

Meaning Making by Managers: Corporate Discourse on Environment and Sustainability in India

Prithi Nambiar · Naren Chitty

Received: 3 December 2012 / Accepted: 19 July 2013 / Published online: 9 August 2013
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2013

Abstract The globally generated concepts of environment and sustainability are fast gaining currency in international business discourse. Sustainability concerns are concurrently becoming significant to business planning around corporate social responsibility and integral to organizational strategies toward enhancing shareholder value. The mindset of corporate managers is a key factor in determining company approaches to sustainability. But what do corporate managers understand by sustainability? Our study explores discursive meaning negotiation surrounding the concepts of environment and sustainability within business discourse. The study is based on qualitative interpretive research drawing from symbolic interactionism (Blumer, *Symbolic interactionism: perspective and method*. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1969) which postulates that meaning in discourse is an essentially contested domain dependent upon negotiation in the Habermasian tradition of mutually respectful dialogue (Habermas, *The theory of communicative action: lifeworld and system: a critique of functionalist reason*. Beacon Press, Boston 1987). Data from semi-structured intensive interviews of a small sample of senior corporate managers was analyzed to examine how corporate elites in India frame their approach to sustainability issues and respond to external pressures for deeper corporate responsibility. The findings point to the existence of a distinctively local narrative with strong potential for the discursive negotiation of personal and collective understanding

of ethical and socio-cultural values that may help internalize broader sustainability considerations into corporate decision-making processes.

Keywords Sustainability · Environment · Corporate social responsibility · Discourse · Sustainable development · Business ethics

Introduction

The convergence of complex trans-local business and organizational processes has prioritized research into communication practices that span multiple linguistic and cultural contexts (Forey and Lockwood 2010). While much of this research is focused on linguistic and behavioral praxes (Bargiela-Chiappini 2009), the rise of sustainability concerns over policy horizons foregrounds research into whether global survival and ecological crisis are making any inroads into traditional corporate values, goals, and practices.

It has been widely acknowledged that sustainability is best defined through a discursive process of meaning negotiation at the individual and societal level (Huckle 1993; Beckerman 1994; Herremans and Reid 2002; Kates et al. 2005; Gadsby and Bullivant 2010; Atkisson 2011) thus underscoring the importance of exploring what managers in specific societies understand by sustainability in order to reconcile meanings and develop effective cross-national and local approaches by the business sector in an increasingly globalized world.

Background and Concepts

Within the global discourse on sustainability there has been a general acknowledgement of the complexity and

P. Nambiar (✉) · N. Chitty
Department of Media, Music, Communication and Cultural
Studies, Macquarie University, North Ryde,
NSW 2109, Australia
e-mail: prithinambiar@gmail.com

N. Chitty
e-mail: naren.chitty@mq.edu.au

contestability of the concept which are, at the same time, very much a part of its functional value. In fact, the very process of attributing a range of different meanings to the concept of sustainable development within a society is itself seen as a highly political discursive process with different interests and concerns staking their claims (Dryzek 1997). In a closely inter-connected world, the participatory nature of the understanding that global problems and concerns are caused by all, and affect all, calls for consultative discussion between stakeholders and actors at every level and across varying developmental contexts so that the common future of all can be secured (Ferguson and Thomas-Hope 2006).

While development is taken to mean structural change with benefits in terms of quality of life for all (Todaro 1981; Adelman and Morris 1997; Sen 1999), sustainable development as defined by Brundtland, extends these aspirations in terms of intra-generational and inter-generational equity in the use and conservation of resources far beyond the scope of the term development (WCED 1987). The World Summit of 2002 added the three pillars of sustainable development to the Brundtland definition, after identifying them as society, environment, and economy with culture as a cross-cutting concept (Kates et al. 2005).

Although environmental and economic aspects of sustainability first came into focus in global discourse, the social aspects of sustainability such as equity have taken relatively longer to make a strong impact on the public.

Globally, the business sector has started to grapple with the complexity of sustainability. Sustainability perspectives seek to steer business beyond a single-minded focus on the triple bottom-line, to larger concerns such as equity, social justice, and burden-sharing (Jones et al. 2010).

A multi-industry survey by Deloitte of 48 executives entrusted with the task of overseeing sustainability efforts problematized the continuing gap between aspirations and action with the following observation: “what we think of as sustainability may not be what you think it is” (Deloitte 2010, p. 3). The report clearly identifies the absence of reflexive thinking within the business environment with regard to the multiple dimensions of sustainability. It acknowledges the lack of priority accorded by business leadership to what was perceived as indirect and linked aspects of socio-cultural, ethical, moral, and equity related dimensions of sustainability attributing it to a poor understanding of the complexity of sustainability among managers across several industries. A research survey by an online media platform of 600 corporate professionals across the world found a similar gap between policy and practice (Eco-Business 2012).

Citing the recent global financial crisis (GFC) as key evidence of the need for ethical business practice and good

governance models for all business. Indian corporations are believed to be opening up to the discussion of issues like sensitivity to environmental obligations, social inclusion, and welfare, respect for cultural beliefs and customs along with fairness and transparency in business dealings (Chin 2012). An increasing acceptance of spirituality and the Indian ethos is being seen as an independent influence in creating a change in the mind set of corporate India toward more ethical and sustainable business practices (Mandal 2010).

However, it was noted that senior managers from India, China, and Indonesia showed the least involvement in sustainability, although Indian managers were the most vocal in their prioritization of the need for corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability (Eco-Business 2012).

The Research Problem

While extensive cross-sectoral industry surveys have confirmed the existence of a gap between corporate aspirations and action with regard to sustainability (Deloitte 2010; Eco-Business 2012), little has been done to more deeply investigate the limiting issues that may be contributing to this gap (Smart et al. 2010; Tench et al. 2012). Jallow believes that the serious challenge to CSR research presented by the confusion and controversy surrounding the understanding of sustainability needs to be acknowledged and accommodated (Jallow 2008).

In the hermeneutical tradition of Gadamer (Warnke 1987), when we consider that individual understanding derives from an interpretation (Habermas 1987) of the views of the collective, it becomes important to better understand the framing of sustainability by the influential managerial group which is primarily responsible for creating and maintaining the dialectic of corporate communication (Crowther and Capaldi 2008, p. 6). An intensive exploration of the complex process of meaning negotiation, even if focused on a smaller sample of managers, could thus contribute to an understanding of frames that support, as well as factors that are currently limiting business discourse, thereby generating potentially valuable approaches to integrating contextual ethical and cultural sustainability perspectives into corporate decision-making.

Our research study aims to explore the meanings attributed by managers to sustainability within business discourse in India while identifying the constraints to the discursive integration of broader ethical principles into corporate decision-making through a qualitative interpretivist content analysis of interview responses derived from a small sample of senior Indian executives from a range of industries.

Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

Our research questions seek to explore what the Indian corporate sector understands by sustainability and the ways in which it attempts to frame sustainability in the business context. The theoretical orientation of this study is situated within the interpretivist paradigm of culture and communications research that emerged in the late 1980s (Cohen et al. 2007). The deeper foundational elements of this study are symbolic interactionism based on the thinking of George Mead (Blumer 1969) and communicative action favoring a normative approach as discussed by Habermas in his Theory of Communicative Action or TCA (Habermas 1987).

The study aims to explore the manner in which the concept of the environment and sustainability is being constructed in business discourse in a fast developing but environmentally and economically stressed country like India. As a nation with a long colonial history, located strategically within cross-regional and bilateral trade and investment relationships, India is strongly interconnected with other emergent South Asian, East Asian, and South East Asian economies. Rendered globally active by neo-liberal economic policy reforms since 1991, India is not only a major recipient of foreign investment, but has itself been the second biggest foreign investor in the UK in 2008–2009 (Sahoo 2010).

Our research questions seek to examine how the corporate sector in India perceives the terms environment and sustainability by considering the manner in which these concepts are being framed in public discourse in the country. As part of a study of discursive framing focused on emerging areas of validity and significance for modern business discourse, corporate thinking relating to sustainability in India is a particularly critical area of interest.

One of the ways to explore public perceptions is through interviewing experts. Experts can be interviewed to gauge the multiple public mind because they not only have access to information from a variety of sources including media but are also engaged in a co-dependency relationship with their peers, media, the public and the state which usually implies that they are aware of the entire gamut of views on the subjects about which they are experts (Chitty 2011). In our study, senior managers represent experts whose experience and knowledge of their field renders them influential in public discourse as well as their professional spheres.

Methods

The research methodology involves qualitative content analysis, using elements of grounded theory and framing theory of in-depth semi-structured interviews of senior representatives from the Indian Corporate sector. The

research design of this study has a qualitative framework and involves the use of content analysis and simple but intensive semi-structured interviews. It adopts an inductive inferential approach based on elements of grounded theory.

In order to examine how sustainability issues are being constructed in a fast developing nation like India, a qualitative approach to research was chosen as being more appropriate. The entire process of qualitative research can be likened to a study of a complex situation which is greater than the sum of its parts. This holistic approach to research does not reduce complex realities and interdependent relationships into a study of discrete variables, but, instead, seeks to understand the complexity of real life phenomena in its non-controlled context. Qualitative research employs strategies that involve non-manipulative study with flexible design and purposeful sampling. It is a study of real-life situations where the findings based on information-rich and qualitatively insightful sampling result in the adaptation of research design (Patton 2002). It is acknowledged that subjectivity and interpretation involved in the qualitative analytical process will inevitably affect replicability and confirmability of the findings. However, we believe that the rich meanings emerging from the qualitative analysis of the text are critically significant in the context of the constructivist nature of discursive meaning negotiation. Krippendorff addresses the issues arising from the conflict between subjectivity and replicability of qualitative analysis in his assertion that it is not so much how objectively, but rather how compellingly, it is presented that makes a piece of research valuable to the scientific community (Krippendorff 1980). Qualitative content analysis is inductive in approach as it allows categories to emerge out of data and places emphasis on understanding meaning within the context of the text. It builds on what Glaser and Strauss called Grounded Theory which proposes that generating new theory through an inductive approach avoids the pitfalls of using deductive logic that could, instead of seeking new insights, be merely looking for examples that prove the rule (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Our research study employed content analysis using elements of grounded theory in an inductive manner on interview data to examine how categories or patterns emerge in the way the public in India understand environment and sustainability. This method was found appropriate to our exploratory inquiry into the strands of meaning embedded in the current discourse on sustainability in India.

Our method is influenced by strategic frame analysis (SFA being briefly described below) in its strategic intent and draws on a limited number of methods and devices from among those prescribed by it. Additionally, in our search for a nuanced understanding of the role played by

media and public opinion, we have incorporated a grounded theoretic approach. The complex repertoire of SFA includes survey research, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, media content analysis, metaphor analysis, and media effects tests (Gilliam and Bales 2001); we have used semi-structured interviews and limited our analysis to broad themes and depictions present in the interview text so as to more easily uncover the possibility of new incipient frames (Gilliam 2007) that are being used in meaning making of sustainability. An analysis of rhetorical structure focused on themes and depictions can be both appropriate and productive considering the qualitative inductive nature of our search for new frames that act as central organizing principles (Gamson and Modigliani 1987) and the small and intensive nature of our research sample (Dong and Chitty 2012).

Grounded theory banks heavily on interviews with the belief that new insights emerge from an open-ended exploration of such material. “Limiting the data analysis to interviews as is the case in grounded theory research, delimits the theory we can develop” (Charmaz 2005, p. 527).

Accordingly, this study has opted to use the semi-structured or the guided interview method, which involves the use of a general set of questions and the same format for all interviews, except where it was possible to marginally vary or tweak the questions depending on the situation. The general structure remains the same for all participants and often many interviewees prefer this format as they feel uncomfortable without a clear set of guidelines (Lichtman 2010). It was found that all the respondents were comfortable with the concept of the guided interview where the interaction remained structured and formal and showed respect and value for their time, but, at the same time, allowed leeway in terms of time and attention for them to fully express their views.

Profile The six respondents included CEOs and consultants who are highly influential in corporate India : the Director of a major infrastructural company with a turnover of USD 9 billion who is also on the Board of several professional societies, the Founder and Chief strategist of an Energy Company, a prominent Administrator of Broadcasting and Outsourcing industries, a senior Management Advisor to a wide range of Government and Private Sector companies, the Chief Executive Officer of an ICT company and the Indian Country Head of a globally active (branches in 60 countries) Indian Manufacturing Company.

Process Interviews lasted for approximately 60 min. Extensive notes were taken and the interviews were also recorded.

Interview questions Respondents were broadly asked to discuss their personal understanding of sustainability; how sustainability related to environment; whether there were

recurring frames and themes in media representation of sustainability; what the main problematics in the sustainability discourse were; whether the public influenced policy; and finally what in their view, would help stimulate the sustainability discourse in India.

Results

As part of the analytical process, it is important to first construct a “general account” of the findings from the analysis of research data. This includes identifying key features and themes, and organizing them into headings “that provide the framework for the narrative that tells how groups of people experience the issue being investigated” (Stringer 2007, p. 95).

An Indian Understanding of Sustainability

The interview process fostered a process of meaning negotiation in respondents through posing a set of linked questions that worked to clarify aspects of sustainability personally and with regard to the framing of environment and sustainability concerns by media, NGOs and the government. By problematizing the discourse, the analysis further sharpened the process of meaning making around sustainability and the environment.

Specific themes emerging from the analysis of the data were as presented below.

Making Sense of Sustainability

Respondents were asked what they personally understood by Sustainability. Table 1 lists the four broad elements that constituted sustainability as understood and articulated by corporate respondents.

Inter-generational Equity

More than one respondent voiced the opinion that sustainability considerations centered on intergenerational equity, on the need to consider the needs and the future of coming generations. Respondent 3 said that “[w]e should think about the next generation in all ways, if coming

Table 1 Making sense of sustainability

<i>Meaning of sustainability</i>
Intergenerational equity
Integral to Indian culture
Connecting personal to collective
Holistic and multi-dimensional

generations have to be happy generations, that means we need to be slightly less selfish.”

Respondent 2 was of the view that “the world doesn’t end with you. So you need to think in terms of sustaining the globe and the resources and certain (natural) phenomena.”

Respondent 4 said, “I would define it as leaving the planet in the same state as you inherited it or in a better shape. Not overdrawing on our resources. That’s where sustainability comes in as a concept. Leave the planet richer.”

All respondents appeared to engage easily with the concept of inter-generational equity and were favorably inclined in terms of concern in familial terms toward caring about the needs of their children. It would not be out of place to suggest that in the family-oriented culture of India, it is unsurprising that the concept of inter-generational equity holds strong emotional appeal.

Integral to Indian Culture

Respondents suggested that sustainability was a home-grown concept and a part of Indian tradition through the ages. Respondent 2 said “[w]e have in-built models, cultures, traditions of sustainability. We don’t need to borrow from others. All we need to do is re-evoked these traditions in the current context of consumerism.” The sense that sustainability was part of Indian heritage brings a dimension of national and cultural pride and prestige into the understanding of the term. Despite the attribution of value to the sustainability inherent in Indian tradition, the respondents also acknowledged the underlying challenge of re-working these values and practices in the modern market-ruled context.

Connecting the Personal to the Collective

More than one respondent was of the opinion that sustainability was about connecting the personal to the collective which can happen only when the concept is presented contextually.

Respondent 2 said,

[i]t (sustainability) is contextual. Depends on who is asking me (what sustainability means) and at what level. Would be talking mainly in the context of ministry of environment and forests and what they are

doing. Sustainability can’t have a standard response. It varies according to the context and level at which you are asking—a housewife at the household level or an expert at the policy level.

Respondent 6 was of the opinion that “[s]ustainability is a phrase taken by individuals differently. They have defined it to their own comfort. Common people understand that in their own way.” The contextual nature of sustainability was frequently discussed by respondents who saw it as a term that lends itself to multiple and sometimes deliberate misinterpretation.

Sustainability is Holistic and Multi-dimensional

The respondents were generally aware of the multi-dimensional nature of sustainability in terms of economic, social, environmental, and other related aspects. Respondent 6 felt that sustainable development “must include the economic, social and environmental aspects”. Respondent 5 suggested that the main aspects of sustainability were economic and environmental. “There are broadly two aspects. These are the critical elements of sustainability when we view it in our Indian context.” Although the respondents named the social dimension of sustainability, they did not elaborate on it, preferring to restrict their observations to the environmental and the developmental aspects of the term.

Sustainability and the Environment

Respondents were asked if they considered sustainability to be synonymous with environment. As evident from Table 2, environment was largely viewed as a subset of sustainability.

Column A (Table 2) reveals that no respondent agreed with the view that environment was a broader or more meaningful term than sustainability. Column B shows that some respondents felt that environment was synonymous with sustainability and could be used interchangeably largely because there was an overlap in the meaning of the two terms. Column C illustrates that several respondents felt that environment could only be considered a sub-set of sustainability because sustainability was far more complex and multi-layered in meaning.

Table 2 Does environment mean more than sustainability?

A. Environment more meaningful than sustainability	B. Environment equivalent with sustainability	C. Sustainability more meaningful than environment
<i>No agreement</i>	<i>Some agreement</i>	<i>General agreement</i>
Environment only a subset with a narrower scope	Used interchangeably	Sustainability has additional economic and social dimensions
	Overlap between the two	Sustainability has a broader agenda

At least half the respondents were of the opinion that sustainability had many more dimensions than environment. Respondent 6 said, “[i]n India people don’t differentiate much between sustainability and the environment but sustainability has economic aspects and social dimensions which are extra.”

Respondent 5 rejected outright the idea that the two terms were synonyms,

Environment is a smaller subset of sustainability. Sustainability has a much broader agenda, much broader ecology and economy. So many other concepts that constitute sustainability, gender, culture what is durable over time over a variety of aspects, heritage, it affects us in very many fundamental ways, social life, legislations we pass. Even things that have apparently nothing to do with sustainability have an implication. We don’t see the link between livelihoods, natural resources, culture, tradition, new development plans, and our aspirations are not shaped by any sustainable mode of thinking.

Respondent 4 felt that,

[e]nvironment would largely cover sustainable development. When I say that, I mean all resources around you or whatever you interfere with. Sustainability would also refer to not living lavishly. That’s a personal opinion. I am not propagating austerity. There is a lifestyle issue. Even I consider a huge overlap between environment and sustainable development...though there is more to sustainability (than to environment).

It is significant that respondents appeared to achieve conceptual clarity as part of the interview process as evident from the conclusion arrived at by respondent 4.

Respondent 3 saw environment as a subset of sustainability while Respondent 1 was of the opinion that there was a difference between sustainability and the environment primarily because “[c]oncerns about the environment are not necessarily the same as sustainability. Sustainability has to take social reality into account also (besides purely environmental concerns).”

The critical difference between the two terms was attributed to the relatively narrower scope of the environment which did not include the larger social and economic dimensions of sustainability. One of the respondents suggested that the issue of poverty and lack of economic progress was being largely neglected by those who advocated environmental conservation. However, other respondents did not conflate pro-conservation views with anti-developmental stances. It appeared that the respondents were keen to appear reasonably concerned about the environment and its conservation as part of their responsibilities as good corporate citizens.

Table 3 Media framing of sustainability

<i>Frames used by media</i>
Crisis and controversy
Conflict
Grand spectacle
Anti-development

Frames and Themes in Environmental Reporting by Media

It was generally apparent that corporate respondents considered media to be primarily responsible for generating and shaping the sustainability discourse through voicing their own opinions as well those of the Government, NGOs and other influential communicators.

The respondents appeared to perceive that there was a growing readership for environment related topics in India which was leading to a correspondingly greater focus on these topics by the media. They were asked whether some of the dominant theoretically derived frames of a political and economic nature mentioned in several framing research studies (Corner et al. 1990; Neuman et al. 1992; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000) appeared to be in use in media coverage of environment and sustainability issues in India. Respondents acknowledged the presence of distinct frames in media reporting on environment and sustainability in Indian English language media as depicted in Table 3.

Crisis and Controversy

Most respondents identified crisis and controversy as a commonly used frame for environment and sustainability issues.

Respondent 3 felt that the preferred approach by media in India was to create and enhance controversy or to feature the negative aspects of issues rather than to communicate facts and promote understanding. “Anything controversial (is what) they write (about). Nothing qualitative done by anyone. Only controversial/mostly hypocritical with a pseudo-sense of satisfaction at being social minded.”

Respondent 4 agreed that “Media Coverage (of environment) does border on sensationalism.”

Respondent 2 suggested that the media tended to cast environmental players as villains or underdogs and that “[e]xtremes is what you see, not the reasoning not the logic, not the rationale not the convincing approach, not evidence based.” He suggested that the eagerness by media to polarize the discussion often led to lack of public comprehension of the underlying arguments involved.

Respondent 5 held a similar view of media framing of environmental issues.

By and large its sensational story telling (that’s) blown out of proportion. What happened? Why? No one knows.

The majority of the respondents expressed the view that media was largely irresponsible in their reporting and stood to gain from routine character assassination and attribution of blame to accountable decision-makers in the public arena.

Conflict

Just one respondent felt that conflict was a frame of choice used by media when covering environment and sustainability issues.

Respondent 1 said

I think the conflict frame predominates and comes across in different ways (such as) conflict between tribals and hydro-power projects. Tends to be typically urban versus rural. Urban areas need power, and the rural guys are holding it up. The frame is geared to conflict (whether it is) rural versus urban or Progressives versus people wanting to hold things back.

This respondent felt that conflict appeared to suit the divisive nature of the sustainability discourse while compelling attention from media audiences.

Respondents also named specific themes that they felt were dominant in media coverage of environmental and sustainability issues in India.

Wildlife Conservation

Respondent 6 was of the opinion that media tended to focus on the conservation of wildlife and coastal species. He felt that wildlife was a “huge issue” and constituted an “International draw card” with far more influence today than ever before. The respondent appeared to suggest that wildlife conservation was of marginal importance to the sustainability discourse in India, but was blown out of proportion in response to an international rather than local interest in wildlife conservation.

Anti-development

Respondent 1 said that media framed environmental issues in an anti-developmental frame as if to suggest that

... extreme environmentalists are holding up development.(That) NGOs (are) stopping development, holding up road (construction) etc. (They) put it in a way that (the) common reader tends to be sympathetic to development (rather than conservation) choices. The general thrust of media is much more on the side of economic development at the cost of sustainability.

The respondent was of the view that reasonable people with sound views on the need for sustainable development were being demonized by the media as being elitist and anti-poor, thus creating a general suspicion among the public about their motives and opinions.

Constraints

When asked about what they considered to be the central problematic in the sustainability discourse in India, respondents primarily identified it as being poor public comprehension of the underlying issues in sustainability due to shallow media treatment of these issues. Several other factors were also identified as shown in Table 4.

A Shallow Discourse

Practically all respondents appeared to concur on the point that sustainability and environmental issues were not being discussed at a deep or meaningful level. Respondent 6 said, “[s]ustainability is not getting disseminated properly. (It is) just discussed within closed walls. Actionable points are not happening. Local people need to be engaged. Lay people must understand. (It shouldn’t be) limited to just a few sectors. Sustainability is a fashionable word for the public. Just a word in the dictionary....a catch phrase currently.”

Respondent 4 attributed the problem to lack of public understanding of the technicalities in sustainability discourse. “(It’s all) still at a very obscure level....over 35000 ft. above people’s heads. Most people would like to understand how to calculate the carbon footprint. (This could be) a problem of shallow coverage... perhaps because the discussion is nascent or there is not enough access to subject experts.”

Respondent 1 said, “[t]here is not much deeper thinking. One of the reasons is that while media is covering these issues, there is not much depth. Now you have caught people’s attention, you should go into the depth of the issue. But it stops there.”

Dissonance in the Official View on Sustainability

Respondents believed that there did not exist a consolidated official view on sustainability as articulated by government policy in India but that there were multiple views on the subject. For instance, at inter-governmental meets, India took the stand that all nations needed to bear common but differentiated responsibility for correcting unsustainable development based on the level of affluence

Table 4 Problems afflicting the sustainability discourse

Shallow discourse
Dissonance in official stance
Not situated in Indian cultural ethos
Swift polarization of media debates
India must focus on poverty first
Myopic decision-making
Low public influence on policy

and extent of pollution caused overtime and the other being a strong domestic commitment to sustainable development as articulated within India. Respondent 1 who has a high profile role as an ethical Corporate Administrator, explained that while he was comfortable with both these views, he was uncomfortable with the way resource use decisions were being made on the ground where the environment was being traded off for development in increasingly unsustainable ways despite the presence of a robust policy framework for sustainable development.

Here I have concerns (about) corruption, well intentioned developmentBut giving clearance to the use of forests for mining and for energy and rationalizing unsustainable ways tends to pit short term (against) long-term considerations, (creating) intergenerational issues.

There appeared to be a clear awareness on the part of respondent 1 of the wide gap between the enunciation and implementation of sustainable development on the ground. He was open about his personal discomfort with the ongoing ethical conflict implicit in this gap. For him, sustainability involved acknowledging the gap between a personal value system and that of other decision-makers suggesting a contested domain of values resulting in the loss of the original or intended meaning of sustainability on the ground.

Respondent 2, the head of a major corporate media firm, completely rejected the idea that there was such a thing as an “official view” on sustainability in India. “I don’t know what you mean by official view. I don’t know who is official. I don’t care about UNESCO or any international commission’s definitions...let me be categorical about it.” For Respondent 2, sustainability seemed to encompass an emotionally fraught terrain where the right to define the term was evoked sensitivities related to power and authority issues. He went on to explain that only influential communicators had the ability to interpret sustainability in the context of their audiences. In other words, he felt skilled professional mediation, rather than international or national policy pronouncements, was critical to the sustainability discourse.

Not Situated in the Indian Cultural Ethos

One of the responses related to the problem created by the lack of immediacy with regard to sustainability concerns when people failed to see the chain of responsibility between local action and local impact. They attributed the disjuncture to the fact that media did not situate sustainability issues within the cultural ethos of Indian society.

Respondent 2 said

[w]e need to convert sustainability into something simple, break it into components and integrate it into the

cultural ethos of this country while reminding them of what so many generations before us have been doing and why. Indira Gandhi spoke of it at the international level but we need communication like that at the local level.

Premature Polarization of Media Debates

The quick polarization of debates surrounding sustainability issues, especially when they were framed in anti-development and pro-conservation terms, was seen to be a major deterrent to better public comprehension of the underlying arguments. The polarization which divided the audience into opposing camps was seen as being entirely counter-productive. In the words of Respondent 1,

I see the main problem as being the sense that it’s an either/or situation. Grant people access to electricity OR save a thousand trees. The frame is always either/or and there is an ideological framing which doesn’t allow rational debate. Equally it takes away from looking at innovative or new solutions, technological solutions, social dimensions. You just polarize the issue even before solutions are looked at.

India Must Focus on Poverty Alleviation Before Sustainability

Respondent 3 felt that industrialization and development were the need of the hour in India where most people could not afford three meals a day. As Respondent 3 put it,

It [Sustainability] is a luxury for the common man. [h]ow do you resolve poverty? Self reliance is the issue. It’s a step by step process. Give someone the type of education that makes him self reliant. The financial discipline will come when the person is vocationally happy. Then he can understand softer issues (like sustainability). First things first. [There is] no need for conferences on sustainability in 5 star hotels.

Respondent 3 did not see irony in his projection of sustainability as an elitist and somewhat irrelevant concern that was discussed by elites at opulent conference venues. He appeared to suggest that the contradiction between his anti-elite views and his own undeniable membership of the elite class was amply justified by his ability as a corporate decision-maker to provide jobs and a better standard of life for the poor in the neo-classical tradition.

Myopic Decision-Making

Respondent 5 lamented the lack of an integrated approach to environment and sustainability issues in the corporate sector. He attributed this to,

Myopia. There is severe myopia in looking at the issue. Unless you have an integrated approach, a piecemeal approach is so much more expensive. The root cause [of unsustainability] is the [faulty] way we approach sustainability. We can't [keep] do[ing] an end of pipe approach.

The respondent referred to his own extensive experience in advising senior management on decision-making and put the inability to see the bigger picture down to cultural and ethical flaws in Indian business traditions that have led to an extremely narrow profit-focused decision-making framework with little room for the consideration of externalities.

Low Public Influence on Policy

Respondents were asked if they perceived greater public influence on policymaking in India over the years and if increased public influence and participation in the sustainability discourse would help make sustainable development a more important priority for the Indian government.

Respondent 1 did not think the public had much influence.

I think today it's not very much. But the public will have a larger influence with time. The media is powerful in India, specially the English language media which forms a peer group. Their influence is disproportionately large as is also that of the urban English speaking public. The tribal and rural people have minimal influence. But overall the public is more influential today, absolutely! I would say since the past 3 to 5 years but wildlife conservation and sustainability are still marginal issues.

Respondent 6 acknowledged that there was a change in the degree of influence that the public had on policy in India. "This is evolving. Earlier the public didn't care but now they are more aware of the power of the vote and they are demanding accountability. The Right to Information Act has changed things. But there is no accountability yet among corporates by and large."

Improving the Sustainability Discourse

When questioned on their views regarding improving the discourse on sustainability, respondents had several suggestions to make which were not specific to the corporate sector but broadly addressed the general public. Table 5 illustrates the range and nature of recommendations made by the respondents.

Table 5 Recommendations

New approaches to sustainability

- Focus on personal agency for change
- Increase quality of science and technology information
- Identify and highlight best practice by industry and business
- Avoid presenting sustainability as a first world concern
- Demonstrate by example
- Increase media attention to sustainability

Focus on Lifestyle Change

Respondent 1 suggested that communicating sustainability needed to focus on linking sustainability concerns to daily lived life,

Sustainability is complex. It's still not seen as something that is a part of our daily life. How sustainability affects our life today is not clear. We need to relate it to specific issues and the relationship between sustainability and our lifestyles is not being made. We are following the linear path to western development. We don't even discuss the relationship between consumerism and sustainable development. We have a chance to correct it. Now in the west people do talk about individual carbon footprints. We haven't started doing that yet. And while I think climate change is very important, sustainability should not be overruled by that. Climate change is a broad and general thing. It is seen as having to do with policy and inter-governmental issues. Sustainability needs to be looked at as an individual responsibility and not as distant phenomenon that others are responsible for. The West is using climate change as an opportunity to discuss sustainability. NGOs are also caught up with that. They are not directly taking up the cause of sustainability.

Respondent 4 was of the opinion that the impact of climate change discussions on sustainability was mixed and could result in distancing the average person who would see it as a topic that was best addressed at the national and international level rather than at the individual or local level.

Climate change needs to be seen more from a sustainability perspective. We as human beings only care about the next 2-3 days of our existence. How does environmental change impact daily life. How do you change things on an individual rather than abstract level?

Provide Scientific Evidence and Technological Information

There was a suggestion that communicating sustainability required providing access to hard scientific evidence to

convince the public about the urgency of changing attitudes and behavior as well as to technological information that would enable sustainable resource use decisions. Respondent 4 said, “And you need to have more visibility on solutions and evidence of technological information and solution in action.”

Showcase and Publicize Industry Best Practice

The need to showcase industry best practice in the area of sustainability action was emphasized by one of the respondents. Respondent 4 put it simply, “[p]rovide best practice information and showcase the examples.”

More Media Focus

More than one respondent expressed the belief that media attention to sustainability practice and policy was critical to raising awareness and stimulating change in attitudes and behavior particularly among corporate entities that see value in generating positive public profiles and goodwill through garnering media approbation. Respondent 1 said,

[m]edia use by government in discussing sustainability has been minimal. There has been no sustained campaign to discuss change in consumption to promote saving energy. Here is a great chance to create awareness. But the Government is not using media to promote sustainability. As a campaign the Government has had a very successful polio campaign and this has worked with repeated, intensive, visible and good outcomes but nothing like that done on sustainability issues. Here Delhi’s power shortage was not used to educate the public and change attitudes.

Respondent 4 suggested that media employ an effective strategy, “[b]asically, a communication strategy..... so it addresses everyone.”

Lead and Demonstrate by Example

Two respondents spoke at length about the need for leadership by example and through demonstration in order to induce change toward sustainability. Respondent 3 was blunt in his denunciation of those who only paid lip service to sustainability, “[d]emonstrate, do it and don’t preach,” he said, adding “what you can, do individually or through organizations. It’s a very important thing. Anyone with some amount of literacy and financial stability must not be pardoned for not doing anything for sustainability”.

Respondent 6 echoed this view when he said, “[d]emonstrate some action – show the way, otherwise it’s just limited to talk.” However, he spoke more positively

and personally about corporate responsibility especially in sectors which had high environmental impact.

Our strategy is to take corporate responsibility. (Our) industry is responsible for 7% of the carbon emissions, so we are trying to support awareness. We not only look at technological solutions but also help in education. So we want to send a signal to other corporates that this is what they need to do. We wish to show the way.

Developed Nations Have No Business Telling Us What to Do

A key issue that emerged in the interviews was the articulation by a few of the respondents of the view that the sustainability discourse was being unfairly framed in terms of blame or attribution of responsibility to the developing world by the developed world. Respondent 3 said,

[f]or India it’s not correct. Developed countries are ahead. They are imposing these ideas on India. What I mean is that the westernized culture of India and the countries of the West have much more responsibility and they must not impose this burden on the poor majority of India. I don’t think we should be tough on the poor. They are not ready yet for any talk of sustainability.

Overall, our qualitative content analysis revealed the following broad themes across all response clusters which may have significant implications for the discourse on sustainability in India:

1. There was limited acceptance of a leadership role for corporations toward achieving sustainability goals at the societal level in India.
2. Sustainability is perceived as being deeply embedded in Indian spiritual heritage and cultural capital and consequently leadership for sustainability must be seen to uphold the ethical and moral standards of Indian saint philosophers who led by personal example.
3. Understanding sustainability could lead to a general acceptance of the need for a long-term perspective and ethical behavior at the personal level.
4. Inter-generational equity appears to be a more philosophically attractive goal to managers rather than intra-generational equity.
5. Powerful agents including experts, elites, and media, continue to be privileged as primary definers of sustainability because the public is yet to be empowered for greater participation in the discourse through poverty alleviation and knowledge resourcing.
6. Media must shoulder the primary responsibility for shaping the sustainability discourse in India and must

consequently develop its capacity to interpret situations to the public.

Discussion

There are four broad environment and sustainability related narratives originally articulated by Partridge and Sagoff that can be, albeit over-simplistically, classified into doomsayer, cornucopian, socially iniquitous, and esthetic scenarios (Werhane and Singer 1999, p. 43). In nearly all, bar the cornucopian narrative, business is not just seen as playing no positive role toward sustainability, but as being responsible for the perpetuation of unsustainable practices, values, and strategies for its own survival and success.

A Positive but Limited View of Sustainability

The perspective broadly shared by the respondents of our study defies classification under any of these scenarios, but constitutes a realistic, albeit limited, narrative that acknowledges the situational constraints within Indian polity. There is reluctance to accept or attribute a leadership role for the corporate sector in the sustainability discourse. However, the narrative remains positive in the recognition of the symbolic value of sustainability as a global concern of current relevance lodged within Indian heritage and sensibility and as a personal standard of ethical conduct. The responsibility, according to this narrative, is seen to be held by media, government, and NGOs through persuasive spiritual or civic leadership.

The primary expression of social sustainability perspectives is manifest in the principle of social justice (Ledwith 2001). Social justice as a concern is generally acknowledged as making an appearance in global discourse in the 1990s on the back of widespread concern that inequalities among people were actually increasing rather than decreasing despite development and urbanization (Crane and Matten 2007).

However, the general approach favored by CSR-oriented business philosophy continues to be based on the broad consensus that the old development paradigm predicated on discredited theories, such as the trickle-down effect and the free trade model, will eventually achieve socio-economic equity. The arguments advanced in this regard are that the competitiveness unleashed by increasing free trade and dissolution of barriers to trade by globalization and liberalization will spur eco-efficiency in the use of resources (Boudreaux 2008). The economic prosperity and growth achieved through globalization is expected in turn to enable efficient countries to plough back profits gained through their comparative advantage in trade into

further addressing environmental costs and concerns (Ashford and Hall 2011).

While this line of reasoning appears attractive, there is little evidence to support its validity (Chang 2007). Examples of deepening inequity abound where individual communities have borne the brunt of the negative impacts of industrial growth largely due to the ability of business to externalize the social and environmental costs of industrial activity (Butts 2003).

Globalization has enabled the swift and easy movement of capital across the world in relentless pursuit of the twin business goals of increased markets and lower production costs (Aslund and Dabrowski 2008). This has often led to the exploitation of developing nations and communities where environmental protection regulations or social welfare systems are either absent or poorly enforced.

Inter-generational Equity More Amenable to Corporate Planning

The reality of short-term resource exploitation has meant that the preferred emphasis in the global business discourse on sustainability has remained on inter-generational rather than intra-generational equity, pushing sustainability concerns outside of the current planning framework and into the distant future.

Social movements of varying scale emerged in reaction and protest against the environmental fall-out of business practice, lending support to the cross-national diffusion of sustainability concerns. Corporate responses to the rising visibility of environment and sustainability on the policy horizon tended to vary from appropriating the surface language and claims of the environmentalists to adopting a form of “third worldism” along with selected high profile issues (Alexander 2009, p. 32).

Discussions surrounding the role of business as responsible citizens through the exercise of CSR have tended to obscure the more serious environmental and social aspects of sustainable development. In fact some feel that the emphasis on environmental concerns has taken away from the social to such an extent that there has been little in business literature that directly engages with the aims articulated by the Brundtland report of reducing poverty and social inequality while ameliorating the quality of life of the world’s poor (Purvis and Grainger 2004).

Feasibility Over Viability

Even where the CSR approach was adopted by business as an organizational objective, it appeared to lead to further marginalization of sustainability concerns. Sustainability experts and educators have had to work against the underlying assumption that corporate sustainability is more

concerned with meeting regulatory standards as a primarily non-value adding proposition (Galea 2004). Sustainability concerns were largely articulated as additional rather than central organizational concerns, left to the responsibility of middle management, and seen primarily as attempts to “greenwash” the corporate profile (Smith et al. 2010). While much of the problem can be attributed to the neo-classical approach that views feasibility as a primary criteria for decision-making on resource allocation with the objective of maximization of profits, an alternative understanding is available in the approach favored by the classical political economy of early thinkers such as Smith, Ricardo, Keynes, Sraffa, Malthus, Marx, Mill, and others, where a more systemic view of the decision-making frame was considered appropriate for resource allocation. Indeed the classical approach, which includes social relationships within the decision-making frame, could be said to focus on “viability,” a concern rather closer to sustainability goals than feasibility (Walsh and Gram 1980). Amartya Sen, a staunch classical economist and a student of Sraffa, Robinson, and Dobb, has been responsible for strongly articulating frames for decision-making that have contributed to a second phase of classical revivalism. Sen has not only re-interpreted the classical theory of value, like Adam Smith once did, by extending the range of ideas that are normally considered in the classical frame; he has further examined the connections and the instrumental nature of “goods” such as female empowerment with regard to the achievement of sustainable development (Vienneau 2012). Sen has sought to pre-empt the need for redistributive welfare systems by stressing the need for best possible empowerment of citizens rather than resorting to compensating them for structural impacts (Ulrich 2008). Expanding the decision-making frame to include and internalize ethical economic and social considerations can further sustainable development by addressing the “unfreedoms” in existing arrangements and relationships (Sen 1999). While developmental planners have no argument with this approach, the corporate sector has yet to integrate this perspective within core decision-making processes as revealed by respondents of our study.

Scope for a Value-Based Approach Grounded in Indian Traditions and Culture

An analysis of corporate annual sustainability reports revealed that besides the more commonplace strategic and institutional rhetoric arising from conventional scientific-economic paradigms and CSR theories, there are signs of a more positive thread of dialectic that could spell the beginning of a new role for the firm in society arising from value-based legitimation (Castelló and Lozano 2011).

In *Nature in Asian Traditions*, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian traditions and philosophy have been reviewed to critically examine the potential for constructing a sound environmental philosophy that draws equally from Eastern and Western world views (Callicott and Ames 2001). While there is much in the traditions and philosophical outlook of these great Eastern traditions that appear to honor, idealize and even deify the relationship between man and nature, there is sufficient evidence over the past several decades, in literature and the environmentally insensitive behavior and attitudes displayed in most of these nations, that suggests a discord between the idealized positions of the past with the harsh realities of the present (Fien et al. 2000). In fact, scholars have noted that Asian traditional perspectives or world views which place man in harmonious co-existence with nature have failed to prevent practices that point to widespread disrespect to nature through over grazing, erosion, deforestation, severe pollution of water, land and air as well as careless and improper waste disposal that have disastrously impacted the environment of Asian nations (Bruun and Kalland 1995).

The interview responses point to a general belief that respect for nature was traditional practice and that a loss of cultural values and mores has occurred in the wake of westernization and industrialization. Much of the discourse tends to take the shape of vague regret for the sorry state of the environment and attributes responsibility for it to the confusions created by globalization, consumerism, lack of political accountability, corruption, and corporate shortsightedness and greed. Most respondents took a position of concern regarding unsustainable practices, blaming decision-makers and policy makers for their insincerity in reforming policy and practice. Only one of the respondents appeared to take a position of responsibility and involvement based on an acknowledgement of the impact that their particular industry had on the environment.

Need for Greater Emphasis on Meaning Negotiation

It is our contention that the most useful approach to sustainability would be one predicated on the premise that there may be less value in returning to pre-existent and pristine Eastern or Western world views than in relying on the view that perceptions of nature and sustainability are essentially a contested domain and that each society is best served by negotiating these meanings against the ever-changing and volatile nature and dynamics of the man-environment relationship. We believe that the discourse must transcend basic conflicts over neo-classical and classical approaches and focus on meaning negotiation around values and ethics. Our belief is strengthened by existing research that foregrounds the need to promote greater discursivity in the corporate sector regarding the

concept of sustainable development, for in a Foucauldian sense, sustainable development exists within and has arisen from discourse (Springett 2003). Indeed, the deep theoretical grounding of sustainable development in dialectical processes stemming from critical theory (Huckle 1993) and supported by Foucauldian concepts, would appear to clearly privilege the exploration and facilitation of meaning negotiation within discourse. Our research seeks to highlight the fact that the problems with reconciling western imperatives with traditional values need to also be considered in the context of the ongoing and increasingly complicated interface between individual and collective values in a shifting cultural landscape as reflected in the fluidity of the discourse.

The recognition of the superficiality inherent in the concept of “green” business, which has largely been seen as “green washing”, is being increasingly acknowledged; leading to a correspondingly greater interest in promoting broader discursive settings within the corporate sector that are framed by critical theory (Springett 2003). Essentially, this has meant that much of the literature about green management that has previously exhorted business toward good corporate citizenship remains in danger of being dismissed as technicist kitsch that endorses traditional corporate values and goals while seemingly promoting sustainable development with evangelical zeal (Newton and Harte 1997). The only way around this lack of deep engagement and consequent superficiality of approach would be to promote meaning negotiation at the individual level that establishes connections between personal and collective goals within resonant socio-cultural frames.

Ethical Leadership for Sustainability

The respondents acknowledged the difficulty in re-affirming longstanding, albeit increasingly attenuated, traditional values in a public sphere that has been drastically altered by state-driven forces of modernization unleashed over more than six decades since Indian independence in 1947. Recent research points to gradual changes in leadership values and styles in India which appear to be gravitating to the more individualistic and materialistic values of the West from the spiritual, detached, service-oriented, and myth-inspired approach of the past (Gopalakrishnan and Kaur 2009). The respondents were of the opinion that materialistic and individualistic attitudes among Indians were a consequence of globalizing and market driven influences. They suggested that globalization was similarly responsible for supporting an increasingly anthropocentric and consumer-centered view of nature.

It appeared from the analysis of the interview transcripts of corporate respondents that the majority tended to conflate environment with sustainability even while they

recognized that sustainability was a broader term with social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions. One of the respondents saw sustainability as a suitable concept with which to frame the concern that a purely environmental approach was less suitable to India when poverty was a much more urgent and pressing issue than the conservation of nature. The environment-development conflict was seen as a superficial concern in India where economic growth was more urgently required in the view of more than one corporate respondent.

The Environment and Development Debate in India

The view that poverty eradication is an end that needs little process justification in the Indian context is one that has a long political history; accounting for the schism in the pathways advocated by Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi for post independent India (Rudolph and Rudolph 2006).

While Gandhi’s leadership appeared deeply rooted in the spiritual, service-centered, myth-inspired traditions of ancient India, he acted as one of the earliest political advocates for what is now called sustainability, by placing community at the heart of development. Gandhi believed that community-centered, craft-based, small scale industrialization constituted the ideal development pathway for India (Schumacher 1999). Despite their closeness as political allies, Prime Minister Nehru’s deeply cherished western values led him to bypass Gandhi’s views in order to action large scale centralized planning for industrialization. Nehru’s decision to opt for large scale industrialization downgraded the importance of community and environment, consigning them to the trickle down effects of the mainstream economic development model and strategy devised by his advisor, the Indian economist Mahalanobis (Sarkar 2007).

This early dichotomy of views and values between Gandhi and Nehru can be said to have cast its long shadow over the continuing “Environment versus Development” debate in India. Gandhi’s views on economic development were generally seen by those in favor of rapid and planned industrialization as being quaint and at best useful mainly as a supplementary approach (Cox 2008).

Sustainability as Part of the Dominant Paradigm

Sustainability or sustainable development, however, has appeared to many to be at least superficially more easily accommodated within the dominant paradigm of development. The acceptability of the terms sustainability and sustainable development to pro-development economists, politicians, and industry as well as to activists and the non-governmental sector at the other end of the spectrum has

also been mocked for the spirit of easy compromise it seems to represent (Lele 1991). Sustainable development appears to offer most people the hope that economic growth can continue indefinitely so long as human creativity and ingenuity can find ways to deal with limits and bottlenecks. However, sustainability requires far deeper levels of change in addition to creative solutions at the industry or policy level and it is possible that a large part of its mainstream acceptability stems from an inadequate understanding of the far reaching implications of the intentionality within the term or rather of the potential for meaning negotiation implicit within it.

Sustainability as a Corporate Mandate

That sustainability continues to be interpreted largely in narrow environmental terms in Western discourse has been noted by the interview respondents in this study who recognize the challenge posed to consumerist lifestyles by a values-based socio-economic interpretation of sustainability. Nevertheless there was no corresponding desire to explore more deeply the issue of responsibility in this context with most respondents assigning that responsibility to the government. Other than seeing their role as creators of job opportunities and indirect economic benefits, corporate respondents in this study did not see sustainability as a matter of direct responsibility, beyond the need to show awareness of it as a topic that has gained undoubted traction in global discourse.

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) in 2005 specified the need for business to contribute to sustainable development through enabling a better quality of life for employees, their families, the local community, and society with a view to enhancing the scope of CSR. The redefinition of CSR appears dedicated to the hope that business will see social responsibility and sustainable development as relevant to doing “well” (Mattei and Dinu 2010). However, the link between CSR and the personal interpretation of societal values and ethics by corporate leadership has been found to be a major factor in determining its prioritization within the organization (Joyner and Payne 2002).

Fractional Responsibility

The endeavor by business leaders to introduce a shift in corporate understanding of the value of sustainable development within global discourse appears to have gone largely un-noticed by the respondents of the study. Arguing that business has an “experimental” understanding of sustainable development that may be more intuitive and intimate than any that government or citizens can hope to have, business leaders at the international level are looking

at the concept of sustainable development as a useful stimulant to devising newer and more relevant strategies of growth (Holliday et al. 2002, p. 15). But our study suggests that business leaders in India view sustainable development as the domain of the government, media and not for profit organizations. The belief that business holds a marginal responsibility in terms of trust and expectation relative to other sectors, including the media, continues to create a situation where accountability for change is much debated and only marginally assumed by the corporate sector (Fernando 2010).

The argument that business is only one of many sectors of society and consequently holds only fractional responsibility for societal goals finds its echo in Indian business discourse with some of the respondents talking at length about the issue of accountability for the promotion of sustainability goals, which they have attributed to the media rather than to the government, and least of all to the corporate sector. Most of the corporate respondents ascribed a predominant role and responsibility to media for shaping and limiting the sustainability discourse in India as evident from their concern that issues were being polarized by media rather too early in the discourse. Most of the recommendations arising from the consideration of the central problematic in the sustainability discourse relate to the construction of sustainability in media, using frames that were more authentic and scientific rather than emotional and non-technical. Most respondents were circumspect about attributing blame to the government. Only one of them chose to express resentment against environmentalist groups for what was seen as insensitivity to the need for material upliftment of the poor.

Deflecting Accountability for Change

The general thrust of the recommendations from the respondents with regard to improving public involvement in the sustainability discourse was focused on the need to persuade citizens to take individual responsibility and induce change in small ways. The respondents suggested that the critical requirement was for change at the individual level within the arena of personal values and lifestyles rather than in the corporate work sphere. While it can be argued that the respondents were making a call for deeper change, the consensus on prioritizing personal change can equally be interpreted as an attempt to deflect the discourse on sustainability into the more informal arena of spiritual, moral, and domestic concern. Such a deflection could attenuate the discourse by the treatment of sustainability as a private or personal concern rather than a work value or priority.

Meaning negotiation of sustainability in the professional arena could be considered potentially disruptive and not

entirely germane to corporate priorities and values. Take for instance the ambiguous comments by Respondent 3, “Anyone with some amount of literacy and financial stability must not be pardoned for not doing anything for sustainability.” Respondent 3 then said, “The public will not get involved (in sustainability) except for those who have political motives.” The first comment would imply that in private life, everyone but the abjectly poor could be expected to act in a conscientious manner by contributing toward sustainable development while the second suggests that sustainability could not in reality be considered a policy priority with equal applicability to all right-minded citizens. The respondent was specifically concerned about the plight of the poor which was pronounced the only valid priority for a country like India unlike environment and sustainability. While advocating the need to involve the public in the sustainability discourse, respondent 4 also recommended shifting the sustainability discourse to the personal arena in order to facilitate genuine change. Respondent 4 felt that the challenge was about how to “change things on an individual rather than abstract level.”

Development Before Sustainability

More than one corporate respondent pointed to the extreme irony of attributing accountability for the fall out of industrial prosperity enjoyed by the developed world to poor nations like India. They were of the opinion that India was entitled to claim free rein to grow rapidly to catch up with developed world, unfettered by unreasonable or demanding environmental regulations. As Respondent 3 put it, “[f]or India it’s not correct. Developed countries are ahead. They are imposing these ideas on India. What I mean is that the westernized culture of India and the countries of the West have much more responsibility and they must not impose this burden on the poor majority of India.” The argument reflects a general refrain that remains popular in the Indian discourse and prefaces many a contemptuous dismissal of environment and sustainability concerns by powerful political and corporate elites.

Nevertheless, Respondent 6 endorsed the importance of corporate responsibility and good citizenship by discussing the need for each business organization to consider its adverse impact on environment and sustainability through pollution and the unfair consumption of common property resources while recommending the development of social and environmental initiatives that could compensate for the deleterious consequences. It is important to mention the fact that the corporate entity at which Respondent 6 was a senior executive, has consistently funded, through the respondent’s active personal involvement, major educational projects for school children in India aimed at environmental mitigation and sustainability action. Thus

examples of commitment to sustainable development could be seen to co-exist with the more commonly prevalent instances of corporate indifference to sustainability as a concept and a priority in the responses considered by our study.

Publicity an Incentive for Corporate Best Practice

Curiously, the respondents attributed greater responsibility to the media with regard to initiating and strengthening popular interest in sustainability as well as with regard to educating the public, despite the fact that media in India is organized for profit just as much as any other corporate business. Also striking was the general circumspection with regard to the attribution of blame to the government on issues relating to environmental or sustainability goals. Interview responses appeared to converge on the need for a media led fillip to the cause of sustainable development through maintaining and stimulating public interest in the sustainability discourse. The respondents also suggested that media focus on constructing an exemplary frame that showcased corporate best practice in innovative and sustainable technologies and approaches. The possibility of creating a high profile and generating public goodwill through leadership in sustainable development appeared to be an attractive prospect for all corporate respondents who believed that “walking the talk” should be rewarded by media publicity and public approbation. All respondents were of the view that media needed to focus on public awareness and education although none explained why such a priority should have much appeal for the profit driven media sector in India.

Sustainability More Attractive to Business

Over all, there was more interest and receptivity toward the term “sustainability” rather than the term “environment.” It appeared that the corporate respondents had not had occasion to devote their full attention to the definition of the term for the duration made possible by the interview. This unpreparedness, while eliciting plain language responses revealed attitudes at an instinctive and emotional level. The semi-formal nature of the interview format served to flag the importance of the term, creating a field of opinion where meaning was negotiated between the questions and the responses.

All respondents accepted that sustainable development had relevance to business and corporate behavior and that unlike the term environment; sustainability did not call for an adversarial approach from business. But the relevance of sustainability to mainstream corporate goals and values was then somewhat marginalized by the subsequent deflection of sustainability from the professional to the

personal sphere as a matter of individual choice and moral responsibility.

Securing the Future for Our Children

The respondents appeared far more interested in inter-generational equity or the security of future generations as a key sustainability value rather than in promoting awareness and a social conscience among individuals and organizations in the public sphere about the multiple dimensions of sustainability that included intra-generational equity. There was little engagement with the socio-cultural dimensions of sustainability even though the respondents identified sustainability as a homegrown value that was deeply embedded within Indian cultural practice since ancient times.

All respondents deferred to media as the main agent in the construction of sustainability within public discourse in India and appeared to consider public education as the primary responsibility of media as part of a government led communication initiative. While the respondents concurred on the point that sustainability was generally acknowledged as a common goal for mankind, they differed on the degree of responsibility that India needed to shoulder when it came to sustainable development as compared to first world nations.

On the issue of corporate responsibility, the majority of responses indicated that publicizing best practice would encourage business to adopt innovative and sustainable practice. Other than one respondent who had previously worked in the non-governmental sector, no other respondent discussed the role of penalties or disincentives, subsidies or the need to pay for the true cost of pollution and other unsustainable practices. It was also clear that sustainability although generally acknowledged as an emergent issue in corporate discourse, appeared to be far from being considered an urgent priority and was seen instead as a desirable ideal and one that deserved attention from the corporate sector. However, it was evident that the degree of attention accorded to sustainability within the corporate sector was likely to remain a largely internal decision-dependent upon voluntary initiatives.

Limitations

Our study is exploratory and qualitative in nature and presents an interpretive analysis of responses on the abstract object or term called sustainability where respondents were invited to present a considered view on what they understood to be an important and au courant issue within global discourse. Respondent views need to be considered in the light of the highly positive and evangelical quality of the

meanings attributed to sustainability through policy directives at practically every level of governance and in national and international discourse.

The study is restricted to a small sample of corporate managers. However, the chosen method of data collection involved in-depth semi-structured interviews of corporate managers who were influential communicators and occupied senior management positions in a range of industries. The interviews enabled a more intensive as well as broad ranging view of the range of attitudes and impressions held by the respondents on the subject of sustainability as appropriate to the interpretive constructivist framework of the study.

Significance of Findings

Our study suggests that:

- i. Corporate understanding of and engagement with environment and sustainability is uneven and at a nascent level in public discourse in India.
- ii. Despite the wide acceptance of the classical revivalist approach (Sen 1999) within the development planning sector, the findings of our study do not reveal a change in the general understanding of CSR in India as being anything more than a limited strategy to gain public goodwill and a positive media profile.
- iii. Of great significance in terms of its implications for the global discourse on sustainability was the presence of distinct threads of post-colonial development discourse in business discourse on the subject in India. There was clear evidence of hostility toward sustainability when it was perceived as a concept generated by western neo-colonial powers that was aimed at restricting development and economic prosperity in India. This suggests that in India, it is particularly important to reframe sustainability in a way that establishes a conceptual continuity with traditional socio-cultural values and practice. Strengthening the conceptual association of sustainability with the main themes of the global environmental discourse, including climate change arguments, could be viewed as a neo-colonial imposition. Our findings point to the need to focus on meaning negotiation around sustainability that is specific to the Indian socio-cultural context rather than on technical and economic arguments that, being viewed as external and antithetical to Indian interests, have consequently generated negative reactions from our respondents.
- iv. The challenge is to create a discursive approach within business that does not attempt to superficially co-opt a particular ideology but opens up dialogic space to voices that are not empowered and views that are not

just those emanating from management. Promoting a critical spirit of inquiry and self reflexivity while privileging sustainability values such as equity, burden sharing and democracy has been recognized as the best way to encourage sustainability perspectives within the business sector (Jones et al. 2010) along with a multi-disciplinary approach involving a more holistic appraisal of costs and benefits when business actors consider the social, cultural, economic and political aspects of sustainability (Banerji 2004).

The Link Between Corporate Understanding and Sustainable Business Practice

Our study proposes that reframing sustainability in a manner that breaks association with global sustainability themes and reconnects with socio-culturally relevant values is likely to generate fresh interest and engagement among the Indian public including within the corporate sector. Discursive meaning negotiation can facilitate reframing of sustainability and lead to innovative problem solving approaches within the corporate sphere if promoted and encouraged by managers. All respondents in our study appeared willing and keen to take up sustainability initiatives in their own organizations.

Our contention is further supported by the acknowledgement that the notion of value attributed to nature and ecological health is extremely dependent on cultural interpretations by communities as argued by McAfee in her refutation of the existence of a universal metric by which the real values of nature can be compared or measured by different cultural groups with varying degrees of political and economic power (McAfee 1999). Indeed the variables governing ethical decision-making have been found to be fairly culture specific (Beekun and Westerman 2012). The view that the value of concepts such as nature, the environment and sustainability is determined by local cultural notions was found to be very relevant to our study as the majority of corporate respondents expressed a culturally contextualized view of sustainability. They suggested that sustainability was highly relevant to India, describing it as a principle that was embedded in traditional practice and philosophy. At a personal level nearly all respondents evoked the cultural significance of nature worship and the ethical importance of conservation to the Indian ethos as part of their personal understanding of sustainability.

Our study underscores the need to integrate sustainability ethics and values into corporate decision-making through providing discursive opportunities for reframing the discourse in socio-culturally meaningful ways rather by merely adopting frames favored by the global sustainability discourse.

Conclusion

It is generally apparent that ethical political or economic decision-making best derives its legitimacy from a discursive framework within a deliberative democracy (Ulrich 2008). The findings of our study highlight the powerful role that corporate managers in India ascribe to media in meaning negotiation as well as in creating and maintaining healthy value laden and information rich public discourse in democratic India.

Corporate managers in India do not appear to accord high priority to sustainability even while acknowledging its increasing importance in global business discourse. The relatively low level of urgency accorded to sustainability did not, however, stand in the way of the general endorsement of indirect measures for transformative change with a call for greater reflexivity regarding the need for sustainability ethics and values at the personal level that are aligned with Indian socio-cultural traditions. The encouragement of discursive deliberation as a management sponsored activity through media recognition and other incentives could be the first step toward contextualizing sustainability. Establishing a tensile connection between individual and collective values could thus constitute a firm basis for internalizing sustainability considerations into business decisions at every level.

References

- Adelman, I., & Morris, C. T. (1997). Development history and its implications for development theory: An editorial. *World Development*, 25(6), 831–840.
- Alexander, R. J. (2009). *Framing discourse on the environment: A critical discourse approach*. New York: Routledge.
- Ashford, N. A., & Hall, R. P. (2011). *Technology, globalization and sustainable development: Transforming the industrial state*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Aslund, A., & Dabrowski, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Challenges of globalization: Imbalances and growth*. Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Development.
- Atkisson, A. (2011). *The sustainability transformation*. London: Earthscan.
- Banerji, S. B. (2004). Teaching sustainability: A critical perspective. In C. Galea (Ed.), *Teaching business sustainability* (Vol. 1). Sheffield: Greenleaf Publishing.
- Bargiela-Chiappini, F. (Ed.). (2009). *The handbook of business discourse*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Beckerman, W. (1994). 'Sustainable development': Is it a useful concept? *Environmental Values*, 3(3), 191–209.
- Beekun, R. I., & Westerman, J. W. (2012). Spirituality and national culture as antecedents to ethical decision-making: A comparison between the US and Norway. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 110(1), 33–44.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Boudreaux, D. J. (2008). *Globalization*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

- Bruun, O., & Kalland, A. (Eds.). (1995). *Asian perceptions of nature. Studies in Asian tropics*. London: Curzon Press.
- Butts, D. (2003). *How corporations hurt us all: Saving our rights, democracy and institutions and our future*. Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing.
- Callicott, J. B., & Ames, R. T. (Eds.). (2001). *Nature in Asian traditions and thought: Essays in environmental philosophy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Castelló, I., & Lozano, J. (2011). Searching for new forms of legitimacy through corporate responsibility rhetoric. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 100(1), 11–29.
- Chang, H.-J. (2007). Kicking away the ladder: The ‘real’ history of free trade. In A. Sheikh (Ed.), *Globalization and the myths of free trade: History, theory and empirical evidence* (pp. 23–50). Oxon: Routledge.
- Charmaz, K. (2005). Advancing social justice research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage book of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Chin, G. (2012). *Responding to the Global Financial Crisis: The evolution of Asian regionalism and economic globalization*. ADBI Working Paper 343. Asian Development Bank Institute, Tokyo.
- Chitty, N. (2011). Public diplomacy: Courting publics for short-term advantage or partnering publics for lasting peace and sustainable prosperity. In A. Fisher & S. Lucas (Eds.), *Trials of engagement: The future of US public diplomacy*. Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., et al. (Eds.). (2007). *Research methods in education*. New York: Routledge.
- Corner, J., Richardson, K., et al. (1990). *Nuclear reactions: Form and response in public issue television*. London: John Libbey.
- Cox, P. (2008). Gandhian values and post development: Models for social transformation. In R. Ghosh, K. R. Gupta, & P. Maiti (Eds.), *Development studies* (Vol. 2, pp. 150–189). New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
- Crane, A., & Matten, D. (2007). *Business ethics: Managing corporate citizenship and sustainability in the age of globalization*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Crowther, D., & Capaldi, N. (Eds.). (2008). *The Ashgate research companion to CSR*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing.
- Deloitte. (2010). *Sustainability in business today: A cross-industry view*. New York: Deloitte.
- Dong, L., & Chitty, N. (2012). A comparative study of Chinese and American media treatment of Vice President Xi Jinping’s official tour of the US. *Communications, Politics and Culture*, 45(2), 277–292.
- Dryzek, J. S. (1997). *The politics of the earth: Environmental discourses*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Eco-Business. (2012). *Corporate attitudes towards CSR*. Research. Eco-Business.Com., Singapore.
- Ferguson, T., & Thomas-Hope, E. (2006). Environmental education and constructions of sustainable development in Jamaica. In L. Hill, A. Terry, & W. A. Woodland (Eds.), *Sustainable development: National aspirations, local implementation J* (pp. 91–115). Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.
- Fernando, A. C. (2010). *Business ethics: An Indian perspective*. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley India.
- Fien, J., Yencken, D., et al. (Eds.). (2000). *Environment, education and society in the Asia-Pacific: Local traditions and global discourses*. Routledge advances in Asia Pacific studies. London: Routledge.
- Forey, G., & Lockwood, J. (Eds.). (2010). *Globalization, communication and the workplace: Talking across the world*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Gadsby, H., & Bullivant, A. (Eds.). (2010). *Global learning and sustainable development*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Galea, C. (2004). *Teaching business sustainability: From theory to practice*. Sheffield: Greenleaf.
- Gamson, W. A., & Modigliani, A. (1987). The changing culture of affirmative action. *Research in Political Sociology*, 3, 77–137.
- Gilliam, F. D. (2007). A new dominant frame, Issue 22. Washington, DC: Frameworks Institute.
- Gilliam, F. D., & Bales, S. N. (2001). *Strategic frame analysis: Referencing America’s youth*. Retrieved 25 Feb, 2013, from www.escholarship.org.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.
- Gopalakrishnan, S., & Kaur, R. (2009). Cultural mythology and global leadership in India. In E. H. Kessler & D. J. Wong-Mingji (Eds.), *Cultural mythology and global leadership* (pp. 306–325). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Habermas, J. (1987). *The theory of communicative action: Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Herremans, I. M., & Reid, R. E. (2002). Developing awareness of the sustainability concept. *The Journal of Environment Education*, 34(1), 16–20.
- Holliday, C., Schmidheiny, S., et al. (2002). *Walking the talk: The Business case for sustainable development*. Sheffield: Greenleaf Publishing.
- Huckle, J. (1993). Environmental education and sustainability: A view from critical theory. In J. Fien (Ed.), *Environmental education: A pathway to sustainability* (pp. 43–68). Geelong: Deakin University press.
- Jallow, K. (2008). Sustainability and its place in CSR research. In D. Crowther & N. Capaldi (Eds.), *The Ashgate research companion to corporate social responsibility*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing.
- Jones, P., Selby, D., et al. (Eds.). (2010). *Sustainability education: Perspectives and practice across higher education*. London: Earthscan.
- Joyner, B. E., & Payne, D. (2002). Evolution and implementation: A study of values, business ethics and corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 41, 297–311.
- Kates, R., Parris, T., et al. (2005). What is sustainable development? Goals, indicators, values, and practice. *Environment Magazine*, 47(3), 8–21.
- Krippendorff, K. (1980). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Ledwith, M. (2001). *Community development—A critical approach*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Lele, S. (1991). Sustainable development: A critical review. *World Development*, 19(6), 607–621.
- Lichtman, M. (2010). *Qualitative research in education: A user’s guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mandal, S. K. (2010). *Ethics in business and corporate governance*. New Delhi: Tata McGraw Hill.
- Mattei, L., & Dinu, T. (2010). Regulation and best practices in public and non profit marketing. In *9th International Congress of the International Association of Public and Non profit Marketing*. Bucharest: Editura Economica.
- McAfee, K. E. (1999). *Biodiversity and the contradictions of green developmentalism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.
- Neuman, W. R., Just, M., et al. (1992). *Common knowledge: News and the construction of political meaning*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Newton, T. J., & Harte, G. (1997). Green business: Technician kitsch? *Journal of Management Studies*, 34(1), 75–98.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Purvis, M., & Grainger, A. (2004). *Exploring sustainable development: Geographical perspectives*. London: Earthscan.

- Rudolph, L. I., & Rudolph, S. H. (2006). *Post modern Gandhi and other essays: Gandhi in the world and at home*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sahoo, S. (2010). Political mobilisation, the poor and democratisation in neo-liberal India. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 40(3), 487–508.
- Sarkar, J. (2007). *The Indian economy: Policies, practices and heresies*. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley.
- Schumacher, E. F. (1999). *Small is beautiful: Economics as if people mattered 25 years later*. Vancouver, BC: Hartley and Marks.
- Semetko, H. A., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2000). Framing European politics: A content analysis of press and TV news. *Journal of Communication*, 50(2), 93–109.
- Sen, A. K. (1999). *Development as freedom*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Smart, V., Burman, T., et al. (2010). *Incorporating Ethics into Strategy: Developing sustainable business models*. Retrieved 19 Feb, 2013, from www.cima.org.
- Smith, N. C., Bhattacharya, C., et al. (2010). *Global challenges in responsible business*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Springett, D. (2003). Business conceptions of sustainable development: A perspective from critical theory. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 12(2), 71–86.
- Stringer, E. T. (2007). *Action research*. London: Sage.
- Tench, R., Sun, W., et al. (Eds.). (2012). *Corporate social irresponsibility. Critical studies on corporate responsibility, governance and sustainability*. Emerald Group: Bingley.
- Todaro, M. P. (1981). *Economic development in the third world*. New York: Longman.
- Ulrich, P. (2008). *Integrative economic ethics: Foundations of a civilized market economy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Vienneau, R. (2012, 26 July). *Thoughts on economics: Amartya Sen and the second phase of the classical revival*. Retrieved Feb 15, 2013, from <http://robertvienneau.blogspot.com.au/2012/07/amartya-sen-and-second-phase-of.html>.
- Walsh, V. C., & Gram, H. (1980). *Classical and neoclassical theories of general equilibrium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Warnke, G. (1987). *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, tradition, and reason*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- WCED. (1987). *Our common future*. United Nations.
- Werhane, P. H., & Singer, A. E. (Eds.). (1999). *Business ethics in theory and practice: Contributions from Asia and New Zealand*. Amsterdam: Kluwer.