



2nd CUTS Thought Leadership Lecture by

Shri Sam Pitroda

Nehru Bhawan, HCM Rajasthan State Institute of Public Administration

Saturday, July 09, 2011, Jaipur

CUTS organised a 2nd Thought Leadership Lecture by Sam Pitroda, Adviser to the Prime Minister on Public Information Infrastructure and Innovations entitled, 'Public Information Infrastructure and Innovations' at Jaipur, on July 09, 2011. The lecture was well attended by more than 150 participants. The lecture deliberated on various facets of public information infrastructure and innovations; opportunities provided by creation and access to knowledge, and democratisation of information in order to boost innovations as key to the development of India

Proceedings

Pradeep S Mehta, Secretary General, CUTS International

Mehta began by thanking Sam Pitroda for accepting CUTS invitation to come to Jaipur to deliver the lecture and welcomed all the participants to the lecture. Mehta spoke about his first interaction with Pitroda during the IIM Calcutta convocation, where Pitroda made a famous statement, that you can be a Gandhian and yet drink whisky, which was not taken very lightly by the then political parties.

He further acknowledged the contribution of Pitroda in the area of telecom with focus on rural telephony and as a Former Technology Adviser to the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi in the 1980s, Pitroda not only heralded the telecom revolution in India, but also made a strong case for using technology for the benefit and betterment of society. Mehta emphasised the importance of political support/will to ensure success of reforms and telecom is an example, as the reforms were bought about by Rajiv Gandhi who provided full support to Pitroda to implement the same successfully.

Further, Mehta mentioned about the work being undertaken by CUTS in the field of competition, which is important for innovation. Mehta referred to the breaking of AT&T, which led to a lot of innovation. He said that in India we have yet not adopted a Competition Policy to correct distortion in the law. He cited an example of hardships being faced by private bus operators and common masses in Nathdwara because of the archaic provisions in the Motor Vehicles Act that result in loss of consumer welfare, competition distortion and give undue advantage to a lethargic government bus operation with loss of revenue for the state exchequer as well.

Mehta concluded the welcome speech and informed the audience that the leadership lectures will continue and the 3rd lecture would be organised with Nandan Nilekani addressing the gathering in Jaipur in winters.

V S Vyas, Member, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister and Deputy Chairman, Rajasthan Planning Board

Vyas too acknowledged the contribution of Pitroda in the telecom sector and acknowledged that it was due to Pitroda, that today India is the leader in the telecom sector. Given that the lecture was focused on innovation, Vyas mentioned that in India, we do not have any dearth of innovation, but these innovations do not scale up and the benefits of the same are not enjoyed by the people at large. Vyas, raised an important question, i.e. why are we not able to create innovations that are scalable in this country? Vyas concluded his speech and mentioned about the process of public consultation being undertaken by Planning Commission of India for the 12th plan document and responses have come from all quarters.

Sam Pitroda, Adviser to Prime Minister of India on Public Information Infrastructure and Innovations

Sam Pitroda thanked CUTS for organising the lecture. He deliberated on various facets of public information infrastructure and innovations; opportunities provided by creation and access to knowledge, and democratisation of information in order to boost innovations as key to the development of India.

Pitroda elaborated extensively on the accessibility of knowledge to lessen the disparities between the rich and poor, educated and uneducated and underlined the importance of accessibility of information. He informed that to provide accessibility and help building infrastructure, universities/labs and other research & development facilities will be connected at the national level, on one hand, and approximately 250,000 *panchayats* will be connected in coming years to address variety of issues in health, education and governance on the other. He lamented that the information available in India is not always reliable and often lost in the government files. In this context, he stressed on digitisation, storage and accessibility of information and cited an example of non-effectiveness of the Right to Information (RTI) Act due to unorganised and incorrect information.

Technology, he added, has changed the thought processes and the ways in which things are performed. There exist huge opportunities as well as challenges for development of proper public information infrastructure. However, for innovations to happen, democratisation of information and ability to ask questions need to be developed. Towards conclusion, Pitroda remarked that telecommunication reforms took 20 years, public information infrastructure and innovations may take 25 years, and the task is humungous, however, the need is to plant seeds now for next generation to reap fruits in the future.

Floor Discussion

The floor was opened for questions and several issues were raised. Pitroda emphasised that Information and Communications Technology should be the core focus of the 12th Five Year Plan. Questions were asked about the need for government interventions for innovation in different fields, incentivising innovation in governance as well as how it would impact public infrastructure and urbanisation in future. Pitroda responded by stressing on the need for government interventions in all fields of innovation. He said it is not government intervention but the extent of it which is usually an issue. Secondly, he said that the Innovation Council is taking several steps to incentivise innovation in governance which can be seen on their websites.

However, in order to reap the benefits of any of these changes and their impact on modern urbanisation, one needs to ensure that the cities are capable of utilising technologies made available to them or as he used the term, we need “smart cities”. There is a need to re-engineer what we have and organise innovations well. He allayed some of the concerns raised regarding the misuse of innovations by explaining that aberrations are a part of every system and one can develop laws to take steps when a misuse occurs, however, it is not right to deny the benefits of any technology/innovation altogether for fear of its misuse. Responding to concerns about the quality of education today, Pitroda stated that the latest Report of National Knowledge Commission focuses on three major challenges: expansion, quality and equity and the reforms are being undertaken accordingly.

The exchange was mutually beneficial. Aside from creating awareness on the relevant issues for the benefit of the audience, Pitroda also appreciated some of the insightful inputs such as the need for human development mapping index for the whole country and creating databases to enable *panchayats* to plan better as well as to enlighten *gram sabhas* regarding the basic standards necessary for villages. Pitroda took note of the concerns raised and said that such critical issues such as providing greater connectivity and access to technology at the village governance levels are on the agenda for discussion in the forthcoming meetings.

Vote of Thanks

The vote of thanks was delivered by M L Mehta who expressed warmest appreciation for Pitroda’s scintillating talk. He said that innovations are very valuable and there is need for ambience to support innovation which is why it is great that we now have an Innovation Council and similar exercises must be undertaken at state levels. He also pointed out that major problem today is of lack of scalability, a point raised by Vyas. With everyone trying to re-invent the wheel, there is no lateral learning and something needs to be done to address that. He appreciated the great work that Pitroda has been doing for years and at the Knowledge Commission and highlighted the relevance of Gandhi, a conscience keeper, not only in India but across the whole world today, as rightly pointed out by Pitroda in his speech.
