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**THE TIMES OF INDIA**

# Our society has become so unequal. The wealthy need to be taxed more, says Rohini Nilekani

Nov 26, 2017, 01.00 AM IST



*Rohini Nilekani is a bit nervous that people might have "an overdose of the Nilekanis" as she and her husband Nandan have been in the news all week for having signed the Giving Pledge, committing half their wealth — about \$1.7bn — to philanthropy. She believes philanthropy isn't just about giving but is also a means to start conversations about "deep societal issues" that don't get enough attention. She tells Shalini Umachandran why she thinks the wealthy have to be taxed more, and philanthropy requires both heart and mind.*

Isn't philanthropy outside the system — money channelled towards causes an individual believes are important, unlike taxes that are meant for schools, hospitals and putting in place systems that ensure equality for all?

The tax-GDP ratio of India is pathetic and we need more forms of good taxes on the wealthy; not regressive but progressive taxes. The wealthy in India are lightly taxed, according to me — there might be others who disagree and certainly I'm not an economist — but it needs to be discussed. In the last 300 years, we have learnt that if you tax people too much they can't do creative work, but if you tax them too little, it certainly doesn't help. It is becoming a question worldwide: how much wealth creation should be allowed? Society has become so unequal. That was not how modern democracy was supposed to pan out. These questions are going to open up whether we like it or not. Taxation should be raised because that's one way of looking at

how much money is in the hands of the wealthy. Secondly, there is a big move by the government against black money and that is good because it should be much harder for people to evade taxes. Thirdly, there should be more public pressure and media focus on wealth creation and use, and the state should address the question of balancing out society.

Can individual philanthropy not linked to government achieve scale?

Individuals can touch thousands, probably lakhs, but for real change that is measurable, transparent, institutional and sustainable you have to work with the state. It is sometimes difficult but it is the only way. However, it is very important that philanthropy exists. Philanthropy means that if I see somebody in need, I reach out, have empathy and want to change something I feel is not right. Having excess wealth, time, energy or passion helps you to do that — and that is important. It doesn't matter how much, but it is about participating.

Would crowdfunding be more participatory?

Yes, crowdfunding allows many people to join efforts of social change. Let's take instituting scholarships — one way to do it would be for a big donor to take up the whole thing. The other way is for the donor to start a platform for lots of people to participate. The donor could still make the largest contribution, but more people are involved, aware. It changes the way we think about societal support for change. It brings out empathy and gives everyone agency.

You back a group working with young men and boys. Why is work on masculinity important?

For the last few years, I've been thinking about gender and its root causes. It's not just women who are trapped in patriarchy. Men, too, grow up in a deeply patriarchal environment, which we need to help them break out of. There are 150 to 200 million young males in India; many are undereducated, underemployed, have poor role models, have many aspirations they fear will not be met. I don't know if they have safe spaces to talk about how they feel trapped in their gender identity. What can we do

to help young men evolve to their best self for their own sake and that of society? We need creative and innovative solutions that can turn into policy backed by public money, and I'm interested in that.

Could the CSR law help philanthropy?

The CSR law is outsourcing governance. Business communities are not good at being forced to do philanthropy. The real corporate social responsibility we need from all companies is that they follow laws relating to labour, social justice, taxation, pollution, basically all laws. CSR should be about big companies helping smaller companies achieve good corporate governance, and ensuring they don't put the cost of doing business on society. For instance, funds from big companies could flow to smaller ones to help set up waste management units. That would be great use of CSR money.

Do Indian philanthropists avoid backing political, human rights-related issues?

Indian philanthropy tends to be safe. Across the world, there are amazing examples of people doing deeply political philanthropy. I think people here are nervous, and they may have good reason to be. It could also be that they do not share the views of many grassroots NGOs. But every complex social issue is about politics, in the sense of power structures. Education and health are the most political issues because if you look at it deeply, they are about equity and access. You can't escape deep political issues while doing philanthropy or you won't get very far.