

'Philanthropy isn't about just writing a cheque'

Anu Aga says it like it is. She believes in working for a cause, and thinks people confuse social responsibility with philanthropy

masoom.gupte@timesgroup.com

One of the most influential voices promoting philanthropic activity in India, Anu Aga doesn't believe in cheque-book charity.

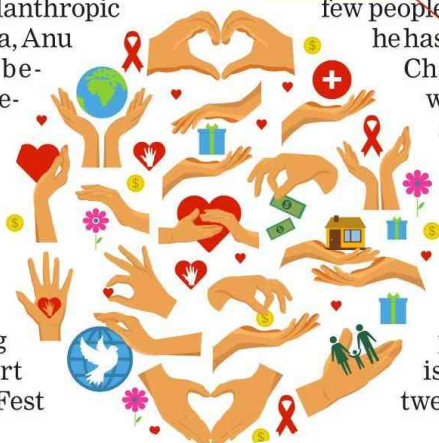
The former Thermax chairperson, who recently met Microsoft founder and philanthropist Bill Gates during his visit to Mumbai, addressed the theme of thoughtful giving—a subject close to her heart—at the recent Times Lit Fest 2016.

A few days prior to the fest, Aga shared her thoughts on philanthropy and the art of giving with ET Panache.

What does philanthropy mean to you?

Philanthropy isn't about just writing a cheque. That's the easiest thing. Get deeply involved with a cause. It is not a rule. It is how I think. I don't pick up many causes, just one or two and I'm actively involved with at least one of them. For me, it is education for the underprivileged and human rights. I'm not so involved with that [human rights]. I just give monetary help.

I think a family gets closer and has a meaningful and purposeful life if they have something to work towards [in terms of their philanthropic initiatives]. I haven't achieved that with my grandchildren yet. But I hope one day they'll come back from their studies and get involved. My daughter is my partner though, and we both encourage each other.



Which India Inc names have inspired you?

The person who has really made an impact is **Azim Premji** [Wipro founder]. I think very few people have been able to do what he has done. I also look up to **Amit Chandra** [MD, Bain Capital], who has done a lot in his personal capacity.

In India, we can count just a couple of names that have done [meaningful] work. A lot of people think that the mandatory CSR counts as personal philanthropy. I feel there is a world of difference between the two.

What are your views on compulsory CSR?

CSR comes from the company. You may be the majority shareholder, but 2 per cent [of the profits which is the compulsory limit for CSR spends] is negligible. It's hardly anything.

I'm not for compulsory CSR. Companies belonging



to the Tatas, the Birlas, even ours have been doing it for a long time. If you make something mandatory in India, we find a way not to do it.

A lot of people here say, "We give employment. We pay our taxes. So, we have done enough." But when you look at the gigantic problems that face our country, I don't think the government can do it alone.

How has your interest in social causes influenced the culture at Thermax?

I've not been able to do that in any significant way. We do involve a few of our employees with Akanksha [Foundation]. Children from Akanksha have spent a day and learnt what the life of a Thermax employee looks like. We've managed a few events like that, but nothing on a regular basis. I don't have the time. We are looking for a person who will be able to engage our people in a meaningful way. So far, I must say we haven't succeeded.



Thermax, that was first helmed by Anu Aga, now has her daughter Meher Pudumjee (inset) as its chairperson



STRENGTH OF A WOMAN

The story of Thermax has been scripted by the women at its helm. It was formerly Anu Aga and now it's her daughter, Meher Pudumjee.

The two spend a lot of time speaking to female employees at their company and ensuring that all issues, including sexual harassment, are addressed. Aga feels that a support system isn't enough.

Women need to be resilient.

"While I'm very happy that we are protecting women, I also feel that women need to be taught to be resilient," Aga says. "If a man tells you a naughty joke and if you don't like it, tell him to shut up. If he asks you to come out, say no if you don't want to. Be firm. If he still insists or harasses you, then escalate it. Don't be submissive, and [learn to] look after

yourself."

"I also find, from what one reads in the papers, women have misused it. 'So and so raped me for two years.' How can that man rape you for two years, unless you are willing? He didn't keep his promise of giving you a promotion or marry you or whatever that was. That is breach of his promise, not rape. I think women also need to be taught not to take advantage of this."