

Meeting point

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Book: *Uncommon Ground*

Author: *Rohini Nilekani*

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This book of conversations between people holding different points of view has a deliberately misleading title. Because Rohini Nilekani has managed to show that in the most uncommon of grounds, between the most adversarial of positions, there can be found something in common if the two sides are willing to at least try and see the other's point of view; to listen to the other's argument.

Uncommon Ground originated in 2008 as a eight-part television series, anchored by Rohini Nilekani, in which leading personalities from the world of business and industry conducted a dialogue with representatives of civil society. The series, which featured, among others, Anand Mahindra and Medha Patkar, Mukesh Ambani and R K Pachauri, Sunil Mittal and Aruna Roy, Yogi Deveshwar and Sunita Narain, elicited enthusiastic response from viewers, focusing as it did on the crucial challenge that not just India but the whole world faces in the second decade of the 21st century: how can we make material and economic progress compatible with safeguarding the environment and promoting social equity for the marginalised and the voiceless?

Based on the televised series, the book deals with controversial themes which continue to make front-page headlines and prime-time news spots. How, and by whom, should land be acquired by expanding industry from farmers, and at what economic and social compensation? How should increasingly scarce natural resources, from fossil fuels to water, be utilised and allocated? How to bridge the widening gulf between town and country, urban privilege and rural neglect? In a democracy, what is the proper role of the state vis-a-vis the free market?

While these and allied issues have great topical relevance, they also have historical resonance. In her acknowledgements, Rohini Nilekani quotes Premkumar Verma, popularly known as Premji, the founder of a Bihar-based NGO and a former follower of Jayaprakash Narayan: "In the good old days, Premji said, there was a fine balance between samaj, sarkar and bazaar; between society, the state and markets in that order. Over the past centuries... that balance has been disrupted. The sarkar... from the various kings and emperors, the Mughals then the British... dominated over the community and controlled the markets. Later... the bazaar dethroned the state, leaving the samaj to be a powerless third in the equation."

The central theme of Uncommon Ground is to restore the balance between samaj, civil society, the state and the free market through open-ended dialogues which try to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable differences. The attempt to find a meeting point between opposing points of view is based on the principle of *anekantvad*, the acknowledgement that truth is not a monopoly but a multiplicity: that there are many truths, and that the opposite of a truth is not a lie but another truth.

Author and social activist, Rohini Nilekani, wife of Nandan Nilekani, is an accomplished and informed mediator in the discourses covered by Uncommon Ground. The single most important point that emerges from these conversations is that there can be no quick-fix, unilateral solutions to the many complex problems posed by social, economic and political philosophy. There are no hard and fast answers, but only approaches to answers which come from different directions to find a meeting point in the joint venture of debate.

A valuable lesson to learn at a time when the state and civil society seem headed for a collision course on the issue of the Lokpal.

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