



SAMAAJ
SOCIETY

SARKAAR
STATE

BAZAAR
MARKETS

a citizen-first approach

ROHINI NILEKANI

Rohini Nilekani is an author and philanthropist and has been a strong influence in the Indian social sector over the past three decades. Her philanthropic work spans different sectors of Indian civil society. She founded Arghyam, a foundation for sustainable water and sanitation, and co-founded Pratham Books, nonprofit enabling access to reading for millions of children. Currently, she is the Chairperson of Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies and a Co-founder and Director of EkStep, a nonprofit education platform. Rohini and her husband, Nandan Nilekani are signatories to the Giving Pledge, pledging to give away half of their wealth to philanthropy.

Rohini's first book, *Stillborn*, a medical thriller, and her second, *Uncommon Ground*, were published by Penguin Books India. She is also the author of 16 books for young children.



Epilogue

I am so happy that the phrase ‘Samaaj Sarkaar Bazaar’ has received widespread acceptance recently and has come into regular usage across the board. I am certainly not claiming to have invented the phrase but am perhaps guilty for overusing it. I find it especially gratifying when people who do not speak any Indian language still attempt to use these three unfamiliar words, along with Society, State, and Markets.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. There is so much more to be analyzed and written about this framework, where I posit that we should think of Samaaj as the foundational sector, which alone can hold the Sarkaar and Bazaar accountable to the larger public interest. I have put this book together with the fond hope that it will trigger thinking, especially among young people, about the role of all three sectors.

Given India’s demographic, with 43% of the population under the age of 25,^{xlv} young people may have to bear the brunt of a Samaaj that cannot heal itself. With rising inequality, there is potential for a backlash against wealth creation itself. With rising climate anxiety, there is fear of a return to a zero-sum mentality. With rising polarization, there is dread of the breakdown of the social order. All these will disproportionately impact young people and their future. To counter these negative energies, we can be inspired by the simple truth that to be human is to have empathy. To be human is to be creative. To be human is to collaborate.

In the face of the negative trends mentioned above, we need to build societal muscle to prevent and reduce conflict. We need safe spaces for people to talk across their divides in our thriving democracy. Years ago, I experimented with bringing leaders from the corporate and social sectors to talk to each other instead of at each other. I hosted a show called 'Uncommon Ground' on NDTV and wrote an eponymous book^{xlvi} later. Now Kshetra,^{xlvii} a new social start-up, is going way beyond that to build safe spaces for dialogue. They are developing creative tools and processes that groups can use to talk beyond divides and to nurture empathy. So far, the demand has been more than the team can manage, which is a good portend.

I also feel very inspired by the hundreds of organizations that have sprung up recently to galvanize young people into civic action. When I catch up with young, dynamic leaders like Krutika Ravishankar and Arti Dhar of Farmers for Forests, Shloka Nath of the India Climate Collaborative,^{xlix} Jithin Nedumala of Make a Difference,ⁱ Abhay Jain and Swapnil Shukla of Zenith Legal Servicesⁱⁱ and many others, any anxiety I might be feeling about the future simply vanishes. They bring so much energy, passion, diversity, and creativity into the work they do, whether it is for better access to justice, or more environmental sustainability, or for the rights and dignity of the most vulnerable of communities. Slowly but surely, they are building solid processes for youth to become more active as concerned citizens. That is tremendous news and makes me hopeful for the future.

While Samaaj must look inwards first, it also needs to reach out to the state and markets. Given that we are facing incredibly complex issues in this century, it seems imperative that Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar reduce the friction to cooperate, since no problem worth solving can be resolved without all three sectors doing what they know best. As

examples, we are seeing some interesting tripartite partnerships being attempted, especially in the existential issues of clean energy and climate change.

At its best, such inter-sector cooperation can do wonders. I glimpsed this potential at Pratham Books, where we saw how a societal movement to create content for children can be unleashed by using open-source platforms, partnering with the state, and inviting the market to leverage the content for a fee. Perhaps it is relatively easy to reach tens of millions of children with stories, as society is well-vested in children.

We saw a more recent and powerful example^{lii} of the collective power of cooperation during the global pandemic of Covid-19. In so many places around the globe, and certainly so in India, ordinary people, civil society institutions, private philanthropy, the state, and also markets came together in record time to push back the virus. For all the dark days of death and desperation, it was truly an important two years in human history. We have learnt so many lessons that when the next crisis comes around, we might be better prepared to cooperate more quickly and effectively.

For some years now, my husband Nandan, myself, and our many highly talented colleagues such as Pramod Varma, Shankar Maruwada and Sanjay Purohit, have been imagining a new framework, which we hope will provide one of many pathways to better align the talents of the three sectors. We call it Societal Thinking.^{liii}

Here is the official descriptor of Societal Thinking – “It is a systemic approach, including a set of values and design principles, to reimagine and induce exponential social change by redesigning the core interactions between all the actors across Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar.”

In essence, the approach is fairly simple. Most people might agree that we need to create mechanisms for the three sectors to work together with some common shared infrastructure, which is unified but not uniform, since problems have to be resolved contextually in diverse situations. For this, we believe there is a need for an open-source, technology-enabled backbone that helps many nodes connect to many others. This allows for rapid knowledge exchange which leads to better feedback loops and coordination. As the network keeps growing, everyone can contribute to this system, which leverages the strengths of each one and improves the value of all.

For example, Sarkaar brings in the scale for greater impact. There are more than 13 million teachers in India's government school system and more than a million ASHA health workers. No other sector can bring in such numbers. The Bazaar knows how to put energy and investments behind reducing the cost of products and services, bringing in much needed innovation and efficiency. The Sarkaar and Samaaj cannot match that ability. And last but not least, Samaaj brings in the diversity, the context, and the empathy. The state and the markets simply cannot reach or tailor to the last mile (or as we prefer to say – the first mile). By working together without stepping on each other's toes, the three sectors can generate high impact at the near scale of any societal problem, and hopefully with the urgency that it usually demands. Societal Thinking can be applied to almost any sector of development. It allows people and institutions to cooperate on an open platform, allows leaders to distribute the ability to solve, and to tap into the collective intelligence of society. As an evolving, learning network, the platform interaction can crunch the time to generate sustainable impact.

We are beginning to see some results from the deployment of societal thinking in many sectors, though we admit it is early days. One such

example is through our work at EkStep Foundation. We worked closely with the Union Ministry to set up the DIKSHA^{liv} platform they had envisaged, to build the capacity of teachers across the country and to enable the creation of more learning resources for students. Within a short time, millions of teachers were able to use the system that we helped the government design, to get right-sized, just in time content for their classrooms; to exchange best practices in a peer-to-peer network; and to draw in children from across the country and sometimes parents as well. During the pandemic, which forced all teaching to go online, the number of teaching/learning transactions on DIKSHA reached the billions, allowing millions of teachers to enhance access to learning opportunities for their pupils. DIKSHA continues to evolve in many directions, inviting more participation from philanthropy, markets, CSOs and citizen volunteers too, through many extensions of the platform. This learnability, this evolvability is at the heart of sustainability in Societal Thinking.

To be honest, though, the real issue preventing more such inter-sector cooperation is the trust deficit. People don't trust each other or the government and markets; the government doesn't trust civil society institutions; the Bazaar is wary of the state; and so on in multiple combinations of mistrust. While some of that is creative tension that separates the powers and responsibilities of each sector, it can also delay common goals of abundance and inhibits freedom for all.

Civil society organizations are good at helping bridge this trust divide between citizens and citizens; citizens and their governments; corporates and the state; and markets and consumers. They create mechanisms to cool passions, enable compromise by holding community meetings during turbulences, and they can help shine the torch on problem areas before they cascade by compiling good data and through compassionate journalism.

Social media, with its ability to trivialize, to heighten the emotional response, and to sustain mutual animosities makes this job much harder. It gives more voice and power to trolls than to ordinary citizens who may hold back.

As we redesign our democracy for this new digital age, how can the space for civil society institutions – including professional media, which I believe to be the cornerstones of democracy – be reimaged? Can there be better policy environments so that CSOs can operate in today's polarized atmosphere without fear, to play their role as mirrors and conscience-keepers more effectively?

In 2022, it does feel as though India is at a crossroads yet again. Which path will the Samaaj of India choose to go?

Will it find its true bearings in the founding values of the Indian Constitution, a document of hope writ together by hundreds of leaders after years of active, open debates? Will this nation of ancient, shared histories, remain true to its syncretic heritage? Will an inclusive, liberal idea of India, wrongly and unfairly assumed to be owned only by a Western educated elite, be replaced by a new framing in a culturally resurgent India? Will India's youth, who are naturally idealistic and optimistic, choose freedom from what Tagore called "the dreary sands of dead habits", and choose to swim in the "clear stream of reason"?

Many people I have spoken to express an enduring faith in the resilience and diversity of this 5000-year-old civilization that has assimilated so many cultures into its polity and traditions. The more one group in Samaaj has tried to dominate the narrative, the more other groups have risen up to balance the equations again. We have often been unified but we have never been uniform. As in nature, our diversity may be our biggest strength in the decades to come.

Looking ahead, I feel optimistic for the long term. The arc of history would suggest that we are capable of moving towards ever greater inclusion, ever more dignity, choice, and freedom. If we map the big social movements that have swept the globe in the past three hundred years or so, we find some evidence for this idea. Think of the anti-slavery movements, the anti-apartheid mission, the anti-caste movements, national campaigns for independence from colonial and imperial powers, and the women's movement, including the power to vote. Let's also remember the role of art and culture groups that consistently and sometimes radically inspire Samaaj to learn from its past in order to reimagine its present and future. Of course, there are always temporary setbacks, just as there are strong backwashes in a rising tide. The pandemic was certainly one such setback, throwing India's development trajectory off track^{lv} just when millions had moved out of poverty. But these might just benefit the future direction towards inclusive justice by unleashing introspection, innovation, and investment.

The world of nature, especially in India's rich, multihued forests, has been my refuge, my inspiration, and the temple for my sadhana (practice) in this personal journey. As I look to the horizon, the lasting image for me is that of the miraculous murmuration of starlings. As they fly in high-speed synchronicity, thousands of these little birds can project in the collective the same form as in the individual. The big sky shimmers with the mesmerizing starling form made up of myriad small starlings. The metaphor of this dynamic fractal is incredibly powerful. When we are engaged in action with mindful awareness of those around us, together we become better and bigger versions of ourselves. If only we could imagine a murmuration where Samaaj, Sarkaar and Bazaar could move seamlessly together, with Samaaj at the head, painting a gigantic picture of a being at its humane best.