

**"En Route to the Future:"**  
**Convocation Speech by**  
**Prof. AFM Ruhul Haque, MP, FRCS, FCPS, FICS**  
Minister of Health and Family Welfare,  
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh  
at the **17<sup>th</sup> Convocation** of the  
**National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS),**  
Bangalore, India

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Your Excellency, Shri Ghulam Nabi Azad, Chancellor, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, and the Union Minister, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, India; Professor P Satish Chandra, Director cum Vice Chancellor, NIMHANS, distinguished faculties, families, graduates, ladies and gentleman: A very good morning to you all.

Thank you very much for inviting me to this auspicious occasion at this prestigious institution.

People across South Asia know about NIMHANS. They know about the institution as a superior service provider in a very special segment of healthcare and human wellbeing. Before coming to you, I have learned quite a bit more about NIMHANS. I have learnt about its history. I have learnt about its heritage and I have learnt about the innovation that the institution engenders. I congratulate the families, who sent their youngsters to this institution!

If there is anything, anything at all, which can describe today's world and its young, it's the supremacy of 'choice' in today's life. I am happy to see you – all these young men and women – choosing a life of selfless service and dedication to a cause and I am happy to be here with you on this rite of passage. Myself being a student of medicine – and of life itself – as it unfolds in all its multifarious ways and means and colors and fury – I know how all of you must be feeling – prepared to step out into the challenging professional world out there!

Today, I do not come to you as a professional alone. I also come to you as the Minister of a sovereign country. Therefore, at the very outset, I would like to convey the gratitude of the government and people of my country to the government and people of India for their generous assistance in the struggle for freedom of Bangladesh in 1971. With deep gratitude, we acknowledge the courageous leadership of Smt. Indira Gandhi, and the sacrifice of the people and the armed forces of India for fighting the evil of oppression and occupation side by side with our people and freedom fighters.

Bangladesh and India have come very much closer over the last four years. We are trying to align our political and economic efforts in such a way that we don't compete with each other; rather we train ourselves to complement each other. In these years, almost all of the top leadership in India, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and UPA-II Chairperson Smt. Sonia Gandhi, have visited Bangladesh. The Bangladesh leadership – starting with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has also undertaken visits to India to inspire the relationship between the two countries to a greater height.

As of now, the support and patronage that the Government of Bangladesh has received for one of its flagship projects in Autism under the UN – WHO umbrella from none other than Her Excellency Smt. Sonia Gandhi is mentionable. The daughter of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Ms. Saima Hossain Putul, in her capacity as the chair of Bangladesh National Advisory Committee on Autism, is spearheading this breakthrough initiative and the Bangladesh position has already been endorsed by the UN General Assembly in a resolution. The Bangladesh resolution was unanimously adopted by the 193 members of the UN. The landmark Dhaka Conference on 'Autism Spectrum Disorder and Development Obstacles' organized by Saima Hossain – which received strong Indian support as well - played an important role in formulating the resolution. I am sure NIMHANS would be pleased to know that the Dhaka declaration of the conference on Autism Spectrum Disorder and Development Obstacles unveils hidden health problems of children and seeks to create a unified world opinion to prevent it. The Autism resolution contained a call for the enhancement of healthcare, education and training for the autism-affected children at the national and international level. The resolution, when implemented, will play an effective role to create a positive social outlook and eradicate disparity towards children.

Distinguished Audience,

We – the people of Bangladesh and India – value our friendship as we believe that our peaceful coexistence does not depend on the strength of our Armed Forces, rather that our friendship and exchanges bring peace to our people and along with peace, ensures greater access to improved education, economic development, health and quality of life. I come here to join you today – young professionals – to see how we could complement each other in terms of advanced research in the health sector as well the other areas of life and living.

Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am aware of the rich history of this premier institution in the field of mental health sciences as well as neurosciences. Being in the lead, the institution has certain obligations to the country, and moreover, to the region as a whole.

I can safely deduce that the history of institution building in health sciences in India coincides with the large strides that the country has taken in the development of its health sector over the past few decades. Life expectancy has been more than doubled from a mere 32 years, in 1947, to 65 years now. Smallpox and Guinea-worm have been eradicated and polio is nearing extinction. Maternal mortality has been brought down to one third compared to the situation even in 1990 and Infant mortality has also been controlled significantly.

Bangladesh began its journey as an independent nation in 1971, 24 years after the independence of India. We experienced similar challenges in the fields of health, nutrition and population. After the liberation though, there has been a seemingly dramatic change in our situation and we have received credible international recognition for success in immunization, safe motherhood and child survival. Bangladesh successfully launched 13,000 community clinics to bring health services to the door of our peoples. Though limited in resources, basic

Community Clinics have reached the grassroots across each and every corner of the country and the feat has brought about a virtual revolution in our health sector. A game changer has been the control we have achieved in arresting the growth of population and also the way we have empowered women to make and absorb the consequences of decisions – ranging from family planning to livelihood options.

However, I must admit and place this before you for your thoughts, that the list of challenges has outgrown the range of initiatives that we have taken over the years. The Indian sub-continent accounts for one-fifth of the population of the world but shares one-sixth of the global disease burden. Malnutrition remains a persistent problem across the region. Capacity constraints remain a problem.

Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we see communicable diseases being curbed across South Asia, non-communicable diseases are emerging as a concern to reckon with – a major part of which involves the state of mental health. As lifestyle changes with the developments in economy, stress, obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular problems are coming up in an ever-bigger way. Some estimates suggest that one in every sixteen in our region suffers from some form of mental disease, but only about one third of them are being treated by trained personnel as of now. Seemingly unrelated incidents make a lot more sense when we look at the patterns, which emerge from the perspective of the big picture.

I would take my cues from Carl Jung when he said, *“About a third of my cases are suffering from no clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and emptiness of their lives. This can be defined as the general neurosis of our times.”* This is interesting to begin with – sets us in the right frame of mind.

I consider NIMHANS to be an institution producing qualified professionals who could give the whole of South Asia, which is going through a tremendous metamorphosis at the current time.

A metamorphosis in economy. A metamorphosis in politics. A metamorphosis in the way we administer ourselves. A metamorphosis in the way we see ourselves!

The demographic construct of age is a key factor to consider too! From Wall Street to Tahrir Square, it is the youth and the invisible organization over vast digitized social networks which define today’s politics – both domestic and international. And somehow or other, the South Asian paradigm is a glorious case in perspective with regards to the proportion of youth! Ladies and Gentlemen, may I remind you that we have stepped into the era of demographic dividend!

Case in point - violent crimes and the repercussions thereof – are also matters of national significance. Why do these crimes happen? What can be done to prevent them? Is it a law enforcement problem? Or is it a psycho-social phenomenon? This complex question calls for only one thing – a thorough assessment of who or what we have become in the process of all

these tumultuous changes that we have undergone over the past decades. A complete review of the choices which we, as individuals, have made available in our society!

Suicides, sexual assaults, violent assaults, domestic violence, aberrant social behavior, hate speeches, shootouts, even stock and financial market scams – bubbles – bullish markets – can be traced to human psychology.

All these and more speak of something – which the ancient scriptures had termed the “mind map”. I am referring to one of the oldest known scriptures of the human race – the *Upanishads* – where it is said that *faster than the ‘body’ is the ‘mind’ and faster than the mind is the ‘atman’*. But what is that ‘Atman’. Maybe it is high time that our tertiary educational institutions focus on the conceptualization of a complete human being and that process calls for a contribution from institutions like the NIMHANS.

I admire the achievement of NIMHANS in the field of research in mental health, epilepsy and many other neurological problems. The Center for Public Health and Epidemiology in NIMHANS is an example of its focus in research in the field. More people are dying from trauma in the street than injuries in the field of war. I am encouraged to see that NIMHANS is working on road safety issues as well – which fall in the brain-mind-behavior domain. In India and Bangladesh, road traffic accident is a major cause of neuro injury. Over 105,000 people are killed in road accidents alone in India. Prevention is definitely the best option here.

Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

En route to the future, I would beseech the authorities and graduates of NIMHANS to look beyond borders and branch out into research cooperation and collaboration with countries beyond your immediate boundaries. We have simple and affordable technology for preventing childhood death by routine vaccination but 19 million of the world’s children are yet to be covered under this regime including 7 million in India! Last night 300 million children went to bed with an empty stomach. 17 million AIDS orphans are trying hard to dream their future. About 375,000 mothers are dying in childbirth at the prime of their lives. Over a million children are dying from preventable diseases. This is happening in the countries of South Asia, Africa and Latin America. On our march into the future, how you – today’s graduates, will mould yourselves as leaders with dedication to the cause of truth and courage will make a difference!

*As John F Kennedy said in his inaugural speech half a century ago "The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life"... "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich".* Poverty still exists causing enormous misery to billions of people of the world.

Dear graduates, today we ceremonially confer the recognition of your scholastic achievement. En route to the future, it is worth remembering a few lines from Tagore " চিত্ত যেথা ভয়শূন্য , উচ্চ যেথা শির , জ্ঞান যেথা মুক্ত , যেথা গৃহের প্রাচীর /আপন প্রাঙ্গণতলে দিবসশবরী /বসুধারে রাখে নাই খন্ড ক্ষুদ্র করি , *Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high, Where knowledge is free; Where the world has not been broken up*

*into fragments by narrow domestic walls....."* Standing there I hope your achievement will benefit people at large of the world. May I remind you what the founder of Bangladesh, the father of our nation, Bangabandhu said, "my greatest strength is my love for the people and my greatest weakness is I loved them too much". I think it is worth living a life with both this strength and weakness.

Dear graduates, our professional goal will only be successful when we can love our people in the true sense. Our honourable Prime Minister, Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina always reminded our doctors in Bangladesh to have a special corner in their hearts for the rural people, a call to meet the challenge of the last mile. I am happy to convey to you that the UN General Assembly has unanimously upheld the peace-centric development model of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Her proposal was accepted by the 67th UN General Assembly as the 29th item on its agenda in December 2012. It would be important to note that Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina proposed this development model based on people's empowerment at the General Assembly. Her inspiration for the concept came from the fact that billions of peoples around the world suffer from political, economic, social, cultural disempowerment, deprivation, or exclusion. It has been rightly theorized that empowerment of the disenfranchised people can foster just and sustainable development. This is a dedicated development philosophy that targets the marginalized and vulnerable peoples. A total of 30 countries including India - helped in securing acceptance for the proposal. And health practitioners, most of all, need to be at the forefront of the initiative.

In my own route to the future, I always remember the conclusion of Steve Jobs' convocation speech at Stanford university in the USA. He found hunger as an inspiration for discovery and development. He advised the graduates there to stay hungry. I advise you on our path to the future, you nurture hunger for continuous development. On our path to the future, walking together, let's leave behind a footprint, which would be a signature for sincerity, empathy and above all, humanity,

This is the month of February. A month – which is dear to all Bengalis – a month of sacrifice for the mother tongue. 21<sup>st</sup> February – the "*Bhasha Shaheed Divash*" - is upcoming. "एक भाषा और अपने वक्ताओं के चरित्र के विकास का सही प्रतिबिंब है, ಒಂದು ಭಾಷೆ ತನ್ನ ಸ್ಪೀಕರ್ ಅಕ್ಷರ ಮತ್ತು ಬೆಳವಣಿಗೆಯ ನಿಖರವಾದ ಪ್ರತಿಬಿಂಬ *"A language is the exact reflection of the character and development of its speakers"*. This is what Mahatma Gandhi said about mother tongue long ago. UNESCO has declared the day as the International Mother Language Day. Let me call upon you to celebrate the day together with us – in a bid to safeguard the linguistic strands which define who we are.

I wish you all the success in the lead to the fulfilment of your dreams.

Long live NIMHANS.

Long live India – Bangladesh friendship.