

"India's NGO sector is the most diverse and dynamic in the world"



Writer and philanthropist Rohini Nilekani, wife of Infosys co-chairman Nandan Nilekani, has been deeply involved in development issues for many years now. She is the trustee of Akshara Foundation, which works to bring literacy and teaching programmes to poorer children; she co-founded Pratham Books, a non-profit publishing enterprise to produce high-quality, low-cost books for children in several Indian languages; and, with a private endowment, she started Arghyam, an NGO committed to sustainable water for all, in 2001. Working long hours with unwavering charm, she says with disarming simplicity, "It has been a wonderful journey of discovery."

What drew you to the subject of primary education?

The work on the education front was an opportunity that came my way in late 1999, when the government of Karnataka and the NGO Pratham wanted to set up a chapter in the state to work with the mission "every child in school and learning well". I was very happy to come on board at the time, because the timing was perfect for me, with my children a little older and settled in their school. Also, the work itself was exactly what I was looking for - an opportunity to work with children but in a way that allowed for scaling-up and for leveraging the work of government. Pratham Books evolved naturally out of this work, to provide children with better and more accessible content for reading and learning.

And how did you come to be involved with the other vital theme of sustainable water for all?

The water idea really was a matter of sudden inspiration, as I have said in interviews before. When I came into some money through the Infosys ADRs (American Depository Receipts) in 2005, I was keen to deploy it towards some meaningful work in the foundation I had set up, named ARGHYAM, which means 'offering', and I was researching many areas in the development sector. One day, in April 2005, I had this sudden insight, as all of us have occasionally, that it should be WATER. After that, it all became easy. The more research we did, the more it seemed clear that this was a critical area where we could make some small difference.

As a compassionate Indian, what have you learnt most by working in the non-government development sector? Do you feel frustrated and helpless sometimes? And despite all the difficulties, what energises you?

No, I certainly do not feel frustrated and helpless. How could I go back to work day after day if I did? Of course, once in a while, there are setbacks, especially because, in all the

organisations, we work very closely with government where we can, and that has some special challenges. But that is only to be expected, and we try to learn quickly from the disappointments. And, certainly, sometimes I feel, my God, whatever we do, it seems so little, given the humungous problems our people face. But of course, I have no illusions about it being my 'burden' or some such thing! So it is not for me to feel helpless anyway!

It was always clear, given our social and political situation, that there were no easy answers, only a constancy of vision and purpose that much needs to change and much needs to be done. I believe that India's NGO sector is the most diverse and dynamic in the world and serves its role remarkably well as a bridge between society, state and the market. And also as a mirror. It is a challenging and energising space to work in, whether at Arghyam or Pratham Books, or indeed in other organisations whose boards I sit on, that are in the fields of environment, micro-finance, public health etc.

I have been lucky to meet thousands of good people working on the critical issues in this country, from Gandhi-inspired people like Anupam Mishra, pragmatic leaders like Madhav Chavan and Aloysius Fernandes, visionaries like Ela Bhatt, creative young social entrepreneurs like Harish Hande, and many corporate leaders who want to give back and so on. In Akshara, it is Ashok Kamath, who took over as chairman recently, and in Arghyam, it is Sunita Nadhamuni, two wonderful people who lead these organisations; they used to be in the corporate sector but found for themselves another calling. People like them will help reshape our ideas for the future.

From each, one learns that there is no ONE single path that is correct but that, when you just keep working and keep learning on the way and, most importantly, keep listening to those whose lives are most affected by intolerance and injustice, somehow, many opportunities open up and many more good people join in along the way.