

Interview with Dileep Ranjekar, Founder CEO, Azim Premji Foundation

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The emerging markets and companies in South Asia have been getting increasing attention for their economic growth and prominence in world commerce. The social sector development is seen as key to accelerate their economic process and overall sustainability. While there have been many successful developmental and social entrepreneurial organizations in India, the Azim Premji Foundation (The Foundation) has initiated significant initiatives, including setting up of a university. In this exclusive interview with the author, Dileep Ranjekar, the founder chief executive officer (CEO) of the Foundation shares his perspectives of the activities of the Foundation, keeping the larger human resource development (HRD) aspects of the country in mind.

The Azim Premji Foundation and the Azim Premji University are not-for-profit organizations with a vision of “contributing towards a just, equitable, humane and sustainable society”. The Foundation was set up by Mr Azim Premji, chairman of Wipro, a large conglomerate, with a generous donation of \$4 billion to the Azim Premji Trust. This donation is the largest of its kind in India for improving school education in India. Wipro is a global information technology, consulting and outsourcing company with over 160,000 employees serving global clients and revenues of \$7.3 billion.

The Foundation has an overall agenda of contributing to social change through systemic reforms in education. It runs programmes and institutions in India for improving quality of education and performance in related development fields. The focus is on developing professionals, carrying out research and building capacity for the education and development sector. The field programmes are run in collaboration with the government. All this work is largely focused on the underprivileged in India. The Foundation has worked with thousands of government schools directly and with many state schooling systems involving over 150,000 schools. It is in the process of a significant scale up, by establishing institutes (which also run field programmes) in 50 districts and 8 state capitals across India.

Dileep has a Post Graduate Diploma of Business Management as well as Master’s degree in Personnel Management and Industrial Relations from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. He joined Wipro as a trainee in 1976.

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He was one of the core team members of Wipro that contributed to setting the tone, the culture, the management and people development processes in the organization. After his long stint as Group HR Head of Wipro, Dileep took over as the Founder CEO of the Foundation in 2001.

What is your journey as the founder CEO of Azim Premji Foundation?

I joined Wipro in 1976 when the organization was just a single factory. I had the privilege of being a part of the core team that was responsible for creating culture, good governance practices, policies and approaches to professionalize the organization which was a typical manufacturing and commodities trading organization. The change that was envisaged by the top management then was very dramatic, and therefore, top class qualified professionals were recruited, who they thought were also culturally closer to what they looked for. I was one of them. During my Wipro journey, though I am essentially a HR professional, the breadth of experience that I went through in areas such as manufacturing, sales, quality, corporate communication, brand and facilities management, was pivotal in making me a multifaceted professional. The key contribution that was expected was in organization building, leadership development and evolving and nurturing a culture that was consistent with the organizational beliefs and values. I never approached my role as a typical HR professional, but as a well-rounded business professional.

What are some of the key changes that you believe are taking place across organizations in India?

The world as well as India is radically changing. There are some positive changes and some not-so-positive. Probably, the most disconcerting development is widening gaps between segments of society. World over, inequity is a very big issue. As a manifestation of that within the organizations, people are focusing more and more on material benefits. The top managements are more disconnected from the junior employees in the organization.

Another big issue is the chasm between the intention and the reality. Several organizations such as United Nations Organization (UNO) at the international level or several other institutions within our country are created to implement policies, programmes that are meant for the poor, the disadvantaged and the underserved. However, the real execution does not happen. Millions of people across the world are living below the poverty line and do not have basic facilities of wholesome nutrition, potable water, decent healthcare, etc. Justice and basic human and environmental care are major issues that the world is facing.

In India, the so-called economic development since 1995 has benefitted probably just about 15–20 per cent of people. More than 70 per cent of people still have an income of less than a dollar a day. The definitions of poverty line in India as fixed by the Planning Commission are significantly off the global definition.

We have some understanding of the impact of globalization, the new customer profile and the new expectations of quality but have very little or no knowledge of

emerging new generation, the discontinuities in technologies that can happen or how to respond to the demands of new generations.

What is your perspective of emerging economies and in particular Brazil/Russia/India/China (BRIC) block of nations?

The BRIC classification itself is being seriously questioned. With Russia and China having completely different notions of a society and non-democratic political systems, there is a problem in actually comparing countries that are fundamentally dissimilar. India has several challenges that are unique—such as the diversity in its ethnic profile, languages and religions. Illustratively, in Brazil (which is a comparable country), 95 per cent of people are Catholics and they speak Portuguese as a language. Compare this with our nation which is a boiling pot of several religions, castes, creeds, sub-castes—with 14 main languages, over 200 mother tongues spoken by more than 1 million people each and over 1,600 dialects. This creates serious challenges for uniform curriculum, reading material, development of educators and homogeneity among people.

Despite all its challenges, India has done well to recover from the economic down-turn, retained its financial integrity and made significantly better progress in select sectors like the information technology (IT) services. We speak about a great advantage in terms of the huge young population we have but have failed in critical sectors such as quality education, creating world-class institutions, addressing the infrastructure, sanitation, water issues and exploiting our agricultural prowess. Both the political and bureaucratic classes have let India down.

Please give a brief overview of the Azim Premji Foundation.

The fundamental reason why Azim Premji Foundation was created was to *contribute to social change*. We have to view our nation and our society in the context of our constitutional commitment for a social, democratic republic that is secular and that promises certain liberties, rights and freedom to all individuals without discrimination. The medium of such social change that we chose was “School Education” and the canvass was the government school education system with 1.4 million schools, 6 million teachers, 1 million people supporting the system from outside the schools that had over 225 million children.

How did the Foundation choose its priorities and strategy?

Both Mr Premji and I were from corporate sector and had very little knowledge of the education domain or the social sector. But we had very strong instincts on what is right and not right. And Mr Premji’s intentions were very genuine. He prefaced his desire by saying that he wanted to do something solid, impactful, long term and something that would leave a legacy for generations to come. After some thinking, we thought the area of education was something fundamental and had the potential to positively contribute to other areas such as poverty, social

equity, health and livelihood. It was Mr Premji's thought that we must begin with "School Education" and not areas such as technical education and management education.

Since we chose to work with the school system, working in collaboration with the government was something that was a "given" because over 80 per cent of our school children studied in government schools (in 1998). We decided that we would work at a large scale, would learn from the system and would offer our help to the government without an approach of offering "silver bullets" or ready-made solutions. In any case, no such readymade solutions really exist. I personally met hundreds of high quality, committed people in the education and social sector across the country and was overwhelmed with their understanding and commitment.

Considering that education is a very vast area, the real question before us was "where do you begin?" Education in India is a subject that is concurrent both at the centre- and the state levels. The government has the constitutional responsibility of providing free quality school education to all children in the country. The total budget for education is currently approximately \$75 billion every year. Whether it is enough or not is a separate issue, but in itself it is a large sum. The country made significant progress since 1999–2000 in creating access and providing budgets to identified expenditure items such as additional classrooms, additional teachers and innovations to improve quality. We now have a school within 1 km in about 98/99 per cent of the villages. The Right to Education Act in 2009 has been a landmark step forward in creating framework and more importantly creating education as a right.

Despite the above progress, we have several quality-related problems. Our schools do not have quality toilets; many of them do not have drinking water facilities. They do not have adequate number of classrooms. The quality of mid-day-meal provided to children is not conforming to the government's own stated policy. Seventy-five per cent plus schools have multi-grade teaching, that is, one teacher teaching 2–3 grades together at the same time in one room. Considering the fact that the teachers are not prepared to do multi-grade teaching, it is a big problem. Probably, the biggest issue is that the learning of children is not happening around the curricular objectives and is almost entirely rote memory based—where children learn without understanding, analyzing, applying, etc.

After finalizing education agenda for the Foundation how did you take it forward?

Once you engage with the system, you start realizing a lot of things. After a lot of experimentations and large programme implementation in thousands of schools especially in Andhra Pradesh and northeast Karnataka, we decided to focus on quality of education that is consistent with the constitutional and policy principles. Many states approached us to help them in their endeavour to improve quality of education. We began work in Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Puducherry and our Digital Learning Resources—developed in

18 different languages reached some 30,000 schools across 16 states in the country. We engaged in multiple interventions for the first 8–9 years. They ranged from curriculum development to teacher education to school leadership development to alternative examination system to experimenting the influence of technology on children and their learning.

How did the current strategy evolve?

Around 2008–2009, Mr Premji decided to significantly increase the allocation of funds to Azim Premji Foundation. Funds were never a constraint. The real challenge was how to spend money prudently and to ensure systemic improvements. In 2009, we took stock of the impact of our work and also analyzed how a comprehensive change in society and education could be achieved. From this, several fundamental issues emerged:

- 1. Education Professionals:** The number one constraint in working in education sector was the almost total absence of universities and schools of education that developed well-rounded professionals (not the BEd and MEd variety) with appropriate perspective. Even for the growth of our own Foundation, we found this a serious constraint. Contrast this with some of the developed nations—where practically every good university has a school of education. Canada—for a population of 35 million develops almost 5,000 professionals each year.
- 2. Research:** There is no concerted effort of significance to develop knowledge to address evidence-based policy and also to find solutions to our very diverse and complex problems. This needs meaningful research effort.
- 3. Institutional and Individual Competence:** Enhancing capacity in the large educational system that the government has set up across the country (close to 8 million people are appointed by the government). The same is true for hundreds of institutions that have been established by the government across the country to contribute to education.
- 4. Institutional vs. Programmatic Approach:** Having an institutionalized presence that is not programme based. Such presence must engage with the system at a geographic unit such as a state or a district, understand issues and help education quality improve in that geography.
- 5. Changing Perspective of Education in the Society:** The institutions must also engage with the parents and community to build the right expectations for their children's education that are consistent with the goals and processes envisaged by the national policy and programmes.

So, our new strategy has two very critical strands: Extensive Field Presence and a High Quality Academic Institutions leveraging our field presence. We established field presence through the state and district institutes of Azim Premji Foundation, and we established an autonomous private University (Azim Premji University)

to address the issue of developing talent for education and development sectors as well as to carry out research to build knowledge about the issues of education and development.

By 2017–2018, we would have about 3,000 students in Azim Premji University, a large Research Centre as an integral part of the University, about 10 state institutes, 50 district institutes with many of them having Azim Premji School as an integrated part of the district strategy. At this time, the Foundation would be employing a large pool of people (over 3,500) with capacity to contribute to the government education system. Currently, we have over 1,100 people working in 8 state institutes, 30 district institutes and 6 Azim Premji schools. Azim Premji University offers a two-year Master's programme in Education and Development to 500 students. In the field institutes, we are engaging with over 35,000 schools and 175,000 teachers through close to 5,000 government functionaries.

What are the staff requirements in the Foundation and how do you choose them?

There are about four to five kinds of people we need in the Foundation.

First kind of people is—top class faculty in Azim Premji University. These are currently required in the broad domains of Education and Development. Because we do not have schools of education in our country, there is an enormous shortage of the kind of people we want in the University. So, we look for people in the domains of philosophy, sociology, psychology, healthcare sciences, livelihood, governance and environment sciences, who identify themselves with our overall vision.

Second kind is subject experts in Science, History, Maths, Language, Social Sciences, etc., who bring in the overall education perspective and innovative, non-traditional teaching and learning practices. Again currently, there are no such experts being developed in any university or school of education.

Third—people in Education Leadership and Management who know how to contribute to the capacity of school principals, education functionaries, faculty in district government Institutes, etc. Education Management is a relatively newer field across the globe. It is not just education—nor just management—but a discipline that views management or administration of large education systems through leadership and management perspective. They fundamentally need a very good understanding of education as well.

Fourth—top class researchers, who can identify issues to research—understand the intricacies, deploy the right research methodologies and analyze the findings from the perspective of our country's perspective.

Fifth—several enabling and support functions such as Human Resources (for recruitment, people development), Accounting and Finance, IT and civil infrastructure (to acquire land, construct our offices and schools, enable them with appropriate IT solutions, etc.).

People's basic alignment to our vision and strategy, deeper expertise in their respective subject-fields, ability to work in teams and strong belief in diversity of

people, views, pluralism, etc., are some of the important attributes that we look for while recruiting them.

How have you incorporated Wipro's key principles of learning and development at the Foundation?

The Wipro principles and learning were anyway embedded in me having worked in Wipro for over 26 years before joining Azim Premji Foundation. I used those principles in two ways—one—what I must continue in the new organization—such as the rigour in recruitment, integrity in whatever we do and quality consciousness. Second—what we would not do at Azim Premji Foundation. For instance, our performance management process in the Foundation is significantly different. We spent a lot of time in thinking through fundamentals; we stayed away from craving for visibility, publicity and brand consciousness. The culture at Azim Premji Foundation is distinctly different—we want people who are deeply aligned to our notion of society and education. We believe that compensation is not a major driver. Change in this sector is measured through the long-term impact. Short-term gains are difficult to be attributed to only your work.

Social sector and non-profit organizations have a distinctly different culture. People are possessed with the idea of contributing to the society and do not treat their work as a “job to earn livelihood”. Their commitment has to be respected and that respect has to be reflected through your approaches to people processes and policies. For instance, rating people's performance with standard ratings of good, excellent, outstanding, etc., would be an insult to their intelligence. Several corporate approaches of processes that create “Pavlovian spirals of expectations” have to be carefully shunned. I also believe that many of these are also applicable in the corporate sector. We really do not have a good understanding of what makes people work and do things—the way they do—even in the corporate sector.

In our kind of organizations, we do not have to spend too much time on creating ownership in their work—people already have it. People have self-selected to join you. Compensation is important—but, that is not the reason why our people are working with us. Thus, there is a very low “entitlement orientation”. This sentiment has to be adequately reciprocated by the organization. For instance, if someone decided to leave in Wipro, I would spend significant time and energy in convincing (selling the organization) that employee. When an employee leaves Azim Premji Foundation—I may spend time in understanding the reasons—but would respect that person's decision to do something else.

There is an enormous dearth of talent in social sector and competent people have done a great favour by choosing to work with you. Our travel policy, certain core policies such as medical policy are all applicable equally to all.

It is a highly intensive knowledge organization that has potential to contribute to people's competence. Not too many social sector organizations invest so significantly in building capacity among its own employees as much as we do. While

defining milestones, time lines and expecting that people achieve them is important, excessive performance orientation is counter-productive.

Our task is so huge and complex that no single individual would be able to achieve anything significant—working in teams, interdependence and absence of competitiveness among people is the hallmark of our organization. Nor will silos work. While there is accountability at certain nodal points, we strive to achieve a hierarchy-free culture. Subservience is frowned upon and people are encouraged to express themselves all the time.

How do you spread this culture over a period of time?

About 4 years ago, we were about 300 people and now we are 1,100 people. This is close to fourfold growth in 4 years. The real challenge is—How do we retain our characteristic of a small organization with individual relationships, individualization of our approach to people and yet evolve some shared principles of working? How do we retain our human face and not bureaucratize the organization. Mechanical systemization should not ruin our individual understanding!

First, a very careful selection of leaders in the organization. They have to be from the grass roots. They have to be people who are connected socially. People who respect other people, respect teamwork and accept diversity.

Second, the top and senior management must walk the talk. They must constantly demonstrate what they state—because no amount of processes and hollow talk matter. What matters is what signals the leadership gives and what you demonstrate.

Third, at every opportunity—the induction process, the Foundation of education programmes, the interactions—all have to reinforce the organization culture. Fourth—the organizational performance process and talent assessment must incorporate cultural factors and recognize those who are high on practising culture by giving them more responsibility.

What are your key initiatives to make the Foundation a great organization?

You must remember that we are not working towards “making Azim Premji Foundation some kind of organization” but contributing to the society outside the organization. However, we realize that only a certain kind of organization can effectively contribute to society.

This particular thinking—that something as serious as culture can be built or driven by one sentence or by one byline or some symbol—is a very corporate thinking. The issue of culture is far deeper than that. It takes life time and generations of thinking, working, demonstrating and walking the talk by organization to build strong culture. In social sector, there are four kinds of organizations. One is organizations that fund other people’s efforts. Second, organizations that are implementing or actually working on the ground. Third, those that create talent for social sector and the fourth are organizations that create networks of such organizations who are all trying to contribute to the social sector.

Azim Premji Foundation is probably one of the rare organizations that is doing all the four. Our final goal is social change and we would do many things simultaneously to contribute to that goal.

How integral is the HR strategy to the overall strategy of the organization and how is it operationalized?

People are at the heart of our entire effort. There is no technique or a mechanical process or a lever that would achieve our objective of social change. It is possible only through large teams of committed and empowered people through their hard and sustained work. However, it has to be well-orchestrated. It has to be synergistic. It has to be done in a strategic way—something that provides a much larger meaning to the entire group effort than an individual's effort. So, it is only through people and developing people in a certain way that would lay the foundation of such effort. These aligned groups of people have to collaborate with the larger system of governance and larger society to be able to achieve the desired social change committed by India's constitution way back in 1950. We want to spend minimum amount of time and energy in resolving our internal things. We want to maximize our efforts to the external world. Our people have to understand that the social change that we are trying is significant.

So, you recruit people of that kind; you develop people of that kind; and you have all the processes within the organization enabling people to do that.

Please describe your company's leadership vision, style and ways of grooming leaders.

Our leaders first of all are not the people who are considered as leaders in a traditional manner. These are people who are competent, who have a very deep connect with work and with society and who are able to be the role models in whatever they do. They are very simple people; they are not people who are assertive in a traditional way; they are not people who can give commands; they are people who lead through respect. The kind of people who will lead through value and by being referral points and not by just being some part in the hierarchy. So, hierarchy-based leader is not something that we are encouraging in this organization. We carefully choose leaders who have proven track record of working with communities, government and societies and who have understood the principles of what they have achieved and therefore, are able to apply those principles to bring about change in a larger population. We choose leaders who are capable of furthering our strong culture and values. Most importantly, people who live those values and care for other people and society in general. The hallmark of our leaders is "ustaadi (expertise)" and "Insaaniyat (care for people)".

We groom leaders through careful selection, giving responsibility, observing on the job and constant interaction with select people. Our reward system is very flat as we do not make huge compensation variations. The subtle changes that we make do differentiate people, their consistent contribution (not just one year),

their potential and their practising values. We provide opportunities to people who are identified to lead. It is not too difficult to provide such opportunities since we are growing leaps and bound and since there is so much shortage of good leaders in the social sector.

What are the significant cultural contributions of the Foundation as an institution accelerating social transformation in South Asia?

First, I think over a period of time Azim Premji Foundation will emerge as an organization which is a good example for many social sector organizations and even corporate organizations to manage the organization in a silo-less manner, in a committed manner without creating the stereotypes of leadership.

Second, we feel that many practices followed by corporates, in their leadership, performance culture, Pavlovian way of dealing with expectations/aspirations (including compensation) and performance incentives are detrimental in the long run for these corporates themselves, forget about society.

The third is that you need more and more organizations with a lot more social conscience. It is not something just to “show” that I am a responsible corporate citizen but to, in reality be a responsible corporate citizen. Organizations must genuinely become good corporate social citizens.

There are many ways the corporates could do it. First of all, by actually conducting themselves better in whatever they are doing. So, you pay your taxes well, you adhere to the pollution norms, treat your employees better, treat your customers better, treat your vendors better, follow certain commitments that you are actually offering, review the duality of what you seek and what you do. We have to do what is in the best interest of the organization and what is in the best interest of the larger society. Organizations should refrain from focusing only on the short-term gains—but think of the long-term impact of what they are doing today.

The corporates actually have to fundamentally review the way they work starting from their myopic quarter-to-quarter result focus, their excessive focus on profits at any cost and the lack of integrity that prevails in several parts of organizations. And, lack of integrity is not just lack of honesty but lack of not honouring the commitments, not being sensitive to the larger part of the employees, etc.