

Sustainability Reporting in India: A Critical Assessment of Business Responsibility Reports of the Top 100 Companies

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Abstract—This paper aims to investigate environmental, social and governance reporting compliance by the top 100 companies in India. It presents and discusses companies' compliance, the nature of disclosures, and the issues and challenges in reporting. For this purpose, content analysis of the business responsibility reports of these companies published between 2016 and 2019 and an expert survey were conducted. The paper provides insights into sustainability reporting compliance amid the ongoing efforts to develop reporting regulations in India suited to the country's context and, simultaneously, at par with global standards.

Index Terms—sustainability, business responsibility, India, ESG, nonfinancial reporting

I. INTRODUCTION

The Union Government of India launched a new sustainability reporting requirement in May 2021 [1]. The format released by the Securities Exchange Board of India (SEBI), which regulates capital markets in the country, is known as the Business Responsibility and Sustainability Report (BRSR). SEBI has mandated the top 1000 companies, by market capitalisation, listed on the two Indian stock exchanges, i.e. the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) and the National Stock Exchange (NSE), to publish the BRSR starting from 2022-23. In this new format, these companies must report material ESG risks and opportunities, mitigation approaches, sustainability goals and targets, and environmental and social disclosures.

The BRSR is the most recent development in sustainability reporting regulations in India. The first reporting format, known as the business responsibility report (BRR), was launched in 2012, and the top 100 companies were mandated to publish BRR [2]. This mandate was extended to the top 500 companies in 2015 [3]. Before the BRR, the government had launched the corporate social responsibility (CSR) guidelines and the national voluntary guidelines (NVGs) in 2009 and 2011, respectively [4, 5]. The CSR guidelines were the first guidelines urging all kinds of companies in India to conduct business socially and environmentally responsibly. However, no framework or format was provided for disclosing information in this regard. The NVGs, following the CSR guidelines, were a set of nine principles to be incorporated by companies in their business models. These principles are related to customers, employees, the environment, ethics, human rights, etc. To date, these nine principles form the basis of sustainability reporting in India. The most recent BRSR format is also based on principle-wise disclosures. After 2015, in the following years, the government launched the national guidelines for responsible busi-

ness conduct in 2019, along with a revised BRR format [6]. This document was one of the comprehensive regulations on sustainability reporting for Indian companies. The format included material risks, stakeholder engagement, social and environmental disclosures in either essential or leadership categories. Before the BRR format came into the picture in 2012, many top companies in India, including the Mahindra Group, the Tata Group, Maruti Suzuki India Ltd., Ambuja Cements Ltd., ITC Ltd., Reliance Industries Ltd., were preparing sustainability reports using formats like the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and CDP (Carbon Disclosure Project) etc. The GRI standards are the most widely used for sustainability reporting [8]. The oldest report in the GRI database is the Tata Motors 2008 sustainability report [9].

All these developments show that the regulations for sustainability reporting in India evolved in the last decade. With every revision, the format became comprehensive. The number of disclosures increased in line with global frameworks like the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) Standards. The accompanying guidance also became extensive [7]. Materiality analysis and stakeholder engagement are essential parts of the new format. The regulation is based on extensive stakeholder deliberations [1], and the number of companies covered under the mandate has increased from 100 to 1000 in ten years. A cross-country study [10] showed that mandatory sustainability regulations improve the quality and quantity of disclosures and firm value.

While financial gains or firm value can be rational reasons for companies to prepare sustainability reports, the stakeholders' expectations for transparency and accountability from the corporate sector are also increasing. The pressures from institutional investors, government, the community, and civil society organisations are intensifying [11]. As we move towards the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, the regulations are expected to become more stringent and compulsory rather than voluntary.

In the literature, the impact of sustainability on the performance of companies has been explored [12]. But very few studies assess compliance with sustainability regulations in India. One study [13] published in 2017 mapped the disclosures against the NVGs for the top 100 companies. In the same year, a consultancy firm also conducted a survey [14] on the response of the leading companies and reported the trends in BRR to provide insight into making the format mandatory for 500 companies. These studies were restricted to reports published before 2017. Post that period, a critical

assessment of the BRRs published by India's top 100 companies is missing in the literature.

Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to provide insight for future policy-making on sustainability reporting in India. The paper presents a critical review of the BRRs published between 2016 and 2019 of the top 100 (by market capitalisation in India) listed companies in India. It presents and discusses companies' compliance, the nature of disclosures, and the issues and challenges in BR reporting. Data extracted from the BRRs was analysed using descriptive analysis. Further, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts to probe the difficulties companies face in preparing reports.

The remaining paper is divided into the following sections: literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and recommendations. The concluding section discusses limitations and future research directions.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. The Indian Context

The keywords used to study the literature were - "sustainability" OR "ESG" OR "business responsibility" OR "CSR" AND "reporting" on the Web of Science platform. Through manual verification, papers relevant to the study's objectives were divided into the following themes: (a) Sustainability and BR Reporting, (b) CSR reporting, and (c) GRI and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting. A discussion emerging from the review follows.

B. Sustainability and BR Reporting

A recent study was conducted by Adler et al. (2021) [15] on waste disclosure by 30 companies in India. The authors used a waste disclosure index to analyse the data of these companies sourced from sustainability, annual, and BR reports. They reported that almost 85 per cent of companies disclosed limited information. Similarly, Singh et al. (2020) [16] developed a sustainability disclosure index for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) listed on the Bombay Stock exchange. They used content analysis to study the sustainability reporting practices of 29 SMEs. They found that these firms reported environmental and social impacts inadequately and recommended more robust policies and regulations. Some researchers focused only on one dimension of sustainability. For instance, Mathiyazhagan et al. (2020)

[17] prepared a model of the social sustainability practices of automotive manufacturing firms. They found customer management, information sharing, reporting and standardisation, and monitoring methods to be the most influential in driving the social sustainability of these firms.

Most of the work on sustainability reporting was found to be sectoral. Kumar et al. (2018) examined the reports of the top 10 Indian banks [18]. They found that the banks had a long way to go in sustainability reporting, specifically regarding adequacy and transparency. Stakeholder engagement was weak, and quantified data on metrics like remuneration, occupational health and safety, and customer privacy were missing. In another study, Raut et al. (2017) [19] analysed the sustainability reports of six banks. They developed an integrated model combining financial stability, cus-

tomers relationship management, internal business process and an environment-friendly management system. They found that an environment-friendly management system was given the least preference by companies.

Yadav and Sinha (2015) [20] conducted a study on public and private companies. They analysed sustainability reports and found no significant differences between the two types on the economic dimension, but reporting on environmental and social dimensions was quite different. Some authors undertook a cross-country analysis. Mishra et al. (2020) [21] evaluated the annual and sustainability reports of Indian, Chinese and USA companies from five highly polluting industries. They found that larger firms are more likely to report more disclosures than smaller firms.

C. CSR Reporting

The concept of CSR in the literature is different from sustainability. While sustainability combines economic, social and environmental dimensions, CSR usually comprises voluntary, charitable initiatives of the company.

One section of the literature was about the impact of CSR regulation in India, unique to the Indian context. A recent study was conducted by Jumde (2020) [22] on companies' compliance with the regulation in India. She found that the law seemed like a "tick-box exercise" for many companies, and the public sector invested in CSR as the government directed.

Some researchers created measurement models for understanding CSR performance. Debnath et al. (2018) [23] proposed a multi-criteria decision-making model based on five criteria and 17 indicators to measure CSR practices' compliance, accountability, and transparency. Some focused on particular sectors only. Pratihari and Uzma (2018) [24] conducted a content analysis of CSR reports in the banking sector. They found that public sector banks prioritise community-related initiatives while private banks accord customers the highest priority.

Plenty of literature explored the relationship between CSR and the company's financial performance. Although such topics do not fall under the scope of this study directly, these papers helped to understand the measurement of CSR in the literature. Singh and Chakraborty (2021) [25] developed a multidimensional CSR disclosure measuring six dimensions, i.e. employees, customers, investors, community, environment and others. Cherain et al. (2019) [26] identified five parameters from the literature, i.e. education, employee benefits expense, environment, community, customer, products and stock return. Muttakin and Subramaniam (2015) [27] designed a seventeen-item scale to measure CSR; the items were adapted from past literature.

Some researchers carried out analyses to identify CSR determinants. For instance, using panel data set for 2012-14, Jadiyappa et al. (2021) [28] found that firms involved in high energy consumption or accounting manipulation have a higher probability of undertaking voluntary CSR. [29] Bansal et al. (2021) investigated if peer pressure affects CSR. They concluded that peer pressure was a significant determinant of CSR performance; however, the CSR mandate as per the Companies Act 2013 has diminished its significance. Adnan et al. (2018) [30] investigated the impact

of national culture and corporate governance on CSR reporting. They studied 403 reports and websites of companies based in China, Malaysia, India and the United States. They found that CSR reporting is more prevalent in individualistic societies with low power distance. Also, board committees and government ownership have an impact.

D. GRI and ESG Reporting

An emerging stream of research focused on ESG reporting. Chauhan and Sharma et al. (2020) [31] analysed the ESG performance of Indian companies listed on the Bombay Stock Exchange between 2013 and 2016 by analysing their annual and sustainability reports. They found that ESG disclosures had a significant positive effect on these companies' financial and market performance. Also, Chauhan and Kumar (2019) [32] investigated the impact of ESG reporting on foreign investments of Indian firms and found that foreign investors preferred firms that disclosed ESG information. Bhattacharya and Sharma (2019) [33] investigated the impact of ESG scores on credit ratings for a sample of 122 firms. The ESG scores and credit ratings were sourced from Bloomberg. They found the overall ESG performance and individual components to be significant predictors of creditworthiness. However, unlike ESG reporting, extensive literature was based on GRI Reporting.

Kumar and Das (2018) [34] evaluated GRI reports of BRIC nations. India scored the highest on all three dimensions - economic, environmental and social; Russia scored the least. IT industry in India was the most compliant. In another study in 2021 [35], they analysed reports of 200 firms in developed and emerging economies using text mining. They found that the adoption of GRI reporting expanded rapidly in the second half of the last decade compared to the first half. Canada was the best in disclosures, while India and China ranked the least. Another cross-country comparison was by Bae et al. (2018) [36] among India, Pakistan and Bangladesh firms. The authors found that corporate governance had a strong influence in reducing marketing asymmetry among the stakeholders. Also, Islam and Thomson (2016) [37] carried out research for the Asia-Pacific region by considering the six largest banks from each of the four countries, namely - Australia, Japan, China and India, from 2005-to 2012. They found that banks participating in the GRI are more responsive to disclosing more information; Australian banks emerged as the leaders.

Rodríguez et al. (2018) [38] conducted a study on a sample of 281 firms to determine if corporate governance defines sustainability reporting practices. They found that institutional mechanisms affect the reporting practices to the greatest extent of the institutional, group and firm-level mechanisms. Narula et al. (2021) [39] collected data from 132 industry leaders and policymakers to understand the importance of Industry 4.0 (14.0) technologies in adopting the GRI framework. It was found that 85% of environmental, 65% of economic, and 50% of societal standards were influenced by 14.0. Also, the social aspect was the most overlooked in the manufacturing industry.

E. The Global Context

Apart from the Indian context, studies conducted across the globe were also reviewed. This section presents an over-

view of the literature in the global context. Mura et al. (2018) [40] conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on sustainability measurement. They divided the literature into 12 subfields. Some have been expanding over the years, and others faded out. The three main problems in sustainability measurement identified by the authors are: (a) duplication of the effort by researchers, (b) poor framing of problem, and (c) proposed incomplete solutions. Fifka (2011) [41] carried out a comprehensive review of 186 studies conducted in different geographies. The author discussed that research on sustainability reporting originated in the Anglo-Saxon and Western European contexts in the 1970s. Still, it picked up pace in the emerging and developing economies in the 1990s. The researchers adopted different approaches, but differences in the impact of determining factors were not strong.

Most reviews and studies on sustainability reporting globally have been sector-based because the standards, conditions and challenges vary from sector to sector. Adres (2019) [42] surveyed 261 owners-managers of SMEs to understand their sustainability and good governance practices. Mariadoss et al. (2011) [43] used a case method to study the marketing practices and strategies for promoting sustainable consumption in business-to-business firms.

A significant section of the literature studied either determinants of sustainability reporting [44,45,46] (Cubilla-Montilla et al., 2019; Gerwanski et al., 2019; Farooq et al., 2021) or the relationship of reporting with corporate performance – financial as well as market-based [47,48,49] (Klassen and McLaughlin, 1996; Clarkson et al., 2008; Akisik and Gal, 2017). However, Milne and Gray (2013) [50] discussed that the triple bottom-line approach and GRI reporting were insufficient to sustain the environment; such frameworks and practices created business-as-usual scenarios.

F. Limitations of the Existing Literature

The literature was skewed and mainly emerged from the Western context, where sustainability reporting originated, and the laws progressed. The bodies proposing sustainability reporting standards are also western. Thus, research on Indian companies gives a contextual perspective. Most literature in the Indian context has either been review-based or sectoral. The mandate for business responsibility reporting in India was announced in 2012, and the regulations have been evolving. But very few studies, like Rana, 2017 [13], have studied BR reports. A critical assessment of BR reporting of the top companies in India and insight into the associated issues and challenges are missing in the literature. This study seeks to fill this gap.

III. METHOD

The study used secondary data. BRRs of three financial years, i.e. 2016-17, 2017-18, and 2018-19 for the top 100 companies in India were analysed. Three accounting periods were taken into account for inter/intra-company comparisons. The period between 2016 and 2019 is appropriate to study compliance as the format did not change during this time. The year 2019 was a turning point when significant revisions were made to the BRR format.

The BRRs were either published separately or as integrated or annual reports on the companies websites. The top 100 companies listed on the national stock exchange were chosen in the final sample based on their market capitalisation. The impact intensity of these large-scale global organisations on the socio-environmental context is very high. The data was manually collated and analysed using descriptive statistics. To determine the reasons for non-compliance and understand the issues and challenges for companies, an expert survey was conducted through semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of ten experts (Table 1).

TABLE 1 PROFILE OF INTERVIEWEES

| SN | Designation | Area/Sector | Experience (Yrs) | Gender | Highest Qualification |
|----|------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|--------|-----------------------|
| 1 | Assistant Manager | Consultancy | 6 | Female | MBA |
| 2 | Associate Director | Consultancy | 12 | Male | MBA |
| 3 | Manager | Export/Import | 10 | Male | MBA |
| 4 | Sustainability Manager | Beverages | 10 | Male | MBA |
| 5 | Senior Manager | Energy | 12 | Male | MBA |
| 6 | CEO | Consultancy | 26 | Male | MSc |
| 7 | Deputy Manager | Construction and Buildings | 8 | Male | MSc |
| 8 | CEO | Consultancy | 25 | Male | Msc |
| 9 | Senior Manager | FMCG | 16 | Female | PG (PR) |
| 10 | Senior Consultant | Consultancy | 8 | Female | MBA |

The interviews were conducted online through Google Meet and recorded. The selected respondents were working in the sustainability/ESG/CSR reporting domain either in a consultancy firm or in a department/division in a public or private sector company responsible for such reporting. The designations and names of the departments/divisions varied, including CSR, corporate communications, public relations, sustainability, and human resource management. Interview data were coded using the web version of Atlas.ti according to thematic analysis adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2006 (Table 2). Descriptive analysis of the reports and themes emerging from the expert interviews follows.

TABLE 2: SIX-STEP METHOD FOR THEMATIC ANALYSIS

| | |
|--------|----------------------------|
| Step 1 | Familiarisation with Data |
| Step 2 | Initial Coding |
| Step 3 | Generation of Themes |
| Step 4 | Reviewing Themes |
| Step 5 | Defining and Naming Themes |
| Step 6 | Writing the Analysis |

Source: Braun and Clarke, 2006

IV. RESULTS

This study had two objectives. One, to ascertain the nature of compliance, quality and quantity of disclosures by the companies in the BRRs between 2016 and 2019 and two, to identify critical issues and challenges emerging in preparing BRRs. This section presents the results in line with the two objectives.

A. Sample Description

The top 100 companies by market capitalisation, listed on the BSE comprised the sample. So, all the companies were large-cap. Almost 50 per cent of the companies across the select three financial years had a paid-up capital of up to 500 crores. Few companies, i.e. 13, 19 and 24 per cent respectively, had a paid-up capital of more than 1000 crores in the three years. Almost 20 per cent of the companies made a profit of up to 1000 crores, and 25, 27, and 34 companies made a profit of more than 1000 crores during the three years (Table 3).

Of the 100 companies, most of the companies were in Maharashtra and New Delhi, followed by a few in Gujarat, Karnataka and West Bengal (Table 4). Thus, majority of the companies were either in southwest or north India.

Most of the companies were required to spend 2 per cent of the last three years' average annual net profit on CSR activities as per Section 135 of the Companies Act, 2013. These companies disclosed that they spent either 1-2% or more than 2% of the profits as per CSR regulation (Table 5). Education and healthcare were the top two CSR activities. Women empowerment followed at the third position for 2016-17 and 2018-19, respectively, while environmental sustainability was the third most reported activity in 2017-18. Upon mapping these CSR activities with the sustainable development goals, most CSR activities lead towards Goals 3, 4, and 5 in all the years. These include good health and well being, quality education and gender equality (Table 6).

TABLE 3: PROFIT AFTER TAXES (PAT) AND PAID-UP CAPITAL

| Paid-up capital * | Profit-After Tax* | Number of Companies | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------|---------|
| | | 2016-17 | 2017-18 | 2018-19 |
| 0- 500 | Upto 1000cr | 27 | 25 | 22 |
| | More than 1000 cr | 25 | 27 | 34 |
| 500-1000 | Upto 1000cr | 0 | 4 | 2 |
| | More than 1000 cr | 6 | 8 | 6 |
| >1000 | Upto 1000cr | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| | More than 1000 cr | 11 | 16 | 19 |

*All numbers are in crores

TABLE 4: GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF COMPANIES

| State | No of Companies | | |
|----------------|-----------------|---------|---------|
| | 2016-17 | 2017-18 | 2018-19 |
| Maharashtra | 33 | 37 | 37 |
| New Delhi | 13 | 17 | 17 |
| Gujarat | 8 | 10 | 11 |
| Karnataka | 5 | 5 | 6 |
| West Bengal | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| Rajasthan | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Tamil Nadu | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Telangana | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Andhra Pradesh | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Haryana | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Hyderabad | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Kerala | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Madhya Pradesh | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Punjab | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Assam | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Chennai | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Haryana | 0 | 0 | 1 |

TABLE 5: CSR EXPENDITURE

| CSR Expenditure (%) | Number of Companies | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------|---------|
| | 2016-17 | 2017-18 | 2018-19 |
| Less than 1% | 7 | 10 | 5 |
| 1% - 2% | 30 | 32 | 38 |
| More than 2 % | 31 | 36 | 40 |

TABLE 6:

YEAR-WISE TOP THREE CSR ACTIVITIES AND THEIR MAPPING WITH THE SDGs

| Year | Top Three CSR Activities | | | SDGs |
|-------|--------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| 16-17 | Education | Health care | Women empowerment | 3,4, 5,10 |
| 17-18 | Education | Health care | Environment and sustainability | 3,4,6,7, 11,15,13,14 |
| 18-19 | Education | Health care | Women Empowerment | 3,4,5,10 |

B. Governance

As far as governance is concerned, the top five designations of the BR heads reported by companies were company secretary, whole-time director, chief financial officer, managing director and chief sustainability officer (Table 7). These were more or less consistent across the years. Other designations included associate vice-president, director-operations, director-legal and regulatory, head-corporate services, head-environment, health and safety, corporate head-safety, health, environment and sustainability, head corporate infrastructure & administrative services, head- BR and CSR, head- human resources, head- corporate communications, and independent director.

TABLE 7: DESIGNATION OF BR HEAD

| Designation of BR Heads | No of Companies | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|-------|-------|
| | 16-17 | 17-18 | 18-19 |
| Company Secretary | 6 | 8 | 9 |
| Whole-Time Director | 4 | 6 | 8 |
| Chief Financial Officer | 3 | 6 | 4 |
| Managing Director | 3 | 14 | 14 |
| Chief Sustainability Officer | 2 | 1 | 1 |

For the three years, the majority of the companies, i.e. 30, 40, and 45, held BR meeting once in a year, i.e. annually (see Table 8). Most of the other companies held meetings once in 3-6 months. At least one company, each year, reported monthly meetings for the BRR. Only one company in 2016-17 reported weekly meetings. At least 16 companies each year did not disclose this data.

TABLE 8: FREQUENCY OF BR MEETING

| Frequency | Number of companies | | |
|--------------------|---------------------|-------|-------|
| | 16-17 | 17-18 | 18-19 |
| Annually | 30 | 40 | 45 |
| Bi- annually | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 3-6 months | 13 | 19 | 22 |
| Within 3 months | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Monthly | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Weekly | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Data not available | 23 | 21 | 16 |

C. Compliance and Principle-wise Disclosures

TABLE 9: DEGREE OF COMPLIANCE

| Measure | Number of Companies | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|-------|-------|
| | 16-17 | 17-18 | 18-19 |
| Prepared a BRR report | 84 | 93 | 93 |
| Used the prescribed BRR format | 84 | 93 | 93 |
| Prepared a Sustainability Report | 37 | 41 | 40 |

Despite the compulsion, few companies did not prepare BRR (Table 9). BRR was mandated for the top 100 companies way back in 2012. Even if we consider the period required for a company to prepare and install mechanisms and systems to collect and report BR data, a few big companies were still not been able to deliver the reporting and transparency required even five years after the regulation; the reasons need exploration. The companies reported principles as per the prescribed NVGs and the BRR format. Almost 60 per cent of companies made all the nine principle-wise disclosures (Table 10).

The maximum number of companies disclosed ethics, transparency, and accountability policies in 2018-19. The least reported disclosure was the responsible engagement in public and regulatory policy across three years.

TABLE 10: PRINCIPLE-WISE DISCLOSURES(Y)

| | Principle | Number of Companies | | |
|---|--|---------------------|-------|-------|
| | | 16-17 | 17-18 | 18-19 |
| 1 | Ethics, Transparency and Accountability | 77 | 88 | 87 |
| 2 | Safe and sustainable goods and services | 72 | 83 | 83 |
| 3 | Employees Well-Being | 77 | 88 | 87 |
| 4 | Respect towards all stakeholders, especially the vulnerable/marginalised | 75 | 86 | 85 |
| 5 | Human rights | 73 | 84 | 83 |
| 6 | Respect and efforts to restore the environment | 75 | 83 | 82 |
| 7 | Responsible engagement in public and regulatory policy | 51 | 61 | 59 |
| 8 | Inclusive growth and equitable development | 76 | 87 | 86 |
| 9 | Value to the customers and consumers in a responsible manner | 73 | 81 | 83 |

TABLE 11: TOP REASONS FOR NON-DISCLOSURE

| Year | Top Three Reasons | | |
|-------|--|---|---|
| | | | |
| 16-17 | Not substantially relevant to the nature of its business | Yet to formulate public policy advocacy | Need for formal policy not felt |
| 17-18 | Not substantially relevant to the nature of its business | Company has other forums | Yet to be formulated |
| 18-19 | Company engages with industry associations and expert agencies | No specific policy for this principle | Not at a stage or in a position to formulate and implement policies on specified principles |

As far as the reasons for non-disclosures related to the principles are concerned, the top reasons were (a) the principle was not of substantial interest to the nature of the business and (b) the company engaged with industry associations and expert agencies for the fulfilment of requirements under the principle. Other reasons included that the company was still not at a stage to implement the concerning principle or no specified policy related to that principle (Table 11).

D. Disclosures

The disclosures in the BRR were in five categories – social, environmental, community development and ethics, supply chain and stakeholder engagement.

TABLE 12A: SOCIAL DISCLOSURES – 1

| SN | Measure | Number of Companies | | |
|----|---|---------------------|-------|-------|
| | | 16-17 | 17-18 | 18-19 |
| 1 | Disclosed total number of permanent employees | 75 | 85 | 83 |
| 2 | Disclosed number of permanent women employees | 76 | 85 | 83 |
| 3 | Disclosed number of permanent employees with disabilities | 67 | 72 | 73 |
| 4 | Existence of an employee association that is recognised by management | 51 | 49 | 48 |
| 5 | Disclosed number of complaints relating to child labour, forced labour, involuntary labour, sexual harassment | 74 | 82 | 80 |
| 6 | Disclosed percentage of mentioned employees given safety & skill up-gradation training in the last year | 52 | 51 | 67 |
| 7 | Disclosed total number of employees hired on temporary/contractual/casual basis | 71 | 80 | 79 |

There was an increase in companies reporting social disclosures yearly (Table 12A, 12B). The maximum increase was in companies disclosing information about employees given safety and skill up-gradation training. Almost 80 companies reported the number of permanent employees, including women, in 2018-19. A total of 73 companies disclosed the number of permanent employees with disabilities. But some companies admitted to having zero permanent women employees. The minimum number of permanent employees was 18 in 2016-17 and 380 in 2018-19, showing that some companies have very few permanent employees. Some companies also disclosed '0' permanent employees with disabilities in all three years. However, on the contrary, a select few did not have any contractual employees.

Almost 70 per cent of companies disclosed information about strategies and initiatives to address global environmental issues like climate change and global warming. There was an increase of 8 per cent in this number from 2016-17 to 2018-19. However, very few companies disclosed information about any projects related to clean development – only around 20% for all three years (Table 13A, 13B).

TABLE 12B: SOCIAL DISCLOSURES – 1

| SN | Measure | 16-17 | | 17-18 | | 18-19 | |
|----|---|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|--------|
| | | Min | Max | Min | Max | Min | Max |
| 1 | Permanent Employees | 18 | 387223 | 25 | 394998 | 379 | 424285 |
| 2 | Permanent Women Employees | 0 | 134542 | 0 | 139487 | 0 | 152114 |
| 3 | Permanent Women Employees as % Total Employees | 0 | 43.75 | 0 | 43.38 | 0 | 43.54 |
| 4 | Permanent Employees with Disabilities | 0 | 1003 | 0 | 1775 | 0 | 1744 |
| 5 | Permanent Employees with Disabilities as % of Total Employees | 0 | 2.81 | 0 | 2.81 | 0 | 3.07 |
| 6 | Number of complaints relating to child labour, forced labour, involuntary labour, sexual harassment | 0 | 1470 | 0 | 1995 | 0 | 87 |
| 7 | Percentage of mentioned employees given safety & skill up-gradation training in the last year | 15 | 100 | 22.55 | 100 | 33.06 | 100 |
| 8 | Total number of employees hired on temporary/contractual/casual basis | 0 | 282311 | 0 | 264589 | 0 | 293662 |

The top products/services incorporating environmental concerns were online, recycling, and energy-efficient products. For three years, the top projects relate to alternative fuels, emission reduction, and biogas production. The maximum number of pending show cause notices from the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) was 6 in 16–17 and 17–18.

TABLE 13A: ENVIRONMENTAL DISCLOSURES – 1

| SN | Measure | Number of Companies | | |
|----|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| | | 16-17 | 17-18 | 18-19 |
| 1 | Top product or service incorporated social or environmental concerns, risks and/or opportunities | Online services | recycling | Energy efficient products |
| 2 | Maximum number of show cause/ legal notices received from CPCB/SPCB which are pending | 6 | 6 | 3 |
| 3 | Minimum number of show cause/ legal notices received from CPCB/SPCB which are pending | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 4 | Top strategies to address environmental issues | Only Y/N | Only Y/N | Only Y/N |
| 5 | Top Projects to address environmental issues | Use of alternative fuel (biomass) | Emission reduction | Produce biogas |

TABLE 13B: ENVIRONMENTAL DISCLOSURES – 2

| SN | Measure | Number of Companies | | |
|----|--|---------------------|-------|-------|
| | | 16-17 | 17-18 | 18-19 |
| 1 | Has strategies/ initiatives to address global environmental issues such as climate change, global warming, etc | 73 | 78 | 75 |
| 2 | Identifies and assesses potential environmental risks | 70 | 73 | 69 |
| 3 | Has Project related to Clean Development Mechanism | 22 | 24 | 24 |
| 4 | Has undertaken other initiatives on –clean technology, energy efficiency, renewable energy, etc. | 67 | 72 | 74 |
| 5 | Reports Emissions/Waste generated by the company within the permissible limits given by CPCB/SPCB | 73 | 76 | 68 |
| 6 | Discloses number of show cause/ legal notices received from CPCB/SPCB which are pending | 66 | 70 | 71 |
| 7 | Has a mechanism to recycle products and waste | 61 | 66 | 69 |

The number of companies disclosing information about policies for human rights across the supply chain increased from a mere 34 in 2016-17 to 55 in 2018-19. The numbers were almost similar for environmental protection policies. There was a gradual increase in companies reporting sustainable supply chain disclosures. However, the most significant number was any trade or association membership revelation. Overall, the numbers were less as compared to other categories of disclosures.

TABLE 14A: DISCLOSURES ABOUT COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND ETHICS – 1

| SN | Measure | Number of Companies | | |
|----|--|---------------------|-------|-------|
| | | 16-17 | 17-18 | 18-19 |
| 1 | Disclosed direct contribution to community development projects | 65 | 65 | 66 |
| 2 | Taken steps to ensure that this community development initiative is successfully adopted by the community | 64 | 72 | 73 |
| 3 | Disclosed percentage of customer complaints/consumer cases are pending as on the end of financial year | 62 | 79 | 87 |
| 4 | Displays product information on the product label, over and above what is mandated as per local laws | 48 | 49 | 54 |
| 5 | Disclosed any case filed by any stakeholder against the company regarding unfair trade practices, irresponsible advertising and/or anti-competitive behaviour during the last five years and pending as on end of financial year | 66 | 70 | 74 |
| 6 | Conducted any consumer survey/consumer satisfaction trends | 58 | 69 | 70 |
| 7 | Specified programmes/initiatives/projects in pursuit of the policy related to Principle 8 | 71 | 79 | 77 |

TABLE 14B: DISCLOSURES ABOUT COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND ETHICS – 2

| SN | Measure | Number of Companies | | |
|----|--|---------------------|-----------|------------|
| | | 16-17 | 17-18 | 18-19 |
| 1 | Maximum direct contribution to community development projects | 659 CRORE | 745 CRORE | 849 CRORE |
| 2 | Minimum direct contribution to community development projects | 1.67 CRORE | 1.9 CRORE | 6.05 CRORE |
| 3 | Maximum percentage of customer complaints/consumer cases are pending as on the end of financial year | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 4 | Minimum percentage of customer complaints/consumer cases are pending as on the end of financial year | 46.47% | 22% | 89% |

TABLE 15:

DISCLOSURES ABOUT STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACT ASSESSMENT

| SN | Measure | Number of Companies | | |
|----|--|---------------------|---------|---------|
| | | 16-17 | 17-18 | 18-19 |
| 1 | Conducted any impact assessment | 53 | 62 | 69 |
| 2 | Internal Assessment (in-house team/own foundation etc.) | USE MIX | USE MIX | USE MIX |
| 3 | External Assessment (NGO/ Government / any other etc.) | USE MIX | USE MIX | USE MIX |
| 4 | Mapped internal and external stakeholders | 59 | 69 | 75 |
| 5 | Identified the disadvantaged, vulnerable & marginalised stakeholders | 56 | 65 | 72 |
| 6 | Taken special initiatives to engage with the disadvantaged, vulnerable and marginalised stakeholders | 58 | 67 | 70 |
| 7 | Disclosed stakeholder complaints have been received in the past financial year | 67 | 70 | 73 |
| 8 | Disclosed percent complaints satisfactorily resolved by the management | 67 | 70 | 73 |
| 9 | Resolved 100% complaints | 26 | 25 | 31 |
| 10 | Resolved less than 50% complaints | 3 | 5 | 3 |

Almost 70 per cent of companies reported that they had conducted some impact assessment in 2018-19; most used a combination of internal and external evaluations. Total 75 companies disclosed having mapped internal and external stakeholders. This number increased from 59 in 2016-17. As far as stakeholder complaints are concerned, 73 companies reported such complaints in 2018-19. Of these, only 31 mentioned that they have been able to resolve 100 per cent of complaints. Only three companies disclosed that they had resolved less than 50 per cent (see Table 15).

V. DISCUSSION

A. Key Observations

- The reports of some companies in the top 100 list are not available, despite the compulsion to pub-

- lish. The number of such companies decreased every year; still some BRRs were unavailable.
- Almost 30 companies spent more than 2 percent or more on socially responsible activities in terms of CSR. But the maximum budgets were allocated to health and education. Consequently, the impact is restricted to a few SDGs.
 - As explained in global frameworks like the GRI, the foundation of sustainability reporting is stakeholder engagement. Only 75 companies mapped their stakeholders in 2018-19. Of these, only 72 focused on identifying the vulnerable, disadvantaged and marginalised stakeholders.
 - Since the NVGs were introduced in 2009, the majority of companies disclosed policies to implement the NVGs. However, the policies varied from company to company and sector to sector, making inter-company and sectoral comparisons very difficult.
 - Governance is the critical enabler for preparing a BR report. The bodies responsible for governance mostly meet annually; hardly any company conducts weekly meetings.
 - The governance for sustainability reporting in these companies is primarily looked after by a director or employees like the company secretary or the chief financial officer. Only a few have hired specialised professionals like the chief sustainability officer.
 - The compulsion to include different categories of disclosures has pressured the companies. This is evident from the increase in the number of companies for each disclosure year after year.
 - However, looking at the top reasons for non-disclosure indicates that BRR is still an obligation for a few companies. There is scepticism about disclosing data on social and environmental impacts. They feel they are not at a stage where sustainability is of relevance or it doesn't align with the nature of their business. Thus, the whole narrative of corporate sustainability is alien to a few of them.
 - There is maximum transparency in the case of social disclosures. These data help provide insights into the status of diversity and inclusion in companies.
 - The numbers in the case of supply chain disclosures are not very promising but indicate a tendency to improve every year.
 - In environmental disclosures, the top priorities are investing in online services, recycling, and energy efficiency. It shows a vast scope here to move beyond the basics.
 - Almost 50 per cent of companies did not conduct any impact assessment in 2016-17. This number remained 31 in 2018-19.
 - The range of contributions to community development was very vast. While one company spent approximately six crores, another spent almost 850 crores.
 - The least number was found in the case of disclosure related to clean development.

- Further, only half of the companies revealed displaying information on product labels, beyond the requirement by law. This number is essential, keeping in view the expected focus on eco-labelling in the future. India launched an eco-labelling scheme in 1991 but failed to generate the desired impact.

B. Challenges (Expert survey coded data)

Based on the thematic analysis of the interviews, the following challenges were identified.

Human resources and expertise: To begin with, the workforce emerged as a significant challenge. Sustainability is an interdisciplinary as well as a transdisciplinary concept. Similar to the discipline of management, which derives its underpinning from various fields, sustainability requires an understanding of diverse areas, including psychology, sociology, environmental science, law and so on. According to the experts, there is a shortage of trained human resources to lead sustainability projects. Limited expertise is available to design strategies to implement sustainability and report such disclosures. In many cases, the tasks are outsourced to consultancy firms which may or may not have ownership.

Business Model: Organisations, not all, continue to consider preparing a BRR as a box-ticking exercise without any strategic planning or long-term orientation to drive business outcomes for social and environmental benefits. One of the primary reasons is that the company leaders do not see the direct alignment of the sustainability concept with the company's business model. As one of the experts expressed, *"Companies are still struggling to find reasons...they say if within the rule of law we operate, why do we need sustainability?"*

Stakeholder Support: Another major challenge was the lack of stakeholder support. While a sustainable organisation focuses on stakeholder wealth maximisation, stakeholders' interests are quite diverse. If each stakeholder is focused on their benefit, the larger purpose of driving business towards sustainable development gets defeated. One of the experts said, *"It is very challenging. Win-win is theory."* Thus, in the trade-off between the benefits and losses of reporting, some companies choose the latter.

Finance: Finance is the backbone of any organisation. Without adequate funds, firms cannot survive. Increasingly, some institutional investors seek ESG compliance; however, many investors still look for fair returns in the short run. In the absence of investors, companies choose to hide disclosures or report vague, ambiguous data.

Leadership: Sustainability can be achieved both through top-down and bottom-up approaches. However, a business organisation cannot work toward sustainability integration without leadership support. There is still a lack of leaders who adopt sustainability at the core of a business organisation. One of the experts cited the case of Danone in 2012 which ousted its climate-champion CEO Immanuel Faber for pursuing a purposeful strategy. Thus, leadership, not only at the CEO level, but at the board level is crucial for building an organisation that takes BR reporting seriously.

Covid-19: Although reports analysed were not of the pandemic years, Covid emerged as a theme as the interviews were completed during the pandemic. According to some

experts, the pandemic was a key challenge for organisations. But it also served as a case in point to align business operations for future goals. The uncertainties brought into light the strengths and weaknesses and gave a jolt to the stability of the organisations. It also brought into light the need to be prepared for the next major crisis i.e. climate change. In this light, it could serve as a motivator for organisations to adopt ESG compliance and prepare comprehensive BRRs because such reports then feed into the business strategy.

TABLE 16: CHALLENGES CODED FROM THE INTERVIEWS

| SN | Themes | Frequency | Quotes |
|----|-------------------------------|-----------|--|
| 1 | Business Model | 23 | “doesn’t align with business model” “an external exercise” “why and how to do” “struggling for evidence” |
| 2 | Human resources and Expertise | 18 | “employees are burdened” “lack of trained workforce” “everyone is an expert” “where to find the workforce” “need for capacity building” |
| 3 | Stakeholder Support | 22 | “consumers want the best at the least price” “everyone is competing; it is a mad game” “win-win is theory” “we need support from all the stakeholders” |
| 4 | Finance | 33 | “where is the money” “long-run makes the management anxious” “need investors” |
| 5 | Leadership | 12 | “top-down works” “leader had to lead by example” “employees follow what the CEO envisions” |
| 6 | Covid-19 | 7 | “pandemic is a good time to re-align” “resources are depleting; covid shook everyone” “the next big crisis” |

VI. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study provides insights into BR reporting in India based on an analysis of BR reports of the top 100 companies and an expert survey. Despite the mandate, it was observed that some leading companies still did not publish a BRR. The number of disclosures increased yearly – maximum transparency was observed in social disclosures. There is far more scope for disclosing supply chain and environmental impact data. The future reporting format must consider mechanisms for improving stakeholder engagement and materiality analysis disclosures, along with frameworks to establish accountability. Some critical research and policy-related questions arising from the study follow.

- If stakeholder engagement is the prerequisite, why are few companies not mapping and engaging with stakeholders?
- Globally, companies are preparing GRI-based reports, which are much more comprehensive. How can India transition toward the GRI framework?

- Should impact assessment be a part of the reporting?
- Should assurance be compulsory?
- What challenges do companies face that prevent them from disclosing all the items in the reports?
- How can this format be adapted to micro, small and medium enterprises?
- Is there a need to assess the penalties associated with non-compliance with BRR?
- Should there be more training programmes for officials engaged in making BRR?
- Has the government launched the framework without adequate guidance and support?
- Why is the impact limited to a few states and a few sectors?

Future research can explore the answers to these questions. Further, there are some limitations of this study. Only three years were taken into account to analyse data. The sample size was limited to the top companies. The expert survey was also based on ten interviews. Future studies may analyse recent data for larger sample sizes as per the new reporting format. Further, sector-wise and cross-country comparisons could be undertaken because sustainability challenges are contextual in nature. Primary data-based surveys to corroborate data available in the reports can also serve as potential future research directions.

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