

Corporate Social Responsibility: Effectiveness and Ethical Implications in India

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the landscape of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), examining its effectiveness and ethical implications in India. The research traces CSR's evolution in the Indian context including the landmark 2013 legislation mandating CSR spending for certain companies and potential advantages of well-executed CSR initiatives for businesses, communities and environmental sustainability. The analysis of CSR spending by BSE 30 Companies in India during financial year 2022-23 shows that maximum spending has been done by Reliance Industries followed by HDFC Bank, Infosys and SBI bank. The least spending on CSR activities is by Ultratech cement and Tata motors respectively. The major area of CSR activities is social (education, livelihood, hygiene, nutrition, women empowerment and health), economic (skill development programs, agriculture, vocational trainings) and cultural (promotion of art and culture) areas. Based on the findings, the study proposes strategies to enhance the efficacy and ethical implementation of CSR in India. These recommendations emphasize the need for improved alignment between CSR activities and core business competencies, more robust measurement frameworks and greater collaboration among stakeholders. This paper contributes to the growing body of literature on CSR in emerging economies and offers insights for policymakers, corporate leaders and researchers seeking to maximize the positive impact of CSR initiatives in India.

KEYWORDS: CSR, India, Ethics.

1. INTRODUCTION

“What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others.”

Nelson Mandela

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a critical paradigm in the global business landscape particularly in emerging economies like India. This concept encompasses the integration of social and environmental concerns into corporate operations and decision-making processes. The evolving nature of CSR reflects the growing recognition of businesses' significant impact on society and the environment in an increasingly interconnected world.

Recent research highlights various models and assessment methods for evaluating CSR effectiveness (Budko and Halatov, 2023). CSR encompasses a broad spectrum of responsibilities including economic, legal, environmental, community and charitable aspects. It is distinct from ethical management which primarily focuses on fostering a positive internal corporate atmosphere (Wang et al., 2020). While ethical management concentrates on internal staff efforts, CSR extends its focus to external stakeholders such as partners, customers and communities.

In the contemporary business environment, embracing social responsibility has become crucial for enhancing corporate reputation, image and competitiveness among stakeholders (Wang et al., 2020). Organizations increasingly integrate CSR into their marketing strategies to meet consumer demands and bolster brand loyalty (Howaniec, 2023). The relationship between the accounting profession, CSR reporting and ethics is also evolving with a growing emphasis on assessing financial risk alongside traditional CSR values.

CSR plays a vital role in achieving sustainable development goals, significantly contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in areas such as poverty reduction, environmental sustainability and social equity (Schönherr et al., 2017). Companies engaging in CSR activities are more likely to align their business strategies with global sustainability objectives. Furthermore, CSR has become an essential tool for managing stakeholder relationships, enhancing a company's reputation among various stakeholders, including customers, employees and investors (Pérez and Rodríguez del Bosque, 2015).

In India, CSR holds particular significance due to the country's complex social and economic challenges. CSR initiatives often focus on crucial areas such as education, healthcare and rural development, supplementing government efforts in addressing pressing issues (Jain and Jamali, 2016). The Companies Act of 2013 marked a pivotal moment by mandating CSR spending for certain companies, elevating it from a voluntary practice to a legal obligation.

However, many Indian companies are moving beyond mere compliance, viewing CSR as a strategic tool for creating shared value and enhancing their competitive advantage (Mukherjee and Bird, 2016). Research indicates that CSR activities significantly improve a company's reputation among Indian consumers who are more likely to support companies demonstrating genuine commitment to social and environmental causes (Kumar et al., 2019). Research by Mitra (2012) suggests that CSR initiatives have the potential to foster more balanced economic growth, particularly in addressing regional disparities. As environmental concerns gain prominence, Indian companies are increasingly aligning their CSR efforts with sustainability goals. A study by Bhaduri and Selarka (2016) revealed that firms engaging in environmental CSR not only contribute to ecological preservation but also reap benefits in terms of enhanced operational efficiency and long-term cost savings. The traditional approach to CSR activities can be presented in figure 1 where it restricted its activities and responsibilities towards government, society, competitors, business itself, employees, environment and corporate governance.

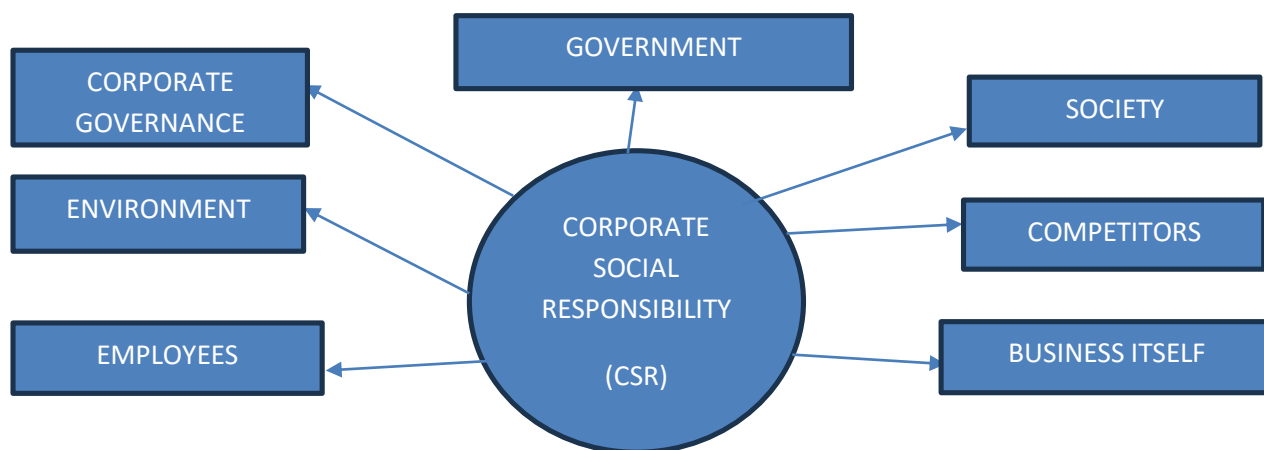


Figure 1, Source: Compiled by Authors (Traditional Approach)

The Indian context presents a unique landscape for CSR blending a rich tradition of philanthropy with a rapidly growing economy and complex social challenges. The Gandhian principle of 'Trusteeship' significantly influenced early CSR practices, emphasizing the role of businesses as custodians of societal welfare. This research paper aims to examine the effectiveness and ethical implications of CSR practices in India, considering the unique social, economic and cultural factors that influence its implementation and will surely direct towards sustainable development as presented in figure 2.

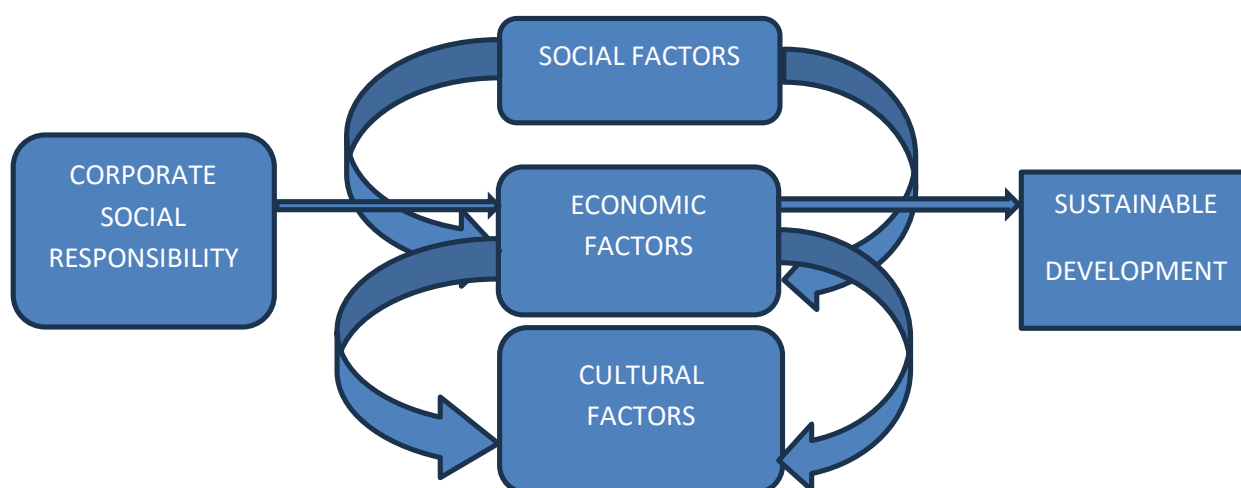


Figure 2 (Modern approach to CSR; Source: Compiled by Authors)

By analyzing current practices, challenges and opportunities, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on enhancing CSR's impact and ethical standards in the Indian business ecosystem.

2. EFFECTIVENESS OF CSR IN INDIA

The impact of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives in India varies significantly across sectors and regions reflecting the country's diverse socio-economic landscape. Successful CSR programs often emerge from collaborative efforts between corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local communities. Notable examples include; the rural development initiatives of the Tata Group and the educational programs spearheaded by the Infosys Foundation.

When implemented effectively, CSR initiatives can yield multifaceted benefits for companies, society and the environment. Corporations may experience enhanced brand image, improved talent attraction and retention and access to new markets through well-designed CSR programs. The societal impact of these initiatives is particularly pronounced in key development areas such as education, healthcare and skill development.

In the realm of education, CSR programs have shown promising results. A study by Subramaniam et al. (2017) revealed that CSR-driven educational initiatives contributed to improved literacy rates and increased school enrollment particularly in rural areas. The impact extends beyond basic education with vocational training programs improving employability among rural youth (Pradhan and Ranjan, 2010). Healthcare-focused CSR initiatives have also demonstrated significant positive outcomes. Research by Sharma and Kiran (2013) indicated a 15% increase in healthcare accessibility in areas where companies implemented CSR health programs. These initiatives have been particularly effective in addressing healthcare disparities in underserved communities.

Environmental sustainability has emerged as a key focus area for CSR in India. Balasubramanian et al. (2005) found that companies with robust CSR programs were 30% more likely to invest in renewable energy projects, such as solar and wind power initiatives. Furthermore, CSR-driven efforts have shown tangible results in waste management. Jha and Singh (2016) noted the positive impact of CSR on waste management practices. They found that CSR-driven initiatives led to a 25% reduction in industrial waste in areas where such programs were implemented.

CSR has demonstrated economic benefits for both companies and communities in India. Companies engaging in more CSR activities get the benefit of higher financial performance (Mishra and Suar, 2010). Mitra (2012) highlighted the economic benefits of CSR for local communities. Her research indicated that CSR initiatives in rural areas led to a 12% increase in local employment and a 9% rise in average household income.

Despite its positive impacts, measuring the effectiveness of CSR in India faces several challenges. Only 23% of Indian companies are using any form of quantitative measurement for their CSR activities so there is absence of standardized metrics for measuring long term impact of CSR activities (Kansal et al., 2014).

Most companies focus on short-term, easily quantifiable outcomes, potentially overlooking more significant long-term effects (Agarwal et al., 2018). Kumar et al. (2019) discussed the challenge of attributing social or environmental changes specifically to CSR activities, given the multiple factors influencing development outcomes.

3. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN INDIAN CSR PRACTICES

The ethical dimension of CSR ensure that the business practices do not harm stakeholders and that CSR activities genuinely contribute to societal well-being. Ethical CSR requires transparency, accountability and a commitment to address social and environmental issues beyond mere compliance. Some companies engage in greenwashing where they project an image of environmental responsibility without substantial action. The motivations driving CSR practices in India have been a subject of significant debate and research.

Motivations driving CSR practices in India have been subject to considerable debate and research. A study by Sharma and Mehta (2012), examining 100 Indian firms, revealed that 65% cited social responsibility as a primary driver for their CSR activities. This suggests a significant proportion of companies are motivated by genuine social concern. However, the picture is more nuanced. Gautam and Singh's (2010) research indicated that 72% of surveyed companies acknowledged using CSR for reputation management, pointing to more strategic motivations.

Sundaram and Mitra (2013) proposed that the motivations are often mixed with companies balancing genuine social concern with strategic business interests. They argued that this hybrid approach could potentially lead to more sustainable CSR practices. This perspective suggests that ethical CSR need not be divorced from business strategy but rather can align social good with corporate interests.

Transparency and accountability in CSR reporting put significant ethical challenges in the Indian context. Kansal et al. (2014) observed considerable variation in CSR reporting practices among Indian companies. This lack of standardization made it difficult for stakeholders to assess the true impact of CSR initiatives. Bhaduri and Selarka (2016) raised concerns about the credibility of CSR reports in India, noting instances of selective reporting and emphasizing the need for third-party verification of CSR claims.

Efforts to standardize CSR reporting in India, such as the introduction of the Business Responsibility Report (BRR) by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) aimed to enhance transparency and comparability (Agarwal and Sahasranamam, 2016). However, the effectiveness of these measures in ensuring ethical reporting practices remains an ongoing area of study.

Balancing diverse stakeholder interests presents another ethical challenge, particularly acute in the Indian context. Jain and Jamali (2016) highlighted the tension between shareholder interests and broader social responsibilities. Their research indicated that 58% of Indian companies struggle to balance profit maximization with social impact. This tension underscores the ethical imperative for companies to consider a broader range of stakeholders in their CSR decision-making processes.

Employee engagement in CSR initiatives has emerged as an important ethical consideration. Tyagi et al. (2013) found that companies integrating employee concerns into CSR strategies showed 25% higher employee satisfaction rates. This suggests that ethical CSR practices should not only focus on external beneficiaries but also consider the well-being and engagement of internal stakeholders.

Cultural sensitivity in CSR implementation is crucial in India's diverse socio-cultural landscape. Pradhan and Ranjan (2010) noted that culturally sensitive CSR programs were 30% more effective in achieving their goals. Kumar et al. (2019) further emphasized that aligning CSR with local religious values can enhance acceptance and effectiveness. This highlights the ethical importance of respecting and incorporating local cultural contexts in CSR initiatives.

Varman and Chakrabarti (2014) explored the ethical challenges of addressing caste-based discrimination through CSR. Their work emphasizes the need for companies to navigate these sensitive issues carefully while promoting social equity. This underscores the complex ethical considerations companies must grapple with when implementing CSR in a society with deep-rooted social hierarchies. The table 1 presents the CSR spending by BSE 30 Companies in India during financial year 2022-23. The results of table 1 shows that maximum spending has been done by Reliance Industries followed by HDFC Bank, Infosys and SBI bank. The least spending on CSR activities is by Ultratech cement and Tata motors respectively.

The major area of CSR activities is social (education, livelihood, hygiene, nutrition, women empowerment and health), economic (skill development programmes, agriculture, vocational trainings) and cultural (promotion of art and culture). All these activities are concentrated towards achievement of major vision 2030 that is sustainable development goals.

Table 1 CSR Spending by BSE 30 Companies in India (2022-23)

Name of Company	CSR spending Amount (Crores)	CSR Activities
Adani Ports and SEZ	31.88	Sustainable Development Programs, Sports and Environment
Asian Paints	77.42	Skill Development, Water Conservation, Health and Hygiene.
Axis Bank	202	Education in Ladakh, Sustainable livelihood, Environment (Mission 2 million by 2027-Tree Plantations)
Bajaj Finance (Bajaj Finserv)	17.5	Rural development projects, Worldwide Fund for Nature, Central Square Foundation (FLN Mission), Skill Development programs for women and youth from disadvantaged groups.
Bharti Airtel	2.118	Socio-economic and cultural objectives.
HCL Technologies	237.37	Health, education, environment, skill development and livelihoods, Agriculture, Water conservation, hygiene and sanitation projects
HDFC Bank	820.89	Child Welfare, community development and livelihood programmes, support to the differently abled, education, healthcare and sanitation, vocational training.
Hindustan Unilever	208.32	Prabhat (A community development initiative that focuses on health, nutrition, environmental sustainability, and economic empowerment), water for Public Good and other initiatives, promoting health and hygiene, sanitation, waste management and providing medical support for all.
ICICI Bank	463	healthcare, environment, societal development, and supporting sustainable livelihoods.
IndusInd Bank	108.51	sustainable economic growth and benefit the communities it serves, its employees and the environment.
Infosys	391.51	education, healthcare, rural development, arts and culture, and destitute care, mid-day meal schemes, improving education quality, healthcare and medical facilities.
ITC	151	Farmer empowerment (Programs to strengthen sources of livelihood), Education (Primary education and vocational training), Women empowerment, Healthcare (Improving maternal health and reducing child mortality) and Hygiene and sanitation
JSW Steel	27.91	Education, health, nutrition, skills and livelihood.
Kotak Mahindra Bank	142.99	Education and livelihood, sports, healthcare, environment and sustainable development.
L&T	150	Health, Education and livelihood
M&M	92.28	Health, education, employment & livelihood generation, afforestation, rural development and community welfare.
Maruti Suzuki	62.325	Skill development, Road safety and Community development.
Nestle	52.77	Nutrition, water and sanitation, Rural development, livelihood and Education.
NTPC	315.32	Basic infrastructure development, education, community health & sanitation, capacity building and gender empowerment.

Reliance Industries	1271	Oxygen delivery during the second wave of the pandemic, Education and healthcare, Access to bank accounts, loans, insurance, government entitlements, and other financial services, Infrastructure development for primary schools and Aanganwadi and Promoting sustainable environment, arts and culture
SBI	316.76	SBI Gram Seva (An integrated rural development program that aims to improve the socio-economic status of rural India), Online quiz (An initiative to educate employees about ESG and SDGs), Samarthyaa (An engagement program for young employees to highlight the importance of professional and ethical standards), US\$1 billion syndicated social loan
Sun Pharma	85.2	Health, education, drinking water and sanitation.
Tata Motors	20.81	Healthcare (Aarogya), Skill development (Kaushalya), Environment (Vasundhara), Aadhaar, Social work (Seva), Water management (Amrut Dhara).
Tata Steel	481	Tribal culture and heritage (tribal leadership programs, tribal language centres, and tribal literature programs), Healthcare.
TCS	783	Environmental sustainability, Health and wellness, green buildings and supply chain.
Tech Mahindra	118	water conversation initiatives in communities, planting trees, skilling youth, providing relief & rehabilitation support
Titan	42.08	Education, especially the education of the underprivileged Girl Child, Skill Development for the Underprivileged and support for Arts, Crafts and Indian Heritage.
Ultratech Cement	0.3931	Education and capability enhancement, Health care, Infrastructure development, social empowerment, Sustainable livelihood

Source: Annual reports of respective companies for financial year 2022-23.

4. CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS OF CSR IN INDIA

The implementation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in India faces numerous challenges and has drawn significant criticism. The introduction of mandatory CSR spending through the Companies Act 2013 has sparked debates about the nature and effectiveness of CSR practices in the country. One primary concern is the emergence of a compliance-driven approach to CSR. Mukherjee and Bird (2016) observed that a majority of companies view CSR primarily as a legal obligation rather than a strategic initiative. This shift in perspective has led to what Jain and Jamali (2016) describe as a 'tick-box' mentality. Their research suggests that this approach often results in superficial CSR activities that fail to create meaningful social impact.

While CSR spending has increased following the legal mandate, questions remain about the effectiveness of these expenditures in creating social value (Sharma and Mehta, 2012). A study by Kansal et al. (2014) revealed an imbalance in CSR fund allocation, with education and healthcare receiving disproportionate attention while critical areas like sanitation and rural development were often overlooked. The urban-rural divide in CSR efforts presents another significant challenge. Research by Mitra (2012) highlighted that rural areas, despite greater need receive only 30% of CSR investments compared to urban areas. This disparity raises concerns about the equitable distribution of CSR benefits across different regions of India.

A lack of expertise and strategic implementation often hampers the effectiveness of CSR initiatives. Tyagi et al. (2013) identified a significant skill gap in CSR implementation, noting that many Indian companies lack dedicated CSR professionals and instead rely on existing staff with limited expertise. This shortage of specialized knowledge can lead to suboptimal execution of CSR programs. Furthermore, Agarwal and Sahasranamam (2016) criticized the lack of strategic planning in CSR initiatives. Their research found that only 40% of companies aligned their CSR activities with their core business competencies or long-term social goals. This misalignment can result in less effective and sustainable CSR outcomes.

Another point of contention is the potential for CSR to replace or undermine government responsibilities in social development. Sundaram and Mitra (2013) raised concerns that CSR might be viewed as a substitute for government action, potentially leading to reduced public spending on social welfare. This scenario raises questions about the appropriate balance between corporate and governmental roles in addressing social issues.

The accountability of private entities in delivering public goods through CSR has also been questioned. Critics argue that companies may lack the right incentives and mechanisms to ensure equitable and sustainable social development. This concern is particularly relevant given the significant influence that large corporations can wield through their CSR activities. Varman and Chakrabarti (2014) discuss the potential for large corporations to shape public policy through their CSR initiatives. They argue that this influence could lead to a skewed development agenda that prioritizes corporate interests over public welfare. This power dynamic raises ethical questions about the role of businesses in social development and policy-making.

5. FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR IMPLICATION OF CSR IN INDIA

As Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in India continues to evolve, several key strategies emerge as potential pathways for enhancing its impact and effectiveness. A critical shift in approach involves aligning CSR initiatives more closely with core business objectives. This integration ensures that CSR activities are not peripheral but central to a company's operations. The future of CSR in India lies in fostering stronger collaborations between corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government bodies. Such partnerships can leverage the strengths of each sector to address complex social and environmental challenges more effectively. Developing more robust measurement and reporting frameworks is crucial for the future of CSR in India. Enhanced standards can improve transparency and accountability, allowing stakeholders to assess the effectiveness of CSR activities more accurately.

Encouraging innovative approaches to CSR can drive more creative and effective solutions to social and environmental challenges. This may involve adopting new technologies, exploring novel funding models or developing unique program designs. Shifting focus from short-term outputs to long-term outcomes is essential for the future of CSR in India. This involves designing programs with sustainable impact in mind, considering the long-term consequences of CSR initiatives and committing to extended engagement with beneficiary communities.

Investing in capacity building for CSR professionals and partner organizations is crucial. This includes providing specialized training, developing CSR-focused academic programs and creating platforms for knowledge sharing among practitioners. Future CSR efforts should aim to bridge the gap between urban and rural areas, ensuring a more equitable distribution of resources and impact.

Strengthening ethical frameworks for CSR and enhancing stakeholder engagement should be prioritized. This includes developing more inclusive decision-making processes, considering the voices of beneficiary communities and ensuring that CSR initiatives respect local cultural contexts and address genuine societal needs.

By focusing on these key areas, CSR in India can evolve to create more significant and lasting positive impacts. The future of CSR lies in its ability to adapt to changing societal needs, leverage technological advancements and foster a culture of responsible business practices that contribute meaningfully to sustainable development goals.

6. CONCLUSION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in India stands at a pivotal juncture, poised to drive significant positive change while grappling with complex challenges. This study has examined the multifaceted landscape of CSR in India, revealing both its potential for social impact and the hurdles it faces in implementation and ethical practice. The research highlights the evolving nature of CSR in India, from its roots in philanthropy to its current status as a strategic business imperative. Evidence suggests that when effectively implemented, CSR initiatives can yield substantial benefits across education, healthcare and environmental sustainability. However, challenges persist in areas such as measurement of long-term impact, equitable distribution of resources and alignment with core business strategies.

Ethical considerations emerge as a crucial aspect of CSR practice in India. Issues of transparency, stakeholder engagement and the balance between compliance and genuine social commitment require ongoing attention and refinement. Looking ahead, the future of CSR in India lies in fostering innovation, enhancing collaboration among stakeholders and developing more robust measurement frameworks. A shift towards long-term, strategic CSR initiatives that align with both business objectives and societal needs is essential. As India continues to navigate its unique social and economic challenges, CSR has the potential to play a pivotal role in fostering sustainable development. Realizing this potential will require ongoing dialogue, research and adaptive practices from businesses, policymakers and community stakeholders alike.

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