

DaanUtsav or The Joy of Giving Week started on 2 October. In a four-part series, *Mint* examines the changes and developments in the sector, speaks to philanthropists and discusses how and why they give. We also look at how donations, even small ones, have the potential to change lives.

The Agas on the dynamics of giving

Anu Aga and her daughter Meher Pudumjee, of energy and environment engineering business house Thermax Ltd, are among India's 100 richest people as per *Forbes* magazine rankings. The mother and daughter duo sees philanthropy as much more than writing out cheques for charity and personal involvement takes priority for both. In an interview, Aga and Pudumjee talk about how they complement each other—one is the heart and the other the head—when it comes to giving. Edited excerpts:

What does philanthropy mean to you?

Pudumjee: Philanthropy to me is the joy of giving, both in terms of my time and my resources to a cause that I passionately believe in.

Aga: And it's different from CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), which is now mandatory for corporates to give. So if my company gives hundreds of crores, it's still not philanthropy, it's CSR. I would like to make that difference.

If I were to take you back a little in your journey, when and why did you first decide to give?

Aga: When I was in college, I didn't have money to give but I gave a lot of my time for the social service league at St Xavier's College. And then later in life, I lost my son in a car accident at the age of 25. He had spent eight years abroad and felt that we were very insensitive to the poverty around us. And he said, unless as a family we give 90% to social causes, he will go away to England. I hate taking a decision at gunpoint, so I told him "Go! I don't want you to tell me what I should do". Then, of course, my daughter and son-in-law got involved and he said, "Sorry, I didn't mean to be aggressive and say what percentage, but what I mean is start giving substantially." And we started in a small way. (It was) only after the company went public 20 years ago that we had money in hand. It was only in the last five-six years that we decided that 30% of our personal wealth dividend income will go towards philanthropy.

What have been the lessons learnt, big surprises, big disappointments, highs or lows?

Pudumjee: In the last five years, I am amazed to see how many youngsters are involved with this whole sense of idealism, giving of their time—just look at Teach For India!

Aga: And though by definition, philanthropy is giving your money, I think if you give your life and your time, I would call that also a form of philanthropy. Earlier, I used to give impulsively, not go into too much asking what the cause was, how they were going to do the work, but ever since my daughter partnered with me, she asks the hard questions and we've never



Anu Aga (right) and daughter Meher Pudumjee of Thermax.

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gone wrong. So it's a good combination.

What is your approach to and model of giving?

Aga: From our personal wealth, we would like to find credible NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and support them not just by writing out cheques, but getting involved with them in long-term planning in many areas.

Pudumjee: We like to fund NGOs rather than do it directly.

How do you think you complement each other and how are you different?

Pudumjee: I think mum and I are very complementary in the sense that she does a lot from the heart, I do more from the head. So I think the combination is really very effective in looking at causes, looking at impact, looking at strategy, doing things differently but trying to bring it together towards a particular outcome.

Aga: For me, human rights is very important. Again in a small way, we help there. Meher is very good at finance. I hate finance. So if there's anything related to figures, I say Meher, you look after it. I think I helped Meher to be a little more trusting.

What would your advice to aspiring philanthropists be?

Pudumjee: For people who have the funds but don't know where to invest them, I would say don't do it on your own. Try and find a good, credible NGO that you trust, that you know other people are working with, that is making an impact. There are so many NGOs doing really good work that are very professionally run, but it is very difficult for them to find funders. And I

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would really urge more and more people to come together, because there are some people who can give money, a cheque, some people who can give time but less of money, and I think all the combinations are required to take things off the ground. And if I can just give one example of a platform called Social Venture Partners which started in Pune a couple of years ago. You give a minimum of Rs2 lakh to join. In Pune, we are 45 partners that have come together. We pool in all the money and we have a grants committee who then chooses which NGOs to support. The NGOs make a presentation to all the partners. Initially I was very sceptical but I think it's such a wonderful way to get more and more people to come together and give their time and a little bit of money, and then see the cause

grow.

Aga: My advice to people who are seeking a cause is to check out different causes and see what they are drawn to. It's no use giving to a credible NGO for a cause you don't feel passionate about.

What according to you should philanthropy work towards in the next 10 years and what will get us there?

Pudumjee: I think there is no dearth of causes in India that require funds. My only fear is that it shouldn't be a little bit here, a little bit there. We really need to look at scale, in whichever way. It doesn't have to be scale in terms of huge amounts, but it has to be scale in terms of impact and sustainable impact.

Aga: I would be a little more specific and say I am ashamed that after 70 years of independence and with our GDP (gross domestic product) growing in the last few years, we haven't solved the malnourishment problem. Second is education. Look at the quality of our education. We love to be ostriches and not face the problem that the quality of education is bad. If we educate people but they can't get jobs, there will be chaos. We all have to realize that business cannot survive in a society that fails.

This interview is a part of the India Philanthropy Series, a joint initiative between Dasra, a strategic philanthropy foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This series which will be launched in 2017 will showcase through videos and a report, the philanthropic journeys of some of the most generous, strategic and innovative philanthropists in India.