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**ROHINI NILEKANI**

**Providing safe, sustainable water for  
all through Arghyam initiatives**

# COVER STORY

AQUA DREAMS

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*Rohini Nilekani looks with satisfaction as Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh launches India Water Portal*

*Rohini Nilekani, a philanthropist, journalist, author and social activist, has understood water management with all its complexities, and has channeled her efforts through Arghyam, which she founded. It's no surprise that in late 2010 Arghyam was requested by the Planning Commission to collate civil society inputs on drinking water and sanitation for the approach paper to the 12th Five Year Plan. Tells Kavitha Srinivasa...*

**For** the uninitiated, it would suffice to say that Rohini Nilekani and Arghyam are two sides of the same coin. Rohini, an accidental-philanthropist as she calls herself and her cause – Arghyam (Sanskrit word for ‘offering’) – a grant-making foundation is working towards providing safe, sustainable water for all.

Set up earlier by Rohini to ramp up her philanthropy, it was only in 2005, that she was able to put some decent money for a social cause. “I had set up Arghyam in 2001, with some little initial investment, just to learn the ropes of giving. In 2005, during the Infosys American Depository Receipts (ADR) issue, my personal wealth (Nandan Nilekani is her husband) grew to Rs. 100 crore. I was able to put in a larger endowment and have a strategic focus on the water sector.” All this while she was looking to find something where a small Indian company could do something strategic. And once, like a ‘moment of epiphany’, while holding a glass of water it struck her that it was water! Some preliminary research led her to a clear gap that existed and room for a foundation to do something meaningful emerged.

# ARGHYAM SUPPORTS NGOs WHICH WORK TOWARDS SAFE, SUSTAINABLE WATER. IT ALSO RUNS AND MANAGES THE INDIA WATER PORTAL, WHICH IS A DIGITAL COMMONS INITIATIVE TO HELP SHARE KNOWLEDGE ON WATER

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For the last seven years, Arghyam has understood the complexities surrounding this precious and finite resource, called water. According to Rohini, people too are now realising that with the need for more energy, it is water that is going to be a constraint to their development; unless one learns to do things differently. Since then, it's been a journey of discovery as she began to understand water with all its complexities. "To tackle water, we need to understand the politics of water, its governance, social aspects and gender. It is very complex, but very stimulating and rewarding," said Rohini, who features among the country's most active philanthropists. Her project has supported about 85 projects in 20 states in India till now. While the focus has been on domestic water and sanitation, there is a serious attempt to address issues on related subjects, like reviving traditional water bodies, rainwater harvesting, all of which also spill onto areas beyond domestic water.

## WATERWAYS

Rohini Nilekani never imagined that water would change her lifestyle. "Once I understood the issues and complexities around water, I was forced to look at my own personal use of water." She describes it as a humbling experience. "Before Arghyam, I had no idea as a citizen that the water I used for my shower came from 100 km away, possibly depriving others on the way. Once I understood it, I had to act on it." In many ways, she has tried to reduce her water footprint from actual water use. Mercifully, water is a renewable resource; and it was appalling how badly people used it. According to her Delhi, technically, could be self-sufficient in water, using simple practices; but because our cities do not contain demand, or reuse, there are high-cost schemes to bring water from far away. She says 'we use it, pollute it, and send it away. That model is disastrous.' According to her, India has reasonably bountiful water supplies—a lot of the problem is a governance deficit. The government has the money and the mandate, but it's not really happening. It's about access, empowerment, having a voice; water is a deeply political issue in many parts of the

county. Water is just bang there, in the middle. There will be a big revamp of policy. The Planning Commission has set up several committees to rework the laws and the regulation and the financing of water. This is welcome, she adds.

For Rohini, the next formidable boundary is 'virtual water', which is tough. "We want to encourage people to be water sensitive without making them feel guilty. Virtual water understanding tells you that water is embedded in everything you do, everything you use. It is a useful concept for all of us to become more ecologically literate. This is the key," she explained.

"When I started researching, I found that no Indian foundation has focused on water. I decided to channel my efforts in this direction. We were a new kid on the block. But we have matured and built partner networks comprising 40-50 NGOs," she adds. "Our teams have learnt from everywhere. It's not possible to apply one metric for everyone, it is necessary to be more sympathetic towards people from far-flung places like Bihar and Jharkhand than those in Bangalore."

"We did a survey called ASHWAS (a survey of house-



Rohini Nilekani gets Kelvinator GR8! Women Awards, 2007

**"I never dreamt that I would be so wealthy. The wealth allowed me to think about how best this money could be spent. That's when I thought I should give back to society"**

## THE WRITE CONNECT



Nilekani's journalistic career began after a post-graduate diploma in mass communication from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. That's when she worked as a reporter for the now defunct Bombay Magazine. She may have earned a mere Rs. 450,

but she enjoyed every moment of it. Things were comparatively easier at that time. Those were the days when there weren't gate keepers to barricade job seekers from approaching a publication. She may not be part of mainstream journalism, but she keeps in touch with her writing. Over time, she became an author and established herself as a popular writer beginning with the medical thriller *Stillborn*. In 2008, she anchored *Uncommon Ground* a television show for NDTV. The show struck a dialogue between top corporate leaders and the social sectors in India. A book based on the show was released in 2011.

A writer with diverse interests, Nilekani connects with children beautifully. She writes under the pen name Noni when she authors books for children. "I have read Rohini right from my college days when I used to read her dispatches as Bangalore correspondent in my favorite *SUNDAY* magazine. I have always respected her ability to get discursive, the ability to weed out the issue from the chaff, and present it all in a most readable format," praised Harish Bijoor, Brand-expert & CEO, Harish Bijoor Consults Inc., and author of *Marketing Trends* and added that he was a fan of *Uncommon Ground*, "Here is a book that does it all. It mixes Rasam with *Rosogulla*. It gets together social leaders with business leaders in a debate that touches lives." The book is written and put together very well. "There is panache, there is the writer's delicate touch, the keen editor's eye, and most importantly it recognises issues that I would personally consider most pressing. It is more pressing, than a host of issues we debate endlessly and needlessly in today's media. Rohini is a natural," he said. Yoga and music helps Nilekani unwind, but what really keeps her ticking is her ability to go with the flow, quite like the water she's concerned about.

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hold water and sanitation) in Karnataka and it was massive: 17,000 households. We realised how little the gram panchayats and villagers could really do about their own water issues. Often, they did not have the means; there was corruption; or people simply didn't make the connection between sanitation and public health. All that came through loud and clear. From there we said, 'Let's take these reports back to the villages,' and then we helped them to make their own action plans. So what began as a citizen survey ended up as a structural analysis on the gram panchayat," shares Rohini.

Over the years, Arghyam has helped NGOs to do participatory ground water management. At any time, several projects happen simultaneously. Right now, Arghyam has tied up with NGO Inner Voice Foundation to mitigate arsenic in drinking water in Ballia district of UP and Bhojpur district of Bihar. This is done by providing improved water supplies and the empowering community through awareness generation and capacity building measures. The ongoing project also entails monitoring of arsenic contaminated water sources at regular intervals using Field Testing Kits, opening up dialogue with government agencies and working closely with the state government, mainly Jal Nigam in Ballia and PHED in Bhojpur. Such projects are a regular feature. "We are a grant-making foundation and our key areas are public policy and citizen action. Annually we have a budget of Rs. 12 crore to Rs. 14 crore," said the active philanthropist.

The Bangalore-based foundation has helped build many toilets and sanitation awareness campaigns. "In order to get the water issue right, you need to address it from the gender discrimination point of view. This can ensure equity and sustainability," she highlighted. It has supported programmes of rainwater harvesting, revival of traditional water bodies, helping communities to draw up water security plans. "We have facilitated the India Water Portal which is a public, web-based platform to share knowledge. Going ahead, we will be having a sharper focus on ground water and sanitation issues, which we think are among the most critical elements for ensuring domestic water safety and security in the country," the 53-year-old said, sharing her forthcoming plans.

Regardless of location, Arghyam now supports NGOs which work towards safe, sustainable water. It is involved in finding the right leaders and institutions that work in domestic water and sanitation. Either the NGO approaches Arghyam or sometimes it is vice versa. When a water project is identified, the NGO partners visit the site and do the work. Though the Arghyam team visits all

**“TO TACKLE WATER, WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE POLITICS OF WATER, ITS GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL ASPECTS AND GENDER. IT IS VERY COMPLEX, BUT VERY STIMULATING AND REWARDING”**

the project sites, the local people may not know them by name so much, as they directly meet the NGOs more than they meet the Arghyam team.

Till date, the philanthropist has donated Rs. 150 crore to Arghyam as an endowment from her personal wealth. Arghyam works from the interest money it earns from this endowment. “We are still a small foundation and, out of Rs. 150 crore, we get about Rs. 12-15 crore a year, and, therefore, we can’t scale further than our budgets allow. But we are able to leverage a bit more if we are able to replicate good practices. So we are looking for innovations, new responses to new challenges. The focus in many places is changing from quantity to quality now. But whatever we support has to be low-cost, you cannot have expensive solution,” adds Rohini.

Now Rohini and her team are taking a more programmatic approach, with emphasis on ground water and sanitation issues. “Arghyam has by far been the most challenging. Water is a critical resource, and there’s a science and technology to it.”

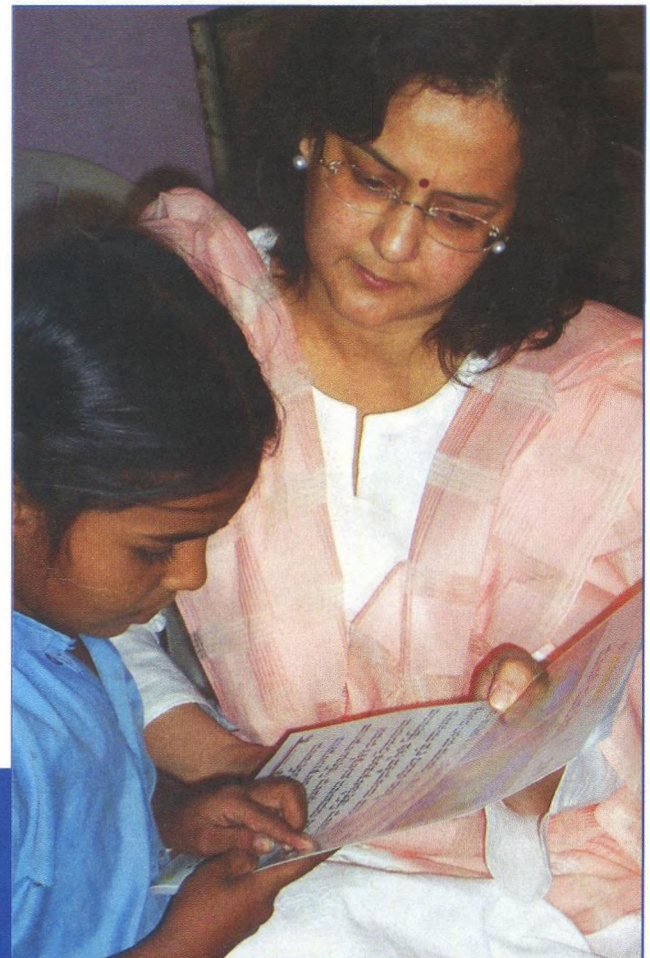
Nilekani has a very hands-on involvement with her pet project. “While I do visit projects just to learn from listening to people, it is the team at Arghyam that makes collective decisions on grants. It is true that I come away humbled by people’s resilience and innovation in the face of tremendous hardship,” she reminisced. The word Arghyam was suggested by her mother. It was actually the name given to their home to suggest that anything you create must be seen as an offering to something else and not for yourself. Later on, it seemed the most appropriate name for the Trust. Hence Arghyam became the name both for their home as well as the Trust. “My mother was a student of Sanskrit. She used to write scripts for Marathi plays and could have done a lot with her talent. Instead, she chose to bring us up and gave us the tools that we need to succeed,” she remembered with gratitude.

### **CHILDREN’S CORNER**

Today, Rohini Nilekani is a product of her circumstances. When wealth came her way, it instilled in her a ‘give-back’ mechanism. And the result has been Arygham. “Society

gives scope for wealth creation. It also expects that wealth is used for the good of society. I’m glad I had the opportunity to give back,” she said with contentment, as she supports initiatives in microfinance, education, ecological and environmental issues, culture and the arts.

But the beginnings were made much before Rohini started Arygham. Even then she was backing various initiatives, when came Pratham her way. Pratham Network was started in 1994 in Mumbai and was very successful. Different state governments began to notice it and the Karnataka government decided to take it forward as a public-private partnership for education. C.V. Madhukar, who was with Pratham Books approached her to work with Akshara Foundation in Bangalore. Akshara is a part of the Pratham Education Initiative and has replicated Pratham’s approach of comprehensive, scalable, replicable and cost-effective education solutions. Rohini realised it was an



*Rohini Nilekani writes children’s books under the pen name Noni*

**“When we think of social change, you want to look at society and how much better we could be, in terms of human dignity”**

# COVER STORY

AQUA DREAMS



opportunity waiting to be tapped. “When I was asked to join the Akshara Foundation in 2000, it was just the right time for me. I wanted to work in an area where we could work towards a large social goal – in this case – every child in school and learning well. I wanted to work closely with the state, with corporations and with citizens,” and added, “Akshara Foundation has broadened my spectrum.”

Former colleague of Akshara Foundation Ashok R. Kamath recalls with gratitude that Rohini supported his move from the corporate sector to the development sector. “In late 2003, she was Chairperson of Akshara Foundation and I came in as the Managing Trustee. In the beginning, she allowed me room to understand the new space with which she was familiar – over time she allowed me the freedom to try new things and build/grow

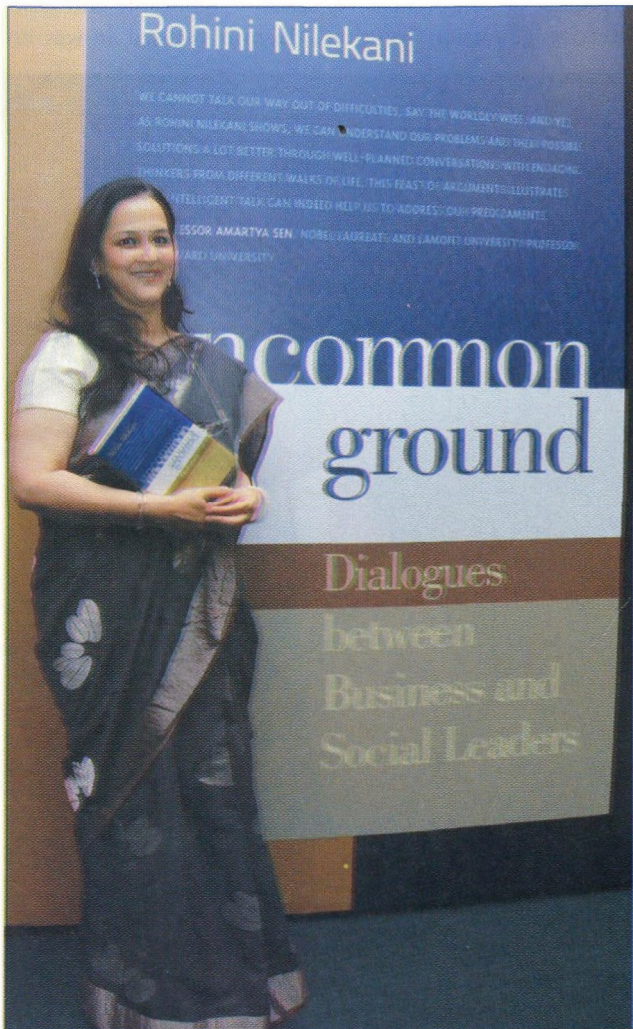
the organisation,” he remembered and said that she was not an operations person but is very strong in strategy building and a strong networking person. “In addition, she gets an alignment towards a goal within the organisation she works with, so that the organisation moves forward to meet those goals – this consensus building is very important in the development sector and clearly Rohini is a great practitioner of this,” he explained.

Sharing his experience he felt that she had the ability to reach out to different levels of people and get the best out of them. “This can be very hard and challenging but Rohini does spend her energy and time in making this happen. To me, I learnt many valuable lessons (hopefully well) from her that I am now putting into practice as I take Akshara Foundation to its next milestones.”

Akshara Foundation has established libraries in government schools for inculcating the reading habit and making good content accessible to children. After nine years, Nilekani decided to move on. As she put it, “All organisations need to renew their leadership after a time.” Pratham Books is an autonomous institution that came out of Pratham’s work. It is now independently run and funded by Nilekani. According to her, it is possibly India’s largest children’s publisher. Its non-profit status, driven by societal mission, is of importance. “We depend on philanthropic capital, I myself fund Pratham Books but we invite others to join us, as no single individual or institution can possibly reach all the 250 million children of India who are in need of good books,” she felt.

Pratham Books has published more than 200 individual titles, in up to 11 Indian languages, which amounts to about 1,800 titles. “In eight years, we have sent out about 9-million books and 10-million story cards into the hands of children who might otherwise not have had joyful material to read. We have helped to enhance the ecosystem of children’s publishing, and now have attracted many writers, illustrators and other publishers to help with the societal mission of democratising the joy of reading,” said Nilekani, with immense satisfaction.

Many of these books are put out into the Creative Commons, which means that content is free for people



Rohini Nilekani after a successful launch of *Uncommon Ground*

**Pratham Books has published more than 200 hundred individual titles, but in up to 11 Indian languages, which means about 1,800 titles**

# ARGHYAM HAS SUPPORTED PROGRAMMES OF RAINWATER HARVESTING, REVIVAL OF TRADITIONAL WATER BODIES AND HELPED COMMUNITIES DRAW UP WATER SECURITY PLANS

to download and reuse. This gesture was done because it was felt that social impact is more important than financial sustainability; and that early reading habits must be inculcated in children, who need affordable access to good books. Of course, it takes time to bring a social change. "To bring about a social change is no mean task. It requires leadership skills, patience and humility. You just have to learn by doing and that's what I did. Whether I got it right or not is not for me to decide. Social change cannot be created by any single person or institution anyway, and it takes years to be seen as a change anyway," the Bangalore-based philanthropist struck a philosophical note.

## ROHINI AND UNCOMMON GROUND

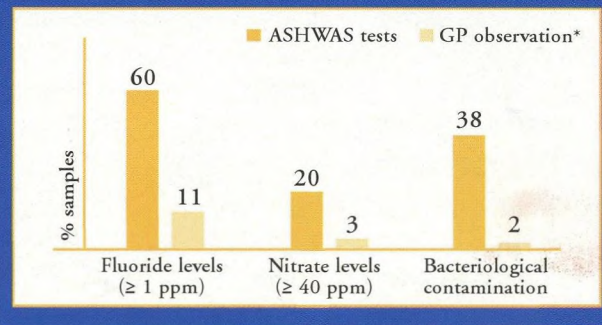
Rohini's marriage to Nandan Nilekani in 1981 coupled with his plunge to join a close knit team to start Infosys, exposed her to many learnings which she otherwise would have never managed. Since then, life has been an exciting and fulfilling journey. Though she was not directly involved with Infosys, she learnt a lot by sheer observation, "The start up team of Infosys had a larger vision than themselves. Though I had nothing to do with Infosys, I watched as a bystander and I learnt what it is to maintain grace under pressure." That also gave Rohini the opportunity to meet a lot of people from India's corporate sector and even international corporate. Rohini discovered some sort of polarisation and thought India looked so different when viewed from these two sides and felt that there would be a middle-ground in between that could be explored. It is from there that 'Uncommon Ground' was born. The team took eight important national issues such as energy, environment, food among others, and had the top leaders from both sides come and discuss amongst themselves to see if there was a more common ground than they originally believed. There were people like Sunil Mittal, Mukesh Ambani, Medha Patkar and so on, who came and spoke on the sectors they were engaged in. Rohini says that some common ground emerged in these interactions and more importantly, they recognised the need for such a platform for dialogue and perhaps there wasn't enough quiet introspection about each other's positions.

## THE WAY FORWARD

According to Rohini, there is a tectonic shift happening in the non-governmental organisation sector. There are far too many NGOs in some places, and it is going to be harder for them to sustain themselves as Western donors have receded and the state is taking back some of the space that it had yielded to NGOs. One expects to see

## WHAT'S IN YOUR WATER?

Based on the nation-wide water quality test, Arghyam has found fluoride upto 5mg/l present in ground water when the permissible level is only 1.5mg/l. Fluoride, when present in excess in water can lead to diseases like pitting of teeth and in severe cases skeletal fluorosis. Fluoride excesses is putting 90-million at risk in 200 districts in 17 states, while Arsenic excess is putting 3-4-million people at risk in 8 districts of West Bengal & other Eastern states. In addition, over extraction, pollution – bacteriological (sewage), nitrate (sewage & fertilizers), pesticide contamination & industrial waste – are another emerging issues.



a lot of mergers, a lot many fading away; and we are watching the space, because the changes on the ground are going to affect what we do in the future.

There's also a huge policy push (new laws, regulations, pending court judgements, issues of public doctrine). So there's a lot of churn happening from the government side and the foundation is, in some ways, in the middle of that.

Though the media has often hailed her as a strategic philanthropist she prefers not to have any labels. At the most, she is comfortable being known as a writer. She describes herself as an accidental philanthropist. "That's because we could not have dreamt of such wealth which has come our way. It is transparent, legal and ethical wealth creation. Yes, but it turned me into an accidental philanthropist from a socially concerned citizen and activist/journalist," she summed up.

For Rohini, the biggest challenge she feels is the change from within. The self awareness, that personal journey, that is the real business of life. The continuous state of self-transformation is a challenge. For her there is no ground for pessimism for there is no choice and we all have to be optimistic and just go and do things.