

**Speech of Hon. (Mrs.) Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun
Minister of Education & Human Resources
Tertiary Education and Scientific Research
Opening of “National Science Week 2017”
Monday 08 May 2017**

Dear Students

It gives me great pleasure once again to be at the Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre, this time on the occasion of the Opening of the National Science Week 2017.

I guess all of you present here today do not have to be convinced or persuaded about the significance of Science in our everyday life. All of you have certainly more than a mere passing interest “*dans la chose scientifique*”. Science and its handmaid, technology, have a tremendous impact on our everyday life, working as they do for our collective welfare. We are surrounded by constantly upgraded gadgets in our homes and offices: our TV, fridge, washing machine, electrical network, WI-FI and smartphones, the food we grow, buy and eat, our Health system, our transportation system.

You name it and Science & Technology readily delivers.

So, the virtue lies in bringing Science and Technology to the doorstep of every Mauritian. And that has to start from an early age. Hence, the genesis of this National Science Week that my Ministry propounded in 2016 as part of a science promotional venture.

Let me also add that the holding of such a Week is a common feature in many countries. In Australia and India, for instance, the Science Week is replete with a whole set of activities dedicated to Science and Technology, including chats with scientists, whether face-to-face or online. In other cases, schools facilitate science demonstrations—

and we all know the power and appeal of hands-on demonstrations in fueling the imagination of our young learners.

Ladies and Gentlemen

This edition of the National Science Week has as an important component to it, namely, an exhibition on Science and Technology. As you well know, in Mauritius, all Ministries and Departments place a reliance on science and technology in the transaction of their core business and activities, albeit in varying degrees.

In this National Science Week, we bring together a number of stakeholders from all spheres of our economy under one roof to showcase and explain and let you discover the hidden technology in the gadgets they use. Some stakeholders would be quite willing to let you test these gadgets and, as importantly, answer all your questions.

Do raise as many questions as you can: remember that “scientific temper” is founded on two things: a child-like curiosity and the search for answers to the questions “Why?” and “How?”

I wish to thank all those departments who are supporting this laudable initiative to motivate our youth. It is a way to showcase and promote your precious contribution directly or indirectly to the socio-economic well-being of our Republic.

In fact, the departmental participation reflects a recognition of the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to science.

All Departments are today called upon to coordinate their actions and work hand in hand to ensure optimization of resources and fast progress in all domains of activity. I need hardly spell out how it is crucial for scientific researchers to pool their brains and find solutions for the greater good of the community at large.

My Dear Students

You will undoubtedly have been informed that a major aspect of the National Science Week is the holding of thematic seminars on pertinent issues related to Science and Technology over the five day period.

I am informed that there are six themes identified, namely,

- (i) Research Trends in Science, Technology and Innovation
- (ii) Opportunities in Science
- (iii) Science Career Fair
- (iv) Informal Science Education
- (v) Science for Society, and
- (vi) Success Stories of Local Scientists

There are two important dimensions you, dear students, have to keep in view here.

One, Science & Technology breakthroughs are one of the megatrends acting as drivers of change in society. This is the language of our modern world—the Internet, the Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence and Big Data, the Sharing Economy that digitally allows the exchange of goods without having to go through traditional establishments like banks, etc. The sooner we familiarize ourselves with these and many other scientifically-induced megatrends, the better off we will be in Mauritius.

The **second** dimension is linked to the first.

As per Government Vision 2030, new pillars of the Economy have been identified—the Ocean Economy, Food Security, Renewable Energy, ICT, and Sustainable Development. Incidentally, these goals are also in line with the SDG Goals as defined and adhered to by the

UN. Successful implementation of these new thrust areas depends on Science and Technology.

However, what is the picture we have before us?

A stock-taking of the present intake in science subjects at SC and HSC reveals that there is a low percentage of students embarking on science subjects studies. For example, Biology, which is considered an essential base for food security & sustainable agriculture, the blue economy and health sciences, has the lowest output at HSC level with only about 6% of HSC intake. Conversely, in Europe and the US, Biology is one of the most popular science subjects.

How to explain this situation?

We can think about and agree on a number of reasons for the lack of interest in science.

But I believe that we also agree that the trend has to be reversed.

Thus, one of the tasks the HRDC could take on board is to come up with a long-term plan for science-related fields in Mauritius and the Tertiary Education institutions would then plan their courses accordingly. My Ministry also plans to rethink totally the Careers Education and Guidance service so as to have better informed and properly-guided students as they reflect upon the choice of future studies and careers.

On the other hand, the Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre could also envisage encouraging schools to put up a Science-related event.

A case in point would be the issue of sustainability that is today a global commitment. Under this overarching theme, issues like water, energy, food security, health and resilience, among others, could be at the heart of discussions, giving science pride of place in the students' psyche.

In the interim, I am happy to know that there will be a Science Career Fair where various departments will have one- to- one interaction with students and guide them through the process and requirements of embarking into specific careers.

Science and technology are thus our future and, if Mauritius wants to evolve, it should have more scientists and encourage more research in all areas. We shall always need engineers, doctors, chemists, teachers and technicians to maintain and develop our infrastructure while maintaining our sustainability.

Ladies and gentlemen, Chairperson of the Centre,

I am very pleased to learn that RGSC has worked out a visionary Strategic plan for a long term. This is going to be a major milestone in that it provides a holistic approach to science promotion in Mauritius. I am positive that, if properly implemented, it will certainly give a fillip to the promotion of science in our schools.

On this note, I wish to thank everyone who has collaborated to make this 2017 edition of the National Science Week a success: Thank you, stakeholders, students and educators and thank you to the entire staff of the Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre.

National Science Week 2017 is a welcome addition to the Science Centre's exhibits and programs. I hope you will also appreciate it as a place of fun, exploration and learning for everyone.

I would certainly encourage everyone of you to pass on the message to your family members and friends to come and visit this Exhibition and participate actively in the interactive sessions.

With these words, it is now my immense pleasure to declare the National Science Week 2017 open.

Thank you for your attention.