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## AN ANALYTICAL INQUIRY INTO ETHICAL JUSTICE: A CASE STUDY OF ADITYA BIRLA GROUP

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Ritesh Deshmukh, B.B.A. LL.B. (Hons.), Department of Law, Himachal Pradesh National Law University, Shimla, India

Samvaad Anand, B.A. LL.B. (Hons.), Maharaja Surajmal Institute, GGSIPU

### ABSTRACT

This study examines the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives of the Aditya Birla Group through the philosophical lens of Mahatma Gandhi's ideals of justice, exploring how contemporary corporate practices can embody principles of trusteeship, equity, and sustainable development. In India, CSR has gained legislative significance through Section 135 of the Companies Act, 2013, transforming corporate obligations toward social welfare. The Aditya Birla Group, as one of India's leading multinational conglomerates, exemplifies how businesses can function as agents of social transformation while maintaining financial viability.

Gandhi's concept of trusteeship—which posits that wealth and resources are held in trust for societal welfare rather than personal gain—provides the theoretical framework for analyzing the group's CSR activities. The study investigates how the Aditya Birla Group's comprehensive initiatives across education, healthcare, rural development, environmental sustainability, and women's empowerment align with Gandhian principles of non-violence (ahimsa), truth (satya), and equitable resource distribution.

The research reveals that the group's educational programs serving over 45,000 children, vocational training empowering 200,000 individuals, healthcare interventions reaching millions in underserved areas, and environmental conservation efforts reflect a holistic approach to justice-oriented CSR. These initiatives demonstrate practical applications of trusteeship by addressing systemic inequalities and prioritizing marginalized communities' needs. The group's focus on rural development and self-reliance particularly resonates with Gandhi's vision of village upliftment as fundamental to national progress.

However, the study also identifies challenges in implementing Gandhian philosophy within profit-driven business environments, including concerns about transparency, measuring long-term impact, and avoiding tokenistic practices. The findings suggest that integrating Gandhian ideals into

corporate governance offers a viable pathway for businesses to balance profitability with social responsibility, contributing to a more equitable and sustainable society while honouring Gandhi's enduring legacy in contemporary corporate ethics.

**Keywords:** Corporate Social Responsibility, Gandhian Philosophy, Trusteeship, Business Ethics, Social Justice, Aditya Birla Group

## Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a cornerstone for ethical and sustainable business practices, which relates to corporate awareness of responsibilities to create social, environmental, and economic values. Today, in a globalized world, the function of corporations goes beyond profits, and corporations are acknowledged as another major player in promoting social change and achieving equitable development. In India, CSR is especially significant, deeply embedded in the cultural DNA of community welfare, and has been supplemented by legislation, e.g. Section 135 of the Companies Act, 2013, restricting CSR disbursement to a particular class of companies. Through this legal framework, corporations have been able to make use of a systematic and efficient approach to addressing social issues and nation-building.<sup>1</sup>

The Aditya Birla Group, one of the leading Indian multinational conglomerates, has been spearheading the CSR activity in India. Due to its wide engagement and wide range of activities, the network has been a catalyst for impactful work in strategic sectors including education, health, rural development, livelihood relevance, and environmental care.<sup>2</sup> With the projects not only the lives of marginalized communities have been much improved, the group has transformed itself into a corporate organisation, in charge of sustainable and inclusive development.<sup>3</sup>

By analyzing these works through a lens informed by Gandhian thought as based on justice, fresh insights as to the ways in which the legacy of equity, non-violent resistance and trusteeship are manifested in the work that is emerging. Mahatma Gandhi, a father of ethical leadership, proposed the business model that they should consider wealth and resource holders

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<sup>1</sup> Companies Act 2013, s. 135

<sup>2</sup> Aditya Birla Group, *Sustainability and CSR Reports 2022-23* <https://www.adityabirla.com/sustainability> accessed 20 November 2024.

<sup>3</sup> KPMG, *India's CSR Reporting Survey 2022* (KPMG 2023) <https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home.html> accessed 20 November 2024.

devoted to the good of the society. His guiding principle of "trusteeship" embodied the moral responsibility of corporations to put profit to work by closing social and economic chasms, providing for justice for all social strata. Gandhi's emphasis on sustainable practices, community welfare, and the equitable distribution of resources remains profoundly relevant in the context of modern corporate governance.

This article focuses on the social responsibility behaviour of Aditya Birla Group (ABG) and tests the compatibility of its behaviour with the social consciousness of Mahatma Gandhi of justice and social responsibility. It probes the manner in which the group has used and adapted Gandhi's idea of trusteeship and equitable growth to its practice, in order to produce empowerment and sustainability. Across the fields from educational and vocationalization development to environmental protection and healthcare, the group's work represents a wide scope agenda of social advancement.

In addition, this work analyses the constraints faced by Aditya Birla Group and other companies to actualize Gandhian philosophy into concrete and meaningful CSR practices. The issues of reconciling business objectives and the public good, and of balancing transparency with responses to criticism for tokenistic practices in corporate social responsibility are discussed. Therefore, the study provides insights into how justice-oriented CSR can be implemented in a highly competitive and profit-driven business environment.

Critically scrutinizing The Aditya Birla Group's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities, this study highlights its continuing relevance of Gandhian values in shaping ethical issues related to corporate governance. The aim is to demonstrate the business community as a catalyst for change, being able to incorporate it into their business practices while embedding social justice, environmental sustainability, and equity into business practices in a way that does not compromise their financial profitability, in order to pave the way in a fairer and more peaceful society. The dialogue not only highlights the feats of the Aditya Birla Group, but also offers hints to make CSR programmes more effective and impactful on the pursuit of noble causes (our vision of) the iconic Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

### **CSR Initiatives of the Aditya Birla Group**

The Aditya Birla Group, one of India's leading conglomerates, has consistently demonstrated its commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) through comprehensive and impactful initiatives. Guided by its ethos of inclusive growth and sustainability, the group's CSR efforts are aligned with its philosophy of "Giving Back to Society." These initiatives span

various sectors, focusing on addressing critical societal challenges and improving the quality of life for marginalized communities.

### **Education and Skill Development**

Education remains a cornerstone of the Aditya Birla Group's CSR programs. The group operates over 50 schools, providing quality education to more than 45,000 children annually, many of whom belong to underprivileged backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> Initiatives such as scholarships for meritorious students and vocational training programs aim to bridge the education gap and equip youth with the skills needed for employment. The Aditya Birla Skills Foundation, for example, provides skill training in sectors such as retail, construction, and hospitality, empowering over 200,000 individuals across India.<sup>5</sup> These programs not only address unemployment but also foster social mobility.

### **Healthcare and Sanitation**

The Aditya Birla Group has made significant contributions to healthcare, focusing on preventive and curative measures for underserved communities. Through mobile health vans, free medical camps, and partnerships with local health organizations, the group has reached millions of individuals in rural and semi-urban areas.<sup>6</sup> Key projects include initiatives to combat malnutrition, maternal and child healthcare programs, and campaigns promoting hygiene and sanitation. For instance, their "Swachh Bharat Abhiyan" activities involve the construction of toilets in schools and villages, improving sanitation for thousands.<sup>7</sup>

### **Rural Development**

Rural development is a central theme of the group's CSR activities, with interventions aimed at holistic community development. Projects in this domain include improving agricultural practices, creating self-help groups, and providing access to clean drinking water.<sup>8</sup> Through watershed management programs, the group has enhanced irrigation facilities, benefiting farmers and promoting sustainable agricultural practices. Additionally, microfinance initiatives have supported rural entrepreneurship, enabling women and small business owners to achieve financial independence.

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<sup>4</sup> Supra footnote 2

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Deloitte, *Impact of CSR: A Report on India's Mandate* (Deloitte 2022) <https://www.deloitte.com/insights> accessed 20 November 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Supra footnote 3

<sup>8</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *Trusteeship* (Navjivan Publishing 1962) 15.

### **Environmental Sustainability**

Environmental conservation is a key focus of the Aditya Birla Group's CSR framework. The group has invested heavily in renewable energy, afforestation, and waste management projects. Initiatives include setting up solar power plants, promoting energy efficiency, and adopting sustainable practices across its business operations. The group's afforestation efforts have resulted in the plantation of millions of trees, contributing to biodiversity conservation and carbon sequestration. Furthermore, waste-to-energy projects and programs aimed at reducing plastic usage highlight the group's commitment to a sustainable future.

### **Empowering Women and Marginalized Communities**

The group's CSR initiatives also emphasize the empowerment of women and marginalized groups. Programs focused on women's literacy, vocational training, and health awareness have empowered countless women to become self-reliant. Efforts to support differently-abled individuals and marginalized communities reflect the group's inclusive approach to social development.

Through these diverse initiatives, the Aditya Birla Group has created a significant social impact, addressed pressing societal challenges while promoting equity and sustainability. These projects, aligned with Gandhian ideals of trusteeship and justice, reflect the group's dedication to ethical business practices and inclusive development.

### **Gandhian Ideals of Justice**

Mahatma Gandhi's ideals of justice provide a moral and philosophical framework that transcends conventional legal systems, focusing on fairness, equity, and the holistic well-being of society. His vision emphasizes the moral responsibility of individuals, corporations, and governments to contribute to a just and harmonious society, where the needs of the marginalized are prioritized. Gandhi's justice does not rest solely on punitive measures but instead seeks restorative solutions that reconcile differences and foster mutual understanding.

Central to Gandhian justice is the principle of trusteeship, which advocates that wealth and resources, though generated by individuals or corporations, are ultimately held in trust for society. This principle challenges the accumulation of wealth for personal gain and promotes its equitable distribution to bridge societal inequalities.<sup>9</sup> Gandhi argued that wealth creators

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

have a moral obligation to use their resources for the betterment of the underprivileged, ensuring that economic progress benefits all sections of society. This aligns closely with modern CSR principles, where corporations are seen as custodians of resources with a responsibility to address societal challenges.

Gandhi's belief in non-violence (ahimsa) and truth (satya) as tools for achieving justice further underscores his ethical approach. He asserted that true justice could not be achieved through coercion or conflict but through dialogue, empathy, and truth-seeking.<sup>10</sup> This aligns with contemporary approaches to justice that emphasize restorative practices, aiming for societal healing rather than retribution.

Moreover, Gandhi's ideals stress the importance of self-reliance and empowerment, particularly for rural and underserved communities. He believed that justice must ensure access to basic necessities, education, and opportunities for all, fostering dignity and independence.<sup>11</sup> These values resonate deeply with the CSR efforts of corporations like the Aditya Birla Group, which aim to empower communities through sustainable development.

Thus, Gandhian ideals of justice serve as a timeless guide for ethical governance, urging businesses and institutions to integrate equity, sustainability, and compassion into their practices. These principles provide a robust foundation for evaluating modern CSR initiatives and their impact on creating a just society.

### **Analysis of Aditya Birla Group's CSR Through Gandhian Ideals**

The Aditya Birla Group's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives resonate deeply with Gandhian ideals of justice, emphasizing equity, trusteeship, and community welfare. By aligning its CSR practices with principles of sustainable development and ethical governance, the group exemplifies how businesses can function as custodians of societal and environmental well-being, much like Gandhi envisioned.

### **Trusteeship in Action**

Gandhi's concept of trusteeship, which advocates that wealth should serve as a tool for social upliftment rather than personal gain, is vividly reflected in the group's CSR initiatives. Through its extensive programs in education, healthcare, and rural development, the Aditya Birla Group

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<sup>10</sup> Judith Brown, *Gandhi's Rise to Power: Indian Politics 1915–1922* (Cambridge University Press 1972) 208.

<sup>11</sup> Niraj Kumar, 'Relevance of Gandhian Philosophy in CSR Practices' (2019) 14(3) *Indian Journal of Corporate Governance* 35, 39.

ensures that its resources are directed toward addressing systemic inequalities. The group's focus on empowering underserved communities, such as through scholarships for underprivileged students and vocational training programs for unemployed youth, underscores its commitment to equitable development.<sup>12</sup> This approach aligns with Gandhi's vision of bridging economic disparities and fostering inclusivity.

### **Empowerment of Marginalized Communities**

The group's efforts in empowering marginalized communities also resonate with Gandhi's belief in self-reliance and dignity for all. Programs aimed at women's literacy, microfinance initiatives, and skill development enable individuals to become self-reliant, thereby fostering a just and empowered society.<sup>13</sup> For instance, initiatives like forming self-help groups for rural women embody Gandhi's ideals of ensuring that even the most vulnerable sections of society have access to opportunities for growth and independence.

### **Non-violence and Sustainability**

Environmental sustainability, a significant focus of the Aditya Birla Group, aligns with Gandhi's ideals of non-violence (ahimsa) and respect for nature. Projects such as afforestation drives, renewable energy adoption, and waste-to-energy programs reflect a commitment to minimizing harm to the environment while promoting sustainable practices.<sup>14</sup> Gandhi's emphasis on living harmoniously with nature is evident in the group's endeavours to combat climate change and promote ecological balance.

### **Holistic Rural Development**

The group's rural development projects, including watershed management and the construction of essential infrastructure, highlight its adherence to Gandhi's belief in the upliftment of villages as the foundation of national progress.<sup>15</sup> By improving agricultural practices, providing access to clean water, and supporting rural entrepreneurs, the Aditya Birla Group ensures that its CSR efforts contribute to a balanced and just rural economy.

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<sup>12</sup> Supra footnote 2

<sup>13</sup> Deloitte, *Impact of CSR: A Report on India's Mandate* (Deloitte 2022) <https://www.deloitte.com/insights> accessed 20 November 2024.

<sup>14</sup> KPMG, *India's CSR Reporting Survey 2022* (KPMG 2023) <https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home.html> accessed 20 November 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Supra footnote 10

## Justice Through Healthcare

Healthcare initiatives such as free medical camps, maternal and child health programs, and sanitation drives reflect the group's dedication to ensuring justice by addressing basic human needs.<sup>16</sup> These programs align with Gandhi's vision of justice as a means to protect the dignity and well-being of every individual, particularly the underprivileged.

## A Reflection of Gandhian Justice

The Aditya Birla Group's CSR initiatives illustrate how modern corporations can effectively integrate Gandhian ideals into their practices. By adopting trusteeship, promoting equity, and committing to sustainable development, the group demonstrates that profit-making and social responsibility can coexist harmoniously.<sup>17</sup> However, challenges such as ensuring transparency and maximizing impact serve as reminders of the continuous effort required to translate Gandhian ideals into measurable outcomes.

Thus, the Aditya Birla Group's CSR activities exemplify a contemporary application of Gandhian justice, offering a model for businesses to function as agents of social transformation while achieving sustainable growth.

## Conclusion

The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a critical tool for businesses to engage with societal and environmental challenges, transforming their role from mere profit-making entities to drivers of social change. Mahatma Gandhi's ideals of justice, rooted in equity, trusteeship, non-violence, and sustainability, offer a timeless framework for evaluating the ethical dimensions of corporate practices. The Aditya Birla Group, through its CSR initiatives, exemplifies the application of Gandhian principles in the contemporary business world.

Gandhi's philosophy of trusteeship asserts that wealth and resources are not the exclusive property of individuals or corporations but are held in trust for the welfare of society. This principle is vividly reflected in the Aditya Birla Group's efforts to address systemic inequities through its programs in education, healthcare, and rural development. The group's initiatives, such as scholarships for underprivileged students, skill development programs, and support for

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<sup>16</sup> Niraj Kumar, 'Relevance of Gandhian Philosophy in CSR Practices' (2019) 14(3) *Indian Journal of Corporate Governance* 35, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford University Press 1999) 87.

rural entrepreneurs, demonstrate a commitment to bridging social and economic divides. By prioritizing the needs of marginalized communities, the group ensures that the benefits of economic progress reach the most vulnerable sections of society.

Non-violence and sustainability, central to Gandhi's vision of justice, are evident in the group's environmental programs. Initiatives such as afforestation, renewable energy projects, and waste management highlight the importance of harmony between economic activities and ecological preservation. These efforts reflect an understanding that true justice involves respecting the planet's resources and ensuring their availability for future generations. In a world grappling with climate change and environmental degradation, the Aditya Birla Group's focus on sustainability underscores the enduring relevance of Gandhian principles in addressing contemporary challenges.

Gandhi's emphasis on self-reliance and empowerment is another pillar of justice that resonates with the Aditya Birla Group's CSR initiatives. By promoting vocational training, women's literacy, and microfinance programs, the group enables individuals to achieve independence and contribute meaningfully to their communities. These initiatives reflect a belief in the transformative power of education and opportunity, creating pathways for individuals to rise above poverty and lead dignified lives. Gandhi's vision of justice as the empowerment of every individual finds a powerful expression in the group's efforts to foster inclusivity and equality.

The holistic approach of the Aditya Birla Group's CSR programs also aligns with Gandhi's belief in the upliftment of rural India as the foundation of national progress. By investing in rural infrastructure, improving agricultural practices, and ensuring access to clean water and healthcare, the group addresses critical challenges faced by rural communities. These efforts not only improve the quality of life in rural areas but also strengthen the country's economic and social fabric. Gandhi's ideal of justice as a balanced and harmonious society is evident in the group's commitment to rural development.

Despite these successes, there are challenges that require continuous attention. Measuring the long-term impact of CSR initiatives, ensuring transparency, and scaling programs to reach larger populations are areas that need further improvement. Gandhi's emphasis on truth and accountability serves as a reminder of the importance of integrity in all actions. The Aditya Birla Group, by focusing on these aspects, can enhance the effectiveness of its CSR efforts and further align its practices with Gandhian ideals.

The relevance of Gandhian principles in guiding corporate practices cannot be overstated. In

an era marked by widening inequalities, environmental crises, and social unrest, businesses have a critical role to play in fostering justice and sustainability. The Aditya Birla Group's CSR initiatives demonstrate how corporations can embody these ideals, balancing profitability with their responsibility toward society and the environment. By adopting a trusteeship model, promoting sustainability, and empowering communities, the group has set a benchmark for ethical and impactful corporate conduct.

Ultimately, Gandhi's vision of justice calls for a deep sense of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility among individuals, corporations, and governments. The Aditya Birla Group's CSR journey serves as a powerful testament to the enduring relevance of this vision. By addressing societal challenges with compassion and integrity, the group illustrates how businesses can be transformative forces for good. As more corporations embrace Gandhian ideals, the potential for creating a just, equitable, and sustainable world becomes ever more achievable. In this sense, the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi continues to inspire and guide the evolution of CSR as a pathway to justice and collective progress.

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