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Giving Pledge is not meant to be prescriptive: Rohini Nilekani

Rohini Nilekani on why she and her husband Infosys chairman Nandan Nilekani signed up for Bill Gates and Warren Buffett's Giving Pledge initiative

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Rohini Nilekani says that finding ways for inspired citizens to engage in societal questions is at the heart of a good society. Photo: Abhishek B.A./Mint

Rohini Nilekani and her husband, Infosys Ltd chairman Nandan Nilekani, pledged at least half their wealth to charity last month, the fourth among Indians to sign up for The Giving Pledge initiative started by Microsoft Corp. founder Bill Gates and Berkshire Hathaway Inc. chairman Warren Buffett.

The Nilekanis, whose estimated net worth is \$1.74 billion, work in the field of water and education, among other initiatives. In their The Giving Pledge letter, the couple state that “wealth comes with huge responsibility and is best deployed for the larger public interest”.

In a phone interview from Bengaluru, Rohini Nilekani explains why the couple felt the need to sign the pledge, how wealth can influence policy and how societal platforms will help them scale up. Edited excerpts:

Why the need for a public pledge right now, you are already doing a lot in the field of Indian philanthropy as it is?

I think the signalling matters because the Indian wealthy are not giving enough. We must overcome our cultural barriers that giving should be a private and silent activity. It took us so long to decide on signing the pledge because we had to get over our own cultural roots of being quiet about one's giving. Also, it will help us more now to be a part of the Giving Pledge circle since both Nandan and I are willing to spend more and more of our time and energy on this. Together with Nandan's time, it makes it more powerful for us to be able to do our giving better and therefore we are much more responsive.



Will you both be looking at the same philanthropic initiatives?

Some of Nandan's philanthropy and mine will continue to be separate because we focus on different things and some will converge. There are some things we are learning to do together like EkStep which we have set up. We are learning from each other. Not much has changed except that for the first time Nandan and I will be doing more focused and impactful work together.

How does a collaborative effort like The Giving Pledge become relevant for philanthropists who work on specific issues in their own geographies?

Signing the pledge does not mean we are not open to other things. It's just a statement of intent to publicly hold ourselves accountable for giving away 50% of our wealth. That's all it is. It does not mean we are locked into collaborating only with the people who are part of the pledge. The Giving Pledge is not meant to be prescriptive or restrictive.

Philanthropy as a collaborative effort—does The Giving Pledge provide you with a forum that will help you focus more on collaboration? Can you not learn all this from outside too?



Some of us have been trying to work together, maybe not as much as we could or should but certainly it is happening. But it is very hard. There are many different ways of collaborating: simply or in a complex way. Simple is when people just co-fund a project they believe in but when we say collaboration it is often about meshing efforts in a way that it produces more than the sum of the parts. That is very tough and that is why we are designing this idea of societal platforms where the partnerships can be a little more seamless.

Explain the concept of societal platforms.

When you keep un-bundling various aspects of a social problem, you can arrive at a very basic, common space. In education, for instance, there is always a teacher and a learner. That is completely context-independent, context-invariant. And all teaching-learning needs content of some kind. That is also context-independent. So, in the base infrastructure of a societal platform for education, there would be content creation tools. Then, at the second level, which is more dependent on the context, there would be, for example, math worksheets which are built with the content creation tools from the base infrastructure. These could be built by any relevant entity, and shared back on the platform, because openness and sharing are a core part of the design. And finally, there is a much more context-specific level, where someone needs to deploy those math worksheets in their specific language or region or for specific grades or needs. So, for example, a state government could use those worksheets, have them translated into the state language if they were created in another language, and deploy them in the classroom. As these are all digitally enabled layers, data keeps emerging, almost as an automatic exhaust, creating rapid feedback loops.

Certainly there are no silver bullets, but we believe this approach of designing societal platforms is applicable to many, though not all social sectors. It requires philanthropic capital, especially to help develop the technology, an intensive part of the platform architecture. We are willing to invest risk capital into this.

Where did this idea of societal platforms come from?

My work at Pratham Books, which I used to call a societal mission and Nandan's work at Aadhaar—the building of a technology platform for identity. If you combine these two it's the work that EkStep does. From there we came to the idea of societal platforms, which has at the core a sophisticated digital infrastructure and on top of that many layers for co-creation and

amplification. So that any entity with a stake in positive change can participate, be it a non-profit, a state government, or even market players. We are in the process of developing the idea further.

Is this Giving Pledge a way of saying that you will work for social change when it is about scale?

Once you sign the pledge you know you have to give away so much money that you have to think scale. We now have to design our efforts for bigger impact and scale. It's a forcing function, a behaviour-shaping constraint. We have to think bigger, and differently.

Bill Gates has always been very vocal that scale comes only with governmental partnerships. Do you also believe in that?

The way modern nations are set out, a lot of the function of social welfare is given to the state to execute and enable. If you want to achieve something large, something on a population scale, who has the reach? Obviously it will take all levels of the state to do it. The only way you can reach all the people who need to be reached is if you partner with the state. Having said that, I do want to make a point today that our state institutions are not exactly doing well.

We must put a spotlight on how the state infrastructure itself is crumbling and that makes it doubly hard to work with the state. We need to build back the ability and power of the state to be transparently doing what it is supposed to be doing. There is no point in saying we need to work with the state without adding that we also need to build the capacity of the state.

Is it then easy to really separate the politics from the philanthropy?

I don't personally think so. I have never hesitated to say that all philanthropists do have their politics. All of us have a political point of view; some of us articulate it, some of us don't. Anyone who works in this sector will have their way of understanding how change must happen and obviously they are going to use their money to make the change happen in a way they see fit.

In The Giving Pledge letter you talk of individual citizens as stakeholders. How do you hope to engage with them?

My belief is that a lot of work has to be done investing in the samaj (society) and building up the strength of citizens and citizen groups so that they are able to become part of the solution and not remain part of the problem. States and markets operate in the context of society, not in a vacuum. Finding ways for inspired citizens to engage in societal questions is at the heart of a good society. A societal platform hence must have space for inspired individual citizens to pick something from the platform and deploy it.

The pledge talks about being inter-generational. Did you have long-drawn conversation with your children?

Both our children are very socially aware. They are very sensible about their wealth and will find lots of satisfaction engaging with philanthropy rather than staying away from it. In fact, I think our daughter is going to make sure we get more and more efficient at giving. She is a very strategic thinker and I expect and hope she will be involved.

There is an old argument that such public declarations of donations in specific areas can impact policy decisions. How would you tackle this?

I think we should be very clear that wealth has power behind it. That is why it is very important for philanthropists to be self aware of the impact they can have. While we remember the power of intent, we cannot deny the power that comes with wealth to shape public policy. We need to look in the mirror a lot. Our wealth has power attached to it and possibly we can influence things to suit our beliefs. But also remember that most philanthropists who do this are trying because they want to see a positive change towards progressive principles and not regressive ones. There need to be checks and balances like media attention, people asking how philanthropy is working. This however is not the reason to prevent philanthropy.

Among the criticisms of the pledge is that most of the money does not end up getting spent for many years. Do you have a timeline of how you will start spending?

Look, we have been giving for 20 years and we will give till we drop dead. Even beyond us, this pledge is now public and our children are beholden to it. It is a continuous process.

Who among the people who have signed the Giving Pledge would you like to learn from and why?

We will be joining the annual gathering of the Giving Pledge next year and at that time, we'll do a lot of homework and look at more specifically what people are doing and who we would especially like to meet and talk to. Right now, I don't have any names that just pop up.

Would your philanthropy model also look at supporting social entrepreneurs? You do talk about innovations in your letter.

I think it is important and Nandan is much better at that. My expertise is in non-profit institutions and I don't instinctively know how to support the for-profit side.

What are your focus areas right now in philanthropy?

Aside from water and education, I have been talking about gender, focusing on young men and boys. I have a big environment portfolio because I think we will be making a huge mistake if we don't protect our ecology and it will have the biggest impact on the poor. I am opening up some work on mental health and justice. My approach is do some big bang stuff and spend a lot of focus time and also open up new areas of investigation for pilots. My immediate time is not required for the latter and my staff and institutions can be involved rather than me directly. I want to add that in India, philanthropists should think about climate change and see if we are keeping space in our portfolio for this.

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