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PREM AHLUWALIA

# RAJASHREE BIRLA

*Philanthropist par excellence*

The renowned philanthropist Rajashree Birla is the Director on the Board of all the major Aditya Birla Group of Companies: viz., Aditya Birla Nuvo, UltraTech Cement Ltd., Grasim and Hindalco. She is also the Director of the Aditya Group's International Companies in Thailand, Egypt, Indonesia and Philippines. Besides, she is the Chairperson of the Aditya Birla Center for Community Initiatives and Rural Development, which oversees the corporate social responsibility programs and projects of the Aditya Birla Group (ABG) across thirty companies.

Born in Bikaner and raised in Madurai, Rajashree graduated in Arts from Loreto College in Calcutta. She comes from a traditional middle-class Marwari family. Her father was an agent with Burma Shell. Rajashree was just ten years old and Aditya Vikram Birla just fourteen when they were engaged. By the time, she was about to marry him at the age of seventeen, in 1965, her fiancé was taking a lot of interest in her education. She was doing science at Fatima College in Madurai, but switched over to arts later. Encouraged by her husband and with the support of her in-laws, she finished her graduation after marriage. For years after marriage, Rajashree concentrated on taking care of her home and children and was not involved in the family business.

In 1995, tragedy struck and Rajashree went through the most difficult phase of her life. She lost her husband, who was only 52 then. He was ill for four months, suffering from cancer. Her son, Kumar Mangalam, who was just 27 then, had to take over the business. He was a qualified chartered accountant and had an MBA from the London Business School. She is proud of him and says that he is running the companies admirably with the highest standards of governance and ethics and is an excellent human being. Though Rajashree is not engaged in running the business, in her capacity as the Chairperson of CSR, she is looking after the social and welfare driven work across all the companies.

"Right from my childhood," avers Rajashree Birla, "I have always felt deeply touched by the plight of the underprivileged. I wanted to open an orphanage, where we could look after destitute children. That was my dream. When I got married, Adityaji fully empathized with me. Almost three decades ago, the first thing that the two of us wanted to do was to set up a home for destitute children. So, we set up the Aditya Birla Centre for the Welfare of Children in Mumbai. Here we train children through the Industrial Training Institutes in different vocations and help them stand on their own feet. So far, we have trained more than 2,500 boys and more than 90 per cent of them are well placed in factories. Some of them have started small scale enterprises". She further says, "Importantly, I must also add that quite honestly it's the family environment that is a great influencer. We have been deeply influenced by my grandfather-in-law, Ghanshyam Das Birla. He in turn was deeply influenced by Gandhi's values of truth, non-violence, and justice. These values were passed on from generation to generation. It is a legacy, which we have closely guarded. These values and the trusteeship concept, which says that part of the wealth, must be used for the welfare of the society, and the

philosophy of giving and caring has become part of our DNA. G.D Birla put in a vast amount of his wealth in building magnificent temples, excellent schools, and Dharamshalas all over the country, and financing the freedom struggle. This philosophy of caring and giving is thus embedded in the Birla family. So long before Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) became a buzz word in the corporate lexicon, it had long been embedded into our Group's value systems".

Rajashree Birla's exemplary leadership in corporate philanthropy is significantly felt by the extent of the reach of the Aditya Birla Centre for Community Initiatives and Rural Development. It spans three thousand villages in India, Egypt, Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and parts of America. Its initiatives in education, healthcare, sustainable livelihood, infrastructure and social reform, make a positive difference in the lives of at least seven million people and the communities they live in. Says she, "our vision at the Centre is to actively contribute to the social and economic developments of the communities in which we operate. In so doing, build a better, sustainable way of life for the weaker sections of society and raise the country's Human Development Index. Today, our social vision forms an integral part of our business vision. A decent roof over one's head is the most minimal need of a human being. A home gives a tremendous sense of security, spurs education, lays the foundation of a sustainable livelihood, and builds a fine family. In India, the housing scenario is a matter of concern. We need fifty million houses in India, of which, twenty-five million units are required in urban India alone. We, at Habitat for Humanity International, endeavour to bridge this gap, albeit in a very small way. We are committed to cross the hundred-thousand homes for the homeless-mark by 2015," vows Rajashree Birla, in her capacity as the Chairperson of Habitat for Humanity India.

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Reflecting on the state of the country, Rajashree Birla says, "We are a country conspicuous for its gaping divides. Divides between urban and rural areas; divides between states, divides between the backward regions and the rest of the country. This is not sustainable, let alone equitable. India cannot let its vast majority remain untouched by development and out of the mainstream. This is the single most important change that must happen quickly. It is here, that we need the engagement of every Indian. Often we hear the phrase that there are two Indias - the India of the cities and the India that exists in the hinterland. And so they say there is one India and there is the other Bharat. When we think of a social vision, we are alluding largely to the rural India and India's poor. This is because after more than six decades of independence, we have not been able to mainstream the marginalized. Of course, every successive government has done its best to execute their social responsibility. But there's still a long distance to cover."

Rajashree Birla is the Chairperson of the FICCI - Aditya Birla CSR Centre for Excellence. She is the Chairperson of FICCI first ever-expert committee on CSR constituted. She holds a string of important positions. She is also on the Board of Asia Pacific Committee as well as Habitat's Global Committee. She is member of the advisory board of The Research Society for the Care, Treatment, and Training of Children in Need of Special Care, Mumbai, and of BAIF Development Research Foundation, Pune. She is also actively involved with the NGO Population First, where the focus is to save the girl child and spread awareness against female feticide. "It happens in educated and rich families also. We work towards eradicating this evil and give scholarships for girl children," she adds. She is on the Executive Committee of the Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti. As a patron of



arts and culture, she heads the Sangeet Kala Kendra, a centre for performing arts, as its President.

Rajashree wears many hats and with each one, she plays her part to perfection. No wonder that several accolades have been bestowed upon her. She received the Government of India's Padma Bhushan Award in the area of social work. A rare distinction, the Economic Times Corporate Citizen of the Year award was bestowed twice upon the Group under her leadership. The All India Management Association conferred the AIMA Managing India Awards - Corporate Citizen of the Year Award on her. The Rajiv Gandhi Award for Eminence in Social Field was awarded to her in 2009. This award recognizes her path breaking work among the poor, more so in India's villages. Pratibha Patil, the former President of India, bestowed the coveted Polio Eradication Champion Award on her at Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi. She is the recipient of the FICCI - FLO Golden Laurel Award for her iconic stature and achievements in the area of CSR. The Pride of India Award was bestowed on her by the Rotary Clubs of Mulund, and The Citizen of Bombay Award by the Rotary Club of Bombay. The Rotarians in Action named her for The Seva Shiromani Award, and the Archana Trust honoured her as The Woman Achiever. The Suryadatta National Award for Lifetime Achievement in CSR was bestowed upon her as well. Dr. Ola Ullsten, the Former Prime Minister of Sweden, conferred the Global Golden Peacock Award for CSR upon her in Portugal. Her fame has spread beyond the shores of India, for the impact, her work has made both in qualitative and quantitative terms.

Says, Dr. Pragnya Ram (Group Executive President, Corporate Communications & CSR), "There is something very touching about her tenacity. She leads with a single minded focus - whatever it takes to lift the poor out of their poverty in her own way. Compassion is the only currency that counts. It is not just about our Group. Her gaze is fixated at the nation. Rajashreeji's vision is to help raise the Human Development Index of India, which today stands at a lowly 134 even though we are on the intellectual map of the world. For her it's not about choices. For her it's a duty. A Karmayogini, she follows the philosophy of hope. An evolved, reflective, iconic leader, she is by nature endowed with a very sunny disposition, an optimistic, can do attitude, always focused, and forever willing to learn afresh. She is a great role model for women per se. Her philosophy of life has a lesson for all of us."

A highly spiritual person, Rajashree reads the Gita regularly. Her favourite phrase is "This too shall pass," just four words, which tells you that everything in life is ephemeral. Her philosophy, she says is simple, 'live, and let live'. "Today, I am about 90 per cent successful in living this philosophy day in and day out. I believe that this live and let live principle embodies the philosophy of tolerance. It helps you recognize that every individual is distinct, different from you and has the right to his own views and attitude. I am also a great believer in self-acceptance. Accepting yourself unconditionally and believing in you is very important. Many times people tick themselves off because they have not measured up to their image of themselves. If it is not for want of effort, you should just let it pass by."

Regardless, of the limelight, Rajashree Birla remains a simple soul and is the personification of humility of the highest order. Her's is a life of purity and of service. She dreams of an India free from poverty; an India of inclusive growth; an India where every person realizes his or her optimal potential; an India where every human being lives a life of dignity; an India that can hold her head high in the hegemony of nations.