

Corporate Social Responsibility: Modern and Indian Views

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Key words: Corporate Social Responsibility, Indian thought

Abstract

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has attracted increasingly fashionable attention recently. Corporate Social Responsibility refers to corporations voluntarily assuming the responsibilities for the impacts of all aspects of their business activities on the whole society and the environment. The corporations, through Corporate Social Responsibility, try to help the society through development projects towards betterment of the standard of life. The practice of Corporate Social Responsibility is also not free from controversy and criticism. There are two opposing arguments: one, the corporations profit in manifold ways by spending on Corporate Social Responsibility projects; the other, Corporate Social Responsibility is criticized and opposed in that it makes the corporations deviate from their primary economic roles in doing business. The debate has not yet rested. This paper attempts to resolve this debate by highlighting the Indian views of Corporate Social Responsibility.

1 Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has attracted increasingly fashionable attention recently. Corporate Social Responsibility refers to corporations voluntarily assuming the responsibilities for the impacts of all aspects of their business activities on the whole society and the environment. The corporations, through Corporate Social Responsibility, try to help the society through development projects towards betterment of the standard of life. The practice of Corporate Social Responsibility is also not free from controversy and criticism. There are two opposing arguments: one, the corporations profit in manifold ways by spending on Corporate Social Responsibility projects; the other, Corporate Social Responsibility is criticized and opposed in that it makes the corporations deviate from their primary economic roles in doing business. The debate has not yet rested. This paper attempts to resolve this debate by highlighting the Indian views of Corporate Social Responsibility.

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development defined Corporate Social Responsibility as the continuing “commitment of business to contribute to sustainable economic development, working with employees, their families, the local community and society at large to improve their quality of life.”¹ There is numerous definitions but all they mean that Corporate Social Responsibility is about how companies manage the business processes to produce an overall positive impact on society.

2 Corporate Social Responsibility in practice ²

The concept of corporate social responsibility is not new to India though! It has been a well-established tradition in a number of organizations, particularly family-based companies with a strong community ethos. Historically it has been a significant influence, impacting on business, government and society relationships. It has been defined in a number of ways and to a large extent the discussions about 'what it is' have been confused by the variety of perspectives adopted. suggest that four models of social responsibility can be identified as operating in India: (1) Gandhian model: Voluntary commitment to public welfare based on ethical awareness of broad social needs; (2) Nehru model: State-driven policies including state ownership and extensive corporate regulation and administration; (3) Milton Friedman model: Corporate responsibility primarily focused on owner objectives and stakeholder responsiveness which recognizes direct and indirect stakeholder interests.

India is among the few countries where more than four out of five organizations are practicing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), ranging from donating to local charities to undertaking global fair labor standards, an international survey conducted by the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) has revealed. SATYAM COMPUTERS seeks to tone up emergency response system in Andhra Pradesh on the lines of 911 American systems. At Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) there are a host of education programmes. The company aligns itself with the Tata Council of Community Initiatives which is the apex body co-coordinating social initiatives across all Tata companies. TCS is committed to health, safety and environment stems from the Tata Group’s abiding concern for environment and society. While the Tata group companies may continue to provide health services, education and other tangible benefits, its focus is more on building self-reliant communities, and working towards sustainable livelihoods. For this the company intends to involve volunteers from within the group who will be project leaders. They will be responsible for measuring human impact on a five-point scale of human excellence. Their purpose is to improve the quality of lives of the people at all times. Besides them, there are several groups and companies that undertake quite a bit of charitable work but as a matter of policy do not divulge the kind and extent of amount spent on such activities “Maitree” an association of employees and their families across the globe, is an important vehicle of Corporate Social Responsibility. Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation’s Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives centre on education, environment and financial literacy. AGILENT takes initiative to help employees to give education back to the society by allowing its employees to voluntarily take part in this initiative. Besides Agilent also helps schools equip with a computer lab. INFOSYS is utilizing its core competence in the area of technology to bring larger good to the community. As a part of this strategy, the company, along with Microsoft, launched a new program in 1998-99, called Computers@Classrooms. Mahindra

& Mahindra is one such company, and even though the figure against its name shows Rs 1.3 crore, this is just the amount available under the head donations in its annual report and contributes much more in reality. Its activities include the K.C. Mahindra Education Trust, which promotes education at various levels and Nanhi Kali, a programme aimed at helping the underprivileged girl child at the Mahindra Foundation. Table-1 presents a select list of Corporate Social Responsibility innovations from some more of India's leading companies.

Table-1: India Inc.: Selected Corporate Social Responsibility innovations ³

Issue	Company and Corporate Social Responsibility Action
Community development	Hindalco Asian Corporate Social Responsibility Award for its Integrated Rural Poverty Alleviation Programme; Indian Oil Corporation Dedicating 0.75% of net profit to community development initiatives.
Health	Larsen and Toubro One of first corporates to launch an HIV/AIDS programme.
Gender equality	NTPC One of the few organizations to have a policy for the grant of paternity leaves.
Labour standards	ITC First company in India to be certified to the SA8000 social accountability standard for its Chirala facility.
Human capital	Infosys Pioneering evaluation of human capital using an education index for its employees.
Environmental management	BHEL All BHEL units are certified to the ISO14 001 environmental management system.
Energy conservation	Reliance Energy conservation measures are saving the company 1150 million rupees per annum.
Water conservation	Hindustan Sanitaryware Reduced flushing WCs is estimated to save 2 billion litres of water.
Disclosure	Tata Iron and Steel First Indian company to publish a sustainability report in line with Global Reporting Initiative guidelines.

3 Corporate Social Responsibility: The Controversy ⁴

The practice of Corporate Social Responsibility is not without criticism and controversy. Many argue that companies benefit in many ways from Corporate Social Responsibility. While many others criticize that Corporate Social Responsibility is not their basic economic role of business. Still others argue that Corporate Social Responsibility is an attempt to preempt the government's role as a watch dog over powerful MNCs. The quantum and type of benefits the corporations gain from Corporate Social Responsibility varies across companies and industries. A Corporate Social Responsibility programme can be seen as an aid to recruitment and retention. Reputation that takes decades to build can be ruined in hours through incidents such as corruption scandals or environmental accidents. These events also draw unwanted attention from regulators, courts,

governments and media. Building a genuine culture of 'doing the right thing' within a corporation can offset these risks. Corporate Social Responsibility can also play a role in building customer loyalty based on distinctive ethical values. Corporations by taking substantive voluntary steps, they can persuade governments and the wider public that they are taking issues such as health and safety, diversity or the environment seriously, and so avoid intervention.

However critics argue that corporations are fundamentally entities for generating a product and / or service to gain profits to satisfy shareholders. Milton Friedman and others argue that there is no space for social responsibility as a business function. These critics point to the rule of corporate law that prohibits a corporation's directors from any activity that would reduce profits. Corporate Social Responsibility inhibits free markets or seeks to preempt the role of governments in controlling the socially or environmentally damaging effects of corporations' pursuit of self-interest. Also critics believe that Corporate Social Responsibility are often undertaken to distract the public from ethical questions posed by their core operations. Some critics also argue that the reason corporations put in place social projects is for the commercial benefit they see in raising their reputation with the public or with government. Other views are that the corporates really care little for the welfare of the workers or the environment; companies do not pay for the full costs of their impact such as the costs of cleaning pollution.

In spite of these criticisms, corporations practice Corporate Social Responsibility influenced by the following factors: consumers' decisions being increasingly influenced by environmental and ethical concerns; global competition puts pressure on MNCs to gain support for their presence in global markets to maintain competitive advantage through Corporate Social Responsibility activities; social awareness and investors' ethical training to employees in making ethical decisions; role of governments in enforcing and regulating socially responsible behavior by the corporations.

In sum, it can be said that though Corporate Social Responsibility is controversial many corporations practice Corporate Social Responsibility and the trend is increasing. The main point of the controversy revolves around the fundamental economic role of a firm is only to produce goods / services and maximize the returns and that spending on Corporate Social Responsibility programmes is not the responsibility of the corporations. Also Corporate Social Responsibility reduces the returns to the shareholders. Chendroyaperumal (2008) argues that the primary objective of any firm, small or big or bigger, is the primary objective of an economy, is to help sustain the livelihood of the mankind and sustenance of the earth containing the mankind. This implies that Corporate Social Responsibility is very much an objective for all firms and therefore Corporate Social Responsibility is very much the responsibility of all firms of all sizes and types.

4 Corporate Social Responsibility: Indian views

The debate / controversy revolve around the basic objective of the firm. The modern scholars seem claim that the basic objective or role is to produce products and services or to maximize the profits or returns to the shareholders. Voluntary spending on social developmental projects through Corporate Social Responsibility is a deviation from the basic economic role of doing business and this reduces the returns to the shareholders. The other argument is that corporations

profit from the society in manifold ways and that its operations also impact the society and environment and hence corporates have social responsibility.

4.1 Corporate Social Responsibility and Objectives of Firms

Coase traces back the origin of the firms to cost-reductions in allocating a given resource (Cohen, 1979, p-583). To Alchain and Demsetz (1972) the firm came into existence as a result of team-work in production whereas to Knight the firm come into being as a desire to lessen the amount of uncertainty and to shift the incidence of uncertainty (Cohen, 1979, p-581). However Williamson (1981) argued, “(the) transaction-cost economizing... is the only hypothesis that is able to provide a discriminating rationale for the succession of organizational innovations that have occurred over the past 150 years out of which the modern corporation has emerged (p-1564). However to Chendroyaperumal (2006) firms originated to minimize the time-cost, i.e., to do more with less time input, using the basic method of ‘division-of-labour’. Thus a firm originated basically to satisfy the needs of the mankind as a group in lesser time only because every human being is dependent on other human beings to carry out the required economic activities since all those required activities can not be done by any single person all by oneself.

Various scholars have identified and disputed over the internal objectives (micro objectives) of a firm such as profit maximization, sales maximization, revenue maximization, market maximization, growth maximization, wealth maximization, survival of the firm, penetration or entry into the market, satisficing, minimization of loss or damage, maximization of growth rate of sales, maximization of balanced growth, maximization of managerial utility, high liquidity, stability in the short-run (Trivedi, 2002, pp-81-87). Thus the various objectives propounded by the modern economists are only the secondary objectives of a firm having different internal variables in focus. This is similar to the various scholars focusing the importance of the effect of the nine sub-systems in the human body. The importance and role of these variables remain undisputed but it cannot be said that the objective of the human body is to optimize the output of these sub-systems. The objective of a human body remains, as is obvious, to be survival of the mankind and reproduction to serve the personal needs through serving the needs of the society (mankind) as a system using division-of-labour as the method. Similarly all the functions represented by variables are important and hence are to be treated as ‘objectives’ but secondary in nature. These objectives are derived from the primary objective that is to serve the mankind to survive and sustain the earth containing the mankind at the same time as clearly stated in Arthasastra, the science of wealth, is the acquisition and maintenance of Earth The subsistence of mankind and the sustenance of the Earth containing the mankind (Shamasastri, 1967, p-469). This objective gives rise to the objective of ‘survival.’ Thus “all the firms (or business) have only one responsibility in common in that a corporate is not only supposed to produce products / services but also help in all possible ways to ensure the subsistence of mankind of the whole world! Therefore social responsibility is not a deviation from their basic economic role but it is also the primary duty!” (Chendroyaperumal, 2008).

4.2 Corporate Social Responsibility is everyone’s duty

Critics argue that the fundamental objective of corporate is to maximize returns to the shareholders and not to spend on Corporate Social Responsibility programmes reducing the

returns to the shareholders. Indian scholars have clearly reflected the basic purpose of making money. Thirukkural declares the very objective of ‘all’ the money yielded by the manual labour or efforts (i.e. all businesses) is to do the money-farming for the deserving people as stated in Thirukkural below:

*Thaal aatri thandha porul ellaam thakkaarku
Waelaanmai cheydarporuttu.*

(kural-212)

Here the word ‘farming’ carries special significance. That is, in agricultural farming, the output of the harvest is spent for seeding and consumption by the self and others. For instance, paddy harvest is used as either seeds for producing the next harvest or yield and that rest is used for consumption purpose. Similarly the wealth (money) earned should be used for seeding for further earnings and distributed for consumption. Like agricultural farming is not for self-consumption alone but also for the consumption of all, money-farming should also be for self-consumption and public consumption. Thus Thirukkural justifies the corporates’ social responsibility. Thus the critics’ argument that Corporate Social Responsibility is not the responsibility of the corporations is nullified. Moreover the society’s primary responsibility is to extinguish the hunger-fire because the very purpose of all the types of economic systems and activities like serving, begging, overseas trading, acting, governance, and singing songs is only to escape from the physiological need of hunger-cruelty with a handful of meals as stated by Avvayaar in the ‘Best Way’ as below:

*Saywithum sendru erandhum theneerkadal kadandhum
Paavithum paar aandum paatu esaithum povippom
Paalin udambai vayitrin kodumaiyaal
Naali arisikay naam.*

(Nalvali-19)

Again an analysis of all the resources endowed for the Earth-born is nothing but for giving it to others and nothing else and that the prescription of all the people of all the ‘ways-of-life’ (i.e. religions) is to do benevolent help (social welfare) excluding the socially-bad acts to make general or public welfare and to reduce the past sins (social ills) as below:

*Punniam aam paavam poam pona naal cheydha avai
Mannil pirandharku vaitha porul ennungaal
Eedhy oliya waeru illai yechamayathoar chollum
Theedhy oliya nanmai cheyal.*

(Nalvali-1)

Moreover it is the duty or prescribed action for the wealthy is to give at least a thing to the poor and not discharging this duty is just like a very beautiful female becoming very old fully unused or unenjoyed! as stated in Thirukkural below:

*utraarkkondru aatraadhan chelvam miganalam
petraal thamial mooth thatru.*

(Kural-1007)

Thirukkural goes even to the extent of defining wealth as that which is using it for the self and giving it to others for use else it is not wealth even if produced in multiple of infinities (crores).

Thus wealth is defined to mean consumption (use of money) by self and by helping others as below:

*Kodupadhuvoom thuipadhuvoom illarku adukkiya
Codi vondaayinum ill.* (Kural-1005)

Besides, the wealth is a pain to those characters that neither use it for themselves nor give a thing to deserving others, i.e. helping others (social benevolence!) as below:

*Yaedham perumjchelvam thaan thuvvaan thakkaarkondru
Eedhal eyalilaa dhaan.* (Kural-1006)

Again Avvayaar chides those who hoard the hard toiled and amassed wealth by burying them as sinners! That is not enjoying the hard earned money and denying opportunities to others also to enjoy it by burying is defined as a sin! as below:

*Paadu pattu thaedipanathai pudhaitu vaithu
Kaeduketta manidharay! Kaelungal koodu vittu ingu
Aavithaan ponapinbu yaaray anubavippaar
Paavigaal andha panam!* (Nalvali-22)

Thirukkural cautions that the wealth will be taken away by others if earned without any regard to love, comfort and ethics as below:

*Anbu oreeth thatchetru aram nokaadhu eetiya
Oneporul kolvaar pirar.* (Kural-1009)

4.3 Effects of Corporate Social Responsibility programmes

According to Thirukkural the wealth with a great intellectual in this world is like a public tank filled with drinking water;⁵ Wealth lying with a ‘user’, i.e. the one who has use for it, like a use-tree (or investment-tree) fruitioning (benefiting) in the locality (i.e. the local area);⁶ Wealth lying with the generous one is like an unfailing medicine of a tree;⁷ Also, it is rarer to get any other better and useful activity than materially helping the people as a service (corporate social responsibility) in the modern world even now.⁸ Avvayaar also strongly prescribes social responsibility to all saying “do not expect a benefit (help) returned when a help is given (by you) to a person, because even a growing coconut tree steadily and incessantly gives back the water taken from Earth by its roots (from one end) as coconut water from the other end (tree-top).”⁹ This implies that a coconut tree receives water from the Earth through its roots and gives coconut water in return to others, not to the Earth, without expecting anything from the people. This suggests that one should have the macro view of the society in helping others. But the people grow, maintain and protect the coconut trees for the sense of social responsibility (benefits) of the coconut trees! Similarly corporate social responsibility sans expectation will result in growth and protection.

Thirukkural goes one step further and questions the believers on the return-driven corporate social responsibility as to what would they payback to the rain which takes in water from the sea and gives it to the people on the land without expecting anything in return?¹⁰ The simile of rain process implies that the wealth (water) taken from the society (sea) goes back to the society (sea) when given to the others (society) as help. This indicates the circular flow of income in an economy. Therefore Corporate Social Responsibility has an important macro economic role to play in contrast to the claims of some modern scholars that Corporate Social Responsibility is not an economic activity of the micro economic units.

4.4 Corporate Social Responsibility and loss of returns?

Modern critics argue that Corporate Social Responsibility, being beyond the economic role of a firm, is a radiation in the returns or loss to the shareholders. But Thirukkural strongly recommends and highlights the importance of Corporate Social Responsibility as “even if Corporate Social Responsibility (helping the society) results in loss, it is worth selling oneself to do it.”¹¹ In view of the macro economic effects Corporate Social Responsibility is never loss making to both individuals and companies for the single fact that any micro economic unit of any size and type is only for the economy and economy is not for the micro economic units!

4.5 Corporate Social Responsibility is everyone’s duty

Modern critics argue that Corporate Social Responsibility can be the responsibility of only individuals and not corporations. However Indian views are different in the sense that Corporate Social Responsibility is everyone’s responsibility from the macro economic dimension. Thirukkural goes to the extent of saying that a wealthy person, whether natural or artificial, not giving even a thing to others as help is like a very beautiful female getting older without the self enjoying or being enjoyed by others! This is a kind of stupidity. Therefore wealth without Corporate Social Responsibility is also a kind of stupidity in the sense the macro economic purpose of ‘using’ the wealth is ignored and compromised by a micro economic unit.¹² Moreover only those human being who realize the social responsibilities are only living in the real sense whereas all those without the sense of social responsibility should be placed among the dead!¹³ Thus it is the duty of all human beings to discharge social responsibility! Some may think that help to the society is needed only in crisis or trouble. But it is not so, argues Thirukkural that those who are icons of social responsibility will not shrink from discharging even in times of no-crisis or no-trouble.¹⁴ Simply because it is something ‘due’ to be paid to the society at all times.

4.6 Corporate Social Responsibility is growth oriented

The business is cyclical in nature with varying peaks and troughs. Modern economists prescribe investments in public works or infrastructure building to pump prime the economic activities. This pump priming is suggested to be done by the government. However Indian view suggests that such investments can be done by private sector also especially in feeding the poor, establishing safe drinking water facilities with social responsibility as the support to tide over the fluctuations in business as below:

*Aaru idum maedum maduvum pole aam selvam
Maaridum aeridum maanilatheer – soru idum
Thanneerum vaarum; dharmamay sasrby aaga
Ull neermai veerum vuyarndhu.*

(Nalvali – 32)

This implies that the social responsible investments will not only help escape from the vagaries of the ups and downs in business cycles but it will also increase and accelerate the enthusiasm (of the people) towards social responsibility (helping the society sans expected returns).

4.7 Temple estates: Symbol of social responsibility

It is general knowledge that very many temples in India have estates and properties the returns of which are supposed to be used for helping the society through feeding them at least a palmful of food, etc. These estates and properties are governed by 'trusts' in the best public interests. The public also make offerings, many a times, regularly to be back channeled to the society, especially to the needy! The temples of India stand tall as a symbol of social responsibility for the whole world to learn!

4.8 Social responsibility and the factors of production

Modern economists have identified land, labour, capital and entrepreneurship as the four factors of production. Leaving aside all the criticisms on the list of these factors (causes) of production, anyone will immediately agree that no production can take place when 'time' is zero. Therefore time as a cause is also a factor of production.¹⁵ Then Time should also get a share in the income distributed among the other factors of production. If shareholders by contributing a factor (capital) should get a share of income, then why not a share for 'time-factor.'

5 Concluding remarks

Many argue that Corporate Social Responsibility is not the business of business corporations, and that it is only for individuals and governments, reasoning that the return to the shareholders! This view seems to be microscopic in view and seems to believe that the economy is for the corporations. This view does not view holistically that all the business units of all types and sizes are only for achieving the macro economic objective where the public welfare tops the list! This paper argues that Corporate Social Responsibility is the duty of everyone including corporations because of the following reasons: the income is earned only from the society and therefore it should be given back; thus wealth is meant for use by self and the public; the basic motive behind all types of business is to quench the hunger of the mankind as a whole (not specific to a particular geographical area); the fundamental objective of all business is only to help people; Corporate Social Responsibility produces macro economic benefits and gives returns to the economy and hence Corporate Social Responsibility is growth oriented; Time as a necessary cause of all production is not given its distributive share; the mankind does not payback anything to the selfless rain!

Notes

- 1 www.epaw.co.uk/homegloss.html
- 2 <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1912066.cms>
- 3 Compiled from published data on company web sites
- 4 The foregoing discussion on the controversy on Corporate Social Responsibility is substantially drawn from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/corporate_social_responsibility
- 5 Vooruni neer niraindhatray ulagu-avaam
Paerari vaalan thiru. (Kural-215)
- 6 *Payanmara ulloor paluththatraal chelvam
nayan udaiyaankan padin.* (Kural-216)
- 7 *Marundhaagi thappaa marathatraal chelvam
Perundhagaiyaan kan padin.* (Kural-217)
- 8 *Puthael ulgaththym eendum peral arithey
Oppuravin nalla pira.* (Kural-213).
- 9 *Nandri oruvarku cheythakaal unnandri
Endru tharungol yena waendaa – nindru
Thalaraa valar thengu thaal vunda neerai
Thalaiyaalay thaam tharudhalaal.* (Moodurai-1)
- 10 *Kaimaaru whandaa kadapaadu maarimaatu
Yen-aatrung kollo ulagu.* (kural-211)
- 11 *Oppuuravinaal varum kedu enin ahdu oruvan
Vitrukole thakkadhu daithu.* (Kural-220)
- 12 *atraarkkondru aatraadhan chelvam migalam
petraal thamial mooth thatru.* (Kural-1007)
- 13 *Othadhu arivaan vuyir vaalvaan mattraiyaan
Seththarul vaikkappadam.* (Kural-214)
- 14 *Edanil paruvathum oppuravirku olgaar
Kadan ari kaatchiyavar.* (Kural-218)
- 15 Please see Chendroyaperumal (2004) for a detailed discussion on the factors of production and time.

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- 10 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/corporate_social_responsibility
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