

EAR TO THE
GROUND

CSR will soon become a non-tariff barrier
investors and buyers

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Business of charity

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The business world seems to be suddenly consumed with goodness. Every company wants to talk about the nice things it is doing for slum children, village girls, weavers and farmers. Coke, Pepsi, ITC, Tatas, Reliance, all have a list of goodies for the community. Little drops of joy as some would call it.

The industry calls it Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), while the cynical social action groups call it Qo-option of Social Resistance.

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) is having a summit on CSR this week, while the CSR units of other industry bodies, like Ficci and Assocham, are suddenly active again and meetings on healthcare, education and climate change are being planned.

Retail chains, which were at the receiving end of mob fury till the other day, have

found in CSR a tool to woo their enemies. Street vendors, physically handicapped, senior citizens, dropouts, all are welcome to work with them.

If you smell trouble, you can also run a health van. The gentle dabs of a dentist on the gums of angry villagers is a sure way to make them consider selling a bit of their farmlands to the company.

The beleaguered business community nursing its wounds from Singuf, Orissa and the numerous SEZ and big retail riot spots admits that CSR is no longer charity. It is a business strategy, as the person heading the CSR wing of CII, Shefali Chaturvedi, puts it. She is only echoing ITC Chairman Y C Deveshwar who says that it is the way to do business. ITC for its part has made CSR into a fine art by revolving its business around it. E-choupals are aimed at empowering farmers as much as at its business of procur-

ing food grains and potatoes for its products.

Reliance is following suit through its farmer advisory cells coming up in villages, assisting its fledgling jathropha plantation and dairy procurement projects.

According to CII, the urgency of companies to push their CSR initiatives is driven by the fact that CSR would soon be a non-tariff barrier and companies would have no option but to do it to get investors and buyers.

IT companies Intel, Dell and Microsoft have been aggressively distributing computers and doing everything to bridge the digital divide, putting to shame even the government's own programmes. "We are creating future customers while doing our CSR," admits John Davies, General Manager, Intel World Ahead Program.

Among Indian IT companies, Satyam, Infosys and Wipro

and companies will have no option but to do it to get

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are now also known for the work they do in the community apart from their offices.

Is it the birth of a kinder, gentler industry? Recently, JSW Steel's Sangeeta Jindal, talking about her foundation's new earth care awards, admitted ignorance about the havoc that

the sponge iron plant of sister concern Jindal Power and Steel was wreaking on villagers in Raigadh in Chhattisgarh. Her award jury includes top names like M S Swaminathan.

Similarly, Coke's foundation is in the hands of people

who would normally be on the other side of the fence. There is a headmistress, a poet, an actor, a social worker, a retired chief justice and a cardiologist in the outfit. Now, 'jholawalas' call it co-option, that is more employment for them to pierce the corporate veil.

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