

Putting Samaaj on top for positive collective action

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3–4 minutes

This is the third book by philanthropist and civil society leader Rohini Nilekani, the founder of Arghyam, a foundation that works towards sustainable water and sanitation goals, and Pratham Books, a publishing nonprofit that helps millions of children to read books.

Samaaj Sarkaar Bazaar is a collection of Nilekani's articles, speeches, and interviews, which offers an overarching framework for India to achieve its full potential. The book is divided into six chapters covering a range of topics from justice and governance to water and environment.

In the Introduction and Epilogue, the author explains why India must get the ordering of Samaaj (society), Sarkaar (government) and Bazaar (market) right. Nilekani recalls a conversation she had with a local NGO partner, Prem Kumar Varma, during a road trip to [Khagaria](#) in Bihar in 2007. "Premji", she says, outlined the ways in which power had shifted between Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar

in India over time.

In the good old days, he said, Samaaj would be on top, and Sarkaar below it. During the British Raj, however, the Sarkaar took over, and India's Samaaj and its norms were pushed down. However, Bazaar remained below both these entities.

After Independence, Sarkaar remained on top, while Bazaar tried to get close to Sarkaar. After economic liberalisation, however, the inversion has been complete.

Bazaar now dominates, Sarkaar is in the middle, and Samaaj is placed last, exploited and “unable to defend and help itself”. This, the author says, is true globally as well. The role of the state became all important in the wake of the World Wars. However, over the decades that followed, markets came to dominate across the world.

Nilekani posits that we should think of Samaaj as “the foundational sector which alone can hold the Sarkaar and Bazaar accountable to the larger public interest”. She points to the ways in which social cohesion is taking a hit — rising inequality threatens to create a backlash against wealth creation, and climate anxiety is growing.

In order to heal, India must reset the order of the three entities and give primacy to Samaaj. “For true equity and justice to prevail, it should be elements within Samaaj that assert moral leadership and maintain harmony,” Nilekani writes, adding that these responsibilities cannot be delegated to Sarkaar or Bazaar.

Of course, Samaaj is neither a monolith nor bereft of its own conflicts such as caste and gender discrimination. That is why it is important for people to get involved directly and to not wait for solutions to emerge on their own. And getting involved, she says, means far more than the “empty clicktivism” of the digital age.

Nilekani ends the book with the evocative image of the “miraculous murmuration of starlings”. “The metaphor of this dynamic fractal is incredibly powerful,” she writes. “When we are engaged in action with mindful awareness of those around us, together we become better and bigger versions of ourselves”.

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