

Citizens need to get involved in governance: Rohini Nilekani

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5-6 minutes

The philanthropist on what people can do to build a strong civil society, and make politicians, the rich and themselves accountable

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Rohini Nilekani, philanthropist and founder of Arghyam Foundation, believes that the state (*sarkaar*), the market (*bazaar*), and society (*samaaj*) should strive for a balance with none of them having too much power. Her new book, *Samaaj, Sarkaar, Bazaar: A Citizen-First Approach*, is a collection of essays on what citizens can do to build a strong civil society. Excerpts from an interview:

You speak of how *sarkaar*, *samaaj* and *bazaar* share a

highly unequal relationship. We see this even more now in the way the government has come down on NGOs. So, how does a civil society thrive in the face of resistance from the *sarkaar*?

Power accumulates everywhere and not just in this country or with this government. Power also accumulates in *samaaj*. No government in the world likes to be challenged too much. Civil society's role is to help to show a mirror to the government and to *samaaj* too. It is supposed to fill in the gaps where there is not enough inclusion. So, while it is true that the state is cracking down on civil society, I wish there would be more trust between civil society and the state. After all, they have the same goals. The state is mandated to provide more equity, inclusion and justice and uphold the rule of law. Civil society's ambitions and aspirations are for the same. So, we must build bridges of trust instead of finger pointing.

How do we do that?

There are organisations that are working with citizens as well as the government to create more access to services, to get citizens to band together to solve hyperlocal issues, to create new pathways to reach government. There is so much space for creativity. We have seen it, especially among young leaders. They see themselves as 'actionists' rather than 'agitationists'.

Why do you say that 'voters expect too much from representatives' or that a 'politician's job is

thankless'?

All over the world, there are surveys to show that trust is coming down between all sections of society, but I believe that being a politician is a thankless task. There might be some politicians who don't do their work, but the ones I have seen are on call 24/7. Yes, they might be promising more than what they can provide. But my focus is on what *samaaj* can do. Voters are confused about what to expect, which is either the politician's fault or the fault of political parties, which are not able to talk to the *samaaj* about what politicians are supposed to do when they are elected. We can focus on asking lawmakers what laws they are making for us, because I believe good laws make a good society. *Samaaj* needs to be activated to uphold the rule of law.

Why do you think it's so important for civil society to come into the digital age?

If civil society doesn't get digital itself, it will not be able to play its role effectively in enabling power balance and inclusion. You can't only work in the digital world with offline tools alone.

You write about people helping each other during the pandemic as an example of civil society coming together. But people were forced to do that. Do you think you end up excusing the state for its failures by placing the onus on the people?

I come from a *samaaj* lens. What should *samaaj* do more

of, and better to hold the state and markets accountable? We cannot sit back and become consumers of the governance we need. We can't say, "we pay our taxes, we obey the law, we are nice to our neighbours, so what else do we have to do?" Citizens need to get involved in governance, or we need to point out that the state needs to get involved. But we cannot absolve ourselves of the responsibilities of citizenship.

So, you are saying this is our duty?

Duty is a big word. I think it's enlightened self-interest.

In 2018, the Centre for Asian Philanthropy and Society's Doing Good Index found that India is doing 'Just Okay' in philanthropy. How can India improve its score?

Indian philanthropy has made big strides in the last 15-20 years. But has philanthropy reached where it needs to be? No way. We also should remember how much invisible philanthropy is happening. Some of us are working to make this process more transparent. We must hold the wealthy accountable. There are terrific signs of energy among younger people who want to give much more away and much faster.