

# Uncommon Ground: Path to India's future

*In 2008, Rohini Nilekani did the near-impossible by bringing sets of for-profit business leaders and not-for-profit social leaders together on a TV show for focused debates on issues crucial to India's future. Now, she has turned those discussions into her latest book, Uncommon Ground. The author-social activist-philanthropist spoke to Sangeetha Chengappa ahead of the book's launch in Bengaluru on Thursday. Excerpts:*

**Q: What are the themes discussed in your book 'Uncommon Ground'?**

I wanted to take up themes of national interest, in which both the private sector and the not-for-profit sector had played some role and so could talk about them from direct experience. These are also the issues that will determine our future. So I chose Land; Energy; Jobs and Livelihoods; Health; Transport and Personal Mobility; Financial Inclusion; Food Security; Business and Sustainability.



**Q: Does the book offer resolutions to the problems afflicting India?**

When you read the book, you will see that both sets of leaders offered several approaches and solutions, and certainly added many insights to the ongoing debates in these areas. It was clear that many goals were common. It seemed to me that both sides were willing to give a little. It is clear that we need many more platforms for discourse if we are to come up with solutions that are acceptable to a wide range of people. Because there are always going to be tradeoffs to be made, no matter what decisions are taken. To make the solutions more win-win, there is no escape from dialogue, discussion and consensus. We have to nurture this process. That's what Uncommon Ground is about.

**Q: What inspired you to convert a TV show into a book?**

From the beginning, it seemed like these conversations should be recorded in text form. It is quite rare for some of these people to actually sit across from each other and listen and share. Today, opinions have become so polarised on everything important, that it is very important to listen and learn when two people from traditionally opposing camps agree to sit down in dialogue. I wanted to reach many more people than could have possibly seen



Rohini Nilekani

the shows. I had to do a lot more research and work for it, but it was very worth it!

**Q: Who are you trying to reach out to?**

I would love young people in colleges, at universities, people who have just entered the workforce to get their hands on it - and get their minds involved too! These are key issues that they will be much impacted by. But, of course, this book is for anyone interested in the intense debates on these critical issues in India. How we address the issues in Uncommon Ground will determine the future of our people.

**Q: How have these discussions changed your perspective?**

I learnt a lot from the show. Everyone was so dignified, their sincerity and strong vision for India came through loud and clear. I began to see many issues differently. I began to rethink the role of the private sector, of the civil sector, of government. We need these to be always in a dynamic balance in order to have a successful society. Uncommon Ground guests made me think harder about these things and see many issues from their perspectives too. For example, when Yogi

Deveshwar asked why would any corporation worry about sustainability when state policy did not incentivise it enough. Or when Suman Sahai asked why do we talk of food security on the one hand and tear up our most fertile agricultural lands on the other.

I also felt even more strongly that we have to get past brackets and labels, keep our minds open to new solutions. The world is changing fast, our thinking and our beliefs have to be re-examined. We cannot construct ideological "others" and set ourselves up against them. We have to learn from every quarter.

**Q: What is the way forward on basic problems of "Roti, Kapda aur Makaan" in India?**

That is a tough question. It cannot be answered so easily. All I can say is, this book and the conversations in them hold many good ideas. I think India must look to its own solutions, there are no recipes for us to follow in this troubled new century. We have to innovate and we have to work very hard and we have to have a strong desire for an equitable and sustainable future, even if it involves some sacrifice of our assumptions and current beliefs.