UNIVERSAL ELEMENTARY EDUCATION
A WAY FORWARD FOR INDIA
The Third Annual Public Affairs Lecture

AZIM PREMJI

The Third Annual Public Affairs Lecture was delivered on February 22, 2003 by Mr. Azim Premji, Chairman, WIPRO in Bangalore.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Azim Premji is a graduate in Electrical Engineering from Stanford University, USA. On the sudden demise of his father in 1966, Premji took on the mantle of leadership of Wipro at the age of 21. At that time, Premji had only one Vision – that was to build and create a Company on a solid foundation of Values. Wipro continues to be driven by its core Values even today.

In the year 2001, Premji established Azim Premji Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation that has a Vision of impacting the life of millions of children in India by facilitating the Universalisation of Elementary Education, which means every child is in school and learning. Premji personally contributes the financial resources for the Foundation. The Foundation has already launched initiatives in this direction in the states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat and work is in progress in partnership with the Government of these states, in about 8000 villages.

He is a member of the Prime Minister’s Advisory Committee for Information Technology in India. Premji was featured by Forbes in March 2003, in the global list of ten people who have the most “power to effect change”.

AZIM PREMJI
Chairman and
Managing Director, Wipro
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The Third Annual Public Affairs Lecture by Mr. Azim Premji

The Third Annual Public Affairs Lecture was delivered on February 22, 2003 by Mr. Azim Premji, Chairman, WIPRO in Bangalore. The theme of the lecture was “Universal Elementary Education: A Way Forward for India”. Mr. Premji, who heads Wipro, a global IT company, has established a foundation solely dedicated to the cause of improving elementary education in India. The foundation will spend Rs. 500 million this year alone on a major project on elementary education launched by Mr. Premji in over 5000 villages in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. While introducing Mr. Premji to the audience, Dr. Samuel Paul noted that his new initiative to reform elementary education is perhaps the most unique and innovative of such non-governmental efforts not only in India, but across the globe. His lecture was followed by a lively discussion in which Mr. Dileep Ranjekar, Chief Executive of the Azim Premji Foundation also took part. Mr. Premji’s talk is summarized below:

The Lecture

Chairman of Public Affairs Centre Dr. Samuel Paul, Executive Director Dr. Balakrishnan and Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to be present amongst you all today. I am thankful to Dr. Paul for this opportunity. When I was asked to choose the theme for this speech, I had no hesitation in choosing “Education”.

The importance of education can be illustrated best by the Chinese proverb that says:

“If you want to think one year ahead, plant rice
If you want to think 10 years ahead, plant trees
But if you want to think 100 years ahead, give education to people.”
Here I recall our President Dr. Abdul Kalam’s passionately inspiring comment that we are a nation of a billion brilliant people and if each person is educated, the sheer power of knowledge can transform India from a developing nation into a strong and economically developed nation.

Among the various challenges and priorities before our country, I personally emphasise the challenge of “every child receiving basic education” as the most important priority. In my opinion, education is the only hope for our country to change its current status of a “developing country” into a “developed country”. And we cannot make this change happen unless we ensure that the 50 million children who are currently out of school get enrolled in proper schools and also ensure that all children in school are learning.

Though “right to education” is now a fundamental right, I am aware of the several debates among the urban intellectuals when it comes to the education of the under-privileged children. A lot is spoken about the kind of education that they should receive and also the kind of education that is not helpful to them. Attempts are made to link even the elementary education to “employment opportunities”, “vocations” and “opportunity to earn money”. Yes, all this is important. However, the urban intellectuals do not ask these questions when it comes to enrolling their own children in the school. It comes very naturally to them. It is like “second nature”. No questions are asked about even basic issues like the relevance of education their children are receiving.

To me the most important issue is that “every child has a right to childhood”. We need to examine, whether we are mentally accepting this concept.

Being associated with the business and corporate worlds all my life, I view the importance of education from the point of the end output we expect from our education system. The all-important question is: why do we educate our children?
There are multiple answers: To become good citizens. To be good professionals. To be good leaders of their families. To be good leaders in their area of work. To be good subject matter experts. And above all, to be good human beings who can make informed decisions in their life. Human beings who promote human values, care for others, allow others to express and promote peace, fraternity, harmony and principles of equality without any prejudices of religion, gender, caste and creed.

The foundation for all the above is each child receiving “elementary education”.

In our country of 1 billion people, we are talking about an elementary education system that deals with about 700,000 schools, over 2 million teachers and 186 million children in the age group of 6-14.

It is a matter of shame and concern for all of us who have been fortunate to receive education that, after 56 years of independence, we still have over 50 million children in the age group of 6 to 14 years, who are outside the school and thus deprived of education.

What is keeping these 50 million children outside the school?

There are several theories and reasons. Poor quality of access, poor quality in school processes, lack of participation by the community in the school affairs and poverty are among the key barriers to universal education.

Though poverty is clearly the number one reason, our experience of having worked in the field suggests that the poor parents are willing to sacrifice one meal and willing to send their children to the school, once they see education helping their children. The resounding success of several state governments’ enrolment drives is enough evidence for the same. In Karnataka alone, over 300,000 out-of-school children have been mainstreamed during the past three years.

The issues of real concern are the national average drop out rate for children in 1-8th standard, which stands at 57% and an alarming dropout rate of 60% for girl children for the same standards.
My hypothesis is that children do not find it worthwhile to remain in the school. Children find it threatening, boring and confusing. They do not learn enough. The only way children could be retained in the school is when they find their existence inside the school gainful, relevant and beneficial for life. And the most powerful way of achieving this is to ensure that the children in the schools learn in an interesting and joyful way. That they achieve the learning competencies commensurate to their grade so that they themselves feel the difference and become the ambassadors for those children who are outside the school. The competencies acquired by the children should convince their parents and the community at large to actively participate in the process of universal enrolment and retention.

It is important to create and drive the concept of “Learning Guarantee” versus “Education Guarantee”. Both at Wipro and Azim Premji Foundation we believe that a sustained Universalization of Elementary Education can be achieved only through dramatic improvement in learning in the school.

When we speak about “learning in the school”, it’s useful to keep in perspective that it is a very complex process. It raises fundamental issues such as what we mean by “learning”. Achieving “learning guarantee” in the school is beyond the fragmented view of the education system. It is not just about the number and quality of teachers. It is not just about the Government playing its role effectively or not. It is beyond the issues of a “mid-day-meal program” or “training of teachers” or the “kind of text books” that are followed.

“Learning guarantee” consists of more serious and deeper issues such as understanding the pedagogical processes in the classroom, clearer understanding by the teachers of what competencies are to be developed among the students, the class-room practices that bring out the best among the children in the most non-threatening and exciting manner, the competitive spirit that the school is able to create, the parents’ untiring interest in their children’s learning, the pressures created by an active
and lively parent teacher committee for better delivery of learning in the school etc. It is a social process as well as a high quality management process. It is no different than how organisations create some of the best competencies among their employees.

It is also about accountability of every key stakeholder who can influence learning and education. Children and parent being the end users of the education services, the system must be oriented to deliver the end benefits of learning.

To me, the biggest issue in education is the cumulative “lack of accountability”. We read in the newspapers every year that the SSC board results of most states range from 35% to 45%. Which means over 60% children fail in the examination. Who is accountable for this?

I am happy to learn that the Public Affairs Centre deals with issues related to governance and accountability. These are very critical issues for any public system that is responsible for delivering end results and services.

At Wipro we launched a program “Wipro Applying Thought in Schools” that focuses on enhancing the quality of learning for children in 3rd to 7th standard in some of the premier schools in identified metros and mini-metros. The objective of the initiative is to address key issues in the school that impact children learning in an interesting and innovative manner, which includes issues ranging from teacher training to administrative, pedagogical and academic interventions that impact children's learning.

Through the Azim Premji Foundation, we are working in rural Government schools in identified areas with complete focus on improving quality of learning in these schools. For the next 24 months, we will be working in about 3700 habitations in northeast Karnataka, 1000 habitations in Andhra Pradesh and in about 300 municipal schools
in underprivileged areas in Gujarat. This work is entirely focussed on improving the learning in the rural Government schools.

The most heartening issue for us so far is the extremely positive response from the Government of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. To our proposals of working shoulder to shoulder with the Government, these states have responded constructively.

We are partnering with the Government in trying out a number of innovative proofs of concept and if they succeed, the Government has promised to integrate them as a part of their system. It is necessary that the proofs of concept are tried out on a large scale that is robust enough to succeed in the Government system. Our budget for the next 12 months is about Rs.50 crores. What we bring to the table is our passion, our sincerity, our result orientation, our process orientation and our quality orientation. It distresses me no end when I read in the newspapers that education is the third highest in the ladder of corruption in the country.

For the Universalization of Elementary Education to be successful and achieved in the stipulated timeframe, I have the following suggestions:

1. We must clearly define what we want to achieve through the education system for our children.

2. Benefits of education and learning must be clearly explained to and understood by the parents and the children. The stark difference between the conditions of children who receive education and those who don’t must be very evident.

3. Innovative experiments in learning that have a potential to deliver “learning guarantee” must be actively encouraged and tried out intensively.

4. In addition to the Government, the community members, the corporates, the parents and the teaching community must take keen interest in education.
5. The management of education system must adopt the look and feel of a corporate organisation without necessarily “privatising education” in the first go.

6. Systemic changes in the education system that bring in “meritocracy and professionalism” in appointment, transfers, movements, training and compensation of teachers must be considered on priority.

7. The huge funds currently deployed by the Government -$ 4.6 billion per year by centre and state- must be effectively leveraged by appropriate contributions from the community wherever possible.

8. Technology must be used in a huge way -not only to bring in computer-assisted joyful and interactive learning for the children -but also for very focused training of teachers, Government education officers and community members.

9. Focus must be shifted from the current text-memory and marks-driven children assessment to “competency based assessment”. This also necessitates shifting of focus from “teaching” to “learning and much higher importance of the ability of the teacher to manage classroom practices than mere subject knowledge.

10. Provision must be made to provide a structured mechanism for a comprehensive review of curriculum and expected competencies at least once every 10 years.

The task at hand is complex and multifaceted. It requires many like-minded individuals and organizations to come together and address issues together. Education is the foundation on which we can build our country. It has to be the first national priority. It is an investment, which has the biggest multiplier.

Let me share a story I am very fond of.
There was once a poor Scottish farmer named Fleming. One day, while trying to make a living for his family, he heard a cry for help coming from a nearby bog. He dropped his tools and ran to the bog. There, mired to his waist in black muck, was a terrified boy, screaming and struggling to free himself. Farmer Fleming saved the boy from what could have been a slow and terrifying death. The next day, a fancy carriage pulled up to the Scotsman’s sparse surroundings. An elegantly dressed nobleman stepped out and introduced himself as the father of the boy Farmer Fleming had saved.

“I want to repay you,” said the nobleman. “You saved my son’s life.”
“No, I can’t accept payment for what I did,” the Scottish farmer replied, waving off the offer. At that moment the farmer’s own son came to the door of the hovel.

“Is that your son?” the nobleman asked. “Yes,” the farmer replied proudly.

“I’ll make you a deal. Let me take him and give him a good education. If he’s anything like his father, he’ll grow to a man you can be proud of.” And that he did. In time, Farmer Fleming’s son graduated from St. Mary’s Hospital Medical School in London, and went on to become known throughout the world as the noted Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of Penicillin. Years afterward, the nobleman’s son was stricken with pneumonia. What saved him?

Penicillin.

This is not the end. The nobleman’s son also made a great contribution to society. For the nobleman was none other than Lord Randolph Churchill. And his son’s name was Winston Churchill.

The story also brings out another important truth. Education is the greatest gift one that anyone can receive because it has a cascading effect on the society at large.

I thank all of you for providing me this opportunity to share my views.
QUESTIONS & ANSWERS FOLLOWING THE LECTURE BY Mr. AZIM PREMJI

On partnerships with other organizations and individuals for the cause of Universalisation of Elementary Education:

Achieving true and sustained universalisation of Elementary Education within the next seven years calls for a mass movement and participation of all relevant stakeholders. The issues before us are complex, comprehensive and interlinked. There is a tremendous need for organizations and corporate social initiatives to address many of these issues. Models and concepts have to be implemented, demonstrated and hopefully replicated. In such a scenario it is essential that Azim Premji Foundation and like-minded organizations come together to develop and implement joint innovative programmes and support and work with each other.

Would Azim Premji Foundation like to influence change in Policy on areas like curriculum, examinations etc.

The three key areas where the Azim Premji Foundation has decided to focus on are (1) Quality of learning in school (2) Management processes within the education function which has an influence on the quality of learning and (3) Effective usage of technology in improving the quality of learning. All these would involve fundamental changes in teaching learning methods, materials and approaches. All that we are trying is to enforce what has been articulated and intended by the Government through the 1986 Education Policy document. This would also mean shifting focus from text based learning to competency based, life-relevant, holistic learning with a thrust on the overall development of the child. The child will clearly be the focus of this process. The approaches will have to be child centered, interactive, integrative and individualistic. This would involve some fundamental changes in the policies and current paradigms with ramifications on current policy and functional frameworks, curriculum and assessment / evaluation methods.

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On the concerns expressed by some on partnering with Government:

Only the Government has the reach and resources to provide access to elementary education for the 186 million children spread across 700000 schools in the country. Our attempts to have an impact on the lives of millions of children and catalyze change in education outputs can happen only if large scale initiatives are demonstrated in rural government schools in active, healthy and constructive partnerships with Government. Our experience in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and with the Ministry of Human Resources Development at the center has been very positive. It is necessary that organisations striving to impact on a larger scenario give up their cynicism about the Government.

On the issue of supporting multi grade teaching instead of insisting that Government provide adequate teachers and class rooms.

The most important issue is that multigrade teaching / learning has a number of positives and many schools in the developing countries have consciously tried to practice multigrade learning owing to the benefits / merits of such learning.

The second key issue is as a country, we must be able to come up with solutions that are practical in our context and have a higher probability of succeeding in a large system. The solution of developing multigrade teaching competencies addresses both the issues of number of classrooms and the number of teachers. The approach of Multigrade Teaching Competencies development is an attempt to prioritize within existing issues.

It is simply not possible and practical to provide 6 teachers in a rural school wherein there are 6 standards and a total of 45 students in the entire school.
On the details of the Learning Guarantee Programme, the positive and negative aspects of incentives etc.

The Learning Guarantee Programme has been designed to identify schools that demonstrate guarantee of learning, analyze the success factors and communicate these to other schools. The programme recognizes and rewards schools that enable children to acquire expected competencies while ensuring enrolment and attendance. The programme aims at motivating and inspiring teachers and schools to develop locally relevant innovative processes in a sustained manner.

The reward or incentive is deliberately underplayed in all communications and is meant to play only an incidental part in the motivation of schools and their competitive spirit.

On factors that contribute to improvement in the quality of learning:

Learning is a very complex issue and before speaking about improving the quality of learning, it is important to define what is learning. Again, there are a number of definitions and paradigms of learning. After analyzing the current situation, we have, on an immediate basis decided to focus on children achieving the competencies defined under the Expected Levels of Learning by the NCERT, though we fully recognise that there is life beyond competencies. We are implementing a range of programmes towards this. For example the innovative use of technology in the form of computer assisted learning with curricular content on CD provides children the opportunity of joyful, interactive, self paced learning.

The accelerated learning programme attempts to bridge the huge gap between current and desired competencies among children who have been recently mainstreamed so that they are able to catch up and cope with their other classmates and thus prevent potential drop out.
Essentially our premise is that every child has enormous potential and all that they need is opportunity, nurturing and care. If they are provided a non-threatening, enjoyable environment where they can learn at their own pace in interactive manner the learning quality will be improved and sustained.

On the issue that Azim Premji Foundation is not addressing programmes to tackle the issue of poverty as the reason for out of school children:

We have explained earlier that the issues to tackle in achieving universalisation of Elementary Education are many and poverty could be one of them. However our belief is that if we can focus on the issue of quality it will have a positive impact on this issue also. Research supports our conviction since nearly 40% of boys and 28% of girls do not attend school because of the stated lack of interest in studies rather than economic compulsions. Also it is not possible for one organization to address all issues and we must choose areas where we can leverage our core strengths.
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