

'Challenge creation of islands in society'



natural to work in this sector. The wealthy have a responsibility.

Do you think that the IT boom that has resulted in fatter paychecks at a younger age has diluted the middle class values?

In fact I see a lot of young people who are beneficiaries of this money beginning to question the value of this money. Many are rethinking their lives and priorities. Out of ten people who are getting wealthy due to external factors, even if one of them starts thinking about what he can give back to society I think that is exciting.

But there are elites who are not really bothered about the reality of India, right?

Certainly this is also happening. But like I said many people even in this group are questioning this because for how long can you secede. You cannot have a country where 100 million people are inside a glass case and 900 million standing outside, their noses pressed to it. One of the good things in our society is that this glass case has never been so closed and there has been movement in and out. But when people shut themselves off completely that is when it gets dangerous and that is why we must constantly challenge the creation of islands in our society.



ROHINI NILEKANI

Rohini Nilekani is essentially a philanthropist at heart and passionate about development issues. The fact that she has featured in the Forbes' list of Asia Pacific's 48 'Heroes Of Philanthropy' for the second consecutive year proves this. Former chairperson of the Akshara Foundation (2002 to 2008), she also is the co-founder of Pratham Books and founder chairperson of Arghyam, which promotes equity and sustainability in access to water. Nilekani who also authored a medical thriller called 'Stillborn,' speaks to **Shruti Khairnar** on middle class values and corporate social responsibilities

What made you go the philanthropy way?

I have always thought about myself as someone concerned with social issues and when some wealth came our way it was

When it comes to Corporate Social Responsibility, many companies are getting into frivolous CSR activities. What do you think of this trend?

Some companies are doing this, but then why are they doing it. Because today you cannot run a company without involving the society. To me what is interesting is that no company can say that we don't do CSR because without reaching out to the community they cannot function. So the language has changed which is a good thing. So when you go to the next stage employees today do not want to work for companies that is only making profits. The churn that is happening in the Indian business space to me is the next level of thinking.

Do the employees ever get involved in the CSR activities of their companies?

The spotlight is on multinationals and they know that unless they involve their employees it is not going to work. So I see a lot of forward looking companies involving their employees in CSR. They have to be good corporates inside the fence too like looking at the way they use water, reducing their energy usage, indiscriminating HR policies and so on. And there is outside the fence as there are so many stakeholders and stake losers. So I don't think today's companies have

much choice but to engage in this much larger and wider question.

What are the projects in the water sector under Arghyam?

We started the focus on water in 2005 as I always wanted to do something strategic. Now there are 60 projects in 18 states. We are focusing on domestic water security. We are also supporting ecological, sustainable sanitation and looking at the next cutting edge technologies that will allow us to connect urban and rural sanitation issues.

Do you also work with government bodies and how was the experience?

Yes. We have worked with the central and state governments and panchayats and a lot with NGOs. Water is at the heart of so many of our issues today and most people are open to dialogue and partnership. So we are able to work with a diverse range of actors.

What were your learnings after working in the water sector?

This journey of five years has been quite something because I was not aware of the layered complexities in this space. I have been really humbled by the work I have been able to do in water. You begin to understand the seminal role of water in all the things

you do.

In your work in education what was the significant change you have seen?

This country lost 20-30 years of human potential as we did not focus on the universalisation of elementary education. Those people could not understand the value of the opportunity but around the late 90s, due to various reasons like liberalisation plus the work of NGOs the demand of education suddenly mushroomed. New questions came up - what kind of school, what quality of education, is my child really learning something, how do I as a parent engage in that,

what is the responsibility of the government towards this? This was a very interesting shift in focus that happened when we were working in front of our eyes. Today the demand is fairly established and the challenge is that how do we make sure that everyone gets quality education.

What are your plans in the future?

At Pratham Books, in six years we have created 175 individual titles and many have been translated into 11 Indian languages and many more are in the offing. Work in the water sector will keep on evolving, and I would rather talk about things that are done rather than the ones that are planned.

There is lots more that needs to be done and god willing I will be able to do more work.

