

# “My Country’s Future”: A Culture-Centered Interrogation of Corporate Social Responsibility in India

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**Abstract** Companies operating and located in emerging economy nations routinely couch their corporate social responsibility (CSR) work in nation-building terms. In this article, I focus on the Indian context and critically examine mainstream CSR discourse from the perspective of the culture-centered approach (CCA). Accordingly, five main themes of CSR stand out: nation-building facade, underlying neoliberal logics, CSR as voluntary, CSR as synergetic, and a clear urban bias. Next, I outline a CCA-inspired CSR framework that allows corporate responsibility to be re-claimed and re-framed by subaltern communities of interest. I identify such resistive openings via interrogations of culture (I focus on oft-cited Gandhian ethics here), structure (State policy, organizational strategy, and global/local flows), and agency (subaltern reframing of institutional responsibility, engagement with alternative modes of agency, and deconstructive vigilance).

**Keywords** Corporate social responsibility · India · Emerging economies · Culture-centered approach

Chevron Employee: In Angola, Chevron helped train engineers, teachers and farmers; launched health programs. It’s not just good business...

Student: I’m hopeful about my country’s future.  
Chevron Employee: It’s my country’s future...  
Background: We agree.

The above excerpt, from one of the advertisements (titled “Community”) highlighting oil giant Chevron’s new “We agree” campaign on corporate–community involvement (see [Appendix 1](#) for the full text of this ad), illustrates an important point about the new “global” corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Stohl et al. 2009). Chiefly that, as multinational companies (MNCs) from both the developed and developing nations expand to new locales and markets, they increasingly employ a nation-building and nation-branding discourse (Mitra in press; Dutta-Bergman 2005; Pal and Dutta 2008). Such a discourse frames the corporation as working for the national good, aligns the firm with the nation–State in a seeming volte-face from the traditional capitalist doctrine of *laissez-faire*, and—as I argue in this essay—makes it harder for dissident voices to emerge. Would-be opponents are silenced via logics of neoliberalism, postcolonial nation-building, and modernization-oriented development. This article suggests an alternative way for marginalized voices to re-frame and re-claim this space, via the culture-centered approach (CCA) (Dutta 2008, 2009, 2011).

Corporate social responsibility has long been debated/critiqued for its efficacy, interests, and target audiences in various global contexts (Cheney et al. 2007; Ganesh 2007; Munshi and Kurian 2005; Stohl et al. 2009; Utting 2005; Vogel 2005; Wettstein 2005). However, few scholars have considered how situated discourses of development in the “emerging economy” (for an overview of this term, see Char 2009; also Mitra et al. in press) may influence the social role of corporations and CSR. As Jamali and Neville

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(2011) observe, it is “crucial to identify and leverage existing cultural/religious values and norms (formal/informal) that are consistent with CSR across the developing world and channel these more effectively in pursuit of more systematic and substantive forms of CSR.” Moreover, as Iyer (2008) notes, few studies of business ethics delve into the historical development of State power, institutions, such as the media and judiciary, economic sectors, corporate groups, and whole industries. Although contextualized emerging economy-specific concerns *have* been articulated in a few studies, these are mainly from a policy or strategic perspective (e.g., Baskin 2006; Luken and Stares 2005; Visser 2008), instead of examining how local/global socio-politico-economic flows constitute and evolve CSR meanings. In this essay, I focus on the Indian context with its “new economies of desire” (Menon and Nigam 2008, p. 86), following economic liberalization of the 1980s and 1990s, to show how—despite scholarship attesting to as many as four different “models” of CSR in use (Kumar 2004; Kumar et al. 2001; Mehta et al. 2006)—there remains a strong neoliberal profit-centered agenda at the core. This essay thus adds to the critical perspective on CSR, using contemporary examples from corporate India to show how the mainstream discourse frames a facade of nation-building, which systematically and strategically de-legitimizes subaltern voices opposed to this neoliberal agenda.<sup>1</sup>

My critique is guided by the CCA (see Dutta 2008, 2009, 2011), which highlights how resistive openings may occur for subaltern communities of interest through communicatively re-framing *culture*, *structure*, and *agency*. Moving beyond showcasing corporate dominance and unequal power relations, CCA-inspired CSR scholarship must also actively engage with grassroots meaning-making with subaltern communities, to decipher and strengthen alternative systems of organizing, which re-define “corporate responsibility.” The CCA perspective to organization studies differs from conventional frameworks in at least two major ways. First, situated at the intersections of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies, it recognizes collective and individual agency of impacted communities, shifting the locus of study to *the affected other* rather than the corporation or even its mediating non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Second, it resists reified understandings of culture as stable and occurring at the macro-level only, and examines instead how subaltern actors perform or “do” culture across the micro *and* macro in

social interaction, given their structural and material constraints. CCA-guided CSR scholarship, as this article purports to be, then involves both re-construction and de-construction operating dialectically, in its critique of dominant ontologies and epistemologies. My concern here is not so much how companies may strategically frame their CSR policies by selecting what they see as “conducive” parts of local culture (Dirlik 1997), but how subaltern communities may resist organizational hegemony when it threatens their ways of life and thus re-claim CSR in meaningful ways.

### A Review of Mainstream CSR Models in India

Contrary to traditional managerial views that downplay corporate responsibility in emerging markets, companies originating from and operating in these locales display a keen sensitivity to their social obligations (Alon et al. 2010; Baskin 2006; Luken and Stares 2005; Visser 2008). Currently, as many as 127 Indian companies are signatories to the U.N. Global Compact; of these, 102 are active members. Research indicates that Indian companies emphasize stakeholder commitments, societal ethics, and business synergy while crafting CSR programs (Alon et al. 2010; Arora and Puranik 2004; ASSOCHAM 2010; NASSCOM Foundation 2007). In a survey of Indian managers and the urban public, most respondents recognized “a paradigm shift occurring wherein investors of the future shall demand greater transparency in disclosure of both financial and non-financial information” (Mehta et al. 2006, pp. 90–91). At the same time, there remains much room for improvement. For instance, scholars and activists charge that CSR information needs to be disseminated more effectively, a more coherent policy on CSR should be mainstreamed with regular business operations, a wider range of stakeholders (including the rural and poor) must be addressed, more participative systems with sufficient feedback mechanisms need to be instituted, and politico-legal safeguards enacted (Bhushan 2005; Chaudhri and Wang 2007; Glover 2007; Times Foundation 2008).

In their landmark survey of Indian CSR, Kumar et al. (2001) identified four operational models of corporate responsibility in action: the ethical, Statist, liberal, and stakeholder models. The ethical model draws on religious values and Gandhian thought, the Statist model emphasizes the postcolonial Indian State’s economic policies, the (neo)liberal model is centered on profit-motives, and the stakeholder model is based on Freeman’s (1984) conceptualization of stakeholder responsibility. Though these models were verified and used by subsequent empirical study on CSR in India, it turns out that companies rarely follow one or the other faithfully, instead strategically

<sup>1</sup> The examples I draw from span private domestic companies (e.g., Reliance Telecom), private MNCs from outside India (e.g., Coca Cola), private MNCs originating from India (e.g., Tata Motors), and publicly owned domestic companies (e.g., National Thermal Power Corporation). Thus, my conception of “CSR in India” includes CSR work done by both homegrown firms and those originating elsewhere.

employing elements that best serve their business interests. In this section, I consider each of these models, noting how they are hardly isolated and discrete, but contain both significant overlaps and disjunctures, as depicted schematically in Fig. 1.

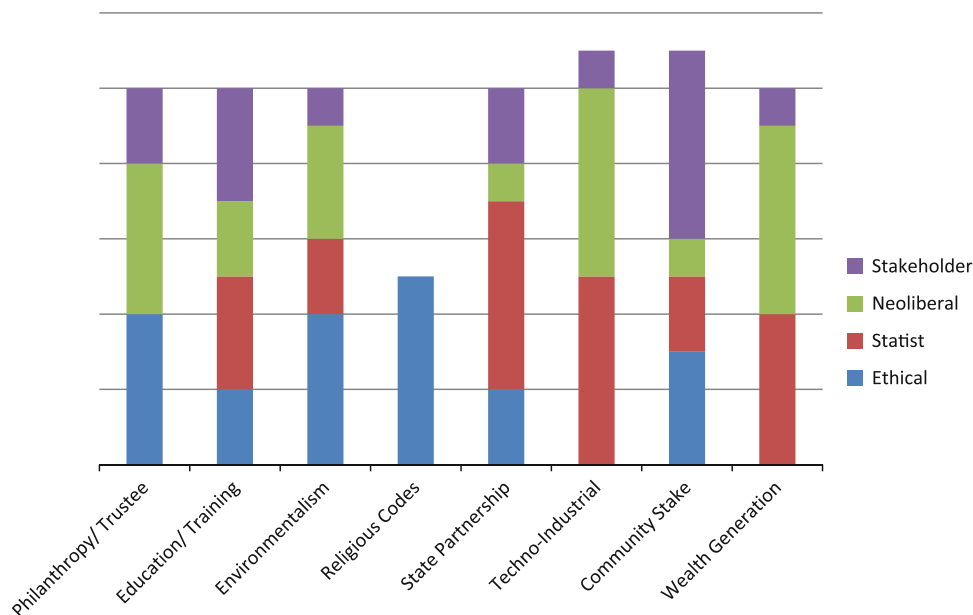
### Ethical Model

First, Kumar et al.'s (2001) ethical model notes the loose interpretation of Gandhian ethics by Indian corporations, involving philanthropy, a thrust on education and training programs, corporate leaders as trustees, environmental protection, and an adherence to religious–social (mainly, but not strictly restricted to, Hindu) values. Since Mahatma Gandhi enjoyed close relations with several chief executives of Indian corporations, it is not surprising that many of India's older companies implemented Gandhian philosophy in their mission statements (Rudolph 1971) and are perceived to be more socially responsible by the public than newer ones (Kumar et al. 2001; Mehta et al. 2006; NASSCOM Foundation 2007). Several companies say their CSR policies are led by their founders' guiding principles (British Council et al. 2002; Mehta et al. 2006; NASSCOM Foundation 2007), in line with Gandhi's trusteeship concept (Richards 1991). In the aviation sector, Gupta and Saxena (2006) note the importance of *loksamagraha*, a concept from the Hindu text *Bhagvad Gita*, which Gandhi

repeatedly drew on, which they translate as “binding men together, and protecting, maintaining and regulating them in such a way that they might acquire that strength, which results from mutual cooperation, thereby putting them on the path of acquiring merit while maintaining their good conditions” (p. 4). The strong push to education/vocational training, community development, and livelihood generation (ASSOCHAM 2010; British Council et al. 2002; CREM 2004; Kumar et al. 2001; NASSCOM Foundation 2007; Times Foundation 2008) is also in line with Gandhian ethics.

### Statism in India

With India's first (and the longest-serving) Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, among Gandhi's many mentees (Rudolph 1971), it was inevitable that Gandhian ethics were written into official State policy, albeit diluted and non-enforceable (Hardiman 2003; Levi 1971). Nehru's priority was building the newly independent nation into the leader of the Third World. Thus, the State adopted a mixed-plan economy, where industries deemed crucial to development were reserved for public-sector companies, and private firms were put under tight regulations (Kaushik 1997). Gandhian ideals of self-sufficiency were integrated with Nehru's plans for economic progress via heavy industrialization and investment in science/technology,



**Fig. 1** The schematic figure shows how strategic elements emphasized by mainstream corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices are influenced by individual models highlighted by Kumar et al. (2001). These models are the ethical, Statist, neoliberal, and stakeholder models. Eight broad aspects of mainstream CSR have been highlighted: philanthropy/trusteeship emphasis, education/training, environmentalism, religious codes, State partnership, techno-

industrial modernization, community stake, and wealth generation. The proportions depicted here are not based on particular statistics; however, I have produced this figure as a means for readers to grasp how particular CSR aspects may have multiple influences. For instance, techno-industrial modernization is emphasized especially by Statist and neoliberal models, and not at all by the ethical model (read the article text)

resulting in import substitution and an elaborate licensing regime (Kedia et al. 2006). The State accorded high priority to education, but this was a technocrat and industry-oriented system, rather than the indigenous-based knowledge Gandhi had envisioned. Though the State took up environmental protection, in the form of reserved forestland and pollution regulations, industrial investment was the prime focus. In the 1990s, following a severe economic crisis, the Indian State embarked on a policy of controlled liberalization, forcing firms to restructure their operations as a result of the “competitive shock” (Kedia et al. 2006). Changes in organizational culture and ideology were central to this revamping, as Khandwalla (2002) notes:

The new rhetoric of corporate India seems to be “change is the only constant,” “only quality ensures survival,” “people, not products, are paramount,” and “information is everything”; and the main challenges before their chief executives are seen to be to create flexible systems, to develop a culture of excellence, to facilitate teamwork and empower employees, and to speed up and decentralize data flows. (pp. 428–429)

Signifying the interplay of global/local flows, there is a marked similarity between this language and the neoliberal rhetoric of global capitalism. Menon and Nigam (2008) note the emergence of what they term “new economies of desire” (p. 86): while the earlier nation-building program maintained Gandhian ideals of renunciation (in spirit, at least), post-1990s India embraced competition and consumption as key to socio-economic development. The new project hinges not so much on mere consumption as *desire*; for Nilekani (2008), “new India is united not just by a respect for achievement and yearning for a better life, but also by an unprecedented belief that such a life is possible, regardless of one’s social and economic status” (p. 29). Liberalization, being carefully controlled (and still ongoing), did not completely erode the State’s influence, and the State evolved into a crucial partner for private industry (Mitra in press).

The Statist model is relevant for contemporary CSR not just in the large public-sector companies, where “social obligations remain an integral part of their business despite the march of privatization” (Kumar 2004, p. 1), but also in the case of private firms. Many stalwarts of corporate India actively supported the independence movement and the postcolonial nation-building exercise thereafter, so that they have come to be hued with a nationalist tinge (Lala 2007; Roy 2005). Arora and Puranik (2004) found several companies to partner with State agencies on both CSR and normal business operations. Indian corporations regularly align their CSR with State objectives and use State-

generated data for their CSR programs (Kumar 2004; Mehta et al. 2006; NASSCOM Foundation 2007; SHRM 2007). A recent large-scale survey noted that, while most companies acknowledged the State’s positive role in CSR thus far, as many as three-fourths wanted a coherent government policy on CSR put in place, in consultation with private companies (Times Foundation 2008). Tata Motors, India’s largest automotive company, noted in a recent annual CSR report (Tata Motors 2008) that “the traditional role of the State is evolving from government-led and government-owned training systems towards creating and enabling environment for enterprises and individuals, employers and employees.” While older and larger companies (like Tata) are perceived to be more socially responsible, firms in new-age sectors, such as information technology (IT) and pharma, bellwethers of economic liberalization, are also regarded as *very* responsible (Kumar et al. 2001; Mehta et al. 2006; NASSCOM Foundation 2007). Interestingly enough, around 66% of private companies initiated CSR policies between 1991 and 2005, post-economic liberalization (Times Foundation 2008). Education and healthcare are important areas for CSR work, crucial in both Gandhian and Statist frameworks: more than 50% of the IT industry’s CSR budget is dominated by educational initiatives, and 86% of IT companies say their educational initiatives “contributed to a wider national goal” (NASSCOM Foundation 2007, p. 17; also see ASSOCHAM 2010).

#### The (Neo)liberal Model

Next, there is the neoliberal model, where “companies are solely responsible to their owners” (p. 3) and investors and “the social responsibility of business is to increase profits” (Friedman 1970, p. 32), so that a *business case* for CSR must be argued. The business case operates along several planks (see Kurucz et al. 2008). First, it emphasizes voluntary CSR and companies as “corporate citizens” operating within legal requirements. Second, it is driven by corporate leaders, who are ethical and transformational (Waldman and Siegel 2008). Third, stakeholders are recognized by virtue of their potential impact on the bottom-line (e.g., ethical investing by shareholders, conscientious consumption by customers, and employee volunteerism; see Vogel 2005). Fourth, ecological and resource-oriented concerns are usually stressed over communities of interest (Peterson and Norton 2007). Fifth, CSR that taps hitherto-ignored rural and developing markets to generate better revenues is privileged (Prahald 2007). Sixth, scientific methods of conducting/evaluating CSR, upgrades to and awards, for “green” technology are important (Peterson 1997). Finally, it shares several commonalities with the

parochial modernization paradigm of development,<sup>2</sup> including a preference for top-down communication.

Several studies have found the business case—particularly, the enhancement of the corporate brand—to be a prime motivator for CSR in India (ASSOCHAM 2010; Balasubramaniam et al. 2005; British Council et al. 2002; Kumar 2004; SHRM 2007; Times Foundation 2008). Several companies report leadership-driven CSR measures, where senior executives push their CSR agenda (British Council et al. 2002; Mehta et al. 2006; NASSCOM Foundation 2007)—also in line with what they see as Gandhian “trusteeship.” Balasubramaniam et al. (2005) noted that though “the strength of Indian traditions and classical literature provides an underlying ethos that reinforces CSR... modern business practices are likely to erode this” (p. 83). The researchers fail to emphasize, however, that these “modern business practices” evolve in interaction with the “underlying ethos,” so that the business case in India contains Gandhian and Statist influences. For instance, corporate entrepreneurship, team ethics, nation-building, and social responsibility as understood in mainstream media depictions are an amalgamation of traditionally perceived ethics and global “best standards” (Mitra 2010). A dialectical relationship between Statist motives and the business case is evident when the founder of one of India’s largest IT companies says,

...decision makers across Indian companies today recognize that following the dictates of a broader, social conscience can help them realize new markets, increased profits, an improved corporate image, and happier employees... [It] enables them to contribute meaningfully to economic and social development in the country. (Murthy 2007, p. x)

### Stakeholder Participation

Finally, there is the stakeholder participation model. Though its terminology is often used by the neoliberal business case, stakeholder participation’s deeper ethics of accountability and grassroots organizing are rarely engaged with in detail by mainstream CSR (Freeman et al. 2007; Kallio 2007). This involves going beyond the bottomline

<sup>2</sup> The modernization paradigm of development, much in vogue during the 1970s–1990s and arguably still favored by international aid agencies, has been critiqued for a number of reasons. It measures social development mainly via national economic growth indicators (like GDP); does not consider contextual specificities; assumes that the “developed” status of the West is the final good for all nations/communities; prioritizes neoliberal capitalism and privileges national elites, assuming that wealth will “trickle down” to the rest; tends to adopt top-down communication methods over participative dialogue; and arguably orientalizes non-Western cultures. For an overview, see Dutta (2011) and Melkote and Steeves (2001).

and immediate organizational context to recognize how stakeholders may be impacted by corporate actions: although community “still retains that connotation of place... it has been broadened to include the ‘community of interest’ or ‘virtual community,’ and these ideas may require a great deal more of businesses” (Freeman et al. 2007, p. 36; also see Freeman 1984). Indian companies frequently describe their CSR partners (State agencies and NGOs) and intended beneficiaries (investors, employees, and impacted communities) as stakeholders (ASSOCHAM 2010; Kumar 2004; Mehta et al. 2006; NASSCOM Foundation 2007; SHRM 2007). The urban public regards the media and NGOs as vital stakeholders in social development and CSR, ranking them higher than either corporations or the State in terms of trust. However, NGO-involvement in CSR is still notably low (Times Foundation 2008). The public also sees itself as a key stakeholder in corporate projects, and expects firms to step up their role in social development (British Council et al. 2002; Kumar 2004; Mehta et al. 2006), which often translates into reputational problems for MNCs. While local stakeholders expect long-term commitment in social change projects like education and livelihood generation, several MNCs think this unnecessary for business gains in the country of operation (CREM 2004; Kumar et al. 2001).

This brief review was meant to highlight some of the key strands of mainstream CSR discourse in India (for an overview of discourse in organizational contexts, see Grant et al. 2004), also shown schematically in Fig. 1. However, to the critical scholar, such an exposition is incomplete without simultaneously interrogating it with an eye toward the social privileges and inequities perpetuated therein. Next, I outline the CCA that guides me in this endeavor.

### Why Culture and CCA?

Given that most of the extant theory on organizational practice—and indeed, social science research in general—has been formed on the basis of populations in the West, an increasingly vocal group of scholars and activists have urged for contextually based theory-building that takes into account local subjectivities and material conditions (e.g., Breen 2007; Dutta 2008, 2011; Spivak 1988; Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Wettstein 2005). While culture has long been a buzzword in organization studies, at least since Hofstede’s (1980) landmark study on IBM employees worldwide, recent scholarship has attempted to integrate it more fully in studies of business ethics and CSR (e.g., Christie et al. 2003; Jamali and Neville 2011; Sagar and Singla 2004). However, some important critical-cultural and postcolonial critiques may be identified here. First, most of this study takes culture as a reified stable macro-level

(usually national) construct, drawing from Hofstede's five dimensions of individualism–collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity–femininity, and long–short-term orientation (Mitra et al. in press; Dirlik 1997). In doing so, this approach tends to miss the practical, action-oriented nature of culture: i.e., how culture, while being a shared set of meanings for a community, transcends both micro and macro (Appadurai 1990; Shome and Hegde 2002). It is in everyday social interactions that culture is “done” and constituted, and it is then sedimented and transformed over time into more stable macro relations among social actors. Even as culture is “public” (since it concerns itself with shared, not individual, meanings), it is hardly an abstraction (as suggested for instance by Christie et al. 2003), but very *real* in its embodied everyday performance (Geertz 1994).

Second, this line of scholarship tends to reify culture as a variable to be used by corporations to serve managerial interests, a form of “re-engineering to make the work force feel good and positive about changes in the nature of work that have created new forms of deprivation and degradation, both physical and psychic” (Dirlik 1997, p. 188), while failing to interrogate the deeper power relations and ideological privilege behind it. As Shome and Hegde (2002) note, culture is “a site of struggle through which the social order is maintained, challenged, produced, and reproduced, in the performance of various social relations of equity and inequity” (p. 172). Third, some organizational scholars have argued that it becomes meaningless to consider culture as a defining concept in organization studies, pointing out that cultures are rarely distinct among national borders, several sub-cultures exist, and cultural predictors often fall short, overlap, or yield markedly dissimilar results (Singh 2007). Often, institutional theory is suggested as an alternative framework, but this does not skirt the culture question either, since even institutions are shaped by culture in important ways (Singh 2007, p. 425). For instance, while tracing the “crossvergence” of global and local CSR in Lebanon, Jamali and Neville (2011) note, “we stand to gain a deeper understanding of CSR dynamics in the developing world by considering implicit forms of CSR and the salient formal and informal cultural and religious norms and institutions at play.” In another example, while Visser (2008) attempted to outline historical, cultural, and institutional factors to trace a CSR theory for developing countries, he ends up with a pyramid model not much different from the standard economic–legal–ethical–philanthropic model used elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Importantly,

<sup>3</sup> Visser's (2008) CSR pyramid for developing nations simply moves “philanthropic responsibilities” at a more fundamental level, second only to the “economic,” but little else is changed from the standard pyramid. Moreover, the “new” pyramid tends to treat cultural differences as homogenous, clubbing all developing countries

then, a framework of CSR is required, which incorporates both institutional structures and culture as micro/macro-shared meaning, so that the two influence each other in constituting CSR meanings.

However, it is not enough to focus only on culture and structure, without considering the active negotiation of both by social agents. Most of the existing literature on CSR, in both developing and developed nations, focuses on corporate agents—the corporation itself or its boundary spanners, such as public relations and NGOs—rather than the subaltern communities impacted by them. When such communities *are* the focus of attention, they are rarely accorded meaningful agency. Consider Iyer's (2008) socio-historical analysis of farmer suicides in India, where he argues for companies to step beyond contractual obligations and adopt a “benign paternalism” to inform and protect farmers. His treatise is well informed by critical realist approaches, but crucially denies *agency* to the affected farmers: the suicides are treated as outcomes of sheer helplessness, while the farmers' knowledge of traditional techniques is dismissed as being out-of-sync in the modern economy where MNCs push genetically modified (GM) seeds. Ironically, while Iyer persuasively argues that the presumptions of a liberal democratic social contract do not apply to contexts like rural India, where communal forms of organizing are crucial for survival, he fails to consider how the suicides may in fact constitute collective protest. In fact, even “the weak” have recourse to “weapons,” acts of resistance in everyday practice (Scott 1985).

Given these important gaps in the literature, there is space for a CSR framework that keeps in mind both micro and macro aspects of culture, envisions cultural influence on institutional structures (and vice versa), and centers the subaltern communities most affected by CSR. To this end, I examine Dutta's (2008, 2009, 2011) CCA, which draws from postcolonial theory and subaltern studies to interrogate dominant relations of State–organization–community from the perspective of marginalized voices. As an epistemological framework, CCA has been used by researchers to critique dominant constructions of health, media literacy, poverty, public relations, corporate reputation and public diplomacy, suggesting alternative frameworks of organizing and social change (Mitra et al. in press; DeSouza et al. 2008; Dutta and Basnyat 2008; Sastry and Dutta 2011). I submit, therefore, that it provides a useful tool in CSR studies to shift our focus from the corporations organizing such programs to the communities dealing with them on an everyday basis.

Footnote 3 continued  
together, and aims toward a normative “ideal”—perhaps stemming from a reified conception of culture, as noted by Dirlik (1997).

In brief, the CCA attempts to engage with subaltern subjectivities, noting how marginalized actors may resist hegemonic knowledge structures through their communicatively enacted cultural practices, within the constraints and availabilities afforded by institutional structures (Dutta 2009, p. 291). Subalternity is taken to be the relations of subjugation and subordination in terms of class, caste, age, gender, sexual orientation, wealth, position, or in any other way, such that local or indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing are violently stripped of legitimacy, by complex ideological and material flows (Dutta 2011; Gramsci 2001; Spivak 1987, 1988). In line with postcolonial and subaltern studies, CCA calls for an “activist” stance to be taken by researchers, so that they may be attuned to the social injustices at play in local/global contexts and committed to interrogating them. In no way does the framework ignore material conditions, such as resource availability and ownership, bodily functions and capacities, or geographical factors. Rather, discourse and materiality are dialectically aligned, so that each accords the other social meaning. Since the CCA rests on the triad of *culture*, *structure* and *agency*, I explain each of these below in some more detail.

First, the CCA views *culture* as a dynamic web of shared meanings, continuously constructed, reified, and challenged through communication in local contexts, as participants draw from macro discourses, depending on the structural and material conditions at hand (also see Geertz 1994; Shome and Hegde 2002). Such a perspective allows us to continually critique cultural norms, rather than take them for granted, so that we may trace how social inequities may be embedded within cultural traditions (e.g., the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system in India)—so that culture and structure become intertwined. Considering that culture is always performed in situ allows us to engage with social actors and decipher alternative communicative practices whereby these structural injustices may be combated over time.

Second, *structure* refers to the systems of organizing that both constrain and enable agentic choices (also see Appadurai 1990). By foregrounding the relevance of structure in the study of organizational practices, the CCA attends to the inequities and power structures that limit possibilities at the margins. Structures may be both material and discursive (Dutta 2009); for instance, resource availability and ownership (material) form important structural constraints on the articulation of voice by poor communities, as do various organizational norms/standards and civil society conditions laid down by the State and media (discursive). Importantly, while some structures are more stable than others, they are not beyond transformation. In fact, the CCA recognizes only deep structural transformation as real social change, rather than piecemeal efforts that end up co-opting the subaltern voice and reifying inequities.

Finally, *agency* refers to the ability of individuals and groups to make sense of their environment and adopt a course of action meaningful to their particular context. Specifically, the CCA focuses on the agency of subalterns to articulate their concerns and alternative logics, to resist the hegemony of powerful, structurally aligned frameworks (Dutta 2008, 2011). The recognition and avowal of subaltern agency means that the CCA is especially attuned to the organization of social actors according to self-reflexive and flexible frameworks that may be alien to dominant (Western) epistemologies (also see Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Moreover, agency involves “deconstructive vigilance” (Dutta 2009, p. 296) that notes the co-optive possibilities of engagement, when powerful corporations and State agencies supposedly “dialogue” with subaltern communities but do not enact meaningful structural transformation.

How might the CCA perspective consider organizational practices? The economic is not a discrete realm, but inherently linked to the political organization and social history of a people, negotiated and manifested through the interplay of structure, culture, and agency. Neoliberalism as a discursive trope operates through complex and dynamic (re)combinations, such that it privileges certain forms of knowledge over others (i.e., quantitative and predictive models outweigh lived experience and traditional subaltern knowledge; Tuhiwai Smith 1999), values particular resources (e.g., commodities traded on international markets or those hoarded by powerful First World States, rather than those treasured by indigenous communities; Spivak 1987), de-legitimizes indigenous paradigms of valuation (e.g., communal and ancestral links with one’s land is dismissed in favor of property rights; Breen 2007), and idealizes Western modes of liberal democracy, contracts and civil society instead of alternative community systems (Dutta-Bergman 2005; Iyer 2008).

## A Culture-Centered Interrogation of Mainstream Indian CSR

Guided by CCA principles, a critical deconstruction of mainstream CSR discourse in India, drawing on the “models” identified earlier (also see Fig. 1), five main themes stand out. In brief, these are nation-building as a facade, the underlying neoliberal logics of CSR, CSR as voluntary and as synergetic with “normal” business, and a clear urban bias in CSR programs.

### Nation-Building

Research indicates that Indian corporations strategically couch their CSR in lofty nation-building rhetoric (British Council et al. 2002; CREM 2004; Kumar 2004; Kumar

et al. 2001; Mehta et al. 2006; Times Foundation 2008). According to PIC (2003), “majority [companies] expressed the view that nation building through uplift of the underprivileged, and ethical conduct including compliance of business, [and] welfare of its primary stakeholders” was the definition “closest to their perceptions of CSR.” Nation-building is thus a dominant discursive trope in Indian CSR and builds on the economic aspirations of the growing middle-class population and the political leadership’s own ambitions to join the ranks of the First World (Menon and Nigam 2008, Nilekani 2008; Varma 1999). The elements of this trope include technological advancement for the company/industry/country, investments in primary and higher education, partnership with State agencies and congruence with State objectives, greater urbanization, wealth-generation (in terms of economic growth indicators like GDP), and avowal of the so-called traditional societal values. Mehta et al. (2006) cite the representatives of a foreign MNC operating in India, describing “the role in terms of proving Indianness and commitment to the community and country” (p. 71). Importantly, the nation-building trope utilizes elements from each of the four models reviewed earlier: ethical and Statist models contribute to national commitment goals, the ethical model reifies “traditional” values even as economic wealth is pursued, the stakeholder model allows communities and the nation-state to be framed as ostensible partners in this process, and the neoliberal aim of wealth generation is forcibly (and unproblematically) extended to even subaltern communities who may have alternative meaning-systems.

### Underlying Neoliberal Logics

Despite the seemingly altruistic facade of nation-building, the underlying logics behind contemporary CSR programs are staunchly neoliberal and profit based. For starters, CSR in rural underprivileged areas is publicized as “national development” in more affluent (urban) markets, in the hopes of improving corporate reputation and garnering more sales. Glover (2007) shows how Monsanto used its Smallholder Program (SHP) with small-holding farmers in India to assuage the concerns of European customers and authorities on GM crops. Second, it adds to corporate leaders’ clout, building charisma and ascribing community-focused long-term vision to them (Mitra in press; Waldman and Siegel 2008). In the Monsanto case, for instance, the company’s work with smallholders was attributed directly to CEO Robert Shapiro’s superior vision in integrating CSR with the firm’s regular operations: “Developing country farmers assumed, therefore, a central place in Monsanto’s strategy for market development and competitiveness as well as in Shapiro’s vision of sustainability”

(Glover 2007, p. 855). Third, several companies have profited tremendously by entering rural and under-tapped markets (Prahalad 2007). For instance, IT major Reliance Telecom is said to revolutionized the revenue model for telecom in India, following its low-cost high-base entry in B- and C-tier villages and towns across the country (Roy 2005). Finally, the State sheds its traditional (at least in neoliberal frameworks) role of stringent regulator and becomes a crucial corporate partner that directs market liberalization, provides valuable information, facilitates easier tie-ups and entry to untapped markets, and helps de-legitimize dissidents. Thus, in the case of Tata Motors’ launch of the world’s cheapest car, which was opposed by rural communities whose land was being acquired for the factory, the State became a key organizational ally, which helped portray subaltern protesters as anti-progress and anti-national anarchists, rather than stakeholders who should have been consulted (Mitra in press).

### CSR as Voluntary

The State–corporation partnership is constantly contested, however, by the neoliberal logic of *laissez-faire* at the core of the mainstream CSR discourse (British Council et al. 2002; Kumar 2004; Kumar et al. 2001; Mehta et al. 2006; NASSCOM Foundation 2007). Times Foundation (2008) found that while companies want the State to outline a clear policy on CSR, they want a strong say (including veto power on regulation issues) in its design, which might produce a policy with little regulatory teeth (if any). In other words, CSR is emphasized as a voluntary (*sans* regulation) business practice, where the State is asked for benefits on taxes, duties and customs, even as companies are hesitant to engage in deeper issues related to social transformation, such as human rights (British Council et al. 2002; CREM 2004). This situation means that, in case of organizational irresponsibility, legal recourse for communities of interest is often puny (Bhushan 2005). Perhaps the best known example of this is Union Carbide’s response to the infamous Bhopal gas leak of 1984. As Ice (1991) comments, “Carbide’s response to what should be done following the gas leak dealt with the scientific, rather than the human, sides of the leak’s effects... One might even wonder whom Carbide saw as the victim – Carbide or the Bhopal residents” (p. 357). More than 20 years later, the Bhopal disaster victims’ petitions remain unfulfilled, while MNCs scramble to protect their reputation and bottom-line from litigation.

Recent incidents, such as Coca Cola’s excess extraction of groundwater and dumping of toxic waste (Raman 2007) and ongoing farmer suicides owing to inadequate corporate and State support (Iyer 2008), reiterate this legal inequity. In the latter case, Iyer notes that the lack of structural/



financial safeguards in case of GM crop failure, inadequate land reforms, and high internationally determined prices of cotton (owing to the World Bank's advice for liberalization) have all benefited Big Agro, while decimating the small farmer (p. 439). The severe effects of "voluntary" and unregulated CSR are even more shocking when State-owned companies violate their own lofty standards. For instance, power giant National Thermal Power Corporation (a signatory to the U.N. Global Compact) not only violated safety protocols at its facility near the city of Vishakhapatnam, leading to dangerous mercury pollution, but also refused to share medical reports of potentially affected locals with them (Newell 2005). Eventually, an intensive media campaign brought the matter to court, so that the company was directed to release the records. More recently, the same plant has been found to cause severe groundwater pollution, leading to deformations among the local people, especially children (CityofVizag 2010).

### CSR as Synergetic

Most companies advocated a synergetic combination of CSR and "normal" business, so that "CSR is not just a cost but also a concrete help in planning and tracking environmental and social improvements that bring financial benefits, [which] can then be engaged in the virtuous cycle of continuous improvement" (Luken and Stares 2005, p. 40; also see ASSOCHAM 2010; Times Foundation 2008). However, there are plenty of cases to demonstrate that unless these synergies step beyond traditional neoliberal parameters, there is good likelihood of failure (for an overview, see Bhushan 2005; also Mitra in press; Munshi and Kurian 2005). Glover's (2007) examination of Monsanto's SHP in India shows how "mainstreaming CSR" often means that less-powerful stakeholders (small farmers, in this case) lose out to the profit-interests of shareholders located in urban and Western contexts. While SHP was positioned beyond both philanthropy and public relations—and thus "intermediate" to CSR and business (p. 859)—it became a victim of its own success. Because it was integrated so well with regular marketing, the latter took precedence over it, which then became characterized as "transient." Instead of focusing on the actual small size of farm holdings, the "'long-term potential' and the 'objectives of the farmer'" (p. 859) became salient, so that development for Monsanto referred to the development of *market*, rather than social needs.

### Urban Bias

Mainstream CSR discourse in India increasingly pits the relatively powerful urban middle and upper classes against rural communities. For instance, while health and

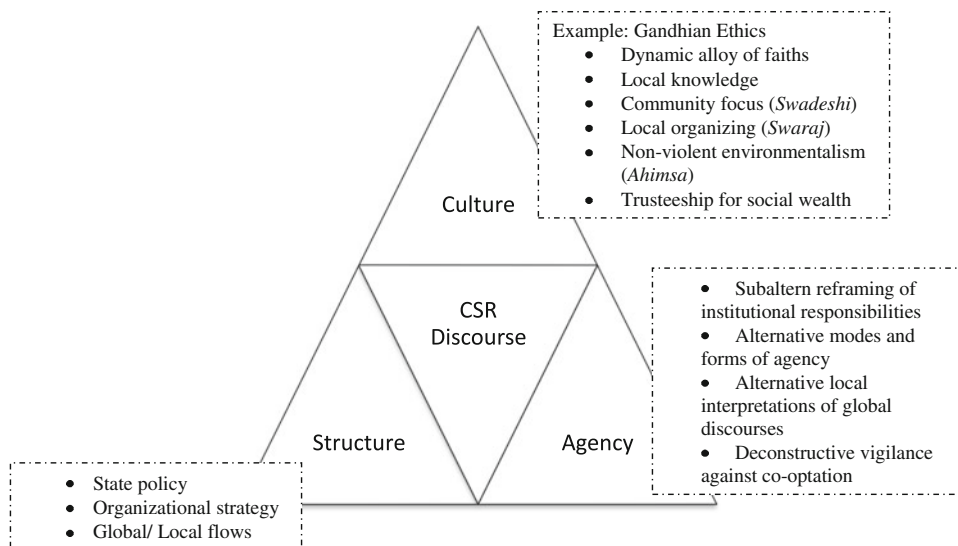
education remain the most important areas for CSR to focus on, especially among poor rural communities, urban respondents want companies to address transport, infrastructure and workplace issues (Balasubramaniam et al. 2005). Thus, those unable to establish themselves in a market economy are de-legitimized as stakeholders. This urban bias is a natural consequence of the modernization paradigm of development (in which the neoliberal business case operates), where the industrial economy is privileged over the agrarian sector, and capital and other crucial resources are concentrated in urban centers, rather than rural communities (Dutta 2011; Melkote and Steeves 2001). As in the case of Tata Motors, an organizational mindset dominated by the investor-focused neoliberal case might simply not deem indigenous communities important enough to negotiate directly with, which may have potentially disastrous consequences for both the company and community (Mitra in press; Breen 2007). Moreover, though the model of conscientious consumerism has gained some popularity in developed markets (Vogel 2005), it seems underdeveloped in India: potential customers are reluctant to censure (e.g., through boycotting products) socially irresponsible companies, if price considerations are still favorable (Kumar et al. 2001; Gupta and Saxena 2006).

To summarize, mainstream CSR discourse in India frames neoliberalism through rose-tinted nation-building lens that marginalize subaltern voices. Accordingly, Utting (2005) calls for an alternative framework that "recognizes that if CSR is to be meaningful it needs to be articulated with social change and cannot rely exclusively on individual effort or agency" (pp. 384–385). Similarly, Iyer (2008) argues that prevalent models of CSR, based on a contract between the corporation-as-person and the atomized (not communal) stakeholder, simply do not fit in developing countries like India. However, where his solution is an "appeal to the paternalistic benevolence" (p. 440) of corporations, which arguably further erodes subaltern agency, I suggest a culture-centered framework that centers communities of interest.

### An Alternative Culture-Centered CSR Framework

Rather than disparate realms, *culture*, *structure*, and *agency* are coeval and dialogic, so that organizations and stakeholders negotiate their discursive and material conditions across all three. "This interplay of culture, structure, and agency offers a theoretical and empirical opening for... scholars to study the ways in which global inequalities brought about by neoliberal logic are experienced by the people who have been pushed to the margins of policy debates and articulations" (Dutta in press, pp. 43–44). To

**Fig. 2** This figure interrogates mainstream corporate social responsibility (CSR) discourse in India through the *culture–structure–agency* triad of the culture-centered approach. Adjacent to each block, constituent themes for resistive social action have been shown. Noting the multiple cultures at stake, rather than invent a single monolithic “Indian” culture, I examine Gandhian ethics here



this end, I outline below a CCA-based understanding of CSR, which allows the subaltern to re-claim this space through the lens of culture, structure, and agency acting in concert with each other (see Fig. 2). For instance, when I discuss *culture* (–*structure–agency*) below, although I foreground *culture*, *structure*, and *agency* are never far in the background.

#### Culture (–Structure–Agency)

In contrast to extant studies on CSR in India, which focus on “stable” cultural themes like respect for elders, familial ties, and religious teachings (e.g., Gupta and Saxena 2006; Sagar and Singla 2004), a CCA-based framework notes how ongoing negotiations of culture may occur in local contexts, providing openings for marginalized stakeholders to voice themselves. Given the frequent invocation of Gandhian ethics in mainstream CSR discourse (Kumar 2004; Kumar et al. 2001; Lala 2007; Mehta et al. 2006; NASSCOM Foundation 2007), I examine here how subaltern voices may re-claim them.<sup>4</sup> Although prevalent CSR norms in India usually equate personality-driven philanthropy with Gandhian ethics, CCA allows activists and scholars to probe and utilize masked themes of Gandhian philosophy as a suitable cultural frame for subaltern organizing (Dutta-Bergman 2005). Bose (1971) argues that, far from being static and unalloyed, Gandhian ethics demand a dynamic interpretation, whereby communities and corporations give of themselves both on account of religious principles and realization of individual-system

<sup>4</sup> While I have focused on Gandhian ethics in my discussion of culture here, CCA might be fruitfully applied to other cultural frames as well (e.g., re-interpreting Islamic scripture to draw out deeper meanings of *khairaat*), so that several resistive openings arise to critique dominant CSR meanings.

interconnections. Hindu codes of duty (*dharma*) and the life/death cycle (*karma*) may intermingle with Islamic *khairaat* (voluntariness) and Christian charity (Mehta et al. 2006; Richards 1991). A rigorous examination of Gandhian thought rejects philanthropy alone as effective CSR, and calls for longer-term commitment to impacted communities. Though I have noted earlier how mainstream CSR discourse narrowly interprets education in the modernist vision of “re-training” for the industrial economy (also see Mitra in press), for Gandhi, primary education, vocational training “and the need for it to be economically self-sufficient” were to be “the spearhead of a silent social revolution fraught with a sound economic basis” (Richards 1991, p. 112). This alternative interpretation of education might be gainfully used by CCA-informed CSR frameworks to privilege indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing.

Moreover, it may be related to the neglected concepts of *sarvodaya* (“the welfare of all”; Bose 1971, p. 79) and *swadeshi* (self-sufficient or homegrown nature) of the community. While the terms have been reduced in State policy to import substitution for industrial activity, their original focus on the local community and indigenous knowledge may be re-claimed by dissident subaltern voices to oppose neoliberal logics of mass-production (Kumarappa 1951). For Gandhi, the emphasis on adopting home-spun cloth (*khadi*) would not only “create self-sufficiency and supply work and adequate wages... but also would embody a simpler way of life... rejecting luxuries and self-indulgence, the sources of unchecked competition that in turn breed poverty disease, war, and suffering” (Dutta-Bergman 2005, p. 283). In fact, one of the twentieth century’s most influential anti-neoliberalism texts, Ernst Schumacher’s *Small Is Beautiful*, is based on Gandhian “economic theory that is oriented towards people”

(Richards 1991, p. 131). Schumacher (1973) calls this “intermediate technology”: rather than mass production, participatory production *by* the masses, attuned to the contextual needs of a community. Another point of re-entry in the CSR discourse is provided by the famous Gandhian term *ahimsa* (non-violence). While it is well known for its role in the Indian independence movement, it signifies non-violence not only toward fellow humans but also toward the environment (Hardiman 2003; Richards 1991). A non-violent discourse of environmentalism, while being attuned to the sustainability and material availability of resources, is potentially far richer and has deeper consequences. It emphasizes the social embeddedness of human communities, from the past and into the future, and connects both the animate and inanimate intrinsically. Anecdotal evidence suggests that such a strategy might be successful in resisting neoliberal hegemony: for instance, the Dongria-Kondh tribals in the Indian state of Orissa were able to repulse mining company Vedanta Resources from their surroundings, mounting an emotionally charged campaign that emphasized their spiritual, material, and communal ties to the land (Rahman 2010). This was a far cry from mainstream discourse on sustainability that tends to strip the concept of emotion and spirituality, rendering it abstract and hard to relate to (Ganesh 2007).

The cultural reclamation of CSR discourse necessarily involves both communal and individual *agency* to modify and use the available *structural* conditions—limbs of the CCA triad I examine in turn, below. In the case of the Dongria-Kondh, a strong social network of digital activists and scholars was actively mobilized to spread the tribals’ message to a wider national and global public. Similarly, Dutta-Bergman (2005) highlights how Gandhian systems of village structure might be engaged with as an alternative to dominant (Western) notions of “civil society” that are closely linked to the aims of transnational capital, rather than subaltern communities. These examples highlight a re-framed meaning of the term “trusteeship,” often used in mainstream CSR discourse; Hardiman (2003) quotes Gandhi,

We invite the capitalist to regard himself as a trustee for those on who he depends for the making, the retention and the increase of his capital. Nor need the worker wait for his conversion. If capital is power, so is work. Either power can be used destructively or creatively. (p. 83)

Corporations as trustees (in the Gandhian sense) are then managers of *social/collective* wealth, formed not on the basis of a contract among atomized individuals but as an organic relationship communicatively negotiated via everyday cultural practices, who may be resisted (and gradually transformed) when they turn against communal

interests. Finally, it should be kept in mind that the CCA perspective does not advocate a simplistic “going back to basics”—in fact, such a move might be even more disastrous for impoverished communities—but an honest engagement with grassroots cultural practices to re-define notions of “corporate responsibility” that do not marginalize the subaltern out-of-hand. Even as it suggests reclaiming Gandhian ethics, it encourages the everyday critique of this philosophy so that one set of dogmatic principles (the business case for CSR) is not replaced by another.

#### Structure (–Agency–Culture)

At its core, the CCA is a theory of structural transformation: social change is meaningful only when deep-rooted structures are transformed, however gradually and imperceptibly, rather than just “greenwashing” via protestations of “dialogue.” I consider three forms of structure here—State policy, organizational strategy, and global/local flows—which act in concert with each other and culture–agency to constitute CSR norms.

First, in terms of *State policy*, a culture-centered inquiry asks how the Indian State organizes itself and its offshoots, how is the law constituted and implemented, and what are the goals sought to be achieved through State policy. A challenge along either of these fronts might expose glaring structural inequities and mobilize stakeholders (e.g., the media and NGOs) to action. For instance, in the aftermath of the Bhopal leak, when Union Carbide was successfully able to navigate the Indian legal system to escape relatively unscathed, a sustained campaign spearheaded by aggrieved communities and the media sought to pressure the India State to re-cast its structural frameworks. Through case studies in Nicaragua, Chile, and the Philippines, Dutta-Bergman (2005) has shown how local and global elites use the rhetoric of “democracy” and “free market” to progressively shut out subaltern voices from the artificially constructed “civil society,” which operates essentially as a neocolonial tool to garner resources and stifle dissent. In the Bhopal case, the strong grassroots movement forced the Indian State to change its tone *vis-à-vis* the company, pressing for a larger settlement and strengthening environmental regulation (see [www.bhopal.net](http://www.bhopal.net)). Despite Bhopal, CSR regulations are sorely lacking in India, so that Bhushan (2005) urges for sustained critique of the legal discrepancies. Even as some companies also call for stronger policy guidelines on CSR (NASSCOM Foundation 2007; Times Foundation 2008), I have noted earlier how they stand to gain much from implementing a toothless regulation that might easily co-opt subaltern protests via promises of “dialogue” with little meaningful follow-up, so that CCA

scholars and impacted communities may not rest entirely easy.

Second, *organizational strategies* are also prone to change and critique. Meaningful social transformation may occur when organizations go beyond “business as usual” and implement new ways of constituting their social responsibility, as argued by Iyer (2008). For instance, Thiagarajan (2010) narrates how a mid-sized Indian bank used its vast rural branch network to launch a targeted micro-credit system that helped subaltern communities gradually become self-sufficient and allow branch-managers to get better informed of customers’ challenges/needs. Terming the approach “missionary leadership,” he argues that organizations must re-frame their goals toward a “shared desire to serve the mission” (p. 646) and tap “the need for personal growth and the desire to derive satisfaction from serving a cause” (p. 647). The nation-building theme espoused by mainstream CSR discourse may thus be re-claimed by subaltern communities and CCA scholars/activists, via the argument that nation-building is indeed a greater cause than short-term profits, or that even State policy goals recognize. Instead, meaningful nation-building can occur only when grassroots and subaltern communities are transformed from below (Dutta 2008).

Even incremental transformations in mundane organizational practices, such as revenue streams and billing practices, may be usefully engaged with, from a CCA perspective. While Thiagarajan’s example did note how basic practices of determining credit worthiness, debt collection and customer care were re-crafted with key inputs from the rural subaltern community, the case of energy company Union Fenosa in Colombia (Peinado-Vara 2006) is also instructional. In an environment with insufficient formal access to electricity, unreliable billing system and rampant unit-wastage, the company formed a specialized subsidiary (“Energia Social”) that developed an innovative method of collecting revenue and delivering customer care through small enterprises created within the local communities, a collective billing system that allowed cost-splitting among neighbors, and outsourcing maintenance work to local contractors (p. 66). Important in both examples is the community’s agency, though somewhat limited (i.e., the community is still treated as potential “consumer”), without which they would not have been successful. Despite the shortcomings, the examples are useful indicators of how agency, culture and context provide useful avenues to re-frame organizational and CSR strategy.

Third, a CCA perspective *interrogates the global/local flows* of capital, media and labor (Appadurai 1990) that frame mainstream State-business discourse. The structures of international and domestic NGOs, the World Bank and other agencies that set global financial standards, and MNCs

operating in diverse locales must be critiqued to re-privilege subaltern voices. Ganesh (2007) argues that the global CSR discourse, focused on technological certification, sustainability, and Protestant work ethics, is a tool for neo-colonial dominance, impressing upon developing nations the parochial capital-intensive modernization paradigm of development. Moreover, while NGOs are often feted as “objective” partners in CSR, with the best interests of subaltern communities in mind, their role in perpetuating “civil society” frameworks and “dialogue” must be interrogated, since so much of their funding depends on corporate and State funds (Dutta-Bergman 2005). Stohl et al.’s (2009) call for a “third generation” of corporate codes of ethics thus focuses on communal (not just individual) rights, dismantling rigid national/organizational boundaries, and emphasizes social interconnections the world over.

Extending this line of thinking, CCA would examine CSR in multiple inter-connected locations and suggest possibilities for stakeholder organizing across these contexts. It would probe the advantages and disadvantages, merits and demerits, credentials, and backgrounds offered by certification of CSR standards by domestic and international entities, to ensure that these awards were legitimate and duly earned. While extant research has focused on issues pertaining directly to MNC interests (e.g., CSR standards in global supply chains; Pedersen and Anderson 2006), alternative viewpoints are called for. For instance, researchers should examine the ability of global suppliers (usually, but not always, emerging-economy firms) to meet the standards mandated by powerful MNCs and international NGOs (often in concert with the World Bank), the overlap and disjunctures of mainstream global CSR discourse vis-à-vis local cultural influences, and a close analysis of the availability/suitability of local grassroots measures (rather than global “best practices”). A CCA lens must consider how global/local flows implicate far-flung rural and urban communities together, how corporations use discourses of emerging economy nation-building to further neoliberal agendas (e.g., the Chevron ad seen earlier), and how subaltern stakeholders may organize (sometimes, across vast distances) using both traditional and digital technologies to voice their concerns—in some cases, going against their elected State representatives (Mitra in press; Dutta 2011).

#### Agency (–Culture–Structure)

The CCA takes a fundamentally agentic stance in its communicative negotiation of culture and structure: social actors voice their concerns, otherwise marginalized by corporate and State strategy, through discursive openings that produce/provoke cultural–structural change. For Dutta (2011), “agency is explained as the capacity of human

beings to engage with structures that encompass their lives, to make meanings through this engagement, and at the same time, creating discursive openings to transform these structures” (p. 13). It is agency then that forms, reifies, and appropriates culture and structure. In my exposition of subaltern agency in CSR here, I focus on three main areas: subaltern reframing of institutional responsibility, engagement with alternative modes of agency, and deconstructive vigilance.

First, a CCA perspective to CSR would *actively explore grassroots negotiations of institutional responsibility*, as in the community re-framing of Gandhian trusteeship, *sarvodaya*, *swadeshi* and *ahimsa*, noted earlier, to resist the neoliberal agenda of profit-market primacy (Dutta-Bergman 2005). Actively stressing the organic embeddedness of corporations with subaltern communities of interest provides a way of turning the cultural norm atop its head and recognizing subaltern voices (Mitra in press; Pal and Dutta 2008). Rather than static/fixed interest groups, stakeholders are agentic and formed on the basis of issues that evolve in urgency and shape over time, necessitating the use of different stakeholder responses and tools in turn (Freeman et al. 2007). Although mainstream CSR discourse grants agency mainly to corporations, so that stakeholders must be recognized by the firm or neoliberal State apparatus to be legitimate (Mitra in press; Kallio 2007), the CCA framework sees legitimacy grounded in stakeholders’ *self-concepts*. They do not require external certification to have an interest or be effective in their protest; rather, their very (socially embedded) existence constitutes and *arms* communities of interest. For instance, in the case of the Tata Motors protests, although dissidents were initially not recognized as legitimate stakeholders by either the firm or the State, they were eventually heard because of their grassroots organizing and networking with like-minded groups (Mitra in press).

Second, *alternative forms and modes of agency* need to be recognized, rather than those confined to dominant understandings of civil society or the public sphere (Dutta-Bergman 2005; Scott 1985). To take an extreme example, in Iyer’s (2008) essay on farmer suicides in India, while he treats the suicides as the natural outcome for a people with no agency or autonomy left, a CCA perspective would recognize it as a crucial act of communal defiance. That is, the suicides may be re-framed as an individual cry to form a collective protest—as indeed, the spate of suicides has arguably succeeded in widespread media coverage and public debate (both domestic and international) on the Indian State’s agriculture policies and the responsibilities of involved companies (e.g., see Indian Express 2011). In her landmark essay, titled “Can the subaltern speak?”, Spivak (1988) argued that the subaltern subject might in fact embrace death as a way of articulating protest, seeking

to be heard when she has few tools available in a neoliberal world-system where the odds are so completely stacked against her.

The CCA scholars should also be attuned to how such alternative forms of agency might re-frame global discourses, like sustainability. Although the “sustainable development” concept is traditionally seen as “development that meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland 1987), arguably centering ecological conservation not social embeddedness and is in line with the modernization paradigm of development (Ganesh 2007; Peterson 1997), it may be usefully re-framed by subaltern communities. One way of doing this is via Gandhian *ahimsa*, noted earlier; but the Dongria-Kondh protests also extended “sustainability” to the community’s right of self-determination. The evocative international campaign that allies of the Dongria-Kondh unleashed via the Internet and other stakeholder networks emphasized the tribals’ right to live on their own terms, keeping their spiritual traditions and forest-based livelihood intact, so that future generations could thrive, free from corporate and State authoritarianism (Dutta 2011; PTI 2010).

Finally, the CCA framework of CSR proposed is *constantly critical, though not inherently antagonistic* toward organizational interests. Subaltern communities of interest and CCA scholars/activists must adopt “deconstructive vigilance” (Dutta 2009) and “critical watchdog roles” (Ganesh 2007) to guard against flagrant dismissals of the law and gross irresponsibility by corporate agents. Spivak (1988) notes astutely that even as the subaltern strives to be heard, her voice is always appropriated in some way by the storytellers who narrate it. That is, even as we attempt to represent subaltern subjectivity, erasure occurs simultaneously: powerful institutions and actors provide the appearance of dialogue but with little meaningful exchange (Dutta 2009; Munshi and Kurian 2005). Thus, although the Dongria-Kondh successfully ousted Vedanta, credit for the expulsion was claimed by the Indian State (Rahman 2010), despite reports of its involvement in human rights violations against the tribals (PTI 2010). Reiterating State-primacy and denying subaltern agency, the Indian Environment Minister remarked, “There’s no emotion, no politics, no prejudice... I have taken this decision purely on a legal approach – laws are being violated” (as quoted in Rahman 2010).

## Conclusion

The nature of hegemony is that it occurs by consent, rather than exercising the proverbial heavy hand of power. It is through the strategic and artistic manipulations of

discourse in everyday life that hegemonic interests reify their dominance and marginalize alternative views and subaltern paradigms (Gramsci 2001; Spivak 1987). Accordingly, corporations tend to use their promises of economic advantages, social responsibilities, and individual empowerment to assert a colonization of the life-world (Mitra 2010, in press; Dirlik 1997; Ganesh 2007). Critical scholars argue that CSR acts as a prominent tool in this process of corporate colonization, by “greenwashing” the socially undesirable consequences of the neoliberal agenda, such as growing inequities, structural rigidities, State control and mass consumerism (Dutta 2011, in press; Kallio 2007; Munshi and Kurian 2005). Yet, there also exist examples that show companies *can* indeed “make a difference,” as the ad for Chevron runs, “create jobs, keep people healthy, and improve schools... and our communities” if there is an honest engagement with subaltern communities of interest (e.g., Peinado-Vara 2006; Thiagarajan 2010).

In this essay, I have reviewed extant literature on CSR in India to reveal a vast gap between corporate rhetoric and social reality, however. Drawing on the CCA (Dutta 2008, 2009, 2011), I have critically deconstructed mainstream CSR discourse, showing how the neoliberal agenda of profit-market primacy lies at its core, behind a facade of nation-building. While the avowed aim of Indian CSR is community and national uplift, what persists is the drive to further profits, tap new markets, and reduce expenditure (if necessary, at social and environmental cost). Although some may call this a cynical reading, the CCA-based CSR framework I outline suggests ways to correct this situation in socially just ways by allowing subaltern stakeholders to re-frame and re-claim CSR discourse. Culture, structure, and agency operate dialectically to challenge and appropriate mainstream CSR discourse, whereby subaltern communities of interest may resist corporate colonization. This article thus seeks to re-open the politics of CSR as a crucial area of debate and research, and urges for its continued openness to avoid the erasure of valuable alternative perspectives. From the specific examples cited in this article (i.e., CSR by and resistance against Tata Motors, Vedanta, Monsanto, Union Carbide, and the National Thermal Power Corporation, among others), it should be apparent that I regard CSR in the broadest sense. That is, I take CSR to be the *responsible relations, communicatively formed, and between firms and societies*, rather than just *ad hoc* or even particularly designed/defined ventures and programs. Far from being exhaustive, the CCA perspective offered here is meant to draw further critiques and considerations of these relations from across the research spectrum—critical, post-positivist, strategic, postcolonial, and so on.

By way of concluding this essay, I offer some directions for future CSR research, not necessarily restricted to

developing and emerging nation contexts. First, the CCA’s contextualized consideration of culture, such that it is both embedded in everyday structures of organizational practice and State policy, and actively practiced by individuals and groups, suggests that scholars should connect the micro and macro realms of CSR vis-à-vis culture. Second, this essay calls for a broader lens to CSR, beyond what companies and NGOs say and do, to the lived experience of communities impacted by CSR efforts, and how they may “speak back” to dominant actors. Third, researchers might consider adopting “an activist stance” (Dutta 2009) that cautions against taking corporate or NGO discourse at face value and deconstructing their underlying ideologies, especially the benefits accruing to key corporate and State actors. Postcolonial and feminist scholars (e.g., Spivak 1987; Tuhiwai Smith 1999) have demonstrated at length that this is no less rigorous than “objective” science (which in fact is rife with unvoiced internal biases), but enhances the research at hand via core humanist principles of reflexivity, care and empathy. Finally, alternative logics of organizing and resisting that emanate from the subaltern should be carefully attended (e.g., Scott 1985), to allow a re-construction of CSR practice and norms in ways that do not trample over indigenous people’s rights and liberties. My goal here is not to craft a taxonomy of strategies and tactics for communities, but to highlight alternative interpretations that may radically alter our interpretations of the cultural, structural, and agentic in business–society relations.

## Appendix 1

Transcript of Chevron Advertisement, “We Agree ... Community”

- |                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| Student:          | Oil companies have changed my country.  |
| Chevron Employee: | Oil companies can make a difference.  |
| Background:       | Oil companies should support their communities.   |
| Student:          | We have a chance to rebuild the economy...  |
| Chevron Employee: | Create jobs, keep people healthy, and improve schools.  |
| Student:          | ... and our communities.  |
| Chevron Employee: | In Angola, Chevron helped train engineers, teachers and farmers; launched health programs. It’s not just good business... |
| Student:          | I’m hopeful about my country’s future.  |

Chevron Employee: It's my country's future...  
Background We agree.

(Source: <http://www.chevron.com/media/weagree/community/weagreecommunitytv.pdf>. The advertorial clip can be viewed at <http://www.chevron.com/about/advertising/?gclid=CPyhtMXSo6YCFUmo4AodTV2kog>).

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