Letter from Azim Premji for the first international Giving Pledge group

My mother was the most significant influence in my life as I was growing up. She was a strong woman, and a deeply committed person. Though she was a Medical Doctor, she did not actually practice medicine, but dedicated a large part of her life, close to 50 years, in helping to build and run a charitable hospital for Polio and Cerebral Palsy Children in Bombay. It was not an easy task. It was very difficult to get the funding and even harder to organize everything and make it run efficiently. Yet she tackled every kind of challenge and never stepped back from her purpose.

In those days, a newly independent India was abuzz with a sense of idealism and a genuine sense of nation building; this influenced me as well. I was deeply influenced by Gandhi’s notion of holding one’s wealth in trusteeship, to be used for the betterment of society and not as if one owned it.

In 1966 I had to drop out from my studies at Stanford on my father’s untimely death (though I did finally complete my Engineering Degree in 2000) and came back to India to run our small family business. I was 21 and over the next 30 odd years, I focused on building Wipro in to a successful professionally run organization. As Wipro became a globally successful IT Services firm, I began to seriously consider what I should do with my wealth, which had accrued from the success and market capitalization of the company.

In these intervening three decades, I had seen India change and evolve. I became convinced that markets, public systems and philanthropic initiatives all had a significant role to play if the country was to have inclusive development, and that we needed to work purposefully towards establishing a more humane, equitable and ethical society for all our citizens.

It was this purpose that made me decide that I must focus my philanthropic initiative on trying to help improve the Public Education System in India, beginning with Primary Schools, for I strongly believe that Education is perhaps the most important social institution to empower individuals and shape a better society. And it’s the Public Education System that does (and will) best serve the disadvantaged and deprived.

My experience in India had taught me that much harder than committing or collecting money, is establishing effective operational and execution structures. Which is why I decided to set up an operating organization, the Azim Premji Foundation in 2001, with the aim of working in collaboration with the government to improve the Public Schooling System.

In 2009, we reviewed our experience and our strategy at the Foundation. As a result, we decided to scale up our work and deepen our support to the public schooling system by creating institutions.
This includes institutions at the district & state level which work on capacity development of teachers & other people in the public education system, and also on other related academic and managerial issues. The institutions also include a University focused on education and related human development domains. To enable this strategy I donated about 8.7% (then valued at approximately US $2 Billion) of the total stock of Wipro Limited out of my personal holdings to create an Endowment of the Foundation in December 2010.

The Foundation currently has 800 people spread across the country: most of whom are engaged in some of the most disadvantaged regions of the country, and others at the Azim Premji University in Bangalore. The Foundation plans to scale up to 4000-5000 people over the next 5 years.

The developments of the past 2 years have given me confidence in our scaled up and institutional strategy. Even as we execute this strategy, I am aware that ensuring stable funding source is critical for its success. I am committed to transferring more of my wealth to scale up the Endowment of the Foundation.

I strongly believe that those of us, who are privileged to have wealth, should contribute significantly to try and create a better world for the millions who are far less privileged. I will continue to act on this belief.

Azim Premji
Chairman, Wipro Ltd. &
Chairman, Azim Premji Foundation

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