

# Our mission is safe and sustainable water for all

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In the third of *Mint's* "Joy Of Giving Week" interview series, Rohini Nilekani, chairperson and founder of Arghyam, talks about the foundation she set up to address the problem of one of India's scarcest resources—water.

## What does Arghyam do?

Arghyam is a grant-making foundation; so, technically, our job is to find the right leaders and institutions that are working in (the area of) domestic water and sanitation. Our mission is safe, sustainable water for all. We started work on water in April 2005—it's been six years now—and it's really been an incredible learning journey because I didn't know much about the complex state of water before then.

## What prompted you to start the foundation?

I set up the foundation to practise giving back—at that time, we didn't have that much money; but I came into some money selling shares from Infosys—₹100 crore (\$32 million)—and I wanted to put all of it into the foundation, but it begged the question, "What will you do with it?"

The idea came just like that; I suddenly thought of water—it

## THE CAUSE

Arghyam works as a funding agency, primarily through partnerships—with government, non-governmental organizations and various types of institutions—for impact and scale. Projects address issues of quantity, quality and access to domestic water in communities. It also started the India Water Portal, an online forum through which information and best practices can be shared.

**WHERE:** Across 18 states in India through 80 projects.

**SINCE WHEN:** 2005

## mint INTERVIEW

was obvious. And we found that there was no other Indian institution working on it. Within a few months we were giving our first donations, and we were hiring fast.

## What are the challenges for managing water in India?

Water is such a key resource in ecology and economy. Meritifully, it's a renewable resource; but it's amazing how badly we use it. Delhi, technically, could be self-sufficient in water, using simple practices; but because our cities do not contain demand, or reuse, we have high-cost schemes to bring water from far away. We use it, pollute it, and send it away. That model is disas-

trous.

India has reasonably bountiful water supplies—a lot of the problem is a governance deficit. The government has the money and the mandate, but it's not really happening. It's about access, empowerment, having a voice; water is a deeply political issue in many parts of the country. Water is just bang there, in the middle. There will be a big revamp of policy. The Planning Commission has set up several committees to rework the laws and the regulation and the financing of water. This is welcome. At Arghyam, to date, we have financed more than 85 projects and programmes across 19 states; plus we have our own programmes like the India Water Portal and our urban initiative.

## How did you attempt to grow the foundation from its original form?

We are still a small foundation and, out of ₹150 crore, we get about ₹12-15 crore a year; and, therefore, we can't scale further than our budgets allow. But we are able to leverage a bit more if we are able to replicate good practices. So we are looking for innovations, new responses to new challenges. The focus in many places is changing from quantity to quality now—we have really contaminated our water supplies. But whatever we support has to be low-cost, you cannot have expensive solutions.

## How much of your time has been



ANIRUDDHA CHOWDHURY/MINT

**Building resources:** Nilekani says Arghyam is looking for innovations, low-cost solutions to grow.

## devoted to research?

We did a survey called Ashwas (a survey of household water and sanitation) in Karnataka and it was massive: 17,000 households.

We realized how little the *gram panchavats* and villagers could really do about their own water issues. Often, they did not have the means; there was corruption; or people simply didn't make the connection between sanitation and public health. All that came through loud and clear. From there we said, "Let's take these reports back to the villages," and then we helped them to make their own action plans. So what began as a citizen survey ended up as a structural analysis on the *gram panchayat*.

## How involved have you been in the cause? Is it just giving money or are you taking a more active role?

Well, I do a lot of cheque-writing; once I research an institution, I'm very happy to give to it. But with Arghyam I feel more involved—even in the way I look at water in my life today. Years ago I installed a bathtub in my bathroom but I haven't used it since I started to understand water issues. I can't use it now. Never will I leave a tap on without thinking. It does change the way you live.

The joy of giving comes from being involved in seeing where that giving goes; when I see a child reading a book published by Pratham Books (another cause Nilekani supports) I am

happy. You have to go to the heart of it. Why do you want to give?

## What is your view on the future of Indian philanthropy?

I meet many young people who are turning on its head the idea that you first make your money and then start giving it back. The way you make your money itself is the new thing—where has this social entrepreneurship come from? Many people are challenging the very idea of the corporation and its role in society. That is a real change.

There's a tectonic shift happening in the NGO (non-governmental organization) sector. For the older NGOs, their leadership may have moved on and succession planning is difficult.

There are far too many NGOs in some places, and it is going to be harder for them to sustain themselves as Western donors have receded and the State is taking back some of the space that it had yielded to NGOs.

We are expecting to see a lot of mergers, a lot who are fading away; and we are watching the space, because the changes on the ground are going to affect what we do in the future.

There's also a huge policy push (new laws, regulations, pending court judgements, issues of public doctrine). So there's a lot of churn happening from the government side and the foundation is, in some ways, in the middle of that.

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