

CSR DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND MAPPING WITH SCHEDULE VII OF COMPANIES ACT, 2013 VIS-À-VIS SDGS: REFLECTIONS FROM BSE-MANUFACTURING INDEX COMPANIES

-Sumit Kumar Maji, Assistant Professor Department of Commerce, University of Burdwan, West bengal

ABSTRACT

The article tries to shed some light on the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities undertaken by the top Indian manufacturing companies to combat the social, economic and health challenges emanated from the COVID-19 crisis. Effort was also made to map the CSR activities undertaken during this pandemic situation with the mandated list of CSR activities under Schedule VII of Companies Act, 2013 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in general using Content analysis technique. The outcome of the study revealed that majority of the selected Indian manufacturing companies have undertaken various preventive and mitigation measures for enabling the stakeholders to tide over the crisis which can be mapped with Clauses i, v and ix of Schedule VII of Companies Act, 2013 and SDGs 2, 3, 8 and 17.

Keywords: CSR, COVID-19, SDGs, Companies Act, 2013, Content Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The entire world is confronted with unprecedented socio-economic challenges in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic during December, 2019 in the Wuhan city in Hubei Province in China, it spread like forest fire throughout different countries of the globe (United Nations, 2020). So far, approximately a total number of 108.90 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 infections have been reported across 221 countries with nearly 2.40 million total deaths as on 14th February, 2021¹. A total number of approximately 0.90 million cases have so far been reported from various parts of India including 0.16 million deaths in total¹. The pandemic which started as a health crisis soon got transformed into a socio-economic crisis in across the globe because of the imposition of lock down to prevent the outbreak (He and Harris, 2020). With lock down, the normal activities in the economy (barring some emergency or necessary activities) got completely disrupted.

Poor, casual and part time workers and in some cases full time permanent workers lost their livelihood due to such disruptions (United Nations, 2020). It is noticed that Government of different countries have rolled out social relief packages so as to enable the people of the society especially the poor to combat the challenges emanating during and after pandemic situation. However, Government's effort only cannot be sufficient. The business houses are also supposed to shoulder this responsibility equally.

Increasing profit is no longer the sole business of the business as opposed to what Milton Friedman (1970) propagated. A business emerges out of the society, it gets nurtured in it and it also sustains its existence because of the society. It should not be homocentric or egocentric anymore rather it ought to be eco-centric which gives equal consideration to all the stakeholders in the society (Maji & Mondal, 2015). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a manifestation of the eco-centric approach of business. CSR therefore is the philosophy that justifies the positive business-stakeholder relationship (Maqbool, 2019). In fact, CSR is considered to be at the core of overall corporate sustainability in present time (Kansal et al., 2014).

External shock injected by any form of crisis poses two distinct questions to the firms regarding CSR. Whether the firms should try to survive the crisis by focusing more on the fundamental operating activities or the firms should try to be more CSR centric to win over the confidence of the various stakeholders during testing times which will pay off in good times (Lin et al., 2017; Ryu, 2019; He

and Harris, 2020). The first option relates to the idea of Shareholders Theory as articulated by Friedman in 1970 and the second option reflects the Stakeholders Theory as argued by Freeman in 1984. Financial crisis of 2008-09 like present situation also had serious socio-economic implications with huge job loss, depressed demand situation, loss of livelihood etc. (Karaibrahimolu, 2010). During this testing time, the firms cannot isolate itself from the problems prevailing in the society rather it should become more responsible to look after the needs of the society for its overall sustainability. The idea of 'conscious capitalism' should prevail which focuses more on Stakeholders Theory based on the principle that ethics, social responsibility and sustainable business practices are integral to the core business strategies to be adopted by the firms (Lauesen, 2013). In fact, CSR can be regarded as the response of the corporate houses towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Mishra, 2020). CSR activities towards people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership adopted by the business houses can be directly mapped with the attainment of the various SDGs (Singh and Mishra, 2016; Sarkar and Singh, 2019; Poddar and Narula, 2020; Mishra, 2020). As a matter of fact, firms which are proactively integrating UN Global Compact on social responsibility are expected to be least affected by any kind of economic downturn (Arevalo and Aravind, 2010). Moreover, the literature also supports the view that CSR and corporate financial performance are positively related and therefore, strong CSR activities during this testing time are expected to have favorable

effect on the financial performance vis-à-vis sustainability of the business houses (Marom and Lussier, 2020). Hunger, health crisis, unemployment and inequality etc. as consequences to COVID-19 are also creating opportunity for the business houses to align their CSR activities to mitigate these challenges. Fortunately, the large business houses across the globe have been observed to be very proactive in undertaking CSR activities to combat the pandemic (He and Harris, 2020; Marom and Lussier, 2020). On the other hand, it is also true that during any crisis the resource available to the firms are less and as a result it will be strenuous to undertake CSR activities for the firms which are trying to survive the crisis due to such resource crunch. With reference to the CSR in times of the financial crisis of 2008-09, the observations are mixed (Giannarakis and Theotokas, 2011).

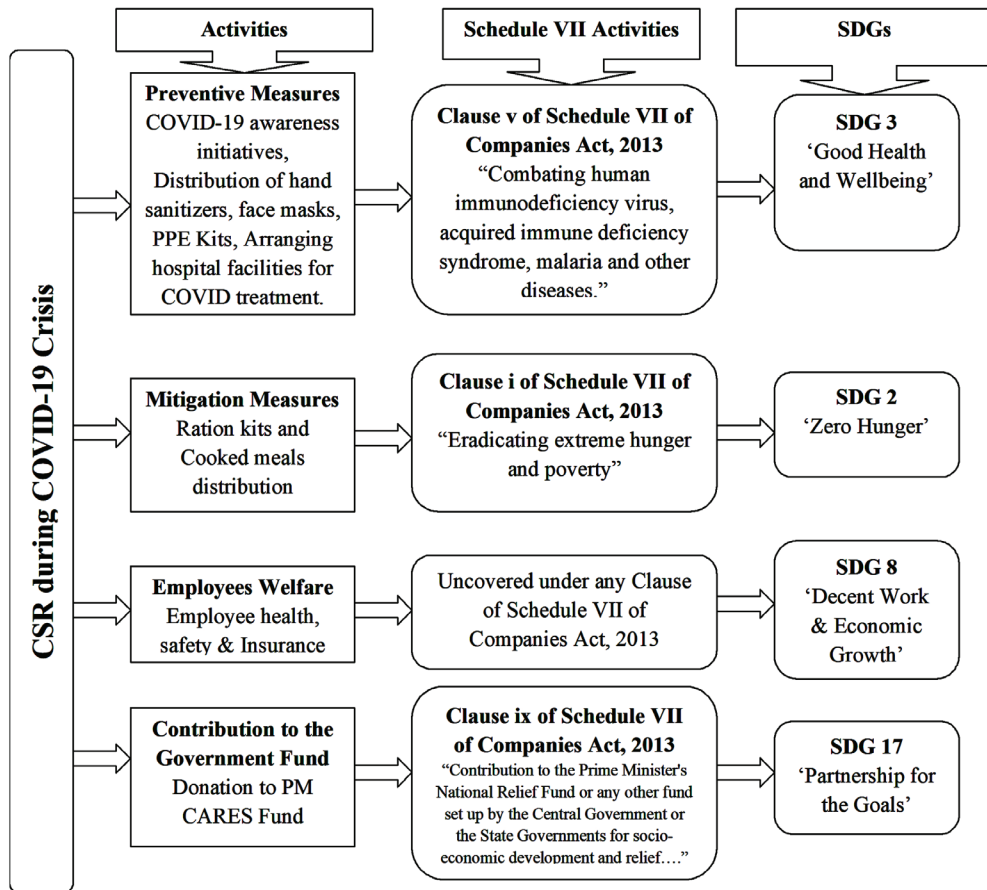
The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic is a very recent origin and thus the research works on CSR during such pandemic are scanty. Recently, Marom and Lussier (2020) presented an overview of the CSR activities towards various stakeholders to combat the COVID-19 crisis undertaken by the various U.S. based MNCs. Abbas et al. (2020) in a similar fashion highlighted the CSR activities undertaken by handful Indonesian corporate houses during this pandemic situation. He and Harris (2020), on the other hand, provided the theoretical justification of undertaking CSR activities during this pandemic by the corporate house in their research work.

The existing literature suggests that there is almost no study which tried to evaluate the

CSR initiatives undertaken by the top Indian manufacturing companies in response to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. The reason of concentrating on the manufacturing sector is that, this sector is considered to be the engine of growth and development especially in the context of an emerging economy like India (Haraguchi et al., 2017; Maji et al., 2020). Therefore, a modest effort is made in this study to appraise the CSR initiatives undertaken by the top Indian manufacturing companies in this pandemic situation. Further, attempt is also made to align those CSR initiatives with the specific SDGs as spelt out by United Nations and specific Schedule VII² activities of as mandated under Section 135 of the Companies Act, 2013.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

By addressing various socio-economic challenges through their CSR activities will enable the society to tide over this testing time and on the other hand these activities will help the business houses also to align their CSR activities with mandated Schedule VII activities under Indian Companies Act and also with broader SDGs as mandated by UN. In Figure 1 the linkages between COVID-19 specific CSR activities with Schedule VII of Companies Act, 2013 and UN SDGs are established.



Source: Author’s own representation

Figure 1: Conceptual diagram on the Linkage between COVID-19 specific CSR activities with Schedule VII of Companies Act, 2013 and UN SDGs

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of the study the BSE-Manufacturing index constituent companies have been taken into consideration. The response of the respective companies during this pandemic is assessed based on the reports on their respective official websites. Since the outbreak of the pandemic various corporate houses directly or indirectly (through their philanthropic arms) have undertaken various initiatives to help

the society and the Governments to combat the challenges emanating from the spread of COVID-19 as a part of their CSR activities. A number of research studies have advocated that CSR activities act as a major marketing tool now a days and it has profound effect on the consumer behavior. Therefore, it is very much expected that if the corporate houses have undertaken CSR measures during COVID-19 crisis, the companies will disclose these information in a celebrated fashion in their

websites and in the forthcoming Annual and Sustainability Reports. For the purpose of this study, information available in the respective company websites is content analyzed. In the absence of the information on the website, this study made a Content Analysis on COVID-19 related CSR activities undertaken by using various news papers articles, blogs and other reliable e-resources available in websites. Keeping in mind the pandemic environment, the CSR activities has been broadly measured based on the parameters such as 'Preventive Measures', 'Mitigation Measures', 'Employees Welfare', and 'Contribution to Government Fund'. The information obtained from the content analysis was evaluated primarily through frequency distribution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, CSR activities of the sample companies in terms of 'Preventive Measures', 'Mitigation Measures', 'Employees Safety and Welfare', and 'Contribution to Government Fund' are presented in detail along with the mapping with Schedule VII of Companies Act, 2013 and SDGs.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

This section highlights the extent of preventive measures undertaken by the sample companies in India as a part of the CSR strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Creating public awareness about the pandemic is propagated as a mainstream strategy by World Health Organization (WHO). As a matter of fact, United Nations (2020) in its 'Global Humanitarian Response Plan' has accepted

that inadequate awareness about COVID-19 adversely affects social cohesion which creates violence, discrimination, marginalization and xenophobia. Such awareness initiatives includes informing people at large about the virus, how it transmit from human to human and the use of various WHO recommended safety measures (such as maintaining physical distancing, washing hands regularly with soaps, use of sanitizers, wearing face masks etc.) to stop the spread of the virus.

Analysis of Table 1, shows that majority (73.3%) of the sample manufacturing companies have played significant role in creating awareness about the virus among the people in the local areas surrounding the manufacturing plants across the country. For example, Divi's Laboratories Ltd, a leading pharmaceutical company in India had created awareness about the virus amongst 28,000 rural people of 7,000 families across 8 Panchayats in the States of Andhra Pradesh and Telengana in India³. In a similar line, UPL Ltd. a leading agro-chemical manufacturer had also undertaken several initiatives in promoting public awareness about the spread of the corona virus⁴. Top Indian manufacturing companies have not limited their activities only to the public awareness initiatives rather they have contributed heavily in enabling the people in the society to stop the spread of the virus by freely distributing face masks and hand sanitizers which are considered to be essentials for preventing the human to human transmission of the virus.

Table 1: Preventive Measures undertaken by the Sample Companies

Measures	Responses	N	%
Undertaking COVID-19 awareness initiatives	Yes	22	73.3
	No	8	26.7
	Total	30	100
Distribution of hand sanitizers	No	7	23.3
	Less than 1000 lit.	13	43.4
	Above 1000 lit.	10	33.3
	Total	30	100
Distribution of face masks	No	7	23.3
	Less than 1500000	11	36.7
	Above 1500000	12	40
	Total	30	100
Distribution of PPE kits	No	12	40
	Less than 10000	9	30
	Above 10000	9	30
	Total	30	100
Arranging hospital facilities for COVID treatment	No	13	43.3
	Provided basic amenities	4	13.3
	Provided Beds, testing kits, Ventilators	2	6.7
	Created COVID Hospital	11	36.7
	Total	30	100

Source: Author's own compilation.

Analysis of Table 1, suggests that approximately 77% of the sample companies have distributed the face masks and hand sanitizers free of cost to the people in the society, the frontline workers (doctors and health workers), hospitals and Government across India. For example, Maruti Suzuki Ltd. a leading car maker in India had donated 200000 face masks to the District Administration of Rohtak in the State of Haryana⁵. Hero Moto Corp Ltd., a premier two wheeler manufacturer in India, had donated over 5,000 liters of sanitizers to the people belonging to the underprivileged section of the society⁶. It can also be noticed that 60% sample manufacturing companies have also donated PPE kits to the doctors, healthcare workers and police which is considered to be one of the essential gear to treat corona patients. For instance, Cipla Ltd⁷ (pharmaceutical), JSW Steel Ltd⁸ (steel), Hindustan Unilever Ltd⁹ (FMCG) etc. have donated PPE kits to the frontline workers.

In a densely populated country like India, the public health care facilities are never expected to be sufficient especially in the wake of a pandemic situation. 20% of the sample manufacturing companies have played pivotal role in strengthening the public healthcare system by supplying medicines, beds, oxygen cylinders, ventilators, testing kits etc. whereas 11 selected manufacturing companies (approximately 37%) initiated steps in scaling up the beds in hospitals for the purpose of treatment of corona patients. For instance, Vedanta Ltd (Mining and Mineral Production) in partnership with the State Government has created a 110 bed hospital for treatment of corona patients at Jharsugda in the state of Orissa¹⁰. Reliance Industries Ltd the leading refineries in India had set up a 100 bed COVID treatment hospital in Mumbai in the state of Maharashtra¹¹. A number of manufacturing companies in India have transformed their existing manufacturing units to produce PPE kits, face masks, face shields, ventilators, hand sanitizers etc. which is identical with the observation made by He and Harris (2020) in the context of U.K. In fact, United Nations¹² has recognized the global risk of the pandemic and urges more funding in the health systems, better sanitization and hygiene and access to healthcare facilities etc. given the prevailing inequality of the countries to tide over this health crisis. These preventive measures are in line with mandated Clause v of Schedule VII of Companies Act, 2013 i.e. "Combating human immunodeficiency virus, acquired immune deficiency syndrome, malaria and other diseases". Moreover, the above mentioned initiatives can be seen as efforts towards achieving 'Good Health and Wellbeing' (SDG 3).

MITIGATION MEASURES:

Table 2: Mitigation Measures undertaken by the Sample Companies

Measures	Responses	N	%
Distribution of ration kits	No	6	20
	Less than 3000 kits	3	10
	Above 3000 kits	21	70
	Total	30	100
Distribution of cooked meals	No	14	46.7
	Less than 2500000	11	36.7
	Above 25000000	5	16.6
	Total	30	100

Source: Author's own compilation.

To counter the spread of the virus, Indian government followed a lock down policy, in which the entire economy and the society comes to a standstill. The implications of lock down

are many but perhaps the most important of them is unemployment and people losing their livelihood. In fact World Food Programme¹³ estimated that 130 million people were expected

to suffer from acute hunger by the end of 2020 due to the COVID-19 crisis in addition to 135 million already suffering from hunger owing to conflicts, climate change and economic slowdowns. One of the recommendations of Food and Agriculture Organization¹⁴ to tackle this food insecurity is to look after the immediate food needs of their vulnerable populations. Under such a situation the people belonging to the poor and marginalized section have no option but to rely on the welfare measures adopted by the State. However, in a highly populous country like India, Government interventions solely cannot be sufficient and thereby there is a great role of the private sector too. Fortunately in India, the private sector has played their role in mitigating the shocks emanating out of the lock down as implemented by the Government. Analysis of Table 2 highlights that 80% of the selected manufacturing companies have distributed ration kits containing food grains and other essential food items to the poor people in the community at different parts of India. The various mitigation strategies adopted by the sample companies can be linked towards Clause i of Schedule VII of Companies Act, 2013 i.e. "Eradicating extreme hunger and poverty". Further, these companies are directly contributing towards attaining SDG 2 i.e. 'Zero Hunger'. For example, Dr Reddy's Laboratories Ltd has donated free rations to approximately 20,000 poor families across the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana during this pandemic¹⁵. Approximately 53% of the selected companies have also distributed cooked meals to the poor and marginal people during the pandemic. Reliance Industries Ltd¹⁶ under its 'Mission Anna Seva' has provided over 3 crore meals to

the poor and marginalized communities across India. In a similar line, Vedanta Ltd under its 'Meal for All' initiative has provided more than 11.08 lakh meals to daily wage earners across India¹⁷.

EMPLOYEE SAFETY AND WELFARE

Taking care of employees has been considered as one of the most important facets of overall CSR strategy of the corporate houses and that becomes even more critical during this pandemic. Table 3 reports the initiatives undertaken by the select manufacturing companies in ensuring safety and welfare of the employees. It is very much evident that all the selected companies have implemented a number of employee safety policies in the workplace such as compulsory wearing of face masks, proper sanitization of the workplace, maintaining physical distancing at the workplace, creating awareness amongst the employees, provisioning for work from home (wherever possible). Additionally, many of the select companies have implemented the stress management; physical fitness and yoga training etc. to empower its employees to cope with the physical and emotional strain during this pandemic. For instance, Reliance Industries Ltd¹⁸ has undertaken its existing 'R-Swasthya' wellness initiative as a part of counseling its employees to become emotionally and physically fit during this crisis time. Similarly, Maruti Suzuki Ltd. has also undertaken a number of initiatives to ensure health and safety of its employees. The company has also developed an in house mobile application named 'Wellness Mitra' to ensure employee safety and monitor the health status of its employees on a real time basis¹⁹.

Table 3: Preventive Measures undertaken by the Sample Companies for employees

Measures	Responses	N	%
Employee health and safety during COVID-19	No	0	0
	Yes	30	100
	Total	30	100
COVID-19 Insurance for employees	No	23	76.7
	Yes	7	23.3
	Total	30	100

Source: Author's own compilation

However, the performance of the selected companies in ensuring employee insurance against the COVID-19 infection was found to be very dismal as only 7 (23.3%) out of 30 manufacturing companies were found to have arranged employee insurance. For instance, two FMCG companies (Dabur Indian Ltd and Godrej Consumer Products Ltd) have made insurance provision to its employees against COVID-19²⁰. Taking care of the employees during this pandemic is enabling these business houses to contribute towards achievement of SDG 8 i.e. 'Decent Work and Economic growth'.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE GOVERNMENT FUND

In order to combat with the socio-economic crisis as posed by the COVID-19 and to provide assistance to the people most affected 'Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund' (PM-CARES Fund²¹) was set up by the Central Government in India where donations can be made. Indian corporate houses have made a generous contribution to PM-CARES Fund to strengthen India's fight against the pandemic. In Table 4, an effort is made to assess the donations made in absolute and relative (as a percentage of CSR spending of financial year 2018-19) terms by the selected manufacturing companies as part of their overall CSR strategy. The analysis of Table 4 shows that a total amount of Rs. 3694 crore has been donated by the select BSE-Manufacturing index constituent companies

to the PM-CARES Fund towards mitigating COVID-19 crisis. Top three contributors are: Tata Group (Rs. 1500 crore), Reliance Industries Ltd (Rs.535 crore) and Aditya Birla Group (Rs. 500 crore). Britannia Industries Ltd, Nestle India Ltd, Sun Pharmaceutical Industries Ltd and Maruti Suzuki India Ltd have not contributed any amount to the PM-CARES Fund, though these companies have undertaken various COVID-19 centric CSR initiatives in different parts of India. Donations towards PM-CARES Fund will help these companies in taking care of contribution to the Clause ix of Schedule VII of Companies Act, 2013 i.e. "Prime Minister's National Relief Fund or any other fund set up by the Central Government or the State Governments for socio-economic development and relief and funds for the welfare of the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, other backward classes, minorities and women"

Table 4: Contribution to PM CARES Fund to Fight COVID-19 pandemic

Company	Sector	Donation Amount in Crore	% of CSR Spending of 2018-19
Vedanta Ltd	Mining and Mineral Production	101	580.79
TATA Group	Group Co.	1500	457.33
UPL Ltd	Agro Chemicals	75	415.05
Aditya Birla Group	Group Co.	500	378.30
JSW Steel Ltd	Steel	100	158.73
Larsen and Toubro Ltd	Infrastructure Developers and Operators	150	123.27
Bharat Petroleum Corp Ltd	Refineries	175	98.21
Bajaj Auto Ltd	Automobiles	100	91.71
Dabur India Ltd	FMCG	21	79.70
Hindustan Petroleum Corp Ltd	Refineries	120	75.09
Cipla Ltd/India	Pharmaceuticals	25	74.83
Asian Paints Ltd	Paints	35	66.41
Reliance Industries Ltd	Refineries	535	62.99
Lupin Ltd	Pharmaceuticals	21	55.34
Mahindra and Mahindra Ltd	Automobiles	50	53.48
Hero MotoCorp Ltd	Automobiles	50	49.04
Dr Reddy's Laboratories Ltd	Pharmaceuticals	10	38.17
Divi's Laboratories Ltd	Pharmaceuticals	10	35.75
ITC Ltd	Tobacco	100	32.58
Godrej Consumer Products Ltd	FMCG	5	22.82
Hindustan Unilever Ltd	FMCG	10	7.91
Eicher Motors Ltd	Automobiles	1	2.77
Britannia Industries Ltd.	FMCG	0	0.00
Nestle India Ltd	FMCG	0	0.00
Sun Pharmaceutical Industries Ltd	Pharmaceuticals	0	0.00
Maruti Suzuki India Ltd	Automobiles	0	0.00

Source: Author's own compilation.

The PM-CARES contribution as percentage of 2018-19 CSR spending indicates the inherent urge of these companies to combat the crisis. Table 4 reflects that Vedanta Ltd, TATA Group, UPL Ltd, Aditya Birla Group, JSW Steel Ltd and Larsen and Toubro Ltd have donated even more than 2018-19 CSR spending in the PM-CARES Fund. The contribution of Eicher Motors Ltd and Hindustan Unilever Ltd were found to be less than 10% of the CSR spending of 2018-19. Apart from Tata and Aditya Birla Group, if the sectoral contribution is considered it can be observed that Rs. 830 crore, Rs. 201 crore, Rs. 66 crore and Rs. 36 crore were donated by the companies belonging to the refineries, automobiles, pharmaceuticals and FMCG sectors respectively. Rest of the sector is represented by single companies in the BSE-Manufacturing index. It can also be seen that two public sector refineries (Bharat Petroleum Corp Ltd and Hindustan Petroleum Corp Ltd) together donated Rs. 295 crore to the PM-CARE Fund. It is true that this pandemic cannot be overcome in an isolated fashion, rather it requires solidarity. By making contribution to the Fund and also by entering into the partnership with the Government at national, state and local level in fighting COVID-19 crisis, the selected corporate houses are upholding the spirit of solidarity in tune with SDG 17 ('Partnership for the Goals') in general and Target 17.17 ('encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships') in particular.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the CSR initiatives undertaken by the top manufacturing

companies in India during this pandemic. Attempt is also made to link such CSR activities to the Schedule VII of Companies Act, 2013 and UN-SDGs. The findings of the study clearly shows that majority of the select companies have undertaken a good number of preventive measures such as creating public awareness, distribution of face masks, hand sanitizers, PPE kits etc. in intercepting the spread of the virus. The outcome of the study also showed that a good number of companies have created hospital either in a standalone manner or along with Government to treat the corona infected patients. Other companies have donated essential items, equipment, medicines, beds etc. to hospitals across India. Although, all the select companies implemented various health and safety measures for their employees but very few of them arranged employee COVID insurance. During this pandemic and in the event of lock down when poor and marginalized people in the society are having difficulty in earning livelihood, the majority of the select companies were observed to distribute free rations and cooked meals at different parts of India. A sum of Rs. 3694 crore have also been donated by the select companies to the PM-CARES Fund to financially assist the Government to fight with the crisis. The crisis is not over yet and that is why more cooperation and support from the corporate houses are sought to tide over the present crisis.

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