



TWO CENTS FROM NRN: HAVING AN IDEA VERSUS LETTING IT GO

He's immensely inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's leadership qualities. His simplicity is personification of Gandhi's belief in 'simple living and high thinking'. He's NR Narayana Murthy, founder of Infosys Limited. 69-year-old Murthy, who owns private investment firm Catamaran Ventures, spoke to Shivani Venugopal about the enthusiasm among today's youth towards entrepreneurship, the role of venture capital (VC) and the need to improve our education system. Edited excerpts.

Bangalore has become a hub for start-ups. You think today's entrepreneurs have the appetite to take more risks than in your time?

Well, there are several reasons for the higher level of enthusiasm among today's youth for start-ups than during our time. First of all there is ample availability of venture capital (VC), therefore the entrepreneurs are not risking too much. Due to tremendous financial support of VCs, entrepreneurs have the luxury of putting systems in place—having an office, getting decent salary, putting technology and attracting talent. So the kind of risk that existed during our time in early '80s, don't exist today. However, the current world is a lot more competitive; therefore, the ideas of today too have to be much more competitive than the ideas of earlier days.

The second reason—sufficient role models. There are many youngsters today, who are pretty early in their career and have got very good valuation for their ventures. The valuation is optimistic, despite the venture not being matured or making profits. With high salaries and good standard of living, the concern about the risks involved in entrepreneurship has vanished by and large. Third, is the success of very young entrepreneurs outside India—Facebook, Twitter, Alibaba, etc., that has created a positive momentum for our entrepreneurs.

Lastly, the support of parents—they have seen life and they aren't as concerned about the quality of life of their children on they becoming entrepreneurs, as it was earlier. On all these accounts, entrepreneurship has become quite fashionable.

Your first consulting venture Softronics was a failure as an entrepreneur. Did it make you tread the entre-

preneurship rope cautiously before starting Infosys?

(Softronics did not take off as) the market was not ready. I could predict it quickly and closed it down. I learnt my lessons and decided to start my venture again at an appropriate time. (However, I don't consider it my failure. I realised that nothing was wrong with my idea, but the market wasn't ready. Therefore, I thought of looking at the export market, but I had no knowledge of their workings. So the smart thing for me was—not to be doggedly attached to my ideas when it was not likely to succeed in the market place. That's very important for entrepreneurs: to give up an idea if they realise that the probability of success is low.

What is the time frame to gauge the consequences of a venture?

It varies. In my case, I realised it in less than a year. Nowadays, you get a sense in six months or a year. Since VCs today are funding entrepreneurs, they are not worried about the salary and basic comforts. Today's entrepreneurs have a much longer leeway than we had.

So there are no financial risks involved for entrepreneurs? Yes, but the key is a good-powerful idea.

You feel very proud of Deepika Padukone's contribution to the film industry, but not satisfied with the contribution of Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and Indian Institute of Science (IISc). Why?

I've equal respect for all profession and people who make our country proud. It's not easy to become No.1 in Bolly-

wood, but in a span of eight or nine years, Deepika Padukone, has demonstrated that through discipline and hard work one can reach the top. It's a very tough job, with long working hours; therefore, I've tremendous admiration for Deepika.

I've nothing against IIT and IISc, but the reality is in the sixty years of the life of our higher education system, I've not seen lots of data to prove that these institutions have added significant value to make the life of the poor Indians

better. I don't see a single invention, technology or idea produced by them that has helped make the society a better place.

What is the education system lacking?

It's very simple—we focus on rote learning. The quality of education is very poor. We don't help our youngsters to relate what they learn in the classroom to the reality around them.

So what should be done to improve our education system?



If we have to improve our education system, then the quality of primary and secondary school teachers should be improved. We must have meritocracy. Competent salaries must be provided to attract the best person. Cast, creed and religion shouldn't form the basis of recruitment.

Poor children should be provided with nutritious food. Along with healthy meal programme, they should be provided with textbooks, proper uniforms and best teachers. The way to improve the life of our poor is by ensuring that they have good primary and secondary school education.

Are you happy with the quality of education in private schools?

Private schools form only five per cent of the total number of schools in the country. Just beating down on private schools is not the solution. We have to improve on what forms ninety-five per cent of the schools.

Our whole education system requires improvement; therefore, the input for teachers both in private and public schools is the same. Only when we improve our college education, can we hope to see improvement in primary education. It's interrelated.

What makes you consider women more employable than men?

Generally I find women much more disciplined. They have better aspirations and work harder. You go to any university in India, I see women win most of the gold medals. I think parents have better influence on women. They have more respect for teachers. They aren't unnecessarily rebellious and absorb the good things in life very well.

You had an enriching experience at the Indian Institute of Management-Ahmedabad (IIM-A). What was

so different about IIM-A?

In my opinion IIM-A during my time was the finest education institution. It taught me—a technologist, the importance and success of management principles in the society. Management is nothing, but optimal utilisation of resources. I found that my stay at IIM-A helped me learn so many good things—interacting with people, working with teams, importance of leveraging the power of technology for making a better society around us. IIM-A changed my perspective.

People who influenced your life.

I admire Mahatma Gandhi's leadership qualities, as he led by example, which is lacking today; Jawaharlal Nehru's vision impressed me, though he was somewhat a socialist, he still did lot of good things for India. I've learnt from several leaders, innovators and business people all over the world. So I've learnt from everybody.

You returned to Infosys during its rough phase as executive chairman. What compelled you to come back?

Nothing compelled me. It was the request of the board and I wanted to do good for Infosys' community. Infosys has responsibility for 170,000 jobs. It's important to ensure that their families are secured including their children's education.

How do you see Infosys under Vishal Sikka's leadership?

They are doing well. The last quarter was good. As an outsider, I'm certainly happy.

Your advice to aspiring entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship is all about having a smart idea, so empower yourself with a powerful idea and add value to the world.