

ROLE OF CORPORATE SECTOR IN PROMOTING ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

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ABSTRACT:

Environmental sustainability has emerged as one of the largest issues of the 21st century globally. It requires all to collaborate, such as governments, people, and corporate sector alike. In recent times, corporate sector has begun to understand that they must not only earn money but also contribute to save the environment. This Article examines how corporate sector can contribute to creating environmental awareness through activities of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, adoption of sustainable corporate sector practices, and public outreach campaigns. It reveals how companies can impact their employees, client, and society by implementing environmentally friendly techniques, green advertising, and collaborating with NGOs and government authorities. The study further examines successful cases of Indian and multinational companies that have spearheaded green initiatives. It further reveals problems such as greenwashing, absence of responsibility, and conflict between earning money and saving the environment. Ultimately, the Article asserts that corporate sector must contribute to creating environmental awareness not because they must, but because it contributes to sustainable growth in the long run.

Key words:

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), ESG Reporting, Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR), Public Interest Litigation (PIL), Corporate Governance, Stakeholder Engagement, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

INTRODUCTION:

Environment degradation has become one of the greatest problems of the 21st century globally. More pollution, climate changes, deforestation, and loss of natural resources are significant threats to human survival and economic growth.¹ In order to solve these issues, society has to come together, for instance, governments, citizens, and companies. The companies are involved because they contribute to have a large impact on the environment. With their role being major players in industries and economic growth, firms are today required to produce revenue while being major players in industries and economic growth, firms are today required to produce revenue while being mindful of their surroundings and embracing sustainable practices.²

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has played a significant role in making such a transition possible. CSR comprises moral and ethical responsibilities of companies towards society and the environment besides their core company's objectives.³ In India, Section 135 of the Companies Act, 2013 made it obligatory for certain companies to invest part of their profit on socially useful activities like activities that are environmentally sustainable.⁴ Globally, such as in the United Nations sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁵ and Paris Climate Accord, companies are encouraged to integrate environment considerations into their plans.⁶

The world of corporate sector plays its part towards encouraging environmental awareness through creating green initiatives, awareness programs, green advertising, and outreach to society. The companies inform their clients and employees about the environment and cooperate with governments, NGOs, and schools to encourage environmental awareness across society. Major Indian companies like TATA, Infosys and ITC started their sustainability initiatives, while multinational companies like Google Unilever and Patagonia use creative means to further environmental awareness.

¹Climate Governance Initiative, IPCC April 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change (Apr. 4, 2022), <https://hub.climate-governance.org/Article/ipcc-april-2022-mitigation-of-climate-change>.

² International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank), World Development Report 2010: Development and Climate Change (2010), UN Digital Library, Record No. 1305257, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1305257>

³ Archie B. Carroll, Corporate Social Responsibility: Evolution of a Definitional Construct, 38 Bus. & Soc'y 268 (1999), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282441223_Corporate_social_responsibility_Evolution_of_a_definitional_construct.

⁴ Companies Act, No. 18 of 2013, § 135 (India).

⁵ United Nations, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1, 2015), <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

⁶ Paris Agreement, UNFCCC, 2015, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/parisagreement_publication.pdf.

Yet it is important to note that the involvement of corporate houses in environmental initiatives does have a fair amount of criticism and evaluation by different stakeholders attached to it. One of the primary concerns that often comes up is the notion of greenwashing, which is the false or deceptive representation of the eco-friendliness of a company or the environmental initiatives of a company.⁷ This can be a very deceptive practice, as it gives the appearance of sustainability without the supporting real intent of embracing environmentally friendly practices. Also, there is very little accountability of these corporate setups, which further makes the situation worse. Furthermore, the often-evident conflict between the necessity of economic development and the necessary environment protection often works against the overall efficacy and real impact of such initiatives. These often result in choices that will favor profit against sustainable practices, which works against the very purpose these environmental initiatives seek to fulfill.

CORPORATE SECTOR AND ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS:

The corporate sector is very important in spreading awareness about the environment and promoting sustainable practices. Companies are expected to follow legal rules and also to actively work on reducing their impact on the environment and teaching others about environmental issues. The corporate sector contributes through their actions, use of sustainable practices, awareness campaigns and teamwork with others.

CSR Initiatives for the Environment:

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) defined under the Companies Act of 2013 has been focusing on the protection of the environment as one of the key focus areas of Indian corporations.⁸ Acknowledging the mandate, many corporations have been investing massive amounts of financial resources on a range of initiatives that focus on sustainability, such as tree plantation campaigns, renewable energy-based projects, biodiversity conservation initiatives, and awareness campaigns that aim to enhance the public's understanding of the environment. For example, Infosys, one of the leaders of the software sector, has invested significantly with the main aim of drastically cutting down the carbon footprint of the company, which reflects a high level of commitment to environmental sustainability.⁹ Similarly, ITC Limited has been

⁷TerraChoice, The Sins of Greenwashing (2010), <https://www.ul.com/resources/greenwashing>

⁸Companies Act, No. 18 of 2013, § 135 (India).

⁹ Infosys, Sustainability Report 2022–23, <https://www.infosys.com/sustainability>

taking active initiatives by actively undertaking watershed development and several afforestation initiatives that focus on the development of local ecosystems.¹⁰ Globally, Microsoft has made a remarkable commitment to become carbon negative by the year 2030, which happens to be a prime example of how the practice of CSR has become a vital instrument that focuses on stimulating proper environmental stewardship by corporations.¹¹

Adoption Of Green Technologies and Sustainable Practices:

The corporations globally are increasingly accepting and implementing green technologies that encompass a variety of creative solutions like renewable energy sources, energy-efficient production methods, and advanced systems of recycling the entire range of waste materials. In India, Tata Power¹² and Adani Green Energy are investing heavily in solar and wind energy projects, which play a major role in the reduction of the usage of conventional fossil fuels.¹³ Multinational companies like Tesla also popularize the notion of electric mobility as a further sustainability drive.¹⁴ Also, Google has achieved the remarkable feat of becoming carbon neutral by effectively incorporating renewable energy into the operations of data centers it manages. These sustainable methods not only act to reduce environmental degradation, but they also play an important role to sensitize the employees, consumers, and competitors on the fact that eco-friendly options exist and have become available today.¹⁵

Awareness Campaigns and Public Engagement:

Corporations actively engage in the dissemination of environmental awareness through various channels, including advertising, the vast reach of social media, and informative workshops aimed at educating the public. A notable example of this is Hindustan Unilever's campaign titled "Swachh Aadat, Swachh Bharat," which is dedicated to promoting the significance of hygiene practices and effective waste management strategies.¹⁶ Similarly, Coca-Cola has launched its "World Without Waste" initiative, which strongly emphasizes the importance of

¹⁰ ITC Ltd., Sustainability & CSR Initiatives 2022, <https://www.itcportal.com/sustainability>

¹¹ Microsoft, Sustainability Report 2023, <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/sustainability>

¹² Tata Power, Sustainability Report 2023, <https://www.tatapower.com/sustainability.aspx>

¹³ Adani Green Energy, Sustainability and Renewable Energy Initiatives, <https://www.adanigreenenergy.com/sustainability>

¹⁴ Tesla, Impact Report 2023, https://www.tesla.com/ns_videos/impact-report-2023.pdf

¹⁵ Google, 2025 Environmental Report, <https://sustainability.google/google-2025-environmental-report/>

¹⁶ Hindustan Unilever, Swachh Aadat, Swachh Bharat, <https://www.hul.co.in/sustainability/swachh-aadat-swachh-bharat/>

recycling in our daily lives.¹⁷ These well-crafted campaigns are designed to significantly influence consumer behavior by drawing attention to the necessity of adopting sustainable lifestyles that are beneficial for the planet. By establishing a connection with the public through diverse digital platforms, these companies are transforming themselves into powerful agents capable of fostering mass awareness regarding environmental issues.¹⁸

LEGAL FRAMEWORK:

The contribution of the corporate world to environmental awareness does not just come from ethical responses, which are part of the responsibility to the world and to the future generations, but also from a pervasive legal and policy regime that exists both nationally and internationally. In taking care of the requirements of environmental degradation, the governments of the world as well as the international societies have put in place an elaborate array of regulations, guidelines, and legislations that serve the purpose of making the company to behave responsibly but also puts emphasis on its responsibility to take an active role in contributing to development in environmental awareness by the customers and the broader population.¹⁹

NATIONAL LAWS:

National laws have a significant influence on how the corporate sector approaches environmental responsibility. Through the establishment of legal responsibilities and regulatory structures, these laws guarantee that companies do not function in a vacuum, disregarding society and environmental issues. They enforce reporting and accountability, offer clear criteria for sustainable company operations, and offer incentives for projects that raise environmental awareness among staff, customers, and the general public.

Companies Act, 2013 - Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

The companies act that came into force during the year 2013 was a landmark and revolutionary change in the approach India has towards imposing corporate accountability. Through this act, India for the first time came up with an all-encompassing statutory law specifically for corporate

¹⁷ Coca-Cola, World Without Waste Initiative, <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/sustainability/world-without-waste>

¹⁸ United Nations, World Without Waste: Coca-Cola's Global Recycling Initiative, <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/world-without-waste>

¹⁹ International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank), World Development Report 2010: Development and Climate Change (2010), UN Digital Library, Record No. 1305257, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1305257>

social responsibility CSR. According to the provisions in section 135 of the act,²⁰ it has now been obligatory for the companies that meet certain threshold defined for the purpose to conduct CSR initiatives.

- The gross value lying equivalent to or even over ₹500 crore, or
- Turnover or over ₹1,000 crore, or over and above, or
- The total net earnings which add up to ₹5 crore or more in the period of any financial year.

Such companies must spend not less than 2% of their average net earnings over the previous three years on activities exclusively related to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

Schedule VII of the Act provides that:²¹

A board list of permissible CSR activities. Among them, specific emphasis is placed on:

- Assuring environmental sustainability
- Balancing the ecology with human activities
- Conservation of plants and animals
- Conservation of natural resources
- Conserving the quality of the water, atmosphere and soil

This particular provision establishes a clear and direct legal obligation for corporations, requiring them to allocate and commit a specific portion of their resources towards environmental causes.²²

In addition to the various statutory mandates and regulatory guidelines that are in place, the corporate sector's obligations regarding Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in India have also been significantly subject to the scrutiny and oversight provided by the judicial system through mechanisms known as Public Interest Litigations (PILs). These PILs act as an important mechanism for citizens and members of civil society, allowing them to hold corporations accountable when there are instances of CSR funds being misused, neglected, or otherwise diverted away from their originally intended purposes, thereby ensuring that these resources are utilized appropriately for the benefit of the community.

²⁰Companies Act, No. 18 of 2013, § 135 (India).

²¹ Companies Act, 2013, Schedule VII (India).

²² Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA), Government of India, CSR Rules under the Companies Act, 2013, <https://www.mca.gov.in/content/mca/global/en/home.html>

Courts have increasingly recognized Corporate Social Responsibility, commonly referred to as CSR, as being significantly more than merely a voluntary activity that companies can choose to engage in at their discretion. They have begun to emphasize quite strongly that companies must adhere strictly to the objectives that are clearly laid out under Section 135 of the Companies Act, 2013,²³ which mandates specific obligations. For instance, Public Interest Litigations, often abbreviated as PILs, have been filed against various companies that are failing to allocate the mandated 2% of their profits toward CSR activities, with particular emphasis on initiatives related to environmental sustainability and community development efforts. Such litigation serves to underscore the crucial role that the judiciary plays in ensuring that CSR initiatives are implemented effectively and responsibly. This, in turn, reinforces the broader goal of promoting environmental awareness and fostering a strong sense of social responsibility within the corporate sector.²⁴

Through these legal interventions, the courts have established that CSR is not merely a corporate exercise in goodwill but a legally significant obligation that companies must fulfill responsibly. This judicial recognition complements statutory and regulatory frameworks, creating a comprehensive ecosystem that promotes accountability, transparency, and tangible contributions to society and the environment.²⁵

Tata Chemicals Ltd. v. Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA)

Tata Chemicals Ltd., which is recognized as a prominent and influential player within the chemical industry, serves as a noteworthy example of the proactive and responsible approach towards CSR that has been mandated by this important piece of legislation.

Under the Companies Act, 2013, companies meeting specific criteria such as a net worth of ₹500 crore or more, a turnover of ₹1,000 crore or more, or a net profit of ₹5 crore or more during any financial year are required to allocate at least 2% of their average net profits from the preceding three years to CSR activities. Tata Chemicals Ltd., with its substantial financial standing, falls within this ambit and has consistently adhered to these statutory requirements.

²³ Companies Act, No. 18 of 2013, § 135 (India).

²⁴ Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA), Government of India, CSR Rules under the Companies Act, 2013, <https://www.mca.gov.in/content/mca/global/en/home.html>

²⁵ Tata Chemicals Ltd., Corporate Social Responsibility Policy (2021), https://www.tatachemicals.com/upload/content_pdf/csr-policy-2021.pdf

The company's initiatives related to Corporate Social Responsibility, commonly known as CSR, are intricately aligned with Schedule VII of the Companies Act,²⁶ which clearly outlines the permissible activities that organizations can engage in within this framework. Tata Chemicals, in particular, has undertaken a variety of projects that specifically focus on several critical areas, including environmental sustainability, education, healthcare, and the development of rural communities. Notably, the company has made significant investments in renewable energy projects that aim to harness sustainable resources, as well as water conservation efforts designed to protect and manage water resources effectively. Additionally, their community health programs further highlight the company's commitment, demonstrating a comprehensive and proactive approach to CSR that goes well beyond mere compliance with regulations and legal requirements.

Moreover, Tata Chemicals Ltd. has established a dedicated CSR committee at the board level, as mandated by the Companies Act, 2013.²⁷ This committee oversees the formulation and implementation of CSR policies, ensuring that the initiatives are impactful and align with both legal requirements and the company's core values.

Through these extensive efforts, Tata Chemicals Ltd. not only adheres to and complies with the legal framework that has been established by the Companies Act of 2013, but it also goes above and beyond to set a significant benchmark in the realm of corporate responsibility. This commitment plays a vital role in contributing to sustainable development as well as enhancing societal well-being in a meaningful way.²⁸

ENVIRONMENT (PROTECTION) ACT, 1986²⁹ – CORPORATE COMPLIANCE

This Act was enacted after the devastating Bhopal gas Tragedy (1984),³⁰ one of the world's worst industrial disasters. It serves as the overarching framework of legislation that governs and ensures the protection of the environment throughout the entirety of India. Unlike the preceding statutes and regulations that only focused on individual issues, for example, the Air

²⁶ Companies Act, 2013, Schedule VII (India).

²⁷ Companies Act, No. 18 of 2013

²⁸ Tata Chemicals Ltd., Corporate Social Responsibility Policy (2021), https://www.tatachemicals.com/upload/content_pdf/csr-policy-2021.pdf

²⁹ The Environment (Protection) Act, No. 29 of 1986, § 3 (India).

³⁰ Union Carbide Corporation Gas Plant Disaster (Bhopal Gas Tragedy), Bhopal, India, Dec. 2–3, 1984, 29 U.S. Env't L. Rep. 20781 (1985).

Act of 1981³¹ or Water Act of 1974,³² the Environmental Protection Agency, also referred to as the Environmental Protection Act, covers all encompassing array of all the issues relating to the environment. These involve key factors such as air quality, water supplies, soil quality, and numerous ecosystem crucial for the sustenance of human life on Earth.

For corporate enterprises and institutions, this would mean that there is a need for obtaining the necessary environmental clearances needed prior to commencement on new projects or upscaling existing ones. Regular and scientific monitoring with the reporting of the level of pollution to the appropriate authorities is required. Adoption of cleaner technologies to reach set standards. Accountability failure to comply can result in fines, closure orders and even imprisonment of company's directors.

Through the imposition of these specific requirements, companies are encouraged positively and implicitly to maintain an improved sense of awareness among their working population as well the surrounding communities regarding the core relevance of environmental safety. Having for instance, a company take on the obligation to observe the segregation of wastes or invest in solar energy technologies; by taking on the said responsibility, it not only adheres to juridical dictates but also becomes an active agent in informing its personnel as well as the rest of the populace on various eco- friendly methods and sustainable ways of living.

INTERNATIONAL GUIDELINES:

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

In the year 2015, the United Nations also took an important leap ahead when it adopted the sustainable Development Goals, also known simply as the SDGs, as part of the world program known as the 2030 Agenda.³³ This program includes the total number of 17 separate goals that specifically identify and aim the remedy numerous economic, social, and environmental problems that are being met throughout the world. In contrast to earlier international paradigms that might have left certain parameters unattended, the SDGs specifically recognize and give due importance to the paramount role played by the corporate sectors in the quest for sustainability. Input by the companies is crucial, as companies hold immense power over the

³¹ Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, No. 14 of 1981 (India)

³² Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, No. 6 of 1974 (India).

³³ United Nations, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1, 2015), <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

world's consumption, production, and resource extraction patterns; therefore, active input by companies is imperative for achievements. By aligning the business activities and reporting mechanisms with the set SDGs on an appropriate strategy, companies not only ensure sustainable development but also perform an indispensable function by sensitizing an array of stakeholders, including the employees, customers, and others interested, on the issue.

Among the encompassing list of 17 goals that have been put in place, Sustainable Development Goal 12 (SDG 12), which centers on the responsible Consumption and Production, and Sustainable Development Goal 13 (SDG 13),³⁴ with its focus on climate Action, are both directly connected to the critical elements of the environmental protection. SDG 12 underscores the major role that companies need to play in driving sustainable modes of production that are favorable for the environment, by encouraging the minimization of wastes, advocating for recycling of materials and actively informing customers on sustainable choices and activities.³⁵ In the same vein, SDG13 compels companies to institute urgent and decisive action on the critical challenge of climate change by drastically minimizing their emission of greenhouse gases, importantly shifting to renewable sources of energy, and urging activities resistant to climate change. These notable goals place business enterprises not only as players that adhere to regulations but also as prime agents of awareness, sharing quality information on the dimension of sustainability at the organizational as well as the larger community level.³⁶

Several companies worldwide have specifically endeavored to mainstream the Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs, as part of their larger sustainability approaches. In particular, Unilever is expressly advocating for responsible consumption through numerous campaigns urging people to adopt sustainable lifestyles and make ecologically responsible choices in their daily consumptions. Tata Group, on the other hand, is assiduously working on projects for water conservation and renewable energy initiatives that have immense benefits for rural communities, thus positively impacting their livelihoods. By comparison, Google has substantially invested in sources of renewable energy, serving specifically as the best example for the climate action globally and setting high standards for everyone. These initiatives in their many forms thus help to highlight how company's commitments to the SDGs extend beyond mere compliance; they cause substantial ripple effects to create awareness on the one hand and

³⁴United Nations, Sustainable Development Goal 13: Climate Action, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal13>

³⁵ United Nations, Sustainable Development Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal12>

³⁶ United Nations, Sustainable Development Goal 13: Climate Action, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal13>

behavioral change among the company's employees, customers and the greater society on the other. By expressly aligning company's operations and objectives with the SDGs, the corporate sector becomes an influential agent for environmental education as well as agent sustainable change across several corporate sectors.³⁷

Paris Climate Agreement (2015)

Adopted in 2015 under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC),³⁸ the Paris Climate Agreement is legally binding international agreement whose main goal is to keep global warming far below 2°C, ideally to 1.5°C, relative to pre – industrial levels. The Agreement urges the private sector to actively participate in reaching climate targets, even though governments are the main parties. In response, numerous global firms have promised to adopt renewable energy, lower their carbon footprints and report on their environmental performance. Company's dedication to "net zero" goals shows that they understand how vital it is to align with global climate goals while also educating stakeholders, investors and customers about sustainable practices.³⁹

Environmental, Social, And Governance (ESG) Norms

ESG standards have become a global framework that directs companies towards sustainable and ethical operations. The three pillars of ESG reporting are governance (transparency, ethics, compliance), social responsibility (employee welfare, diversity, and community participation), and environmental performance (emissions reduction, energy consumption, and waste management). In India, stock exchanges and regulatory agencies have made great progress in integrating ESG.⁴⁰ The top 1,000 listed firms are required by the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE)⁴¹ and the National Stock Exchange (NSE)⁴² to report on their ESG compliance using Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR). In addition to increasing corporate accountability, this framework raises public and investor understanding of

³⁷ Google, 2025 Environmental Report, <https://sustainability.google/google-2025-environmental-report/>

³⁸ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Paris Agreement, Dec. 12, 2015, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/parisagreement_publication.pdf

³⁹ United Nations, The Paris Agreement: Key Facts, <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/paris-agreement>

⁴⁰ Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) Guidelines, https://www.sebi.gov.in/sebi_data/commndocs/may-2021/Business%20responsibility%20and%20sustainability%20reporting%20by%20listed%20entitiesAnnexure2.p.PDF

⁴¹ Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE), Guidance Document on ESG Disclosures, https://www.bseindia.com/downloads1/BSEs_Guidance_doc_on_ESG.pdf

⁴² National Stock Exchange (NSE), ESG Disclosures Guidance Manual, <https://www.nse.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/NSE-ESG-Disclosures-Guidance-Manual.pdf>

sustainability issues, establishing ecologically conscious company practices as a fundamental requirement in contemporary financial markets.

CONCLUSION:

In order to further enhance the role of the corporate sector in raising environmental awareness, the companies should foremost comply stringently with the law and regulations, such as Section 135 of the Companies Act, 2013, and the Environmental Protection Act, 1986. Compliances of these clauses do not just constitute the discharge of the statutory duty, but it also provides a standard of sustainable corporate practice. Reporting requirements and mechanisms of accountability should be put into practice to avoid the abuse of the funds of the CSR and to make sure that the environmental programs become effective on the ground.

Addressing the problem of greenwashing, which has gained greater significance in the current environmentally sensitive society, is another imperative step that needs to be addressed. In order to combat the problem effectively, businesses need to take the initiative of accepting third-party audits, looking for appropriate certifications, and undertaking verifiable reporting mechanisms that accurately account for the true effects of their environmental practices and initiatives. In addition, the inclusion of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards of the overall business plan is just as imperative; this allows measurable achievements to be made on measurable parameters such as reduction of emissions, management of resources, and the use of renewable energy sources. By aligning the operations of the company with prescribed ESG norms, corporations can not only show sincere intent toward environmental responsibility, they can also boost investor and public confidence in their initiatives and integrity.

Finally, collaboration and interaction have a central role to play in achieving sustainability. Businesses must cooperate with government bodies, NGOs, universities, and local populations to exchange information, resources, and expertise on the best practices. Staff-based initiatives, information campaigns, and community programs can integrate the culture of environmental responsibility, stimulating behavioral change internally and within the broader society. With

these joint initiatives, the business community can make a major contribution to sustainable development as it educates and impacts stakeholders on environmentally friendly practices.