



Mr. Azim Premji's Speech | ET Awards | December 7, 2013

Good evening. It's a pleasure to be here with all of you.

I want to thank the Economic Times for bestowing this honor on me.

While I receive this honor, the simple fact is that it is actually an honor for the thousands of my colleagues and partners, who have helped build Wipro in to what it is, over the past few decades.

Thank you.

It was suggested by the Economic Times that I share some thoughts on Philanthropy on this occasion. So let me do so.

Let's think about tonight. We will all go home or go to our hotels and sleep. No matter where we are, within a couple of kilometers of where we are sleeping safely and soundly, there will be a young girl, who is our daughters' age or our granddaughter's age, trying to sleep in the cold night of December on the roads.

She has been abused in the past, and she will be abused in the future. She is probably desperately hungry. In her circumstances, going to school or having anything else that every child must have, is not even a remote possibility. When she wakes up tomorrow morning, it's just the start of another day of trying to survive, to again sleep shivering on the cold pavement somewhere.

This girl is not alone. There are probably 3 million children, who are homeless and will sleep on the streets in India tonight and every night. She is also not alone in sleeping hungry. More than 200 million of our people will probably sleep hungry, like her.

In very simple terms: can we be indifferent to this?

To my mind that is the basic question that we need to ask ourselves, do we feel connected to our country, to the people around us? Should not every Indian have the very basic, very bare necessities of a life of dignity. This is certainly not hoping for too much, it's just basic safety, adequate food, a roof to sleep, basic education and healthcare.

Most of us would we feel this way. I think we just need to act.

I have mentioned only a few kinds of issues. But as all of us know, our country is facing challenges of similar kind on every front. Be it education, healthcare, nutrition, sanitation or of deep inequality and discrimination.

Each one is as complex as the other, and each one as necessary for a life of basic dignity.

We can perhaps justifiably say that many of these issues need to be addressed by the government. Certainly the government needs to do more and better. But that doesn't in any way lessen the responsibility that we have. I and you, who have the privilege of being successful, have a greater responsibility.

To me Philanthropy is the connection that we can have if we are not indifferent to all these issues that face us. It is the mechanism for us to contribute to making some positive change. And I think greater our success, the greater the responsibility for us.

I must also say that, the desire to engage must come from within. No one can be told to be philanthropic. At its core Philanthropy is about the connection that you feel with the people around you or the world around you. Many, who feel this connection and have taken action, have experienced that there is enough reason for hope in our country, and that one can genuinely contribute.

The Foundation that we have set up has been working with various state governments to improve equity and quality of government schools for the past 12 years. I have learnt that trying to improve education is a very long process, but I think that basic education is the basic route to building a better society, so we remain totally committed to it. Let me narrate one of many things that give us hope in this journey.

We work in some of the most disadvantaged districts of the country. We have 50-70 of our own people in each of these districts. They are all deeply committed to the cause of education, and are capable of educating teachers.

In all these places we run voluntary learning forums for government school teachers, amongst many other initiatives. What this means is that teachers come to these learning sessions on their own. They spend their own money for transportation; they come from up to 30 km away in difficult conditions. They also spend their own money on food. They do this on a holiday, usually a Sunday.

Can we imagine this happening in the best of the companies? How many employees of such companies will spend their holidays and their own money, so that they can do their jobs better? How completely contrary is this experience of ours, to the notion of the disinterested government employee? These are all government employees, but they are deeply committed and they genuinely care.

Our experience has been that between 12-18% teachers in a district become a part of such forums over a period of time. And if you ask them why they do it, they all have the same answer, which is that they want to learn so that they can teach better. We are not talking about small numbers. In a typical district with 5000 teachers, this implies that 600-800 teachers are engaged in such forums.

I find this a great reason for hope. When so many people from within the government school system have this kind of commitment, I am sure education will improve, given time and sustained effort.

As I said before we have been at it for 12 years. I have only one regret about my Philanthropy, which is that, I wish I had started earlier. There is so much to do, and this kind of work takes so much time that the earlier we try to contribute, the better it is.

With these 12 years' of our experience, let me share three other things that I have learnt about Philanthropy. Those of you, who are very active in Philanthropy, would perhaps resonate with these lessons that I have learnt.

First, involving your family early on in Philanthropy is very important. Their understanding, endorsement and involvement may eventually be the most determining factor. There is another positive aspect to this early involvement. Some of the smartest people that I know have been those who chose to become home makers. They can perhaps play a significant role in starting off their families philanthropic efforts.

Second, the key to scaling up Philanthropy and doing good work is getting good people in the team. This is exactly the same, as in our businesses. The work in Philanthropy is perhaps more complex than business, because social issues are more complex. So it needs really good people. I think that the most serious start to anyone's philanthropic work would be to pick one of their top people from within the business, a person who has the intent, empathy, ability, and trust and move him or her to the Philanthropy side.

Third, philanthropic work needs patience, tenacity and empathy. It is different from business. We all know that intellectually, but it's very challenging when one gets in to it. One has to change ones' mindset significantly, if one has to make a difference. I have learnt this only slowly in the past 12 years.

Thank you for hearing me out. I absolutely believe that we are trustees of our wealth for this society, and we must use it as such. We must do Philanthropy because it is the Right thing to do.

I also believe that every one of us has the basic empathy with the people around us; we just need to let it find expression. I am certain that none of us wants to let the young girl I talked about earlier, to go hungry, to get abused, or to sleep in the cold night of December on the road, when our daughters and granddaughters are sleeping safe and sound – as they should.

Thank you.