


### Nandan helps me think logically: Rohini Nilekani

 One wonders how different her life story would have been, had she not fallen in love and married one of corporate India's brightest entrepreneurs. But Rohini Nilekani says while her bank balance may look very different, her outlook to life and her aspirations remain the same. For 26 years, she has given Nandan Nilekani the support he needed to make Infosys the billion-dollar company it is today. Her activism continues to flourish as she engages with various organizations to change the social fabric of this country. She is a fiercely independent woman with a mind of her own.

Bangalore-based Akshara Foundation is the brainchild of Rohini Nilekani. It is a public charitable trust that helps every child who is less privileged. Akshara is on a mission to improve the quality of education provided to these children. So far, the foundation has touched the life of 3,50,000 students just in Karnataka. Her current passion is Arghyam, an organization that helps to provide solutions to the water crisis in the water-starved regions across India.

#### Excerpts from an interview given to CNBC-TV18

**Q: It has been quite a journey for you from a journalist, to a author to now, what you call yourself, a strategist philanthropist, what's it been like?**

A: It has been a fascination journey and it's been 26 years since my marriage and if we begin with my career in journalism, it's been 28 years.

**Q: How much of it has been choice, how much of it accident and how much just because of the external environment around you changing?**


A: Writing comes naturally, I always think of myself as a writer and so journalism was something that I chose to do. In terms of philanthropy obviously, it had to come because of chance and because of what happened with Infosys, with Nandan and my life in that sense, but I am very glad it happened.

**Q: You talk so passionately about writing and you have authored one book, do you ever miss journalism? Would you not have continued with it?**

A: I tried for a bit, when my kids were small. I gave up my job after my daughter was born but I continued in some sense or the other. I have never been completely out of touch with writing, I do write the occasional column even now and many of the organizations I am with, there is constant writing to be done. So, it is not that I don't write and I write personally for myself. It's just not out there, after my first book.

**Q: There is a second book in the making I believe?**

A: Well until it comes out, you shouldn't talk about books in the making. But people ask me that all the time. I sincerely hope that there will be a book.

 **Q: But has life changed for you personally because you talked about this exciting 26-year journey that you embarked on. How have people around you changed, how have they responded to the sort of success that has come your way because of the success that Infosys has become and how has that transformed and changed your life?**

A: I don't think that I have seen, at least at a personal level certainly not. And professionally, if anything, I feel that it has opened doors. It is much easier to meet people that I need to meet in my work because of being known as Nandan's wife or because of the Infosys connection. So, that I see as a positive.

**Q: Is there a downside of being Mrs. Nilekani?**

A: The downside of Mrs. Nilekani. May be I'm in a good mood this morning or something because I can't think too much of a downside! I mean it would be very silly of me to think of a downside so much. Earlier, when the children were small, I thought the downside was that Nandan was just not around. I mean in the early days, certainly they were all so busy that personally I don't think he had much time for us. Obviously, Infosys had to take precedence over other things.

**Q: Did you ever want to get directly involved with Infosys?**

A: No, no. I've tried my best not to. It's a very conscious decision. The only connection as such that I have with Infosys was because Mr. Murthy asked me to come and do some kind of work in the space that he thought I was good at.

**Q: Art and culture, right?**

A: Yes. I chair 'Unmeelan', which has now become enough of a brand within Infosys itself. So, I just need to go in once or twice a year to do shows. But it started out as something that I did for Infosys for the first time in an official capacity. But otherwise, I've stayed out of it.

**Q: Where did the whole philanthropy bit come from? Was that your quest to find your own voice, to find your own identity, to make a space for yourself? Where did that start?**


A: I've said this before; I've always been a bit of an activist. Sometimes a sensible one, sometimes not such a sensible one.

**Q: What is not such a sensible thing that you've done?**

A: I've always sort of gone out there and held flags and protested about something or the other ever since I was very young. I've always worked with some non-profit organization in some capacity or the other. Even in Chicago where I couldn't work because it was not possible without a working visa, even if it meant just being in an organization called 'Women for Peace' and licking envelopes, but I was still always doing something like that. Whether it was marching on the streets against nuclear weapons or something like that. So, I've always been in that activist phase.

**Q: Do you think it's hard doing the balancing act between motherhood and career?**

A: I respect all the women who do that. I really tremendously respect them. I think it's very hard to balance that well. But, the downside of staying at home is like you said, sometimes you are what on earth am I doing here? Why am I not out there working? But then you remind yourself that you made that choice, nobody forced you to make it. And when you look back, I think it was one of the best choices I made.

 And then of course when the money started coming in, it seemed very, very clear to me that it was an opportunity. So, I started by just giving a little away, somewhat randomly. But I always knew I would want to come to a point where I would focus the giving into something that seemed like a strategic intervention. It was a natural progression. So, when the monies came in, it was easier and easier to do this sort of thing. So, at some point it turned from being just giving to being philanthropic, which is a very popular word nowadays. So, people started saying Rohini, writer and philanthropist. The first time I said 'wow'.

**Q: Are you uncomfortable with that label or that tag?**

A: I don't label myself. But if somebody feels comfortable with it, that's fine. It's true that I believe in giving. It's true that we are in a position in which we can give. So, it's easy for me I mean. It's not so hard.

**Q: Talking about money and of course your life completely changed with what happened with Infosys and what happened with the stock markets, were you uncomfortable in the beginning?**

A: Yes I was. I really was very, very uncomfortable because it was not like I came from a very poor background or anything. My parents, we were very middle to upper middle class in Bombay, very comfortable. But this was a zone of wealth with which I was not comfortable. Again, perhaps because I saw myself as a social activist. Now, I'm on the other side and the transition took me a while. I did have a tough time.

**Q: How did you deal with it?**

A: Not so well, made some mistakes. But I think I'm comfortable now. That's the main thing.

**Q: You are not apologetic about the fact that you are rich?**


A: I was at one time. I sort of had to battle myself over it. And then the one thing I knew that I could be proud of where the money came from. It was not coming from some murky sort of business. I was very proud that it came from Infosys' wealth and it was all-transparent, everyone knew where it came from. So that made me very proud. But all that money, it took me a while to understand that it really allowed me to do better, what I always thought I was doing in the social sector. It took me some time. But I'm okay now.

**Q: Akshara, Pratham Books and now Arghyam - are you varying more towards water, urban planning as opposed to education at this point?**

A: In primary education, I think we have reached the kind of tipping point in India, so the education thing is happening and will get only much better. So, my passion is shifting to the water sector, which now needs the kind of focus that education got.

**Q: But where you taken seriously when you decided to do this?**

A: I haven't thought of that before but I think I was lucky I started out in a public way with Akshara Foundation which was actually set up by the government, to replicate the work of Pratham in Mumbai and so already it had its legitimacy and was looking for the engagement of the corporate sector - of people like myself, and so perhaps the legitimacy of the organization transferred to me so it was much easier. Maybe people thought I was being frivolous, idling away my time but the kind of work we did and the impact was rapidly showing on the ground, and I hope that if anybody had such mistaken notions, they are now set to rest.

 **Q: How have things changed really, because when you met Nandan you must have been around 19-20 years and since then, both of you have evolved into different people.**

A: I think its getting better and better as the years go by - it's been 26 years. I am the fighter in the family, Nandan is calm and he says relax if I get overheated. It is getting better because now we tend to talk about ideas a lot, and we don't get too much into the nitty-gritty of everyday life because that is pretty much sorted out unless I want to nag him on some particular thing! But a lot of it now is influencing the other person's zone - like I have tried to move him to my way of thinking and he tries to move me to his way of thinking.

**Q: What changes have you managed to incorporate in him and vice-versa?**

A: I think he has become more sensitive to issues of development because he has seen my work closely and I constantly go to him for advice and he did say so in an interview. He has hugely influenced me in how to think much more logically - be much more data-centric and not be so emotional as I tend to be.

**Q: What about the wives at Infosys. Do you actually still manage to get together because I believe a lot of you actually spent substantial amount of time together?**

A: We are very close and I am sure its one of the things which kept Infosys people together. We are still close, obviously, we do not meet as often as we used to but now we are making a conscious attempt to do so and Sudha Gopal Krishnan is my absolute neighbour. We shout at each other across windows and it's nice to have her here because that's such a strong bond that it can't break.

**Q: Anything specific that you think you would like to do and you haven't got around to doing?**

A: I think if I had not done this, I would have been a television journalist.