

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



A call to upend philanthropy

Rohini Nilekani's book offers a useful maxim for philanthropists to live by

Of India's many prominent business couples, few can match the Nilekanis in their uniqueness. Nandan Nilekani is now a business legend, for his role in building Infosys (with N R Narayana Murthy and his co-founders) and for rescuing it a few years ago when he came back to set the company right. But unlike most well-known business people, he has found success in many other fields. I doubt if anyone else could have rolled out Aadhaar as quickly and as successfully as he did. He remains one of India's leading public intellectuals and is every government's go-to guy for technological solutions.

Perhaps because he has so many other achievements, Mr Nilekani's philanthropy goes largely unnoticed. Nearly two decades ago when he was already a multi-millionaire, I asked him why he kept giving so much of his money away. His answer has stayed with me.

He had made so much money, he said, not because he was necessarily better than everybody else. He happened to be in the right sector at the right time. It was the conditions that prevailed in India and in Indian society at that time, he explained, that had benefited him. So, he had a duty to try to improve things for society as a whole so that (a) more people had opportunities and (b) India became a better place.

His was not an unusual view, he continued. In the US, for instance, many of the families that made vast fortunes in the early part of the 20th century (the Rockefellers, the Fords, the Mellons) had felt an obligation to put something back into society. Bill Gates was trying to do the same thing.

In a country like India, where there was so much inequality, everyone who made money, he believed,

had a moral obligation to give some of it away.

Many of Nandan's views were influenced by his wife Rohini, a former journalist (disclosure: We were colleagues in many news organisations in the last century!) who discovered that she too was now a multi-millionaire. When Infosys was starting out, the founders were desperately short of funds. So Rohini put every penny she had saved into the company. It was not a lot of money but such was the success of Infosys that her stake is now worth hundreds of crores.

When Nandan was still running Infosys, Rohini began a series of philanthropic initiatives and today she is one of the country's leading philanthropists. Indian business-people can be generous: The Tatas have done more for India than any other business family. But all too often, many businessmen confuse philanthropy with charity.

They give some of their money away at least partly because they feel they ought to thank God for their good fortune. In few Western countries will you find very many churches that are paid for by wealthy industrialists. In India, on the other hand, nearly every business family has built temples or spent money financing religious pursuits.

While Rohini Nilekani has written and spoke about her attitude to philanthropy, it has been hard, till now, to find her views encapsulated in a single volume. With the publication of *Samaaj, Sarkaar, Bazaar* that gap has now been filled. The book is a collection of essays, articles and speeches and its contents offer a fascinating glimpse into the worldview that motivates her (and presumably, Nandan's) philanthropy.

Rohini was born into a middle-class Maharashtrian family, which valued education over money. Her

grandfather was a Gandhian and the family followed his lead in regarding wealth as not being a huge achievement. That may explain why, even when the millions came rolling in after the success of Infosys, her concern was less with enjoying the money than with seeing how she could use it to help society.

To give away that kind of money, you must have an overarching vision. Her book sets out the broad contours of that vision. Her favourite expression is *Samaaj, Sarkaar, Bazaar* ("I am certainly not claiming to have invented the phrase", she writes, "but I am perhaps guilty of overusing it!") and it captures what is central to her philosophy.

She thinks that *samaaj* or society is the foundational sector and everything flows from the strength of that *samaaj*. By itself, this is not an unusual view; it is, in fact, the basis of what we call civil society organisations. But, Rohini argues, no society can succeed unless there is a balance between the three sectors. Unlike many activists in civil society organisations, she does not view the market as the enemy or treat capitalism as the source of all evil. She accepts that technology and business can create wealth and can make things better for society. And she suggests that civil society organisations that always see their roles in opposition to the state may be making a mistake. Very little can happen in India in the long term without the involvement of the government. (Not the prime minister or the chief minister but governments at the village and local level.)

The problem with maintaining the balance is that the market can lead to exploitation and inequality. The government can turn to tyranny. The role of *samaaj*, therefore, is to keep a check on both, the excesses of business and the incipient despotism of the state.

It is a much wider view of philanthropy than ending hospitals and building temples (though these have their place too). She suggests that Indian philanthropists must work to strengthen society so that the market and the government (which don't need philanthropy) work in the interests of the citizens. She writes: "It is an especially opportune time for business and civil society to act more creatively from their own, unrecognised common ground... We can together ensure that this country's solemn promise to itself — to secure liberty and justice, social, economic and political — for all its citizens will be met, and met in abundance."

As a mission statement, this is bold in its scope but Rohini's activities over 30 years of philanthropy have shown us that it can be done. As she says, "Indian philanthropy does not take enough risks. However, it cannot achieve its potential without risk-taking... It is time to look at our society as a whole and for the philanthropic sector to step up and to get into more important areas such as access to justice."

Will that happen? The Nilekanis have taken risks. I am not sure how many others will. But as Rohini quotes Swami Vivekananda as saying "take risks in your life. If you win, you can lead. If you lose, you can guide."

It's a useful maxim for all philanthropists and business people to live by.

The writer is a journalist and TV presenter



DOUBLE TAKE

VIR SANGHVI