

Sam Pitroda explores collaborations in Minnesota

SUMAN GUHA MOZUMDER

Sam Pitroda, chair of India's National Knowledge Commission last week explored the potential for collaboration with Knowledge Exchange, a collaborative of a wide range of Minnesota institutions seeking to make investments in India.

At a meeting earlier this month in St Paul ahead of Governor Tim Pawlenty's planned visit to India this October the members of the collaborative acquainted themselves with the Indian Knowledge Commission's goals and the areas where India has the greatest needs for foreign collaboration. They also showcased some areas where Minnesota has strengths and could possibly match those with India's needs while also trying to identify India's strengths that could meet the needs of the North Star State.

"I found a lot of enthusiasm, energy and expectations among the participants during my May 28 visit. I had a two-hour meeting with the collaborative which had invited people from universities, colleges and libraries and all of them wanted to do something in India, partly because the governor is going to there in October," Pitroda told *India Abroad*. "In the governor's agenda during his India visit knowledge should be an important part of the discussions because in Minnesota there are a lot of knowledge institutions," Pitroda said, referring to his discussions.

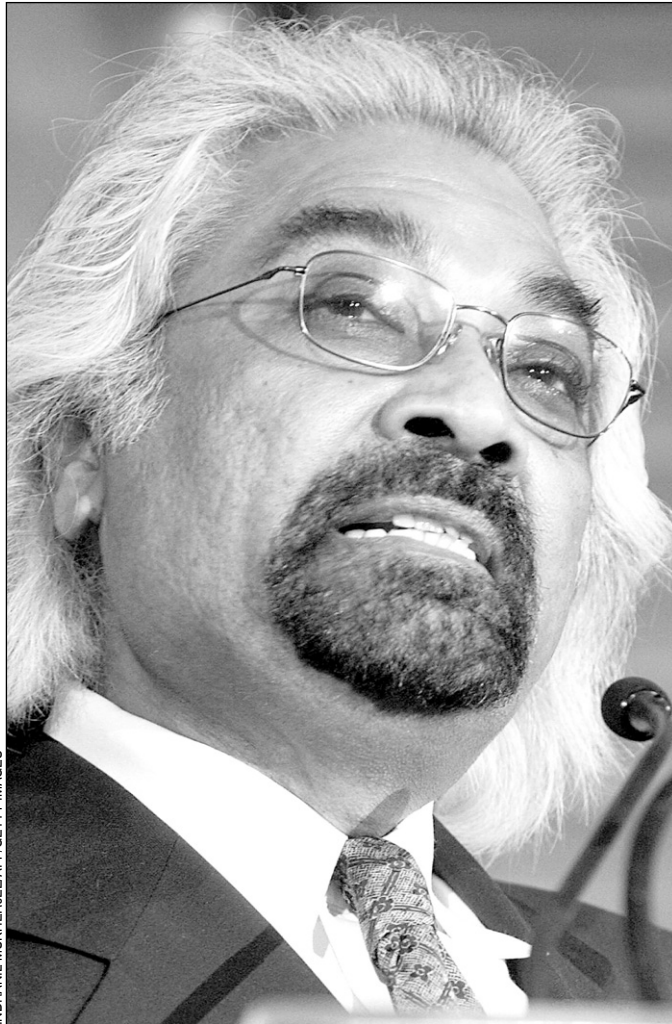
The two-hour discussion on potential collaboration focused on areas such as resources for entrepreneurs, early childhood education, workforce development, public health education and e-governance, among others.

Pitroda met with policy officials of the Governor's Cabinet including Commissioners Dan McElroy and Alice Seagren, Susan Heegaard, Director of the Office of Higher Education and Gopal Khanna, chief information officer of the state of Minnesota.

State Representative Erik Paulsen, who proposed a bill on setting up an India Center at the University of Minnesota that has now been passed by both Houses of the legislature, met with Pitroda as did Tony Lorusso, director of Minnesota's trade office briefing on Pawlenty's forthcoming trade mission to India.

Pitroda visited the Children's Museum and the Science Museum of Minnesota as well as the James J Hill Reference Library – a leading entrepreneurial resource in the country – to experience first hand the operations of these top museums and libraries in the United States.

Dr Bruce Corrie of Concordia University and co-founder of the Knowledge Exchange said, quoting Scott Odman of



■ Sam Pitroda

the JJ Hill Library that the founder of the library and famous entrepreneur JJ Hill came to St Paul while trying to go to India to sail on the Ganges. "Odman said it would be fitting if the library that he endowed helps bring empowerment through knowledge to people in India," Dr Corrie, who hails from India, told *India Abroad*.

He said what the library is good at doing is providing resources to entrepreneurs online and they could work with the Knowledge Commission and provide, for instance, a business portal for India where people could have

entrepreneurship education.

"They do get requests from India – entrepreneurs asking some questions – and they have access to certain data bases, in view of the fact that the NKC talked about encouraging small and medium enterprises, they saw that as a niche area for collaboration," Dr Corrie said.

Similarly, he said, the Minnesota Children's Museum, a national leader in early childhood education that has experience of creating learning opportunities for children birth through age 10 in setting outside formal school system can collaborate with Indian early childhood experts to create informal learning opportunities for young children and can get involved in *anganwadi* programs. "Proposals like these including collaborations with science museums of India came up during the meeting with Mr Pitroda," he said.

Pitroda agreed that a lot of interesting ideas were exchanged during the meeting and some of them could be translated into practice. "For example when I visited the JJ Hill Library I saw some special software in the library geared towards small and medium scale industries. Some library in India can definitely pick that up. Or for that matter somebody in India might want to start a children's museum, in Lucknow, Kanpur or wherever," Pitroda said.

"I was intrigued by the idea of children's museum for 0 to 10 olds. That is important because that is where learning takes place. So there are many positives there," he said.

But Pitroda said while there are lot of opportunities in India in the knowledge sector, Knowledge Exchange needs to find local partners for collaboration. "During my discussions with them I emphasized the fact that NKC works at the national level and being an advisory body it reports to the prime minister. We cannot be working with Minnesota or some other state government. I said all the work that you are suggesting have to be coordinated and collaborated with local institutions. We can facilitate, but all the operating level collaboration will have to be done at the local level with the corresponding groups in India," he said.

Dr Corrie described the meeting as very exciting because of the possibilities of collaboration that would benefit both sides in future, adding that Knowledge Exchange looks forward to taking it to the next level during the governor's visit.

"Sam Pitroda inspired us with his vision for India's future," Dr Corrie said. The Knowledge Exchange is excited about the possibilities of collaborating with the National Knowledge Commission of India in making this vision a reality. We are actively working on next steps."

US judge certifies Silverline staff's class action suit against HSBC

SAMYUKTA MULLANGI

A class-action lawsuit has been filed by employees of Silverline Technologies, an India-based computer consulting company, against HSBC Bank on charges of the latter's failure to pay their wages, health benefits, and pension plan contributions for two years after taking over the company.

US District Judge Judge Laura Taylor Swain certified the suit as a class-action May 24.

At one point, Silverline Technologies Ltd was a highly successfully global software solutions provider with a strong presence in Europe, the US and India. Its clients included Fortune 500 companies like Goldman Sachs, J P Morgan, Ford and Bell Atlantic. In a bid to boost revenues, Chairman Ravi Subramanian began an acquisition spree in 2000. The deal that broke the ford was Silverline's acquisition of SeraNova, valued at \$39.24 million.

Due to a security interest in Silverline's equipment, accounts and leases, HSBC had extended a \$30 million line of credit to the company in 2001 and 2002. However, in May 2002, it claimed that Silverline was in default under the credit line, and a month later, proceeded to bring action against the



■ Naresh M Gehi

company to recover the security interest and amounts due.

A June 2002 court injunction gave the bank a headstart in this process by requiring Silverline to consult with a restructuring firm, Getzler & Co, to manage its operations.

The lawsuit comes in the wake of complaints filed by plaintiffs that under HSBC and Getzler's control, Silverline transferred millions of dollars to the bank to pay off its debt, despite the injunction prohibiting it from doing so. This left Silverline unable to pay what was due to the plaintiffs.

The May 24 ruling breathed new life into the workers' lawsuit, which had been denied class action status in 2003 by a district judge.

Plaintiff attorney Naresh M Gehi said they had proposed an out-of-court settlement and it was up to HSBC to go to trial. "We have a strong case and we'll fight to the bone," he said.

Judge Laura Taylor Swain threw out claims for health benefits because this was not a common complaint among the potential class members. She also denied claims for wages based on unjust enrichment because of lack of sufficient evidence showing how many class members had worked without pay after Getzler became involved in Silverline's management.

However, Gehi said getting class certification itself was a success. "I'm very happy. Can you imagine if your pension plan is wiped out? It's disastrous!" he said. "Also, being an Indian, it's a great feeling to fight for these people," he noted.

Hari Srinivas named to senior post at Planetvu

A CORRESPONDENT

Planetvu Corporation, the Toronto-based distributor and marketer of international television programming, recently appointed Hari Srinivas Senior Vice President Programming Acquisitions and Chief Marketing Officer.

Srinivas joins Planetvu Corporation from B4U US Inc where he served as country head responsible for operations for north and south America.

Srinivas will be responsible for all broadcaster and studio programming acquisitions and will report to President and Chief Executive Officer Stuart W Ross. 'Hari brings his terrific subscriber acquisition and marketing experience as well as international programming know-how to Planetvu Corporation at a time when the company has assembled an excellent South Asian programming portfolio and is poised to experience very strong growth and accelerated product innovation,' said Ross.