



SPEECH

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

**EVENT: LAUNCHING OF NATIONAL AUTISM AWARENESS
PROGRAMME / SUMMIT**

VENUE: ANGEL SPECIAL SCHOOL

DATE: SSR ROAD, RIVIERE DES ANGUILLES

TIME: 10:00 HOURS

Honourable Hambyrajen Narsinghen, Junior Minister of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade;

The Director of the Special Education Needs Authority, Mrs Caroline Arekion;

The Chairperson of SENA, Dr Veemen Appadu;

The President Mr Pravindra Dhorasoo, and the management of the Angel Special School and Welfare Association;

Dr Alok Arora, Clinical Psychologist, Autism Specialist and Director of JKP Care Foundation,

Distinguished Guests;

Teachers and Staff members;

Parents and dear children.

Good morning.

This is my visit to a third special-needs school in the south of the island. Last year, I had the pleasure of visiting the SEN unit of the Rivière des Anguilles Government School, and the Southern Handicapped Association in Riambel.

So, I am very happy to be here today.

Before I make my address, allow me to share a personal observation, as President of our Republic.

The whole world including our society is experiencing a **polycrisis situation**-a time of very rapid changes, while conflict, uncertainty and increasing divisions are being witnessed across the world.

A context conducive for the spread of a narrative of doom and gloom, which can be very harmful to our nation's morale and future.

Mauritius is certainly not immune to these challenges or their consequences.

But can we as responsible citizens allow doom and gloom to prevail over hope and happiness?

As Head of State, I can share with you what I am observing.

My observation is that there is, in parallel to our challenges, some visible signs of a positive societal transformation in progress.

Because, in parallel, I see another movement taking place - quieter, but very real.

I see people reconnecting with arts and culture, with history and heritage, with community, nature, holistic wellness, and with the simple value of human connection - creating spaces where people who might otherwise feel excluded can participate, contribute and feel that they belong.

And we must be honest and courageous with ourselves and, as responsible citizens, acknowledge these signs of hope and positive transformation

When people are doing good work, we have a responsibility to support them.

And this is why I am here this morning.

To recognize and pay tribute to all those engaged, especially the management, staff, parents and well-wishers of the of the Angel Special School and Welfare Association for this noble and laudable initiative.

Commendable Initiative

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me therefore begin by commending the Angel Special School and Welfare Association, for organising this series of activities since 25 August, aimed at raising awareness about autism within the school community and, more broadly, across our society.

I particularly like the name of your school. An angel is traditionally associated with care, kindness and protection – qualities that define us as human beings, qualities which are very much at the heart of the work you do here.

I understand that around 12 new students with autism have joined the school this year. This is a reminder of the continuing need for greater understanding, awareness and support for children with autism and their families.

I therefore commend you for this laudable initiative, and I pay tribute to the leadership behind it: the management, teachers, therapists, carers, parents and the entire team who work with these children.

Having spent most of my life as an educator, I am acutely aware that such work requires not only professional competence, but also empathy, patience, consistency and a great deal of passion, selfless love and humanity.

I extend a very warm welcome, in particular, to Dr Alok Arora, who has joined us from India. Founder and Director of JKP Care Foundation, he is a distinguished and recognized professional.

He is the author of the book, “Spectrum of Hope”, which puts particular emphasis on the neurodiversity movement’s rejection of efforts to “cure” or “normalise” neurological differences, and its advocacy for accepting, respecting and empowering individuals for who they are.

Indeed, rejecting the “normalisation” of differences should not mean that we overlook the specific needs or particularities of individuals with autism.

Quite the opposite- it means recognising those differences and providing the right support, without making conformity to a particular idea of “normal” the condition for acceptance.

This is precisely the difference between **equality and equity** that we must all bear in mind.

Summit:Autism and Disability Inclusion

What I find particularly valuable about today's summit is its holistic and inclusive approach around a very important theme - from early identification and assessment, to family empowerment, inclusion, skills development, employability and, ultimately, greater independence. The Summit themes are well thought out and will provide both breadth and depth of coverage.

Because autism is not one issue.

It touches education, health, social protection, employment, family life and, above all, the question of inclusion and dignity.

That is why our response cannot be fragmented either. It has to be both pluri-disciplinary as well as interdisciplinary.

We are all aware of the challenges - including gaps in access to the right support, stigma, misconceptions and lack of understanding.

But I also believe we are making progress.

Government is working to maximise available resources to provide the necessary facilities, including a new Autism Day Care Centre in Flacq, as announced by the Minister of Health and Wellness.

When we consider that around 13, 000 people in Mauritius may be affected by autism, directly or indirectly, it is clear that this concerns society as a whole.

And this figure also reminds us that autism is not a matter concerning only specialists, schools or families. It is a matter for all of us.

Inclusion must therefore begin not only in our institutions, but also in our communities, our workplaces and in the way we speak about and interact with persons with disabilities.

Presidency's Commitment

This is precisely why, in July last year, as one of among my very first Initiatives as new President, I organised a Round Table on Disability Inclusion at State House, together with the United Nations, the National Human Rights Commission and representatives of civil society.

The clearest message which emanated from that discussion was that many institutions and organisations are doing important work, but often in a fragmented system without proper co-ordination.

There was a need to bring these perspectives together.

I subsequently discussed the question of disability inclusion with various leaders, including President Emmanuel Macron during his visit to State House in November 2025, and we are working closely with the French Embassy on the issue.

These efforts has already contributed to the establishment by Government of an Interministerial Committee on Disability .

For me, this is one of the useful roles of the Presidency;

Not to replace institutions or professionals who have the expertise, but to listen, encourage dialogue and, where possible, help create synergies for greater effectiveness.

And ultimately, to help ensure that good intentions are translated into better coordination, stronger support systems and tangible outcomes for people and their families.

Reflections: Impact of technology

Digital technology is now part of everyday life - offering enormous opportunities, but also presenting new challenges for parents, educators and children.

Research is increasingly highlighting **potential negative effects of early and prolonged screen exposure** on children's development - including possible delays in speech and language, and difficulties with attention, social interaction and emotional regulation.

We should be careful not to make claims that the evidence does not support.

But that does not mean we should avoid the conversation.

We need to ask what happens when screens gradually begin to replace conversation, play, physical activity, outdoor experiences and the simple interaction between a child and a parent.

The question is therefore not whether technology is good or bad. It is how we use it, how much we use it, and whether it is replacing experiences that are essential to a child's development.

And we should approach parents with understanding, not judgement.

Sometimes a phone or tablet is simply what allows a parent a few moments to breathe or helps a child remain calm.

Parents need support and practical guidance, not guilt.

And there is another practical question we should ask ourselves.

When a parent is seeking guidance or facing a challenge, which door do they knock on? Do they know where to go to find all the support and guidance available to them? Or do they have to knock on several doors, navigate different institutions and, eventually, become tired and frustrated?

These are areas which must be discussed and addressed.

The JKP Care Foundation runs an Autism Helpline. We could learn a few lessons from their experience.

A child should not have to wait for a system to become coordinated, and a parent should not have to become an expert in navigating institutions simply to obtain the support that his or her child needs.

We therefore need clearer pathways, better coordination between services, and information that is accessible to families at the point when they need it most.

State House and Inclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since assuming office, equality, equity, inclusion and solidarity are values we have been promoting.

I have also tried to make State House more accessible and open to people from all walks of life.

In this spirit, we welcome children, university students, community organisations and persons with disabilities for visits and interactions.

These encounters matter because they change the relationship between an institution and the people it serves.

Because State House is the people's house.

Message to Parents

I also pay tribute to all parents.

Et là, je souhaite m'adresser directement aux parents.

Je sais que le parcours n'est pas toujours simple.

Il y a les inquiétudes, les questions sur l'avenir, les décisions à prendre pour l'éducation et l'accompagnement de son enfant, et souvent le regard des autres.

Mais vous connaissez votre enfant mieux que personne.

Vous connaissez ses difficultés, mais vous connaissez aussi ses forces, ses intérêts, sa personnalité et ces petits progrès qui, pour vous, représentent parfois de grandes victoires.

Vous ne devez pas porter cette responsabilité seuls.

L'école, les professionnels, les associations et les institutions ont un rôle à jouer à vos côtés.

Et la société tout entière a également un rôle à jouer: celui de vous accompagner, de vous comprendre et de vous respecter.

Je suis venu pour vous assurer de tout mon soutien.

Donc, continuez surtout à croire en vos enfants.

Closing Remarks

Ladies and gentlemen,

As President of the Republic, my most fundamental responsibility is to uphold the rights and dignity of every citizen, and to encourage a Mauritius in which inclusion is not simply an aspiration, but a reality, in keeping with the values of our Constitution and the Mauritius we want to build for future generations.

This is also the undeniable birth right of every citizen.

Let us therefore move beyond slogans and speeches and focus on what we can do, in our everyday lives, to make a real difference - **As One People, As One Nation.**

I congratulate Angel Special School and Dr Alok Arora for contributing to this effort.

I wish you meaningful learning from this summit, and I hope that the knowledge shared today, and the Summit Declaration, will translate into practical, concrete and actionable outcomes.

I shall be very attentive to the deliberations and recommendations that emerge today.

Let us work together so that inclusion is not merely something we speak about at conferences and summits, but something that every child, every parent and every person with a disability can experience in their daily lives.

Thank you.

Merci et bonne continuation.