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Headline

Telephones that transformed lives

Why Sam Pitroda

Imagine if one had to buy a telephone connection in order to be able to make a call...If dialing an overseas or even outstation call was the prerogative of a privileged few with home telephone connections. For the Indian populace, it was, until Sam Pitroda's team at the Center for Development of Telematics (C-DOT) developed the little box that displayed the call cost and made instant telephone bills at the user-end, (not the exchange) possible. With this simple but critical enabling device, came the proliferation of bright yellow public telephone booths dotting the Indian landscape. Suddenly, not just the metros, but small town and rural India was in conversation and even dialing overseas. The network of telephone booths he visualized, defied the first paradigm- of telecom development involving accessibility against the accepted parameter of tele-density. And more important, dispelled the wide-spread notion of anti-development lobbies about whether people who struggled to make ends meet would pay to make a telephone call. They would and they did. One of Pitroda's most heartening moments came when he was traveling in Kheda district in Gujarat. He saw long queues of brightly dressed girls. He was delighted to know that these were village girls queuing up to call their brothers in New Jersey on the occasion of the Indian festival of Raksha Bandhan...which brings us to the second most important aspect of Pitroda's contribution— the RAX (Rural exchanges) he designed were equipped to function in the most rugged of conditions, not just in sanitized laboratory environs.

The inspiration of Sam Pitroda does not end with his transformation of Indian communication systems two decades ago. Over 100 patents to his credit (several of them for mobile commerce), the white-haired genius and one of the most visible global Indians, refuses to stop. What he has brushed behind him is a severe cardiac ailment at the age of 48 and then a battle against cancer.

"I had never paid attention to my health, eating or sleeping habits, nor was I aware of the importance of exercise during young age until I had a heart attack," says Pitroda recalling how his cardiac surgeon Dr Naresh Trehan had predicted that he would not survive beyond the year 2000. "And here I am," he declares triumphantly.

“I have too much intensity in me. I take things too seriously, like a laser beam,” he muses over his battle with cancer.

With tubes on his body and pain that could debilitate the bravest, Pitroda wills himself to stand up at a podium and speak- Not in glowing terms about his battle against the vagaries of nature, but to address international conferences in a room full of executives on the digital divide, the power of technology and how they could ignite change in their own circle of influence. No drama, no projection of a larger-than-life persona...the relentless spirit of Sam Pitroda cannot help but inspire...

The encounter

There are certain encounters that make you feel rejuvenated, even if the interaction is over the telephone. The tele-conference with Sam Pitroda was a distillation of a lifetime remarkably lived- of passion, the love of life and the nonchalance towards achievement that changed lives of ordinary people. The humility that is often spoken about, is practiced by Pitroda sans frills. One e-mail from *Team Inspired* about this book is met with a prompt polite response and we are rolling.

Introduction

In 1964, Satyanarayan Gangaram Pitroda left Indian shores with \$ 400 in his pocket. Two decades later, the millionaire Sam Pitroda returned from the US with 50 patents under his belt. That is also when Pitroda first used the telephone- as in those days; telephones in India were owned and accessed only by the urban elite. The same gentleman went on to chair India's first telecom mission, become the advisor to late Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi and receive India's National Citizen's Award for work on telecom from the Prime Minister of India. It was Pitroda's team at C-DOT that developed the rural automatic telephone exchanges (RAX) with an intelligent network signaling system. Whether a number is busy or available, interconnection between mobile and landlines—the backend of a telephone setup that we tend to take for granted, was enabled by this system.

Among the patents he holds, is one for the digital diary used by companies like Texas Instruments, Casio, and Sharp etc. Then there are others in areas like mobile commerce, digital switching, synchronization, tone generation, tone receiving and conferencing.

In 1993, he was awarded the IIT Alumni Medal, and in 1995 the International Distinguished Leadership Award. The Dataquest Lifetime Achievement Award came in 2002. He was invited by the United Nations Secretary General to join a special committee to advise on global digital divide issues. He is also adviser to Kofi Annan on the ICT Advisory Committee. But for Pitroda, his laurels as a telecom inventor, management guru and entrepreneur rest lightly as he looks reality in the face as he expounds the value of family and a multitude of friends as the achievements he treasures

most in life. He has a collection of over 20,000 visiting cards- not just acquaintances, but people he knows by name!

“I think the strength of India lies in the bonds with family and friends. It is very important to me. If we lose that, it will be sad. In Western society, the focus is on the individual and there is no support system. It is only in India that if you go out with a bunch of new friends, somebody else would want to pay for your cup of coffee,” he says quite simply establishing the triumph of personal fulfillment over professional achievement.

The life and times of Sam Pitroda

Sam Pitroda was born in a Gujrathi family that had migrated to Titalgarh, Orissa. His father had studied barely up to Class 4, but encouraged his seven children to follow their dreams. There was no electricity in Titalgarh and the young boy and his brother were sent to Gujarat to study at the Anand Vallabhai Vidyalay in Gujarat and also to imbibe Gandhian philosophy and Gujarati culture. The childhood he describes had a strong emphasis on creating a value system with Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sardar Vallabhai Patel as role models.

“The inspiration to progress in life came from sacrifice, doing larger things not with the goal of financial success. The focus was on hard work, a disciplined life, waking up early every morning, realizing the value of time and practicing the simple virtues of honesty, sincerity and generosity,” he says.

Pitroda went on to complete his Masters degree in Physics and Electronics in Baroda and moved to the US in 1964 to do his masters in electrical engineering. He worked in a Chicago-based digital communications company-GTE from 1966 to 1974 and then started his own company called Wescom Switching. Wescom was sold to Rockwell International, where he worked as the head of telecom for three years. Pitroda returned to India to establish the Centre for Development of Telematics in 1984.

In 1987, he became Chief Technology Advisor to the late Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi. In 1989, he was elected first chairman of India’s Telecom Commission, responsible for all aspects of national and international telecom and over 500 000 employees. He returned to the US, as he says, to finance his children’s college education as his savings had dried up. He then went on to become the chairman of WorldTel, an organization initiated by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) with shareholders like GE Capital, American International Group (AIG), International Investment Group (IIG), Intel Corporation, NatWest Markets, Reliance Industries and IT Investments. WorldTel is involved in developing telecom infrastructure for developing countries. Pitroda lives in a suburb of Chicago, Illinois wife Anu, son Salil and daughter Rajal.

The inspirer speaks

I am someone who looks at disruptive technology. I am not a guy who takes something that is a small. If there is a technology that will shake up everything, I am interested. But I am better at starting things. I lose interest in running day to day stuff. I do not find it creative. That's something after so many years I have learnt about who I am.

I am proud of my children and believe they are the best in the world and nothing could have bought them the honest great Mum they have. At the end of the day, it is their love and affection that is important. What does one do with money? You can't wear five suits at a time!

Evolution of a leadership mantra

Leadership is about performance, having a vision, breaking it down, farming it out, charging up people, managing them, articulating your thoughts, getting people excited about it and putting it together. Every good leader has to build his own ecosystem or else the leader's scope of influence becomes narrow.

Inspiration for the young aspirant soul

"Young people should be work-centric. They should derive pleasure from work. Honesty, sincerity and loyalty all add up. They must respect diversity as opposed to religious fanaticism.

During a recent conversation, my daughter Rajal and I were speaking about her meeting with the women she grew up with. She had a very interesting observation. Girls who grew up being told they were very pretty had invariably wound up in situations involving messy romantic relationships. As against that, in case of girls who were pretty but did not grow up being told they were pretty, were doing well for themselves as for them, joy would come from work and a focus on internal beauty," he reflects.

What would Sam Pitroda like to be remembered as?

Nobody remembers anyone-except my two children maybe. We are just one of those in a crowd; life would go on when we are not there. Life is a journey and we just need to do our jobs striking the right balance between work and personal life.