

SPEECH

His Excellency Mr Dharambeer Gokhool G.C.S.K., President of the Republic of Mauritius

| EVENT: | Science Quest 2025- |
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| | Exhibition and Award Ceremony |
| VENUE: | Main Hall, Cote D'Or National Complex, Cote D'Or |
| DATE: | 23 MAY 2025 |
| TIME: | 11 00 Hours |

Protocol

Her Excellency Mrs Irada Zeynalova, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Russian Federation to Mauritius

Mr Ranjan Singh, First Secretary, High Commission of India

Dr Aman Kumar Maulloo, Director of the Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre

Members of the Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre,

Mr Gilles Martial, Internal Communication and PR Manager, Mauritius Commercial Bank

Distinguished guests,

Esteemed Rectors,

Educators and Dear Students,

ALL PROTOCOL OBSERVED.

<u>1. Introduction</u>

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is both a great pleasure and a privilege to join you today as the Guest of Honour for the **Exhibition and Award Ceremony** of the 10th Edition of the **Science Quest**.

I wish to begin by extending my heartfelt congratulations to the **Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre** and its partners, especially the Mauritius Commercial Bank, for their unwavering commitment to cultivating a scientific spirit among our nation's youth.

I have a special relation with this Centre.

Inaugurated in 2004, it began its mission "**to promote Science and Technology (S&T)** among the general population in the Republic of Mauritius", in line with its vision to be a "**Centre of Excellence** in the communication and promotion of Science and Technology".

The Centre was set up in collaboration with the National Council of Science Museums (NCSM), India.

It was inaugurated by Shrimati Sonia Gandhi ji on 30 November 2004 and has been open to the public since 1 December 2004.

When I became the **Minister of Education and Human Resource in 2005**, (2005-2008), I appointed a colleague of mine from the Faculty of Science (University of Mauritius), **Professor Maddun Bhuruth**, who teamed up with the young **Dr Aman Kumar Maulloo**, the first Mauritian Director, to engage in an exciting journey of igniting young minds to explore the wonderful **World of Science and Technology**.

The foundation was laid and thereafter, under the able leadership of Dr Maulloo and his team, with a myriad of activities and events, the institution emerged as a well-established Centre of learning and discovery of Science and Technology.

The annual reports of the Centre constitute a living testimony of the achievements of the Centre over the past 20 years.

2. Science Quest 2025

Over the past decade, **Science Quest** has evolved into more than just a competition.

It is now emerging as **a platform for nurturing a scientific mind** among our youth- a process that involves curiosity, the quest for new knowledge careful observation, critical thinking and evidence-based hypothesis testing. It should therefore be a celebration of creative problem-solving, discovery and exploration of innovative solutions enabling our young minds to step into the roles of potential scientists, inventors, designers, artists and change makers.

The participation of over 400 students from 55 secondary schools guided by 90 dedicated educators this year is nothing short of inspiring.

It evidences the passion, curiosity, and potential that define the future of our Republic.

From **solar-powered desalination systems** to **flood monitoring systems** and **greenhouse science**,

these projects show the potential of our youth in addressing real-world issues like climate change, food insecurity, sustainable development and many more challenges and opportunities that I outlined in the National Assembly when I read to the Nation, the **Government Programme 2025-2029** – A Bridge to the Future- on 24th January this year.

I invite you to read that programme so that you can have a clearer picture of the **NEW Republic of Mauritius** we intend to build –together with you.

Each project you have worked on in a spirit of collaboration; devoting long hours of experimentation, learning from failure, and experiencing the joy of discovery, is a testimony of your creative potential.

Today, you should be more knowledgeable, more confident, and more prepared for the world that lies ahead.

Always aim to go beyond the **"beyond the blue** "; challenge yourselves more often and move beyond your comfort zones, not only in your scientific endeavor but in all aspects of life.

<u>3. Beyond the Prize: The Life Skills You've Gained</u>

By participating in Science Quest 2025, each one of you has already gained far more than a medal or a trophy.

You are shaping a new attitude, a new mindset: a scientific mindset that will enable you to pursue careers in Science, Technology, Business, Law, or the Arts, and set you apart as leaders, innovators, and change makers.

Today, I also want to acknowledge the **educators and mentors**, our **unsung heroes**, whose guidance, encouragement, and patience have helped shape these young minds.

You have **inspired curiosity**, **built confidence**, and laid the foundation for *a lifetime of learning*. Thank you for your invaluable contribution.

4. <u>Celebrating Ten Years – Time for Reflection</u>

As we mark the 10th anniversary of the Science Quest, this milestone offers us an opportunity not just to celebrate, but also to reflect.

It prompts an important question:

What impact has the Science Quest had over the past ten years on the lives of the general population as per the mission of the Centre?

When I met the late Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, former President of the Republic of India, during his visit to Mauritius, he shared the following reflection with me:

If Science and Technology do not impact on the lives of the citizens and help improve their quality of lives, Science and Technology has no value.

We have seen enthusiastic participation.

But what happens to our students after **the competition ends**?

- How many go on to pursue science and technology-related programmes at university?
- How many have built careers as engineers, researchers, programmers, or entrepreneurs?
- How important is it for us to know how useful the knowledge of our young minds has been to society?

I would like here to refer to the story of the H2ESTIA project in the Netherlands.

The Netherlands launched the H2ESTIA project to develop the world's first liquid hydrogen-powered cargo ship - a flagship project for commercial shipping, transport bulk goods without emitting harmful substances.

This was inspired by the project of a team of Dutch students from **Delft University of Technology**, who came up with the idea of a boat powered entirely by liquid hydrogen, aiming to spark change in the maritime industry's approach to sustainability.

(Source: <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjwHrk0UGzc</u>)

I would like to humbly suggest to the management of the Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre the value of undertaking a *tracer study*- a comprehensive follow-up on past participants of Science Quest.

Such a study would help us understand the long-term impact of the Science Quest initiative.

I know that the Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre is making continued efforts to promote the love of Science and Technology among the youth.

In fact, on 12th April, you celebrated Cosmonautics Day together with the Russian Embassy in Mauritius, in the presence of Russian cosmonaut

Sergey Kud-Sverchkov. You honored the legacy of cosmonauts like Yuri Gagarin, the first person to orbit the earth.

- But have we succeeded in sparking a lifelong passion for science?
- Has this platform been a springboard for real-world careers in STEM?

This is the 10th edition. Has any of the many Science Quest projects which has been rewarded followed the Dutch example?

If not, what are the reasons?

Knowing the answers would not only allow us to improve and adapt the programme, but also measure how such competitions are helping shape **Mauritius' Scientific and Technological Future**, in line with the Centre's vision.

Food for thought.

5. Promoting Women and Girls in STEM

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's celebration should also compel us to reflect on the critical importance of inclusivity in **Science and Technology**.

As you know, the promotion of women and girls in **STEM fields** has been a cause close to my heart.

In fact, in February this year, I had the honour to attend the celebration of the International Day for Women and Girls in Science, where we welcomed the first woman hydrographer and first woman cartographer of Mauritius.

Two of our female scientists, who had joined the 43rd Indian Scientific Expedition to the Antarctica, also shared about the research they conducted on climate change and its impacts on our marine organisms and ecosystems.

Yet, despite significant progress, we continue to witness an underrepresentation of women in many scientific disciplines- globally as well as in Mauritius.

- Only **one in three** scientists worldwide is a woman.
- Women constitute **31.5%** of researchers globally.
- Female authorship of scientific publications stands at **30%**.
- Women in **computer science and engineering** earn **27% less** than their male counterparts.
- In aviation, men dominate piloting roles, while women are mostly assigned as flight attendants.
- In artificial intelligence, women make up only 22% of the workforce.
- Just **2%** of venture capital goes to tech startups led by women.

Despite excelling in National Examinations, girls in Mauritius are still underrepresented in advanced science subjects.

In fact, over the past three years, the pass rate for girls in subjects like Biology and Chemistry has dropped by nearly 30%. Meanwhile, the overall proportion of students pursuing science subjects remains around 25-30%.

This is deeply concerning in a World that will increasingly rely on scientific thinking and innovation to address pressing global challengesfrom pandemics and food insecurity to energy transitions and climate change. Policy makers, educationists and industry must address this issue.

But everything is not doom and gloom.

It is expected that by 2069, gender parity will be attained in Biology and by 2087, in Chemistry, by 2144 in Engineering, Mathematics and Physics by 2158.

Let us hope that these timelines will be compressed and that we shall be able to achieve gender parity in Science and Technology much earlier.

Meanwhile we must continue to collectively create environments, both in classrooms and beyond, where curiosity is nurtured, ambitions are supported, and achievements are celebrated.

<u>6. The Evolution of STEM into STREAM</u>

As we think about the future of Science Education, we must also be forward-looking in how we shape it.

The traditional STEM model- Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics- has evolved.

Today, educators around the world speak of **STEAM**, adding the Arts to foster creativity and empathy.

And even more recently, we speak of **STREAM**, which integrates Reading and wRiting, emphasizing the importance of literacy, communication, and critical reflection.

This holistic approach is vital for preparing our students- not just to compete in exams- but to solve problems, work in teams, and contribute meaningfully to society.

I encourage schools and institutions to embrace this broader vision of scientific learning.

7. A call for lifelong-passion for Science

Dear Students,

Whether you're in Grade 7 or Grade 13, whether you walk away today with a Gold, Silver, Bronze, or a Merit Prize- please know this:

You are all winners.

By daring to explore, to test, to question-you have embodied the very spirit of science.

You have demonstrated **creativity**, **curiosity**, **and courage**. These qualities will serve you not only in labs and lecture halls but in every aspect of your life.

Let your participation in Science Quest 2025 be just the beginning.

I urge you: keep experimenting, keep exploring, and keep dreaming.

Take inspiration from the great women and men who have walked the path of Science before you- but also forge your own path.

8. Conclusion

In closing, I wish once again to thank and congratulate:

- Every student who has worked with passion and perseverance;
- Every teacher and mentor who has guided with dedication and love;
- Every parent and guardian who has supported behind the scenes;
- And the Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre and its partners for a decade of leadership in nurturing scientific talent.

Let us continue to create more platforms like Science Quest.

Let us ensure that *science is accessible, inclusive, and empowering* for everyone.

And let us remember that science knows no gender, no borders, and no boundaries. It only asks that we stay curious and committed.

A recent documentary, filmed with support from the Russian Embassy and titled "Friendship Beyond Cyclones", revisits a remarkable moment in Mauritian history — the aftermath of Cyclone Gervaise in 1975 — when Soviet ships crossed oceans to assist our island in a time of great need.

Their work exemplified not just technical expertise, but human solidarity through science and service.

May such examples of cross-national collaboration continue to inspire our youth to see science as not just a career, but a mission — a bridge between people, nations, and hearts.

Finally, let me share this quote from Megan Smith with you:

The more people we can attract to science and technology - men, women, everybody - the more economic opportunity we have as a nation.

Congratulations to you all once again.

Thank you for your attention.