inferior or superior: CJI

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Citing the example of how the present President is a Dalit, a farmer's son is Vice-President while a tea vendor has achieved the unique distinction of becoming the country's Prime Minister, Chief Justice of India JS Khehar on Tuesday said that no citizen in the country is inferior or superior and this is what the Constitution has promised to all.

Giving his maiden and final Independence Day speech as CJI, Justice Khehar gave his own example to show how despite not being an Indian citizen (initially he was a Kenyan citizen), after becoming one, he got equal status and opportunity like anyone else, that helped him ascend the highest seat of judiciary.

"After being a citizen, you are neither inferior nor superior to anyone. You are no less or more than anyone else... the country has a Dalit President, who spent his childhood in a mud hut. We have an agriculturalist as our Vice-President who started his political career by pasting party posters. We have a Prime Minister who used to be a tea vendor at one point... The CJI was not a citizen of this country to start with, but when he became the citizen of this country, he was



Former Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh and HD Devegowda, CJI Justice JS Khehar, Home Minister Rajnath Singh, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley and other dignitaries during the 71st Independence Day function at Red Fort in New Delhi on Tuesday PTI

equal to everybody else and had equal opportunities. This is what citizenship or Independence is — the freedom to all to achieve their hopes, ambitions, desires," said Justice Khehar said.

Union Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad, who was also present at the function organised by Supreme Court Bar Association, said, "India is not secular because the Constitution says so... India is secular because India's heritage is secular." He urged the crowd comprising judges, lawyers and their families to make an effort to remember the "unsung heroes"

of the freedom movement. He urged lawyers, who usually vacation to exotic locations abroad, to plan a visit to Andaman and Nicobar and show their children the Cellular jail where our freedom fighters spent decades to win us freedom. "It will be the best way of showing respect to their contribution," he told the gathering.

The CJI too recalled Abdulla, who killed Culcutta judge JP Norman in 1871 and Sher Ali Afridi, who assassinated Lord Mayo, Viceroy of India on February 8, 1872, as being the unsung heroes of our freedom struggle. "These peo-

ple did not run away from the scene. They did not tender any defence. They were put to gallows in Andaman," the CJI said.

Attorney General KK Venugopal, also present at the occasion, spoke saying that Independence is not merely for those who are wealthy and rich but also for the poor and deprived. SCBA president RS Suri, in his address, mentioned that 33 per cent of Parliamentarians have criminal cases against them while most judges happen to be the children of senior judges in the higher judiciary.

Taking offence to his ref-

erence of son of judges becoming judges, the CJI recalled his experience of meeting a young "impressive" lawyer who turned down the offer of becoming a judge because his father was a judge.

Making his point, the CJI said, "There are many wise children in this country. They may be the children of judges, Dalits, Brahmins. In independent India, we stand together to achieve whatever we can achieve." The CJI also used the occasion to deny a news report that published his son's name as one of the law officers selected to represent Punjab Government. It turned out to be some other Khehar and was a case of mistaken identity, he clarified.

Taking cue from the CJI on selecting meritorious persons as judges, the Law Minister Prasad backed the centralised selection mechanism mooted by Supreme Court for selecting trial court judges.

"Why shouldn't we have a good intake by having a stricter selection process? I fully endorse it and would appeal to high courts and the states which are opposing it to reconsider as this initiative is for the country," the Minister said. He also assured the High Courts that this process will not impinge upon the rights of High Courts in any manner.