



## Azim H. Premji

# The day the Government stops thinking its schools are for the poor, **INDIA WILL TRANSFORM** itself

I believe, there are three key challenges that our nation faces:

- ▶ Moving towards social, economic and political equity. The first step here is to ensure that everyone has access to livelihood, education and healthcare.
- ▶ Strengthening our multi-cultural heritage, and creating space for diverse worldviews.
- ▶ Reducing and reversing human impact on larger ecological processes.

**B**ut, I believe, the biggest challenge revolves around a popularly expressed sentiment: “The poor send their children to government schools because they cannot afford private school education.” For many of us, the government school classroom is far removed from our everyday lives. Perhaps this is why we are unable to appreciate the pivotal role it plays in Indian society. We need to understand why government schools exist, and indeed what they represent.

An urban upper middle-class parent will have a different set of desires for her child compared to a rural farmer. And this urban parent will be able to back her desire with significantly more money. Since the burgeoning private school system is largely driven by market forces, it is inevitable that these schools will limit themselves to the immediate needs and demands of the communities they serve. There are, of course, several private schools that are motivated by larger social ideals. We have had the privilege of working with many of them as part of Wipro’s social initiatives. These schools are beacons; they are the ones that show us what education can be. I am not referring to them, but to a large number of market-driven private schools we see all around us.

One outcome of this is that most such

market-driven private schools operate out of a narrower agenda. Their objectives are usually limited to maximising academic performance in examinations, with some supplemental work in arts and sports. While these objectives might be somewhat important, they fall short of education’s larger societal aims. I have even heard people argue that private schools, given that they only reiterate social stratification, hold us back from realising our societal dreams.

The connection between society’s aspirations and education becomes clear when we see that the school is a microcosm of larger society. What unfolds within a school today will become the new Indian reality tomorrow. Since our future is mirrored in today’s classrooms, society organises education out of two desires. One, it wishes that each new generation will further the limits of human understanding and knowledge. And two, it tries to realise its ideals of equality, liberty, and the dignity of every citizen by constructing this society within its classrooms.

This is what the government school classroom represents; it represents the dreams and aspirations of India in a way that no other school system can. If we wish to transform India, this is where we have to begin. I suppose it is clear why we do grave injustice when we think of government schools as “schools for the poor”.

The need to significantly improve the quality of government schools is well recognised, and work is already underway in these areas: making learning more engaging and relevant for children; making classrooms more sensitive to the abilities and inclinations of every child; ensuring adequate teachers, learning material, and school infrastructure; offering greater school autonomy along with accountability and authentic feedback;

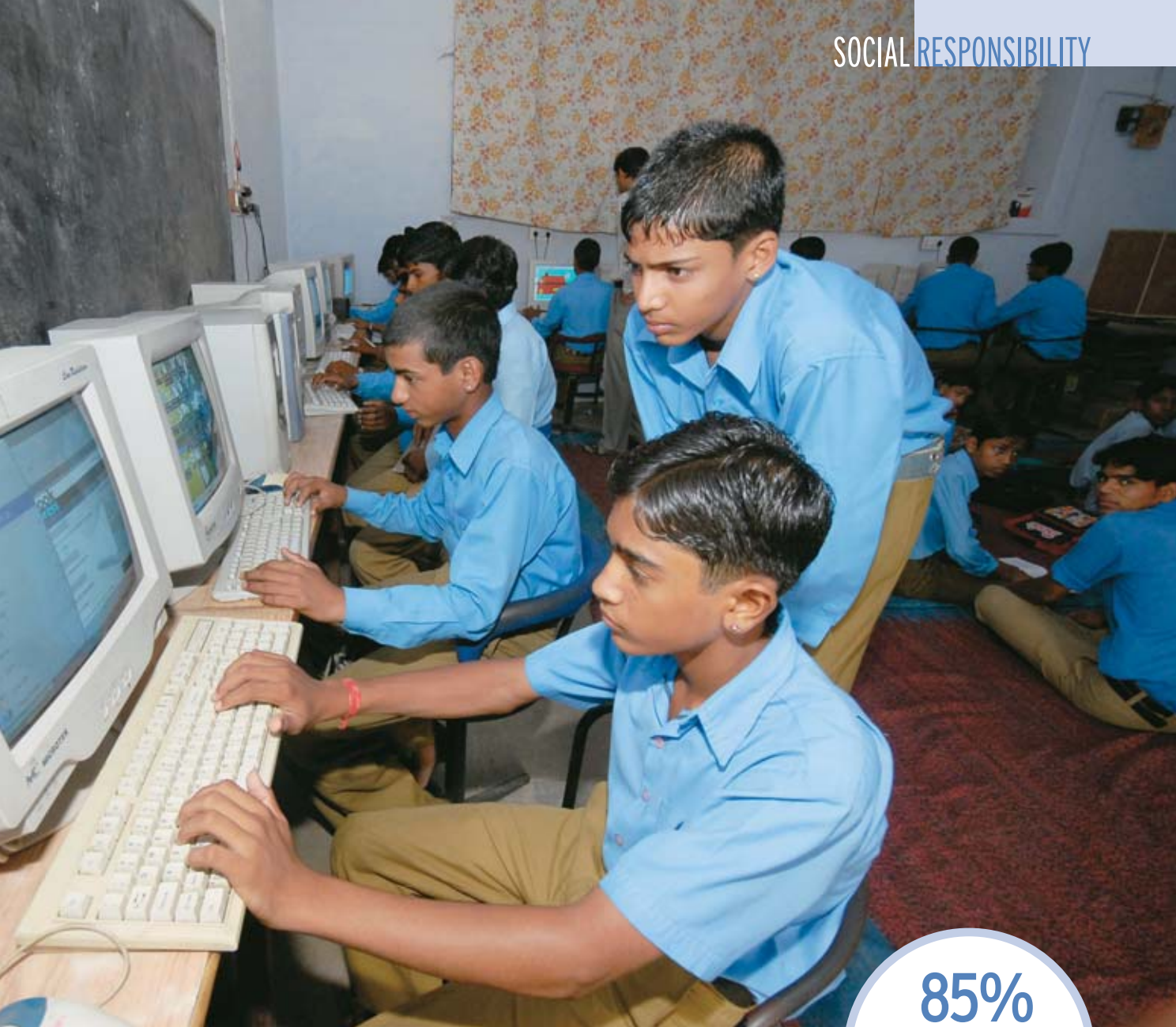


PURUSHOTTAM DIWAKAR

**Learning the ropes:** Students of a government senior secondary school in Ajmer attending computer classes

## Class Apart

**A GOVERNMENT SCHOOL CLASSROOM REPRESENTS THE DREAMS AND ASPIRATIONS OF INDIA IN A WAY THAT NO OTHER SCHOOL SYSTEM CAN.**



85%

LITERACY RATE BY 2012 IS WHAT THE GOVERNMENT HOPES TO TARGET BY GIVING EMPHASIS TO EDUCATION IN ITS 11TH FIVE-YEAR PLAN.

making the bureaucracy more competent and enabling and so on.

Without doubt, each of these is crucial to achieve. However, I now want to focus on some aspects that will directly impact the three challenges I listed initially. These aspects are the pedagogic processes of exploration and dialogue; and the educational goals of empathy and independence.

Learning happens when children explore things and interpret what they encounter. The teacher facilitates this process by choosing what children explore and by influencing how they interpret. I would suggest that teachers choose issues that will create debates around issues of equity and inequity, respect and prejudice, and harmful versus sustainable lifestyles. For instance, the kinds of caste, class and religion-based stereotypes that exist

around us; garbage and its impact on ecology; or even the different ways in which hegemony operates.

Let us take the garbage example: this is something a government teacher has tried with his students. For homework, the teacher asked children to rummage through the dustbin, and make a list of waste items. The next day, the class explored three questions: What is waste? Why is it generated? And, what is the impact of each form of waste on the environment? Something as simple as the dustbin suddenly opened up a Pandora's box: the idea that waste is an exclusively human creation, that no other species on earth generates waste; that local products generate lesser waste than products that are processed, packaged and transported from distant areas;



PANKAJ TIWARI

### New lessons:

Government teachers should use dialogue to help students see things from multiple perspectives

that traditional rural lifestyles generate lesser waste than the urban bourgeoisie. The teacher told me that he planned to extend the discussion to questions such as: What is development? How is humanity harming the earth? And, finally moving to the need for water harvesting, renewable energy, natural farming, and other sustainable practices.

As children explore issues through such real projects, the teacher should use dialogue to help them see things from multiple perspectives, thereby helping the child to develop a worldview that is broader than that of the community she lives in. As the complexity of projects, breadth of perspective and depth of dialogue increase through the school years, children will acquire a greater empathy towards their peers and the world they live in, and will also feel more confident about their own place in society.

This kind of educative process will create a critical and caring citizenry who will expand our notions of who we are, what society

should be, what development is, and how to live in harmony with each other and with nature. These children, our torchbearers, will help us find a more nuanced expression of our ideals, and also inclusive and practical ways to confront the challenges India faces today.

It is important to see that these are not esoteric and distant ideals, but very real possibilities. It might be counter-intuitive, but I believe that such ideals are easier to realise in the government school classrooms than in the more popular private schools.

My dream is to improve the quality of our government schools to such an extent that, no matter who we are, each one of us desires to educate our children here. The day when the local government school is able to attract children from across the social spectrum, that will be the day we can proudly proclaim that India is on the threshold of transformation.

*The author is the chairman of Wipro Technologies.*

## Spectrum of Hope

INDIA WILL BE ON A THRESHOLD OF TRANSFORMATION THE DAY GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS ARE ABLE TO ATTRACT CHILDREN FROM ACROSS THE SOCIAL SPECTRUM.