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**Science Quest 2014**

**Prize Giving Ceremony**

**Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre – 29 May 2014 at 11 30 hrs**

Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Students

Good day to all of you.

It is always a pleasure to be at the Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre that has over the years carved a reputation for itself as a promoter—if not a guardian-- of what is often called the ‘scientific temper’. It is noteworthy that, year in and year out, the Centre seeks to innovate in its drive to develop the sense of wonder about ‘la chose scientifique’ among the students.

Numerous ventures undertaken by the Centre bear testimony to this. The ‘**Science Adventure** ‘ and **“Science on the Move”** launched in 2013 have been competitions that have seen the participation of numerous students while **‘Talking about Science**’ has enabled interactive discussions on inventions, discoveries, new technologies and facts on science topics to boost students’ knowledge and understanding of science.

Obviously, the general public has also been targeted through programmes like **National Science Week** launched in 2013 and the “**Caravane de la Science**” put on the rails in 2010—both of which promote public understanding of science issues.

Nor has Rodrigues been forgotten with contextually relevant science dissemination programs like the Rodrigues Science Challenge, On the Spot Drawing and Painting Competition, , Science Slam/ Poetry Contest and the National Science Week.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you already know, the Science Quest contest encourages students to undertake hands-on projects to solve a problem in their immediate school or home environment. It is gratifying to note that more than 200 entries were received from about 800 students. The exhibition of these projects is a must-see event.

Let me confess that there are two stated objectives behind the organization of the Science Quest that have struck me.

One of them has to do with developing “*team spirit and communication skills among students*”.

Perhaps two of the most significant lexical items that are globally used today are “lifelong learning” and “employability”. The idea is that no one knows what jobs in the future will be like and, therefore, there is an inability to be confident about which skills will be needed.

As a safeguard, we always hear that the human capital will have to be ‘de-skilled’ and ‘re-skilled’. Just as importantly, we hear a lot about a new ‘skills set’ that has to be mastered – namely, a common core of ‘Soft Skills’ like communication, problem solving, team work, collaborative learning and working, critical thinking and the like.

My Ministry’s curricular reform programme is precisely geared towards attaining this objective. Illustratively, the HSC Pro to be started next year and , especially, the Entrepreneurship Programme that was put on track last year in secondary schools are meant to inculcate and sharpen these skills.

As the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) puts it, ‘Entrepreneurial skills center around **attitudes** (soft skills), such as persistence, networking and self-confidence on the one hand and **enabling skills** (hard skills) on the other hand” like business planning, financial literacy and managerial skills. The important thing is that these skills are transferable.

To my mind, Science Quest, by seeking to develop team spirit and communication skills among students becomes an important contributory appendage to the development of an entrepreneurial culture in society.

Ladies and gentlemen, and dear students,

Let me now come to the second Objective behind the Science Quest contest. This relates to instilling, and I quote, “*an awareness of how Science and Technology can be used to address problems*.”

Scientific literacy is today a *sine qua non.*  We are surrounded by science and its several and variegated manifestations. Not having an awareness of the usefulness of this literacy can be a major slow-down in the individual and, ultimately, in the social set-up.

And yet, after Form 3, numerous students shy away from opting for science for a variety of reasons.

Allow me to highlight two or three paradoxes regarding these perceptions about science and the actual reality that it represents.

**Paradox One**: Science does not open new professional avenues and jobs.

The reality is otherwise. Scientific thinking brings to the fore such skills as reflection, the making of assumptions, the formulation of hypotheses, the search for evidence to back these up, etc., until that ‘Eureka!’ moment when the chips fall in place.

And who can deny that all professional expertise—whatever the profession one embarks on—are ultimately based on these scientific skills?

Scientific thinking is in reality a **life skill**, a **survival skill** that none of us can do without.

**Paradox Two**: Scientific study necessitates huge expenses through the provision of sophisticated, costly and state-of-the-art equipment.

Not necessarily. The Exhibition outside demonstrates how we can go far in the domain of scientific literacy with the basics. I have always said it – nature around us has provided us with a warehouse of limitless resources. We can tap these and easily concoct useful lessons that have a scientific thrust. The Science Educators present today will doubtless vouch for the veracity of this.

Learning by doing—the hands-on approach—is definitely strongly facilitated when we have these readily available resources.

**Paradox three:** There is a gender issue involved, with girl students most often opting out of science studies because ‘Science is too difficult’ for them.

Well, ideally I’d rather leave it to the girl students to laugh off this fallacy ! In fact, science is within the reach of ALL learners, boys and girls. The level of difficulty has nothing to do with it—if anything, there is no subject that can be deemed as “easy”!

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me end on this note.

Congratulations to all of you who have participated in the Science Quest Contest. Congratulations to the Exhibitors and the winners.

Students, do go back to your schools as Ambassadors of Science and proselytize to win over converts among your peers to the Scientific Cause!

I thank you for your attention.