

Vol. 1 • Issue 2 • Oct. - Dec. 2007

# NRI ACHIEVERS

INDIA Rs. 125 • US \$6 • UK £3 • UAE AED5



**GENIUS EXTRAORDINAIRE**  
**SAM PITRODA**

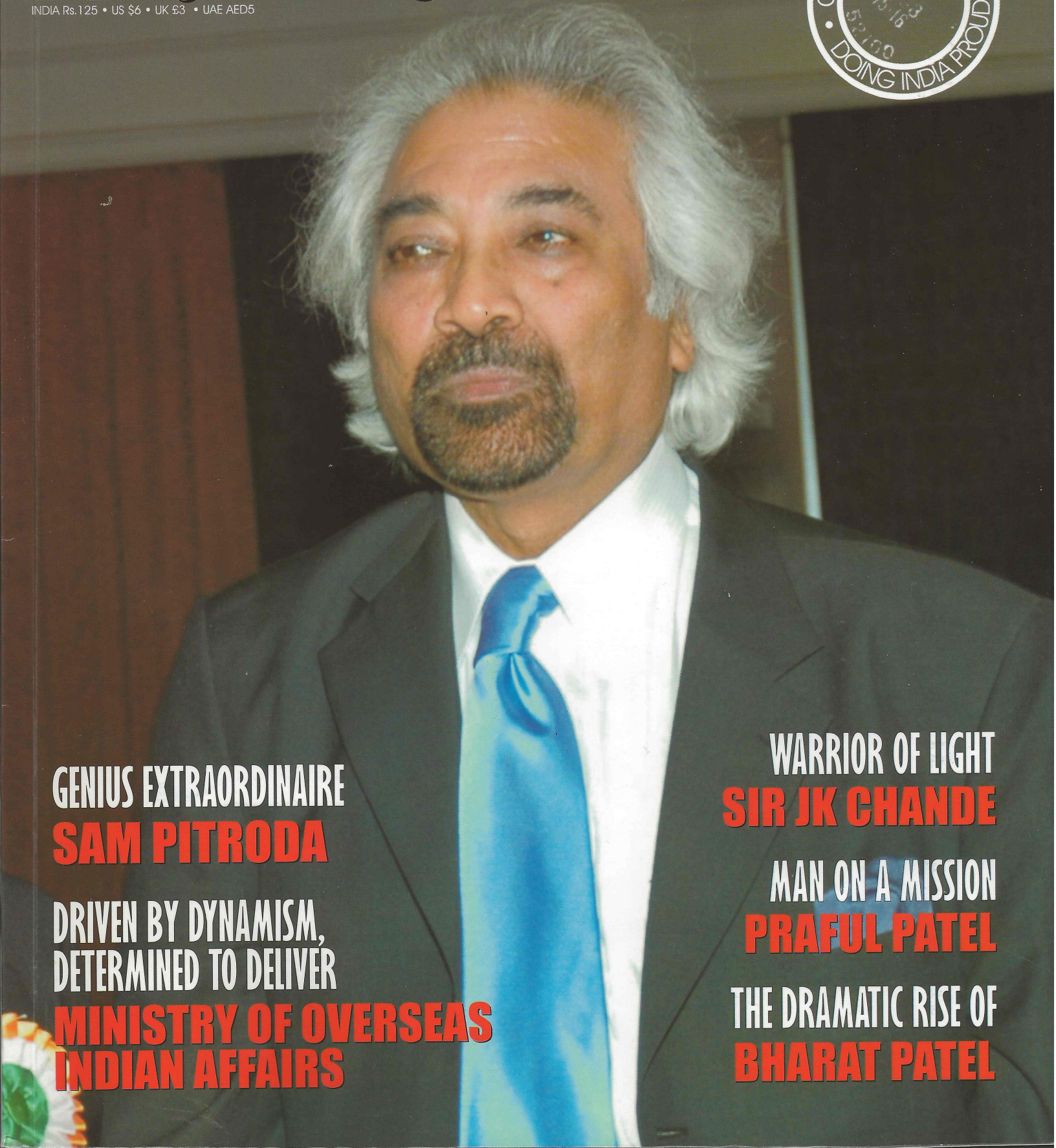
**DRIVEN BY DYNAMISM,**  
**DETERMINED TO DELIVER**

**MINISTRY OF OVERSEAS**  
**INDIAN AFFAIRS**

**WARRIOR OF LIGHT**  
**SIR JK CHANDE**

**MAN ON A MISSION**  
**PRAFUL PATEL**

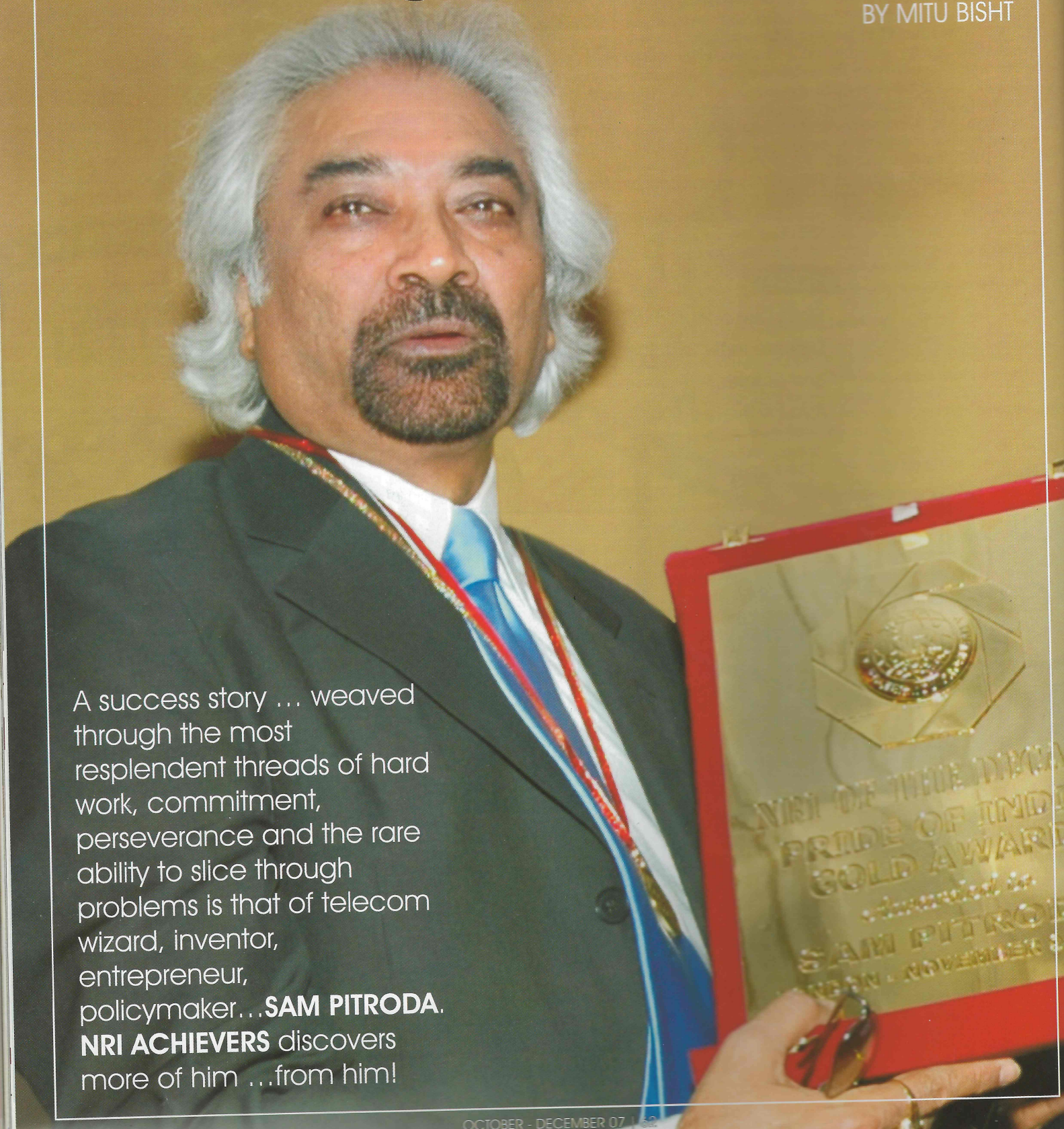
**THE DRAMATIC RISE OF**  
**BHARAT PATEL**



# GENIUS Extraordinaire

# SAM PITRODA

BY MITU BISHT



A success story ... weaved through the most resplendent threads of hard work, commitment, perseverance and the rare ability to slice through problems is that of telecom wizard, inventor, entrepreneur, policymaker... **SAM PITRODA.** **NRI ACHIEVERS** discovers more of him ...from him!

*“Ideals are like stars; you will not succeed in touching them with your hands. But like the seafaring man on the desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and following them...you will reach your destiny.”*

**- Carl Schurz,  
Address, Faneuil Hall, Boston, 1859**

Satyanarayan Gangaram Pitroda, better known as Dr Sam Pitroda, was born in Titlagarh, Orissa and his has been that extraordinary professional journey where more often than not, passion has followed intelligence; although, there are many examples of people having powered their lives through passion but Sam Pitroda is a gifted man and his rare intelligence compels him to see reason in everything he seeks or is inspired to do. Therefore, passionate he may be; about everything that he attempts in life but it is intelligence he insists that quite naturally and instinctively precedes passion in his individual case. And this is perhaps the one big cause that backs his stupendous professional journey of success and achievements, a reason that makes him a subject of greatest admiration and the hero, the ideal of many ambitious young people world over. His is the story that invokes overwhelming appreciation, great wonder and tremendous inspiration for the youth of today.

Pitroda's parents hailed from Gujarat but had migrated to Orissa. They were profoundly attached to principles of Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy of life. Sam Pitroda and his brother were therefore sent to Gujarat, to imbibe Gandhian philosophy. Sam Pitroda's schooling can be traced to Vallabh Vidyanagar in Gujarat and he completed his Masters in Physics and Electronics from Maharaja Sayajirao University in Vadodara. After completing a Masters in Physics from Gujarat's reputed MS University, he went to the US and did his Masters in electrical engineering from Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago.

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s he was involved in the cutting edge technology research work in telecommunications and hand-held computing. He is majorly recognised for having introduced microprocessors in telephone switches leading to early digital switching. His invention of the Electronic Diary in 1975 is now regarded as one of the earliest examples of hand-held computing. With over 100 patents to his credit, Sam Pitroda has been a leading name in telecommunications and information technology for over three decades. He also went on to become the founder of Wescom Switching.

In 1984, Sam Pitroda was invited to return to India by the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi; on his return he founded the Centre for Development of Telematics (C-DOT) under the Indian government. In 1987, he became the chief technology advisor to Mrs. Gandhi's successor and son, Rajiv Gandhi and was responsible for shaping India's foreign and domestic telecommunications policies. He is largely considered responsible for the telecommunications revolution in India and specifically, the ubiquitous, yellow-signed Public Call Offices (PCO) that quickly brought cheap and easy domestic and international public telephones all over the country. By introducing small, rural exchanges to India, he brought the telephone to some of the world's most previously isolated regions. He also made the case that accessibility, not density, should be the focus of the implementation of telecom. Sam Pitroda modernised and completely morphed the state of telecommunications in India and provided a model for other developing nations as well. Some untoward reasons, led to his exit from public service in India and his return to Chicago. This was post Rajiv Gandhi and during VP Singh government's time.

Sam Pitroda's reputation as an internationally respected telecom inventor, management guru and entrepreneur has been built over many successful years of service in the global telecom sector and



IT industries. His experience straddles corporate, technological, management and sociological worlds.

Apart from his significant amount of tangible work in telecommunications, Sam Pitroda also shifted paradigms: He also made the case that telecommunications – along with substantial food, clean water, and shelter – were a fundamental component in the process of modernisation.

In all his chief initiatives, Sam Pitroda has always looked to provide great service to the common man and he would try his level best to serve the cause of the latter till many years ahead. In fact, he most assuredly claims that he's the one who keeps the ordinary people in mind quite consciously in most of what he does. No wonder then, he's the one man in India who is accredited with the genius of having revolutionised the Indian telecom world in the brief span that he was in the country to serve its progress. Sam Pitroda will always be remembered in India for his remarkable gift to his countrymen, which was something that changed the world of Indian telephony most dramatically.

Even now, when Sam is back in the United States of America doing some incredible work with his own enterprise C-SAM (a technology company, all geared up to introduce some exceptional innovations in mobile telephony in that part of the world), he continues to stay attached with India in a rather commendable though distinct way. With his will to serve the common man still going strong, in his current role in India, Sam Pitroda predominantly relates to the National Knowledge Commission, of which he's the designated Chairman. As the latter, he directly reports to the Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh. The mandate of the commission is to equip India as a knowledge economy and society and Sam Pitroda is planning to leave no stone unturned in playing his role to the fullest.

Besides of course, Sam Pitroda brings enormous professional weight and credibility to C-SAM's operations. His reputation as an internationally respected telecom inventor, management guru and entrepreneur has been built over the past 38 years in the telecom and IT industries the world over. His experience straddles corporate, technological, management and sociological worlds. And what's more is that this inventor, technocrat, and social thinker is also recognised as a genuine visionary. Pitroda, who holds some 50 worldwide patents in digital communications, is also currently the Chairman of WorldTel ([www.world-tel.com](http://www.world-tel.com)), an International Telecommunications Corporation.

Sam Pitroda is a true achiever in the sense that he has most conspicuously won the respect of intelligent people and the admiration of the common man, he has also earned the appreciation of honest critics and endured all trails with an unwavering faith and conviction in his ideas and beliefs. "Success," as Walter Cronkite says, "Is more permanent when you achieve it without destroying your principles," something so true in the case of Sam Pitroda. A man who followed his heart, applied his intelligence and used his multiple gifts to reach his goals of uncompromising success. And success has instilled in him greater amounts of self-discipline, sense of balance, humility, and commitment. He's the best example of success in contemporary times and the perfect role model for all age groups. What makes his success sweeter is the fact that he has achieved it... completely on his own.



Receiving Pride of India Gold Award from Tony McNulty, MP, Home Office Minister of State for Security, Counter-terrorism, Crime and Policing



(Left to Right) Rasik H. Patel, Lord Karan Bilimoria, C.B. Patel, Sam Pitroda, Tony McNulty, Ylias Akbaraly, Jagmohan Singh and Dr. S.P. Sharma



# EXCLUSIVE

## SAM PITRODA IN AN INTERVIEW TO MITU BISHT

**Q. What precisely makes you such a tremendous achiever in life?**

**A.** It is hard for me to call myself a tremendous achiever. However, when it comes to any professional endeavour my approach has been to be fully focused on it, irrespective of distractions or obstacles. I suppose some of that focus has paid off.

**Q. What have been your inspiration and your philosophy at work?**

**A.** My philosophy has been to break any work down to what its eventual benefit will be to people other than me. I have been a passionate admirer and advocate of Mahatma Gandhi's values of honesty and integrity. These may sound like very clichéd terms but they still hold profound meaning for the successful execution of any task in life, be it running a family, a company, or a country.

**Q. Inventor, entrepreneur, policymaker which role do you enjoy the most? And how do you manage essaying all your roles so very successfully?**

**A.** I enjoy them all in equal measure but I am at my happiest when I help solve a problem either through invention, entrepreneurship or policymaking. The trick while multitasking is to treat all the varied tasks as if they are seamlessly connected. Doing many things at a time has always been my style. From technology to management to policymaking to inventing everything is in a sense a break from the last activity. I do not see myself as performing different roles but merely dealing with many different aspects of life.

**Q. Very few people are able to manage so many distinctions in life. Is there any special formula to such an extraordinary success?**

**A.** The only formula to success is unwavering commitment to anything one does.

*"I have been a passionate admirer and advocate of Mahatma Gandhi's values of honesty and integrity. These may sound like very clichéd terms but they still hold profound meaning for the successful execution of any task in life, be it running a family, a company, or a country."*

**– SAM PITRODA**



*"I would qualify Albert Einstein as a case of rare intelligence or for that matter Gandhi. I am merely a product of a lot of hard work and dedication plus some ability to slice through problems."*

**– SAM PITRODA**

**Q. Do you believe that you're blessed with a rare intelligence and versatility or have you inculcated the positives that make you what you are today, through hard work and dedication?**

A. I would qualify Albert Einstein as a case of rare intelligence or for that matter Gandhi. I am merely a product of a lot of hard work and dedication plus some ability to slice through problems.

**Q. Telecom ... it's quite an unusual subject in which you chose to make your career. What were the special reasons behind your choice?**

A. I do not think there were any special reasons other than the fact that soon after I completed my Master's in the mid 1960s, telecom switching technology was just about beginning to be transformed. I saw a lot of inventive potential in it.

**Q. And you've been a significant part of the telecom revolution world over, you've virtually seen the industry evolve ... take us through your biggest challenges in a span of these four decades where you've witnessed the highs and lows of this remarkably progressive industry?**

A. I would say, my most exciting phase in telecom was the time I spent in India in the 1980s. Innovation in organisation was the biggest challenge. In retrospect had we not set up the Centre for Development of Telematics or C-DOT as an autonomous R&D organisation we would not have been able to accomplish much of what we did. During my early years in telecom the most exciting phase was in the early 1970s when switching technology began going digital. Overall, telecom has been at the heart of global progress. It has been the bridge that made the movements of ideas possible, without which the world would have remained largely unconnected and stagnant.

**Q. Tell us, how and why did you think of coming up with an outstanding concept like the PCO in India?**

A. When I returned to India in the 1980s it was inconceivable that the central government will have the resources to increase telephone density. Given India's limited resources then I reasoned that rather than increasing telephone density, which really means the number of phones per thousand people, it would be more feasible to increase access. It was obvious to me that in a poor country like India, the important thing was not to individually own a phone connection at home but to have access to one whenever one needed it. That's how the idea of public call office or PCO came.

**Q. What as per your views India is lacking vis a vis telecommunications?**

A. I think India is on the right path now as far as telecom goes. Phones are no longer a tool used by the privileged few. That was the whole idea—to make them accessible to a large number of people.

*"I would say, my most exciting phase in telecom was the time I spent in India in the 1980s. Innovation in organisation was the biggest challenge."*

**– SAM PITRODA**

**Q. How and why did you think of C - Sam?**

A. C-SAM really is a logical next step to an invention I made in 1975. It was the Electronic Diary or organiser as it came to be known. The idea then was to have a hand-held device that carries out some everyday functions such as remind its owner about important appointments or dates. It is now regarded as one of the earliest examples of handheld computing. In 1994, soon after my return from India, I decided that there had to be a way to digitise leather wallet. In simple terms whatever one can do using the wallet, such as using credit or debit cards, insurance cards, coupons and so on, can be done on mobile phones. This was well before mobile phones became smart and were equipped with the kind of computing power they have now. I filed the first patent for what I called OneWallet in 1994 and was issued in 1996. Since then we have created a whole portfolio of patents that cover the entire spectrum of secure mobile phone based transactions. We believe the world of mobile telephony is now ready to use C-SAM technology.

**Q. How much are you enjoying the role of the Chairman of National Knowledge Commission?**

A. It is a great challenge. In some ways the consequence of the commission's work could be even more defining than the Telecom Commission's. Our aim is to create institutional climate in India to leverage our well known strengths in knowledge and transform society. It is a generational challenge.

**Q. And what are the significant initiatives that you've been able to promote during this tenure so far?**

A. The commission focuses on five key concerns related to

*"C-SAM really is a logical next step to an invention I made in 1975."*

**– SAM PITRODA**

knowledge such as access, concepts, creation, applications and services. We believe these are at the core of any initiative to make India a knowledge hub. The commission has come up with a series of recommendations in the areas of language, translation, libraries, networks, portals, vocational education, higher education, science and technology, public funded research, e-governance and right to education. These recommendations are made in the form of a letter to the Prime Minister who then builds them into his government's policies if he and his cabinet finds merit in them. I am happy to say so far a lot of what we have recommended has met with the seriousness of purpose.

## **SAM PITRODA'S ILLUSTRIOUS CAREER**

- ☛ Currently Chairman of World Tel Ltd.
- ☛ Founding Chairman of Telecom Commission - Government of India
- ☛ Founder of several companies in the United States and Europe, including Wescom which was one of the first digital switching companies in the world.
- ☛ Owner of over 50 worldwide patents, including the digital diary which was used by companies such as Casio, Sharp and Texas Instruments etc.
- ☛ Credited with having laid the foundation for and ushered in India's technology revolution in the 1980s as Technology Advisor to the Prime Minister of India.
- ☛ Invited by the United Nations Secretary General to join a special committee to advise on global digital divide issues.