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Chief Guest

Prof. Saifur Rahman

2023 IEEE President & CEO,
Joseph P. Loring Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering
Virginia Tech, USA



TED Talk – Professor Dr. Saifur Rahman, IEEE BD, 29 Aug. 2025

Let me quote from the Chinese philosopher Confucius [slide #2] who said “What I hear I forget, What I see I remember, What I do I understand”. Please remember this as I speak with you for the next 15 minutes.

I was born in Dhaka, the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to refugee parents who had migrated from India. My parents were new to the city and knew almost nobody there. Making a living in this environment was their only concern. I grew up in a modest home with none of the technology commonly found today.

I had a grandfather who believed that education was the key to success and provided me with reading materials and maps when I started going to school. He told me to dream, and dream big, and work hard to realize my dreams.

I realized early on, that my future is not limited by **who I am** now or **where I am** today. My future is limitless, and I must act on every opportunity that comes my way. This belief was a driving force behind me becoming the IEEE President.

From a young age, I found myself drawn to learning and innovation. Not just for grades, but also out of curiosity.

When I took my Secondary School Certificate exam at the age of 16, I ranked 8th out of over 8,000 students who took the exam.

High standing was never the goal; It is what you did with this recognition. It was simply the outcome of asking questions, seeking understanding, and putting in the time.

At Notre Dame College in Dhaka where I finished my higher secondary education, at the age of 18, I was recognized for achievements in academics and extracurriculars—five of them, to be exact.

I was not the best at everything.

But I always showed up.

I was open to the ideas of others.

And I treated every opportunity as a chance to grow—whether it was solving math problems or helping plan a debate.

I've faced rejection.

I have come back from an election defeat. I was unsuccessful in the election for IEEE President in 2020. So I ran again on a petition campaign in 2021 and won

Getting up every day and doing the work. This is GRIT which keeps me going even in the face of uncertainty, rejection and unwelcome news.

Innovation is important. It cannot be taught. It needs to be nurtured

Don't let your future be limited by **what** you are today or **where** you are today in your life. You have limitless possibilities, grab every opportunity to excel – in academia, in your job or in volunteering work.

Inspiration doesn't always begin with a standing ovation.

Sometimes, it begins in silence. In grief. In curiosity.

Inspiration lives within you.

Your life experiences — whatever they are — are unique, important, and powerful.

Never underestimate where curiosity can take you.

Never forget the strength you have inside you.

When you speak, speak with compassion, confidence and purpose.

In 1971, my life took a sharp turn when the Bangladesh Liberation War erupted.

My teenage brother was active in the resistance movement. Many boys of his age followed him for his work and he was an example to them. But soon he met death in the hands of the occupying forces

And I carry my brother's memory forward...

not as a burden, but as a responsibility — to make my life count, because his was cut short.

Living and working abroad, I have lived in five countries and spoke in 40

I entered BUET in 1968 and graduated in 1972

My years there were formative.

I was elected unopposed to student government.

I led our university quiz team to a national championship on Pakistan Television.

I applied for graduate education to many US and Canadian universities and got admission and financial aid from four universities. I chose to come to the Stony Brook University in New York.

The following quote from US tennis star Arthur Ashe:

“One important key to success is self-confidence. An important key to self-confidence is preparation.”

In 1974, I entered Stony Brook University, New York. I earned my master's degree in electrical engineering from this university in 1975.

Then came to Virginia Tech to work on my PhD. I got my degree in 1978.

Step by step, I went from graduate student...

to assistant professor...

to associate professor...

to full professor...

to holding the Joseph R. Loring Endowed Professorship at Virginia Tech
which I still do.

And finally, the IEEE President

Along the way, I got more and more involved with the Institute of Electrical Electronics Engineers (IEEE) and I traveled the world.

to lecture, to collaborate, and to listen. I have given lectures in over 40 countries

In 2018 and 2019, it was my honor to serve as the elected President of the IEEE Power & Energy Society serving 40,000 members globally.

In 2023, I had the privilege of becoming the President and CEO of IEEE
First South Asian born IEEE President.

Being IEEE President meant listening to students, to industry leaders, to underserved communities, all across the world.

It meant standing on the global stage

at United Nations Conference on Climate Change – Conference of Parties (COP) in Egypt, in United Arab Emirates and in Azerbaijan, and at the European Parliament. They talk about problems, we talk about solutions. Talk with Princess Anne.

As the President and CEO of IEEE launching new committees on climate change, digital realities, and innovative funding.

I saw firsthand how one talk, one grant, one mentor can unlock someone's future.

And I hope I gave people—not just tools—but courage.

Courage to lead, to speak up, to maintain ethical standards, and to believe their ideas matter.

IEEE platform gave me global visibility to lead with purpose, and to serve others.

That journey wouldn't have been possible without IEEE.

I'm very proud of the work that IEEE continues to do to raise its visibility as a trusted voice on mitigating the effects of climate change matter.

Met ITU Sec General, Chinese Han Zheng, President of Macedonia, Stevo Pendarovski, Princess Anne of GB.

As engineers and technologists, we are uniquely placed to provide technical solutions and offer a neutral space for discussion and action.

We also want to make sure people on the ground benefit from our work.

My story has never been about individual greatness.

It has been about staying grounded — in purpose, in values, in people.

I learned to help others rise alongside me.

When I see talent, I try to offer them your helping hand. You never know – someday this person can be a famous artist, a well-known inventor or a great teacher.

Please know:

You don't need permission to lead.

You don't need perfection to begin.

You don't need someone to tell you that your voice matters.

Please remember: There's no shame in failing. The only shame is not giving things your best shot.

If I could leave you with just one message, let it be this:

Never underestimate where curiosity can take you.

Never forget the strength you have inside you.