

5

CSR through the Lens of Indian Knowledge Traditions

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Abstract

In the 21st century, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become one of the cornerstone components of a business's sustainable practices. Today, the majority of contemporary frameworks for CSR derive their roots from the Western tradition of ethical theories and stakeholder definitions; whereas India has a long tradition of civilizational social responsibility inherently built into its very own knowledge system. There are centuries of economic behavior in India shaped by philosophies like Dharma, Lokasañgraha, Dāna, Seva, and Trusteeship which were utilized to always ensure economic efforts were aligned to the greater good of society and acted with ethical and moral integrity to benefit the entire society collectively. This chapter will look at CSR from the perspective of the Indian Knowledge Traditions (IKT). The study seeks to demonstrate that far from being eccentric and somewhat unrelated to CSR, many of the oldest philosophies, ethical principles and socio-economic thought that exist within IKT can actually provide us with a holistic, value-based foundation on which businesses can conduct themselves ethically in a sustainable manner. By integrating classical Indian text and language with the historical record of the socio-economic thought and practices that are found in these cultures, along with the new CSR laws that have emerged through contemporary business practice, this chapter will present an indigenous or culturally based framework for defining CSR that aligns ethical purpose with sustainable development. Thus, the study seeks to advance the current discourse surrounding CSR within the academic literature by demonstrating the manner in which IKT can enhance corporate governance, ethical leadership and the support of inclusive growth in a globalized economy.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Indian Knowledge System, Dharma, Trusteeship, Business Ethics, Sustainable Development & ESG.

Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility has quickly become a central part of the ethical behaviour and governance of business today. Most importantly, there is now much greater expectation that businesses should be more than just profit maximising endeavours, but rather they should contribute to the social well-being of their communities. Globally, corporate social responsibility is no longer considered just a form of philanthropy but has developed into a fundamental element of business strategy that includes ethical behaviour, engagement with stakeholders, care for the environment, and sustainable development. In the case of India, corporate social responsibility has taken a unique direction through the introduction of the Companies Act of 2013, which contains a section requiring companies deemed qualified to spend money on their corporate social responsibility initiatives. This law has put India on the map as one of very few countries in the world that have created a legal framework to mandate the corporate social responsibility of their companies and has clearly defined the role of business in relation to the overall economic development of the country.

Even though there is an improved approach to CSR in India, it still leads to CSR being guilty of being compliance based, fragmented and project based. The majority of corporate CSR initiatives are created to meet legal obligations as well as meet certain regulatory reporting obligations or because of pressure regarding one's reputation, instead there should be an ethical commitment that is part of creating CSR. As a result, the CSR activity frequently does not have any degree of strategic fit, any long-term impact, or to be aligned with the organisation's original values. This raises the core issue of whether CSR can have any true impact in India if it is not grounded in India's unique ethical/civilisation.

For thousands of years, Indian civilization has demonstrated a strong tradition of social responsibility before any form of contemporary corporate structure or institution. Ancient India's economic activities were never separate or independently operated solely on market principles; rather, they were part of a larger socio-moral framework based on the four purusharthas (purposes of man): Dharma, Artha, Kāma, and Mokṣa. In other words, the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), through a recognition of balance between material growth and ethical behaviour, held that wealth could be produced and enjoyed while society remained stable, healthy, and moral.

The notion of the responsibility towards society of those who have wealth is found throughout traditional classical Indian texts and traditions. In particular, Lokasaṅgraha, as explained in the Bhagavad Gita, states that the ultimate aim of all individual and institutional activity should be for the collective welfare of society. Also, through the practices of *dāna* (ethical giving), *Seva* (selfless service) and trusteeship, surplus resources were directed to meet the needs of society; therefore, merchants, rulers and institutions were thought to be custodians rather than owners of society's wealth. Later reformists picked up on these ideas, and perhaps most notably, Mahatma

Gandhi developed a doctrine of Trusteeship, which viewed economic power as a moral obligation or trust held for Society's benefit.

Today, all Global corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environmental, social and governance (ESG) frameworks place significant emphasis on stakeholder inclusion, accountability and sustainability (ethics) However; the CSR/ESG models have predominantly been shaped by Western cultural philosophies and beliefs of Contractualism, Utilitarianism and Shareholder Theory. While the above frameworks have proven to be successful in many parts of the world, many of the world's ecological, socio-economical, and political matters are impacted negatively by a lack of useable cultural depth and ethical practice needed to validly implement plans in societies with different social and cultural constructs in comparison to India. Incorporating India's Indigenous Knowledge Systems into the CSR conversation provides a platform to re-establish Corporate Responsibility through the lens of Indigenous Ethical Guidelines which have cultural relevance, social inclusion, and moral integrity.

The chapter argues that CSR in India will become more authentic, effective, and sustainable when framed using Indian Knowledge Traditions as a lens. By integrating modern CSR/ESG concepts with traditional Indian ethical principles, corporations can move away from being symbolically compliant towards becoming value-based stewards of their stakeholders. This type of value-based stewardship creates greater legitimacy for the corporation and builds trust with its stakeholders. Moreover, this approach also supports the objectives of inclusive growth, ethical governance, and long-term social welfare. The chapter ultimately seeks to show that Indian Knowledge Systems are not simply complementary to modern CSR systems, but rather serve as the foundational ethical structure for responsible business practices in the 21st century.

Review of Literature

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has its conceptual base firmly rooted in the literature on management in the western world, where responsibility is regarded as an obligation of managers to both corporations and society. The original thinker of 20th-century modern CSR was Bowen (1953), who argued that business decisions should reflect the values and expectations of society. Carroll (1991) was the next major contributor to 21st-century CSR theory, developing his well-known CSR pyramid classification to identify the economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic aspects of corporate roles and responsibilities. While developed as a hierarchical structure to facilitate the study of CSR, it placed ethical and social roles and responsibilities behind the primary responsibility of corporations to their stakeholders in terms of profitability.

Stakeholder theory's development broadened discussion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) by questioning the focus on maximizing shareholder value and promoting accountability to a more extensive network of stakeholders—e.g.,

employees, consumers, communities, and the environment. Scholars suggested that balancing the interests of all stakeholders would lead to successful, sustainable businesses over the long term versus only focusing on profit maximization. Nevertheless, despite this progress, the majority of the literature suggests that CSR models used primarily in the West are still predominantly instrumental and typically utilized as strategic tools for reputation and risk management (e.g., enhance/augment financial performance) rather than producing intrinsic benefits. Most western-supported CSR models are grounded in utilitarian-based ethics and stress results-based, versus morality-based, justification of CSR and usually treat CSR as an externally imposed obligation versus an internal moral obligation.

Indian academic discussion places social responsibility in a larger civilizational and ethical paradigm which has been present long before there was a corporate theory in the current era. The Indian Knowledge Traditions consider an economic activity as being cognate to ethical behaviour/ accounting and for the welfare of society. One of the key components of CSR thinking from an Indian perspective is the doctrine of Trusteeship as expressed by Mahatma Gandhi which reinterprets the concept of ownership as being stewardship and wealth as being held in trust for the benefit of society as a whole. Gandhi argued that industrialists should manage the resources they use for the benefit of society rather than for their own personal gain pre-empting some of today's notions related to sustainable development and inclusive growth. As a result, those studying trusteeship write about its normative power to eliminate inequalities, act ethically, and promote social justice within capitalism.

Indigenous perspectives on the economy are further informed through much ancient Indian literature. The Arthashastra by Kautilya provides a model for monitored state commerce through ethical taxation, fair trade, welfare-based government and holding each agent within an economy accountable. The majority of these studies suggest that the Arthashastra continues to be useful in developing public policy, corporate governance, and the ethical enforcement of regulations, noting that the economic development of a country was always subservient to its social stability and welfare of its citizens not all government fiscal/monetary policies or all economic agents are required to act in terms of Dharma, thus achieving justice, equity or harmony among themselves and aiding their nation's society.

Dharma has been studied by a lot of scholars because it is a basis for ethical principles in Indian philosophy. Dharma is not a set of rules like legalism, but is the foundation of the moral order of both individuals and institutions based upon a duty to one another. Scholars also say that Dharma provides an ongoing ethical framework to respond to problems such as social issues and issues related to the economy because lessons from Dharma reflect responsibility, balance, and the impact of actions on the future. CSR, or corporate social responsibility, implies that corporations must behave

according to expectations of the public and do good for society, regardless of whether they are required by law.

New interdisciplinary research is starting to investigate how Indian philosophy and contemporary sustainability frameworks, such as environmental social and governance standards (ESG), and the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDG), are coming together. Researchers indicate that principles associated with Lokasañgraha (collective welfare) and Ahimsa (non-violence). Also, the concept of trusteeship correlates well with global objectives related to sustainability, including inclusive economic growth as well as sustainable environmental practices, and good governance. As a result, many scholars are now viewing Indian Knowledge Systems as providing moral and cultural legitimacy to the sustainability conversation, particularly in emerging economies.

In contrast, the vast majority of recent empirical research on CSR in India has focused on compliance with statutory regulations, disclosure practices, financial performance and creating value for shareholders. These studies provide useful information about how companies operate, but do not provide insight into how organizations should either ethically or philosophically conduct themselves, nor do they consider the cultural foundations of ethical business practices. Because of this lack of integration between Indian Knowledge Traditions and more traditional approaches to CSR research, a significant gap exists between what companies believe is ethical and what they actually do in relation to CSR.

There is sufficient evidence in the literature to warrant a framework that integrates traditional Indigenous ethical wisdom with contemporary corporate social responsibility frameworks. Filling this gap would allow for CSR to be viewed as a moral obligation rather than just a regulation or strategy in light of the traditional and cultural heritage of India. This chapter will be an additional contribution to the literature by incorporating Indian Knowledge Traditions into CSR and ESG within the current literature and presenting a value-based, contextually appropriate model of responsible business.

Conceptual Framework: An Indian Knowledge based CSR Model

- **Rationale for an Indigenous CSR Framework**

Literature review indicates that existing CSR frameworks are largely based on Western ethical traditions & managerial rationality and they provide a very comprehensive structure. They focus on compliance issues (stakeholder), managing the relationship of your organisation's stakeholders with the organisation itself, performance outcomes etc, but most importantly treat social responsibility as an externally imposed obligation on the corporation. In India, this risk of alienating the concept of CSR from the 'civilisational' context, in which ethical behaviour & social responsibility are part of the normal scheme of things within the economic activities of the nation.

An Indian Knowledge Based CSR Framework aims to create a new perspective on Corporate Responsibility by viewing it as an Ethical and Social Responsibility rather than being Statutory or Reputational in Nature. The framework incorporates values and principles from Indian philosophical traditions by embedding ethical intention, social purpose and sustainable value creation within the core of how corporations operate.

- **Philosophical Foundations of the Indian CSR Model**

The proposed conceptual framework is anchored in four interrelated principles derived from Indian Knowledge Traditions:

- **Dharma (Ethical Duty and Righteous Conduct):** Dharma serves as the foundational ethical axis of the model. In the corporate context, Dharma implies conducting business with integrity, fairness, transparency, and accountability. Unlike rule based compliance, Dharma emphasizes internal moral discipline and contextual judgment. CSR guided by Dharma moves beyond legal mandates to embrace ethical self-regulation and long term societal responsibility.
- **Artha (Responsible Wealth Creation):** Indian philosophy recognizes wealth (Artha) as a legitimate and necessary pursuit, provided it is acquired and utilized ethically. In this framework, profit is not rejected but subordinated to moral purpose. Corporate profitability is viewed as a means to sustain operations, generate employment, and create social value, rather than as an end in itself.
- **Lokasaṅgraha (Collective Welfare Orientation):** Lokasaṅgraha, meaning the welfare and cohesion of society, represents the social objective of corporate activity. This principle redefines CSR as an instrument for inclusive development, social harmony, and community empowerment. Corporate decisions are evaluated not only on financial outcomes but also on their impact on stakeholders, society, and future generations.
- **Trusteeship (Stewardship of Resources):** The principle of Trusteeship conceptualizes corporations as custodians of societal resources such as natural, human, and financial. Resources are held in trust for the benefit of society, imposing moral responsibility for equitable distribution, environmental protection, and intergenerational justice. This aligns closely with contemporary ESG concerns, particularly environmental sustainability and governance ethics.

- **Structure of the Indian CSR Model**

The proposed Indian CSR Model operates across three inter-connected levels:

- **Ethical Core (Normative Level):** The communitarian philosophy of Dharma is the basis of the corporate values, leadership philosophy and

governance culture of the organisation. CSR is driven by ethical intent rather than regulatory compulsion at this level;

- **Strategic Integration (Organisational Level):** CSR is integrated into the corporate strategy, risk management, and decision-making processes of the organisation. Lokasañgraha guides the engagement of stakeholders to ensure CSR initiatives address real social needs and produce sustainable social benefits over time. The principles of trusteeship guide the policies for resource utilisation, environmental management, and human capital development.

Social Impact (Outcome Level)

The results of CSR show up like society involved, the environment protected, using an ethical supply chain, and having a strong community. Performance is measured both by how much money was spent and how much information was disclosed, but more importantly by the impact to society and/or ecology.

• **Integration with Modern CSR and ESG Frameworks**

The Indian CSR Model does not reject contemporary CSR or ESG frameworks; rather, it complements and enriches them. While ESG provides measurable indicators and reporting standards, Indian Knowledge Traditions supply the ethical consciousness and moral motivation necessary for authentic implementation.

- **Environmental (E)** aligns with Trusteeship and Ahimsa
- **Social (S)** aligns with Lokasañgraha and Seva
- **Governance (G)** aligns with Dharma and ethical leadership

This synthesis enables corporations to pursue global sustainability goals while remaining culturally rooted and ethically grounded.

• **Distinctive Features of the Indian CSR Model**

The proposed framework is distinguished by the following features:

- Intrinsic ethical motivation rather than extrinsic compliance
- Holistic integration of profit, ethics, and social welfare
- Cultural legitimacy rooted in Indian civilizational values
- Long term orientation emphasizing intergenerational responsibility
- Transformational impact beyond philanthropy and reporting

• **Implications of the Framework**

Adopting an Indian Knowledge based CSR model has significant implications for corporate governance, policy formulation, and management education. It encourages corporations to internalize responsibility as part of their identity, strengthens stakeholder trust, and enhances the societal relevance of business institutions. For policymakers and educators, the framework provides a normative basis

for embedding Indian Knowledge Systems into CSR regulation, reporting standards, and business curricula.

CSR in India: Contemporary Framework and Challenges

- **The Contemporary CSR Framework in India**

The Companies Act 2013 (India) is the law that governs Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in India under section 135 and Companies (CSR Policy) Rules. It requires eligible businesses to spend at least 2% of their average Net Profit over the previous three reports on CSR activities specified in Schedule VII of the Companies Act. This statutory model has dramatically increased the amount of Corporate Participation in social development in areas like education, healthcare, sanitation, rural development, and environmental sustainability.

The design of CSR practices has led to a system of compliance with laws to achieve financial commitment to social causes. The majority of CSR activities are designed to meet the requirements for spending money and meeting specific reporting requirements, but they are not normally linked to the corporate vision or strategy or to the corporate system of values. Infact, many CSR activities are conducted as separate functions; therefore, many CSR activities are not connected with the basic operation of the business, risk management, or the long-term objectives of the organisation.

- **Expenditure Centric Orientation and Its Limitations**

One of the most prominent features of India's CSR regime is its emphasis on financial outlay rather than social outcomes. The focus on meeting prescribed spending thresholds has led many corporations to adopt a project based, short term approach to CSR. Such initiatives are often fragmented, geographically dispersed, and insufficiently aligned with local needs.

Moreover, impact assessment mechanisms remain underdeveloped. While reporting requirements emphasize disclosures related to expenditure and activities undertaken, there is limited emphasis on measuring long-term social, environmental, or behavioral change. This outcome-centric gap undermines the transformative potential of CSR and reinforces perceptions of CSR as a statutory burden rather than a strategic opportunity.

- **Strategic and Organizational Challenges**

A critical challenge facing CSR in India is the lack of strategic integration with corporate goals and competencies. Many organizations fail to leverage their core expertise, technological capabilities, or value chains in designing CSR initiatives. This disconnect limits scalability, innovation, and sustainability of CSR interventions. Leadership orientation further influences CSR effectiveness. In several cases, CSR is delegated to specialized departments or external agencies without active involvement of senior leadership. Such delegation weakens ethical ownership and reduces CSR to a functional activity rather than a leadership driven moral commitment. Additionally,

governance challenges persist, including limited board level oversight, insufficient transparency in partner selection, and weak alignment between CSR policy and corporate ethics codes.

- Community Engagement and Stakeholder Inclusion**

Effective CSR requires meaningful engagement with communities and stakeholders. However, many CSR initiatives in India suffer from top-down planning and inadequate participation of beneficiaries. This approach often results in misalignment between corporate interventions and community priorities, leading to low ownership, sustainability, and impact. From an Indian Knowledge perspective, societal engagement is not an external obligation but an intrinsic duty. Traditional concepts such as Seva (selfless service) and Lokasaṅgraha emphasize participatory, inclusive, and empathetic engagement. The absence of these principles in contemporary CSR practice limits its social relevance and ethical depth.

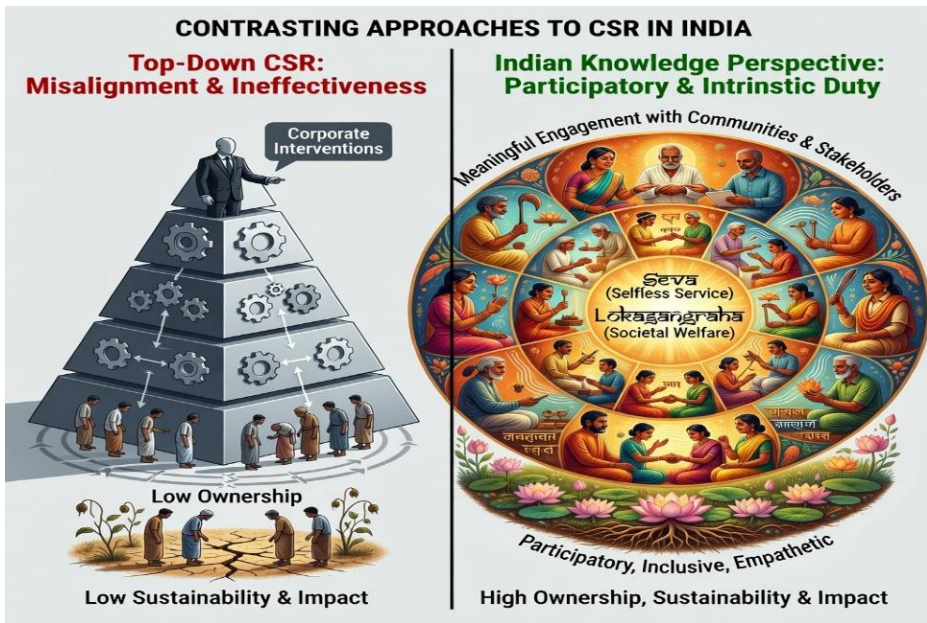


Figure 1: Contrasting Approaches to CSR in India

Source: Curated by the author with the data input on Notebooklm

- Ethical Disconnect and Cultural Misalignment**

Despite operating in a society with strong ethical and philosophical traditions, modern CSR practice in India often lacks moral anchoring. Corporate responsibility is frequently framed in technical, legal, or financial terms, with limited reference to ethical intent or cultural context. This ethical disconnect contributes to superficial CSR practices that prioritize visibility over value creation. Indian Knowledge Traditions emphasize internal moral discipline (Dharma) rather than external enforcement.

Without internalization of ethical responsibility, CSR risks becoming transactional, reactive, and symbolic. Bridging this gap requires reorienting CSR from obligation driven compliance to purpose-driven commitment.

- **Toward Transformational CSR Rooted in Indian Knowledge Traditions**

Transformational CSR represents a paradigm shift from transactional philanthropy to value-based stewardship. From an Indian Knowledge perspective, this transformation involves embedding ethical responsibility within corporate culture, leadership philosophy, and governance structures. Dharma informed leadership encourages ethical decision-making even in the absence of regulatory pressure. Trusteeship reframes corporate control over resources as a moral responsibility toward society and future generations. Lokasaṅgraha guides corporations to prioritize inclusive growth and social harmony over narrow financial gains. Such a reorientation enables CSR to function as an integral component of corporate identity rather than an ancillary obligation. Transformational CSR thus aligns economic performance with ethical purpose, social equity, and environmental sustainability.

- **Policy and Practice Implications**

Reimagining CSR through Indian Knowledge Traditions has important implications for policymakers, corporations, and civil society. Regulatory frameworks must move beyond expenditure mandates to encourage impact assessment, ethical governance, and long-term social outcomes. Corporations should integrate CSR with strategy, leadership development, and organizational values. Educational institutions must embed indigenous ethical frameworks within management and commerce curricula.

By aligning contemporary CSR frameworks with India's intellectual and ethical heritage, CSR can evolve into a powerful instrument for sustainable development, social cohesion, and responsible capitalism.

Integration of Indian Knowledge Traditions with Modern CSR and ESG Frameworks

Present-day, CSR and ESG frameworks focus on accountability, sustainability, engaging stakeholders, and creating a measurable impact. However, many times CSR and ESG frameworks are mainly based on processes and driven by indicators. Therefore, the typical limitations of using such frameworks relate to their lower level of ethical depth and cultural embedding. Indian Knowledge Traditions (IKT) elaborate on modern CSR and ESG as they serve to provide a moral, philosophical foundation for building stronger intent, authenticity, and long-term orientation.

With regard to the Governance aspect of ESG, Dharma has integrative perspective by focusing on ethical leadership, transparency and accountability above and beyond the minimum legal requirement. The emphasis on collective welfare within Lokasaṅgraha directly relates to the social aspect of ESG through an emphasis on

developing shared prosperity, empowering communities and harmony among stakeholders. Furthermore, the concept of Trusteeship reinforces the Environmental aspect of ESG because it regards natural resources and financial resources as social trusts that are to be managed or stewarded responsibly, equitably and with concern for future generations.

IKS directed models for corporate sustainability are based on developing ethical business practices through an ongoing cultural transformation within corporations rather than solely on measuring results in terms of ESG reporting (and compliance). The business culture and company-wide decisions formed by this continual process are the basis for IKS and ESG metrics that provide the structure to compare and follow the progress of businesses on ethical and sustainable practices. The application of Indian principles, however, additionally assures that businesses also consider the ethical and societal implications when determining the purpose of their existence (i.e., how they can fulfil an ethical duty). As a result, IKS transforms the nature of CSR from a compliance-driven activity into an ethical/legal-based governance mechanism that results in developing and implementing a purpose-driven business strategy.

- **Illustrative Indian Practices:** Several Indian corporations implicitly reflect this integrated approach:
 - **Tata Group** has historically embedded Trusteeship and community welfare into its business philosophy, with long-standing commitments to education, healthcare, and community development funded through institutional trusts rather than ad hoc CSR spending.
 - **ITC Limited** integrates CSR with core business strategy through initiatives such as sustainable agriculture and rural livelihoods, reflecting Lokasaṅgraha by aligning corporate growth with community empowerment.
 - **Infosys** emphasizes ethical governance, transparency, and education focused CSR, reflecting Dharma oriented leadership and long-term societal investment.

These examples demonstrate that when ethical purpose precedes compliance, CSR and ESG outcomes become more sustainable and credible.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in regards to Indian Knowledge Traditions, and made the case that India's ethical and philosophical traditions provide a solid base to re-envision how CSR is practiced today. Although CSR and ESG are often used to create regulatory systems or establish measurable indicators of performance, they can be constrained by the use of instrumental reason, or by being entirely compliance based. Through Dharmic principles; Lokasaṅgraha

(collective benefit to society) Dāna (giving), Seva (service), and Trusteeship; Indian Knowledge Traditions see providing social responsibility as an intrinsic moral obligation versus as an extrinsic obligation. Integrating these principles with the modern CSR and ESG frameworks allows corporations to go beyond being symbolically compliant to becoming value-based stewards, driving inclusive growth and sustainable development. By basing their CSR practices on indigenous ethical wisdom, Indian corporations can create legitimacy and trust with their stakeholders and create a positive long-term impact on society while providing valuable contributions to the global sustainability conversation.

Recommendations

- **Ethical Internalization:** Corporations should embed Dharma based ethics within leadership training, governance codes, and decision-making processes.
- **Strategic Integration:** CSR initiatives must align with core business competencies and long term corporate strategy rather than operating as isolated projects.
- **Impact Oriented Assessment:** Regulators and firms should emphasize social and environmental outcomes over expenditure-based compliance.
- **Community Participation:** CSR design should involve beneficiaries to ensure relevance, ownership, and sustainability, reflecting Lokasaṅgraha.
- **Academic and Policy Integration:** Management education and CSR policy frameworks should formally incorporate Indian Knowledge Systems to cultivate ethical leadership.

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