

Is India Inc's CSR truly driving systemic change or just shifting funds?

ET CONTRIBUTORS Last Updated: May 21, 2026, 11:56:00 PM IST

Synopsis

Corporate India is entering a new phase of CSR. Spending is expected to cross ₹1.2 lakh crore by 2035. Companies are shifting towards systemic giving. This approach focuses on scalable pilots and evidence building. It aims to create population-level impact. This strategic shift will unlock larger public spending and ensure durable, long-term social change.



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Understanding social sector responsibility with strong corporate, strategic skills is the golden mix

Corporate India is entering a new phase of its CSR journey. It now accounts for nearly a quarter of private philanthropy, with annual spending expected to cross ₹1.2 lakh cr by 2035, making it one of India's most dependable sources of [long-term social investment](#).

But a company's [social impact](#) extends beyond CSR spend. Employment practices, supply chains, product design and distribution models shape outcomes for millions every day, forming an important - if often unmeasured - part of a company's broader impact footprint.

As CSR grows, India Inc is broadening its ambition. This shift is driving a focus on [systemic giving](#) - investments that create non-linear, population-level impact by funding scalable pilots, building evidence and enabling government systems to adopt and expand what works.

When CSR plays this catalytic role, it can unlock much larger pools of public spending and create strong multiplier effects, ensuring that every corporate rupee contributes to durable, long-term impact. In practice, CSR capital is proving most powerful when used for [evidence building](#) that can later have the highest multiplier effect. Shift towards systemic giving is evident in

Sattva's India CSR Outlook 2025, Avanti's research on proximate leadership, and Dasra's India Philanthropy Report 2024, which together signal a move from fragmented NGO grants to multi-year partnerships and integration of proven models into public systems.

CSR becomes a true strategic lever only when leaders are equipped to think and act differently. While these conditions require top-down ownership, they are realised through strong [CSR leadership](#). The most effective systemic CSR efforts share a common trait: sustained involvement from CEOs and promoters, alongside empowered CSR leaders who can translate intent into long-term strategy.

[Cipla Foundation](#)'s long-standing commitment to palliative care, for instance, shows how a promoter-backed CSR initiative, aligned with the company's healthcare domain, can evolve from a local service model into nationally-scaled protocols and partnerships embedded within public health systems.

As ambitions rise, the role and expectations of CSR leaders are evolving accordingly. A 2025 Convergence Foundation-SCALE report, 'India Inc for Building Bharat: How Systemic CSR is Building Enduring Impact for Tomorrow', highlights that this shift is underway in some companies. These have invested in mission-driven CSR leaders who bring the same rigour and strategic discipline to social investments as to business growth - working with multi-year horizons, retaining flexibility to experiment and adapt, and building a compelling narrative around long-term impact.

CSR now requires leaders to adopt a different orientation:

Systems-think & thematic focus: When organisations and their CSR leaders concentrate on 1-2 core issue areas, they can better understand the full landscape - root causes, key stakeholders, delivery gaps. Bridgespan Group studies show that 'theme concentration' correlates to 10-30x systemic impact for philanthropies. Companies like [Axis Bank](#) in livelihoods and [Bharti Airtel](#) in school education illustrate how thematic focus helps identify high-leverage opportunities and direct resources toward long-term change.

Think portfolios, not projects: CSR leaders could allocate 10-20% of funding to long-term, system-strengthening efforts while continuing direct programmes. They should also treat CSR capital as innovation capital that unlocks larger public resources, shifting the focus from incremental gains to population-scale impact.

Influence & partnerships: Systemic giving succeeds when CSR leaders have direct visibility with the board and senior leadership, and mandate to make multi-year bets. It requires the ability to work across the ecosystem - aligning governments, nonprofits, experts and peer funders to avoid duplication and drive collective impact.

To anchor this work, CSR leaders must bring discipline to measurement by owning a clear portfolio-level theory of change and a unified view of impact, giving boards confidence to stay invested in long-horizon systemic bets. As CSR becomes more strategic, treating it as anything less than a C-suite

responsibility is no longer viable.

CSIO: Elevating the role to a chief social impact officer (CSIO) signals that social impact is a strategic function - much as the CHRO or CTO did for people and tech. Companies need leaders who combine social sector understanding with strong corporate and strategic skills. Attracting this talent requires valuing the role appropriately, including compensation that reflects its complexity and responsibility.

They must be empowered to engage with issue-area experts, nonprofits, government counterparts and peer funders. These relationships help leaders understand how the system works, identify high-leverage opportunities and design initiatives with lasting impact.

For India Inc, the most important CSR investment now is in programmes and leadership. Companies that act early will set the benchmark for how corporate capital can drive lasting, nation-building impact.

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