

Corporate Social Responsibility and Public Libraries: A Review

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Over the last two decades, the Indian industry had seen a dramatic growth fuelled by economic reforms and fiscal planning. Today, India as a developing country is moving forward bestowed with opportunities which are reflected in its economic progress and growth. However, the situation does reflect some inequalities in the society, which need to be addressed for an overall growth and development of our country.

The Prime Minister of India in his message on social responsibility of business stated that "business has a responsibility to itself, to its customers, workers, shareholders and the community. Every enterprise, no matter how large or small, must, if it is to enjoy confidence and respect, seek actively to discharge its responsibilities in all directions and not to one or two groups, such as shareholders or workers, at the expense of community and consumer. Business must be just and humane, as well as efficient and dynamic".

This reminds us that in any societal structure, there are multiple stakeholders, the one amongst others being the business represented by companies. Indian business has traditionally been socially responsible and has been adopting various methods of discharging its social obligations. Almost all the leading companies have reaped the benefits from this growth and realised that by doing social good they are discharging their social obligations towards the society which gave them the profits.

Today, many developed countries including countries in Asia, are now paying increasing importance towards corporate social responsibility (CSR) disclosure norms. All over the world the corporate sector has realised its obligations towards the society while meeting their commercial objectives. However, the private sector, generally, has been more active in CSR than the Government and public sectors, and the situation is slowly changing. There are many instances where businesses have all along played an important role in addressing issues of education, health, environment, and sanitation through their

CSR interventions in various parts of the country. The World economic forum has also recognised the importance of CSR by establishing the Global corporate citizenship initiative. This initiative hopes to increase businesses' engagements in and support for CSR, as a business strategy with long-term benefits both for companies themselves as well as the society in general. National Knowledge Commission (NKC) too felt that industrial and corporate house and private agencies should be encouraged through fiscal incentives to support the development of libraries and library services in India. The concept of CSR is not new to India. Large companies have been doing social good in the name of 'philanthropy' much before the concept of CSR became popular. Some of the big Indian corporations such as the Tatas and Birlas are already engaged in CSR in the form of charity or philanthropy. The concept of CSR is finally coming out of the purview of 'doing social good' and is fast becoming a 'business necessity'.

The CSR in essence is all about building economy, markets, and communities. It is just a form of self-regulation built into a business model. The CSR is business embracing social responsibilities for the impact of its activities on the environment, consumers, employees, communities, stakeholders, and to everyone in the society at large. The CSR-focused business should proactively promote the public interest by encouraging community growth and development and by voluntarily eschewing practices that harm the public sphere. The corporate CSR policy should normally cover the following:

- (a) Responsibility towards all stakeholders
- (b) Ethical functioning
- (c) Respect for workers rights and welfare
- (d) Respect for human rights
- (e) Respect for environment
- (f) Social and inclusive development activities.

The concept of CSR is perceived by many organisations in many ways. Some consider it as

a strategy; some have taken it an opportunity for innovation. Some view it as the one which opens new avenues for entrepreneurship. Intervention is required for the equitable distribution of wealth and improving the quality of the life of the society and it must come with voluntarily from corporate houses and their top management.

Companies usually spend certain percentage of their profits for product research and publicity. Further, the expenditure incurred for such activities attract special concessions and tax exemptions from the government. Through CSR, the organisations serve the interests of society by taking responsibility for the impact of their activities on customers, employees, shareholders, communities and the environment in all aspects of their operations. The thrust of CSR in public sector is on inclusive growth, sustainable development and capacity building with due attention to the socio-economic needs of the neglected and marginalised sections of the society.

The CSR mainly focuses on grassroots approach through public-private partnerships for a sustainable development. This is a unique concept as it attempts to achieve tangible results through a framework of dialogue and partnership between business and community through enabling environment provided by the State. The CSR is a company's commitment to operate in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable manner, while recognising the interests of its stakeholders.

Realising the importance of CSR in business, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs has brought out the CSR Voluntary guidelines in 2009. Later, in 2011, CSR was made mandatory and the big corporate houses are contributing sizeable amounts from their profits to CSR activities. Many corporate houses and PSUs are already extending their support under CSR in areas like health, education, environment, and community development. Every year awards are given away to firms which perform well in CSR activities. It is unfortunate that the list does not include 'public libraries'.

Public libraries are democratic institutions, critical to the development of socio-economic well being of any nation. They acquire process and disseminate information in a variety of formats to every citizen in the community where they are located regardless of race, gender, age, etc. Public libraries also employ all kinds of services to ensure that information get to the generality of the populace at the most convenient time and place.

The UNESCO's manifesto on public libraries which states that the "Public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups".

Since public libraries are called 'peoples universities' they also need the support from corporate houses, PSUs in addition to Government support. We sincerely hope that in the years to come public libraries will once again regain their past glory under the new initiative—public-private partnership.

We all know that only public libraries can provide the basic learning resources such as books, magazines and newspapers for non-formal education for livelihood creation and skill development of the rural and urban poor. We also know that public libraries in our country are in a pitiable condition due to lack of funds and support from the respective State Governments. Although, the Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF), Kolkata provide funds to public libraries to purchase books, we need more funds for maintaining the large number public libraries in our country. This is possible only through PPP under the CSR mandate.

Let us follow the path of Andrew Carnegie who is an all time role model with regard to public libraries and CSR, who founded 2,880 libraries all over the country long back. His popular words "Distribution of wealth for people's welfare is equally important as earning". He used to keep a lighting lamp in each library as symbolic spread of knowledge in the darkness of ignorance. That is how he became an all-time role model with regard to CSR and public libraries. Let us hope that our Indian corporate sector will also take a leaf from his life book and practice it.

Corporate firms desirous of intensifying their CSR efforts may come together and form clusters in a local area and make a meaningful impact on the lives of the under privileged fellow citizens. If companies can patronage and provide funds for the development of at least five public libraries in and around their manufacturing units, they would be helping the community by promoting reading habits and also be socially responsible. Therefore, CSR activities not only have a positive impact on community development but also on business promotion.

The CSR is a wonderful concept which can be applied to public libraries to enable them to stand on their feet. Just like corporate firms adopting villages and schools, they can also adopt local public libraries and serve the community at large. It is felt that if public libraries are given the required inputs, resources, and infrastructure they can help the country to become a knowledge society.

"Social obligation is much bigger than supporting worthy causes. It includes anything that impacts people and the quality of their lives."

-William Ford Jr., Chairman, Ford Motor Co.