**Inclusive Society for Divyang – My Dream**

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**Who are ‘Divyang’ ?**

Individuals with missing or dysfunctional organs are increasingly being referred to in India as ‘divyang’, i.e. the Sanskrit word for the beings with divine organs. The sentiment behind this terminology can be justified using the cultural interpretations of Bhagvad Gita, which suggests that the divine spirit can neither be pierced by a weapon, burned by fire, drenched by water or withered by wind. Since the missing/dysfunctional organ of the person is no longer of any physical significance but only of spiritual, referring them as ‘divyang’ elevates them to a position of respect while also acknowledging the very real challenges they face due to their loss.

People facing a variety of long-term issues with their mobility/functionality of limbs as well as visibility, hearing and mental health can be classified as divyang. These issues affect every part of their lives and are often a source of emotional distress for themselves and their family/friends.

Such disability can originate from either a disease, an accident or elderly age. This makes every person a potential divyang. While it is true that most people are statistically unlikely to encounter such misfortune, the widespread belief that ‘it will never happen to me’ is unfounded.

**What is an inclusive society ?**

The position of a person in a society is always defined by their relationships with persons representing other parts of that society including their family/friends, teachers, strangers in public places, employers, clients, colleagues and service providers. The limitations of divyang become readily apparent in most social interactions which may also require an additional support from the other person. While such support may be happily provided in many cases, it may also be perceived as burdensome or inconvenient at times. This places the relationship between the divyang and the society under an enormous strain and often leads to social isolation of divyang. The society considers divyang as a liability worthy to be ignored and at best, to be sympathetic towards. It eventually become a society exclusive for ‘normal’ people.

An inclusive society, on the other hand accepts not only the harsh reality that disability exists but also that the people suffering from disability deserve to be a part of the society as much as any other group of people. The characteristics of an inclusive society for divyang are: (i) societal respect, not in form of pity but out of dignifying them to a level of a fellow human being (ii) empowerment through relevant education and training and (iii) facilitation of routine activities at home and at public places.

India has had a long reputation as a diverse and pluralistic society where many languages, customs, ethnicities and religions thrive. Cultures from outside of India have been successfully and mutually assimilated into Indian society over millennia. On the other hand, the acceptance of divyang into wider Indian society has been considerably less than proportionate. Most disabled individuals succeeding either have privileged background or benefit from lucky coincidences. The fact that India arguably has the highest population of disabled individuals around the world makes this social injustice even more relevant.

**Social constructs**

The society is a complex web of several institutions, such as family and friends who shape the early development of an individual. Schools and colleges provide support in developing the intellect and knowledge base required to live in the world, and also help the individual in becoming employable. Festivals and celebrations are an integral part of Indian society. Public service providers such as healthcare professionals, shops, restaurants and public buildings are a go-to destinations in daily lives, so is the employment. All of the above social institutions have to conform within the regulatory framework set by the law and authorities. Since disability can be acquired at any point and affects most aspects of life, all of the above social institutions need to accommodate the emotional and physical requirements of divyang.

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| Major components of society. |

**Family and Friends**

The onset of disability for an individual, especially for a child does not only come as a shock to them but to the entire family. A wave of shock ripples across the family and friends of the disabled individual. The first emotional response is often of denial, that it cannot be or is not true, followed by deep frustration. It is usually a long time before the family accepts the reality and starts planning about how to minimise the discomfort and the impact over life caused by the disability. Even then, many tend to suggest that the disability is caused by the destiny of sufferer and there is nothing other can or should do about it.

An inclusive society would have counselling facilities for anyone who has acquired a disability as well as for their family members. Government, NGOs and spiritual organisations can fill this gap quite easily. Such counselling can help people (i) cope with the emotional shock by providing moral support and then (ii) develop a plan to minimise the adverse effect the disability may bring to the life.

Especially in underprivileged families, the tendency may develop to see the divyang as a burden upon family in many different ways including financially. In most such cases, the disabled person is tolerated but with heavily diminished respect as a family member. This could be best mitigated by education and awareness about what needs to be done for mitigating the adverse effects of disability, i.e. providing training and equipment to divyang. The person in question needs to be examined by a qualified medical professional for a complete assessment for their requirements. Based on this assessment, personal requirements can be met.

For example, individuals with mobility issues need to be provided with prosthetics, walking sticks or wheelchairs, whereas upper limb losses can also be mitigated with hand prosthetics and hearing loss with hearing aid. Vision impairment can be managed with braille training. Such training and equipment should be provided either free or at a subsidised cost to the needy individuals by NGOs.

Such training and equipment help an individual retain much of their lost independence and self-respect in an underprivileged social environment. 3D printed prosthetics are a relatively recent invention which have the potential to help many divyang with their mobility and functionality.

**Education**

Learning institutions have a significant contribution to be made into betterment of divyang lives by empowering them with (i) life skills for their independent (as much as possible) survival and (ii) enhanced employability. The availability of schools for challenged individuals is disproportionately low in comparison to the number of such individuals in India. Most schools are exclusive for students with no known disabilities.

An inclusive society should not only have schools and colleges specially dedicated to divyang but also mixed school in which all types of students can study. Mixed schools provide an opportunity for interaction between disabled and other students and pave way to a closer social integration of divyang from early years of life.

Schools and colleges also help identify the individual window of ability for divyang, thereby providing them the education more suitable for their situation. Each divyang has unique set of limitations and abilities. For example, an individual may have mobility issues but has excellent planning skills. The other individual may have vision impairment but is very good with writing or singing or dubbing. These divyang can be educated in line with their own talents to bring the best out of them.

Recently, the charitable organisation Voice of Specially Abled People (VoSAP) helped a blind divyang secure an admission in a medical school at Ahmedabad. This was made possible through the intervention of the Honourable Supreme Court of India. It is quite apparent how this incident not only changed the life of that blind divyang, but of countless other struggling to access higher education in India. Such a ruling has opened the door of opportunities for divyang and is one step towards the inclusive society.

**Social institutions**

An inclusive society always has equal opportunities for people with disabilities for all social activities including leisure. In such society, public places such as shops, restaurants, government and private offices, places of worship and leisure are all accessible for divyang.

Unfortunately, significant work needs to be done in India in order to make all public places accessible despite much progress being made. A notable initiative for this cause is the mobile app by the charity Voice of Specially Abled People. This app allows user to rate the accessibility of public places so that divyang can plan their visit accordingly and non-accessible places can be identified so that requests can be made to make them accessible. The nature of this app is that the more popular it gets; more useful it becomes.

Government policies and law are another very significant factors affecting society. In EU and USA, right to equal opportunities for disabled is enshrined in the law. Such rights extend to all aspects of society, such as education, employment and social welfare. Policies promoting equal opportunities bring everyone on a level playing field and create more inclusive society. Many such initiatives have also been taken in India. Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 was passed in India which, among many other provisions made it an offence to discriminate against the disabled. Individual states such as Gujarat also adopted their own disability policies which include free MMR vaccination.

**Employment for Divyang**

Employing divyang has been seen as somewhat of a burden by many employers in India. Since disabled constitute more than 2% of Indian population according to 2011 census, excluding them from the workforce has significant economic and social ramifications.

Regulatory support from the government and innovative thinking from employers is needed to create more inclusive workspaces. A particularly inspiring story from my home town of Bhavnagar is relevant here. A business owner had a hardware workshop with very loud machines. These machines worked continuously and it was very difficult for people to work in that environment even with ear-plugs. This resulted into low staff retention and was affecting the business. The owner had a revolutionary idea, and he employed workforce of deaf people in his workshop. Every single person working in those surroundings was now a deaf person. He not only gave employment to people who could not have been employed elsewhere, he also had an excellent staff retention afterwards.

In India, the government has been providing incentives to the employers for employing divyang by offering to pay the employer’s share of provident fund contributions. Voice of Specially Abled People has also encouraged corporate leaders to allocate 10% to 20% of their corporate social responsibility funds to the cause of people with disabilities.

These activities indeed help transform the workplace to be more inclusive where people with disabilities are not seen as a liability but rather as an asset.

**Conclusion**

When there is a need to bring about a massive social transformation, people often ask: what can I do on my own ? Based on the examples above, it is quite apparent that no matter who or what one is in a society, be it a homemaker or an employer, a teacher or a student or any other professional person, there is always something they can do to make the society more inclusive for people with disabilities. Even if it is apparent that nobody else around them is doing their own share, one must never forget that while they may not make a difference to the whole world by helping only one divyang, they are indeed changing the world for that particular person. And that is, my friends, how the revolutions begin !