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The Public Role of the Private Sector: Measuring Corporate Social Performance in India

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Abstract: Corporate social disclosure has emerged as a cornerstone topic of research for examining how firms use various communication media to signal virtue and publicize substantive as opposed to symbolic implementation to their stakeholders. This dissertation examines whether the top 120 corporations in India -- the fourth-largest economy and the most populous and longest-standing democracy in the developing world -- design and disclose corporate responsibility orientation, implementation, and behavior outputs according to global or local norms. Using annual and sustainability reports and corporate websites, the investigation employs a first-of-its-kind database that contains granular firm-level disclosure data on a comprehensive array of indicators. In particular, the study explores how social disclosure in India varies by ownership and industry affiliation.

The findings indicate that a) both, ownership and industry matter, but only in disclosure of environmental orientation; b) only family ownership and industry groupings matter in environmental implementation, and c) neither ownership nor industry but external-linkages matter in social behavior outputs. This suggests that while Indian corporations may have made the shift from arm's-length philanthropy to sustainable business practices, the transition to behavioral outputs is wanting. Importantly, additional research is needed to uncover how lessons learnt by outward-oriented firms can be taught to firms operating in domestic markets.

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