



Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago
Ministry of Trade and Industry

Feature Address by
Senator the Honourable Satyakama Maharaj,
Minister of Trade, Investment, and Tourism
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It's a pleasure to be here at The Leader in YoUTT seminar, and I thank the University of Trinidad and Tobago for the opportunity to speak with such a dynamic group of future leaders.

When I first accepted this invitation, it was as the Founder and Managing Director of Sacha Cosmetics, and this was accepted as part of my ongoing commitment to mentor young entrepreneurs. In keeping with commitment, I've spoken at multiple forums like this and launched Young Entrepreneurs TT, now one of the fastest-growing entrepreneurship groups in the region, with nearly 15,000 members in under two years.

At the time that I accepted the invitation, I never imagined I'd also be standing here today as Minister of Trade, Investment, and Tourism. When I was appointed, I was asked if I still wished to address you. My response was immediate: Absolutely. Because no matter the title, I remain fully committed to mentorship and sharing the lessons I've learned building Sacha from scratch over the past 45 years.

Lessons not found in textbooks, but in lived experience, allowed us to thrive for over four decades. In fact, McKinsey & Company recently ranked Sacha among the three oldest Black-owned beauty brands in the world. Of those three, one disappeared for two decades before being relaunched, and the other went into bankruptcy. Sacha is therefore the oldest continuously successful beauty brand created for people of color.

Why did so many Black beauty brands of the 60s, 70s, and 80s vanish while Sacha has not only survived but thrived over the years? The answer is a masterclass in entrepreneurship, starting with little more than an idea and a small savings. As they say, rock bottom teaches you things that mountaintops never will.

I was born and raised in San Fernando. Like many families then, we struggled financially. With five children, my parents worked hard, and so did we. My mother was Madame Maharaj, who owned a beauty salon near Naparima College, where I went to school. After class, I'd help out by sweeping floors, running errands, and manning the front desk.

What felt like chores to my siblings fascinated me. It wasn't the hairstyling that caught my attention, it was the makeup. No matter how beautifully my mother styled a client's hair, the moment she applied makeup, the transformation unraveled. The products simply didn't work on women of color. Foundations left them looking mask-like. Powders turned ashy. Colors disappeared on deeper skin. Some of Mom's clients looked like frosted doughnuts, others like Casper the Ghost. The darker the client, the harder my mother tried. But no matter what she did, the results were never quite right. And each time, I asked myself: Why isn't anyone fixing this?

At first, I thought this was just a local issue. Surely, I felt, in more developed countries, better options existed. But when I moved to Canada to attend university, I was shocked to find the same problem.

Women of color still wore mismatched foundations, chalky powders, and invisible colors. Many had to extend foundation down their necks or even to their shoulders just to avoid looking two-toned.

What I witnessed in Trinidad and later in Canada wasn't isolated, it was everywhere. This wasn't a minor inconvenience. It was a global problem hiding in plain sight. That realization lit the first spark. I began wondering if I could build a brand to satisfy this unfulfilled gap in the market. It wasn't about business. It was about solving a problem that the cosmetics giants could not be bothered with.

By the time I returned to Trinidad from university, with that idea stuck in my head, the economy was in a mess and jobs were scarce. Thankfully, I was able to get a job teach math in high school, and earning a salary for the first time, I quickly settled into a comfortable teaching career, with a secure job.

While I loved teaching, it didn't light a fire in me. I had seen a problem I wanted to solve and I could not unsee it. The problem was I knew nothing about making cosmetics and had no idea how to get started in the business. While mulling over this, one day, I learned of a cosmetics company that had gone bankrupt and decided to approach them to take it over. Fortunately, the buy-out sum was small and I was able raise the money to take over the company.

When friends and family heard that I wanted to leave a secure job in a sour economy to do something I knew nothing about, they all thought I was crazy. When I told them that my intention was to build a premium brand to compete with the filthy-rich, giants of the cosmetics world, on a shoestring budget, they thought I had gone stark raving mad.

What I wanted to do made no sense and I had no option but to agree with them. These were the top US and European brands, and no brand from any developing country had ever dared to attempt to compete with them.

Despite recognizing this, I couldn't stop thinking about the problem. I knew that if I did not fix it, chances were that no one else ever would and our women would continue to be marginalized by the cosmetics industry. That more than anything else was my primary motivation.

I had no science background, no lab, no funding. But I had something far more powerful. I had a reason. When your reason is strong enough, you figure out the rest.

I studied ingredients, ordered samples, failed, and tried again, not to build a business, but to build a solution. Every time I saw a mismatched face, I thought of my mother. Every time someone said, "This is the closest shade I could find," I felt it as injustice. That injustice became my call to action. I realized this wasn't just about makeup, it was about dignity, visibility, and representation.

The beauty industry hadn't just failed women of color. It had erased them.

And that's when my passion became purpose.

From the beginning, Sacha wasn't created to be just another beauty brand. My mission was to build a world-class company, one that could stand shoulder to shoulder with the giants- not as a niche player, not as a regional brand, but as a serious global contender.

Unlike the legacy brands, we didn't treat inclusion as an afterthought. For us, it was the foundation. Where they designed for a narrow definition of beauty, we created for the full spectrum. We weren't trying to be just another brand on the shelf. We set out to raise the bar and redefine the standard.

But I knew ideas weren't enough. Dreams are easy. Execution is hard. If I wanted to change the narrative, I had to build something real, something the world couldn't ignore.

Sacha became more than a brand. It became a disruptor, born in a small Caribbean nation, proving that beauty has no borders, that representation is not a trend, and that even from a small island, we could compete globally. And win.

Ideas are exhilarating. They make you feel unstoppable. But the truth is, having the idea is the easy part. The hard part is bringing it to life through uncertainty, exhaustion, and rejection.

Passion starts the fire. But only persistence keeps it burning.

What it takes is:

- Relentless discipline
- Courage to leave comfort behind
- And the will to keep going long after the excitement is gone

One of the hardest lessons I learned early on is if you're not stubborn about your vision, you won't survive the first storm. And the storms came.

Progress was painfully slow. Over the years, I took the hardest Mike Tyson punches over and over and always got back up. Failure is not getting knocked down, it's not getting back up.

I left a stable teaching job during an economic collapse to enter an industry I knew nothing about. I could've played it safe. I could've scaled back, repositioned Sacha as a discount brand, and settled for local survival. But that was never the plan. The problem we saw was worldwide and if we wanted to solve it, we knew we would have to build a high-end global brand right here in Trinidad.

The odds were stacked against me. I had no experience, no capital, no connections. I often wondered: Why me? Why not someone better equipped? Quitting would have been easier. Safer. And yet, I kept going.

Because doubt is part of the journey. So is fear. But they're only permanent if you let them be.

Real dreams don't whisper, they roar. They stretch you, shake you, and pull you far beyond your comfort zone. As John A. Shedd once said, "A ship is safe in harbor, but that's not what ships are built for." Neither are we.

Sacha was built on a bold idea, brought to life through sleepless nights, deep faith, and the refusal to give up. It wasn't glamorous. It was hard. But when your vision truly matters, you don't fold when it gets tough. You double down and build it anyway.

In developing markets like ours, the norm is to manufacture cheap, low-end goods and compete on price. That wasn't my goal. I didn't want to survive, I wanted to thrive globally. I wanted to show that a luxury beauty brand could be born in a small developing country and compete at the highest level. But to do that, we had to exceed, not match the performance of global brands. In quality. In purpose. In authenticity. In connection. Because no one else was building high-performance products that truly served women of color. And if we didn't do it, who would? I still had doubts. But I held on to one truth: You can't solve a global problem with a local mindset. So, we dared.

One of the most powerful lessons my mother taught me was this: The world doesn't reward average. It rewards excellence, with conviction and soul.

In my hardest moments, I clung to a story about a little girl drawing in class. When asked what she was drawing, she replied, "I'm drawing God." Her teacher said, "But no one knows what God looks like." She answered, "They will soon."

That was the kind of belief I needed: Quiet and unshakeable, the kind that builds, even when no one else understands.

Michelangelo once said, "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free." That's how I saw Sacha.

I started Sacha not even in Port of Spain or San Fernando, but on my kitchen table in Freeport, with a small savings, a vision, and a belief that I could build something meaningful.

Today, Sacha is the best-selling brand locally, sold to wholesalers in 50 countries and also online. It consists of a wide range of high-performance products that look far more exquisite on deeper complexions than any other brand in the world.

Sacha is also the only brand in the world with a Holy Grail product, Buttercup Powder. Buttercup is one of the most purchased beauty products by women of color worldwide, with over 10,000 five-star reviews on Amazon. One of the major challenges we face is the millions of fake Buttercup Powder sold especially across Africa. Imagine people making fakes of a product made in our little T&T.

Sacha is also the only brand in the world that is certified cruelty-free and halal. It is also one of the rare brands that have been the Official Cosmetics of both the Miss Universe and Miss USA pageants, the highest beauty forums in the world. Imagine, a brand made in little T&T.

Our journey to get where we are today was long and hard, but despite the many obstacles on the way, we never gave up.

When we started, we had no internet, no smartphones, no Google, just a landline, unreliable electricity, and paved roads that came later. Research meant libraries. Marketing meant flyers. International communication took weeks.

Today, starting a business takes a phone, Wi-Fi, and an idea. You have free access to YouTube, Google, and yes, ChatGPT. You can design packaging on Canva, run your own ads, get feedback instantly, and collaborate globally.

You don't need a store to launch a product. Platforms like Amazon, eBay, Etsy, and TikTok Shop have democratized global commerce. You can build a personal brand, sell e-books, promote niche products, or earn from affiliate programs. You have tools I couldn't even dream of. If I had what you have today, it would've saved me decades.

Now I speak directly to you as young people gearing up to enter an exciting stage of your life. In today's uncertain world, relying on a single income is risky. Regardless of what career path you choose, you must have alternative income streams. With rapid advances in AI, even a steady salary offers little security. Many jobs of today could easily be replaced by AI.

So, if you're thinking of starting a business, and I believe you have to, either full-time or as a side hustle, here are 10 hard-earned tips I would like to share with you:

1. Don't compete in the mass market. You can't outspend the giants.
2. Find a niche they overlook. For us, it was women of color. Focus your resources there and sell globally—especially to the diaspora.
3. Don't try to compete with China. You won't win on price.
4. Focus on value, not cost.
5. Price for the problem you solve, not what it costs to make. Niches support higher prices.
6. Quality is the price of admission. If it's not world-class, don't launch it.
7. Differentiate in ways that can't be copied. Think secret formulas, proprietary methods like Angostura, Coke, or Buttercup Powder.
8. If it can't be run from your phone, don't do it.
9. Solve a real problem. The bigger the problem, the bigger the opportunity.
10. Learn business by working in one. My advice to you is that if you want a crash course or short cut learning everything about running a business, get a job working at McDonald's.

It's not just fast food, it's business school in disguise, with a paycheck. You'll learn systems, branding, logistics, and leadership under pressure. Every task is streamlined. Every shift is a lesson in scale and efficiency. McDonald's doesn't run out of beef or buns, there's a reason for that.

In 2017, I was a finalist at the World Entrepreneur of the Year Hall of Fame in Monte Carlo. Each country was represented by a winner. For the U.S., it was Mr. Bill Marriott of the Marriott hotel empire. Icons like Mark Cuban and William Lauder of Estée Lauder were there. We were in the presence of business royalty.

While quietly having coffee, a woman approached. She introduced herself as the regular Chief Judge of the awards, though not judging that year. Then she said something I'll never forget: "I've reviewed hundreds of applications from top entrepreneurs. But yours was the most compelling I've ever read. Most build businesses. You set out to change the world for those long ignored by the mainstream. And you did it."

Had she been the judge that year, she said, Sacha might have won the global title. But as they say, timing is everything.

My hope is that this story inspires you to rise into your own purpose. Whatever path you choose, aim not just for success but for significance. Build something that outlives you. Leave behind a legacy that makes the world stronger, better, and more beautiful because you were here.

Now, as Minister of Trade, Investment, and Tourism, my mission has expanded. Just as I built Sacha from the ground up, I intend to help you build what matters to you. I am committed to removing the barriers that stand in your way by improving access to funding, creating better support systems for startups, and making it easier to do business in Trinidad and Tobago.

Because the next great global brand can come from right here from you.

Let's build a future where bold ideas are embraced, not ignored, where young entrepreneurs are empowered, not overlooked, and where the brightest minds in our nation don't wait for approval, they take the lead, break new ground, and build the future themselves.

So, I challenge you, start now. Start small if you must, but start with courage. Because the future we're all hoping for, is waiting for you to create it.

Thank you.