

AN OVERVIEW OF CSR INITIATIVES IN MENTAL HEALTHCARE IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The discourse surrounding mental health in India is characterized by a widespread misunderstanding of mental illnesses and disorders and stigma which has to lead to its exclusion from the public healthcare system. Corporate Social Responsibility by companies of a certain class was made compulsory by the Companies Act, 2013. Healthcare is one of the most popular fields that companies launch their CSR initiatives, with 24% of the overall CSR spending in India being allocated to it. The paper has examined the attention attributed to mental health in CSR in India and has found that CSR spending in this sector has been minimal, even in the absence of public facilities. Despite initiatives launched by select conglomerates including the Tata Group and Reliance Industries, this sector has largely been invisibilized by corporate India. This paper has looked into the efficiency and effectiveness of CSR programs in India that aim to generate awareness about mental health and provide diagnostic treatments. It has been found that mental healthcare in India has largely been unexplored, not only in terms of public and private initiatives but also in terms of research. Lastly, this paper has also provided policy recommendations to improve the outreach and impact of Corporate Social Responsibility targeted at providing mental healthcare to the underprivileged.

Keywords: Mental Healthcare, Corporate Social Responsibility, Mental Illnesses

INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility refers to all activities undertaken by businesses that aim to contribute to societal goals that are of a philanthropic, activist, or charitable nature or by engaging in or support volunteering or ethically-oriented practices (Lee & Kotler, 2013). It is considered to be a method of self-regulation adopted by private businesses through which they engage themselves in initiatives that are not primarily directed towards the profit motive of business, but towards generating positive social change (Benedict, 2015). Corporate Social Responsibility has been historically viewed as a voluntary opt-in system for individuals,

organizations, and industries but CSR activities in most developing or developed countries are now governed by national and international law. India is one of the many countries that have mandated minimum CSR spending for a particular class of companies (Grant Thornton, 2014). Corporate Social Responsibility allows businesses to indulge in activities that cause welfare for the society as a whole, and especially for those stakeholders who are in most need of it. CSR initiatives include campaigns aimed at promoting environmental sustainability, education for low-income households, mental healthcare and women's empowerment. From a business perspective, CSR improves the long-term learning capacity of companies by enhancing their reputation and image in the minds of consumers. For CSR activities to be economically sustainable, they must be integrated into the primary business model of companies. For example, through Project Shakti, Unilever hires women in villages in India and provides them with microfinance loans to sell soaps, oils, detergents, and other products manufactured by Unilever door-to-door. Research conducted on the success of this scheme indicates that beyond increasing the sales and consumption of commodities produced by Unilever, more than 65,000 women have become self-sustaining entrepreneurs due to loans provided by Unilever which has effectively doubled their incomes. Moreover, the increased access to Fast Moving Consumer Goods has promoted nutrition and hygiene in Indian villages (Ranjan, et. al., 2015).

Similar to most low-income countries, the development of the mental healthcare sector in India has been slow. Access to mental healthcare is severely restricted, due to multiple socio-economic factors. Discourse related to mental illnesses and disorders is fairly recent in India and is still limited to only the most developed parts of the country. State-sponsored mental health care is severely understaffed and under-trained and private therapists and hospitals are too expensive to be accessed by the majority of Indians. Research and development are also restricted to exclusively developed spaces, the impact of which rarely extends to the majority of the country (Srivastava, et. al., 2016). Lack of awareness about mental illness leads to its invisibilization from society and discourse. Those who suffer from mental illnesses are the worst off, not only because they do not receive the healthcare they need which decreases their economic productivity and social mobility but also because their behavior and disorders are often stigmatized by society. Lack of awareness also leads to lesser accountability and questioning of the democratically elected government, which directly has a detrimental impact on its incentive to improve existing facilities. Official Statistics indicate lower rates of prevalence of mental illness in India as compared to the developed countries but research at the grassroots level shows that this arises not due to lower occurrence of disorders and illnesses but due to the lack of access to diagnostic services (Srivastava, et. al., 2016).

The improvement of the Mental Healthcare sector of India requires efforts at multiple levels, including research awareness generation, and enhancement of the availability and access to

mental health care. Despite recent government initiatives, including the passage of the National Mental Health Care in 2017, state-sponsored development continues to be slow (National Health Policy, 2019). Corporate Social Responsibility programs, such as the Mpower Foundation- created by the Aditya Birla Group can be instrumental in filling the gaps that presently exist in this sector and improving the quality and accessibility of mental health care in India (India CSR Network, 2018).

BACKGROUND

Corporate Social Responsibility in India has historically had both cultural and political affiliations. Values such as Seva which translates to service have been a core tenet of Hinduism, which is followed by over 600 million people in India. Other religions including Christianity, Sikhism, and Buddhism also characterize social service as a path to God or salvation. The cultural emphasis on charity and philanthropy in India has caused major conglomerates including the Tata Group to orient their business activities in a way that they benefit communities as much as they benefit proprietors. During the Indian Independence Movement, Gandhi proposed the Trusteeship Approach to society, which stated that businesses were ‘trustees’ of the wealth of communities which is why that wealth must be primarily used for the benefit of the society. The development of cooperatives including Amul, led by Dr. Kurien has pioneered inclusive growth focused around dairy farmers at the grassroots level in rural India. Even though CSR initiatives have been prevalent since the British Raj, they have mostly existed as charities, outside the eyes of the law. This led to the restriction of CSR activities in terms of innovation and impact. However, with the influence of western research and discourse, philanthropy by companies started being viewed as their responsibility and not acts of charity (Shyam, 2016).

Through the Companies Act 2013, the Government of India has mandated every company with a net worth of ₹500 crores or turnover of ₹1,000 crore or net profit of ₹5 crore to spend 2% of the average profits made by them over the previous three financial years on social development (PTI, 2019). Companies in India invest about Rs 6000 crore in CSR Initiatives every year (Tandon & Kaur, 2017). Education and healthcare account for the highest CSR spends, amounting to over 45% of the total investment. However, most healthcare CSR initiatives in India are restricted to ‘physical’ healthcare. The discourse around mental health and its importance to individuals and society have not significantly evolved in India to the extent of it being included in the definition of ‘healthcare’ in mainstream narratives. Conglomerates including Reliance and Mahindra & Mahindra have made significant investments in CSR initiatives aimed at improving access to healthcare, but have invisibilized mental illness from not only their CSR programs but their general company policies as well (Tandon & Kaur, 2017). The Tata Group was one of the first major corporate houses in India to launch CSR initiatives to

target the problem of growing mental illnesses in India through the Udaan Initiative of Tata Trusts (Sabru, 2017).

Mental Healthcare has been prioritized by many companies in their CSR programs globally. The Employee Assistance Program is a part of Tokyo Marine Holding's CSR initiative under which the company has appointed special psychiatrists to support its mental health management system which can be accessed by its employees. The EPA was expanded from a typical employee welfare program to include mental healthcare as a response to increasing rates of depression amongst the Japanese workforce (Okumura & Higuchi, 2011). As a part of its CSR program, Johnson & Johnson has financed 17 grassroots level projects in partnership with local, not for profit organizations that focus on providing long-term support to people with serious disabilities or mental illness. Johnson & Johnson has partnered with ĀAPZ that focuses its efforts on developing community-oriented approaches to help people suffering from mental illness. It operates a therapeutic center for young people suffering from schizophrenia, an intervention telephone line for psychological help, and the monthly magazine Esprit (Johnson & Johnson, 2008).

DISCUSSION

Even though, the World Health Organization, health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, 'healthcare' in India primarily revolves around disease management and cure. Mental health, on the other hand, is mostly ignored because it has no real physical manifestation despite mental illnesses and disorders such as depression and anxiety reaching epidemic levels and affecting about 20% of India's population (Rana & Majumdar, 2019). About 9.8 million teenagers in India suffer from anxiety and depression, lacking access to active interventions (Rana & Majumdar, 2019). The misunderstanding and stigma surrounding mental health have led to its exclusion not only from hospitals but also from universities and social initiatives.

About 80% of India's top 200 companies invest their CSR funds in health or education or both yet only a handful of initiatives focus on prevention and management of mental illnesses. The Mpower Foundation is a social enterprise registered under The Aditya Birla Education Trust, which the Aditya Birla Group runs as a part of its Corporate Social Responsibility campaign. Not only does it run awareness-building campaigns and workshops to deal with the stigma around mental health, but it also offers free clinical services to the underprivileged (Rana & Majumdar, 2019). A research conducted by the Udaan Initiative, which is funded by Tata Trusts found that 14% of the global burden of diseases is called by mental illness; and that 1 in every 4 families in India has a member suffering from a mental health disorder. The Udaan Initiative aims to

improve access to quality mental health services, raise awareness and knowledge of mental health issues among the target population, increase the number of trained mental health service providers across new geographies and facilitate private financial investment in mental health from external sources (Roysam, 2017). The Tata Trusts has partnered with several grassroots level mental health programs including the Incense Initiative, Schizophrenia Research Key Achievements Foundation's (SCARF), and the Banyan in Maharashtra that have reduced the rates of farmer suicides by conducting interventions aimed at targeting mental health problems that are considered to be correlated with suicidal tendencies (Roysam, 2017). MPS Limited, a software company based in Delhi-NCR has become one of the first Small and Medium Scale Enterprises in the country to launch a CSR Initiative targeted at mental health. Through the Sambandh Health Foundation, it has supported community workshops, street plays, educational & awareness sessions, and mental illness screening camps to generate awareness about mental health and to incentivize people to access formal medicine to treat mental disorders instead of relying on traditional myths, which is a common practice in rural India (CSR Box, 2017).

Mental Health in India has always been invisibilized or stigmatized. The effect that mental illness has on individuals is often attributed to the lack of intelligence, will-power, and potential. Conservative sections of the Indian society continue to link symptoms of mental disorders such as schizophrenia with abnormal or paranormal forces. The taboo that surrounds mental illness restricts the development of mental healthcare in the country. Not only does it allow the government to shirk off its responsibility, but it also creates active opposition against private initiatives. The fear of backlash causes businesses to avoid taking up the cause of mental health in their Corporate Social Responsibility Programme. The lack of infrastructure and support mechanisms in the mental health sector has also acted as a deterrent for corporates and has resulted in a lesser focus on healthcare in the CSR initiative.

Beyond operational problems, CSR has been criticized at a more principled level by academicians and policymakers. The left has criticized CSR programs on the belief that they are undertaken by companies to distract the public from ethical questions posed by their core operations. It is considered acceptable for companies to unintentionally reap benefits through the goodwill that Corporate Social Responsibility programs generate in society (McKibeen, 2006). However, it is hypocritical for companies to promote social welfare whilst defying the same principles in their operations (Adhikari, 2016). Neglect of the mental health of employees is common amongst Indian companies, many of which have launched mental health awareness programs or have been associated with companies that have done so. CSR activities act as a disguise for companies to avoid questioning and erode responsibility, generating a 'Halo Effect' (Bakan, 2012). The goodwill that CSR activities also cause society to treat businesses more leniently. Research has found that a 20% increase in corporate giving or a similar commitment to

eradicating a significant labor issue causes a 40% decrease in fines awarded to companies for illegal activities including bribery and environmental degradation (Haynes, 2007).

CONCLUSION

The potential of CSR to improve the mental healthcare sector in India has been stifled by structural and operational difficulties. However, the current scenario of the mental healthcare sector in India requires active interventions from external agents. The inaction and ignorance of governments across party lines, coupled with the social stigma and misconceptions about mental health prevailing in society has reduced the propensity of change from within the system. Even though CSR initiatives can never be a substitute for or replace state-sponsored healthcare, they can fill crucial gaps in the absence of the latter and have a positive impact on some of the most vulnerable stakeholders in society. Even though public mental hospitals are subsidized by the government, they are often understaffed and lack the necessary equipment and qualified personnel to deal with patients who suffer from mental illnesses or disorders (Srivastava, et. al., 2016). Even though exceptions such as the National Institute for Mental Health and Neurosciences exist, public hospitals usually only have the capacity to treat people suffering from the most serious conditions. Even then, the quality of the treatment is not considered to be at par with international standards. On the other hand, private hospitals that tend to be better in terms of quality are concentrated only in the most developed urban centers of the country (Thara & Patel, 2010). Private mental health hospitals are also inaccessible by the majority of the country due to the existence of economic barriers. In such a space, the mental health needs of a significant section of the Indian population is ignored.

To actualize change in the mental health sector of India, corporates need to bring this issue to the mainstream in public discourse. Initiatives can only be successful once people accept and access them, which is prevented by the social stigma existing in India. Awareness campaigns targeted at rural and conservative sections of the society generally enhance participation. The HIV campaign in India is a testimony to the effectiveness of grassroots level campaigns. Partnerships with grassroots level non-governmental organizations such as Manas in West Bengal, the Medico-Pastoral Association (MPA) in Bangalore, and Shristi in Madurai are effective in enhancing impact (Thara & Patel, 2010). The National Mental Health Act, 2017 also contains provisions of state partnerships with private organizations aimed at operationalizing mental health and wellness centers across the country to provide comprehensive primary health care across the country (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2017).

The essence of Corporate Social Responsibility is that enterprises are placed at the center of society and social issues that concern stakeholders. Private companies need to be cognizant of

social realities to effect practical change and improve the lives of the underprivileged. Many sections of the society that are unable to access mental healthcare facilities directly contribute to the profitability of large conglomerates. Beyond the legal provisions of the Companies Act (2019), facilitating mental healthcare to the underprivileged population of India does not only productivity of individuals but also creates safe and conducive environments for them in the workplace and beyond.

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