

Time for industry leaders to take a position

As the government and civil society face-off on the draft of the Lokpal Bill and related issues continues, industry leaders—who have done exemplary work in the social sector—speak to FE's Rajiv Tikoo on the role their peers need to play in the current situation

ANU AGA
DIRECTOR, THERMAX

'Responsible people are trying to find the right solution, which is not easy'

ANU AGA is known as much for standing up for causes she believes in as for turning around energy and environment engineering firm Thermax. After her retirement as chairperson in 2004, she got actively engaged with the social sector. She says, "I am a trained social worker and ever since I retired from the corporate world, I decided to give my time and financial support to the social sector."

She has a post-graduate degree in social work from Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Later, she won a Fulbright Scholarship to study social work in the US. There is another reason behind her engagement with the social sector. She shares, "When my 25-year-old son died, I wanted to honour his memory. He was very keen that I should actively support social sector." Today, she is on the board of three NGOs—Teach For India, Akanksha and GiveIndia. Agaspoke to FE on:

CIVIL SOCIETY

The role of civil society is very diverse and difficult to capture. We have committed activists such as Harsh Mander and Aruna Roy who are reaching out to the marginalised sections of society. Many in civil society recently have shown their anguish and anger at the growing corruption, and responsible people are struggling to find the right solution, which is not easy. However, a few want quick-fix solutions and have come up with irresponsible comments and actions.

At the same time, we in the corporate world often wear blinkers and do not want to face the reality that in spite of our 9% GDP growth, it has not trickled down to many in India who continue their lives in desperation and deprivation.

BUSINESS LEADERS AND SOCIETY

Knowing how much needs to be done, whatever each one is doing can and should be enhanced.

CORPORATES AND CORRUPTION

I love my country and see its tremendous potential and yet it saddens me the way we are going ahead. As a person who once belonged to the corporate world, I wish we would be more honest and confess that we are all practising corruption in small and big ways. Thanks to the system, being honest in the corporate world is almost impossible. Instead of pretending to be honest and signing codes of conduct and carrying on business as usual, I wish business chambers would say that our members do practise dishonesty because of the system and would engage with the government to find ways to eliminate this disease.

THE GOVERNMENT-CIVIL SOCIETY FACE-OFF

There is no easy solution to stop the confrontation between the government and civil society. Over the years, I find there is a growing mistrust between the government and civil society and between the corporate world and civil society. We have forgotten the art of listening, having a dialogue and being respectful of differences. Corporates can engage more with civil society to understand this distrust and find out ways in which they can partner to solve India's problems.



SUSHMA BERLIA
PRESIDENT, APEEJAY STYA GROUP

'The biggest thing biz leaders can do is to run businesses ethically'

APART FROM leading Apeejay Stya Group & Svrn Group as its president, Sushma Berlia has been active in policy-making bodies in the government and non-government sectors in the area of education. As the founder-president of Education Promotion Society of India, a nodal agency for promoting education in India and abroad, she was instrumental in setting up a platform for laying down key action plans. Saying that she picked up the trait from her industrialist father Stya Paul, who was also a freedom fighter, educationist and philanthropist, she adds, "There is an inner fire, which pushes me to try to make a difference through whatever means I can." Berlia spoke to FE on:

CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society has added a new dimension to traditional politics. While, on one hand, there is certainly an increasing awareness about burning issues like corruption thanks to mass media, on the other hand, there is also a 'feeding frenzy' tendency in the media to exaggerate the scale of this movement with its minute-by-minute reports and 'breaking news' bulletins. The contribution to the country by civil society is more than candle-light protests and sitting on dharna at Jantar Mantar or Raj Ghat. Since some of these issues have become so overwhelming, one wonders if we would be able to weed out these evils merely by legislation and protests.

However, this is only one aspect. Taking the government to task is all right, but taking a positive step to contribute to society through one's action is not only more effective, but it has a snowballing effect.

BUSINESS LEADERS AND SOCIETY

There is an increasing trend of business leaders contributing to society in their personal capacity in the last decade or so. Besides, there has been a growing trend of business leaders increasing their role in CSR activities in their later years, and here a change would certainly be welcome to see them start early. This, of course, needs a fine balance between running a business and doing philanthropy.

THE GOVERNMENT-CIVIL SOCIETY FACE-OFF

I believe that for the country to progress there has to be a healthy synergy among the government, private sector and civil society. All three partners have to be involved in healthy dialogue and action, which I think is the only way to ensure progress, transparency and accountability. The biggest contribution that a business leader can make is to run his business ethically. But this is easier said than done, given the type of regulatory regimes and laws that prevail in the country.

Currently, the way laws are framed, implemented and operated, it is increasingly becoming not only difficult for business leaders, but also the common man to be able to achieve anything at all by ethical means. Earlier corruption used to be about getting something more than what was due. It went on to be about being able to get what was due. Now it has become a form of extortion to prevent losing what is your due.

SMINU JINDAL
MD, JINDAL SAW

'Business leaders should help build framework for good governance'

SMINU JINDAL is leading Svayam, an NGO dedicated to the mobility-challenged people, with the same zeal with which she is managing Jindal SAW. She is probably the first woman to break the glass ceiling in the steel sector in the country. Though it's a family business, she rose through the ranks. Her love affair with accessibility began at the age of 11 when she met with an accident. "Despite my work commitment I ensure that I devote extensive time, resources and energy to realise its mandate of working towards making public infrastructure accessible to all people, including those with reduced mobility," she says. She is also involved with Arunim, which aims to empower the differently-abled people. She wants to help them to move away from dependency and compete in the mainstream market.

Jindal emphasises, "I strongly believe that accessibility is everyone's birthright. An accessible and barrier-free world is my dream! Everyone should have equitable access to public resources and opportunities. This will help them contribute to the economy. It would not be an exaggeration to say that accessibility can help improve the economic might of a nation!" Jindal spoke to FE on:

CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society in India is playing the role of 'ensuring the accountability' of the state in different spheres. With the rising population of youth in the country today, civil society can be considered as a space, rather than a movement, which is free and accessible to all.

BUSINESS LEADERS AND SOCIETY

When I look around, I see a very encouraging picture of Indian business leaders involved beyond corporate social responsibility. Whether they are doing enough or not, I am not in a position to comment on that! As for myself, I think my efforts are just a mere drop in the ocean that is waiting for more drops to fill it up. I constantly try and encourage my peers to go beyond their work space to help make a difference.

THE GOVERNMENT-CIVIL SOCIETY FACE-OFF

In the current scenario where there is a confrontation between the government and civil society, I urge more people, especially business leaders who are looked up to by so many people, to join the civil society movement and help build the framework for ensuring good governance, in which both the state and citizens are accountable to each other.



AMRITA PATEL
CHAIRMAN, NDDB

'Demanding accountability is a good sign for a maturing democracy'

AMRITA PATEL, chairman, National Dairy Development of India, has been instrumental in leading the national dairy programme, Operation Flood, to promote a cooperative movement covering 13 million members from 100,000 dairy cooperatives all over the country. She has also set up the National Tree Growers' Cooperative Federation to promote revegetation to enhance the productivity of village commons. Besides, she is a board member of the Society for Promotion of Wasteland Development and chairman of the Foundation for Ecological Security. She is also a trustee of India's largest private philanthropic trust, Sir Dorabji Tata Trust.

Explaining the reasons behind her passion for ecological security, she says, "We must recognise all over the truth that enduring economic progress is only possible if it rests on a firm and sustainable foundation of ecological security." Patel is also focusing on rural healthcare and chairs the Charutar Arogya Mandal, a trust that manages a 550-bed rural hospital, medical, physiotherapy and nursing colleges. She says, "The ultimate objective of the institution is to ensure that rural communities get quality and affordable healthcare." Patel spoke to FE on:

CIVIL SOCIETY

Defining 'civil society' has become an extremely complex issue. But with increased and improved communication facilities our civil society is also more connected and more willing to raise its voice on issues of common interest or concern.

BUSINESS LEADERS AND SOCIETY

Many non-profit, public agencies and foundations are operating in the space between an "individual" and the "government", attempting to assist in achieving development, in supporting causes, in developing examples and assisting collaborations to take place. Though some industrial houses have a reasonably good record of philanthropy (though generally restricted to areas around their institutions or which may add visibility to their business) and more have joined the CSR fold in recent years, I feel a great deal more needs to be done.

In a sense, industry leaders need to appreciate that invariably large ventures that they promote make use of natural resources taken from the earth or that destroy the natural resource foundations of our ecological security and should be made conscious of the long-term implications of their actions. Our industry leaders need to redefine philanthropy as paying back for what they have taken to generate wealth and not doling out charity.

THE GOVERNMENT-CIVIL SOCIETY FACE-OFF

While some view it as a confrontation, I see it as a sign of a more vibrant civil engagement in the governance of the country. Accountability is being demanded and that is a good sign for a maturing democracy. In the transition that we are going through as an emerging economic power as well as a more connected society, I believe we need to evolve new institutions to govern ourselves better. And I am talking of institutions at national level looking at accountability, transparency and self-regulation in dealing with matters of 'development' and governing the economic, social, ecological or environmental dimensions of the country.

