

'Reconciling public stature with privacy is tough'

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Childhood was ordinary: I was born and bred in bustling Mumbai in an urban, middle class family. I was one among three sisters. Childhood was ordinary, nothing stands out, nothing very spectacular. My father was an engineer in the Walchand Group. I always fancied myself as a writer and wrote



STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

awful poetry, which I still do, and after thrusting it upon people, have fewer friends.

My days as a journalist: After a PG in Mass Communication, I got my first break in Bombay, regarded as the first city magazine. I was rather proud of it. I subsequently wrote for India Today from the US, where I lived for seven years soon after marriage. I didn't realise my potential as a journalist. Today, newspapers believe in being easy on the eye, complementing people's inability to face stark reality.

My mother dotes on Nandan: The year 1981 was eventful. Infosys and Nandan happened at the same time. I first met him on December 21, 1977 — some 25 years ago at our college day function at Elphinstone. He was part of the IIT quiz team while I crooned Nigaahen

milaane ko ji chahtaa hai. We were part of a large group of friends but our relationship grew steadily. It was only in 1980 that we decided to become life partners. It came in the form of a subtle suggestion from Nandan and I agreed. It was as simple as that. However, both families opposed it since we belonged to different communities. Eventually, they came around. Now my mother dotes on Nandan and absolutely adores him.

Living below the poverty line: Soon after marriage, in the US, we lived on a monthly stipend of just \$500. The joke was that we lived below the US poverty line! Life was tough but fun. We shared apartments with other families, lived frugally. Nandan was travelling all the time and the excellent public library system became my saviour. We returned in 1987. We always

Rohini Nilekani, wife of Infosys CEO Nandan Nilekani, is a journalist-turned-author whose debut Stillborn — a medical thriller — was the first Indian novel of its kind in its genre. An active social worker, Rohini now runs Akshara Foundation promoting education for underprivileged children. She also plans to pen another novel. Chetan Krishnaswamy finds out more about her.

planned to have children in India; Jhanavi was born in 1988 and Nihar two years later. Thankfully, both have grown to be balanced kids studying in Valley School.

My novel's part of Harvard syllabus: In 1998 I released my first book. Stillborn was a medical thriller which, by publishing industry standards, did quite well. I am amazed that some people are still reading it and Harvard has for some reason included it in its syllabus.

Writing another thriller: I was always obsessed with health issues and was forever reading mysteries and thrillers. Slowly, the plot evolved. It was an unexplored genre based on real-life happenings and I did considerable amount of research. Despite my creative inclinations, the kids were my first commitment. Since I have the gall to call myself as a writer, I will be coming out with another thriller. Don't ask me when.

I visit many slums: Today, I'm serious about my social work. Akshara, which I launched three years ago with the mandate of putting under-



privileged children back in the schools, is doing very well. I have put Rs 1.7 crore of my own money into the project and visit several of the slums with my volunteers... I have realised that coercion will not work.

Sudha and I were very close: Both Nandan and I have enormous regard for Narayana Murthy and his wife Sudha. They are a great inspiration to us. Sudha is such a well-disciplined writer. We were very close some time back but with everybody doing their own thing, we don't have time these days to meet regularly.

Nandan makes very few demands: Nandan is an amazing guy; very good at handling stress. He has this ability to switch off at home and we have rarely seen him upset. I wouldn't want to change anything in him. He makes very few demands on me. Once in a while I organise a party at his behest, he's happy. The children understand the nature of their father's work well. The most difficult task is reconciling with your stature in public without sacrificing your personal privacy. But that's the way the cookie crumbles.