

Rohini Nilekani of Arghyam: 'We Focus on Lifeline Water'

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Dec 03, 2012, India West



Indian residents in a district facing a drinking water shortage wait with plastic pots at a community tube well to collect drinking water in Bangalore Oct. 8. A nonprofit called Arghyam, founded by Rohini Nilekani, is hoping to change the ways water is delivered and distributed. (AFP/GettyImages)

BERKELEY, Calif., United States

Grounded and detail-driven, water activist [Rohini Nilekani](#) is committed to helping India solve its water crisis one village at a time. Nilekani, the founder and chair of [Arghyam](#), an NGO based in Bangalore that works to improve water and sanitation in small towns across India, spoke about the reach of her work to a near-capacity audience at UC Berkeley's Richard C. Blum Hall Oct. 30.

Her talk was presented under the aegis of [Urban WASH: Paradigms for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for the 21st Century South Asian City](#), an urban water initiative headquartered at [UC Berkeley's Center for South Asia Studies](#), and was facilitated by UC Berkeley water specialist [Prof. Isha Ray](#), the lead faculty of this initiative.

If Nilekani's name sounds familiar, that is because she is probably better known as the founder of [Pratham Books](#) (I-W, Oct. 26), a nonprofit publishing house that has provided more than 10 million high-quality, India-centric books to poor children in India. Most of the books are priced at around 25 rupees.

Nilekani is a former journalist whose 1981 investment of Rs. 10,000 in her husband Naland Nilekani's company, Infosys, has now made her one of India's richest women. Forbes named her one of its ["48 Heroes of Philanthropy"](#) in 2010.

"I call myself an 'accidental philanthropist,'" she said at UC Berkeley. "Too many external factors made that money, so it should be shared forward. I feel that the money is not really mine."

While Pratham Books continues to thrive, Nilekani decided to branch out in another direction. Why water, she was asked at the beginning of her talk. "I wanted to work on something that would have a strategic impact," explained Nilekani. "I found that people were focused enough on education, but that no one was focusing on lifeline water."

Nilekani started the public charitable foundation Arghyam in 2005, "literally 'jumping into the deep end,'" she quipped. The word "Arghyam" means "offering" in Sanskrit, she said.

Arghyam is a funding agency based in Bangalore which facilitates implementation and research to support evidence-based advocacy and influence policy in cities and towns in 3,000 villages across India — located in mountains, deserts, flood plains and coastal areas.

According to Arghyam's figures, India has around 4,000 billion cubic meters of water, with around 1.86 BCM readily available for use. Some cities may sit over aquifers yet prefer to get their drinking water from lakes and rivers farther away, which drives up costs and limits access.

One key to Arghyam's success is that the NGO doesn't preach a methodology to its grantees — instead, its officers listen to the needs and challenges of each microeconomy it encounters on the ground. What works for one small town may not work in another, so Nilekani says it's vital that Arghyam tailor its approach to each location it touches.

In Kerala, it could be an open well designed to recharge levels of rain water. In Karnataka, it could be a fluoride mitigation project. In Bihar, it could mean installing a matka (clay pot) water filter in each home, or composting toilets to keep a community water supply clean. “We don’t come as a patron,” said Nilekani. “We believe in creating mutual partnerships.”



Arghyam is especially proud of one of its most spectacular successes, “[The Mulbagal Experience](#),” which looked at the problems in Mulbagal, a town in Kolar district, 100 kms from Bangalore. Working with a consortium of partners from government, civil society, academic, and other water sector institutions, Arghyam transformed their water system from polluted and diseased to clean. As an added bonus, their work in Mulbagal uncovered an ancient temple tank

(kalyani) in the town filled with garbage, weeds and snakes — and enlisted the townspeople to clean it up and bring it back to its ancient glory.

The NGO is also working to change policy both at the grassroots panchayat level and in the Central Government, said Nilekani. Arghyam is aware of the large-scale impact of private companies such as Coca-Cola, which is accused of creating huge water shortages in Kerala, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu and inciting local activism. “We are in a time of extreme transition,” she said. “People are organizing.”

Nilekani’s talk at UC Berkeley was the second in a series of lectures organized by the [Sarah Kailath Memorial Lecture Series](#) on the theme of women and leadership (the first speaker in the series was [California Attorney General Kamala Harris](#)). The lecture series derives from the Sarah Kailath Chair in India Studies, which was established by award-winning Stanford engineering professor and Padma Bhushan [Thomas Kailath](#).





As Nilekani explained, one of the most valuable things Arghyam can give to a community is a new sense that it can find its own water solutions — even a system as small as a single schoolhouse rainwater collecting device. “Sometimes people in deep poverty can get stuck in a cycle of helplessness,” Nilekani explained. “So a small catalyst can really make a difference.”