

Govt policy should make it easier to give: Rohini Nilekani

Philanthropist Rohini Nilekani on how the wealthy can be persuaded to give more to charity, importance of natural resources to improve living standards, and the India Philanthropy Initiative



Rohini Nilekani, chairperson and founder of not-for-profit Arghyam and co-founder of Pratham Books. Photo: Hemant Mishra/Mint

Rohini Nilekani, chairperson and founder of not-for-profit Arghyam, is a former journalist, writer and philanthropist. She co-founded Pratham Books, a non-profit publishing enterprise to produce high-quality, low-cost books for children in several Indian languages. Nilekani has been involved in development issues for several years. In an interview, she speaks about how the wealthy can be persuaded to give more to charity, why access to natural resources is important for improving lives and the India Philanthropy Initiative. Edited excerpts from the interview conducted by Bridgespan in partnership with *Mint*:

One of the under-reported elements in the new strategic philanthropy era is the element of personal reward and the joy that comes from philanthropy. What do you consider to be your most rewarding philanthropic experiences recently?

Yes, you are absolutely right that our brains are wired for altruism and what keeps altruism going in the human race is the actual joy you get out of it. You have to watch out that it doesn't turn into a sort of ego-driven joy. But when I meet children reading the books we published at Pratham Books, it gives me the most undiluted joy. But also at a more fundamental level, being able to work with communities to

improve their water resources and then to see what a difference it makes, especially to the lives of women. We have helped with spring restoration, for example, and when communities are able to get sustainable, safe water, that's been a deep fundamental satisfaction as well.

Can you give an example or idea where philanthropy can change the power structure?

One of the great conundrums in philanthropy globally is that the way wealth creation happens itself often creates the inequities in society. In the ideal world, philanthropy should be redundant or at least it should be at the edges, as innovation or risk capital. But it's far from an ideal world; the wealthy are cornering more and more opportunities and resources from this planet. So, the big challenge for philanthropy is...can it engage with the distribution of wealth itself? It is very difficult, let me tell you. Once you are wealthy, you are in a nice comfort zone and want to stay there. So I always look in the mirror and ask, is my philanthropy making the world a more just and fair place? Take the water example; because when people don't have access to water, it's very hard to have good health, good income and livelihoods, so I think the work on water is about restructuring power. So also with some of the other work that I do on ecology, I think people's access to the natural resource base really does make a difference in how they can bootstrap themselves up to a better life.

What can be done or needs to be done to stimulate the newly wealthy in India?

I think those who are already in philanthropy and enjoying it and making a difference have a responsibility to share their stories widely, and to be very transparent about their giving. That is very necessary in India today. There also needs to be public pressure on the wealthy, and government policy should make it easier to give. The regulatory cholesterol around setting up charitable organizations can be cleaned up. I think enabling non-profits, which are essentially the absorptive pipeline for philanthropy, is critical. And right now there is distrust between government and NGOs (non-governmental organizations), which I think is not healthy. So we do need government and NGOs to sit at the table and say how can we make the NGO sector more transparent? How can we then have less regulation and make it easier to function? I think all this will help to increase philanthropy in India.

Can you talk a little bit about the role of big bets in India? Is there a need for more strategic action?

I think we have seen international philanthropists take these audacious big bets and obviously the (Bill and Melinda) Gates Foundation comes to my mind, when they deploy their capital to crack some vaccine or child mortality. I mean that sounds like the kind of areas we used to leave to God or at least to the big state! But it is wonderful that people who have become so incredibly wealthy are now putting their intellectual capital along with their monetary capital to say, why can't we just be audacious and crack things that have just not cracked for so long? It has its risks; it always has its risks when individuals use their power and wealth to solve something because unless it comes with a

set of checks and balances in society, sometimes you can also go very wrong. But I am all for these big bets and in India I don't think we have taken enough of them. I hope we mature to that.

You are involved with other philanthropists in establishing and leading Indian philanthropic initiatives...

The India Philanthropy Initiative was set up by a few of us under Azim Premji's leadership. We have decided to take it slowly but the goal is to see how we can inspire much more philanthropy in India. We are learning to see if we can be effective as a group of philanthropists, pushing each other's limit. And we are best as a peer-to-peer network where we can freely ask questions and learn.

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Do you think the expression and experience of philanthropy in India can be distinctive?

It can be made distinctive. If we really get back into the roots of our culture and philosophy, we can bring that out into the modern era by infusing it with new meaning about responsibility in society. And you can make it as spiritual as you want it to be or make it just about creating a better democracy. So yes, there is potential to infuse Indian philanthropy with a deeply culturally rooted new meaning. And that is a journey worth taking I think.

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The Bridgespan Group, an adviser and resource for mission-driven leaders and organizations, in partnership with Mint interviewed several philanthropists across India to trace their journeys and share their learnings—Conversations with Remarkable Givers: India. To see the full video series, go to www.livemint.com/indiangivers