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A Philosophy of Philanthropy

Journalist-turned-philanthropist **Rohini Nilekani**, the founder of Bengaluru-based NGOs Pratham Books and Arghyam, feels everyone should be water-wise today.

By *Shonali Advani*

Rohini Nilekani wears many hats and her life has been colored by the eclectic set of opportunities that have come her way. As I waited for her at her double-storied bungalow Arghyam (meaning offering in Sanskrit) in Bengaluru's up-market Koramangala colony, I couldn't help but notice every corner bore testimony to her personality. Simple, yet refined and dignified. Known to be fiercely independent and extremely private about her personal life, Nilekani never shies away when it comes to her passion, her work. Despite being the wife of one of India's most successful and wealthy IT entrepreneurs, Nilekani has spent a large part of her life trying to equalize society. "I've always been interested in social issues and concerned about inequity, even when I was young," she says.

She started her career as a journalist after gaining a post-graduate diploma in mass communication from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. In 1981, she married Nandan Nilekani, not knowing that the company he was building would be the start of a whole new era. The real twist to the tale came 11 years ago, when her children were older and Nilekani was fortunate to be at the receiving end of Infosys' (co-founded by Nandan Nilekani) soaring stocks. She decided it was time to ramp up her professional life and give something back to society. "I haven't done anything great. Anyone in my place would have done the same," she says.

In 2000, Akshara Foundation (part of the Pratham network), a Bengaluru-based public charitable trust working in the education sector, invited Nilekani to chair it. The foundation deemed to provide multiple solutions for universalizing elementary education in India. "It suited me because I really wanted to be part

of something that worked towards systematic, scaleable change," she mentions. From that work emerged the need to create Pratham Books. The Pratham Network had been working with elementary education in India since 1994 to provide quality education to underprivileged children. "A lot of new young readers had surfaced who did not have much to read other than their text books," recalls Nilekani. Her mission at that time was to create content for children which was intrinsically rooted in India and written by Indian authors. Additionally, she felt the children's publishing industry in India needed a greater range of attractive, colorful, good quality books at affordable prices. Pratham Books was started in January 2004, and since then has had eight million copies in print, under 185 titles in up to 11 regional languages. As publishers, Pratham Books sells books through various government bodies (including schools), NGOs including UNICEF, the Pratham Network (which runs community libraries) as well as to many high-end clients. "Our goal is a book in every child's hand," she says. Almost 98 percent of its books are priced under Rs.25, and so far it has 15 million child reads.

But Nilekani wasn't satisfied with only working towards changing the education sector. While she was investing one part of her time and energy building Pratham Books, she channeled a substantial amount of wealth and effort towards Arghyam, founded in 2001. From 2005, the Indian public charitable foundation, started with an endowment of Rs.150 crore by Nilekani herself, began to focus on domestic water security and urban water, looking to ensure that people across India have the basic quantity and quality of water required for home-based livelihoods and lifeline needs. "Our twin goals are equity and sustainability," she explains. At any time Arghyam supports (by way of grants) 30-40 current projects initiated by NGOs across India. Currently its work is set in about 18 states through NGO partners and government and it also funds projects for sustainable sanitation. "I visit these project sites whenever I can because there is so much I can learn from being there," she explains. Alongside, it facilitates the India Water Portal, a platform for knowledge-sharing currently targeted towards people within the sector. Arghyam's involvement

in the water sector cuts across the key themes of water quality, ground water management, water security, integrated water management, sanitation, education, outreach and capacity building, and advocacy initiatives pioneered by Nilekani. "The integration of urban water management, a complex issue, is something Arghyam is driving actively," she says. The organization is currently running a practical pilot with the Karnataka government in Kolar district to study various issues around it. "We have also developed a theoretical framework, which will be out soon, over the gaps in policies, and how urban water needs can be met," Nilekani states. "How do we rethink urban water in the country?" is a pressing question in Nilekani's mind right now. "Everybody needs to become water-wise," she notes.

Interestingly, her daughter Janhavi is now on the board of Arghyam as well. "I do hope that the philanthropic philosophy continues in the family," she says. Other than her own, Nilekani sits on the board of several other not-for-profit organizations, including microfinance institution, Sanghamitra Rural Financial Services.

Nilekani may be constantly on the go with so much to do but her approach to life has been calm, allowing opportunities to flow in as they did. Her journey from journalist to philanthropist, as she mentions, has been challenging and exciting. "As a journalist you raise questions related to society; as a philanthropist you take a broader look and invest in a better society for the future," she explains. Perhaps that explains why when asked whether we should call her a social entrepreneur or philanthropist, she replies promptly, "I don't like labels. I guess I'm an aspirer to making changes."

The other and equally significant part of her life as the wife of Nandan Nilekani has been no less fortunate. "I was able to work in the social sector and yet constantly engage with the corporate sector because of Nandan's work," she says. "It was also a privilege to be a part of the whole idea of Infosys, though I was never directly a part of it," she adds. Of course, in between all this, Nilekani has also been known for writing a book and a hosting television show, *Uncommon Ground*. She spends her free time reading, traveling, practicing yoga and relaxing in her perfectly landscaped garden which is kept lush and green with an in-house rain harvesting system. ■