Corporate Social Responsibility and the participation of women in community development

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Introducing CSR

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2005) defines Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as- ‘the 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’ (Banerjee 2008:60). In the legal guideline proposed by the Government of India, CSR is labeled as clause no.135, supplemented by Schedule VII, and can be found in Chapter 9 entitled Accounts of the Company, in the Companies Bill 2011. The clause spells out details of how a profit making company shall engage in CSR by enlisting the various areas in which work may be undertaken. Broadly, the players involved in rolling out a CSR initiative are the corporate and its stakeholders. The European Commission’s green paper (COM (2001) 366) ¹ defines a stakeholder as ‘an individual, community or organization that affects, or is affected by, the operations of a company. Stakeholders may be internal (e.g. Employees) or external (e.g. Customers, suppliers, shareholders, non-governmental organizations, certifiers, financiers, the local community’.

From a historical perspective CSR is simply the latest manifestation of earlier debates on the role of business in society. What is new, according to Fabig and Boele, is that today’s debates are conducted at the intersection of development, environment and human rights, and are more global

in outlook than earlier in the twentieth century or even in the 1960s. Currently, Corporate Social Responsibility has assumed the status of one of the parameters of global comparison between nations. This makes it all the more necessary to explore the same in the Indian context. However, it must be mentioned there is no consensus on the definition of CSR. The present study explores CSR primarily at the level of community involvement in the initiative, which is contrast to analyzing CSR holding the corporate firm as the unit of analysis.

Conflicting views regarding CSR makes one ponder whether CSR is mere philanthropy and charity or is it geared towards sustainable development. The term sustainability originates from the Latin word sustinere, which means 'to hold up', or 'to endure'. Sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and providing opportunity to satisfy their aspirations for a better future life (Tripathi 2005: 2). Sustainable development becomes possible when the real needs of the people of a community are deciphered, taken into account and met. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) by definition suggests that it caters to sustainable development. However, only research at the field level can bear testimony to it.

In India CSR is not a new concept, companies like Tata and Birla have been propagating for social good in their operations for decades long before CSR became a popular cause. Despite having such life size successful examples, CSR in India appears to be in a fairly nascent stage. It is still one of the least understood initiatives in the Indian development sector. Thus, the situation is far from perfect as the emphasis is not on social good but rather on a policy that needs to be implemented. For most companies, CSR is a way to improve the public perception of the company, and over half of them do so to brand the company among the people. Only few of the organizations practice CSR because it is mandatory, and it is believed that a lesser number undertakes it solely for tax exemption (Based on statistics from Times Foundation--TNS survey 2008).

Objective

As Brejning (2012:1) points out, CSR has remained a subject area which is predominantly studied from a business perspective. As a result, very little is known about the impact of CSR on society.

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Academic Research on CSR has mostly focused on describing CSR from the vantage point of the corporate, its principles, facts and figures. Seldom is research undertaken keeping in mind or even mentioning the role of the beneficiaries. This paper is an attempt to explore the larger discourse within which CSR is rooted, with special reference to gender and sustainable development. The chief objective is to ascertain to what extent CSR influences the life world of its participants. In the process of doing so, the various research questions to which one seeks answers are: what are the reasons underlying execution of CSR?; how does civil society play a proactive role in the same?; how do beneficiaries, in particular females, respond to and participate in development through CSR? and in the case at hand, where does the CSR initiative fit in the development discourse?

**Research Methodology**

The present research entails the use of the ethnographic methodology using the tools of observation, interview, participant observation and focused group discussion. In addition life history and case studies have also been resorted to. The total duration of field work is 14 months, but for the purpose of this paper, only the data collected during the last 7 months shall form the basis for discussion. The 7 months of data collection being referred to here is a result of rigorous field work undertaken in Chetla, a slum in South Kolkata. Data was collected between January 2013 and July 2013. This phase of fieldwork was arrived at after having conducted a pilot study on CSR at a public and private sector company respectively, which provided an overall impression of how CSR is carried out, in an ideal typical scenario. All levels of fieldwork were based on random sampling and snow balling. The sample comprised of various actors across the layers of CSR implementation. The total sample size which stands at 171 includes corporate employees, NGO staff, beneficiaries who in this case are the slum dwellers, local political leaders, government representatives and academicians. It is interesting to note that 61% of the entire sample comprises females.

**Field Site**

The site of fieldwork was Chetla, a slum in South Kolkata. According to Singh, a slum is one such space where the environmental stress of socio-economic strains of urbanization is clearly visible
Owing to its evident lack of basic amenities, Chetla, attracts the corporate, both public and private, to choose the space for conducting CSR intervention. In order to see how CSR actually pans out, for a period of 7 months I was attached to HOPE Kolkata Foundation (HKF), a Kolkata based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). During this period, I held the designation of an intern at HKF. The NGO having undertaken intervention at Chetla for social welfare, with and without CSR funds, proved to be the perfect location to understand how various parties interact and negotiate in the process of a CSR intervention. More specifically, the various actors were - the corporate, the civil sector, the government officials, and the recipient or target of the initiative, in this case, the slum dwellers.

*Introducing the NGO*

HOPE Kolkata Foundation (HKF) was established in February 1999 for the protection and development of children on the street and in difficult circumstances. It strives – with the help of partner organizations – to create a just and equitable society where people can live life with dignity. The target audience here are - street and slum children, child laborers, children of sex workers, child beggars, homeless children and people, female children, children and people from disadvantaged communities, and children with HIV / AIDS (HOPE Kolkata Foundation Annual Report. 2011 – 2012). In addition, the activities of HOPE include the Night Street Patrol which keeps an account of the street dwellers and tries to eradicate trafficking.

For the purpose of the research, I was attached to the Health Department of the South Kolkata My observations at HKF South were within the purview of the *Jana Swathya Suraksha* (JSS) Program which is presently being implemented in the field. The prime aim of this Program is ‘improving the health status of slum dwellers through awareness, access, action and advocacy. This health Project has three phases: 1*st* Phase: From 2007 to 2011: The Stage of Initiation. 2*nd* Phase: From 2011 – 2015: The Stage of Consolidation and Sustainability. 3*rd* Phase: From 2015 to 2017: The Stage of Phasing Out.’ (Program Report) The Program uses the needs based and rights based approaches to improve the health status of slum dwellers.
Introducing Chetla

Chetla located in South Kolkata is home to a large slum, known as Chetla Lock Gate, divided in terms of 113 and 114. Twenty years ago, Chetla, infamous for being extremely notorious was an area infested by local goons. The slum is a kilometer off the main road. The slum in the interiors is flanked by a canal on one side and a local rail track on the other. The canal, formerly part of the holy river Ganga, is now nothing more than an open sewer. On a regular day in the slum, it is not uncommon to see people sitting along the canal and chatting and basking in the sun and the hustle-bustle of children running and playing.

Based on the respondents I interviewed I was able to discern an overall sense of the demography of the slum. For instance parameters such as, occupation trend, family structure, the distinction between house and household, socio-cultural and religious status- with special reference to their annual Sitala Puja, which I witnessed firsthand, dietary-pattern, etc. In terms of occupation, most of the women are either house wives or work as household help. The men are mostly daily wage laborers. In the process of interviewing, I also got a sense of the manner in which the entire Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative is carried out from scratch and how it percolates and influences the lives of the recipients on a day to day basis. This includes- the manner in which the initiative is proposed at the ground level by the NGO social worker based on the needs of the people; the nature of community mobilization that takes place at multiple levels; response of the people regarding the implementation process and the impact of the same on their lives; and most importantly, the manner in which they maintain the initiative by coordinating amongst one another, with the support of the NGO once again.

CSR Intervention Observed

Given the background of Chetla 113 and 114 among the many pressing needs, one certainly is the lack of sanitation and hygiene. This has proved to be by far the largest domain of CSR intervention in this space. One such instance of intervention is where the slum dwellers are the ‘beneficiaries’ of a sanitation-oriented CSR program which pertains to the construction of toilets in the particular slum. This was executed under the CSR banner of a public sector construction company in India. The total population of the slum is approximately 2600 households and since the year 2009 under the provision of CSR, 10 toilets have been constructed. Out of which one is non-functional. Each toilet is used by 20-30 families on an average. This makes the approximate number of families
having access to toilet facility 300. Prior to becoming ‘beneficiaries’, they defecated in an old sheltered hut kind of structure created out of bamboo and empty cement bags.

The interesting fact is that the actual plan of construction, purchase of raw material, hiring of labor and forming community groups is executed by the NGO under their existing health program in the area. The chief role of the corporate is to fix the cost of raw material and the upper limit for NGO service charges in terms of manpower involved in executing the initiative. Taking community solidarity and mobilization as the base for CSR; this ground is laid by the NGO through networking and creation of volunteers within the community.

**Role of the NGO in CSR implementation**

As per observation, community mobilization acts as the biggest pillar of the entire CSR initiative. HOPE executes its *Jana Swasthya Suraksha* (JSS) program in this slum which involves catering to Reproductive and Child Health (RCH). JSS has two parts – preventive carried out by social worker and curative carried out by health worker. It is as part of this program that HOPE mobilizes the community, in this case Chetla, by means of creating Community Health Groups (CHG) and Community Environment Group (CEG). The groups have 12 volunteers each. Also, there is a separate committee for water and sanitation (WATSAN group). Since these volunteers do not receive any monetary gain, the social worker in the area representing HOPE, needs to motivate them and conduct awareness camps and campaigns. It must be noted that almost all the community volunteers are women, exception being couple of young college boys and an unemployed man who attend the meetings.

The regular camps and training on various pressing issues, is open to the volunteers and the community members at large. However, it is only the women and children who turn up to attend. These events act as an informal platform that enhances the bond and rapport amongst the local people. Some issues around which camps have been held are- First Aid, Fair Price Shops, Global warming and World Environment Day. In addition, to ensure that the CSR project can be implemented successfully, the social worker also has to network with the local Ward Councilor, office bearers of the local clubs and construction contractors. Though these programs are apparently not directly linked to CSR, in reality they pave the way for the corporate to make inroads. It is in this preconditioned environment that the corporate strikes a partnership with the NGO and rolls out the CSR initiative. The need analysis and conception of the project is done by
the NGO and the chief function of the corporate becomes to approve of the proposal, issue a work order and disburse the fund. One could say that to an extent, the NGO silently also functions as the unofficial gate-keeper of the slum. However, the recipient community is not a mute spectator. During the process of construction, the labor recruited was from within the community. Of greater interest is the way in which the community was impacted by the intervention and responds to the same.

**Community participation**

Based on first hand interaction, I found that Chetla dwellers who are the recipients of the above described CSR initiative are extremely pleased with the same. They believe that it has brought with it – awareness, self-dependence and cleanliness. Also, they find it to be extremely useful especially during the rainy season. The people of the community are hopeful that they will be the recipient of several other initiatives of this kind and are also willing to contribute in monetary terms for any output geared towards common good. One of my respondents, Shankari, recalled how earlier Chetla was renowned for being notorious. One could never get a taxi to Chetla even if you offered a thousand rupees. Whereas, today things have changed, there are so many *pacca* houses, roads are better, there is electricity, water and sanitation. She added that seeing the current state of development at Chetla people say that, “*Gobore paddma phootechhe*”, which literally means a lotus has bloomed in the midst of cow dung.

Since the initiative at hand is sanitation oriented, it is extremely close to the lives of the people and is a point of daily interface and requirement. It is the households immediately surrounding the toilet that avail of the facility. This is in contrast to the motive behind the initiative which ideally is meant to be for the community at large, but in reality only those who contribute towards the maintenance of the toilet in monetary terms can avail of the facility. Maintenance is required to ensure that the toilet is clean. So, with the help of group formation induced by the NGO, the community members make a monetary contribution towards the same. One member of the group, volunteers to be the leader and he or she (mostly she) collects a sum between Rs.12 and 20 per month from each household that avails of the toilet facility. This money is used to pay the person who cleans the toilet and to purchase toilet cleaning provisions. The record keeping for the collection is done with the help of a register which has details of name of family, amount given and the exact date on which the amount was collected. A separate note is kept of the expenses as
well. Despite the facility provided, due to larger number of people inhabiting the space, if the toilet was occupied, people resort to traditional means of defecating in the open or a makeshift kaccha hut like structure beside the open canal which runs along and around this slum.

However, appearing to be common and standard on the face of it, each CSR structure, in this case the toilet has a different story to tell across Chetla 113 and 114. The exact sum of money collected among people and the group dynamics varies. In case of one toilet a female member within the group has assumed the role of the paid toilet cleaner so that she can pay for her son’s education. In another instance a retired school teacher voluntarily cleans the toilet. This apart, people have their own strategies of dealing with this new structure in their lives. In one case owing to a superstitious belief that the toilet had been constructed over a space by burning down a sacred tree used by a snake for shelter, a woman engages in an annual fast to appease the snake and save her family from its wrath. In another case, in order to maintain cleanliness a group within the community has resorted to the lock and key system for their toilet, whereby all members who pay towards maintaining the toilet, have an individual key to unlock the structure every time they wish to use it.

Challenges post-implementation

Despite the coherence displayed by the community in the process of implementation, there are specific problems faced by them too. For instance, if the door breaks it has to be manually lifted, placed and removed every time it is used. If people find that the toilet is dirty all the time, they refuse to pay and discontinue using the facility, abandoning the structure altogether. The common difficulty pointed out is that the size of the toilet is too small, it is ill-ventilated and that there is no provision of a tap inside. Other specific problems are that men burn holes into the plastic door with a beedi which in turn prevents women from using the toilet; and some people also chew Tiranga (a local variety of betel nut powder) and spit it in the toilet which makes it nauseating for the non-addicts. Also, dirty toilets are unhygienic and result in infections for women in particular. The slum functions based on shared electric meter boxes hence there is no separate connection for the toilets and sharing units becomes difficult. Under these circumstances, people usually use a torch after dark. In the advent of any such grievance, the community once again contacts the NGO expecting them to intervene in the situation and suggest corrective measures. Hence, post implementation too it is the NGO who remains the contact person and facilitator. In the light of
such occurrences the notion of sustainability becomes highly questionable at the ground level, where corporate involvement is minimal.

*The Corporate stance*

At Chetla, as mentioned before, there is more than one corporate involved for the cause of CSR. In order to highlight the overarching stance of the corporate as an entity, I would like to share the case of one such company that has contributed to the cause of sanitation in Chetla by constructing toilets. This is a national public sector construction company which has its headquarters in Kolkata. My interaction took place with the personnel manager of this company whose role it was to also handle the CSR. He explained to me that the CSR Policy at the company was predefined as per the guidelines provided by the Government of India’s Department of Public Enterprises. As per these guidelines, the company shall not provide CSR fund to a project already being funded from another source. CSR, according to his company guidelines, should involve an activity that affects the society and contributes to development at grass root level. For instance, building roads for a village, or digging tube wells.

The personnel manager added that the public sector companies have been directed to use the help of a specialized agency in order to execute CSR. This includes government department, semi-governmental organization, NGO, autonomous organization, professional consultancy, registered trust and mission, community based organization, self-help group; non-profit organization, local bodies like panchayat, and academic bodies. As explained by him, the reason for using a specialized agency as medium is to avoid corruption in the form of money swindling.

In response to my curiosity regarding the name of the corporate inscribed on the marble slab affixed on every toilet constructed with the help of CSR funds from this company, the manager said that it was so that people recognize the company and support it in future. Once again, it is the government guideline that tells them to place their name beside the work done. When probed regarding the choice of language for the inscription, he said that English was chosen so that the local politician and party workers would understand and influence the people. Also, it helped the company in keeping a record. They click a picture of the construction and use it as evidence for the particular financial year. The manager went on to say that in future, whether the structure exists or not and whether at all the slum exists, they will have pictorial evidence testifying the nature of work done in a particular financial year.
While reporting the CSR intervention at the company level, the first step shows that a baseline survey is conducted to find out the need at the community level, then a site survey is conducted by the company by means of visiting. On being satisfied about the requirement, a work order is issued to the NGO. Throughout the implementation phase, monitoring is carried out by both parties-corporate and NGO. Once the construction is complete, the NGO produces an execution and utilization certificate. This includes a commitment that the constructed structure will be maintained by the beneficiaries of the project. It is only then that the fund allotted to the project is sanctioned. However, in reality, the survey could be overlooked and the corporate representatives visit the field only to unveil the structure. Finally, when I asked the corporate manager whether the beneficiary should be aware of the concept of CSR, his response was- “Why should a beggar know why he is being given alms!”

Conclusion

CSR activities have created among the women of Chetla a sense of responsibility towards their own community and a feeling of self-worth. Not only are they more conscious about matters of environment, health and hygiene, but owing to their active participation in CSR activities, they have a voice in matters that affect their home and community. The women of Chetla feel that through their active contribution they have been successful in changing the image of their community and making it a better place for the next generation. However, a lot of the learning was in fact unintentional. The lack of interface between the community members and the corporate has resulted in the ‘beneficiaries’ not being aware of the concept of CSR.

For the community members the NGO social worker is the point of reference and they are under the impression that all the programs and initiatives are completely a gesture of good will on the part of the NGO. Though each constructed toilet does bear the name of the corporate in English, most of the community members do not pay heed because they are illiterate. The handful literates can read only Bengali, and the few who can read English, claim to have read board but never been sufficiently curious because the toilet construction project has brought to them basic facilities and amenities that their locality was devoid of.
One can see that the CSR intervention described above does cater to a basic and fundamental requirement of the slum community in terms of health and sanitation and has been understood and accepted by the community. However, though identification and strengthening of local level institutions does take place in the form of Community Health and Environment Groups (CHG and CEG) and WATSAN, they are dependent on the presence of the NGO to engage with one another. Despite women’s empowerment by means of the training camps and campaigns held by the NGO, these bodies do not hold the capacity to stand on their own. The group members communicate with one another in close proximity only based on the instructions of the NGO’s social worker. Also, they look up to the social worker to intervene and solve any differences that arise amongst them.

With respect to the representative nature of these bodies and their role in decision-making from the project formulation stage through different levels of implementation it can be seen from the data collected that the nature of involvement of the community in decision making is only partial. Their involvement is chiefly restricted to the maintenance stage of the project. In fact, the means and ways of maintenance are also based on the ideas and inputs received from the social worker. For instance, the register method of money collection used by every group was the induced by the social worker. To quote Saint, ‘The participation of the masses in development is somewhat akin to the participation of the bullocks in ploughing done by the farmer. There is never any doubt as to whose design and decision is involved in this work’ (Saint 1980: 4).

With respect to sustainability across time and space, on one hand, as per the NGO’s JSS project outline, after the implementation they intend to phase out of the slum from the year 2015 onwards. On the other, the corporate it satisfied by appeasing the local political body and with the pictorial evidence of CSR in their annual report. This once again leaves the slum dwellers to their own plight once the NGO withdraws from the area. This could not only result in people resorting back to their earlier practice of open defecation, but also in the case of an eviction from the slum, the entire project could be reduced to dust. Thus, concerns are raised regarding the notion of sustainability associated with the development that resulted in the case if the initiative at hand.
Through the medium of this paper it is proposed that CSR be perceived as catering to the alternative\(^3\) development paradigm, which is not in keeping with the essence of sustainability but stems from a need to conform to legal binding. The legal binding being referred to here is the Companies Act 2013, the provisions of which are reflected in the CSR related policy and guidelines of individual companies.

CSR can be seen as alternative because it is separate from mainstream or state led development in terms of both the goals and the means adopted to achieve its ends. Also it is alternative because it focuses on local development. According to Nerfin (1977) alternative development is the terrain of ‘Third System’ or citizen politics. This arises out of the failure of the first system which is the government and second system which is the economy. The key point in alternative development is that, “alternative development is development from below. In this context, ‘below’ refers to ‘community’ and to NGOs” (Pieterse 2001:75). In order to combat the problem of sustainability, Hopkins (2008) suggests that CSR should be linked to the bottom line or core competency of the company. In this manner it will be saved from being reduced to damage control or ‘whimsical philanthropy’.

It is by addressing these missing links that one could possibly take a step towards incorporating sustainability in CSR, not only in the printed definition but also at the ground level of formulation and implementation. This is important because CSR is one endeavor that can shape the world’s social and environmental conditions. Crane et al rightly point out that, ‘the term corporate social responsibility is very difficult to pin down precisely- it can have many meanings, applications and implications, and these are rarely agreed upon by those who take an interest in the debate. This may not make our lives any easier when studying CSR, but it certainly makes it more interesting!’ (Crane et al 2008:16).

References


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\(^3\) Alternative development as a paradigm took root on the 1970s when dissatisfaction with the mainstream development crystallized into an alternative, people-centered approach to development. See Pieterse 2001.


