

ROHINI NILEKANI

# Charge of the compassionate brig

Multi-faceted Rohini Nilekani says the movement initiated by NGOs represents a desire for universal access to opportunity and can go beyond identity-based demands of all kinds

Nithin Belle

**M**odern society is classified into different segments. First you have the state, as represented by elected officials and lawmakers, politicians, ministers, bureaucrats and other organs of the state. Then there are the commercial bodies — companies, chambers of commerce and other market players.

The third segment (there is a fourth, the underworld and the mafia, but let's not talk about it) is civil society, comprising "the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market where people associate to advance common interests," a definition coined by Civicus, the World Alliance for Citizen Participation. Civicus also expanded the definition: it includes civil society networks and organisations; trade unions; faith-based networks; professional associations; NGO capacity development organisations; philanthropic foundations and other funding bodies.

Rohini Nilekani, author, philanthropist, a major shareholder in India's IT major, Infosys Technologies (which was co-founded by her husband, Nandan, now the chairman of the Unique Identification Authority of India), has been closely associated with various NGOs and civil society bodies in India for several years now. Forbes magazine named her as one of Asia's Heroes of Philanthropy in 2010, for having "donated \$40 million to myriad causes."

Chairperson and founder of Arghyam, which she set up with a private endowment in 2001, Rohini also co-founded Pratham Books, a non-profit publishing enterprise to produce high-quality, low-cost books for children in several Indian languages. She is on the board of Pratham India Education Initiative, and was chairperson for Akshara Foundation. An interview with Rohini:

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others to step in. NGOs have been quite influential in India since the eighties, but it is probably the first time we have seen very large numbers of middle and middle-upper class folks coming to the street.

It is a very interesting development though I am not sure where it is headed. I hope the movements represent a desire for a universal access to opportunity and can go beyond identity-based demands of all kinds.

**NGOs have been in the limelight in India for more than a decade, but these days many — especially in political circles — are questioning the credibility of a section of NGOs. What do you think has led to this conflict between 'civil society' — perhaps represented by NGOs — and the political class?**

It is a healthy competition of ideas for the most part. The political class is wary of a shift in power balance and since the media seems to love controversy, however socially harmful, people talk to each other in higher and higher decibels. It may also be a good wake-up call for NGOs.

It is dangerous to claim a singular moral high ground, is it not? The real problem though is, even



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where we can agree to disagree after we have tried to see and show different points of view. And that without too much acrimony and judgmental posturing. That is a reasonable hope.

**Considering the good work that a lot of NGOs are engaged in, do you see a setback to the movement if there's a backlash from the political class?**

Yes. I believe the NGO sector in India is under multiple stresses. The political class is anxious, as is the bureaucracy. They are taking back the space they had conceded

with the new direct tax code, which will have a negative impact on many small and good NGOs.

It is a great pity. Because any society needs good intermediaries to help prevent the abuse of both state and markets, and to go to areas and activities where the state is ineffective and the markets will not be able to reach.

**What are your views on the government's move to make it mandatory for the corporate sector to set apart funds for CSR activities? Should be it made compulsory, or should it remain op-**

To be a business better in we expect. Many companies develop good outside the incentive that first to completely impossible. Leave CSR — they are business

**What has of not just even last? What has ways?**

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