

Friday, October 7, 2016, 11:25

## Disruptive giving

By INDRAJIT BASU in Kolkata

**'Accidental philanthropist' uses her good fortune and influence to create more opportunities for India's poor**

Rohini Nilekani describes herself as an "accidental philanthropist".

Deeply involved in initiatives that have unleashed disruptive change in India across a range of issues, from education to the environment, she has mastered the art of giving.

She is wealthy—very wealthy in fact—and has jockeyed that wealth into various charitable endeavors over the past 15 years with one basic objective: Creating a level playing field for the "far too many unlucky".

Her trusts and foundations include: Arghyam, an organization that implements water and sanitation projects in Indian villages; the Akshara Foundation, which focuses on education; Pratham Books, a non-profit publishing house that works on inclusive child literacy; and EkStep, a technology platform for early learning.

"Maybe I am a serial entrepreneur too," she said with a grin. Nilekani is also an author who has penned more than 10 books for adults and children.

She is the wife of Nandan Nilekani, one of the cofounders of Infosys, the multinational IT, business consulting and outsourcing services firm based in Bengaluru, India.

To date, the couple has donated over \$40 million (according to Forbes magazine) to the cause of reducing inequality.

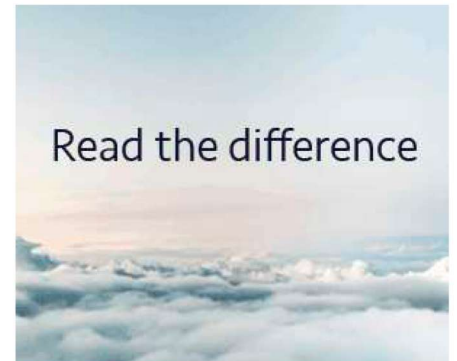
"The driving force behind all that I do is the objective to reduce inequality in terms of access to opportunity," she said. "We are lucky, but far too many people in India are not."

Her journey to becoming a woman of ultra-high net worth reads almost like a fairy tale—growing up in a middle-class family and starting her career as a journalist in the 1980s.

She made her first commitment to a cause in 1981 when she invested a hard-earned \$200 into the company cofounded by her husband and six others—the now well-known Infosys.

Infosys, in which she now holds a little over 1.3 percent, has grown into one of the largest listed companies in the world, with a market capitalization of around \$37 billion.

"(But) my evolution as an activist or philanthropist started in 1992 with the organization called Nagarik, that I cofounded with like-minded people to spread awareness for safer roads to



### Latest News

China's FTZs drive new opening up  
 China to retain prudent monetary policy  
 Economy stable, says central bank official  
 Hurricane kills at least 283 in Haiti  
 More Chinese cities 'to try taming home price'  
 Manila for shaking off 'US shackles'  
 UNCTAD sees FDI fall up to 15%  
 HK-listed firms falling behind  
 UNSC formally nominates Guterres to be next chief  
 Millions flee as Matthew slams into Bahamas

### Photo

**Hundreds dead in Haiti****#hk24hr: Selfie art****Formula E 2016/17 to kick off****Hurricane Matthew heads toward US**

Chest of Drawers -Riku Chest Of Three Drawers In Walnut and Solid Black...

~~₹ 8,497~~ ₹ 4,199

Shop now!

reduce the number of road accidents in the country," Nilekani said.

But back then, she said, she had neither the financial resources nor the ability to direct the organization, and the venture quickly failed.

"That's how I learned how to fail and also the big lesson: That it is not so easy to initiate change."

In 1999, she tried again by joining the Akshara Foundation, a joint venture of the Karnataka state government.

"Akshara was a landmark event in my life because I got a chance to jump in at the deep end. The organization had a big vision of every child attending school and learning well."

Akshara taught her how to effect a large social change, and provided the opportunity to work with the state and local communities.

Pratham Books was another venture that sprang out of her experience with India's education system.

"We found that while children in whom we were trying to inculcate the reading habit were learning fast, they were unable to sustain that habit due to a lack of interesting content. We realized children did not have many options to read other than text books that one can't curl up with before going to bed at night," Nilekani said.

"There were hardly enough books for them to practice their newfound skills on, in any Indian language. Good and joyful content was needed to get children hooked on reading."

So she decided to make an effort to fill that void and started publishing with Pratham Books as a non-profit venture. Within a decade, Nilekani said, the company emerged as one of the largest children's book publishers in India.

"And now, it is fueling a whole publishing ecosystem for children's writing in multiple languages in India."

Nilekani is discerning about the projects she chooses to back. For instance, in 2001, she founded Arghyam to focus on water conservation, because she found that not enough was being done in his area.

"I started with 100 crore rupees (1 billion rupees, or about \$23 million at that time), which I had recently come into from the sale of Infosys shares. I put in another 50 crore rupees soon after.

"Arghyam's main activity is to work with non-governmental organizations to help them in their efforts for ground water management. India has abundant river resources but, surprisingly, a majority of the population uses ground water for agriculture and domestic needs. India urgently needs to conserve this resource," Nilekani said.

Now, she said, Arghyam has initiated 500 projects in 22 states to initiate conservation measures and better use of water using natural science and technology.

"Once we became wealthy, I became acutely conscious of the responsibility that wealth brings. I think in societies like India, which have a vast number of poor people, the very few wealthy have an added responsibility to give creatively," she said.

A modern nation should not allow runaway wealth creation, unless that drives public good and gives more people access to more opportunities, she added.

She said Indian philanthropy is changing and is now at an exciting stage.

"I see a lot of positive changes already, where the rich want to start giving away their wealth early and not after they have turned gray."

Although the country still has a long way to go, that awareness is increasing as Indians go to elite gatherings in the West and see the philanthropic trends there — so that they too want to give more, she said.

Still, the problems in Indian societies are huge, Nilekani said, and there is not enough money to solve them.

"All one can do is to work at the pressure points and hope that government can either put in more resources or drive the public to take up those issues. I believe that without governance and the response of the government, no issues can have solutions."

So, how does she juggle a handful of ventures simultaneously?

"My management style is simple: I attract people smarter than me, at least as committed to the cause as I am, and then trust them to do their job," Nilekani said.

She functions like a startup founder, working hands-on in the initial stages, and then gradually hands over operations to professionals.

"I believe that after some time, one has to move on. So I inspire and set up an organization, get in great people to run it, and then move on to some other cause close to my heart," she said.

That is why she moved away from the Akshara Foundation after spearheading it for nine years. Similarly, she handed over the reins of Pratham Books to professionals after spending 10 years at the helm.

"And I certainly do not see myself running Arghyam until I become senile," she said with a laugh.

Nilekani is already planning her next move. "My next focus is EkStep, which is the first venture where I am working with my husband."

She described it as a mobile-enabled platform that is simple enough for children to use, and said its objective is "democratizing the access to learning opportunities".

She said EkStep has launched a beta version of this platform and aims to reach several million children within five years.

"So," she concluded, "we don't have much time."

PRE 1 2 NEXT



Reality Bites



Drone and Phone -  
Walking



Drone and Phone -  
Rafting



Hanjin's Shipping  
Crisis

---

[| About Us](#) | [Services & Products](#) | [Advertise on Site](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Subscriptions](#) | [Join Us](#)

Copyright 1997-2015. All rights reserved. The content (including but not limited to text, photo, multimedia information, etc) published in this site belongs to China Daily. Without written authorization from China Daily, such content shall not be republished or used in any form.