

# Do we see ourselves as citizens or consumers?

Shrabonti Bagchi | TNN

In 2008, Rohini Nilekani, chairperson of NGOs Pratham Books and Arghyam, moderated an eight-part television series called 'Uncommon Ground'. Conceptualised by Nilekani, a former journalist, the show had an unusual premise: it put together, on the same platform, one business leader and one social leader and encouraged them to talk, non-confrontationally, about the issues closest to their common area of work from the point of view of their divergent ideologies. Nilekani has put these rare dialogues into print with her book 'Uncommon Ground', bolstering the content with robust essays on each development sector tackled by the original guests on her show. Excerpts from an interview with TOI on the eve of launching the book in Bangalore:

**With civil society engagement in governance and policy at an all-time high, would you say your book has turned out to be well-timed?**

As it happens, the timing for the book is perfect. Although it's out three years after the completion of the se-



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**WIDE ANGLE:** Rohini Nilekani says the young NGOs' brigade is more pragmatic

ries, and I was afraid at one point that it would seem dated, the question of the role of civic actors and the role of business in public life is alive as never before.

**What purpose does the kind of dialogue**

**you initiated and moderated serve?**

Business leaders and social leaders seldom have the opportunity to listen to the arguments of the other side. They tend to treat each other as adversaries. But that's not healthy and they all have a stake in India's

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future. They have to be open to listening. The way the world is today, none of us can afford to sit in our comfort zones. There has to be a fine balance between society, government and market — samaj, sarkar and bazaar. I attempted to seek that balance through a dialogue between samaj and bazaar.

**After this exercise, are you hopeful or pessimistic about India's future?**

The time for pessimism is over. We must realize that this is a very, very critical decade for India. Some extremely important decisions will have to be made, and some painful trade-offs as well, which is why it is important to have a well-round-

ed view of each issue as it affects people. Finding that right, inclusive balance — the sweet spot — will depend on that.

**What is a citizen's role in this?**

The citizen is today, and will have to be, more involved. It goes beyond paying one's taxes. He or she will have to develop a sense of community, a more universal and inclusive sense. Ultimately, we have to ask — do we see ourselves as consumers or citizens?

**What are the challenges that lie ahead for the NGO sector?**

There are huge shifts happening in the social and voluntary sectors. Most of India's biggest NGOs were set up in the 1970s and 80s, by leaders who had socialist points of view, whereas the young brigade in NGOs has grown up in market-oriented societies. The younger ones are more pragmatic — they have a solutions approach. Unfortunately, we will see more and more NGOs dying out, not just because of ideology but because funding from the West is drying up — they have their own problems and they see India as a rich country.