

**Heroes of
Philanthropy**

ABORIGINES
AN IRONCLAD COVENANT

MALAYSIA'S QUIET BENEFACTOR
ROHINI NILEKANI'S ABUNDANCE

MARCH 2010 | WWW.FORBES.COM

Forbes

Asia



Australia's 40 Richest

DELIVERING

Lindsay Fox has made the Asian goods trade "a people business"



AUSTRALIA A \$10.00
CHINA RMB 55.00
HONG KONG HK \$55

INDIA RS 180
INDONESIA RP 50,000
JAPAN (TAX INCL.) ¥1300

KOREA W 8,000
MALAYSIA RM 18.00
NEW ZEALAND NZ \$11.00

PAKISTAN RS 300
PHILIPPINES P 200
SINGAPORE S \$11.50

TAIWAN NT \$220
THAILAND B 220
UNITED STATES US \$6.50

"Giving Is Easy"

Journalist and novelist. Corporate wife and mother. Now, armed with a fortune from Infosys' meteoric rise, Rohini Nilekani is intent on helping India's poor. By Anuradha Raghunathan

ANNALAKSHMI DURAIRAJU IS proud of one particular room in her village home: her restroom. The 4-foot-by-4-foot cement cubicle symbolizes privacy and dignity to her. It's the first time in her life that the 50-year-old Durairaju and her farming family have had a restroom. The common practice was to use the open fields. "We were susceptible to snake bites and diseases like diarrhea, particularly during the rainy season," she says. "But that was the way we lived."

So what changed? Durairaju was inspired by a hygiene program outlined by Arghyam, a Bangalore foundation that focuses on water and sanitation issues. Arghyam workers took her around neighboring villages to show how convenient and important it was to have a restroom. For Durairaju, it was not the lack of resources. She owns a 2-acre farm in the village of Pudukulam in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. It was just a habit to which everyone was accustomed.

But the Arghyam program shook her up. She quickly took out a \$50 loan and built the restroom outside her farmhouse. She also urged five others in her village to follow her lead. That was in 2006. Now all 37 households in her village have restrooms. And Durairaju has become a hygiene ambassador, carrying the message of cleanliness to nearby hamlets.

It's this kind of change that Arghyam's founder, Rohini Nilekani, is seeking. Over the

years Rohini has donated \$40 million to a variety of groups supporting education, microfinance, health care, the environment and access to clean water and sanitation services. Her biggest contribution has been to Arghyam, which was set up in 2001 and now has a \$32.5 million endowment. "For someone like me giving is easy," she says. "It's no big deal."

That's because Rohini, 50, the wife of tech-giant Infosys Technologies' cofounder Nandan Nilekani, became very wealthy in the early 2000s as the company's stock soared. She owns 1.41% of the shares, a stake now valued at \$456 million. Her shares come from her investment in Infosys when it was founded in 1981. (Her husband owns 1.46%.)

What is a big deal, however, is the time and energy she spends visiting the sites of the projects she's funded to make sure she's getting the best value. "It would be very easy to go and set up a million drinking-water outlets in the country, but she's not doing that," says Rajni Bakshi, a board member for a charitable trust for children and a friend of Rohini's for 30 years. "She takes the time to understand what is what and to look at the key points of intervention."

Rohini grew up in a middle-class family in Mumbai, the second of three daughters. Her father was an engineer and her mother a homemaker. She stayed in Mumbai for university, earning an undergraduate degree in French literature from Elphinstone College. (She still loves languages, speaking

English, Hindi, Kannada, Marathi and Konkani while understanding French and a little Spanish.) She got a postgraduate diploma in mass communications from St. Xavier's College, and then she started working as a reporter at the now defunct *Bombay* magazine in 1980.

She met Nandan at a quiz competition at her college in 1977. He was pursuing his B. Tech degree at the Indian Institute of Technology in Mumbai, a premier engineering school. They started seeing each other and got married in 1981. That same year Nandan helped start Infosys, along with N.R. Narayana Murthy and five other engineers. "I remember Nandan asking me, 'Is it okay? Do you want me to [join Infosys]?"' recalls Rohini. "We were both young. We were willing to try anything."

Nandan was shipped off to the U.S. to build Infosys' overseas business. "He was always working," says Rohini. "We lived out of four suitcases and went across the U.S." She spent her time reading in public libraries, putting together shows for community television and sometimes writing for Indian and American publications.

She returned to India in 1987 and started working in Bangalore for *Sunday* magazine (since closed). And she had two children, Janhavi and Nihar, both now undergraduates at Yale University. Rohini and Nandan gave \$5 million to Yale last year to fund an India studies program.

While her children were still young, Rohini busied herself cofounding a civic organization called Nagarik, aimed at promoting road safety. She also cranked out

**Heroes of
Philanthropy**

a medical thriller—*Stillborn*—that was published by Penguin Books in 1998.

Then came the rise of Infosys and the subsequent riches. She started pondering what to do with the money. “We were so middle class to the core, and we had the typical denial attitude towards money,” she says. “But with money also came the realization that we could do something of a different scale.”

That’s when she started Arghyam, which means “offering” in Sanskrit. (It’s also the name of the Nilekanis’ 8,000-square-foot home in Bangalore.) In 2005 Arghyam started focusing on the water sector, and it is now working in more than 800 villages. It supports everything from hygiene training to groundwater management to rain-water harvesting.

Until recently Rohini was also chairman of the Akshara Foundation, a Bangalore organization that aims to get every child into school and learning well. It’s started pre-schools and libraries across the state of Karnataka and also provides remedial programs in math and reading.

Rohini’s focus on children, learning and books converged in her work for Pratham Books, a trust that she cofounded in 2004. It’s aimed at publishing inexpensive but good-quality books for children. It has brought out 175 titles in 11 languages and has more than 7 million copies in print. “Our organization’s goal is not that we have to become number one but to democratize the joy of reading,” she says.

As Rohini has got more involved in



Keeping it simple: “I don’t see myself buying a private jet or a yacht,” says Rohini Nilekani.

philanthropy, she’s examined her own lifestyle more. After seeing how difficult it is to get clean water in Indian villages, she says, she finds it difficult to fill up her Jacuzzi. “I use my Jacuzzi to hang clothes,” she says wryly. At her home harvested rainwater helps keep her huge garden green. And while it’s hard—and sometimes not even practical—to put a stop to a high-flying corporate lifestyle, she says, she and Nandan try to make sensible choices. “We don’t just fly out to a party, for instance,” she says. “We try to live within our ecological limits. The rule of thumb is, if you spend X on yourself you give away so much more.”

Even though Rohini’s time is taken up with philanthropy, the journalist in her keeps surfacing. In 2008 she developed and presented a show called *Uncommon Ground* for NDTV that brought together social and business leaders for a dialogue. In one show she had industrialist Anand Mahindra chatting alongside Medha Patkar, a vociferous opponent of rapid industrialization.

While she’s doing much on her own, does Rohini feel eclipsed by her immensely successful husband? Nandan now heads the central government’s Unique Identification Program, which is working to assign an ID number to every Indian. He left Infosys last year. “I am extremely proud of him,” she

says. “But I am not in competition with him.”

Rohini, who’s done yoga almost every day for the past ten years, doesn’t bristle at the suggestion that she might be seen as a charity-circuit billionaire’s wife. “Yeah. Yeah. I know this stereotype of women in silk saris with bejeweled fingers doing some kind of social work.” For one thing, she’s not that much into jewelry.

Rohini’s approach is simple: “There’s just a lot of work to be done, and I have the resources to do it. And I don’t just sit there writing checks. I see myself doing this seriously and doing it full-time.” And her notion of how she would use her money is clear: “I don’t see myself buying a private jet or a yacht or an island.” She finds it far more satisfying to help people such as Durairaju. **F**