

Interview: Rohini Nilekani, author, *Samaaj, Sarkaar, Bazaar: A Citizen-First Approach* – “I wanted the book to be available free”

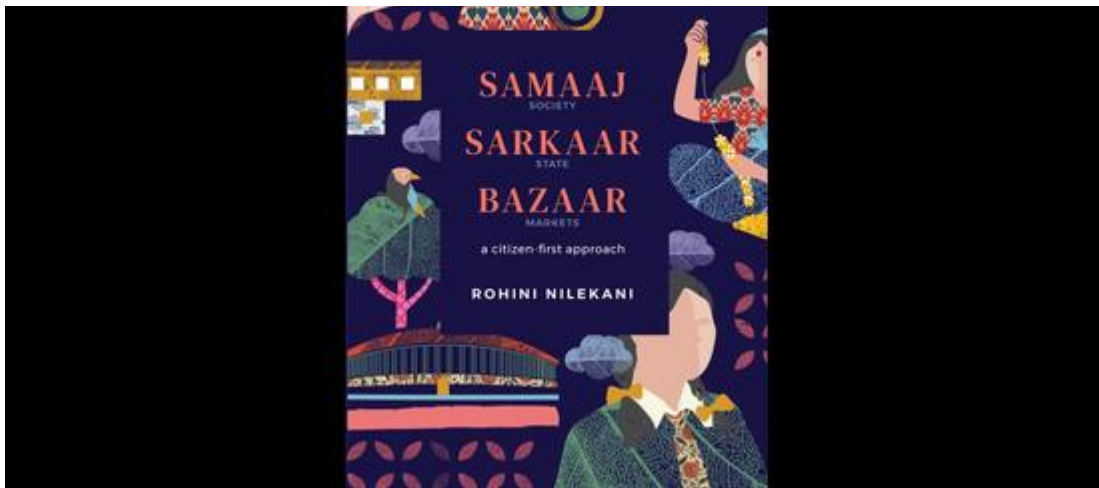
Chintan Girish Modi

8-10 minutes

Your book *Samaaj, Sarkaar, Bazaar: A Citizen-First Approach* has a selection of your essays and speeches over 15 years. How was your experience of revisiting all this material from the standpoint of where you are today?

It was certainly rewarding to look at all the articles that I have written on diverse topics over the years. But looking back, some of the things that I said were in the context of the time and of my understanding then, and I guess I have learnt more along the way. For example, today I am not sure I would write about turning back the river Cauvery from Bangalore, though I would continue to argue on using water more equitably and sustainably.





Self-published using a Creative Commons license.

Who is your target audience for this book? You have chosen to self-publish it using a Creative Commons license and have also made it freely downloadable. What were the creative and commercial reasons behind taking these decisions?

I genuinely wanted to experiment with a different model in publishing. Today, it is relatively easy to self-publish and put out your work on commercial channels, especially online. But the main reason I wanted to self-publish is that we wanted the conversation around the roles of *samaaj* (society) *sarkaar* (state) and *bazaar* (markets) to continue openly, and I wanted the book to be available free for students, social sector professionals and others to create a new discourse around what I consider an important public topic. I really hope that the book will become a trigger for young people, in particular, to start thinking about their own roles as citizens of their communities, of the nation, and indeed of the world too. It has been an interesting experiment so far. Publishers are interested in language versions or translations. People want to convert

the book into Braille and so on. At Pratham Books (a non-profit that Nilekani co-founded to enable access to reading), we tried to open up children's publishing through the Creative Commons. Maybe for some kinds of content, this is the right path.

If you had to pick out three key takeaways from your book, what would those be?

My first point is that I have come to believe that *samaaj*, which includes all of us, is really the foundational sector, and that bazaar and sarkaar evolved to serve the larger interest of the *samaaj*. The state, in all its forms, came up because sometimes *samaaj* itself – because it is not a monolith – needs independent institutions to uphold the rule of law, and maintain peace and reduce conflict. The bazaar was needed for the purpose of innovation of goods and services, and for the systematic creation of value and the regulation of fair exchange.

My second point is that these three sectors are always in a dynamic, changing balance. Sometimes, the power can shift away from the *samaaj*, and get concentrated in the *sarkaar* and the bazaar. I guess technology has made that more possible than ever in this century. I question whether we as *samaaj* (and even those in the *sarkaar* and bazaar as humans and citizens of the *samaaj*) need to swing back the balance a bit. After all, we are not consumers of the market first, we are not subjects of the state first. We are primarily humans in a complex social web of other humans, and we are essentially citizens of our

communities first.

My third point then is that we have to be a little more aware of our own agency to collectively co-create the good societies that we all want to be a part of. I am interested in the new forms of social association that may need to emerge in this digital age for us to help restore a healthier balance among the three sectors – *samaaj*, *sarkaar* and *bazaar*.

You write, “Charity and strategic philanthropy can both play a critical role in mitigating some inequity.” Can charity and philanthropy dismantle structures like the caste system, which determine access to resources and rights?

Charity and philanthropy can only have limited impact, and indeed, philanthropy should have only limited impact! Definitely, charity can help reduce the suffering of fellow human beings, and philanthropy at its best can look at the root causes of exclusion and inequity. But eventually both depend on the positive intent of ordinary people to make a change for the better. Without that intent, passion and commitment, philanthropy cannot be effective. At Arghyam (a foundation for sustainable water and sanitation that she founded), we were able to support a national policy consensus on Participatory Ground Water Management (PGWM) because there were so many institutions willing to experiment and take the idea to the people.

How do your early experiences as a journalist inform the way you examine data?

As a journalist you are trained to look at all sides of an issue. You try to be dispassionate and represent the people at the centre of the issue you are reporting on. You try to use good, objective data. However, I left journalism a while ago, so now I do more opinion writing really. When I see a problem, I try to write about it. When I see people or civil society institutions coming up with innovative solutions, I write about that too.

You have written a novel that is a medical thriller, a non-fiction book about business leaders and social leaders, and over a dozen books for children. What gives you the confidence to explore different genres of writing? How have you honed your skills?

I love writing, and have tried out these various genres over a period of time. I think that some of them have worked, and others have not. I wish I could get my act together to write more adult fiction but somehow, I have not managed it. I must say that the non-fiction writing became easier because it was so closely tied to my work and my philanthropy.

Your latest children's book *The Great Rifasa* looks at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic through the perspectives of animals in the Kabini forest. How did you come up with this idea? What other books are you working on for your young readers?

I love writing for children. My mind is always searching for new themes and ideas, with a little twist, for young readers. I used to go to the Kabini forest a lot during the

Covid-19 pandemic, and one day, I suddenly flipped the perspective to ask what the animals would think. It was such fun to write that story. Luckily, children liked it! And now my grandson is such an inspiration for me that I want to keep writing stories that he would like to read.

You studied French literature as a college student in Mumbai. Do you still read and write in French? Are some of your books now available in French translation?

The children's books I have written are out in many languages, including French, on StoryWeaver – a digital repository of multilingual stories for children from Pratham Books. The magic of the Pratham Books community globally is that people translate books for the sheer love of it. Unfortunately, I have not kept up with my love of French. *Quel dommage!*

You write about being an election campaigner when your husband, Nandan Nilekani, ran for a Lok Sabha seat in the South Bangalore constituency. What lessons did you learn during that time? Would you consider joining politics? Why or why not?

I don't think I could join politics at all! During the campaign, I understood how difficult it is to be a politician, where you are on call 24/7. I learnt that people do not expect enough from the politicians, and perhaps expect the wrong things from them. They want direct execution to resolve their own local problems but perhaps they should be exhorting their representatives to create and uphold

good policies and laws, and to effectively hold the executive to account. That would create the sustainable change they need. I also experienced just how exhilarating and exhausting our elections can be, and just how much people are willing to participate in the electoral process. So long as we have that public enthusiasm, our democracy is safe!

Chintan Girish Modi is a writer, journalist and educator who tweets @chintanwriting