

September 15, 2009

Azim Premji Foundation experience

Distinguished guests and friends,

It is a pleasure to be back with you all at a YPO get-together. I am honoured to have this opportunity to share with you my views on education in India and the experiences of Azim Premji Foundation in its efforts to contribute to quality universal education in India.

Our constitutional commitment and development

As Indians, we are all very proud of our country and want India to be among the most developed nations in the world.

When we people in business speak about development – we mostly focus on the economic and infrastructural part of the development. Such development is extremely important since it provides a basic stability, sets a standard of living for the country to aspire to. However, equally, or perhaps far more important, is societal development for everyone of our citizens. For only when all our people are empowered can we build the nation conceived and articulated in our constitution.

The constitution of India, a great document of which we can be rightly proud, guarantees, among other things, to secure for all its citizens Justice, Liberty and Equality.

JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity;

As a nation we have failed to uphold this guarantee of an India in which, to paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi, the poorest can feel that it is their country, in whose making they have an effective voice, an India in which all communities can live in harmony, in which there is no room for untouchability and inequality, and where women enjoy the same rights as men.

India's performance

It does not take much application of mind to realize that our performance against the above objectives has been dismal. Today, our nation of over 1.2 billion people contributes merely 1.2% of world's GDP. There is an all round failure to deliver equity to all our fellow citizens as borne out by several statistical parameters. We have a Human Development ranking of 129 out of 175 countries, and are placed among the bottom 25% countries in governance, and the top 20% in corruption. 50% of our population is still deprived of electricity and over 25% people don't even have access to potable drinking water. Our sex ratio is worse than what it was in 1901 and 60% of our women are anemic. Half the children under 4 years of age are malnourished and a large proportion of population does not have access to basic health. While 10% of the population has reaped the excessive benefits of globalization and economic development, 70% of the population is still reeling in poverty with an income of less than Rs.1500 per month.

This is the young population on which we are placing our hopes of a shining India tomorrow. Let us not forget that an educated, healthy population will be a tower house of strength, but a malnourished and disempowered populace will be a gigantic stone around the neck of the nation, capable of dragging it down irretrievably.

Top Five issues

The most critical issues, we as a nation face are:

1. Inequity
2. Under realization of the huge human potential
3. Poor governance & governance structure
4. Inadequate Infrastructure
5. Dismal quality of education & health

It is imperative that we address these issues. Change is crucial. Effecting change on such an enormous scale is a monumental task.

The power of education in national development

We at Azim Premji Foundation believe, that of the many interventions that can help build the nation, education is one of the most powerful vehicles which can bring about far reaching change in the society. We have therefore decided to focus on education as the domain through which we would contribute to change.

The National Policy for Education 1986 drew up an enlightened agenda spelling out educational objectives which were consistent with the rights guaranteed in our

constitutional preamble. It clearly stated that the objective of education was to create children who, apart from learning the three 'Rs', would develop a scientific temperament with the ability to reason, and who would grow up to become responsible, empathetic and proactive citizens of this country.

However, our performance in the field of education has been far from satisfactory. Our literacy is 65% vs the global average of 80%. Out of the 100 children who join school, only about half reach 8th standard, a third of whom go on to 10th standard. Of these, 50% pass. Thus the efficiency of the entire funnel is just 15 % or so. Of those that pass, approximately 20% pursue higher education. I leave it to you to assess how many of our children really get a meaningful education.

In almost all schools, public or private - and between Azim Premji Foundation & Wipro we have worked with both - there is an excessive focus on rote memory based-learning. Very little is done to promote independent thinking, application of mind, or developing values. This is further exacerbated by an examination system which primarily tests memory of the students, rather than their ability to apply their minds.

The Azim Premji Foundation approach

The picture is not without hope. Government has made significant improvement in the reach of schooling. Over 95% habitations in the country now have a school within 1-3 kilometers. However, studies reveal that very little learning happens in most of these schools. At the 5th standard level, one in three children cannot read or write. The quality levels are abysmal for a number of reasons:

- Teacher: Inadequate in number, short on attendance and motivation, politically protected

- Administration: System lacks accountability, unmotivated, often without requisite skills
- Arbitrary transfer of educational officials
- Poor methods of teaching learning
- Lack of inadequate infrastructure including school building, functional toilets, and drinking water
- Poverty: children in work place rather than in schools
- Poor quality of education, which discourages parents from making the effort to send children to school.

It is for this reason, that Azim Premji Foundation decided to focus on:

- **Government schools in rural areas.** About 80% of the people live in rural India and almost 200 million of our children are already in Government schools. They have little choice either because of unavailability of alternative institutions, or their own economic incapacity
- **Improving quality of education.** The numbers involved are so staggering that we realized that it was totally implausible to try and duplicate the entire system. The answer, we believe lies in improving the quality of education in existing Government schools, by engaging with the Government, and by focusing in rural areas where heart of the problem lies.
- Our aim is to significantly **contribute to a fundamental change in the way schooling takes place**, so that our children receive quality education. One which will promote independent thinking and empower them, and which,

over time, will facilitate the development of a “just, equitable and humane society”.

- The sweeping change we envision cannot, we believe, happen merely by creating islands of excellence - some of which already exist - but by initiating a **change that is systemic and large scale in its nature**, which can influence policy and bring about not only a statewide, but a nationwide, change.

- **How to effect change?** Our country has 1.3 million schools deploying 6 million teachers and 1 million support staff to deliver education. Our analyses suggest, that the most critical levers of change that need to be addressed if we are to improve the quality of education, are:
 - Most importantly, the teacher
 - Education administrators and management
 - Examination reforms, as these influence the way schools teach

We felt it was important to **try and reach a large number of schools** across various geographies and communities, rather than concentrate in a single area or state. In keeping with our decision to work with the Govt. and focus on rural schools we have to date, engaged with 25000 schools across 14 states, covering over 2.5 million children and 100,000 teachers through our various programs, including making individual assessments of almost 4 million children.

Challenges

The journey, of course, is not easy. We are talking about a social change where several stakeholders are involved – and we are dealing with human beings that are diverse. The most critical challenges that we have faced are:

- 1. Non-convergence of interest among stakeholders:** In business for example, there is clear synergy of interest around one factor – money. Everyone wants more money – the shareholders, the employees, the business associates – all identify themselves single-mindedly with one objective.

In education, the stakeholders have divergent objectives and views. The educationists and purists view education as an arbiter of social change. Teachers and government functionaries look upon it as a source of livelihood. Parents see education as a means to gainful employment for their children and economic independence for the family. Children as a place to interact with other children, or one they are forced to go because of parental pressure.

- 2. Lack of political will:** Unfortunately political parties have never given education, one of the most crucial elements in the enhancement of a nation, any importance, let alone primacy, in their election agendas. It is obviously a non-priority for them, perhaps as it is neither a great generator of money nor votes. And since it is from leaders that people take their cues, quality education for all has been relegated to a position of minimal importance in our nation.

3. The facelessness of the Government and the issue of tenure:

We have consistently experienced that when one deals with Government, one engages not with an institution, but invariably with the person who is currently in the seat of power, a person who may be transferred anywhere, anytime, and so has only limited engagement with the job. This is a great impediment to substantiate intervention. But even the Prime Minister seems to have expressed his inability to address this issue. This creates discontinuity and instability when dealing with the Government, making it hard for programmes to have a sustained impact. For example, a year ago, we entered into an MoU with a particular state in which it was clearly agreed that no teachers or education functionaries would be transferred during the period of project, since significant training development inputs were being invested in them. Within 12 months of the MoU, the officer in charge changed, and the Government transferred over 70% of the teachers and education functionaries in the district.

4. Inadequacy of financial resources: Whoever we talk to in Govt. says, money is not the issue, it is the dearth of ideas and the execution that is the problem. But let me assure you that money is definitely an issue, because quality education is expensive, and the current provisioning of around 3.6% of GDP is just not adequate to create the quality infrastructure, quality administration, quality teachers, or the quality classroom interaction that is most necessary for the child to learn. The children of our poor deserve better. They must receive an

education that is an education, and not a mockery of it. We must provide the necessary budgets to enable this. We should not speak here in terms of percentages, but in terms of whatever is required, to give every one of our children a decent education.

- 5. Dealing with the Government:** Government is like large organizations anywhere and dealing with it has all the implicit challenges in dealing with such entities. The key challenges when interacting with Govt. are absence of accountability, political interference, lack of professional approach and the non-existence of a risk - reward system that can motivate people. There are some very good officers and functionaries within the Government, and we have been fortunate to come across many such people. However, overall, the system is not geared to achieve the objectives envisaged, nor the policies enunciated by governments.
- 6. Unavailability of education professionals:** For any large scale change, you need people with vision, who are not only passionate, but who have the competence to effect change. Unfortunately we have no institutions of education of the caliber of our IITs and IIMs to develop outstanding, well rounded professionals in the field of education, who can provide necessary leadership for so crucial a mission to have the desired impact. All we have is a large number of B Ed colleges that provide teachers training - and that too of questionable quality.

So what are some of our takeaways from our experiences?

- 1. Creating Missionaries of Change:** Creating a just, equitable and humane society for all citizens is a gigantic task. To achieve such a change requires almost religious dedication and fervour, and an implicit belief that dispensing quality education is imperative for the future of our nation. It calls for bright, dedicated, passionate and committed professionals, with missionary zeal, who can effectively preach and pursue the cause. Since such a cadre does not exist it is imperative to create one. Azim Premji Foundation plans to establish the Azim Premji University precisely to develop such intellectual capital in the field of education, as well as to develop knowledge and ideas necessary to realize this mission.

- 2. Reach:** Since meaningful change necessitates reaching a large number of people and engaging with them holistically, it is not possible for a couple of Universities or to institutions to reach the far corners of the country. We believe it will be necessary to set up Education Resource Centers, at least one in each of our 600+ districts, either on our own or through public/private partners who share our vision. The University/ies and Education Resource Centers will in time, create a bank of dedicated professionals who understands the kind of education that needs to be imparted, and who can help create large cadres of trained and committed people in the field. The Resource Centres shall also serve as vehicles to guide and support, quality education in schools within the regions.

- 3. Networks:** It is not possible for a single organization to achieve such an aspirational goal. Working with large numbers of like-minded people and organizations across the country and abroad, is the only way. Not casual networking but serious engagement with individuals and institutions where we can learn from each other and get support for our measures. What we are trying to achieve is not a change, not a movement, but indeed a revolution in education.
- 4. Effective advocacy and communication:** Every citizen of our country needs to understand the role quality education can play in transforming the social and economic fabric of the nation.. It calls for a ground swell of public opinion, of people imbued with this realization, if we are to empower our people.
- 5. Long term commitment to the cause:** I am personally committed to the cause of creating a “just, equitable and humane society” through the domain of education, as I believe that is the key solution to several issues that India faces.

I think every organization, every leader, every citizen of the country needs to think about this. You, as leaders of large work forces, have a significant role to play in understanding the importance of quality education as a one of the most powerful tools of social transformation, with tremendous trickle down possibilities. Quality education for all

children needs to become an integral part of our discourse in the board rooms, in employee interactions, in media, in forums across India. The issue is beyond clichés and social talk. We need to act, and we need to act now.

Thank you