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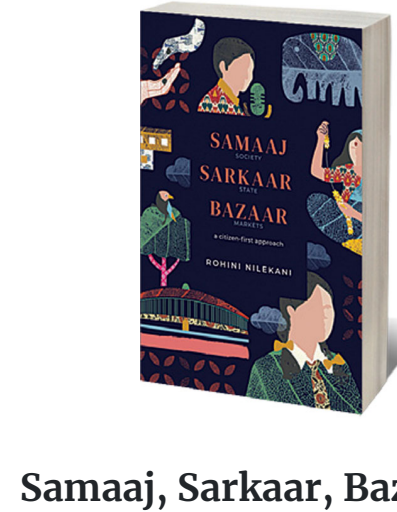
# 'You have got to be optimistic in a young country,' says Rohini Nilekani

Rohini Nilekani speaks to Open about creating a balance between the state, communities and the marketplace

V Shoba | 09 Sep, 2022



Rohini Nilekani



Samaaj, Sarkaar, Bazaar: A Citizen's First Approach  
Rohini Nilekani

Notion Press  
270 pages | ₹ 349

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**F**EW PEOPLE IN India have confronted issues of social urgency in the many ways that Rohini Nilekani does—as a philanthropist, but equally, as a founder-member of some of India's best-known civil society organisations, as an inveterate mediator between society, state and market, and as a writer who has thought long and hard about what happens when people come together to fix a problem. Her new book, *Samaaj, Sarkaar, Bazaar: A Citizen's First Approach* (Notion Press; 270 pages; ₹ 349), is a collection of her writings and speeches on the intersection of the three spheres. She speaks about her life as a reporter, rights-based activism and community action. Excerpts:

**Your tribute to the river Aghanashini is among the most evocative and impactful pieces in this collection. You also funded a film on the river. What is it about the river that is close to your heart?**

The Aghanashini emerges from the town of Sirsi, and the village Nilekani is part of Sirsi. For the past 41 years that I have been married, whenever we went back to Sirsi, I was able to see it. And, hearing about the people's struggle to save it from being dredged and meeting those who have been trying to keep it clean, I felt it was a story worth writing.

**What was life as a reporter like in the 1980s? What stories do you remember covering?**

I remember covering the Antulay cement scandal. I remember struggling to understand the political and economic implications of it. I had lots of fun reporting on the city. We were India's first city magazine—*Bombay*. It was exciting because we had to cover fashion design, celebrities, politics and business. In some sense it exposed me to the workings of *samaaj, sarkaar* and *bazaar*—I got to cover all of it. I even covered a murder in a Bandbox.

Then I started writing for *India Today*. I covered India's first satellite launch—Insat 1A at Cape Canaveral. While the satellite failed, I do clearly remember the pristine surroundings and our scientists solemnly breaking coconuts and doing a little *pooja* before the launch.

Worldwide, the space for dissent is shrinking. Yet, when people feel wronged, they will always make themselves heard. In my articles you will see this thread about why governments should allow for dissent, and not be thin-skinned, says Rohini Nilekani, author

**You hosted a show, Uncommon Ground, for NDTV, bringing business and civil society leaders together to discuss something of interest to them both. How did this idea take shape?**

I loved TV as a medium. I didn't pursue it in my journalistic career because there weren't a lot of opportunities till NDTV came, and also, I was travelling a lot with Nandan. As I travelled, because of his corporate career, and my interest in social issues, I could see how everyone's goals seemed to be the same at some level, and yet, there was no conversation between the social sector and the corporate sector. Since I knew both sides somewhat well, I said, why don't I facilitate dialogue between representatives from both sectors—not talking at each other so much as talking to each other—on national television. When I approached NDTV, they were very keen that I do it. I reached out to people and everyone said yes right away. I enjoyed it a lot and it made sense to turn it into a book more as a record than anything else. A lot of people asked, why did you stop, why didn't you continue to do that show? I guess *Samaaj, Sarkaar, Bazaar* is one way to pick up that thread again, as to how we can create and continue that conversation across sectors.

**What was it like setting up and working in a civil society organisation for the first time, over 30 years ago—what did you set out to achieve with Nagarik?**

We failed spectacularly. We set out very idealistically saying we can do something for safer roads—because of a tragedy I had personally experienced but also because of the newspaper headlines every day. India remains a country with the highest road accident rate, and when you think of how few cars we have per capita, how few vehicles, it remains a real tragedy that not enough focus is given to road safety. But we didn't quite know what to do. Everyone had other jobs. We worked very hard, put in a lot of hours. I remember standing at junctions with traffic police, talking to motorists, making sure signs were put up right. At the time there were about 32,000 traffic junctions in the city, and we might have worked on 20. So the scale of the problem and our response were not aligned. I think, mainly, we didn't know how to make this the pressing issue of the time, or we were in the wrong place at the wrong time. You have to either fight for issues that people are concerned about or spend a lot of time drawing attention to those issues. We learned a lot along the way, we made minor improvements at some junctions, we got the conversations going. In my heart I would still like to support people who are concerned about this. I am sorry I haven't done much about it.

What is important is to have a public conversation on the role of punishment. Do we need imprisonment and hefty fines for minor crimes? This is where the samaaj needs to wake up. Is the purpose of punishment reform or just revenge?, says Rohini Nilekani

**Where do you get your optimistic streak from?**

You have to go into India and meet people. You cannot come back depressed. Most of the time, people are trying to do whatever they can to better their situation. And we tend to meet people who are trying to be part of the solution, so we get energised by them. You have got to be optimistic in a young country.

The second reason is that Nandan is an optimistic spouse.

**You are passionate about civic engagement and about ways to scale it. What is your take on the protests and citizen movements, such as those against the farm laws and against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, that mobilised more people than anyone could have thought possible in an age of web petitions?**

I think when people have to come to the streets to sustain a movement, we have to understand it very carefully, no matter what the politics. In a democracy we have to allow these voices to be heard. It is not easy to come together for collective action these days. It is so much easier to go click click click. In the farmers' agitation we did see the political class taking note. In a democracy, the ability to go out and make your case, whether it is for Nirbhaya, against corruption or environmental pollution, or to demand your rights, which you think are not met, whether it is *anganwadi* workers, whoever it is, we have to respectfully give space for that.

**Is this space shrinking?**

Sometimes governments don't like too much protest. Nobody wants everything spilling out on the streets. Other members of the *samaaj*, too, get angry if the streets are blocked. Worldwide, the space for dissent is shrinking. Yet, when people feel wronged, they will always make themselves heard. In my articles you will see this thread about why governments should allow for dissent, and not be thin-skinned.

**You have written about the dangerous trend towards criminalising minor and common failings.**

Our access-to-justice portfolio is fairly large. Actually, there is consensus at many levels, and this government has scrapped a lot of outdated laws. What is important is to have a public conversation on the role of punishment. Do we need imprisonment and hefty fines for minor crimes? This is where the *samaaj* needs to wake up. There are so many laws criminalising small, human failings. It is a good time to take stock, create the right framework that is discussed openly, about what laws should be made and how punishment should be framed. Issues of crime and punishment need to be discussed in society. Is the purpose of punishment reform or just revenge? All human beings need changes to reform themselves. I am not saying release everybody. But every society has had to deal with crime and punishment. This question has to stay alive—what is the end objective of punishment? How should society respond? I am interested in this public discourse.

We need to imagine a new public policy oriented towards what the 200 million or so young men in this country need. It's not just sports and skilling. It needs to be more than that, says Rohini Nilekani

**Is there a middle ground between rights-based activism and community action?**

A lot of people are inspired to speak up for those who are left behind. They feel it is their moral duty. When you meet them, you realise they are full of that zeal. I do admire that. But there is also a space, which is being filled increasingly in today's civil society, where people see themselves as actionists rather than activists. That's the middle ground where you don't deny the injustice, you don't only play the role of calling it out loudly, you work through the system, to figure out how things can be changed for the better. You find champions inside the system, you find support in society, you look for sources in the bazaar, you try to build bridges, create constructive positive work around the problem. That element is growing in civil society. For instance, after Aadhaar, so many organisations have set up help centres to help people understand their rights and translated government policy to make it accessible to citizens. Those are critical things. They are also asking people to be more aware and to know what they have to do. If you look at Reap Benefit, for instance, their Solve Ninjas go into their own communities and figure out how to solve local problems through community action.

As part of continuing the work I began on *Uncommon Ground*, we have helped incubate an organisation, which was already doing work on mediation to create what we call the societal muscle for dialogue. How do you prepare people and societies to reduce or prevent conflict? It's almost a science because there are some clear methods you can use. They call themselves Kshetra and they have had a tremendous response. A lot of people from NGOs to corporates to educational institutions want to install this process. We have to see how to scale it.

**Can you tell us about adolescent boys and men as a focus area in your portfolio?**

Earlier as a feminist, and then as someone who feels that we need to go to the root causes of things, when I began to see young men on my travels and the situations they find themselves trapped in, I felt it was important to think of a portfolio of approaches to address the issues they are facing. I don't think they have enough safe spaces or role models. They are often forced into identities that are thrust on them. We need to imagine a new public policy oriented towards what the 200 million or so young men in this country need. It's not just sports and skilling. It needs to be more than that. This has been interesting us and when we started supporting organisations dealing with it, there were just one or two, now there are 14-15 who are working with young men and trying to help them, sometimes just giving them a bit of space to speak and think. We have to secure the future of all our youth and look at what could go wrong with them and try to prevent it.

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