

Good Morning Consulate General of India, Hon. Mayor, Member of Parliament, Representatives from ICTA, Chief Organisers and Summit Participants

Ladies and gentlemen, though I'm a Member of the Parliament, a former Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Jaffna Development Chairman, today I wish to address you wearing a different hat, and it is something which I earned years ago - before politics, before parliament and before all of this, I used to be a computer engineer. I do not know if this invitation came to me knowing that piece of information, but I would like to believe so. But even if not, I consider this as a great honour and an opportunity to be at NEXTWORK 2020 – International Tech Summit and share my thinking with all of you.

Ever since I can remember, I have been curious and interested in how stuff works, and I've always been a big fan of gadgets and things, simply put, I've been interested in most things tech. So, going in to university to learn computer engineering was always part of the plan - straight after completing my school, I went to university to learn computer engineering and it was back in the early 2000. I graduated with an honours degree in Bachelor of Computer Engineering in the year 2006 - those were interesting days, filled with interesting stories but a few important things - I'm still 36, and it has not even been 15 years, but when I look back, I realize that so many things have changed, and they have changed at an exponential rate. Back then, at least to me and for a lot of the guys with us, what you call "cloud" today was simply the internet and placing a simple "e" in front of most things was what everyone was doing instead of saying "digital this" and "digital that". Of course, we had Google for search and Yahoo was still a thing but Facebook wasn't this big - Skype was generally used by almost everyone I knew.

Fast forward 15 years, today we live in a different new world, and I think that is the best way to put it - everyone is on the cloud, big tech is trying to give free internet to the entire world, some are working on autonomous cars, you order cabs, food & music through apps, basically there is an app for everything and there is a race to the space, Mars and beyond, it is not just to see how Mars looks like but to colonize and then go beyond. As Marc Andreessen said, software is eating the world and we are in the process of digitizing and automating everything, one industry at a time.

And then when I talk to friends, browse the net or read, I see and hear about Start-ups everywhere. Basically, start-ups are popping up everywhere and we hear about kids hacking products in their basements and some of them eventually growing in to unicorns that are worth billions of dollars. As you know very well, these start-ups are not just from the Silicon Valley anymore but from many countries across the world - they are different stories about different products for different industries, but I have noticed that in most stories, it is about someone or a few people with a big idea, little resources and building something with great passion. Now I know that most of you here are from the industry and others who are soon going to join the industry - I have a question to you, how many Unicorns have we produced? how many Sri Lankans Start-ups have successfully gone beyond our borders to become global? how many internet based businesses operate from Sri Lanka? how much export revenue do we generate per annum from the global market? maybe you know, maybe you have an idea, my next question is, if you know the answers to the questions, then are you happy with them? Basically, are we harvesting the full potential?

Today my plan is to spend most of my time here by sharing my beliefs with you - I'm sure most if not all of you are familiar with the industrial revolutions and how western nations became wealthier with each revolution. I also believe that you will agree with me if I propose that we as a country never managed to catch those revolutionary waves, as they arose - instead we actually ended up becoming a colony of nations that rode the waves. Today we live during the 4th industrial revolution and this one is different to all the 3 revolutions before. This one is not about water power, steam power, mechanization or line production but about convergence of digital, biological, and physical innovations. I do not know whether it is now early or late but I would like to propose that, irrespective of the stage of this revolution, we have no choice but to get on and start riding the waves - if not we run the risk of becoming a member of a different type of colony - it may be virtual but still a colony where Unicorns and big tech giants rule.

I want to talk about the opportunities of this revolution and the internet that provides to us in general - to me, the disruptive technologies & internet are similar to the national electricity grid. In fact, the image that forms in my mind when I think about the technology, internet and their opportunities is exactly that. Simply put, if you connect a small LED bulb to the grid, it will give you a weak light that it can provide. A 5-Watt bulb would give you its potential brightness and light, a 25 Watts will give its potential and 100 watts will provide its fullest potential. The bulb in this instance is the idea & the skill that we all possess - the amount of light and the brightness is up to the bulb; the national grid provides sufficient electricity for any light bulb. I would like to propose that the strength of the light bulb is equal to the strength and potential of a tech start-up, the value that business can generate is similar to the light that a light bulb can generate. Bigger the idea, brighter the light - the total connected global users to the internet is over 3.4 Billion people. Did we ever in the history have access to such a large marketplace with ability to sell but without even leaving the house? This is the largest market we ever had access to and it provides almost equal opportunities to everyone to launch an internet business - what should we be doing?

I'm a proud Jaffna Tamil, this is where I was born, this is where I live, this is where I'm comfortable and this is where I want to grow old, there is nowhere else in the world that I can have this feeling, this is home. If I'm to retire from politics and go back to my previous profession and start coding, Jaffna is where I want to work from. But if I'm to get back to coding and get a job, I'd definitely look for a real challenge and serious problems to solve - but in this day and age, if I'm to expect big tech companies to come to Jaffna and set up an office space, I would be simply dreaming, and I would call it a bad dream as well. This industry, technology and present times are not about where you are or where your employer is based, it is about what you know and what you can do. Big tech does not have to come to Jaffna or to me but I can go to them, get a job, get the work, attend that daily stand-ups, commit my work and go to Nallur kovil after work without having to step a single foot outside of Jaffna, my home, all thanks to technology.

I'm here today as a former software engineer and a tech enthusiast. In my personal opinion, there is no need for local or international big tech to set up offices in Jaffna - we are not talking about capital intensive factories with multiyear tax breaks that churn output - we are only talking about knowledge based businesses, we are talking about how demand and supply can find each other and then start working together, where engineers can commit their work from anywhere on the planet, everything virtual - but letting a Jaffna boy who can code to stay home and code for a big tech company from anywhere in the world.

We have lots to do - we need to incentivise and attract Jaffna techies who wants to come back home to come back and start working from home, to any company in any part of the world. I have a vested interest in my thinking - If a Jaffna techie decides to go back home, I'm sure some of them will also want to give back to the community by teaching and training. The point is helping another member of the community.

Unlike factories that require employees physical reporting to work, we can all agree that our industry can work virtually, even the entire company can be remote and virtual. Gitlab is a good example - you probably know this already, Gitlab is Ukrainian and it is considered the first Ukrainian unicorn valued more than \$1 billion, interestingly, 100% of their team is working from home or any other place in the world. They are not the first to do this, won't be the last either.

I think the biggest need we have today is education. To be precise, knowledge and skill to code - of course this requires some physical infrastructure as well. School leavers, unemployed youth, art graduates to anyone who has an interest to code and passion to develop solutions need the knowledge and skills - I believe we have a shortage but there are many ways to solve the problem. From Codecademy to Udemy to Coursera to Udacity, there are many places for interested people to learn how to code and become a part of this revelation. The only prerequisites for the learning are English & access to Internet. I think we should all put our heads together to find solutions for those two and empower people.

Once someone learns and acquires the skills to code, they can either work for someone, start a start-up or become a freelancer, its just a decision - I have been a keen observer of the Start-ups of Sri Lanka. I'm a big fan and have noticed several successful start-ups - there are many that I personally know as well. Would you believe that I'm working on my own start-up these days? I'm in the final stage of the Beta testing of our own "start-up", it is not commercial but it is a platform that I'm building to engage & foster "Citizen Driven Development" - my intention is to build an open platform that enables all Citizens to create projects, engage their local communities, up-vote or down-vote projects, bring them to the notice of the relevant entities and see them getting completed - a another proud Son of Jaffna is leading the development of it, expecting nothing in return but to give back to the community. I believe that he is a true beneficiary of the 4th industrial revolution - he and his co-founders built one of the most successful productivity applications and have millions of users across the globe. These are self-made millionaires who are using the new tech platforms to build products at home and sell to millions of global users and bring in valuable foreign income to Sri Lanka. As a country, we have been eternally battling the balance of payment issue, with reducing exports during most of the times. I believe that the answer to that problem is in the tech industry - we just need to build more and sell more.

Sri Lankan start-up community need a new funding model - my personal opinion is that, our Angels, Seed investors and early stage investors need to learn from the Silicon Valley. We cannot be Cherry picking - we must learn from successful people and apply them. We need a new approach, from idea qualification to funding, from leaving sufficient room during early stages for series investors to eventually come in without completely diluting the founders, there are many improvements that we need. I am in the process of finalizing a complete proposal and I intend to present it to the highest authorities in the country and try my best to support the growth of tech companies.

Last but not least, not everyone wants to join big tech for jobs, not everyone wants to start a start-up - there must be many who prefers to do what they do but earn a side income by doing some part time work. For people who can code, people who can draw, people who can graphic design, there are millions of opportunities to take part in the gig economy and do small jobs that earn a decent part time income, in foreign currency. Hence our potential is huge and we got to do what it takes to reach the full potential.

There for it's a great initiative of the organisers and all who supported to have the first ever Tech Summit in Jaffna.

Thank you very much everyone.