

Out of the Box Thinking

Telecom legend Sam Pitroda is trying to bring about a second revolution in India. This time, as chairman of the Knowledge Commission, he wants to transform the way Indians learn and think...

Sam Pitroda is busy with the second big "romantic" mission of his life. The first was taking the telephone to ordinary Indians in the 1980s, an attempt that had people laughing at him for being "mad" and discouraging him, saying that what poor Indians needed was drinking water and electricity, Sam, not phones. He

proved them wrong.

Now, as head of the Knowledge Commission, set up by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi, he is engaged in an even more formidable task: transforming the way Indians learn at school and university so that they think as well as memo-

rise, updating what they learn, and finding ways of making them less scared to experiment and come up with fresh ideas.

Based in Chicago, Pitroda (his full name is Satyanarayan Gangaram Pitroda) visits India frequently for the Knowledge Commission meetings and usually has back-to-back meetings from early in the morning to late at night. Plagued by ill-health, his busy lifestyle exasperates his family.

"My wife would have a fit if she knew the schedule I'm following here and so would one of my daughters. She's always saying 'Daddy, you're retired, you're meant to be taking it easy, what's wrong with you?' and gets all worked up," he says.

Dressed in a dark suit, he arrives at the Taj Palace top-floor coffee lounge punctually, immediately identifiable by the shock of white hair and black goatee. Having reached the pinnacle of success early in life and with nothing left to prove, he is more relaxed and candid than many corporate leaders. Living in the States has also given him a self-deprecatory touch that tends to be rare in India.

"Only a nut like me would have taken on this job. But the more people say something can't be done, that it's impossible, the more it appeals to me. If someone were to ask me to be the chairman of some company, I wouldn't be interested, that's something anybody can do. I could have retired at 35 without any problem. But I really want to do interesting, challenging, romantic work, work that has far-reaching implications. I'm not excited by things that are easy to achieve," he says, fully aware that if the Knowledge Commission is successful, the results will be seen only in the next generation, 20-30 years down the line.

One of his objectives is to alter the tendency of bright young Indians to study engineering or medicine. "The liberal arts are neglected. As a society we need to give more value to the liberal arts so that we can produce leaders with vision and who have solutions to India's problems," he says.

In shaking up the education system, he'll also be sweeping years of accumulated dust and cobwebs from the staff room. "I reckon 80 per cent of what's taught in schools and universities is outdated. I met a professor who proudly showed me his

notes, saying that they were so good that he hadn't had to change them in 20 years! That's how bad the problem is. The world has changed profoundly in the past 20 years but so much of this change is not reflected in our educational system.

It's obvious that he feels a real sense of urgency. Given that India has 500 million people below the age of 25, it's the government's responsibility to ensure that they have jobs. India will have the largest and youngest workforce in the world but if it's low quality, young Indians will not get jobs. "Unemployment will go up, we will lose momentum in economic growth, we'll have lots of young men directing their frustrated energy into the wrong things and we'll be left behind."

Oddly enough, despite being a product of an Indian school, he is an example of how, once in a while, the system can produce an inventor, a person who thinks out of the box. Pitroda is the genuine article, a visionary. If there's one man who built the foundation of the revolution in telephony usage in India in the last two decades of the 20th century, it is Pitroda.

He visualised a countrywide network of thousands of phone booths to provide this access. He battled conventional wisdom and lobbies that questioned why impoverished people needed telecom. He also made the case that accessibility, not density, should be the focus of the implementation of telecom. Pitroda's tenacity helped create the concept and technology behind the network of phone booths across the country, in every village. These 600,000 booths, providing employment to a million people, today dot the remotest regions of India – a manifestation of Pitroda's efforts. By thus providing public access, he revolutionised telecommunications in India, and provided a model for other developing nations.

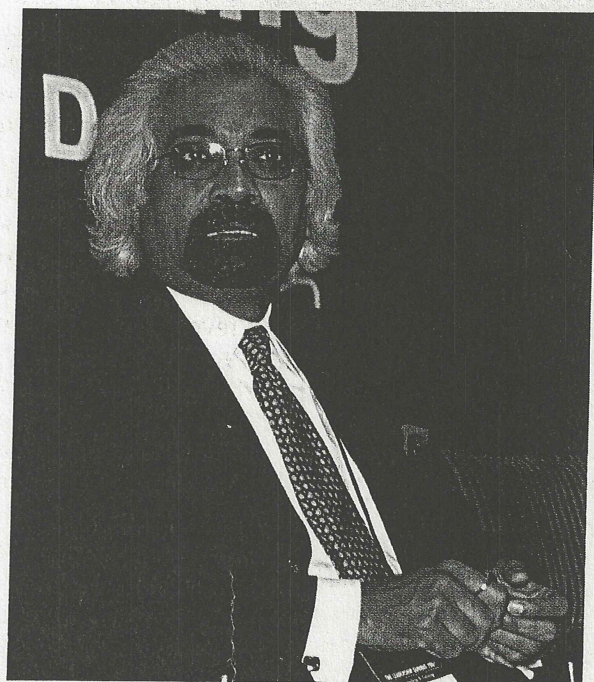
In implementing these changes, Pitroda worked closely with then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi as his chief technology adviser. The two men had struck up an instant rapport – "we understood each other without even talking sometimes" – and Pitroda became a member of the Gandhis' inner circle. While still on

good terms with the Gandhis – Sonia Gandhi, after all, personally backed him for the Knowledge Commission job – the age difference between him and Rahul Gandhi has not permitted the same closeness as with his father.

Pitroda, who holds some 50 patents internationally, is currently the CEO of WorldTel, an international telecommunications corporation. Though based in the US for many years, he has never lost touch with India. He is convinced that the way the Indian government functions needs to be overhauled and streamlined, with much of the paperwork abolished.

"See this GSM phone? I have everything in it. I can pay my bills through the credit card, the icon of which you see on

"The more people say something can't be done, that it's impossible, the more it appeals to me. If someone were to ask me to be the chairman of some company, I wouldn't be interested, that's something anybody can do. I really want to do interesting, challenging, romantic work, work that has far-reaching implications."



this mobile. It is a fully secure system with more than 50 security walls."

Has he patented it? Is it being used in the US? "I have already got 12 patents, apart from the many I got in the past. I am waiting for 20 more patents. As for this particular facility, it is being used in Japan. After 12 months, it will be introduced in the US. The infrared ray beamed from the edge of this mobile will replace the plastic card. It has many other wireless applications. In India, we use mobiles mainly for voice and SMS. But it can help you to store all the information relating to expenditure, which you can review at the end of the year when filing your tax returns," says Pitroda.

On the state of the telecom industry today, he says it has made huge strides, from 2 million phones to 100 million phones. "But the next phase is equally critical. We need to move to 200 million phones. The issue is broadband. The internet experience in India is very bad. We should be talking of 100 million broadband subscribers."

"Every phone should be broadband and that should be the goal. I know spectrum allocation and management are going to be a major issue. Look at globalisation as the key. Twenty years ago, the Rural Automatic Exchange was important. Today, what we need to examine is how to make India a global player. All policies that we frame should be geared to that goal."

Despite being 63, despite the protestations of his family, and despite his ill-health, Pitroda retains a childlike enthusiasm for bringing about change. His energy levels are akin to those of children too. "I've had cancer surgery and two bypasses; I've had a neck surgery – all kinds of problems. But I get it fixed. I've been very unlucky. I take care of myself, I eat well, I never smoke, and I hardly drink."

In the midst of his medical problems, he has demonstrated his faith in technology. "Whenever I had a health problem, I saw myself as an object. I'd turn it over to a hospital, go to my doctor friends, get it on a production line, and they'd fix it. I come out of it and I can forget about it. Have faith in technology." ▲