

## How did you get involved into Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)?

It's the family environment that is a great influencer. We have been deeply influenced by my grandfather-in-law, Shri G D Birla. He in turn was deeply influenced by Gandhiji. So he put in a vast amount of his wealth in building magnificent temples, excellent schools and "dharamshalas" all over, and of course financing the freedom struggle. This philosophy of caring and giving is embedded in the Birla family.

My father-in-law, Shri B K Birla and my husband, Adityaji, both fully subscribed to his way of thinking. In fact, Adityaji brought in the concept of sustainable livelihood. I got involved in our group's social activities with my husband almost 30 years ago.

When my son, Kumar Mangalam, took over he raised the bar very high. I remember him telling me that we must give our social projects the same kind of importance as we give to our business projects. So just as for companies you have a business vision, for our social projects we evolved a social vision.

## What is your vision?

Our vision is "to actively contribute to the social and economic developments of the communities in which we operate. In doing so, build a better, sustainable way of life for the weaker sections of society and raise the country's human development index. Today our social vision forms an integral part of our business vision.

A little aside, right from my childhood I wanted to open an orphanage where we could look after destitute children. That was my dream.

## Has your dream been fulfilled?

Fortunately, yes.

Almost 28 years ago, my husband and I set up a home for destitute children. We take in boys who have passed high school and house them at our Aditya Birla Centre For The Welfare of Children for three years. During this time we send them to Industrial Training Institutes in Mumbai where they are trained in different vocations and after three years of training they can take up a job in a factory or start on their own. So far we have trained more than 2,500 boys and nearly 90 percent of them are well placed.



**What are the areas of focus and what is your approach?**

In line with our vision, our areas of focus are :

- Education
- Healthcare and family welfare
- Sustainable livelihood encompassing agricultural and water-shed development and women empowerment processes
- Infrastructure support
- Espousing social causes.

**Towards this, do you have a Foundation or a special setup?**

Yes indeed. We have set up the Aditya Birla Centre for Community Initiatives and Rural Development” which is our apex body. Under its umbrella, our Group Companies’ activities are carried on. The Centre, which I am privileged to spearhead, along with Shri Askaran Agarwala and Dr. Pragnya Ram, provides the strategic direction and the thrust areas for our work and ensures performance management. We have a 250 strong field force, including four zonal officers.

We view our social responsibility very seriously, far transcending mere cheque-book philanthropy. Corporate Social Responsibility is accorded as much importance as our business projects. Therefore, our social vision forms an integral part of the business vision of all of our Group companies and progress made is reported in our Annual Accounts. Each of our Companies — Hindalco, Grasim, UltraTech, Aditya Birla Nuvo, Essel Mining to name a few, has a One Year Plan and a Three Year Rolling Plan pertaining to social projects. Additionally, we have built in a monitoring system whereby all projects are assessed under an agreed strategy, periodically monitored, measured against

targets and their findings shared throughout our Group. We work in collaboration with the Government, NGOs, Rotarians, etc. It’s the public, private partnership in action.

**What is your view on Public Private Partnership? How can it be a success?**

That is extremely essential. In my view there are six major characteristics for a successful private, public, community, government partnership in projects and their sustainability.

- Firstly, a clear business agenda.
- Secondly, total commitment from the partners to the change process.
- Thirdly, investment by all the concerned parties.
- Fourthly, well grounded in the community.
- Fifthly, networking with other organisations, linkages with whom would add value.
- Sixthly, a long-term commitment to sustain the project and ensure its replicability.

You will recall that way back in 1926, the Economist, John Maynard Keynes had said, “The business of business is to do better business and transfer its benefits to its consumers and stockholders.” Joining him later, Milton Friedman, also was of the view that “The business of business is business.” John Rockefeller regarded this as too blinkered. He said and I quote “Every thoughtful man must conceive that the purpose of industry is quite as much the advancement of social well-being as the production of wealth.”

**Would you advocate linkages between Corporates and the people around their axis? Is CSR imperative?**

At a broader level, social problems undoubtedly are economic problems.

Be it the need of a trained workforce or looking for new markets, as in the Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector.

In a way, when a Corporation pushes its energies and helps resolve social sector issues, indirectly it stimulates its own business development. Today’s better educated children constitute tomorrow’s thoughtful leaders. Reduced unemployment leads to higher consumption of products. This apart, it augurs well that today several progressive corporates are looking upon social concerns as part of their responsibility and not as a fringe activity. So, CSR is a necessary value. We firmly believe that Corporate Social Responsibility is the key to establishing a symbiotic linkage between our corporation and the community within which we operate.

**Do socially conscious corporates make better profits?**

The partnership between private corporations and societies, I believe, should increasingly lead to profitable and sustainable change for either side.

And this brings me to the other point which is, “the need to have strong partners committed to change.” It is not possible nor is it advisable that corporates or institutions committed to social change process work in silos. It makes imminent sense to band with other committed social sector organisations who have the necessary project expertise, community influentials such as the Panchayats, the Mukhias, School teachers, and the District Authorities, to name a few. Only by joining hands with them can systemic changes be brought about. Superficial changes and insular projects become unsustainable if there is no grassroots involvement.



*Mrs. Rajashree Birla receiving the 'Polio Champion Award' from President of India.*



*Mrs. Rajashree Birla giving a speech at the Rotary International Head-quarters in USA.*

**Is pooling in of the resources of all the stakeholders necessary?**

Absolutely. In so far as it relates to “the investment” aspects of projects, I believe, one should never encourage a culture of institutional dependency. To get out of this quagmire, corporations and the community along with other related parties must pool in their resources. We always encourage the community to invest their resources. Wherever financial contribution is possible, we encourage them to do so, and their time commitment is built in the process. By taking such an approach, we are able to nurture a culture of mutuality. Over the long haul, such an involvement also leads to the gradual tapering of the corporate and handing over the project baton to the community for its ongoing sustainability.

**How do you make projects people centric?**

We espouse rootedness in the community. This entails drawing up the project in consultation with the community in a participatory manner and spelling out its benefits. Such a mapping process brings in tremendous community ownership. So while in the short-term we have to do enormous handholding, the projects become sustainable by the beneficiaries over the long haul. Once such a stage is reached, we withdraw, as by then the villagers attain a comfortable level of self-reliance.

**How do you enlist the support of other agencies?**

Each community project has a unique dimension. More often than not, the expertise required is neither resident in the corporate or in the community. “Developing linkages and calling on experts or key players” to become a part of the project, works very well. Let me reiterate, we work with several like-minded organisations. Among these are the Rotary International, UNICEF, SIFPSA, CARE and BBC on our Mother and Child Care projects along with the Government.

Let me now move to our next principle, which is — “securing a long-term commitment” to sustain the project and make it replicable in the Indian context. Its importance in our endeavours to let the community drive the work cannot be underscored. I have explained it partly in the principle of “rootedness in the community.”

**Are there any other particular projects that you feel most passionate about?**

Frankly, I am passionate about all our projects. Among them let me highlight the Eternal Gandhi Museum and the Aditya Birla Memorial Hospital at Pune, two of our projects that I have been personally engaged in.

The project I have been deeply involved in has been the Eternal Gandhi Multimedia Exhibition. This multimedia exhibition was a brainchild of my son, Kumar Mangalam. The Birla family members, who have been deeply influenced by the humane values that Gandhiji and my grand father-in-law, Shri GD Birla, espoused, felt a compelling need to present these in a contemporary fashion to the youth and the children of today. So it served the need to give this generation a sense of history, to help them realise the value of freedom, to evoke a sense of patriotism and respect for our leaders. Most importantly, to take the message of Shanti - peace, of Satya - truth, of Ahimsa - nonviolence and Ekta - the University of Mankind, in today’s day and age. The entire walk through the exhibition — serves as stimulus, even resurgence into Gandhism and is undeniably a serendipitous experience. It can be a guiding light for the youth and for generations to come, given its potential to ignite the minds of the young and spark in them an unquenchable thirst for truth, for values, for compassion.

To rediscover these truths that the Mahatma lived by, we thought we should take them as voyagers on an energising and revealing journey that could touch them in a subliminal

way, and embed his life’s message in their psyche.

The Exhibition is housed in Delhi at the Gandhi Smriti at Tees January Marg. More than a 100,000 people have visited it. I also worked on a mobile replica of the Exhibition which up until now has moved from Mumbai to Pune to Ahmedabad, to Jaipur and other places. Now I am working on one more replica.

**And the hospital?**

I am very involved, in so far as the Aditya Birla Memorial Hospital is concerned. This world-class hospital has been built in homage to my husband, Adityaji. He had always dreamt of building a world-class hospital but it could not be done because of his pre-occupation with business. While it is a commercial venture, undoubtedly, at its core lies our mission to provide compassionate quality healthcare, designed to foster hope, provide the healing touch, nurture health and finally, result in happiness. In line with our tradition of trusteeship, at this 500-bed hospital, 10 percent of the beds are kept for the weaker sections of the community. We ensure that the poor are never turned down at the hospital.

We have also taken special care to provide as much comfort as possible to the near and dear ones of patients who come from locations outside of the city. So we have made special arrangements for their accommodation basically to help reduce their anxiety levels. With these kinds of integrated facilities, we sincerely hope that we would be able to help the patients and their families in a comforting way.

I am also very inclined towards empowerment projects.

**Can you please share some examples?**

To empower men and women in the villages by helping them become economically independent, we have their inherent skills honed through training and education at our vocational training centres. Men and



(L to R) RI Director Ashok Mahajan, PRIP Rajendra K Saboo, Mrs. Rajashree Birla.

women are imparted several skills, such as repair and maintenance of diesel pump sets, electrical and electronic equipments, hand pumps, cycles, bee-keeping, among others. We also mentor villagers, facilitating them in the setting up of their shops in arts such as cobblery, black smithery, durry making, making khatias (native cots), jute products and pottery. Wherever necessary we provide them with the seed capital to kick-start their mini enterprises.

The women hand-pump project provides another good example. In close partnership with the U.P. Jal Nigam, which is a Government Agency and UNICEF, we have been able to provide access to safe drinking water to over 110 villages in U.P., impacting 1,40,000 people in a positive manner. Knowing the tremendous hardship that people in the interiors have to face, we initiated the Hand Pump Project. Hand

pumps at intervals of every 10 houses is now a boon in their life.

What is indeed unique about this project is that, it is manned exclusively by women. More than 70 women have been trained as special hand pump mechanics and they attend to the pump set repairs. The pumps are operated only by women. This is the beginning of a movement that signals women's empowerment process. Each of the women mechanics earn at least Rs.3,000 per month, which is quite a packet in the interiors.

#### **Major upside? Your experiences?**

The women Self-Help Groups also give us a great sense of pride. To empower women to attain financial independence, we have encouraged the formation of Self-Help Groups. As a first step in this direction, we motivate women to form groups and begin savings. We hone their

skills through extensive training in different vocations that will provide them with a steady source of income. The training canvas is extensive, ranging from traditional arts such as creating bamboo products, knitting, weaving, embroidery, dyeing of fabrics, rangoli, candle-making, handicrafts to meeting modern day aspirations of young girls for taking on fashion designing, computer operating, lamination and beauty treatment through cosmetology. Goat rearing, bee-keeping, making ropes, mushroom cultivation, raising coconut saplings are also encouraged among women as these yield good returns. Up until now we have set up 3,000 Self-Help Groups.

#### **That is indeed impressive.**

I think our projects also set us apart as a Group. Our contribution is regarded as notable by society.

To give you some statistics of our work — of the 42,000 children who study at our schools all over India, 18,000 children receive free education. More than 8,000 students in the interiors are awarded merit scholarships.

Likewise, at our medical camps, over five hundred thousand patients are treated for various ailments. Up until now 400 children have benefited from cleft-lip surgery and we have helped immunise 5 million children against polio. Our sustainable livelihood projects, both for men and women, reach out to more than 25,000 people each year. Our 3,000 Self Help Groups have led to the empowerment of 35,000 women.

**I understand you have brought in some innovative concepts such as “model villages.” Can you elaborate, please?**

Our teams, are also engaged in creating model villages in rural India. We have chosen 300 villages for this transformation — whereby in a five year time-frame they would be self-reliant in every aspect, moving out of the “below the poverty line” status. So far more than 80 villages in India’s hinterland have already reached the level of model villages. Of these, four villages in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, have won the President’s Award this year. This aspect of our corporate life is again unique, exemplifying the true spirit of trusteeship.

And, it is our objective to replicate this model of giving back to society, near our establishments around the world.

**We at Rotary International are very proud to be associated with you on the Polio Eradication Programme. Our readers would like to get your inputs here as well.**

The Rotarians symbolise a culture of giving and caring which is strikingly close to our Group’s philosophy and the principle of Trusteeship.

Polio eradication is a programme on which we also lay a great deal of stress. This year alone we have

helped immunise nearly five million children. To make sure that every child is immunised, now in most of our villages we arrange for getting the children from their hut-step to the Polio booth. Our teams across our 40 plants have the responsibility of ensuring that every child is immunised against polio. At the same time, we perform reconstructive surgery and try to rehabilitate polio victims so that they become independent and regain their self-esteem. But of course the Rotarians do a marvellous job and we work very closely with them.

I specially admire the Gates Foundation’s support to this cause through the Rotary International.

**Beyond engaging in community development and making a difference in the lives of the poor, what are your other interests?**

I am also extremely engaged with the Sangit Kala Kendra. Sangit Kala Kendra was founded in 1973 by my husband late Adityaji to encourage and nurture the various performing arts. Since its inception, it has been regularly presenting prestigious art events and has thus acquired recognition as one of the premier cultural institutions.

His passion for art spawned the Sangit Kala Kendra in 1973. As its Founder President he took the performing arts to a new high. As his iconic stature grew, the Sangit Kala Kendra grew too. Twelve years ago, to eternalise its Founder President, Aditya Vikram Birla, the Sangit Kala Kendra members instituted the Aditya Vikram Birla Kalashikhar Puraskar. The award aims to recognise an artist of outstanding calibre in the visual and performing arts for lifetime achievement. Since its inception, more than a decade ago, the award has been conferred on men and women, stars on the art firmament, like Lata Mangeshkar, Shri MF Hussain, Pandit Ram Narayan, Smt. Gangubai Hangal, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra,

Shri K G Subramanyan, Smt. Mrinalini Sarabhai, Shri Purshotamdas Jaloti, among others.

**Who inspires you most?**

I have been an ardent admirer of the Mahatma, my parents and my in-laws, Shri B K Birla and Dr. Sarala Birla, have been my role models. I learnt enormously from my late husband, Shri Adityaji. When I see in Kumar Mangalam, Neerja and my daughter, Vasavadatta, the kind of value-based lives that they lead and the spirit of service that they embody, I feel really blessed. I am also very lucky in having some very close friends who epitomise positivity and optimism at every step in life.

**What is your philosophy of life?**

I have a very simple philosophy. That is to live and let live. By and large, I have managed to practice this. So often I find that minor problems also affect our equanimity. If we can look at them in a spirit of tolerance, then they just tide by. We must all recognise that every individual is a unique individual, who may not necessarily share your views and your attitude and that is fine. So I feel we must all learn to accept people at their face value and also believe in accepting ourselves as we are. That instills a sense of equilibrium in life.

**Are you a very religious person?**

Let me say that I believe in being spiritualistic and not ritualistic. I read the Gita. I chant the Gayatri Mantra every day and I find it gives me a lot of peace of mind. Our family, Kumar Mangalam and Neerja, hold a satsang every week along with some of their friends. I am happy with the way life has turned out for me. My work with our community projects, with Rotary International, with the Eternal Gandhi Museum and the Aditya Birla Memorial Hospital is very fulfilling and engaging.

Above all, God has been very kind. I am blessed with a great family.