

# Small bunch of Indian philanthropists supporting ventures in unconventional areas of governance, human rights

By [Naren Karunakaran](#), ET Bureau | 2 Oct, 2014, 03:57AM IST

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MUMBAI: Even as much of Indian philanthropic capital flows into predictable areas like education, healthcare or water, a small and gutsy bunch of [philanthropists](#) is directing their generosity towards issues like [governance](#) and the thorny thickets of human rights.

Rohini Nilekani, who has done considerable work in water and education sectors over the years, is keen on channelling much of the Rs 164 crore she raised by sale of Infosys shares into initiatives on governance alone — be it data transparency, supporting think tanks for better policy formulations, or supporting independent media. She has been veritably pushed into the governance arena by circumstances as she realised that working on social verticals is not enough — governance as a horizontal, cross-cutting theme has to be addressed too.

"There are huge gaps and leaks in the system, in government plumbing," she says. Another set of givers, including former Infosys director TV Mohandas Pai and Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw of Biocon, are going deeper into the political process itself through Bangalore Political Action Committee (B.PAC). "It's not enough to constantly moan and groan. We have to participate and catalyse reforms," says Pai, who is now putting scores of young, debutante politicians at the grassroots through training regimens.

CV Madhukar, cofounder of the PRS Legislative Research and director for governance related investments at the [India](#) office of Omidyar Network, would like to expand the governance framework a little further and address the issue of judicial delays too in addition to issues involving media, civic technology, open data and fiscal transparency.

While there are risks involved in governance work, he isn't overly bothered. "It need not be confrontational, it's about working together," he says. Globally, billionaire philanthropist Pierre Omidyar and George Soros are among the few that are pushing the governance and [human rights](#) agenda proactively. These philanthropists are of the opinion that issues of governance, if left only to politicians and bureaucracy, will get stymied and all their efforts in trying to address social issues will remain stunted or result in sub-optimal outcomes.

"Unless the governance piece in the framework is fixed, our developmental goals cannot be achieved," explains Anu Aga, former chairperson of Thermax, a philanthropy evangelist. As a Rajya Sabha member, Aga is privy to the processes in government and is appalled by the inadequacy of the present system to deliver. Indian givers have traditionally shied away from addressing human rights issues.

Shalu, who is from a prominent industrial family, is one of the few converts. It started with a study on sex trafficking she was given last year by Dasra, a strategic philanthropy foundation. "It stumped me and my husband," she says.

"The problem is huge and is not being attended to." Over 80% of sex workers nationwide (16 million women) are victims of sex trafficking and 40% of these victims are adolescents and children. "We talk of women empowerment and here we have a situation where she has no right over her own body," laments Shalu. It may take a long time for philanthropists to even look at contentious issues such as labour, environmental and resource rights, freedom from interference in privacy, freedom from gender or identity-based violence or right to sexual expression.

However, a small beginning has been made. Usually donors want all their money to go into projects, giving little thought to the needs of the NGO or the agency itself. Amit Chandra, managing director, Bain Capital, has worked with 30 NGOs in education, vocational training and health, for over a decade. He has drawn his lessons.



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Chandra now wants to expend all philanthropic money and time on building capacities of NGOs — leadership support and training, improving organisational structures, shoring up human capital, building resilience and abilities to scale. "Very few think big because of the huge limitations they are mired in," he says. Capacity building is emerging as a key area for donors who are keen on ushering systemic changes.

## COLLECTIVE GIVING

One of the most gratifying developments of recent times is the emergence of high-impact collective giving where the combined energies of many are directed towards a particular cause. Nimesh Sumati and Rajesh Kacholia, extremely media-shy Mumbai-based businessmen, have strung together an informal network - Caring Friends - of over 400 high net worth individuals who fraternise occasionally, exchange notes and give.

The amounts are not to be sniffed at. Collectively they donate over Rs25 crore a year to 50 select NGOs across 18 states. It's the informal character of the entire exercise that is remarkable. No proposals are sought, no MOUs are signed. Caring Friends doesn't even have a bank account but givers and the NGOs work in a close embrace.

"While the need to professionalise NGOs exists, it's about time to NGOise professionals," says Sumati. The other exemplar in collectivism is the raising of the Ashoka University, India's first university for the liberal arts, by a group of 17 entrepreneurs and professionals. While these innovators lend traction to giving in India, a few industry heavyweights are also beginning to experiment with newer approaches to giving.

Anand Mahindra and Ajay Piramal are promoting high impact, hugely scalable market-based solutions in access to clean drinking water with their personal resources. They are largely in the impact investing mode.

The next practices in giving are clearly emerging. But a question remains. Is enough being done in individual giving? The Wealth X and UBS Billionaire Census for 2014 reveals India, with 100 billionaires whose wealth total \$ 175 billion, is sixth on the list of billionaire countries.

Mumbai alone has more billionaires (28) than Tokyo (26), Los Angeles (25) and Shanghai (21). Are these billionaires giving more?

*For a contrary view on the issue of philanthropy see <http://www.speakingtree.in/spiritual-articles/lifestyle/charity-is-a-waste>*

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