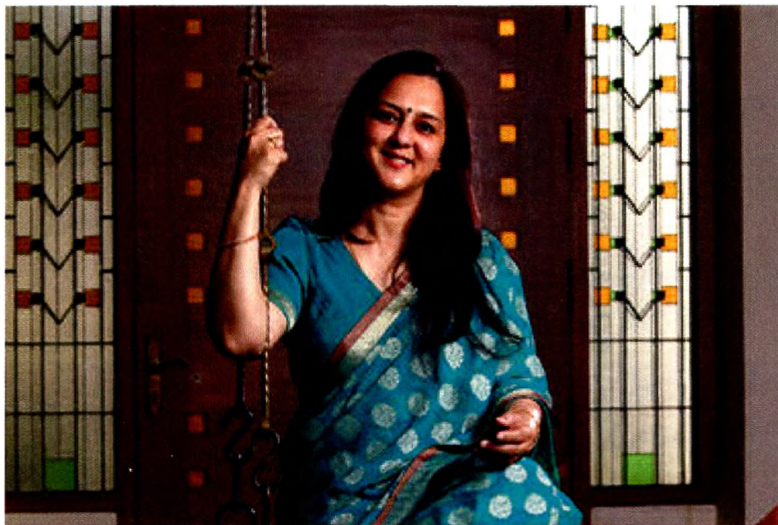


Rohini Nilekani pours her wealth into getting books to India's poorest children

(a)

When she found herself suddenly wealthy, the Indian philanthropist founded **Pratham Books**, a nonprofit publisher that uses innovative ways to put low-cost books in the hands of millions of kids.



Rohini Nilekani, a philanthropist who founded Pratham Books, which produces low-cost children's books, sits in her home in Bangalore, India. (Namas Bhojani)

By Kavitha Rao, Contributor
posted October 12, 2012 at 8:00 am EDT

Bangalore, India

"My mission is to put a book in every child's hand," says Rohini Nilekani. That's an ambitious goal anywhere, but especially in India, where there are more than 300 million children, most of whom can't afford books, or even read.

Ms. Nilekani is founder-chairperson of Pratham Books, a nonprofit publishing house that uses innovative ways to tap India's vast market.

"The children we reach are first-generation readers," she says. "Their parents probably don't know how to read. They may never have bought a book in their lives."

Set up in 2004, Pratham Books is an offshoot of Pratham, one of India's largest nonprofit groups, which supports education across India.

"Pratham was already teaching millions of children, but there was no [high-]quality content out there. What there was was too expensive," Nilekani says. So Pratham Books was set up to bring "as many [high-]quality books as possible, as cheaply as possible, in as many languages as possible, to the unreached child," she says.

Eight years later, Pratham has published more than 10 million books with 225 titles in 11 languages. Most of the books are priced at less than 25 rupees (about 45 cents).

Nilekani's own journey is something of a fairy tale. She has gone from being a middle-class journalist (something of an "activist," she says) to being a wealthy philanthropist. In 1981, when just 20 years old, Nilekani invested 10,000 rupees (about \$180) – all the money she had – into a company cofounded by her husband, Nandan Nilekani, along with six close friends. That company grew into Infosys Ltd., India's second-largest technology company, with a net profit of \$1.72 billion in the last financial year.

Nilekani, who owns 1.41 percent of the stock, is now one of India's richest women. She calls herself an "accidental philanthropist" because of her accidental wealth.

"I felt very uncomfortable when I became wealthy," she says. "One of my ways of dealing with it was to give it forward right away. I believe that any society that allows the creation of legitimate wealth expects that the wealth be used for its benefit."

Early on she used her profits from Infosys to set up a charitable foundation. She soon developed a reputation for philanthropy, and in 2010 Forbes magazine chose her as one of its "48 heroes of philanthropy."

Her reputation for getting involved, rather than merely writing a check, led to her being invited to set up Pratham Books.

Pratham is attacking a huge problem. In most of rural India, children read only textbooks. Reading for pleasure remains a luxury available only to the rich. Even by Grade 5, many children still can't read.

Pratham Books also has to cope with a hugely diverse country with more than 22 languages and innumerable dialects. As Nilekani points out, in India the language changes every 100 kilometers (62 miles). The challenge of reaching children in rural areas who speak obscure dialects is formidable.

Still, she says, everything that Pratham Books does aims to "democratize" reading.

Pratham Books is able to price its books so low partly because it's a nonprofit, subsidized by capital from Nilekani and other donors. Nilekani is unapologetic about this and says that while financial sustainability is a goal, Pratham Books's first priority is social impact.

But Pratham Books also keeps its costs low through continuous innovation. One of its biggest recent successes has been story cards, sheets of laminated paper folded to make a story and priced at only 2.5 rupees (about 4 cents). Children who can't afford books can share and trade these easy-to-read, easy-to-store cards. Ten million have been sold already.

Pratham Books is also trying out "sachet" books in retail stores across India – tiny, cheap books targeted at poor rural customers.

"We are constantly trying out new things," Nilekani says. "Some work, some fail, but because we don't have to worry about the financial bottom line, we can take risks."

Pratham Books's biggest challenge is distribution. Recognizing that it can't possibly cover the whole of India alone, Pratham teams up with both government and private organizations. In 2008-09, it partnered with the government of the state of Bihar, one of the largest and poorest states in India. The state gave more than 70,000 government schools budgets to buy books.

Kamal Jha works in the nonprofit sector and helped the Bihar government obtain the books. "We chose Pratham Books because even the poorest child can relate to them. They are simple and colorful, with Indian authors and local themes," he says. "Later we needed Urdu books for Muslim children, and Pratham was one of the very few publishers which supplied them."

Mr. Jha recalls how Nilekani drove for hours through one of the remotest districts of Bihar to visit a school run by her great-grandfather and established by Mohandas Gandhi in 1917.

"It showed how keen she was to do something in Bihar, and her family commitment to philanthropy," he says. "Corporate donations always come with so many conditions. This kind of enthusiasm means so much more."

Pratham Books is also teaching the teachers. Its new pilot program, currently operating in 45 schools, partners with small private schools, giving them what it calls a "Library in a Classroom," which includes books, activities, and training for teachers.

Pratham Books also teams with large consumer brands, whose distribution networks reach into every corner of India. Unilever, the consumer-goods giant, sends salesladies door to door selling soap. Pratham Books persuaded Unilever to send Pratham Books along, too.

Children's author Subhadra Sen Gupta has published her books with many top publishers, including Penguin and Puffin. Yet her books with Pratham Books are especially meaningful, she says, because of its reach.

"I have done sessions with children in government schools who usually only see textbooks, and I love the way their world opens up with Pratham Books," she says. "My books being published in so many languages is a miracle, because no [other] Indian publisher will do that for you."

Pratham Books uses Creative Commons licensing to make its books more accessible. CC allows anyone to use, tweak, rewrite, and translate Pratham Books, most of which are freely available on the Internet through sites such as Scribd and Flickr. Good professional translators are difficult to find in a country with so many languages. With CC, translators are free to use Pratham Books's content and create versions in their own languages.

"When it comes to learning, why put it behind walls?" Nilekani says. "Everything does not have to be a commodity."

This free sharing of content has already created a bevy of new products, such as audio versions for blind readers, versions for iPads, and books in regional languages. Pratham is also active on social media, which is helping it to gather an army of volunteers. On Sept. 8, International Literacy Day, it held a storytelling day in which 250 storytelling "champions" across India read the same book to children.

Pratham's next task is to "scale up" to face the huge challenges that remain and continue to rethink how books can be used or shared, Nilekani says.

"Knowledge is still kept under wraps in India: We must open it up."

Ms. Sen Gupta sums up what keeps the Pratham family going.

"Once, after doing two sessions with a bunch of kids, I was getting my breath back by sitting on a bench when they were all going past," she says. "One boy patted my shoulder and said with aplomb, 'Bahut mazaa aya! (It was great fun!).' Then I got patted by about a hundred kids with loud 'thank-yous.' It felt like they had pinned a medal to my chest.

"That is what Pratham does. [It] brings the joy of stories and imagination into the lives of kids who have so little of that."

• *To learn more, visit www.prathambooks.org.*

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- Benetech's Bookshare dramatically increases access to books for people with print reading disabilities. Project: Donate to a digital library for people with print disabilities.
- Corazon Roxas assists groups that provide education to children in developing countries. Project: Give four bags of reading books to a school in a remote