

Virtual Address by Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj to Sherubtse College, 9 February 2021

Good morning everyone!

Now I'm sure since you heard the Indian Ambassador is coming to speak to you, you've prepared yourself for an extraordinarily boring speech. You've prepared yourself for a lot of dates and numbers and long words which quite frankly, no one needs to use. But I promise in the next less than 10 minutes, I hope to escape the role of Ambassador and immerse myself in a far more noble one, that of Storyteller.

You see, I've lived quite a bit of life and I think I've realised that nothing moves people more than stories. Stories are the heart of humanity. Stories are what create and end, they are what move the nihilist, they are what inspires the artist. And humanity has had quite the plethora of stories. The French Revolution, the rise of AI, Rosa Parks, Einstein's theory of General Relativity, Women's Suffrage, The Birth of Democracy, The Birth of Yoga... these are some of our stories as a species. So let's start: does anyone have any favourites? Does anyone have a favourite story? Any story... no exception or limits... anything?

Well! I think I have a couple honestly. But I wonder if any of you have stopped to think about the story of today. Because what's been happening for the past year and continues to pervade is something that will be in the history books for some time. How humanity battled the coronavirus pandemic. Isn't that quite the story? An unfinished one right now, of course, but I know we're all holding our breaths for the ending.

And if you think I'm here to tell the tale of the horrors of the pandemic, I'm not. The news does a great job at that. I'm not here to dampen your hearts or your spirits because we all know how bad the past year has been. Instead, I'd like to tell a story. A story of hope and persistence and teamwork and ultimately, success.

Ever since the pandemic became a pandemic, there has been 1 word on everyone's mind: vaccine. Let's find a cure to this. Let's get our lives back to what they were. Let's make and manufacture this vaccine... let's save the world. And so, today I want to tell the story of a group of scientists who were trying to save the world with a vaccine.

In January 2020, the work began. In a lab with researchers in their long white coats, the hours of testing and developing began. The world went into a state of extreme focus with one goal: to make a successful vaccine. However, there was an issue. Historically, the fastest vaccine to be made had taken 5 years to be developed. 5 years was quickest. And so this time, scientists had to defy the realms of possibility. 5 years wasn't acceptable and the world needed its armour now.

It didn't matter what had happened in the past, we needed to break a record.

3 months later, trials began. 2 months later, countries around the world began to help. Some partnered and had their scientists work on the technology, some pledged up to billions of dollars.

For 4 months, trials continued. Brave citizens volunteered, healthcare workers had upto 20 hour work days, the doses are administered, people are observed carefully. Everything seemed to be going great until one day, someone got sick. A volunteer gets ill because of the vaccine. It's been 9 months since the work began but today, 1 person got very ill and trials are suspended. The news is made public. The world feels as if it has gone back to square 1. Sometimes it just takes one person and one reaction to scrap months of progress and effort.

But a month passes, the situation is assessed, the vaccine is re-tested and once again, trials resume. 2 months later and 12 months since the research began, The Serum Institute of India announces it has applied for emergency use authorization of a version of the vaccine. 1 day later, the first scientific paper on Phase 3 clinical trials for the coronavirus vaccine is published. And less than a month later, the vaccine is authorized.

India authorises a version of this vaccine, Covishield, with the Serum Institute of India pledging to produce 2 billion doses in 2021.

Now I know I went fast and so, please do read in your own time for an understanding of this story in greater depth, yet what I come here for today is to marvel at what humankind can do sometimes. This vaccine I spoke of is one of 4-5 leading vaccines within the world, so I encourage you to read the other stories too, but this one is particularly inspiring for us Indians, given the Serum Institute's monumental role in its production. There is no place in the world which possesses such a manufacturing capacity. And as a result, a multitude of countries have already been given doses of vaccine and a multitude of lives are potentially being saved.

This vaccine took 1 year. And so yes, we broke the record, we forged the armour and maybe, just maybe, we got a little bit closer to saving the world.

I also find this story particularly heartwarming because this story isn't about one country stealing the glory and taking a victory lap. It's not about you vs me, it's about the collective. The collective us, who all faced the pandemic in a variety of ways and how we all walk into a new world.

This story is also about loyalty and friendship. In announcing the roll out within India on 16 January 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had promised that the Made-in-India Vaccine would serve humanity. And he kept to that promise, as vaccines were dispatched among India's neighbours and friends, within days of the national launch. Needless to say, Bhutan was a top priority for immediately being given doses of the vaccine.

But you know, I hear a lot of people say that once the world is vaccinated, we'll just go back to normal. But I think I disagree. There is no going back to normal. That would be foolish and irresponsible. That would be a complete waste. Because in my experience, practically

everything in our lives are out of control. A pandemic could start, your car might break down, you might fail that test you studied really hard for... the point is: chaos and entropy are an intrinsic and fundamental part of existing in this Universe. You can't outrun the laws of physics. And so that leaves us with the only thing in our control: our reactions to the world around us. What we learn and how we act. And so, I hope we never go back to "normal", I hope we emerge as greater individuals with more strength and deeper empathy. I hope the meagre days of normal never come close to what lies on the other side. I hope we care more and love deeper and cherish the beauties of life, knowing all well that they are not guaranteed. I hope we take a million pictures of the morning sunlight streaming through our windows and never let go of hugging our friends when this is all over. I hope we act with nothing but gratitude.

So here's to an unfinished story and here's to hoping for nothing but the very best.

Thank you!