



ASPEN INSTITUTE INDIA

**An Interaction with
Mr. N. R. Narayana Murthy,
Chairman, Infosys Technologies Ltd.
11:30 – 1:00 pm: March 7, 2011
WWF Auditorium, 172-B, Lodi Estate, New Delhi**

Continuing with its big focus on leadership and values, Aspen Institute India invited Mr. N.R. Narayan Murthy, Chairman, Infosys Technologies Ltd. for a session that explored various facets of a leader and what triggered those qualities that led him to become an international icon. The session was an exploratory exercise in unravelling the person behind the leader, through questions put to him by the



audience and the moderator Mr. Tarun Das, President, Aspen Institute India.

The conversation started from his childhood years, about how his parents, teachers et al, consciously or unconsciously, engrained those values that he still holds and has helped in transferring to Indian industry. In the conversation held at WWF Auditorium, Mr. Das started by telling the audience about his value for commitment and his unshakeable willingness to keep a promise. He asked him if he had ever changed on his commitment- maybe for health reasons, or for something very special. Mr. Murthy replying to the question said “No actually other than health reasons, I haven’t done that. In fact here in Delhi I was supposed to inaugurate the AIMA annual conference but I fell ill and couldn’t do it. But, I try and make sure that whatever little promises I make I try to fulfil them because at the end of the day credibility is extremely important. And that credibility is only gained by action and not by words. If I can build trust and therefore credibility, it is for the good.”

Mr. Murthy talked of his childhood in great detail about how his large family helped in later years to make him understand sacrifice, sharing, and an attitude of concern for others and other values that makes a leader. He explained his origin thus “I come from a very large family as most families in India tended to be in the 40s. I was born in 1946 and we are 8 children- 5 sisters and 3 brothers. Father was a high school teacher, very strict, a big disciplinarian, always focussed on honesty and integrity, good work ethic, etc. Mother was hardly literate in the sense that she had just studied upto standard 5. She could sign in Kannada which is my mother tongue. She was about compassion, generosity, concern, care, and even today, she is 90 now. She was the one who made sure that every guest had dinner, whatever time they arrived. She was the one who taught us how to share. In that sense we were very average family. Honesty, good work ethics, credibility, all these things seemed to be somewhat of a novel set of attributes today but in 40s, 50s, 60s these were taken for granted in India. We were all lower middle class people at least those I knew and in that milieu generosity, sharing, understanding they were all just given. Nobody celebrated those values because those were the minimum set of attributes that you could have. That’s the environment in which I grew up. In those days a civil servant was required to shift every three years and so we moved from place to place. That also gave us value because we learnt how to make friends pretty quickly. We understood mofussil India extremely well as it existed then. The teachers those days laid the foundation for whatever values we have learned. I remember I had a master in High School in Mysore and I always sat in the first bench and he was conducting a Chemical experiment. That experiment required to use some common salt. He was so careful in putting the common salt. My friend and I just laughed. He got down from the podium and gave us a *thappad* and then he said friend you come to my house I will give you a jar full of common salt but this belongs to the school, a public property and I can’t waste it. Therefore learn one thing, when you deal with public property or something that is common to a lot of people, you have to be very, very careful in how well you utilise it. I think that was an extraordinary value that we learnt. Most values that we learnt were learnt at the feet of our parents, grandparents, in some ways brothers and sisters”.

Speaking about his life during college years, he said: “I got the 17th rank in JEE at IIT. In those days I was being offered scholarship but they were given at the end of the year. When I went to my father, he was earning 190 rupees per month. He said ‘ I am a high-school headmaster, there is no hope of my sending you 60 rupees per month, if you are good you go to the local engineering college and you will succeed.’

Even though I was to go to IIT Kharagpur but decided to pursue engineering from National Institute of Engineering, Mysore. In '67 I completed and went to IIT Kanpur on a scholarship. Though my degree was in Electrical Engineering, my specialisation was in Computer science. That was the first batch of computer science, though officially it was called Electrical engineering and each of us had 5-6 jobs. I myself had jobs from Air India, HMT, TELCO, TISCO. The last interview I had was with professor of IIM, Ahmedabad. And the Professor explained to me how IIM was about to install world's third time sharing system after Stanford and HBS. And He Said IIM would be the third institute to install the system. He said that if you come there you will have the opportunity to develop the software and be the chief system programmer. The salary was of course less than half of all the other offers. I was fascinated by his vision and the fact that it would be the 1st management institute to have time sharing system and I had studied time sharing system. I decided to take the offer. I worked for a year and a half and then I had scholarship to do my PHD at Berkeley and Technion, Israel. As I was about to go there, my professor and I had presented a paper in Italy. The chairman of the session was a director of a software company in Paris. And France was going to build a system for handling air cargo for the new Charles De Gaulle Airport. It was inaugurated in 1974. And this director said that this young man will have the opportunity to be part of the team who will build the system and very few get this chance. Even though I really wanted to go for the PHD, I decided to go to France. And I didn't regret that, I learnt a lot in France, maybe not a lot about Computers but about life. I was a strong leftist, just short of carrying a card as a communist. In France, I met a lot of people from left, right and centre. I even met George Marchais, the head of the French Communist Party at that time. And over a period of 3-4 years I realised, that the only way societies like India can solve the problem of poverty is through entrepreneurship, through creation of jobs, through creation of wealth. And I realised that was possible only under capitalism and I transformed myself from a confused Leftist to a determined Capitalist".

Before dabbling in entrepreneurship and starting his own company he decided to learn the nitty-gritty of management as before that he was just a technical person, therefore, he came back to India and learnt how companies are run and then decided to experiment. Again, after coming back the magic of his professor was cast upon him and both started Systems Research Institute. While relating this story he added that "once a leftist, it's not easy to change. Before coming here at Aspen, I was told by an interviewer that *you appear like a leftist to me, you don't look like a capitalist*. I said, once you are a leftist there is always some of it left in you and it's good. Leftists have their heart in the right place whether they have their mind in the right place I don't know". Talking about entrepreneurship Mr. Murthy said "I had this theory that if you want to be an entrepreneur you have to be 35 or below. And I started Infosys a month before I would turn 35." Mr. Murthy also recalled nuggets from the days of formation of Infosys. He spoke about how a company is built on a set of values, how entrepreneurship is all about depth, trust, sacrifice, patience and about struggle. Mr. Murthy spoke about his family, his current assignments with Catamaran and how he is trying to help entrepreneurs in India with his new venture.

The session concluded with wide ranging questions from the audience