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- Quotes of the Day
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- [Sept. 11: The Nation That Fell To Earth](#)
- [TIME Poll: Fighting Terror](#)
- [Klein: What Bush Should Have Said](#)
- [Table of Contents](#)



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- [Specials](#)
- [Photos](#)
- [Current Issue](#)
- [Past Covers](#)
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NAMAS BHOJANI FOR TIME

**CHARITY 101:** Centimillionaire Nilekani visits a Bangalore school that she provides with books  
Nation

## CURRENT ISSUE

- [In This Issue](#)
- [Sept. 11: The](#)
- [TIME Poll: Fi](#)
- [Klein: What E](#)
- [Table of Cont](#)
- [See Recent Co](#)

- [The Daily RX](#)
- [Global Health](#)
- [Tuned In](#)

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- [Generations](#)
- [Connections](#)
- [Global Biz](#)
- [Inside Biz](#)

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# Learning the Art of Giving

By [BRYAN WALSH | HONG KONG](#)

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Posted Monday, Sep. 04, 2006

For Rohini Nilekani, making the money was the easy part. The Bangalore-based wife of Infosys CEO Nandan Nilekani, Rohini owns 1.67% of the Indian outsourcing company, and her personal fortune soared to about \$300 million along with the meteoric rise of its stock. She calls her windfall "a quite frightening amount of money." And as soon as it started rolling in, the social activist and journalist began to look for ways to give enormous sums away.

That's been the hard part. With little guidance available for the country's would-be Rockefellers, Nilekani became a self-taught philanthropist, building two foundations from the ground up. So far, she has provided a total of \$37 million to Akshara Foundation, which is dedicated to education, and the Arghyam trust, which tackles water issues. But the entrepreneurial zeal she brings to the organizations she runs is as striking as the size of the checks she's been signing. The source of her inspiration? "We're learning from the Bill Gates Foundation, and ones like it," she says, referring to the Microsoft co-founder's famously hands-on, results-driven charitable institution. "It's about accountability and sustainability now. We want to make improvements on a level that no one else has done before."

Those sentiments are increasingly heard throughout Asia, where mounting prosperity and changing attitudes toward charity are altering the ways the wealthy give back to society. Charitable donations in the region have traditionally tended to be a private affair, with the rich quietly giving directly to needy individuals within a family, religion or village network. Now, with tens of thousands of Asians amassing fortunes so large they can no longer responsibly give away substantial sums on a



Sept. 11, 2006

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personal, ad hoc basis, professionally run philanthropic foundations like those that arose in the West in the late 19th century are coming to the fore. Asia's rich "are beginning to see that giving can be sustainable and accountable, if they approach it the same way they approach their business," says Rory Tolentino, executive director of the Asia Pacific Philanthropy Consortium, a charity think tank.

Helping to drive this movement are the highly publicized activities of the Gates Foundation and the staggering generosity of Warren Buffett, the U.S. investor who announced in June that he would ultimately give nearly all of his \$44 billion fortune to the Gates organization. Buffett's announcement seems to have had a snowball effect. In July Indian-born mining tycoon Anil Agarwal pledged to give \$1 billion to help build a world-class university for his native country, telling TIME, "India desperately needs to improve education ... [And] what is the point of money if it's not made to be given back to society?" Hong Kong actor Jackie Chan said that he would bequeath half his wealth to help Asian youth. In May, *Forbes* named Chan as one of the world's most generous celebrities in a list that included Bono, Paul McCartney and Oprah Winfrey. And Li Ka-shing, long one of Asia's biggest donors, revealed at a press conference on Aug. 24 that he plans to give one-third of his fortune, now estimated to be \$18.8 billion, to his own charitable foundation, which he called "my third son" (in addition to his two children, Victor and Richard).

Much charity in the region is still disbursed as it has been in the past. For example, Hong Kong's foundations tend to be family run, with little openness. "It's based on relationships," says Edith Terry, author of a 2005 report on the city's charity sector for the Asia Foundation. Organizations with promising ideas for philanthropic projects can't easily connect with the family foundations, she says. "In that environment, it's inevitable that some worthy ideas are going to be missed." But Terry points out that as younger family members begin to replace their elders in managerial roles, they may modernize foundations just as they modernize family businesses.

That's already happening in India, where new tycoons are beginning to practice Western-style philanthro-capitalism, investing money to alleviate pervasive social problems with the same rigor they apply to their businesses?and with the same insistence on measurable results. For example, the Azim Premji Foundation, funded by the billionaire head of Bangalore-based software company

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Wipro, is helping to reform India's education sector by implementing on-the-ground assessments of the effectiveness of teaching programs at thousands of schools in the country's Karnataka state. It's no coincidence that many of India's most innovative philanthropists come from the Bangalore tech sector, home to relatively young, self-made tycoons who often have more global experience than counterparts in China or Japan. "India is much more connected internationally," says Jai Mukherjee of New Philanthropy Capital, a London-based charity-consulting firm. "You see these trends move to India faster than the rest of Asia."

In some respects, Asian philanthropists have to work outside the system. They often get little government encouragement. Significant tax incentives for philanthropy don't exist in the region, and in some countries the rich who do give are as likely to be looked upon with suspicion as gratitude. The relationship is especially fraught in China, where even before the communist era, private giving had to be done in conjunction with the authorities. "Those who acted outside the state, as the Rockefellers did [in the U.S.], could have been seen as potentially dangerous, undermining the power of the government," says Vivienne Shue, a professor of Chinese studies at Oxford University. But the situation is changing. In January, Beijing explicitly appealed to the country's growing class of multimillionaires for help in addressing China's myriad social ills. "They're beginning to encourage charity, but they're not quite certain of the direction," says Rupert Hoogewerf, a Shanghai-based journalist who runs the Hurun Report, which publishes an annual list of China's top philanthropists. "The rules aren't clearly defined yet."

Government corruption, especially on the local level, has been a persistent stumbling block. Yu Panglin, an 84-year-old Shenzhen-based hotelier who tops Hurun's most recent ranking of Chinese philanthropists, recalls that when he donated 10 ambulances to his hometown in 1988, local officials appropriated the cars as their own. Having learned his lesson, says Yu, "I only donate to the projects that I can see and touch myself. I have to ensure that nobody could get illicit gains from my donations." Yu, who gave \$250 million in 2005, according to Hurun, focuses his work on Bright Action, which has provided free cataract surgery to more than 40,000 poor villagers throughout China. (Yu's own sight was saved by a cataract operation in 2000.) But because there is still little support for philanthropy from local governments?"since they aren't able to take credit for it," Yu says?Bright Action,

like many mainland charities, isn't as effective as it could be.

Yu says change will have to come from Beijing: "The government should improve philanthropy-related legislation to encourage more people to donate."

But even without government support, Asia's rich are increasingly learning to savor the psychic luxury of altruism. "If you don't want to buy airplanes or diamonds, what are you going to do with your wealth?" asks Nilekani. "For me, when I see new schools we helped start, or I see kids eating up the books we've published, it's just a continuous moment of feeling good." With reporting by Nicole Qu/Beijing and Michiko Toyama/Tokyo

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