CSR COMMUNICATION IN CONTESTED ARENA: CHALLENGES TO COOPERATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

By

Hemant Shrivastava

A Doctoral Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

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सिद्धिमूलं प्रबन्धनम्
भा. प्र. सं. इन्दौर
IIM INDORE

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The Advisory Committee:

Prof. Abha Chatterjee

(Chair)

Prof. Swatantra

(Member)

Prof. Patturaja Selavaraj

(Member)

Abstract

"That man is a success who has lived well, laughed often and loved much."

-- Robert Louis Stevenson

This work documents the history of conflict over land acquisition for coal mining in the Hazaribagh region of Jharkhand State in India from the time of the foundation laying ceremony in 1998 to 2013. This thesis, which is based on eleven months of field research, focuses on examining the role of corporate social responsibility and its communication in the context of land acquisition for mining. There has hardly been any investigation into the process of CSR implementation and its communication in the context of mining projects in India. The absence of a significant study of CSR and its communication indicates that scant attention has been paid to the potential of transformative engagement of CSR in dispute resolution.

This study highlights this cavalier attitude towards CSR and its communication in resolving dispute and conflict. It argues that organizational processes must be aligned with vision, ethics so that the power of CSR and its communication can be harnessed to the advantage of stakeholders as well as the organization. It also highlights the fact that when human greed and grievance combine, it fuels the protest discourse, overpowering the spirit and processes of CSR communication.

The paradigm of postmodernism provided the ontological and epistemological framework for the study. Grounded theory was an appropriate method to study an under-explored area such as this; its thematic analysis and pattern coding were then compared with qualitative content analysis and quantitative content analysis for triangulation and to enhance credibility, dependability and trustworthiness of the results.

The complex system of land tenure and the disarray of land holding records can be severe challenges to development initiatives; this calls for urgent administrative reforms to set the records right. A major purpose of the Zamindari Abolition Act was to make land ownership more egalitarian but large scale land acquisition by big corporate houses tends to give rise to a new class of modern zamindars. Increasing land fragmentation is a bottleneck in agricultural investment. Ina fertile area the economic activity is primarily agriculture. The project under study here has unleashed panoply of local struggles between the project-affected population and the company.

The study examines the interface between CSR and its communication with legal codes and administrative actions. On one hand, the legal paradigms which regulate land acquisition, like LA Act and CBA Act for mining, almost seize the land owner's right to sell and purchase, amounting to coercion into transferring land. The state holds the public to ransom. This produces a social situation where the corporate entity

manipulates the law to have its way in the name of development and deprives the affected population of its rights to life and livelihood. To make matters worse, the resettlement and rehabilitation precedence has been a saga of neglect bordering on human rights violation. It reveals how the corporates manipulate laws and CSR, to gain access to land through legal mechanisms. This study focuses on the discourse, rhetoric and language used in various negotiations and conflicts over land acquisition that occurred in Barkagaon and Keredari blocks of Hazaribagh district in Jharkhand. The study enhances our understanding of the ways in which CSR communication shapes people's perception and how this pattern of resistance bears uncanny similarity to a television soap opera.

The research findings reveal that in the investment preparation stage of the project the company avoided CSR communication as public resistance was anticipated. The public resistance despite initial secrecy left them least prepared to handle the unexpected adverse developments. It led to fumbled responses, misdirected efforts and loss of public faith. In view of public opposition, the CSR approach became focused on the landless, women and youth, who were at the fore-front of the struggle. Essentially the CSR approach became fragmented and overlooked community needs. The company exercised non-transparent communication as the project program was likely to induce massive public displacement. Above all its CSR target was not the entire community but the more vocal sections from which threats were perceived. This constrained their CSR communication from the beginning since value or wealth transfer was lop-sided and favored a few classes at the expense of the whole society. The findings of the research amply illustrate that the company avoided direct CSR communication and did not employ any type of reconciliation to defuse the crisis. To determine their CSR communication or image repair strategy, several questions were asked of the project head about what activities they did, and how their effectiveness was adjudged. Their feedback mechanism was only verbal reporting, leaving much scope for manipulation. It was thus concluded that their market characteristic, nature of service/ product, and their being a public sector obviated the need to do image-repair communication.

We can say this with a fair degree of confidence because initially the company was welcomed by the stakeholders and only after learning about their impending displacement did the public opposition begins. It ignored the protests at the public hearing and managed its successful completion in the face of vehement public protest. This amounted to gagging public opinion and revealed a utilitarian approach.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, land acquisition, CSR communication, stakeholder, legal codes, conflict

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