



ASPEN INSTITUTE INDIA

**A Conversation with Mr. Sam Pitroda, Advisor to the Prime Minister on Public Information
Infrastructure and Innovation
Friday, May 28th, 2010, WWF Auditorium, New Delhi.**



Aspen Institute India hosted “A Conversation with Mr. Sam Pitroda”, Advisor to the Prime Minister of India on Public Information Infrastructure and Innovation. During the session, Mr. Pitroda talked about his life, his work, the challenges and obstacles he faced and how his life journey led him to become one of the key influencers of India’s development in the last two decades.

Stating that “My journey is something like the journey of the nation”, Mr. Pitroda said that he was born in humble beginning, but was able to rise to become a leader amongst his peers. Born in Gujarat in 1942, Mr. Pitroda’s family moved to Orissa in search of work. Brought up in a Gandhian lifestyle, his family members were pious believers in Gandhi and the founding fathers of Independent India.

Having completed his Masters degree in Physics, Mr. Pitroda was inspired by President Kennedy’s vision to put a man on the moon and moved to the US shortly thereafter to study engineering.

Having settled in the United States with his extended family, he soon realized his own position—a position where knowledge of technology had given the son of a carpenter new tools and new values, levelling him with others in his field: “Technology is a great social leveller, second only to death”.

Mr. Pitroda said that he got into the Telecom sector by accident. With a background in Physics, he soon had many patents to his name. Following his father’s advice, Mr. Pitroda decided to create his own company with the help of two American friends in designing, developing and manufacturing digital switching systems. Within six years, the business had 2000 employees and was valued at \$

100 million. Mr. Pitroda and his partners decided to sell the company for \$50 million in 1974 and he remained with Rockwell Corporation (the buying group) as the Executive Vice President.

This is where he realized his life was not as complete as he had hoped it would be. Never having visited New Delhi, he came to the capital in search of new experiences. Troubled with the state of the telecom system in India, it was here that he decided to fix the telecom industry. Armed with, in his own words, “a fair amount of arrogance and a lot of ignorance” Mr. Pitroda set out to revolutionize the telecom industry in India.

Not having spent as much time in India and with no real connections to policymakers in the country, Mr. Pitroda was introduced to a Member of Parliament by his father in law. The big break came, when given an hour with then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, he was able to explain to her that given the young talent in India, IT and Telecom can boom in the country. Mrs. Gandhi and her son and subsequent Prime Minister, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi both supported his plan to revolutionize the telecom sector in India and he thus went on to set up the Center for Development of Telematics (C-DoT).

Proximity to the governing party allowed him to dab into many different fields related to technology and telecommunications. Even with changing governments and policies, Mr. Pitroda stayed heavily invested in the nation’s development.

With the revival of the Congress party as the main party in power in 2004, Mr. Pitroda was appointed as the Chairman of the National Knowledge Commission, a group that laid out the future course for the development of the education sector in India.

Given his expertise in the field of telecommunication, connectivity and technology, he was appointed as the Advisor to the Prime Minister on Public Information Infrastructure and Innovation in 2009.

His current projects include connecting the various panchayats across India. Alongside his role as the advisor to the Prime Minister, Mr. Pitroda is also working on a proposal to set up a countrywide network of private food banks. Mr. Pitroda emphasized that food security and hunger are two of the biggest challenges in India. A recent study commissioned by the Chicago based Global Food Network, has revealed that 27% of the world’s hungriest people live in India . He further pointed out that 22 million people in India suffer from chronic hunger and under nourishment. According to statistics from the United Nations Food Program report, India has 350 million food insecure people . The sustainability of food resources, and the necessity of food banks in India is all the more compelling, given that, in India the population’s growth rates are exceeding production of food .

He proposed organizing private food banks and stressed the need for a strategy that will make the system more effective in reaching the people who need it the most. Mr. Pitroda expressed hope that his vision for private and public food banks will be implemented within the year.

In conclusion, Mr. Pitroda reiterated the need for food banks, connectivity and harnessing the power and talent of India’s youth in an effective manner. Through such initiatives, India will be able to achieve its true potential.