



*On the Occasion of the Launch of  
A National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities*



**ADDRESS OF DR. ALIM CHANDANI  
CEO OF GLOBAL REACH OUT INITIATIVE, INC.**

*Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi, India  
March 21, 2015*

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**By Dr. Alim Chandani**

*The following is a transcript of the address by Dr. Alim Chandani, CEO of Global Reach Out Initiative (GRO), on the Occasion of the Launch of the National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) at Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi, India on March 21, 2015.*

Namaste, Honorable Ministers, Secretaries, and distinguished guests.

I am pleased to meet you all on this historic occasion of the launch of the new National Action Plan for Vocational Training of Persons with Disabilities. Congratulations!

I want to thank Shri Sunil Arora, Secretary of the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship, and Mukesh Jain, Joint Secretary, Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities within the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, for inviting me to speak on this special occasion.

Recently, I had the opportunity to meet Mr. Sunil Arora in Boston along with my sister, Asma Chandani, Chairman of the U.S. based nonprofit, Global Reach Out Initiative (“GRO”), that I founded. Mr. Sunil Arora and I have exchanged ideas and discussed how to best support people with disabilities in India.

It is an honor to be designated as a member of the People with Disabilities (PWDs) Skill Council within the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE).

Allow me to briefly introduce myself. My name is Dr. Alim Chandani. I am a Gujarati and was born in Mumbai, India. I was born Deaf. When my parents learned about my hearing loss, they were devastated but did not give up hope. They were determined to ensure that I received the best education possible. My parents, who are both medical doctors, sacrificed their careers and left their beloved homeland of India for distant lands in search of the best ecosystem of education and societal support for me to live in – they found this in America.

After being mainstreamed in my primary school years, I went on to graduate with my Bachelor’s degree from Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), in Rochester, New York. I then received my Master’s degree in Deaf Rehabilitation and Higher Education from New York University.

One of the challenges that I faced while growing up was to trying to “fit” in with the society as well as being embarrassed about my disability. I struggled with my identity for a long time and spent many years feeling isolated from society with a lack of confidence in myself, despite receiving the best marks in all of my school years.

My shame at being disabled was completely reversed after I attended the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in New York. At RIT, for the first time, I met many other Deaf students with similar experiences to mine. After 20 years of being mainstreamed into society through oral speech and lip-reading, I was exposed and immersed in learning a new language --- sign language. For the first time, I was able to fully express myself! It was as if I had been set free!

At RIT, I gained a cultural knowledge about the Deaf community and had experiences that enabled me to learn to embrace my identity as a Deaf person, in a supportive community with our own shared language and identity. I acquired a new confidence in myself, so much so, that I could do things that I never thought I could do, such as being the President of the student body at RIT.

After witnessing my own transformation, I began to wonder how many Deaf individuals around the world have had a similar experience as mine, not realizing their fullest potential due to a lack of opportunity to learn a native language suited to our unique disability and receive support from a community of like minded persons.

In 2007, after traveling to several developing countries and taking certification courses in International Development for People with Disabilities, I felt a strong passion to give back. I wanted to improve the lives of Deaf individuals in developing countries, including my Motherland of India.

Many Deaf individuals in developing countries have never met another Deaf person and, as a result, many do not realize that they can become successful and lead sustainable lives. It is unfortunate to see that many times, people with disabilities are neglected or outcast from society. This happens because unfortunately many people are still ignorant about persons with disabilities and lack skills in empathy and sensitization. There is a big need to provide awareness training to the general society to learn more about people with disabilities and how they are just like the rest of us. These principles apply to all people with disabilities.

My passions led me to found Global Reach Out Initiative, Inc. (GRO). GRO is a Washington, D.C. based 501(c)(3) tax-exempt, non-profit organization that has provided empowerment and skills training to Deaf youths in over five countries, including in India. Through 12 different programs over the past 8 years, GRO has inspired and impacted over 1,000 young adults.

My experiences with GRO led me to the decision to pursue a doctoral degree in Education Management in Special Education from Gallaudet University. Gallaudet University is the first and only Liberal Arts University for the Deaf in the world. It is located in Washington, DC. I graduated with my PhD in 2013, achieving my lifelong dream of becoming a doctor. My dissertation was focused on the feasibility of managing Deaf programs at Higher Education institutions in India, and required me to undertake significant research on education and infrastructure for the Deaf presently existing in India.

After completing my dissertation research, I realized that there is a huge gap, which is that there are not enough employment opportunities being created for Deaf individuals in India regardless of their qualifications and suitability for employment. I felt a new fire inside of me, and I knew that my work was not done. I knew then that I must find a way to return back to my Motherland India and find ways of providing opportunities to the Deaf community so they can have sustainable lives by feeling the dignity of being Deaf and being able to earn a stable income for themselves and their families.

Currently, I am a Professor at Gallaudet University in Washington D.C., where I teach courses on Social Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation. I am deeply passionate about encouraging people with disabilities to identify solutions to address the frustrations they face daily. This will allow them to break down barriers they face, as well as spread awareness of what they are capable of achieving in life regardless of their disabilities. In recent years, the buzz on social entrepreneurship and innovation has been widely spread around the world, to encourage people to create new innovative solutions on various problems/needs, creating a social impact in the community.

It is a dream of mine to come to India to build a training center to skill people with disabilities in vocational and leadership skills and entrepreneurial skills to be able to create and manage their own businesses. I believe that this will reduce the stigmas in society and enable people with disabilities to live with pride. It will also integrate them into their communities and teach society to embrace the people with disabilities. Together, we can change the policies and laws to promote equal rights for all in India.

Upon sharing my dream of returning to India to build a new leadership skills training center and entrepreneurial hub for the Deaf to be initially based in New Delhi, I am happy to share that I have found several supporters. I have received encouraging responses from industrialists, leading vocational skills companies and most importantly, from within the Government of India itself. But we need support from you all, as well, to help make this dream a reality.

I am pleased that India has proposed a National Action Plan that aims to provide quality vocational training with employment opportunities for people with disabilities. This shows the commitment for all of us to reach the goal by providing 2.5 million jobs over the next seven years.

There are millions of people with disabilities across India who are presently not working and, I assure you, that if you ask them what they want, they would tell us that they simply want a normal decent life where they are independent and able to support their family through a steady income. I want to emphasize that each one of these individuals is unique, not just a medical condition in need of fixing, but with the right accommodations and support, capable of contributing to our society and improving, and inspiring, lives!

For this National Action Plan to succeed, there is a need to include people with disabilities in the planning, implementation and evaluation processes to ensure sustainability.

As a member of the PWD Skill Council within the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE), I look forward to working with the Government of India in the implementation and providing my recommendations in the upcoming months and years.

- We will need to develop awareness programs to educate the society on becoming empathetic and understand what the needs of people with disabilities are and how to work with them in a fair and humane manner.
- We should provide cultural sensitivity training for those who will be working with people with disabilities.
- We should encourage and support cooperation between all stakeholders to ensure inclusion, equalization and accessibility for people with disabilities.
- We will review national programs, policies, and strategies by including people with disabilities in the process so that they can share their views.

- We plan to increase and improve the support services and accommodations available to PWDs that promote the economic and social acceptance, inclusion and empowerment of people with disabilities within their communities.

To conclude, I feel the blessings of God to know that I have support from the Government of India, which has been a strong and active partner to me in the initial plans to establish a Leadership Skills Training Center and Entrepreneurial Hub for the Disabled in India.

The new GRO Centre in New Delhi will provide a state of the art platform for quality vocational advanced skills training program to the Deaf that will be designed by the Deaf experts. After the first year of operation, the training program will expand to all other people with disabilities, with people with disabilities included in the design and implementation of the training program.

My team and I will be eager to move to India and establish this new Centre. We look forward to receiving support from all of you, and working closely with you all to achieve the goal of increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities in India.

In addition to the skills modules, we will develop training modules that focus on advocacy for existing disability rights as well as cultural sensitivity training for employers so that corporates can be equipped with the right tools for becoming more empathetic to work with people with disabilities.

We aim to become the model that represents training for people with disabilities that is managed by people with disabilities. I am confident that you will see the benefits of this approach.

Joining you all on this special occasion is a blessing for me, knowing that I have come to a full circle by soon returning back to my Motherland to establish this new training facility run by the Disabled, for the Disabled, which will make a profound difference in the lives of people with disabilities to ensure that they get the lives that they deserve.

I want an India where others born like me in India with a disability will not have to leave their homeland to get the opportunities I received and can thrive right here at home.

Again, I am honored to be invited to collaborate with you in improving lives of people with disabilities across India. I believe that by working together, we can achieve two crucial goals:

One, we can provide more advanced employment opportunities for people with disabilities through training programs that are designed by people with disabilities, and

Two, we will develop and implement new curriculums to train, and provide funding support, to enable people with disabilities to form small enterprises within their communities.

In closing, I am looking forward to working together with you all to carry out the vision of the National Action Plan and ensure that people with disabilities in India will have enhanced opportunities to lead sustainable lives and in so doing, inspire us all!

Thank you, and Namaste.