



Creating resilient communities to help the society

**Ms. Rajashree Birla*

General Ahluwalia, Dr. Graham Wilson and this distinguished virtual audience, I am indeed delighted to be at the Golden Peacock Awards function organized by the Institute of Directors, India. The awards, as you all know, applaud 'Corporate Excellence in CSR'. This is a recognition which all companies value as star CSR performance. At a personal level, the 'Golden Peacock Awards' always rekindle some memorable moments. For now, nearly a decade I have had the honor of addressing my fellow protagonists, all of whom advocate the need to bridge the inequities that we see in our country.

This has been a year of terrible truths as we grapple with the disruption caused by the Covid pandemic. It has undeniably induced a severe setback in the social sector. India's case load has been the highest. At the outset, let us acknowledge our nation's doctors, medical and paramedical workers. They have, and continue to go beyond the line of duty to bring relief to the Covid afflicted. Our population and the size of our country is beyond comparison. This inexplicable pandemic has been the bane of our century. I am sure you all visualize the hardships faced by the people, most by the underprivileged and the community of laborers, and among them, the community of migrant laborers. Truly, the pandemic has altered the course of India's economic and social fabric, in all respects.

Corporates from all sectors have supplemented the efforts of the Government and NGOs, to mitigate the Covid disaster. Industry associations such as FICCI, CII, ASSOCHAM and many others have risen to the occasion to help the nation. At the FICCI Aditya Birla CSR Centre for Excellence, which I have the privilege to Chair, we took cognizance of the immediate needs that were Covid-driven. A holistic approach was taken. This included distribution of cooked meals for lunch and supper, ration kits, PPE kits, working with NGOs like ISKCON and GOONJ.

At FICCI, we addressed livelihood issues, mainly faced by the informal sector workers, migrants, small land-holding farmers, returning migrants, village youths and tribal women. So, with the that foundation, a three-year project themed on 'Creating Resilient Communities' in Orissa, West Bengal, Delhi-NCR, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka and Maharashtra has been launched. These initiatives will benefit four lakh families.

General Ahluwalia requested that I focus on initiatives taken by our Group. In a nutshell, let me just say that with my son Kumar Mangalam, who is the Chairman of the Aditya Birla Group, we are all deeply engaged in Covid relief measures. Engaging with the underprivileged and making the game-changing difference continues to be the mainstay of our CSR work. In our journey, right from a family patriarch, the legendary **Shri Ghanshyam**

Dasji Birla, my grandfather-in-law; **pujye Basant Kumarji Birla**, my father-in-law to my husband, to my son **Kumar Mangalam**, service to society has been and continues to be a part of a legacy and a growing generational tradition.

Moving on, let me place before you some broad thoughts to drive home the point that today, a large segment of Indians here and the global diaspora, are conscious of their duty to the underserved. In the fiscal year 2020, private sector funding in CSR amounted to Rs. 64,000 crores, up by over 23%, from 2019 at Rs 52,000 crores, mentions the 'Bain India Philanthropy Report 2021'. It would interest you to know that the CSR funds came from 'Foreign Contributions' at 25%, 'CSR' at 27%, 'Retail Investors' at 28% and the balance 20% from 'Family Philanthropy' at Rs. 12,000 crore. The total public spending on the social sector was approximately Rs. 15 lakh crore for FY 2020. Regrettably, we still rank 117 on the Sustainable Development Report. There is clearly a felt need to do much more.

'Doing good is good business' - it implies doing the right things with integrity, guided by a moral compass. It augurs well that organizations realize that they are at a tipping point. There is enormous pressure on corporates and investors to move beyond the bottom line, to broaden their legs. Business must take on a more holistic view of their effect on society as a whole. Environmental practices, social consciousness and governance processes are a must. These elevate an organization's stature, win the respect and bond well with people beyond its boundaries, from merely 'shareholder value maximization' to a much broader canvas. It spans 'stakeholder maximization' which is beyond shareholders factors the society, community and employees.

Today, we find a growing demographic of socially cautious youngsters. They gravitate towards the companies that have a purpose. That definition of purpose is making the world a better place. This can only happen if everyone moves the needle. George Soros, the famous financial leader, sees philanthropy as a huge legacy and in his words, I quote, *"The money is a means to an end; the end is a philosophy translated into action"*.

The 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals have clearly spelt out the ethical and existential dangers that face the world. The goal stress, and the need for collective action across all sectors. These wide ranging goals beginning with the SDG 1, which is 'to rid poverty across all nations by 2030', aim at restoring dignity and self-esteem of all of the sufferings of mankind across the globe. Towards the fruition of these goals, public, private and social sectors including capital infusion, must pull in the same direction. This is a valid ask, if we want our world to morph into a more just, inclusive and environmentally sustainable one.

I am heartened to record that progressive corporates are increasingly factoring societal and environmental dimensions

into their business strategy. At our Group, Kumar Mangalam is very clear that we have to be driving a circular economy, pushing for sustainable processes in our businesses. He has laid out a strategic roadmap for achieving 'Net Carbon Neutrality', long-term. 'Circular Economy' is a concept that goes beyond just recycling; it is a restorative and regenerative process, that all of us must pursue.

My sense is that more and more companies will frame a new business model hinged on innovation to enable circular economies, inclusion and an affirmative impact. Change is underway, look at the enormous global interest in rescuing us from our current Covid situation.

Increasingly, companies will frame a new business model hooked onto innovations to enable the circular economy, inclusive growth and creating an affirmative social impact. I very strongly feel that, leaders at organizations will have to go beyond business leadership, develop a plan of action with the NGOs for inclusion, and commit time, energy and expertise to bring in a world that is just, inclusive and environmentally sustainable.

Today, more than ever before, the Vedic truism **'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam'** (means "the world is one family") rings through and this feeling, this sentiment is being practiced. Besides the vaccine, hope and optimism will take us a long way. I would like to sum up in the spirit of optimism voiced by **Kumar Mangalam** at the 56th Convocation of IIMA in the context of Covid. In his words, ***"Hidden behind the stories of loss and valor, agony and or ruin and revival, is the power of the 'human spirit', a collective spirit that has enabled us to wrestle with this pandemic for over a year, now; a spirit that has been tested again and again but a spirit that will triumph no matter what."***

Thank you.

Excerpts from the 'Guest of Honour Keynote Address' delivered by **Ms. Rajashree Birla, Chairperson, **Aditya Birla Centre for Community Initiatives and Rural Development**; and **Director on the Boards of Aditya Birla Group of Companies** at IOD's '15th International Conference on Corporate Social Responsibility - 2021 (Virtual) & Felicitation of Golden Peacock Awards for CSR (Global & National) & HR Excellence, held virtually on June 10, 2021.*