

Practice, Not Preach

JAYANT BHANDARI

The intense struggle one has to face when one is forced to conform to certain "accepted" norms is brought out in this article. The crux of this social responsibility is to do to the best of your ability what you have chosen to do, and leave other fields to those who have chosen them. The author opines that the meaning of corporate social responsibility is business enterprises being efficient and productive in their chosen fields.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development are the *mantras* of anti-business NGOs and some developmental ones who want someone else to do the bidding for them. Garnish your communication with these expressions, and you can ramble on anything; you will be seen as an educated know-all who can envision the path for the future. The typical attitude that fosters non-action is: What I preach, I do not know. Even governments indulge in this: They prefer to control businesses, run lives of the individuals, and leave governance to the deity. You do my work and I do yours. We can then blame providence for all our failures.

An environmental NGO does nothing but work on environmental issues. A doctor is not expected to do anything but treat patients. The police are expected to look after law and order, nothing else. The teachers are expected to educate and teach well. The work they do in other areas are not given importance, nor is it economically the best thing to do. Any distraction they face is seen as unethical. Their prestige does not depend on the social work they do, aside from their chosen profession. Why don't, and can't we just do what we like, and want to do? Why should we all be forced into social work, and environmentalism? Why can't those who claim to be interested in these fields do their job? And do it, in terms of action, not in terms of preaching, forcing, and blackmailing others to do it. Why should corporates be forced to run schools, hospitals etc.? It is neither their core competence, nor an area that necessarily serves their interests.

A recent article by a CSR author in a reputed business daily was "Is the business of business only business?". Cloudy in its analysis, it was written by a person who is completely unconvinced about the usefulness of the market economy, and the need for people to have personal freedom. David Henderson, ex-chief economist of OECD, would call him "New Millennium Collectivist". The CSR author blamed the industry for the Gujarat carnage. Industry in Gujarat has, at worst, played a dampening role in the inertia of carnage. It has not played any participatory role. It should be thanked for whatever it has done. People with a dependency syndrome cannot think otherwise though: No favor is good enough. Then he raised some flimsy comparison of carnage in Gujarat with the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in Nigeria. His execution had an association with Shell (whether it was positive or negative is best left unsaid, for it would be a digression). So, whether Shell should have involved itself in that case, has no

¹ This article is influenced by the CSR related work of Mr. David Henderson.

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analogy for the Gujarat industry to get involved in stopping the carnage. And most importantly, let us not confuse things: Shell's involvement in Ken's case could at best be a case for *responsibility*, and not CSR. A typical CSR article— they are all surprisingly similar— reads something like this: "... responsibility that comes with freedom... .. decline in... role, resources and respect for governments... .. backlash may be brewing and businesses... may find their power curbed.... ..integrity of business... is being questioned... .. business leaders with great personal quality can be deeply pained... when society questions whether business practices are in tune with the evolving values of society, such as human rights".

Responsibility is a separate issue, and clubbing it with freedom is a verbal gamble, which distorts the analysis. The question is what responsibility? It is my responsibility to honor the legitimate laws. Imposing any further responsibility by outside sources is unethical and destroys my democratic freedom, which the CSR authors have no right to advocate. The next aspect they talk about is the decline in the resources of the government. Which country do they talk about? Governments continue to achieve a percentage rise in the GDP each year. Trends are similar in most countries. Then, is it not my responsibility to do more than what is legally required even if government's resources were declining?

Is the "backlash" they talk about not daylight robbery? Then, when I feel pained just because of what others think of me, it does not speak volumes about integrity, but the lack of it. The society's expectations from companies are a result of a beggar mentality that the socialist state and our cultural heritage have fueled. Any curbing of legitimate power of any individual or business is sheer hooliganism. If CSR authors advocate giving in, it is their lack of integrity.

CSR does real harm to the morality of the society and its economic conduct. The harm to morality comes from abdication of individual responsibility, and of the responsibility of governments and of the NGOs. Moreover, in a poor country, how can running schools in a five-star office complex help the poor, in general? Alternatively, how can an airline's sponsoring air travel of blind orphans do well to the poor, in general? If this money were to be used more fruitfully, and economically, so much more good could happen. In fact, a more in-depth look at such a scenario would suggest that this money spent in the name of CSR causes real harm to the society. CSR should be dumped.

The aim of any business is to produce, well, in terms of quality and quantity. We should all do well what we have chosen to do. Beyond a measure, it is immoral to get involved in what is not our vocation, or what is not in our capacity. As it will not be done well; this means depriving a more competent person of the opportunity to do better. Activism of NGOs, who ask people to do more than legally required, is privatization of public policy, and such work is best left to the elected government and the individual voter. The latter may decide to be irresponsible in casting his/her vote, and then if he/she blames the industry, he is insane. Blame should go to him/her for the Gujarat carnage. Imposing responsibilities on people he/she does not feel for, only makes him/her hypocritical. It certainly does no good to anyone.

Finally, the CSR authors assume that the CSR issue has been settled, and that business should be involved. Reviewing a book, "Misguided Virtue" of David Henderson, *The Economist* says, "He is not content to argue, as timid waverers might, that the new commitment to CSR is a sham, behind which the search for profit carries on as before, leaving capitalism in good shape after all. Still less, is he willing to argue that paying lip service to CSR may actually do some good... Henderson claims, rather, that the fad for CSR is doing real harm." 

The author is Business Development Consultant, Vancouver, Canada.

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