

Philanthropy or the giving game?

If malaria is important to Bill Gates, it becomes important to bureaucrats the world over.

But is the line between genuine advocacy for social welfare projects and self-serving publicity becoming increasingly blurry?

Personally, I do not like the word 'philanthropy'. Somehow, it sounds patronising. In the context of Indian businesses, historically speaking, the same people who adulterated food, sold things in the black market and evaded taxes were also the ones building temples and dharamshalas, orphanages and self-help centres for rural women. The cause a company chose was actually one that was dear to the owner. It had an organisational bearing. Largely, it was about paying money and building some form of physical infrastructure to perpetuate the name of an ancestor. There, of course, have been shining exceptions like the Tatas. In that context, the term philanthropy has a rather self-serving and patronising tint to it. Hence, I prefer the phrase 'social responsibility'. No one needs philanthropy.

The power of organised business to positively impact the society is huge. There is no patronising angle to it because, as the term social responsibility encapsulates, it is a responsibility that businesses must carry. The reasons are many. Today, the footprint of every business is large and cascading. So the areca nut grower in Shimoga is connected to the gutkha business and that, in turn, is connected to both oral cancer and environmental pollution. The truck manufacturer makes money from the expanding trucking business that has a direct connection with spread of AIDS in India. The potential impact of the bad part of any business is as large as the good. If we do not emphasise social responsibility, businesses will simply absolve themselves of the bad. When we keep the idea at the same level of consciousness as growth and profitability, business would have a higher chance of taking an inclusive view of the world around them.

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IT'S IMPORTANT NOT TO VIEW BUSINESS THROUGH THE NARROW APERTURE OF PROFIT AND LOSS. IT'S NOT ABOUT PHILANTHROPY; IT'S A MATTER OF RESPONSIBILITY

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PHILANTHROPY IS NOT A PEDESTAL TO CLIMB ON TO OR FOR THE WORLD TO SEE AND APPLAUD. IT'S A WAY OF LIFE. AND IT'S BEST PRACTISED WITHOUT DRAWING ATTENTION AND GRABBING HEADLINES

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The second reason stems from the sheer size of modern day businesses. It's not just about the millions and billions they can donate; in fact, money by itself has seldom solved any problem. Large businesses employ thousands of people. Every such business has the capacity to make its employee base aware of and engaged with important causes important by signalling to them that it is something your workplace encourages. This releases a huge amount of energy into civil society. It creates volunteerism that, in turn, impacts areas like innovation. As a result of employee engagement, when civil society benefits as a whole, business has a more predictable future.

There is yet another important angle. It's about the power of advocacy. Business people have a new found le-

gitimacy in societies the world over. They are respected and decision makers listen to them; young men and women look up to them. As a result, they have the power of advocacy and the capacity to influence social consciousness. If malaria is important to Bill Gates, it becomes important to bureaucrats the world over. If Starbucks engages with Rainforest Alliance, consumers of coffee begin to support sustainable farming. So, given this power, it's important that we do not justify existence through a narrow aperture of profit and loss. Instead, we must balance it by asking for inclusion and engagement. It's not about philanthropy; it's a matter of responsibility.

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Sage Dadhichi, according to Hindu mythology, sacrificed his life by donating his backbone to the *devas* to make a weapon to annihilate a dreaded *asura*. The sage gave his last full measure of devotion for the benefit of the society. We Indians, with such a pedigree, are now being lectured by westerners on philanthropy. How did things come to such a pass? Commercialisation of philanthropy, manifesting itself in a multitude of forms like corporate social responsibility (CSR), is to blame.

CSR, a recent import from the western world, is all about corporates donating funds for a variety of causes and then publicising the fact to leverage their brand and gain

from it. Is this philanthropy? Philanthropy is meant to be for the welfare of the donee and not for the donor to gain mileage from. As an old saying goes, in philanthropy, the left hand should not know what the right hand is giving. Unfortunately, the craving for publicity among these self-styled altruists has reached abysmal levels.

In this fast moving world, where materialistic tendencies reach gigantic proportions, values like duty and responsibility have become jaded and old fashioned. Nothing better can be expected when societies lose their moral fabric with old-age homes becoming dire necessities. If we look after our aged parents, aren't we merely doing our duty? Or is it something that

needs to be written about leading to the subject winning plaudits?

Looking through the same glass, handed down from generation to generation, philanthropy is nothing more than the duty of every human being to the society at large. It need not be covered as news for the world to learn, it's bounden duty. We don't need poster boys to be positioned as examples to be followed. Just as we don't need assistance to distinguish between what's patently right and what's fundamentally wrong, we need not be guided to comprehend that philanthropy is part of our duty. That is something that all of us should engage in, to the best of our ability. Such learning is part of our upbringing. Such acts are part of our culture. As long as we do not force amnesia upon ourselves, we cannot fail to perceive this path.

When philanthropy is practised with popularity in mind, its intended objective becomes a casualty. As the philanthropist is more keen on the publicity gained, little focus is brought to bear on the process to ensure that the needy benefit. Such philanthropy is better eschewed. Pearl S Buck once said, "The test of a civilisation is in the way it cares for its helpless members." By making a charade of philanthropy, we fail miserably in that test. Philanthropy is not a pedestal to climb on to for the world to see us and applaud. It's a way of life. It's how we fulfill the obligations that we are born with. It's how we justify being called human beings. And it's best practised without drawing attention and grabbing headlines.

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