

By ALBERTINA ALMEIDA



A recent cycle tour sponsored by Adani ostensibly for health under the cover of Corporate Social Responsibility, a citizens' protest against these double standards, and police protection for the cycle tour, makes us all ponder about what this Corporate Social Responsibility is all about. Indeed, cycling is good for health, but carrying out such as CSR exercise in today's Vasco is akin to planting a handful saplings while axing thousands of trees.

This CSR was reminiscent of Vedanta's Sterlite company's CSR strategy, which it boasts as 'a bus with team of professional doctors travels through the villages of Thoothukudi to provide free primary and secondary health care access benefitting 50,000 population covering 28 villages', and for which it received the 'BT-CSR excellence award' in 2017. So much for CSR, even as doctors christened the skin patches in patients in the area where the factory is located, as 'Sterlite patches', and citizens met with brutal State repression when they opposed the expansion plans of this company and the operation of its polluting copper plant in Thoothukudi, resulting in death of fifteen innocent protestors.

"We don't need your schools, hospitals or water. Just get out of here," is the refrain that echoes across the villages that surround the Sterlite copper plant, records the 2018 Annual Report of Corporate Watch in India. "The recent years have seen a spate of dilutions in environmental laws and dismantling of age-old institutions and safeguards in order to allow for urbanization, industrialization and unfettered development to the detriment of the people and the environment. Signaling this change in approach, even during an election campaigning pitched on the promise of development – seen in terms of economic and industrial, rather than human or sustainable development – a business-friendly governance structure was assured to industries to ease businesses and increase profitability. Soon after coming into power, the current government fulfilled its commitment to industrialists, who had supported its campaign, by approving at least 230 projects – environmental clearances of which were held up by the previous government – and lifting the moratorium on new industries in critically polluted clusters of the country. Some of the early corporate beneficiaries of these prompt clearances include big entities like Adani Ports and Reliance Power", the Report continues. The same report also mentions that Adani Ports prohibits the use of child labour by the group, but does not mention the applicability of the same to its supply chain.

So, is 'corporate social responsibility' a cover-up for actual corporate irresponsibility? How else does one explain the total disregard by corporates such as Adani, JSW and Vedanta for the consequences of the coal handled at Mormugao Harbour, for the lives of citizens of Goa? The image of the toddler's blackened feet due to coal dust is too recent to forget. The dark

soot covered house surfaces and stored water are a past and present continuous experience. So also, slow but definite outmigration from Vasco to prevent health issues is ongoing. The Corporate Social Responsibility or Actual Corporate Irresponsibility? trail of health hazards and environmental damage caused by coal dust have been well documented, even as Jindal and Adani are looking to expand their existing berths at the port. The coal dust blackens lungs, increases incidents of respiratory disorder, it's threatening fragile forests, paddy fields, countless streams and rivers, at one place even a tiger corridor, at least two sanctuaries, and an entire hill, as an Indian Express report so well exposed some time back.

Or is corporate social responsibility about ensuring the entrenchment of corporate greed within Goa, as the fishing community at Kharevado is rightly asking? Why doesn't the Government tax the corporates adequately and then spend on welfare measures? If the government used taxes for welfare, may be then we would not need corporates to fund cycling events for the collective health of the people. Goans are all too familiar with the insidious attempts over the years in Goa by corporates to gain social acceptability and legitimacy by sponsoring whatever the middle class would love and which can in fact numb them into forgetting all the ills of the day. Right from the days when starred hotels sponsored football tournaments in the villages. It was even reported that "the Goa football league was taken over and its name was changed, when Thapar- DuPont offered a sponsorship of a few lakh of rupees". Only in those days, that is, in the 90s, it may not have been formally called 'corporate social responsibility'.

Or is corporate social responsibility about tax injustice, where a small amount is spent, while wool is pulled over one's eyes for the larger chunks that are evaded to be duly paid to the State exchequer? Companies who pay their taxes don't register themselves in the Cayman Islands, a report titled "the Adani files a short history of corruption, destruction and criminal activity" on the India Environment Portal suggests. There are other ways in which revenue-earning from the Adani Group enterprises' operations in India, has been short-circuited - and understandably so. If one remembers, even before his election in 2014, Modi has been the beneficiary of largesse from the Adani Group. For his pre-election campaign, Modi is reported to have unabashedly used their aircraft while travelling to campaign for the 2014 General Election. The Caravan reported that "from publicly available evidence, it is clear that the Adani Group has, at great cost to the public exchequer, received massive advantages from Gautam Adani's relationship with Modi—first through Modi's tenure as the chief minister of Gujarat, and now his tenure as the Prime minister of India."

One sees various avatars of corporate social responsibility. Corporate Social Responsibility seems to have been reduced to a weapon to promote a brand image that will whitewash the sins of commission and omission of the corporate. It looks like CSR is sought to be used to

distract from socially irresponsible practices in the corporate's core operations. It seems to be a way to create social acceptability even as the State lowers the standards of what is legally required of a corporate or of particular corporates such as Adani.

Should we not then be insisting on Corporate Legal Responsibility instead of this wishy-washy Corporate Social Responsibility – a corporate accountability where the corporate will not enjoy immunity from the law, impunity to act as it pleases, with no agency or appropriate means of redress to people to call in question their ways of adversely impacting people's health, livelihoods and their lives itself?

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