

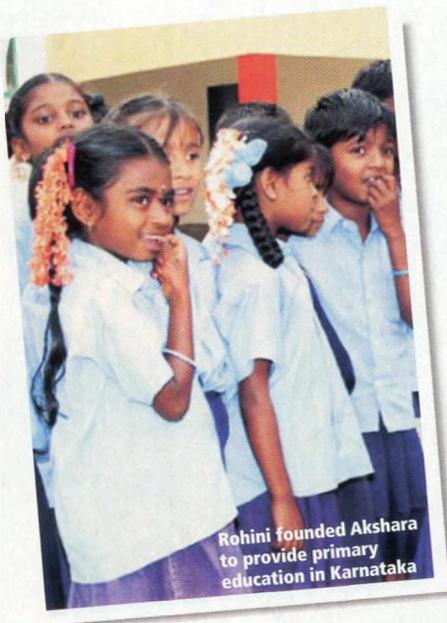
“It’s hard to be a WORKING MOM”

We may know Rohini Nilekani as the wife of one of India’s most successful entrepreneurs and for her tireless good works. But was life always this struggle-free? Here she reveals what being a mother means to her and why she fears for her children’s future. By Madhuri Velegar K

Rohini Nilekani, wife of one of India’s best-known software entrepreneurs, Nandan Nilekani, has good reason to keep a healthy distance from the press — she used to belong to the tribe. She is naturally reticent, but what she has to say about her family is uninhibited and articulate. We catch her in a relaxed mood at her spacious and superbly well-designed bungalow in Bangalore and get a real measure of what makes up Rohini.

“THERE ARE MANY WOMEN WHO ... PERHAPS HAVE TO WALK THE TIGHTROPE, BUT I COULD NOT”

As far as my children go, they’ve now kind of settled. My son Nihar is completing his final year of college here and my daughter Janhavi is away at Yale. I believe it’s hard to be a mother and combine work at the same time. There are many women who don’t have choices, in terms of a support system or finances. They can or perhaps have to walk this tightrope. I, however, could not, and stayed home till my kids were older. It worked for me. I believe the early years, ages 0 to 6 years, are critical for a mother and child, and it’s a terrible



“Sometimes I’m filled with anxiety for the future of our children. We have brought the species to a point of collapse with our unthinking lifestyles”

choice if you have to make it. But I think it’s quite hard raising a child in a nuclear setup; parents and the child need uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents and a family home to visit during the summer vacations. It’s true; it takes a village to raise a child.”

“IN THE USA, WE LIVED OUT OF FOUR SUITCASES BUT WERE UNAFRAID OF RISKS”

“I’ve had a middle-class upbringing; honesty, integrity and humility were values we’ve grown up with. I’ve been quite a Mumbai girl. I studied mass communications at St Xavier’s and it was then that I met Nandan. I married when I was 21 and life changed because his software company Infosys was born in the same year. Later, we went to live in the US for almost seven years. Those seven years were great fun! Though we lived out of four suitcases, we were unafraid of risks and found a lot of new spaces in that country. For instance, the public library became my friend and I could spend hours there. I read and learnt a lot in those years, filling in some of the gaps in my education. The other thing that I tried there was broadcast television, what they dub public access television. >

“ There are many women who don't have choices. They can or perhaps have to walk this tightrope between work and being a mother”



Rohini on the lawns of her beautiful bungalow in Bangalore

These are channels cable casters have to provide for the use of the community. I learnt the ropes of television programming. It was hands-on, fun and free!"

"I LOVE TO TAG ALONG WITH NANDAN WHEN HE MEETS GLOBAL LEADERS"

"My relationship with my husband has grown and evolved through the years. Even today I love to tag along with him when he goes to meet global leaders as I find the experience stimulating, even humbling."

"SOMETIMES I'M FILLED WITH ANXIETY FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR CHILDREN"

"The new word coined for this by someone is 'eco-anxiety'. This generation is culpable. In our desire to

HOW ROHINI SPENT HER SHARE OF RS 100 CRORE

"It was in 2005, when I came into some substantial funds due to the ADR (American Depository Receipt) of our company Infosys, that I was in a position to do something more strategic and meaningful through the foundation, Arghyam." It's one of her crusades.

* Rohini travels non-stop to various villages in Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, meeting women and families, trying to understand how to make a difference to their lives. Arghyam (Sanskrit for 'offering') is a foundation that works exclusively in the water sector in India and hosts the India Water Portal, an open platform for sharing knowledge.

* Rohini's Akshara Foundation is a public-private partnership for primary education in Karnataka.

* Perhaps inspired by her affection for the public library system in America, Rohini founded Pratham Books, to "democratise the joy of reading".

* Rohini published an article in Yale Global, Yale University's publication on globalisation. It suggests a solution to the water crisis, "We use technology not to extract water from the bowels of the earth but to replace the use... especially to reverse our use of fresh water to carry human waste."

* Rohini was a journalist and has also written a novel, 'Still Born'. She hopes to work on a second book soon.

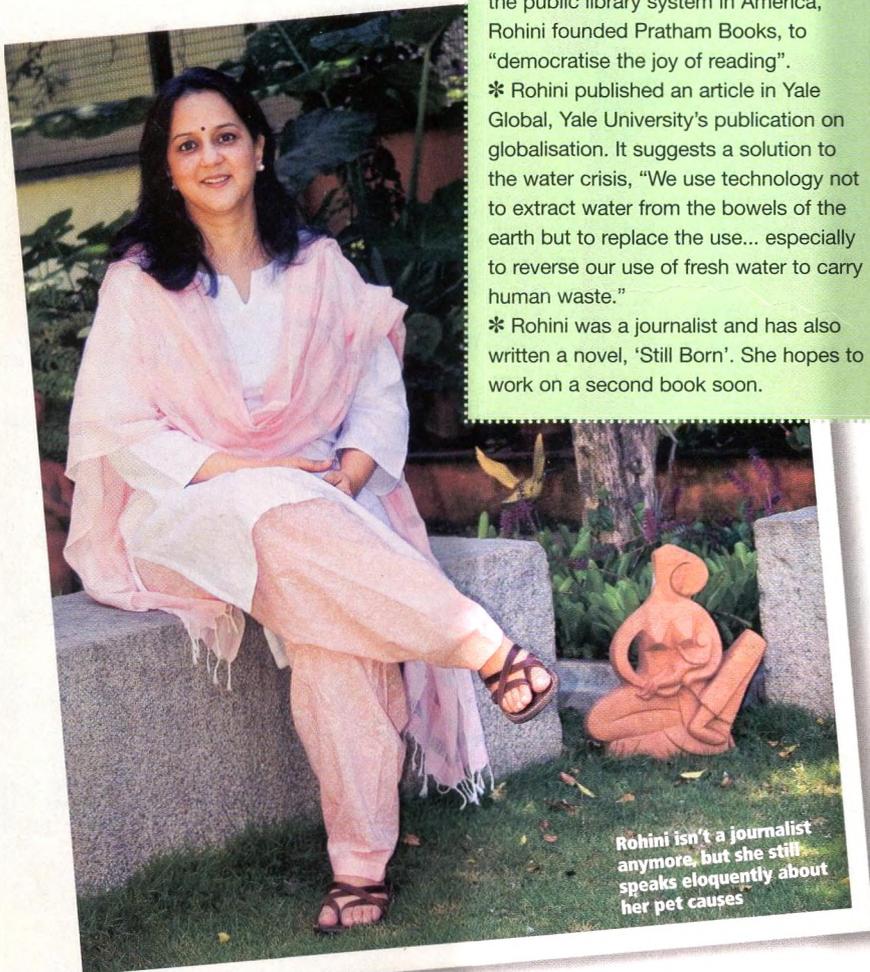
grow fast, we haven't listened to wisdom, but blindly destroyed our landscape, polluted our waters and skies. We have brought the species to a point of collapse with our unthinking lifestyle. What you need more than money is personal example and community action."

"SURE, BEING WHO I AM DOES OPEN A LOT OF DOORS"

"I do get opportunities easily for which I'm thankful and feel blessed. But I believe that all of us, in all our respective faiths, are intertwined as one species. We have a common destiny and should be responsible for the life we lead. We're now at the threshold where we need to refashion our relationship with each other, life around us and with the world. We're at the cusp of huge growth with a young and dynamic population; we also have the creative opportunity to show a different path to the world. This used to be our strength in the past, it can be once again. And I think it will be India's youth that will rise to the challenge."

"IT WOULD BE WONDERFUL IF OUR NEWLY WEALTHY FOUND WAYS TO GIVE BACK"

"We have the world's most vibrant civil society; the government is actively seeking partnership from both the NGO and the corporate sector. There is a diversity of talent and ambition here. But the stark inequalities between the haves and the have-nots still exist and deepen. It would be wonderful if our newly wealthy found more ways and causes to give back to society. I believe that this is happening to some degree but as with everything in India, we need so much more!" ■



Rohini isn't a journalist anymore, but she still speaks eloquently about her pet causes

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