

Revitalizing the Concept of Corporate Social Responsibility with Traditional Indian Wisdom

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ABSTRACT

Corporations are legal entities operating within the boundaries of society. They have social responsibility both for business and moral reasons. The responsibility encompasses economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic aspects and in the context of deterritorialised global business environment, the responsibility assumes wider ramifications especially in the context of diminishing role of governments and ascending role of corporations. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is now an offshoot of the realization that corporation is answerable for the consequences of its operations. Ethical way of doing business for social and economic sustainability is inherent in the thinking of seers of ancient India who proclaimed for universal peace and happiness. The essence of CSR can be traced to Rig Veda which pronounced that a person who enjoys himself being totally oblivious of society is taken over by sin. The sense of charity, sacrifice, dharmic way of doing business and the ideas of live and let live permeate throughout the literature of ancient India. The search for spiritual routes strengthens the convictions towards CSR and for preserving the planet for future generations. An attempt is made in this article to discuss the nature of CSR in the global perspective and try to search for the roots in the cultural milieu of ancient India and trying to integrate the ancient Indian spiritual thoughts for the modern arguments favoring corporate responsibility. The intention here is to strengthen the theoretical thought structure with spiritual inputs for better appreciation and promotion of CSR. The aim of the article is to get insights in to ancient wisdom for connecting spiritual linkage to the theoretical edifice of the CSR and hence the methodology is exploratory in nature aiming to understand the concepts in a better way.

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INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a commitment to synchronize business with social good. Just as a citizen of a country cannot live in isolation without being helped or being helping the fellow citizens, a corporation/company, as a legal citizen, cannot function in isolation ignoring the expectations of the society in which it functions. Business and moral reasons dictate the necessity of being a good corporate citizen. The term CSR has gained currency in the past four to five decades and companies began embracing the concept in the wake of necessities imposed by globalization. Companies are now more openly advocating the CSR both for moral and business reasons. Still we find many corporations shying away from CSR believing that it is the domain of the government to look in to the social good and wellbeing of the *society*. If we look back to ancient roots and turn the pages from ancient wisdom, we cannot but accept the ingenuity displayed by the ancient seers in propounding and promoting social good and wellbeing. The intention of the article is to search for spiritual roots from ancient Indian wisdom and put forth before business community the concepts of CSR with an objective to strengthen their perspectives towards it. We believe that a spiritual insight towards CSR shall reinforce the theoretical belief systems and paves for the establishment of a sustainable world which is amicable to environment and promotes sustainability.

OBJECTIVE

From the discussion above the objective of the article is:

1. To search spiritual roots for the concepts of CSR and integrate them to modern thinking.

Limitations of Study

1. Literature relating to ancient India alone is taken in to consideration for the study.
2. The article is conceptual in nature and no primary data is involved.

Methodology

Since the aim of the article is to study the spiritual roots for the concept of corporate social responsibility from ancient Indian texts and to relate them to modern managerial thinking with an objective to make the CSR more vibrant, the method adopted is one of exploratory or formulative with an emphasis on discovery of ideas and insights.

Review of Previous Literature

In order to understand the true meaning of CSR and its various implications, a thorough search of articles is made from the popular data bases like Proquest, Ebsco, Springer Link etc. The writings of Adam Smith, Friedman, Freeman, Donald Duck, John Elkington, Andrew Carnegie, Michael Porter and the like are refereed for conceptual clarity. The writings and sayings of Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, Premji, Narayana Murthy and the like are verified to understand the trends of CSR and its importance in social perspective. In order to connect the concept with spiritual roots, a peep in to ancient wisdom was made by referring to the Vedas, Upanishats, Maha Bharath, Ramayan, Manu Smrithi, Artha Sastra etc. Scores of articles are referred from Sage publications, Chimaya International Foundation, Ramakrshna Mission, Arsha Dharma etc to understand the wisdom of ancient seers in promoting the concept of social wellbeing and goodness. There is plethora of study available on the concept of corporate social responsibility and its evolution in global perspective. Some of these are as follows:

The concept of CSR has undergone different phases with arguments for and against towards social good. Milton Friedman, a noble laureate in Economics viewed the social responsibility with derision and argued that the ‘the social responsibility of business is to increase profits’ (Friedman, 1970). In his opinion it is the look out of the government to look in to social good and corporations, being responsible to shareholders have to take care of profit maximization for the shareholders. He further argued that corporations are not like human beings and only human beings manning the corporations have a moral responsibility for their actions. This view was, however, contested by scholars like Moore, 1999 and Joel Bakan (2004) who opined that the internal decision structure of the organization is the reflection of the organizational culture of the particular business corporation and the value systems of the corporation decisively influence the decision making by the individuals manning the organization. The ethical beliefs and core values represented by corporate culture (example,

engaging child labor, equal pay for equal work, gender discrimination and the like) have a say on individual decision making. The scholastic thought on CSR has been increasingly recognizing the importance of incorporating CSR in business decisions both on business and moral reasons.

The business reasons for embracing CSR are being 'better brand reputation' (The Economist, 2008), 'employee attraction and retention due to fair employee treatment' (Greening and Turban, 2000), long term business sustainment in competitive market (Kramer, 2006) etc. The corporations, by virtue of operating in a society, willy-nilly, cause social problems like polluting environment and damaging natural systems. Morally they are bound to do well to society and adhere to societal norms and expectations. In the globalized business scenario, the actions of corporations have ramifications on different stakeholders across the globe. The corporations are no longer restrained by the interests of shareholders alone but they have to serve the interests of all stakeholders. Freeman (1984) strongly advocated the responsibilities of corporations to all stakeholders since the decisions of corporations have ripple effect on lot many stakeholders, for example, laying off the workers not only affect workers but it indirectly affects the economies of the countries and the public services. If corporations are to be accountable to its actions, why not CSR be not made integral part of business systems? 'Corporate social responsibility includes the economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic expectations placed on organizations by society at a given point of time' (Crane & Matten, 2010).

In the back-ground of increasing awareness and adoption of CSR, a four-fold approach by the corporations was advocated by Carroll, 1991, viz, economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities of the corporations. While maximizing shareholder profits by ethical means and providing good quality products are economic responsibilities, following laws of the land are the legal responsibilities of the corporations. The ethical angle includes following supra legal aspects and doing good to society even if the principles of goodness are not ordained by law, for example forbidding child labor, promoting the health of workers etc. The philanthropic perspective, which is largely viewed as CSR are merely desired of corporations without being expected and therefore are less important than the other three categories' (ibid: Carroll, 1991). Giving charities, maintaining schools and orphanages etc fall under the category of philanthropic category. John Elkington, 2004, strongly advocated triple bottom line approach of sustainability and ordained the corporations to embrace the principle of 'people, planet and profit'. Sustainable

development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). It refers to the long-term maintenance of systems according to environmental, economic and social considerations. A corporation is supposed to adopt sustainable business solutions, use natural resources judiciously and preserve the planet for future generations.

An analysis of the evolution of CSR from the above literature indicates that the issue of adopting or rejecting CSR in its true senses has both protagonists and antagonists. In the milieu of business evolution, large many corporations are integrating CSR in their marketing strategies for obvious reasons. The issue now is how best it can be integrated both for the good of the society and for the corporations.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of the article is how to build a solid foundation for acceptance of CSR for the doubting Thomases about the utility of CSR. CSR is now being forcefully integrating in to business psyche. We may see the Companies Act, 2013 (India) wherein it is made obligatory for certain companies to spend at least 2% of their profits towards CSR activities. The article is intended to lay a spiritual base for embracing the concept of CSR for all organizations and the people working for the organizations by searching for spiritual roots drawn from ancient Indian wisdom. A sound base for any edifice should be based on one's own culture and one's past traditions keeping in view the present requirements and aspirations of the future mankind. The spiritual base may help the organizations in better appreciating the issues of CSR and embrace the concept of CSR in a big way.

Why a Search for Spiritual Roots to Defend CSR?

Ohmann (1955) argued a few decades back that people had virtually lost their faith in society's value systems and there is a necessity of a spiritual rebirth for the revival of industrial leadership. Perhaps for the first time in the history of mankind, people have less satisfaction amidst the great pleasures. A religion based on materialism, science, and humanism is inadequate. He argues that man, especially at work, is searching for new "skyhooks" – for an abiding faith around which life's experiences can be integrated and given meaning. After all, what for production when

people are used as tools for production instead of production an agent of peoples' happiness? "How can production be justified if it destroys both personality and human values both in the process of its manufacture and by its end use?" Ohmann (1955, p. 37) In answering these questions, Ohmann (1955) describes the successful executive as one who provides an invisible, fundamental structure of "skyhooks" into which the experiences of every day are absorbed and given meaning. These include:

- "Providing a vision without which the people perish.
- Philosophical and character values that help relate the over-all goals of the enterprise to eternal values.
- Setting the climate within which these values become working realities.
- Integrating the smaller, selfish goals of individuals into larger, more social and spiritual objectives of the group.
- Resolving conflicts by relating the immediate to long range and more enduring values". (Fry, 2004)

CSR, as a concept, can be better appreciated and adopted if its values are traced from spiritual truths and integrate them with work culture. It provides a solid foundation for the theoretical construct and in the course of time, become the system of the organization. "In the words of Jensen, 'Spirituality gives me a deeper meaning of life, and therefore also regulates the way I behave on a regular daily basis in my private life as well as in my job-life. My principle of love your neighbor has guided me in the direction of also developing what we call social responsibility at Grundfos. ... Because of my spiritual background I have always had this activity within Grundfos high on my agenda'" (Pruzan and Miller, 2005).

The corporate greed and materialism that go with the capitalism is under stress and some scholars are already predicting the impending crumble of capitalism under its own contradictions. Wall Street Journal, 2009 has an interested article, "Will American children be better off than you" and concluded with a negative note given the 'jobless, statistical growth of the first decade of the 21st century, with stagnant wages, rising poverty, crippling household debt, and 90% of the income growth going to the top 10%'(Clinton, 2009). The protests at Wall Street are definitely an indication of increasing hostility towards the cooperation between the government and big corporations (Bharti, Ajay, 2011). When world economies are at cross roads and corporate greed is at its peak, the global financial architecture requires revisiting to certain new paths. We believe that the integral humanism as prophesied and practiced by the ancient seers aiming at reducing the gulf between private affluence and public

poverty shall provide the impetus for corporate responsibility towards public good.

The Spirit of CSR from Ancient Indian Wisdom

The literature of ancient India is replete with the ideas of corporate social responsibility in economic, legal, ethical, moral and philanthropic perspectives. The seers also talked of protecting and preserving the planet for future generations by advocating preserving the sanctity of flora and fauna and not destroying the nature in a reckless materialistic way. They imbibed the culture of venerating the nature and its forms. A peep in to ancient Indian literature and culture throws light on these aspects.

CSR as Profit Maximization and Customer Satisfaction:

The very purpose of corporate existence is creating value to the shareholders and maximizing profit. The Vedas emphasize that wealth has to be earned only through fair means and one should put in his best efforts to acquire wealth through ethical and moral practices. One has to acquire wealth by ethical means. A few references exhorting people to build the wealth are as follows:

- Wealth is to be earned by dharmic way only, ie, through good deeds. (Rig Veda Samhita vi-19-10)
- Wealth is to be acquired by strolling in the path not affected by sin.. (Vajasaneya Samhita iv-9)
- Only in the righteous path, one should strive to earn wealth. (Rig Veda Samhita x-31-2)
- A man wins wealth when he helps others in winning the health. (Rig Veda Samhita iv-50-9)

Kautilya regarded the State as an institutional necessity for human development. He outlined all the principles that the State should do for the happiness of the people. Kautilya's Artha Sastra (Book 1, 16) has described the following ideal for the King :

Prajasukhe sukham rajnah, Prajanam ca hite hitam
Natmapriyam hitam rajanah, Prajanam tu priyam hitam

Meaning- 'The monarch should seek happiness in the happiness of his citizens, his welfare is in their welfare, and his good is not in what pleases him but in what pleases the citizens'. If corporation is understood

in broader perspective to include business, organization or government, Artha Sastra provides answer for the *rai-sons d'être* for the existence of corporation by delineating its function as providing stakeholder satisfaction and none else.

The literature of ancient India never talked of renouncing the wealth. The emphasis was maximizing profits only through righteous means (Dharma) and spending it for social cause. There are verses to encourage and motivate us to maximize wealth so that we can take care of those dependent on us. (Annam bahu kurveta! Tad vratam! - Taittiriya Upanishad iii-9. It is advised to take care of our wealth as well as welfare of the others. (Bhutyai nappramidavyam! Kusalanna pramidavyam-Taittiriya Upanishad i-11). We are encouraged not only to possess wealth but also enjoy the same (Annavan annado bhavati! Taittiriya Upanishad iii-7). The rich have to satisfy the poor (Rig Veda Samhita x-117-5).

We have references of powerful merchant guilds operating in India during the reigns of Cholas, Pallavas, Cheras etc and wealth acquisition was promoted and considered as an important activity. Unlike occidental civilizations, ancient India recognized and regularized money lending and we have references from Manu Smriti and Artha Sastra to this effect.

CSR as Following the Laws of the Land

The Sanatana Dharma as propounded by ancient India is full of unwritten conventions and has the force of law. The Webster's Dictionary defines Dharma as

- Cosmic order or law, including the natural and moral principles that apply to all beings and things.
- Dutiful observance of this law in one's life; right conduct

The Dharma held the society in good stead irrespective of large scale invasions by Greeks, Huns, Kushans, Arabs, Portugues, French, Dutch, and English etc. The Arthasastra, of Kautilya (around 400 BC) and the Manusmriti, (around 100 AD) were influential treatises in India and were considered authoritative texts for legal guidance. Dharma formed the integral part of decision making in governmental, organizational and individual lives. Karna Parva of the Mahabharata. Verse-58, Chapter 69 says:

“Dharanat dharma mityahu; dharmodhara-yate prajaha.
Yat syad dharanasamyuktam; sadharma iti nischayaha”

This means ‘Dharma is basically for the stability of society, the maintenance of social order and the general well-being and progress of humanity. Whatever conduces to the fulfillment of these objects is Dharma that is definite’. The business organizations, also known as Shrenis, have different rules of operation based essentially on Dharma. The emperors and kings representing different dynasties, the representatives of Gram Sabhas, the merchant guilds and associations used Dharma as a yard stick for all transactions and decisions. The concept of ‘rule of law’ as we understand in the sense that all are equal before law and no one is above law is very much found in ancient literature. Mahabharata says” A King who after having sworn that he shall protect his subjects fails to protect them should be executed like a mad dog.”(Basham, A.L). The great King of Hastinapur (Santana) could not compel a fisherman (Dasaraju) to give his daughter (Yojana Gandhi or Satyavathi) in marriage to him without accepting to his terms. It refutes the view that the kings in ancient India were “Oriental despots” and could do what they liked regardless of the law or the rights of their subjects. The episodes suggest the adherence of the rule of law by one and all. We have also references of kings respecting the dharmic laws made by shrenis and allowed them to govern the respective members.

CSR as Following Ethical Business Practices for Sustainability

Ethical business practices revolve around preserving the natural resources and the plant safe for our younger generations. Doings good things to society even if they are not ordained by law come under the purview of ethical business practices. The Vedas advocate conservation of resources to take care of future requirements. They condemn poverty and give the clarion call to eradicate it. A few references are:

- One shall produce fair wealth for today and tomorrow. (Rig Veda Samhita vi-71-6)
- Poverty should be banished. (Rig Veda Samhita x-76-4)
- Earth, atmosphere, sky, sun, moon, stars, waters, plants, trees, moving creatures, swimming creatures, creeping creatures all are hailed and offered oblations. (Taittiriya Samhita i-8-13).
- The Vedas stress the need for protection and development of forests. Human beings have to safeguard the trees. They assert that the plants and trees are verily the treasures for generations.

- One should not destroy the trees. (Rig Veda Samhita vi-48-17)
- Plants are mothers and Goddesses. (Rig Veda Samhita x-97-4)
- Sacred grass has to be protected from man's exploitation (Rig Veda Samhita vii-75-8)
- Plants and waters are treasures for generations. (Rig Veda Samhita vii-70-4).

There is a reference of great destruction of a forest, popularly known as Khandava Dahanam in Maha Bharat. This destruction is however done to build a palace for Pandavas to live in (Ramrao, 1959).

The Vedas give emphasis on non-pollution of the environment. They condemn in unequivocal terms those who pollute and defile the environment. Waters are invoked to be friendly to humanity. The Ganges is considered most sacred and venerated. The ancient seers use to invoke all sacred rivers – Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri before performing any ablution and the practice is still continued even to this day.

- Waters represent splendor. (Atharva Veda Samhita iii-13-5)
- Waters bear off all defilements and cleanse people. (Vajasaneya Samhita iv-2)
- Whoever injures the essence of food, kine or steeds is a robber who sinks both himself and his offspring into destruction. (Rig Veda Samhita vii-104-10)
- Offerings are dedicated to waters of wells, pools, clefts, holes, lakes, morasses, ponds, tanks, marshes, rains, rime, streams, rivers and ocean. (Taittiriya Samhita vii-4-13)
- Waters are to be freed from defilement. (Atharva Veda Samhita x-5-24)
- Waters cleanse humanity from the evil of pollution committed by it. (Atharva Veda Samhita xii-2-40)

The recognition of panch bhoothas (earth, water, fire, air and the sky) and the identity of human body with the five elements testify the ingenuity of the ancient seers in order to preserve these elements in good stead. In fact all the panch bhoothas are deified and venerated to give a spiritual boost to human inclination for preserving the planet.

CSR as following Philanthropic Responsibilities

The Vedas assert that there shall be proper distribution of wealth from the wealthy to the poor. They also condemn those who enjoy wealth without partaking it with others. A few thoughts on philanthropic leanings are as

follows:

- One shall not be selfish and consume all by himself. (Rig Veda Sam x-117-6)
- Wealth accumulated through 100 hands should be distributed to 1000 hands. (Atharva Veda Samhita iii-24-5)
- One who eats alone is a sinner. (Rig Veda Samhita x-117-6)
- The leader is the distributor of wondrous wealth. (Vajasaneya Samhita xxx-4)
- Let the rich satisfy the poor with a broader vision. (Rig Veda Samhita x-117-5)

Apart from literary evidences, we have evidences of merchant guilds (Srenis) engaging in activities relating to alleviation of sufferings of poor people. 'Of the two Nasik Inscriptions (2nd century AD), one records the endowment of 2000 karshapanas at the rate of one percent (per month) with a weavers' guild for providing cloth to bhikshus and 1000 karshapanas at the rate of 0.75 percent (per month) with another weavers' guild for serving light meals to them. Apart from these more epigraphs and inscriptions are mentioned as evidence in this regard. In addition to this the guilds engaged in works of charity as well. Guilds worked to alleviate distress and undertook works of piety and charity as a matter of duty. They were expected to use part of their profits for preservation and maintenance of assembly halls, watersheds, shrines, tanks and gardens, as also for helping widows, the poor and destitute' - Thapalayal, 2001.

Ashoka's inscriptions talk of Dharma, i.e., the 'Law of Piety' that contained the fundamental principles like purity of thought, gratitude, steadfastness of devotion, kindness, charity, purity, truthfulness, service, support and reverence. The ancient seers always tried to blend spiritual virtues in daily lives by talking principles of Dharma in different ways. In Kautilya's Arthashastra we have reference of separate ministry for charity. King Dilip had the practice of collecting taxes 'only for the good of his subjects just as the Sun draws moisture from the earth to give it back a thousand fold' (Kalidas in Raghuvansh).

The Essence of Ancient Indian Thought

The Indian thought subscribed to maximizing profits through dharmic principles. Ayuh(living long), prithivi (lands), dravinam (riches) and bramha varchasam (resplendent glory) were sought equally by the seers (Gayatri Mantra). When it comes to riches, they are meant for the benefit of all in the society and for alleviating the sufferings of the poor. The

Indian thought is more superior to the current understanding of CSR in the sense that it advocated ethical aspects at all stages of earning and always talked of giving the earnings to the needy. Many stories of sacrificing the riches (stories of Ranti Dev, Sibi, Bali, Karna etc) for the sake of needy are intended to glorify the greatness of philanthropic activities. The ideas are relevant and essential in a world plagued with corporate greed, materialism and consumerism. The seers also took care to integrate the virtues of dharmic principles into the belief systems of the common people (religion) for enabling them to follow the virtues for both positive and negative reasons- positive reason being attaining heaven and negative reason being attaining hell after death. When spiritualism is getting abandoned in the runaway greed for power, pelf and profits, a solace can be found by revisiting and reinventing the ancient values and systems.

CONCLUSION

Corporate social responsibility is the offshoot of the innate desire of the human being to do social good. The crumbling of socialism and the contradictions of capitalism like the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer gave impetus for certain meaningful affirmative initiatives by the corporations. CSR, though initially dejected and rejected by a few scholars, it ultimately gained prominence due to business and practical reasons. The economic, ethical, legal and philanthropic responsibilities are delineated for qualifying as a good corporate entity. Any idea, business or otherwise, can prosper if it is pursued with '*manasa-vacha-karmana*' (identity of what we think-what we talk and what we practice) concept. An emotional bearing for acceptance of CSR can be brought if it sought to be understood from the ancient roots- as to how it is spiritually integrated in the ethos of civilization. The ancient Indian thought always promoted prosperity and riches through ethical value systems and talked of sharing the bounty among the needy. The Indian thought revolved around the concept of 'each for all and all for each' which can be adopted by the corporate for all round prosperity.

Scope for Further Research

The major limitation of this paper is that it is based on the study of ancient Indian literature alone. The scope of the paper is in Indian context only linking philosophical outlook of Indian thought to boost up the cause of

CSR activities. Majority of the countries across the global spectrum boast of vibrant cultural lineages and a study of the literature and corroborating the points with modern thoughts on CSR will result in accepting the CSR in a big way by the organizations across the globe. Anything accepted voluntarily as against by the prescriptions of law is always welcome in the larger cause of CSR. This area, may, therefore, be taken up by the researchers for further study.

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