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10 Years of
The Science of
Persuasion

From Transaction to Transformation

New Rules for
effective CSR in the
21st Century

June 26, 2025

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We are a safehouse at sea.
Follow the light,
and the bigger picture, you'll see.
Ride the waves to shore,
so, you remember what you know-
By earth we are united,
By land we are surrounded,
And the only way of life
is to stay grounded.

The Specialist Reputation Management Advisory

Ashwani Singla

Founding Managing Partner, Astrum

At a time when the role of business in society is under intense scrutiny, the insights generated by this study are more relevant than ever before as the responsibility to create positive social impact is a business imperative.

However, meaningful social change cannot be built on good intentions alone. It requires clarity of purpose, deep community understanding, and a commitment to stay the course. As corporate leaders, we are being called to "go beyond compliance and engage in social investment that is strategic, measurable, and sustainable."

This report is an outcome of a rigorous study bringing together the voices of over 2,000 stakeholders of the CSR ecosystem across India, from senior CSR heads and NGO leaders to frontline workers and community members. The insights challenge many assumptions and offer a practical roadmap for moving from "transactional CSR to transformational social impact."

Reputation is built not only on what we do in boardrooms, but also on how we show up in communities. That is why we have developed tools like the **Social Impact Index™** and the **Social Impact Focus** framework to help organizations define their social purpose, sharpen their CSR strategy, and build enduring trust with their communities. **Social Impact Organisations (SIOs)** is a new term we have minted for the emerging leaders and the islands of excellence, who are redefining the principles of CSR in the 21st century by emphasizing sustainable social transformation over transactional CSR interventions.

We have built our success with our pioneering and relentless dedication to our belief that science and insight must power the pathways to sustainable reputation. This report reflects that belief. It is my sincere hope that it serves as a compass for CSR leaders, helping them navigate the complex but rewarding journey of social transformation.

We are grateful to those shared their voice to make this report possible. We remain committed to supporting those who are determined to make a difference, not just with heart, but with rigour and accountability.

Thank you Sharada and team for lighting the pathway to social transformation.

The increasing importance of CSR

1

The rise of ESG

Social impact is no longer a peripheral initiative. It is a core driver of business valuation, reputation, and regulatory compliance.

2

Investor Pressure and Capital Flow

Businesses that fail to demonstrate responsible practices risk being deprioritized in capital allocation and investment decisions.

3

Consumers Expect Purpose, Not Just Product

Modern consumers, especially Gen Z and Millennials expect brands to take a stand on social issues, support communities, and operate with integrity, making social impact a market differentiator.

4

Talent and Culture imperatives

A strong social impact agenda enhances employee engagement, attracts purpose-driven talent, and fosters an inclusive culture. Companies that lead with values build more resilient and innovative workforces.

5

Risk, Resilience, and Long-Term Value

In a world shaped by climate shocks, inequality, and social unrest, proactive social engagement is critical for long-term value creation.

Insights from **2k** interviews across the country

90
Senior Leaders Interviews

- CSR Heads
- Business Heads
- Project Heads
- NGO Leaders
- Social Impact Experts
- HNI Donors

150
Local Influencer Interviews

- BDOs
- District Officers
- Sarpanch
- Gram Panchayat Members
- Anganwadi Workers
- Asha Workers
- Postman
- Teachers
- Headmasters
- PHC Doctors
- Community Leaders

1829
Local Community Poll

- Across the country
- Age
- Gender
- Life Stage
- Occupation
- Social Class
- Beneficiaries
- 20+ Geographies

Focus of this Report

01

Why and what of Social Impact?

02

What does it take to create social impact?

03

How to make the transition from transactional to transformative?
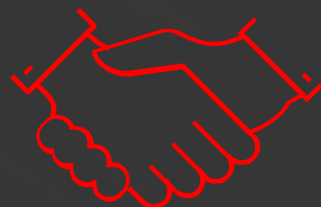
04

Credits: About Astrum

01

Why and
what of Social
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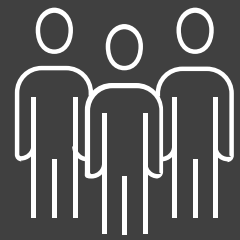
Who we are...

1. *"Highly socio-economically vulnerable"*

2. *"Facing a vicious cycle of issues impacting our lives, livelihoods, and access to social support"*

3. *"The state of infrastructure we live in is dismal"*

4. *"Not everyone of us who deserves to, has access to Government Schemes"*

What we need...

1. *"Be sensitive to our dignity of life"*

2. *"We may be under privileged, but we are sensitive about our self respect"*

3. *"Respect our local sensitivities"*

4. *"Equip us with skill sets to earn an income and create opportunities for employment"*

5. *"You can help us only if you understand what we need"*

TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

"Sustainable impact on a large group of people by solving a problem through a localised approach."

1. **Wholistic improvement** Quality of life, livelihoods and environment

2. **Self-empowered** communities

3. **Critical role in crisis –** Disaster Relief, Pandemic Driven by compassion

4. **Influence Public Policy**

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Who is driving transformative change?

45% NGOs	**26%** Central Government
14% State Government	**7%** Local Government (Panchayats/ Municipal Corporations)
3% Spiritual Organisations	**3%** Private Sector Companies

Consistent transformational impact gets recognised

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- NGOs
- Corporates
- Spiritual organisations

Make transformational Impact to become **SIOs (Social Impact Organisations)**

02

What does
it take to
create social impact?

Values — Is doing good a part of your DNA?

Champion — Do you share success stories and failure stories so that others can benefit? | Do you co-opt peers to do good? | Do you lead industrywide efforts on social/ sustainability causes?

Commitment — What is the continuity of your programs? | Do you completely own a community, a geography and turn it around? | Is the model replicable/ scalable? | Do you have a clear exit plan?

Purpose — What is at the heart of your community programs? | Are you invested because it is the right thing to do? | Do you think it is your moral responsibility?

Connection — Do you understand the nuances of development? | How deeply are you invested in understanding the needs of the community?

Credibility — How does your day-to-day business impact the lives of communities?

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Shortage of trained and passionate social sector professionals
50%

Poor understanding of local community needs
46%

Limited focus on long-term outcomes
46%

Lack of transparency and accountability
43%

Absence of frameworks to measure impact
42%

Low appeal as a career for talented professionals
40%

Weak governance standards
37%

Influence of vested political or corporate agendas
36%

Overlapping focus on common issues
35%

Insufficient commitment to specific causes
35%

Inadequate funding
33%

Corruption
30%

Inefficient execution
28%

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> Right focus on important issues across communities. The CSR team is collaborative, open to feedback, and has high involvement.
>
> Milestones and measures are clearly laid out. But social impact cannot happen in one year. They can't keep changing priorities. Also often, they take too long to provide approvals on initiatives"

There is donor fatigue

Passion project over community need

Shifting priorities every year

Programmes are not scalable

Want to do too many things

Tactical and one-off initiatives

Delayed decision making

Teams work in silos

Expectations from Social Impact Organisations

Works for the greater good
70%

Acts ethically and transparently
67%

Utilizes social media platforms to reach and engage with a wider audience
67%

Builds trust through consistent and responsible actions
64%

Promotes active community participation
63%

Recognises cultural nuances and adapts to changing needs
62%

Transparent sources of funding with utilisation disclosure
62%

Real time monitoring and reporting
62%

Innovates to solve real challenges
61%

Focuses on long-term, social transformation
59%

Has an active board to oversee its activities
59%

Follows ethical fundraising practices
59%

Regularly participates in forums, & conferences
59%

Collaborates with stakeholders
58%

Has a skilled and experienced leadership team
56%

How do you evaluate your implementation partner

43%
NGO strength and stability on leadership, staff expertise, and financial health

31%
Transparent financial management and accountability

30%
Clear approach/ implementing strategy for effective implement

28%
Sustainability & scalability in terms of reach & geographies

28%
Community engagement

27%
Coordination with local schools, Panchayats, parents, and community leaders to ensure effective implementation

27%
Transparent communication with all stakeholders about the scheme's goals, progress, and any issues

26%
Performance in previous or government schemes on timelines, quality, and results

23%
Optimal utilization of funds and resources

23%
Committed to government guidelines & policies

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03

From Transactional to Transformative

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We do community interventions

1 We are committed to transform lives of communities

Transactional and tactical

2 Sustained efforts driven by transformation goals

Scattered and one off

3 Part of integrated social impact strategy

Communicate reach

4 Stories that resonate

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- ✓ **Need Assessment**
- ✓ **Clear and measurable goals and milestones**
- ✓ **Regular monitoring of reach, outputs, outcomes and impact**
- ✓ **Institutionalisation of data**
- ✓ **Regular reporting**

Technology to improve operations, governance and reporting

Communication Fundamentals

Respect privacy of beneficiaries

Preserve their dignity

Go beyond "photo ops" for attention to "photos that tell a story"

Communicate beyond "what you did" to " what impact looks like"

Reached

Benefitted

Impacted

Transformed

Stats → **Stories** → **Sound Bytes**

04

Credits: About Astrum

About Astrum

Astrum is India's first specialist reputation management advisory that uses the *science of persuasion* to understand and shape public opinion ethically. Founded by Ashwani Singla, in 2015 as the next progression for public relations, Astrum is leading the way in rooting creativity in science to offer '*research-based multidisciplinary strategic communication solutions to sustain and protect reputation & license to operate.*'

A work ethic founded on *ownership and accountability* to solve some of our client's toughest challenges sets us apart. Our multi-disciplinary professionals help our C Suite clients successfully negotiate the complex landscape of *Reputation, Risk and Regulation*. Applying the same principles of insights-led thinking, we advise Political leaders to win the mandate of their voters.

Our services include Bespoke Market Research, 3i Multi-Disciplinary Strategic Communication Programmes, ESG Consulting, Crisis Preparedness Planning, Crisis Communications, Policy Advocacy and Election Strategy. Our C Suite capacity building workshops include Message Development, Media Training, Crisis & issues Management.

We serve clients through our presence in the NCR, Mumbai, and Bangalore and reach 60 cities and towns in all major states of India and 100 cities across 30 countries in five continents across the globe through our network of partners and exclusive affiliates.

Ashwani Singla

Founding Managing Partner, Astrum

Ashwani Singla is the Founding Managing Partner of Astrum, India's first specialist reputation management advisory that uses the *Science of Persuasion* to understand and shape public opinion ethically. Ashwani has made his passion of generating proprietary insights to inform strategy and messaging, as the bedrock of his work and is a sought after trusted advisor and strategist by both the C-Suite & Political leaders. Speaking about the uniqueness of Astrum, he says, "deep insights are often the fountainhead of breakthrough thinking and data supported decisions will always have a greater probability of success." Astrum is a pioneer of this convergence of science and creativity.

He along with his multi-disciplinary team of professionals works closely with the C-Suite to resolve the complex challenges they face in successfully negotiating the landscape of Reputation, Risk, Regulation & ESG. Applying the same principles of insights led thinking, he advises senior Political leaders to win the mandate of their voters. He has been an advisor to several national and regional election campaigns with leading political parties, including the historic 2014 Lok Sabha campaign for the BJP.

Prior to founding Astrum, Ashwani, was the Asia MD, of PSB Research and the CEO & Co-Promoter of Genesis Burson-Marsteller, where he led the firm from its infancy to an extremely successful transition from Genesis PR to Genesis Burson-Marsteller (now Burson) after its acquisition by WPP and subsequently served on the Asia Pacific Board of Burson-Marsteller.

He is the Founder Executive Director of Impact Research & Measurement, India's leader in media intelligence & measurement and serves on the advisory boards of several companies.

Ashwani Hold a Graduate degree in Economics and PG Diploma in International Management. He has successfully completed executive education programmes from Indian Schol of Business(ISB) and the Harvard Business School, USA.

Sharada Adhikari Sharma

Co-founder & Chief Science Officer, Astrum

Sharada Adhikari Sharma is the Co-Founder and Chief Science Officer of Astrum, India's first specialist reputation management advisory that uses the *Science of Persuasion* to understand and shape public opinion ethically .

An ace researcher with close to two decades of experience, she is sharply focused on research-based consulting, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, to help clients find answers to their most searching questions.

She has led engagements for both domestic and multinational companies helping them develop pathways to successfully negotiate the complex landscape if Reputation, Risk, Regulation and ESG. Sharada also has rich experience in both national and regional level polling to develop election campaign strategies for clients.

With her initial stint as an educationist, she is a natural talent developer and mentors' young minds into successful professionals. Sharada is an Economics Honours Graduate from Shri Ram College of Commerce and holds a Master's in Economics from Delhi School of Economics (DSE), Delhi University

Sharada has certification in Public Policy Analysis from London School of Economic and Political Science (LSE), UK, sharpening her understanding of analytical frameworks, quantitative techniques, and research methodologies to comprehend and interpret the policy process and factors that contribute to policy success and failure.

She has completed an intensive online course on Transformational Leadership from XLRI Jamshedpur, going through the journey of self-discovery, and studying the tools and frameworks to lead oneself, one's teams, and the organization in an increasingly complex world, to deliver exceptional results

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