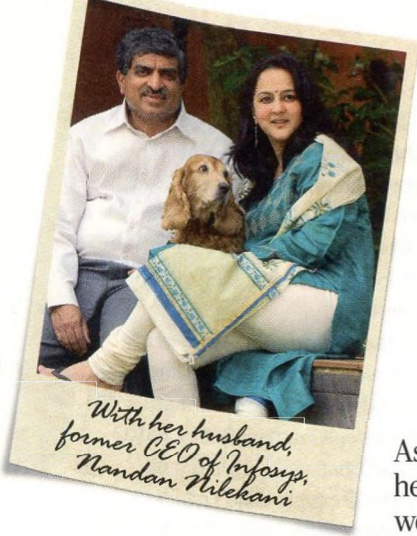


Philips
Kerashine Range
presents
FEMINA'S 55th
ANNIVERSARY ISSUE
MY JOURNEY

About the author: Rohini Nilekani is the founder-chairperson of Arghyam, a foundation that works to resolve water and sanitation issues in India. She is also the founder-chairperson of Pratham Books, a charitable trust. Counted among the most active philanthropists in India, Rohini is a board member in many non-profits such as ATREE (the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment) and Sanghamithra Rural Financial Services. She has also authored two books, *Stillborn* and *Uncommon Ground*.



With her husband, former CEO of Infosys, Nandan Nilekani

'It's time to offer up our shoulders'

As an erstwhile leftist, **Rohini Nilekani** admits to a few years of disquiet when her family started reaping the generous rewards of Infosys. Soon she realised that wealth is a resource that could be used to bridge gaps and create a world of equals

Societal attitudes in India have come a long way in these five decades. So many women have so much more freedom and so many choices. Yet, many others still don't. So the work is only half done. To be fair, many men don't have freedom and choice, either. If we want to be truly empowered, we must understand what men fear. We must enable men to be their best selves, along with us. We have to actively co-create the future.

I have learnt this sometimes the easy way, sometimes the hard way, in my life and work. My early life as an upper middle-class Mumbai girl was typical for the time. My loving parents were fiercely protective and cautiously liberal. Education and independence were highly valued, my rebellion less so! We had fun, we were safe, and we grew up reasonably prepared to face a world that was fast changing.

By the time I got my first job, as a reporter for *Bombay*, India's first city magazine, we were already in the churn of a society that was about to shed its socialism for a market-friendly economy in the tow of globalisation. So much was happening at the time: it was 1980; we had sobered up from the Emergency and its hangover, and there was an emerging urban confidence. Young women like me were politically aware of our rights. We were feisty and often overconfident. We would later learn to be more balanced. Around then, I happily accepted a young man's proposal of marriage and then had to convince my family that this bohemian-looking IIT-ian was actually made to rock the world, but only if I married him. Alongside our wedding, Infosys was born. With full faith in Nandan, I invested all my savings—then a princely sum of ₹10,000—into his new company. Certainly, I have never regretted it.

In the early days, I followed my new husband to the US, where he worked hard writing software, and I continued my >



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writing. For seven years, we lived young and carefree in different cities. Yet, we had tremendous access to rich public assets such as free libraries, beautiful parks, good roads, 24/7 electricity and water, cheap public transport, public swimming pools and tennis courts and friendly people. I remember wanting to make all that possible for the 50 crore people waiting in India. I have never let myself forget this fact.

Many years later, Infosys became financially successful and we suddenly came into some incredible wealth. My earlier activist, left-of-centre political self took many troubled years to

come to terms with the fact that I was now on the other side of the fence. But then I accepted that wealth generation from value creation is a positive for society. I have spent the past 15 years trying to experiment with and learn how best to use that wealth. I do it because I truly believe that wealth confers huge responsibility on the wealthy. I truly believe that societies will not long tolerate the kind of wealth creation that only benefits a few.

In 1999, I joined Akshara Foundation, and retired as its chairperson in 2009. Our goal was: every child is in school and learning well. We impacted lakhs of children in Karnataka's public schools. In 2004, I co-founded Pratham Books, India's largest non-profit children's publisher, and I chaired it till I retired in 2014. Our goal: a book in every child's hands.

Allow me a personal indulgence here. Under the pseudonym Noni, I, too, penned a few books for very young children. The Sringeri Srinivas series, especially *Annual Haircut Day*, has done astonishingly well. This was made possible through the simple strategy of putting up our content on an open, collaborative platform. In 2005, Arghyam, a foundation I set up as a vehicle for my philanthropy, took up serious work in water and sanitation. Sustainable access to safe water is one of the most critical issues in our country today. Arghyam is the only Indian philanthropic

entity devoted to this sector. We have supported more than 100 projects in 23 states, with grants of over ₹100 crore, and we are now focussing more strategically on ground water management, sanitation and urban water.

I have now begun the third phase of philanthropy, based on the understanding that we need to fix basic problems of inclusion and governance across all sectors. There are many passionate people with innovative ideas on how to tackle these issues, and I feel privileged to support a few of them. We cannot have a country that leaves so many people, especially women, so far behind. The history of the past century tells us what miracles can happen when the elite

of society engage deeply in creating a more just society. Benefits accrue all around.

To Femina readers, I also wish to say this: Let's not take our rights for granted. When economies slow down, when men are jobless, when ideologues rule, women can suffer. Read history and be prepared. We stand on the shoulders of countless people and 200 years of work by women as well as men. Our privileges as equal human beings in a modern nation state are derived from that struggle. Now we must see ourselves as part of a continuum, where we, in turn, offer up our shoulders. >



At the CRY Corporate Social Responsibility Summit with corporate honchos, Nitin Paranjpe and John Elkington



Sudha Murty, chairperson of Infosys Foundation, at the launch of Rohini's book, Uncommon Ground, in 2011



With Nandan, receiving the Citizen Extraordinary Award in 2010