



Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in times of COVID-19

The writer speaks about the idea of Corporate Social Responsibility, exploring its national and international dimensions and ways in which modifying the concept of CSR can reinvigorate the economy in times of COVID-19

About a year ago, at *Business Goa's* 10th anniversary celebration, the trustees, mentors and members of the advisory board of the magazine provided their valuable insights on its journey. However, the story shared by Datta Damodar Naik impacted me the most! He spoke about the eagle, and how, after a certain age, it flies to a secluded place and reinvents itself through a very painful process, and yet, does not give up! It's a test of its perseverance which almost culminates into rebirth – a second life for the eagle! At that point, little did we know that Mr Naik may have anticipated something for all of us or subtly hinted us that soon, all of us will use the anecdote that he shared for our personal and professional reinvention and revival which is also going to be used as a reference to build this article. Everyone speaks of CSR so it is about time the concept of CSR is revisited. What then is CSR?

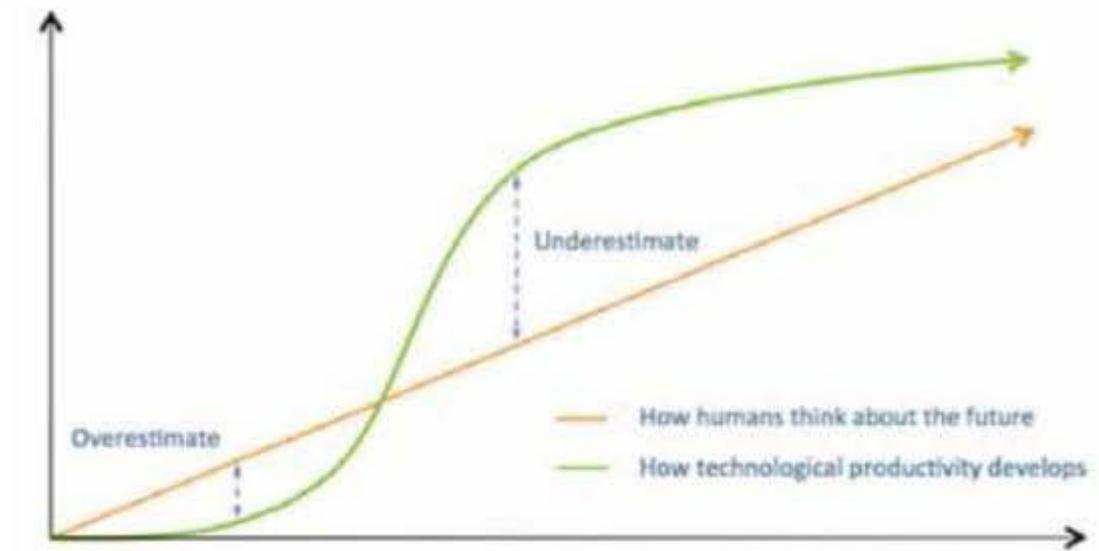
The Global Context

There may not be a single universally accepted definition of CSR. Each definition that currently exists underpins the impact that businesses have on society, the community at large and also the societal expectations of them. All the roots of CSR lie in philanthropic activities (such as donations, charity, relief work, etc) of corporations. Globally, the concept of CSR has evolved and presently encompasses all related concepts like the triple bottom line, corporate citizenship, strategic philanthropy, shared value, sustainability and responsibility.

CSR in India

The concept of CSR in India is still, by and large at its roots – traditional and largely manifested as a philanthropic event; an activity which needs to be performed but not to be deliberated upon. As a result, there is limited documentation on specific activities related to this concept. However, what is clearly evident is that, much of this has a national character encapsulated within it; whether it is endowing institutions to actively participate in India's freedom movement or embedding the idea of trusteeship at the national level.

There is substantial evidence indicating that, CSR in India is



slowly progressing towards the idea of institution building in the areas of education, research, cultural and community development, owing to the influence of globalization and growing awareness and assertiveness amongst the community. The Companies Act, 2013 in Schedule VII, lists out CSR activities, which also partly amended to support COVID 19 relief work, suggests that the community should be the focal point of the concept. On the other hand, by discussing a company's relationship with its stakeholders and integrating CSR into its core operations, the draft rule suggests that CSR needs to go beyond the barriers of the community and philanthropy. It will be interesting to observe the ways in which this will translate into action at the ground level and how the understanding of CSR in times of COVID-19 will transform.

Listed below are a few insights that could facilitate our participation with regards to CSR in times of the COVID-19 pandemic:

Revolutionize the core of your CSR

CSR in India tends to focus on what is to be done with profits, after they are made. Now, the time has come to factor social and environmental impacts of conducting business. The focus now should be on 'how' profits are made.

Bill Gates' rule of thumb for Business and CSR

"Most people overestimate what they can do in next year and underestimate what they can do in next ten years," says Bill Gates.

The S-curve (graph above) – as an installation stage leading to the deployment stage which looks like three main phases that could be characterized as

- A slow build up to some kind of critical mass,
- Compounding taking effect and driving exponential growth,
- Ultimately, diminishing returns once some kind of limiting factor (e.g. number of hours in a day we are awake, number of humans beings on Earth, etc.) starts impacting.

Further, if the intersection point is truly somewhere between two and ten years as Gates suggests, those five year strategic planning processes that corporations indulge in, may be applied to Covid-19 times, businesses and CSR as well.

Communities to provide inputs, insights and license to operate

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed all of us to various threats. There is general deficiency of competency and inspiration at several leadership positions in various institutions and associations. Additionally, there is a sharp growth in the rates of neurotic behaviour that in turn triggers an early onset of mental health problems. We thus, need to understand that there is latent wisdom untapped in communities and if we can create a system, a platform to "hear the unheard", "see the unseen" and "feel the unfelt" we will be in a position to build vigorous CSR which is a bi-directional process. However, to make this happen, we need to train the communities and



create platforms for deeper thinking / interactions and not splash superficial and vague aspirations and suggestions, packed as ideas, on social media. Human beings tend to be largely irrational and so, quite often, we are tempted to take the path that demands the least resistance. Nonetheless, businesses need healthy societies and societies need healthy businesses thereby indicating that it is an interdependent relationship.

Strategic and operational outsourcing of CSR to experts/consultants

Minuscule organizations have a competent, dedicated team to strategize and manage CSR. However, traditionally it is handled by the HR department at most organizations, who are otherwise overwhelmed with administrative responsibilities. Therefore, they can hardly contribute towards the cause of CSR. In my study, the generic pattern is that, the HR team is reduced to the role of a gate keeper that follows the directives given by the 'head office.' The HR team is also mostly under-staffed which adds to lack of thinking, lack of ground-level research and basically, lack of open

deliberations.

The current scenario is such that industries are struggling to remain afloat. In such a situation, a strategic and purposeful CSR module at the local level can kick-start the revival process. We have already burnt our fingers, when none of us anticipated the exodus of migrant labour.

This, in turn, has exposed how hollow our welfare and social security schemes are. I can affirm that, it will be wiser to make provisions in the CSR budget to get on-board, local experts in CSR; not because the companies are obliged to take part in CSR as compliance, but to reinvent and revive their business, failing which, we may face existential crisis.

Our daily life is so over dependent on others, even for basic needs, that with COVID-19, even a routine chore looked like a challenge!

Digital India never took off because we are still grappling with network issues, power failures and our linear planning process which fails to factor the compounding impact of several other variables which builds the future.

Thus, the ideas of collective thinking,

diversity, inclusiveness and leadership, which were always topics for casual talk, need to be put to action. The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken and woken us for good. It is an opportunity to reconfigure ourselves, our habits, attitudes, actions, talents and community inclusiveness.

My heartiest congratulations to *Business Goa* as it completes its 11th year or the first year of its new/next decade. *Business Goa* needs to felicitate and reward those who were the first pioneers to think out of the box! With whatever meagre resources, they paved the way forward to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and make possible, a post lock down revival, while also making it successful by finding solutions for both life and livelihood by bringing diverse communities together, providing social platform, facilitating deeper thinking, and not just suggestions which also, in a way, changed the narrative about Goa that it's not just a 'susegado' state and that it has enough bandwidth to revive, reinvent itself, India and the world in times of the COVID pandemic led lockdown... That's Business@Goa 🇮🇳