



## Dileep Ranjekar

### Azim Premji Foundation

In the year 2001, Azim Premji, Chairman of Wipro, established Azim Premji Foundation, a nonprofit organisation with a vision of significantly contributing to quality universal education to build a just, equitable and humane society. This means every child should receive quality education. The financial resources for this Foundation have been personally contributed by Premji. The Foundation is focused on building accountability for quality education, demonstrating that comprehensive quality education can be achieved in rural government schools and exploring innovative technical solutions to make education play, evaluation fun and deliver child-centric education for all. The current programmes of the Azim Premji Foundation cover over 11,000 rural government schools.

Translating Premji's vision to reality is Dileep Ranjekar, CEO of Azim Premji Foundation. Prior to assuming this role, Dileep Ranjekar was the Corporate Executive Vice President Human Resources at Wipro. Dileep is a science graduate and has a Post Graduate Diploma of Business Management as well as Master's degree in Personnel Management & Industrial Relations from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. Dileep provided leadership to the various innovative people practices in Wipro Corporation ranging from talent access and selection, leadership development from within, employee satisfaction, competency-based people practices and making Wipro an exciting fun place to work in.

**India has become a receiver of knowledge**

**India's demographics are an advantage . . .**

**16% of world's population, but only 1.6% of its GDP**

**Over a period of time we have seen that there are some structural concerns that people have on India - infrastructure, health issues, governance, etc. We are focusing on organisations like yours to highlight the work being done at the ground level in the country to meet these challenges. Why did the Foundation focus on literacy and education?**

You know, the issue that you have identified is one that bothers the whole world. For literacy, though India has made some progress in the past 50 years, owing to the quality of education that we pursue, India has become a receiver of knowledge from being a creator of knowledge. At one point of time we had the tradition of a wonderful university system - Nalanda and Takshila - we used to create knowledge. We claim that we have done lot of work in IT, but even in IT we work on operating systems, languages and platforms that are developed outside India. If you critically examine the value-chain growth, it is insignificant - we are largely working on time and material basis.

The clear advantage for India is that almost 40% of population is under the age of 15. By 2060/2070, the whole world will be at a very high average age. Around that time, we would be sitting on a very large young talent pool. However, if we want to truly become a developed nation and realise the potential advantage, we have to address some critical issues in all earnestness.

Take a look at our human development index - 127 out of 175 countries. So it is a matter of major dent on our national pride. Second is we account for more than 16% of the world's population, but contribute to only 1.6% of the total GDP. This is a major challenge as well as a major opportunity. Again the crux is in our education system.

**Basic education brings about social changes**

When Premji and I began discussions on this way back in 1998, we found that this is one area that influences poverty, health, nutrition and almost every other aspects of human and social development. Basic education has a lot of influence to bring about a social change. More importantly it is about developing a different kind of a society - a society that is just, humane and equitable.

It is disappointing to know that 23% of our population does not have access to wholesome drinking water, almost 50% does not have access to tap water and more than 50% still does not have electricity. We can quote these statistics and nausea but the issue is a lot of our energy gets spent on very basic, fundamental, low-on-the-hierarchy kind of issues. That is a complete waste of the huge talent we have in the country. The kind of education that we impart in our schools is key to all these

**We had no clue what the issues were in the education sector**

**Which segment of the education or literacy chain are you and the Foundation focusing on?**

Since both Premji and I came from the corporate sector, we had no clue what the issues in education were. We did not even know what elementary education meant. We realised that with one million schools, five million teachers and 200 million children, the canvas to work on was huge. On the school front, there is good progress because almost 93% of the population has a school within 2km.

**While the literacy rate has increased to 65%, there are glaring disparities**

Since India's independence, our literacy level has increased to 65% - however it still compares adversely to the world average of 80%. There is a huge disparity - over 20% point difference between male and female, urban and rural. Because of the disparities and lack of quality, more and more people are shifting from government schools to private schools. But whether it is a government school or a private school, no worthwhile education is happening. Besides, the entire system encourages migration - unless you want a high school that is 5km away from your primary school. For tertiary education, you have to go several kilometres away, and for high-quality professional education it could be hundreds of kilometres away from your native place. After that you never return to the village where your parents remain. We decided to focus on quality because we found the government is engaged seriously with quantity issues. Many states like Karnataka have done a commendable job of getting out-of-school children back to school. However, the quality of education for those who are in school remains uniformly poor across the country.

**Almost all actions take place at the state level**

**The government's engagement is at the state or national level? Where do you see most of the action happening?**

Almost the entire action happens at the state level. The current central participation is through its programme Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, which was created in the year 2000. Significant funds are directed at certain specific activities. The states have to submit proposals that fit the programmes. However, the funding for Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan is matched by the share of funding by the states, and this share is gradually increasing. The idea is that the programme or the scheme must be owned by the states.

**The problem is many states do not have adequate resources**

Today 92-93% of the country's US\$6.5bn education expenditure goes to teachers' salaries. Various reports and experts have maintained that if India wants to achieve quality universal education, the requirement is another US\$30bn over 10 years. This would be spent on:

**We focus on quality and equality**

- ❑ Infrastructure: Number of classrooms, toilets, drinking-water facilities
- ❑ Recruitment of teachers to achieve the prescribed norm of teacher-pupil ratio
- ❑ Capacity building: Teacher training, in-service training

We focus on two aspects: The quality of the education and equality (reduction of disparities). How well do all children learn in school? We do not focus on out-of-school children. Of 200 million children, it is estimated that 25 million are out of school. But over 165 million are attending, so let's do something about them.

**A talk with some villagers opened our eyes to the conditions of schools**

We learnt this when we once held a meeting in a village during our early days. Out of the 115 children in the age group of 6-14 in that village, 97 were in school, 18 were not. So we were discussing with the community on how to get the 18 into school. The villagers said, 'Do you know what is happening to those 97 children who are in schools? Can you just go there to find out - teachers do not come, there are inadequate teachers, classrooms are dilapidated, there is no toilet and no drinking water in the school, no learning is taking place. Why don't you fix that first so that it could become exciting for the children to continue there.' That was an eye-opener.

The reason we decided to work in rural government schools was because over 90% of children - primarily from disadvantaged groups and could not afford private education - go to rural government schools.

**We liaise with over 16,000 schools and over 2.5m children**

**Are you now focusing only on a few states?**

We started working in familiar territory - Karnataka and Andhra. But very soon some of our programmes began receiving demand from other states. So today we are in about 16 states and union territories. We are engaged with almost 16,000 plus schools, 2.5 million children and about 40,000 teachers. The Foundation's primary goal is to be able to facilitate large-scale changes at macro level. However, for this it is necessary to engage yourself at the micro level to understand how things work, or do not work. Everything that we do is in collaboration with the government. We are also open to work with several other organisations that have similar goals and integrity of purpose.

**Our first programme examined the influence of computers in schools**

**What are the different programmes that the Foundation is implementing?**

After having engaged in the enrolment of out-of-school children in the initial period, the first formal programme that we launched was Computer Aided Learning. This was to find out what influence computers in the school has on the children, their learning, their parents, the teachers and the entire ecosystem of education as such. To make the programme we decided to develop multimedia software that was to serve the purpose of pedagogic-teaching learning material. We partnered with several developers who could translate our academic concepts into animation, stories, games and riddles. The Foundation gives the software for free to all government schools that have computers and are willing to utilise the multimedia material in a certain purposeful manner. The Government of Karnataka was the first state to submit a proposal to Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan under innovation for the use of the Computer Aided Learning.

**Our multimedia software implies a different culture of teaching**

We follow a certain process in the engagement with states. The first step is that they must send a team of five people - the implementers - to our office to understand the principles of this programme. This also indicates the

**We sign a MoU with the state government**

seriousness of the state because it is impossible for the state to send five people if they are not serious about it. Secondly, they must commit to create a team of facilitators - teacher-trainers - who will be trained to coach the teachers. The programme is more than just a software, it is about a different culture of teaching/learning in the classroom and it is child-centric - child can directly play with it, it is fun-based, story-based, animation-based, exercise, puzzles, riddles, etc. Thirdly, the teacher is supposed to integrate the programme with her classroom practices in a manner that learning gets heightened. It is not a substitute for the teacher but a teaching-learning aid that can significantly improve the learning process.

The next thing the state has to commit is that they will appoint a senior monitoring functionary to ensure the programme is being implemented in the manner it is supposed to be and that it actually contributes to learning. Lastly, the state has to evolve a mechanism under which all schools where this programme is being implemented create a timetable to enable at least two periods per child per week for interacting with the multimedia material. There is a memorandum of understanding (MoU) that the Foundation signs with the states.

**Our tools are more effective to learning than traditional methods**

**So are you monitoring the influence in the states where the Foundation is working on?**

The programme has been in active implementation for the past two years. Our studies indicate that there has been differences in the way children learn the topics covered by the software versus where such Computer Aided Learning programme is not available. In addition to learning improvement by varying degrees, there are several other positive influences. A study conducted by the Spastic Society of Karnataka finds that children with learning disabilities grew in confidence by using Computer Aided Learning. They also began reading better. Schools are excited when they find children working on computers. On the day when children could use computers, attendance is the highest.

We also had an accelerated-learning programme, which deals with pedagogy differently, for those children who have been out of school and have deficit in their competencies.

**Classroom reforms via changes in assessment and examinations**

The other programmes we have include the Learning Guarantee Programme - attempts classroom reforms through changes in assessment or examination. It focuses on measuring the non-rote learning of children as expressed through understanding and application. It has a huge potential to drive the system to move to the kind of learning that could help build children's surviving skills.

We also have a programme called Child Friendly School that attempts and experiments on how we create an ideal rural government school through community involvement, teacher transformation and continuous monitoring of the processes, culture and practices of a school.

**We need the state project director's commitment to our concept**

**And what has been the experience with various states?**

All MoUs are very young and there are varying degrees of compliance in different states. Performance could also change over a period of time. Let say implementation is at its best in a state where the state project director is convinced and committed to the concept. The reality is that such individuals could get transferred after a period of time. The new person may not agree like the previous person; it is not a question of commitment, it is more a

**Main frustration - the system was not delivering to its full potential**

**We would like to be a clearing house for policy issues on education**

**We are in search of a radical stimulus**

**A shift from the existing rote-learning system**

**The existing system does not allow dialogues with children**

question of ideology. There could be one person who says, 'I do not agree with Computer Aided Learning. Why do we need computers? In my childhood, I never used computers but learnt quite well.' However, the views of such person could change if he/she spends time with the children in schools where Computer Aided Learning is happening.

**What has been the biggest frustration in the past few years?**

We are lucky that there has been no major frustration. The frustration has been, if you are expecting a result of 100, you may get only 50. Or you may get 40. There is huge potential in the education delivery system of every state because there are several talented and committed people in the system. So the main challenge is how to facilitate the whole process in a manner that the system delivers to its highest potential.

**So what are the goals that you have set for yourself and the Foundation over the next five years?**

We would like to facilitate a large-scale change that could influence the quality of education for the millions of children in India. We would like to build capabilities so we could be a resource agency for the government and for every other organisation that desires a sea change in the quality of education.

**Have you found a lack of response from the government towards engaging with the Foundation or the private sector?**

No, if you could really add value, if you work with them shoulder-to-shoulder and if you have a long-term, genuine interest in bringing some changes, there is absolutely no issue. We do not find that an issue at all.

**I read that you would like to give a 'radical stimulus to influence the macro system'. What has the Foundation done in that direction and what is the radical stimulus you have in mind?**

We are in search of that radical stimulus. For example, the Learning Guarantee Programme is also in demand by some of the other states. It focuses on reforms in assessment and reforms in examination system, which in turn could result in reforms in teaching/learning processes. All parents and schools want their children to do very well in examinations. The entire education system is geared towards examinations and subsequent admissions, including common admission test (CAT), Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), etc. There is nothing wrong in that if your examination system actually tests the objectives of your curriculum - to develop the understanding, application, analysing and thinking abilities of students.

Today's examinations largely test rote-learning. Because of that, schools impose rote-learning. So here is an attempt or experiment to find out how schools, teachers, students and parents respond if the examination system is changed. Our country has committed itself to ensure educational systems that are helpful to the child, in day-to-day life. So we have developed examination systems in consultation with various experts in the country, which will test the understanding of the child instead of just rote-learning.

When you want to test a child's reasoning skills, you get into a dialogue with the child. But that is not provided for in the existing system. The huge number now is definitely a show-stopper here. With such a large number of student, verbal-testing is almost impossible. Therefore the idea has to be to come up with a solution that in the written exam itself the questions will focus on the understanding, analysis and thinking of a child. Last year we tested

**Our testing tools hold up a mirror to the school**

about 800,000 children in Karnataka. The Government of Karnataka has established a Karnataka School Quality Assessment Programme to evaluate all schools using similar principles of testing. In January 2006, it evaluated children in 45,000 schools using this kind of mechanism.

**After evaluation, is the next step being taken?**

Giving detailed test results to each school is like showing them a mirror. The school has to be accountable for changing things inside the school. Any external force, coercion or facilitation will yield only temporary and limited outcomes. This is another important principle of the programme. The results must create a compulsion on schools to innovate, invent and demand where they need help from the states. The state in turn must build capacity among the District Institutes of Education Training (DIET) to cater to the academic support that will be required to achieve better results in competencies.

**How are teachers being motivated when they depends their livelihood on teaching?**

Teacher motivation is as complex as motivation for any other individual.

**For example, in some states, teacher’s salary is delayed by months and months.**

**States are acting to improve things like teacher’s salary**

This has been fixed in several states, like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, etc. On the first of every month, teachers get their salary. Now, these are some of the changes that will happen. It will happen if you persist. In Jaipur, we are holding a dialogue among a few northern states with whom we are engaged with, on how to build accountability in the education delivery system. It is a beginning and there are no easy solutions. All that we are currently doing is a dialogue on the subject. However, we are confident that change will happen sooner than later.

**There is no point in talking about how much we spend**

**What is the annual budget of the Foundation? On what areas do you spend the money?**

To us, what is more important is the number of schools and states we are engaged in. There is no point in talking about how much we spend. The leveraging effect with the states is important. The government’s spending level on education is so huge that any other figure will be a miniscule figure. Our expenses are evenly divided in the multimedia software that we developed, the operational costs of the Learning Guarantee Programme, Child Friendly School and the salaries of over 250 professionals who are passionately engaged in the goal of universal quality education with us.

**Budget is not a constraint**

In the last three years, we have spent Rs35-40m on the pilot projects of the Learning Guarantee Programme alone. Today, the Government of Karnataka has created a budget of Rs1bn!; that is the leverage. The Governments of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal have introduced similar budgets based on our findings, experience and our contributions to the programme. If I tell you our budget is about Rs250m, it has no meaning, because we consistently under spend. We spend the money on manpower, consultations, getting facilitators, building capacity, incentives and awards to schools, publications of discussion papers, research and analysis of the whole thing. We initially shared costs of the programme with the states. Budget is not a constraint. To spend meaningfully and productively is a challenge.

**Number of participating schools is an indicator**

**Do you have any measurable goals for instance?**

Yes. For example, the number of schools that has come forward and said they wanted to implement the Learning Guarantee Programme. This is a major indicator and that number is growing, as is how many states have come

<p><b>Grassroot schools must have resource coordinators</b></p>	<p>forward since we started working with the system. For us, what happens in regards to individual schools and children are not very critical. It is important but not critical. The measurement criteria are the means by which the whole system agrees to adopt this. We want them to be committed to the concept and then evolve their own concept. We will be with them, we will evolve that concept jointly or they can do it on their own.</p> <p><b>Once the state department issues instructions, does it not become mandatory for schools to change their philosophies?</b></p> <p>No, it does not work like that. It will work for some time, but it will die very soon. The change must be communicated well and must be understood before it is rolled out. Instructions do not work in any system - why will they work in education system?</p>
<p><b>External people like us have no say in the recruitment of teachers</b></p>	<p><b>And are you focused on how to attract good quality teachers or will it come later?</b></p> <p>That is a complex issue. Actually, we do not have a say in that at the moment. External people do not have a say in that. Each government has different recruitment practices and policies. Some do it through counselling. Some adopt the common entrance test (CET) way. Some do it based on the results of the Bachelor of Education examination. We are applying a lot of thought in the area of education management. The education delivery system can learn quite a lot of from management sciences. It can learn from some of the large corporations like General Electric (GE), Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Wipro, etc, on how they manage large workforces more effectively. GE has a global work force of over 200,000 people. TCS, Wipro, Infosys, Satyam together employ over 250,000 staff. How do these companies manage to access the potential of their employees?</p>
<p><b>System accountability is important</b></p>	<p>Teacher is a special focus area for the Foundation. There are issues ranging from defining competencies, pre-service training, in-service training, subject-matter expertise to the understanding of pedagogy, and most importantly, the issue of motivation and accountability. The subject of learning is complex and establishing one-to-one accountability has become difficult. Therefore, systemic accountability is important.</p>
<p><b>Some principles are universally applicable</b></p>	<p><b>But are there other organisations which have inspired this model? How did this come out? How did you become interested?</b></p> <p>My job earlier was to collect information on education. I was helping Premji on a personal basis as I was a full-time Wipro employee then. In the journey of exploring education and meeting hundreds of people across the country, I found a lot of similarities between my human-development job and the education domain. That was when I became interested. I found major resemblance in terms of systemic issues, process issues, management issues, quality issues, etc. Take the concept of a defect-free school. What is a defect-free school? That is what you do in six sigma, isn't it? But I've never quoted these things in the education parlance. Because people may feel that we are trying to implement management concepts in education. Their immediate response would be: 'It would not work here.' It would surely not work if you have that attitude. It is true that issues in the development sector are far more interlinked and difficult to segregate from one another. However, to a large extent, some principles are universally applicable.</p>

**We are not engaged with the children directly**

**What is the scalability of your efforts? Today you are engaged with about 2.5 million children, what about tomorrow?**

You should not give too much of importance to that number since for us it is the states and the schools that we are engaged with, not the children directly. Attempts of any single individual or organisation to engage with the children directly will see limitations. As a proof of concept, it would be appropriate, but not beyond it.

**The Foundation and the schools went as partners**

**What has contributed to the fast scaling-up of the number of schools you are engaged with?**

I think two to three things have contributed to that. One, we had something that catered to the requirements of people. Second is that they saw a lot of seriousness in our work. I must clarify that we do not treat our work as corporate social responsibility or charity or social work. It is an attempt by a group of professionals to evolve solutions to address a large and complex problem before the country in collaboration with the government. Third is that we've never gone to them as people who know everything, we went to them as learners and partners. People who could learn to speak their language, etc. In some large-scale partnerships, there is a danger of you becoming a part of the system. We warn ourselves constantly to ensure that this does not happen to us.

**More optimistic than when the Foundation first started**

**So compared to when you first started a few years back, and now, are you optimistic that things will change?**

Yes, it is a race against time. But I am even more optimistic now than when we first began. In most of the states, our education system heads want to do something. They want to make a difference. They are not saying, 'Why do you come and advise us? What is the locus standi you have?' The same mentality is no longer there. I think overall there is an increased awareness and desire to do something. There is more openness to listen, to partner with organisations that they think can add values with.

**Effective utilisation of resources needs monitoring**

Corruption is an issue in many states. Leakages are significant. Effective utilisation of money is a big problem. One of the biggest needs is monitoring the effective utilisation of resources. I would say we should take that as one of the top most priorities.

**We need volunteers who could help on a regular time basis**

**Do you offer opportunities to professionals to do pro bono work?**

The concept of volunteerism will not work here since the work is too intense and requires something more than full-time engagement. If somebody says he/she will do pro bono work for us during his/her free time, which will be uncertain, I may not use that kind of volunteerism. However, on the other hand, if someone says he/she can commit himself/herself for six months or one year, or every Saturday and Sunday, I will surely take that.

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