

Philanthropy, old and new

Just societies cannot be built merely by the distribution of surplus wealth

Rohini Nilekani

With a plethora of the newly wealthy in India setting up trusts and foundations recently, it is a good time to reflect on the value of strategic philanthropy.

When it comes to giving in India, we have traditionally upheld that feeling of empathy towards others that opens up our hearts and pockets in charity. And millions of Indians, of all faiths, do so every single day, in acts of humble kindness.

But giving back has taken on a whole new dimension today. And this is well reflected in a little story I heard recently. One day, young Kumar, all of eleven, said to his mother, "When I grow up, I want to become a philanthropist!" His mother happily exclaimed, "Why, Kumar, that's wonderful." "Yes," responded her son, "they all seem to have a lot of money."

As new heights of personal wealth are reached everyday around the world, philan-

thropy has come to centre stage, and the wealthy are competing with each other to give a lot of it away, and to do it well. So much so that, as I read recently, foundations are the new Ferraris - everyone must have one! In the interest of full disclosure, I have to say that I too have set up a foundation called Arghyam, focused on the water sector, to share some of the abundance that I have received.

At its best, this philanthropy can do wonderful things. It can make rapid infusions of funds where there is the greatest need; it can bear the upfront risk of new ideas and projects that neither the market nor the state can afford to invest in; it can support creativity and experimentation and allow generously for failure without rolling back; it can invest in the capacity building and strengthening of social sector players and it can deepen democracy by providing a platform for the coming together of different

sectors in society. And there are many good examples in India of what philanthropy can do.

But as I look around now, a lot of us, especially in the newer foundations, are in a big hurry to achieve social change. We want to reduce inequity and we want it now! We want measurable outcomes, we want replicability and we want scale. Some of this impatience to improve things quickly comes from the corporate ethos, where performance measurement is embedded in the culture. Much of the new talent in the foundations and in the new citizen sector organisations comes from business. Hundreds of bright, talented and often young men and women have opted out of their careers to work for development. The ones I know are truly outstanding people, who have embraced the idea of 'enough.' They believe they have secured their financial future sufficiently and do not greed for more. These wonderful people now want to see things work as effectively in the non-profit sector as in their own erstwhile work places. There is of course

OPINION

nothing wrong with that. They are bringing in a new energy and creativity that I have seen shaking up the social sector in the past few years.

Yet, there are some things we must ask ourselves honestly. Do we want to address the symptoms of social inequity? Or do we want genuine social transformation? If so, who are the real agents of such a transformation? To become change agents ourselves, what are the values we must embrace? And how should foundations and NGOs address accountability for themselves?

For all the recent hype, I believe philanthropy can only play a limited role in society. Indeed, it should play only a limited role. Just societies cannot be built merely by the wilful distribution of surplus wealth. We need government to responsibly enable social provisioning and we need deep rooted social movements, working with the last citizen and the most oppressed, in a spirit of voluntarism. We need committed

leaders, men and women of integrity and vision to keep government honest.

So then, in this light, what do we believe our grant making can achieve? What is the change we want? Can we catalyse that change? Or better, can we become that change, as Gandhi asked?

At no time in human history have we been at such a point as we are today, where we know that we have created the monster that can destroy us all. What the shape of that monster is - whether it is called global warming, environmental destruction or habitat loss, the point is the same. Human beings have created an unintended situation, perhaps through the natural processes of human curiosity, human desire and human ingenuity. Human wisdom alas, often comes as hindsight.

Yet, we now have many choices to make. And I believe that what we need now is to create a positive, affirming view of the future, "to achieve our planet" to paraphrase James Baldwin, who wanted all citizens, black and white to come together to achieve his country - America, and the

spirit and the promise behind it.

And to bring us back to grant making then, what does this mean for us? How can foundations understand what leaps of imagination are needed to achieve the new planet? Or indeed, to achieve our country, so that every Indian has equal access to opportunity? How can we make it happen while restoring and regenerating our ecological systems?

For the answer to emerge, we will need patience, compassion and reflection. We will have to stop looking at issues in silos and constantly, and with humility look to support the elements of integration that build community; that recreate human values rather than just 'things.'

Because the future is here and as donors and grantees, partners and friends, we need to be a working, doing and learning part of it. And only then, like Walt Whitman, could we say - "Behold I do not give lectures or a little charity, When I give I give myself."

(Rohini Nilekani is the chairperson of Arghyam.)