

Social responsibility gaining importance

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Our Founding Father, Shri G D Birla, believed that business is not an end in itself but that it exists to serve the larger interests of society.

He espoused the trusteeship concept of management, even as he was setting up industries, way back in the 1940s. In the context of social responsibility, it meant ploughing back part of the profits into welfare driven initiatives that made a qualitative difference to society.

Adityaji, my late husband, took it a step further. In his view, cheque-book philanthropy was simply not the best way to transformation, as it perpetuated a culture of dependency.

He felt it was extremely vital to make people self-reliant. He, therefore, ensured that all social projects taken up by us would be sustainable by the beneficiaries over the longer term.

So while in the short-term, projects needed enormous hand holding, eventually the beneficiaries would take over as they became self-reliant. This approach proved to be a boon as it enabled us to withdraw and replicate the work in other villages and expand our geographic reach.

The footprint of our community work carried out under the aegis of "The Aditya Birla Centre for Community Initiatives and Rural Development", which I am privileged to head, straddles 3,500 villages across the country. We reach out to more than 14 lakh people annually. Over 60% of these live below the poverty line and belong to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Our projects are driven by the needs of the communities in proximity to our plants. Projects are planned and prioritised in an inclusive manner, sitting with the village elders and other opinion leaders of the community, taking recourse to the "participatory rural appraisal" mapping process.

Implementation is the responsibility of the community and our team, as is the monitoring of the milestones and other deliverables. Village meetings are held periodically to elicit feedback on the benefits of community programmes and areas that need to be beefed up.

Our activities include self-reliance through the engine of sustainable livelihood, providing employment schemes for rural youths; making safe drinking water and health care easily accessible; and reaching out to the physically impaired. We support social causes like widow remarriages, dowry-less marriages and foster women's empowerment programmes.

Let me provide you with just one example of how we act as change catalysts and espouse social reform.

During our survey in the villages near Renukoot, we found that many young girls, wedded very early, regrettably were widowed in the prime of their life. Most of the widows were in the age group of 20-34.

Many of these young widows were condemned to a life of poverty and hardship, suffering humiliation even in the confines of their extended family. Often widows had to face social exploitation too, with many of them becoming ladies of the night.

This led to the conceptualisation of the widow re-marriage project. As the subject itself seemed so sensitive and given the stigma attached, we felt it best to take the village elders, the panchayats and other influentials into confidence.

Our teams were able to persuade the panchayat and district authorities to partner with us. Since the inception of the project three years ago, more than 400 widows have become wives again.

Besides our dedicated project team of 140 employees, our thrust is to motivate managers to team up as well. We believe they are an excellent resource, given their talent and management expertise, to bolster community projects.

Today, many of our managers are investing their personal time in community work. More so, younger managers and their spouses are getting increasingly involved in our social projects which gives us a great degree of satisfaction.

It is our belief that community work should not be relegated to a post-retirement occupation.

Against this backdrop, I would like to share with you what have been our key learnings.

- * Firstly: Embedding the social vision into the business vision has been very useful as it has given a tremendous focus to this activity.

- * Secondly: Having a One-Year Plan and a Three-Year Rolling Plan on community projects, with milestones and measurable targets has enabled us to factor accountability and performance management into our Projects.

- * Thirdly: Having our projects audited by reputed external agencies, who measure it on qualitative and quantitative parameters, has aided us in gauging the effectiveness of our work and provided excellent inputs into what more needs to be done and the way, going forward.

- * Fourthly: The government has, in their 5-year plans, special funds earmarked for human development and we take recourse to many of them. Working as catalysts and networking with the government and other like-minded bodies has been both useful and fulfilling.

For us in the corporate world to expect that the government alone should address welfare issues is both unfair and unrealistic. It augurs well that many corporates are taking cognisance of this fact.

More importantly, they are no longer treating social responsibility as a fringe activity. Many business houses have begun to see several advantages in aligning with the communities and their betterment.

For instance, professionals of the highest order want increasingly to band with the company that not only enjoys reputation for quality products and services, but is also committed to social causes. There is a tremendous feel-good factor about such companies.

Customers too, show a definite preference for companies with a social conscience.

Likewise, shareholders expect the companies in which they invest to be sensitive to the needs of the society. In the last two to three years many social projects are also a means of sharing with the community the values that an organisation stands for.

It is a way of telling them that we care about you, that your concerns are ours as well, and that we are a people with a conscience.

(The author is chairperson of The Aditya Birla Centre For Community Initiatives and Rural Development)