

Subroto Bagchi's speech on the occasion of the Institute Day Celebrations
at the National Institute of Mental Health & Neurosciences

Bengaluru, February 14, 2013

Director Dr Satish Chandra, Doctors, Nurses, Staff Members and other friends,

It is a privilege to be with you today. I deem it an honor for both myself and Mindtree that you have invited me to be with you for the Institute Day Celebrations. I want to congratulate all of you on the occasion and acknowledge the great work done by each one of you; your dedication and sense of purpose make us a grateful nation.

I choose my words with care. I believe that you have brought relief to those in need of help; you have kept families from disintegrating, and while doing so, you have built a world-class institution that India can be truly proud of. It is not an easy task in a nation that is still coping with the idea of institution-building. But first, I want you to accept my gratitude for a deeply personal reason.

My parents got married in 1940. My father was a small time government servant in a princely state in what is today's Odisha. My mother was uprooted twice: once when her family had left East Bengal, and then a second time when she left West Bengal as a young bride, married to a man she had no prior knowledge about.

It took her time to realise that she was married to a husband who had a serious mental health issue.

My father suffered from periodic bouts of manic depressive psychosis. His family knew it somewhat but was both ignorant of the larger implications, and in denial, as families are even today. They believed that getting him married would solve all problems. So his marriage was arranged with my mother who knew nothing of what she was getting into. When she realised it, it was too late.

The first three of her five sons were born in quick succession and now she could not return to her lower-middle-class brothers who just about managed to eke out a living themselves. My mother, a matriculate, decided to stay with the problem.

At first every ten years and then in more frequent intervals, my father's condition would flare up. A usually quiet, conscientious man, he would become restless, garrulous, unreasonable and aggressive. With the help of his colleagues and later, her older sons, my

mother learnt to recognise the onset and followed the routine of moving him to the Mental Hospital at Ranchi. Every such internment lasted a month or so. My father was treated with Electro-Convulsive Therapy each time and then he would return home to normalcy—until it recurred.

Between the episodes, he was always an outstanding role model as a husband, father and a government servant. I was eight years old when I realised for the first time that my father had a serious ailment. It is not easy to see your father as a mentally ill person. But as I look back at my years with him, I only have fondness and admiration; if life was to be the same all over again, I would run into his arms the same way that I did when I was a four-year-old.

He and my mother raised five sons including me. The oldest joined the IAS and retired as the chief secretary of Odisha. The second served in the Indian Air Force. The third became a lawyer, activist and mystic. The fourth brother served in the Indian Army and then worked for a bank. And, finally, here I am. I co-founded Mindtree, which is among the Top 500 listed companies in India both in terms of sales and profitability, among the best in corporate governance and we employ 11000 people globally.

As a family, the Bagchis have done well for the country, for society and for themselves. Behind it all were three great forces, three benefactors without whom we would have simply disintegrated. Instead of me, someone else would be making this speech today.

Who were these three forces?

The first force was my mother. When I look at her life, I understand the meaning of the wedding vow that promises “to have and to hold.....for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward until death do us part”.

The second force was the government system itself, which did not frown upon my father’s discernible abnormality during the episodes; his colleagues were respectful and sympathetic and, each time he returned from the Mental Hospital at Kanke, Ranchi, he had his job waiting for him.

The third force, ladies and gentlemen, was the Mental Hospital at Kanke, Ranchi that took my father in, treated him with whatever knowledge and resources they had at the time and then sent him back to his family and work. These were the people who helped him to deal with the unquiet mind, to be normal one more time, to return to his family.

I will never meet the doctors who diagnosed him, the medical assistants and the ward staff who would have taken care of him in his confinement. If I could, I would give anything to shake their hands, to say thank you, to say, “You do not know who I am but I want to let you know that your sense of purpose has saved our family; I am alive and I am able, thanks to people like you.”

Ladies and Gentlemen, I accepted your kind invitation to be with you today because I saw this as my golden opportunity to imagine that I am actually addressing the same people at Ranchi that treated my father; that they are here today in this auditorium, in a different time and space and garb. I request all of you to indulge my imagination for just this moment.

And in that vein, please accept my deepest gratitude, the gratitude of my mother, my family, the gratitude of a society and a nation for the kind of work you do, for the selfless way in which you do it and for your capacity to modify the course of destiny for countless people like the Bagchi family.



Allow me now to speak to you a few words on a subject very dear to me: it is about creating memorable content as an ally for the cause you are so valiantly championing.

All significant crusades in human history have been undertaken with the power of content; from Christianity to Communism; the Bible, the Koran and the Bhagavad Gita – they epitomise the power of the story in ensuring that the memes overcome the malady.

Only you can create that content, only you can spread the message.

We hear that India is the diabetes capital of the world; we say that we have the largest population at risk for cardiac ailments; we talk about cancer and AIDS. No one talks about mental health with that urgency or seriousness. No one goes beyond giving lip service to the fact that we have three psychiatrists for a million people. No one speaks about the fact that we could well be the mental illness capital of the world before we become the capital for other diseases and disabilities.

The time has come to recognize that unlike many other medical scourges, mental health afflictions do not just wreck the individual—they wreck the entire family. They do not just play havoc with a person’s present—they impact several generations.

And, quite unlike most other medical conditions, here is one that creates risks to humanity when undetected and untreated in people who occupy positions of power. We do not think about the consequences of a military general with bipolar disorder, a national politician who is a habitual sex offender, or a CEO who is schizophrenic.

But the issue is not only that. The larger issue is that the individual, particularly in our society, often does not know it; the afflicted do not think they have a treatable ailment. Their families do not know what mental health is all about and even if they do, they are afraid of the stigma more than they are afraid of the often dysfunctional, abusive and sometimes violent behavior of the afflicted.

The time has come to seriously amplify the message on mental health; we have to educate society on mental health in a far more proactive way, we have to bring up the enormous risks that we carry as a nation.

Today, when you come to work, hundreds of patients and their families are waiting to take over your life. You have a tough time maintaining your own sanity. You live for the day. Yet, you cannot be in denial about the larger reality and your work will not get done unless you have created the content and spread the message.

Today more people know about neuroscience because someone wrote a book called “Phantoms in the Brain”; more people know about cancer and understand it better because of the book “The Emperor of All Maladies”; “An Unquiet Mind” has given understanding and hope to more people than outreach efforts have done in dealing with bipolar disorder.

The Mayo Clinic is what it is today thanks in large parts to their 2400 patient publications that make people feel they can manage their serious ailments; that it is they and not their disease that is in charge.

The research paper that you read out to your international peers is important, but today, it is as important for you to write a blog, make a film and create a work of fiction (yes, fiction) that may wake up a sleeping society. If there is one message I have for you, it is simply this: let us make content our ally in the fight against mental illness.

It is not enough to create a great institution like NIMHANS; we need to give it a voice. The voice is in the story. The story is in the word. We need to take the word where our hands and feet do not reach.

The fantastic thing is that today technology to make an idea viral is literally free: from Steve Jobs’ commencement speech to Kolaveri, from Gangnam Style to the Khan Academy, we have myriad examples of great content that can be instantly distributed to the masses at little or no cost.

But great content is difficult to create. By no means is it an easy process.

Given the fact that you are multi-faceted, brilliant people at NIMHANS and, given your first hand understanding of the issues, I have no doubt that if you put your mind to it, it will happen.

At Mindtree, we say, Welcome to Possible.



Your great institution is not just about mental health; it is as much, as admirably, about neurosciences. The world awaits with great hope the outcome of that scientific partnership; for it new vistas are opening up with genetics and the information technology that will help ease human suffering.

Yet, neuroscience is not simply “science” for the sake of itself; it is grounded in feeling for humanity.

I had the first hand understanding of it twenty years ago when a minor but persistent pain in my hand started troubling me. Someone suggested it could be a neurological problem, and the best doctor in town was Dr Bhavani Shankar Das, at NIMHANS. It was my first visit to your great institution. I was ushered into his chamber during what was meant to be his break. But a steady stream of people came and went even as he patiently heard me out. Before he could give me his advice, a very young doctor barged in; she needed his attention. But Dr Das was not happy for yet another interruption, this time, it was from a colleague.

The young doctor was an intern. She was here to plead for a child who had been left at NIMHANS with a grievous head injury. The people who had brought him from somewhere in Madhya Pradesh had gone away. He was simply left to fate and had been now there for weeks. The prognosis wasn't good. But she did not want to give up. She wanted a scan and she was here to ask for money for the scan to be released from the Poor Patient's Fund.

During the entire conversation, throughout her pleading, she did not notice, or care, that there was another person sitting in the room. Dr Das listened to her with patience. Then he told her that he wished, he could help but he couldn't.

The young doctor was visibly agitated. “Why not?” she asked.

“Because there is no money left in that fund,” he told her, in a quiet voice.

She was now beginning to get angry. “So what will happen now?” she demanded.

“I do not know,” Dr Das replied.

Dr Das could bring people back from the jaws of death, but at this time, he could not make the empty cash box jingle. His years had taught him not to become agitated about things he could not help. But the young intern's years had told her she must agitate.

I was overcome. Here I was, demanding attention from the best doctor in town for a feeble reason; and here was a child suspended between life and death, between belonging and abandonment; and here was someone who could conveniently take a clinical view of an unsolvable issue, fighting with a senior colleague.

Your profession receives nobility because doctors like her serve it. From her, I learned that it is not just one's education and intellect that make us who we are, but it is, instead, the compassion we have for another human being who may never know us as their angel.

Whenever I drive past your great institution, I remember her and my head bows down to the nameless crusader.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the evening is young. The festivities must begin. I will not hold you up any more. But before I take my seat, I want to tell you that you do a monumentally difficult job; I know that you do so while your many counterparts have chosen the easier life, sometimes opting for a better organized and higher paying private practice, sometimes migrating to the developed world.

But you have stuck it out against all odds because it is not a merely a matter of medical practice for you. Yours is a life of purpose ahead of a life of pursuit. You are making great personal sacrifices every single day and you are staying with the problem.

Our lives are richer because of you.

You are not laying bricks here. You are building the temple.

As I wish you well tonight, my parents are smiling from Heaven; they join me in saying: thank you.

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