

# ABILITY

India's cross-disability magazine

March 2020



18TH CAVINKARE ABILITY AWARDS

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## CavinKare Ability Awards 2020

Experience the glitz and grandeur of the 18th CavinKare Ability Awards 2020 with Bhuvaneshwari Mahalingam, as she takes you through the star-studded evening that celebrated five real-life heroes – Anindya Bhattacharyya, Swarnalatha J, Adil Mohammed Nazir Ansari, Tinkesh and Rakshitha Raju.

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## EmployABILITY

EmployABILITY 2019 was an occasion that saw careers made, networks forged, and horizons expanded. As you take in the success of this event, and its evolution and impact down the years, ponder too on why persons with disabilities continue to be inadequately represented in the corporate workforce, implores Hema Vijay.



## WE'D REALLY LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU

Whether you are a person with disability, or a parent, or a friend, or just someone who cares, we would love to hear from you.

**You are just a click away!**

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## 16 வகை அனைத்தும் சிறந்த சுவை

உங்கள் உணவை மேலும் சிறப்பாக்க,  
நாங்கள் ஆவக்காய், தொக்கு, எலுமிச்சம்,  
பூண்டு, தக்காளி, இஞ்சி போன்ற 16  
சிறந்த ஊறுகாய் வகைகள் தருகிறோம்.  
அத்தனையும் ருசித்திடுங்கள்.





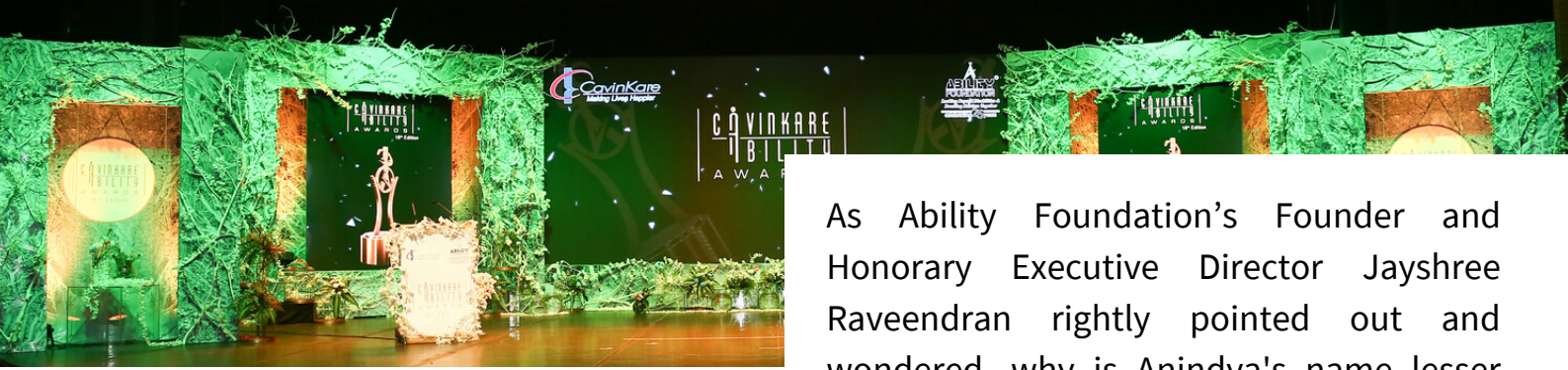
# THE FIVE STARS



What a blessing it was to witness the grandeur of the 18th CavinKare Ability Awards 2020, extols Bhuvaneswari Mahalingam. A star-studded evening for sure, and a celebration of the Five Stars, the unsung heroes. A big salute to Anindya Bhattacharyya, Swarnalatha J, Adil Mohammed Nazir Ansari, Tinkesh and Rakshitha Raju – the five recipients – under the categories of Special Recognition, Eminence and Mastery.





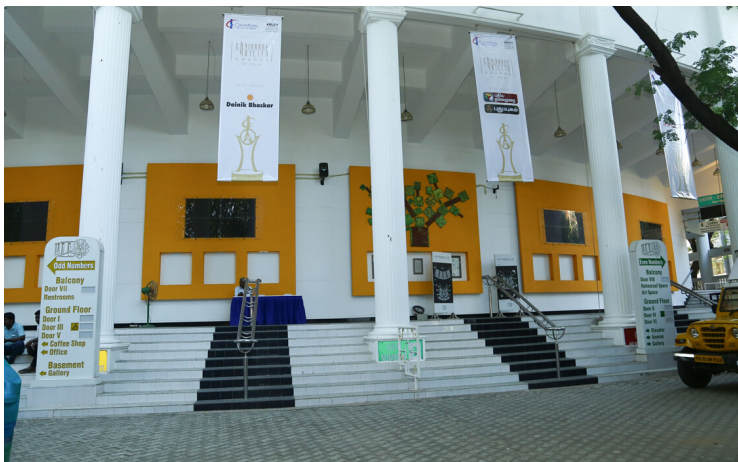


**Spellbound and still** recovering from AbilityFEST 2019's impact, *Success & ABILITY*'s charm and EmployABILITY 2019's amazement, moments with Ability Foundation have been inspiring for me. The Silver Jubilee milestone is yet another feather in the cap of the ever-jubilant Ability Foundation. Ability Foundation embraces rich processes, fine coordination and the full presence of its team tuned to deliver world class outcome. Along with the magical orchestration highlighted by the evening's host – musician, educator, community champion and writer Anil Srinivasan, the classy team members, partners, well-wishers and volunteers put together astonishing packages that unfolded as awesome experiences for the audience.

As Ability Foundation's Founder and Honorary Executive Director Jayshree Raveendran rightly pointed out and wondered, why is Anindya's name lesser known than Helen Keller's, among us Indians? For sure, there are other deafblind heroes making a magnificent mark and they need to be recognized, like Helen Keller. Likewise, while listening to Swarnalatha, I felt like an inadequate, uninformed local, because while I can't remember the number of rounds Pakistan's Wheelchair Activist Muniba Mazari's videos would have made on social media, I hadn't come across Swarnalatha on SM. As an activist, as a mother, as a wife and as an exemplary woman from Coimbatore, Swarnalatha deserves greater presence on social media, I felt. Tinkesh deserves to be every young man's fitness icon. He is every adrenaline junkie's inspiration and 'go to' person. Adil conveys the power of the inner voice which not only transformed his thinking but his entire life. He set himself seemingly impossible records and is bringing medals for India in archery, which clearly feel like miracles. Rakshitha is a sparkling sports star and a born athlete, a natural talent spotted by great souls who happened to be her grandmother, brother, mentors, guides and supporters. She stands as an example of how far one can go with nothing much to start with – be it parents or money.







Rakshitha's "Thank you! Thank you!" was the cutest part of the evening.

Ability Foundation sets the bar high and outdoes itself, event after event. This trait is applicable to every recipient of the award. Their achievements were not to outdo their disabilities or others' capabilities but to go beyond what they themselves might have believed they could do. They surpassed their bars and emerged as outstanding performers exceeding all expectations, staying true to themselves, rediscovering their abilities and

*Ability Foundation embraces rich processes, fine coordination and the full presence of its team tuned to deliver world class outcome.*

power. They are free. They are on fire. Their disabilities and disadvantages, whether by birth or acquired, have little to do with what they are today. Their horizons have expanded. Sure, this is true of every nominee for the award, whether or not they got shortlisted, and even of those who are too remote to even get nominated, but are nevertheless triumphant on a daily basis.

The commonality visible among all the award recipients was their connection with the supreme source, force and energy that is abundant and unfailing. Borrowing Swarna's words, I add, "The five stars are limited editions filled with limitless surprises for the world. Every such star is a powerhouse of inspiration, motivation and hope. Their positivity and their solution oriented thinking sets them apart from the rest. The stars have little time to hover over misfortune, mishap or misery.





They move on. They become better than they were before. They strive to make the world better for all.

The CavinKare Ability Awards is a journey, each year. The planning and steps that went into making the event – from the launch of the advertisements calling for nominations to the receiving and screening of nominations, shortlisting, jury constitution, discussions and selections through jury sittings, finalisation of the recipients, and the presentation of their stories through captivating audio-visuals were shared during the course of the evening.

The event happened in an accessible hall, with an accessible stage, with the accompanying members on high alert. The stage saw a transformed presence for every award presentation. The screening of the audio-visual on the recipient and the reading of the citation preceded each presentation (and the trophies were thoughtfully collected from the recipients to let them stay unburdened while giving their acceptance speeches). Interspersed with the awards presentation, people who

*Ability events are always beautiful, for we get to witness a variety of modes of communication happening all around, putting to use all senses, signs and symbols.*





contributed to the event were felicitated with mementos. It was a well thought out event that flawlessly unfolded with precision. Rounding it off was an elaborate dinner in honour of the awardees, for them and the entire audience.

Long before 6.30 p.m. when the curtain went up, the venue was ready and one could feel the festive spirit pervading the air. Arriving early to breathe in the magic, I felt lucky to experience a warm welcome from Ability team members. I witnessed the social media updates going live, and enjoyed following the event on social media alongside seeing it for real.

The stage decoration was on the theme of nature. There were cages trailing with plants and fishbowls with live fish making it a 'live' stage. Moving fish inside the bowls go unnoticed...it takes a few moments of restfulness and mindfulness to see them move. Likewise, so many good things go unnoticed and so many lives are taken for granted. For those fish, their bowl is perhaps their ocean. The CavinKare Ability Awards are a step to ensure inclusion of every fish into the mainstream ocean. This one step in the right direction changes, inspires and transforms everyone alike.



Anindya Bhattacharyya shared with the audience how he thought it was a joke when he first heard about the award being conferred on him. A living legend, he demonstrates what it means to be fully alive each moment. During the onstage interaction, he explained the support of technology in his life which has enabled his independent travel. Jayshree Raveendran's remembrance about her interactions with Anindya using computer and braille many years ago, and likewise, film maker and Trustee of Ability Foundation, Revathy remembering Anindya's previous guide dog Dina by name, and her remembrance of Anindya's sense of humour were among the warm moments of the evening.



Those with abilities tend to take their abilities for granted. No wonder, there is the tendency to take the struggles of people with disabilities for granted as well. An event like the CavinKare Ability Awards takes us forward by leaps and bounds, because the five stars offered no (lame!) excuses. They leave us with guilt for under utilizing our abilities and over-using our excuse list. In all its awe and majesty, their life becomes their message. We term this experience as 'humbling', for we know, now we're the audience and they are the performers – and not just for this evening.



*The five stars are limited editions filled with limitless surprises for the world. Every such star is a powerhouse of inspiration, motivation and hope. Their positivity and their solution-oriented-thinking sets them apart from the rest. The stars have little time to hover over misfortune, mishap or misery. They move on. They become better than they were before. They strive to make the world better for all.*

Ability events are always beautiful, for we get to witness a variety of modes of communication happening all around, putting to use all senses, signs and symbols. While watching Anindya and his interpreter, it struck me how a mother or primary caregiver understands the less-defined abstract communication of an infant. It is because of those people with caregiver-like qualities such as deep compassion, sensitivity, patience, genuine care, love, understanding and receptivity that a sign language system to reach out to deafblind people might have evolved. It begins from the realisation, "Embrace differences! Everyone matters! Everyone deserves the same deal! Everyone has something precious to say! Everyone can do something so well! Every contribution is important and matters!"

The great souls who walk the extra mile and the support systems, facilitative efforts and the environment that ensures that people with diverse abilities meaningfully participate with mutual respect, dignity and joy is what inclusion is all about. Every Angel with Swarnalatha, Rakshitha, Anindya, Adil and Tinkesh, celebrating them and their success forever with pride, deserve a bow of gratitude and praise.





A photograph of three men sitting on a white sofa on a stage. The man on the left is wearing a white shirt. The man in the middle is wearing a dark suit and a light-colored bow tie. The man on the right is wearing a grey blazer over a maroon shirt and has curly hair. They are all looking towards the right. The background is a large green leafy wall. The floor is dark and reflective.

# ANINDYA BHATTACHARYYA

## CavinKare Ability Special Recognition Award

He is a trailblazer whose road to success leaves us with positivity and hope. Born in a small village in West Bengal, deafblind early on from childhood. Today, leading a full life, essaying a beautiful life-story, overcoming the trials and travails that he faced, Anindya Bhattacharyya stands tall as a pioneer, a technology tester, an entrepreneur, an activist, a family man, a man of many hobbies, an avid and independent traveller... and much more.



Picture this.

*Anindya holds a bachelor's degree in political science from University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR).*

*He works full time, as the coordinator of the National Outreach Technology Development and Training Program at the Helen Keller National Center (HKNC) based in NY. He lives out his goal of helping other deafblind people achieve their dreams and become successful.*

*He trains consumers and technology trainers with a wide range of vision and hearing loss to use computers via braille access, screen magnification and speech output.*

*He evaluates and beta tests various Windows and Mac OS X-based applications, prototypes of new products, and telecommunications equipment and services for people with access needs.*

*He is in charge of the Florida and Iowa Deafblind equipment distribution programs and travels extensively between these states to provide technology assessments and to distribute equipment and training to all eligible consumers.*

*There's more, Anindya also runs a digital online store business and is the CEO of the company, Bapin Group, LLC.*

*He is the founder of the first-ever International Deafblind Expo which had deafblind participants touch and feel various products and interact directly with vendors...*

*We pause for breath!*





His professional success apart, Anindya has been dynamic as an activist. In fact, even as an undergraduate student at the UALR, Anindya served on its committee on the American Disabilities Act for five years, wherein he represented the Facilities Subcommittee to make sure the campus was made accessible through modifications such as ramps, electric doors and adaptive computer equipment. Today, he is a member of the Coalition of Organizations for Accessible Technology (COAT) that makes contributions and monitors legislative activities that improve accessibility for people with disabilities including deaf blindness. In 2010, along with a representative

from the American Association of the Deafblind (AADB), he helped push for the passage of the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act. He also served on the 2010-2014 Equipment Program Advisory Committee (EPAC) under Deaf and Disabled Telecommunications Program (DDTP) in California to ensure that deafblind Californians receive adequate telecommunications equipment and services. Such has been his prolificity and dynamism.





Says Anindya, “All over the world, people are now being supportive to people with disabilities now. And technology has proved to be an amazing game changer too. I have become truly independent. Technology allows us to do so much these days”. Nevertheless, he calls for more research and development in access technology, which would bring down the cost factor of accessibility devices. He says, “Only then can access technology truly reach all people with disabilities”.

To say that this has been an incredible journey for Anindya would be an understatement. From the small village in West Bengal, learning to speak and lip read by feeling his mother’s throat and lip movements, experiencing every hardship possible, from vagrant classmates to being expelled from school as no one could reckon how to teach him to live traumatic years all alone, unable to communicate, to turning

tides in his favour at Behala School for the Blind in Calcutta to the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts, where he opted to live alone and learnt English, braille, and sign language and also to live independently. He went on to get a university degree and onward to the path that we now know so well.

Today, Anindya is a leader of the deafblind community, a successful professional, an entrepreneur, an activist, a sports enthusiast and a man of many hobbies. He lives a full life and makes you truly believe that so much is possible, despite the terrible challenges that life may throw at you. He says, “All of us have struggles in life. With positivity and an open mind, no matter what our dreams are, we can achieve it”. He adds, “It is okay if we fail... because it is part of life and we do get to learn something from it”.

Anindya’s next dream? “To be going around in a self-driving car”.



*“All of us have struggles in life. With positivity and an open mind, no matter what our dreams are, we can achieve it. It is okay if we fail...because it is part of life and we do get to learn something from it”.*



CAVINKARE  
ABILITY  
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18<sup>th</sup> Edition

Media Partner



# SWARNALATHA J

## CavinKare Ability Award For Eminence



Hers is an incredible journey of courage, positivity and initiative. This winsome lady, with her dazzling smile, is a role model by way of her attitude as well as her achievements. In a span of a few years, the Swarga Charitable Trust, founded by Swarnalatha along with her husband Guruprasad has made huge inroads into public infrastructure access in their city, besides creating widespread awareness and sensitivity about access and rehabilitation of people with disabilities.





Relaxed. Ready with a warm and glowing smile. Riveted to doing things. Swarnalatha gives no indication of disability or the intense pain that multiple sclerosis puts her through constantly, barely allowing her to catch up with sleep at night.

Neither the intense pain or the progressive immobility has prevented Swarnalatha from dreaming big and making these come true. The Swarga Charitable Trust that she co-founded with her husband Guruprasad, has been creating palpable progress on ground. This includes creating accessible toilets in 10 Government schools and one in every platform of Indian Railways' Coimbatore Junction as well as an operational lift (elevator) on platforms 2/3, making nine schools in Coimbatore wheelchair friendly, making the office of the Coimbatore Police Commissioner wheelchair friendly, with accessible toilets and designated parking spots for disabled drivers.

To Swarga goes the credit of launching SARATHI, Tamil Nadu's first wheelchair accessible transportation service. The SARATHI van has a foldable wheelchair ramp, an overhead water tank, a convertible sofa-cum-bed, wheelchair restraint, a chemical toilet, a television, and three passenger seats. The van has been a game changer for people with disabilities wanting to go on short or long-distance trips. Another major initiative of Swarga is the Sowkhya Physiotherapy and Wellness Centre that offers services free of cost to people with and without disabilities, mobility aids, medicines, and financial aid for hospitalization for girls and women with disabilities. Swarga also conducts medical camps in government schools for people with pain of any kind, to increase awareness about the benefits of physiotherapy and other treatments offered by Sowkhya. The inspirational 'I'm Special' calendar is yet another impactful and popular endeavour of Swarga.



All this, despite bouts of excruciating pain, and needing assistance even for transferring from bed to toilet and being unable to do routine tasks like holding a pen.

“When I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, people said I couldn’t be a good wife, a good mother, or be useful to society. But here I am. My children are sports champions. *(Not just achievers, her children are amazingly responsible, self-reliant and participate in caring for her and others in the family too)*. Recently, my husband and I won an award for being the best couple. And here I am receiving awards for contributing to society”, she says. The implications need no better emphasis. It is a tribute to her attitude and spirit that she says, “People call us by different names...differently abled, divyang, disabled, handicapped, special, etc. But I feel that I am not just special, but limited edition”.

It was in 2009, when she was 29, that Swarnalatha was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis which rudely interrupted her career, that seemed to be soaring, propelled by her admin skills and personal charm. Following an attack that paralysed her from neck down, she was diagnosed with primary progressive multiple sclerosis, a degenerative condition in which the immune system compromises the brain and nervous system.

“40 percent of my mobility was lost forever then, and the remaining 60 percent is being gradually dissipated as the disease progresses”, she informs without bitterness. Society was not empathetic to her. So too the company she was working with then, and Swarnalatha was forced out of her job.

But then, no one can pin down Swarnalatha for long. She learned to cope with the intense pain and immobility caused by MS and reinvented herself to take on the world. And why not? This gutsy woman had always risen every time life threw a blow at her. Earlier, she had overcome a road accident that fractured her jaw and legs and multiple surgeries which had throttled her education, and the suicide of her father.

Soon Swarnalatha shifted to Coimbatore, with Guruprasad and her two-year-old son, Gagan. Soon their daughter Gaana was born. Swarnalatha overcame the depression she had gotten into by her changed reality and took life head on. She learnt the local language –Tamil. By the way, she is now conversant with 10 languages. She is also a talented singer, writer of short stories, photographer and a finalist at a ‘Mrs Coimbatore’ beauty pageant. And of course, she is a popular motivational speaker.

Her plunge into community service was organic. It began with providing monthly medicines to underprivileged patients, helping disabled children with school fees, and providing mobility aids like wheelchairs, walkers, hearing aids, and hospitalisation expenses. In 2014, the couple started Swarga with Swarnalatha feeling, “I need to use my talents for society, as long as I live”. Noticing that there was both a lack of awareness about rehabilitation options as well as a lack of rehabilitation options, Swarnalatha wanted to set up a facility that offered a holistic package including physiotherapy,



*"When I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, people said I couldn't be a good wife, a good mother or be useful to society. But here I am. My children are sports champions. (Not just achievers, her children are amazingly responsible, self-reliant and participate in caring for her and others in the family too). Recently, my husband and I won an award for being the best couple. And here I am receiving awards for contributing to society."*



alternate health options, and diet and lifestyle counselling to improve the lives of people with neuro, ortho, cardio and other medical issues that render people disabled.

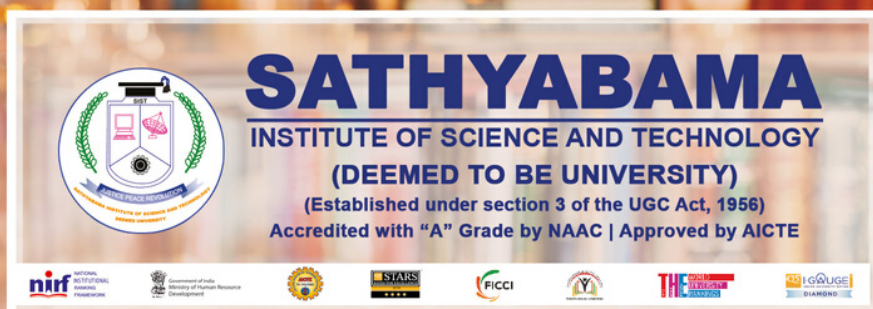
A chance meeting with the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister on a flight to Hyderabad gave her access to governmental assistance. Swarga was given space in a municipal building at a highly subsidized rent. In November 2018, Swarga launched the Sowkhya Physiotherapy Centre for treatment of neuromuscular disorders. Some of the funds for running the centre is raised by Swarnalatha through motivational speaking, which she had earlier been doing free of charge. The proceeds from Swarga's 'I'm Special' Calendar too are routed to this facility. Her credibility and track record have been a huge factor in getting donations. Incidentally, Guruprasad himself is one of Swarga's donors.

The toughest part of Swarga's journey has been in getting CSR funding. "Swarga is growing now and we need CSR support to sustain. Another aspect is in getting people without disabilities to understand the need for accessible infrastructure. For instance, when we incorporated a toilet in our SARATHI van, people were amazed. They saw it as a luxury. They don't understand that, for people with disabilities, it is a necessity, as accessible toilets are not available anywhere", Swarnalatha shares.

Her next goal? To start a hospital with "40 to 50" beds within the next two years! ●



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A photograph of a man, Adil Mohammed Nazir Ansari, sitting in a wheelchair. He is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and dark trousers. He has his hands clasped in front of him and is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. To his left is a large, stylized trophy that resembles a person with arms raised, set on a cylindrical base. The background is a blue wall with a textured, leaf-like pattern. The floor is a light blue-grey color.

# ADIL MOHAMMED NAZIR ANSARI

## Cavinkare Ability Mastery Award

He is a national champion in para archery, winner of several medals in para swimming, a social activist who drives home the need for safe driving, a mentor to new patients with spinal injury, and a record setting traveller. Adil Mohammed Nazir Ansari has not let quadriplegia impede his independence or zest for life.





Not one to rest on laurels, however difficult these may have been to achieve, Adil Mohammed Nazir Ansari prepares in earnest for the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics' Qualifiers that are to happen at the Czech Republic.

Under his belt were records for breaking the 100 km record for a paraplegic biker (he ended up covering 300 km non-stop) and his second Limca record for his seven-day cross-country road trip of over 6016 km in 2015 (that saw him driving his modified car and averaging an incredible 800 km per day, touching Bombay, Delhi, Kolkata and Chennai). He then moved on to swimming (winning two gold medals at the para swimming competitions in Indore) and then to archery. He has represented India in Czech Republic, Dubai, Netherlands and won the National Champion title three times. As Ranjeet Chamle, Sports Director SP College, Pune, and Adil's coach, puts it, what Adil is doing is actually impossible, considering the severity of Adil's disability.



Looking back, it was in 2002, when Adil was 21 years old, that the accident happened, with Adil hitting his head on a rock during a dive into a river. It resulted in neckdown paralysis. That was not all. He underwent surgery, and soon after, contracted severe pneumonia and had to be put on a ventilator for 28 days. When he regained consciousness, he was in excruciating pain. He also developed bed sores that went deep down to his backbone. He was breathing through a tube and depended on a suction machine to remove phlegm from his lungs.

Then began the long and arduous road to rehabilitation. Left totally dependent even for his most private needs, for Adil, who had always been a man-of-action and the family's trouble shooter, it was a huge blow and Adil many-a-time rued the day that his life had been spared.



*"I saw my mother's face. She hadn't smiled ever since the accident had happened. That moment transformed me. I wanted to bring a smile to her face. I thought, if I had to die, I should have died at the time of my accident or in the hospital when the multiple infections ravaged me. But, I didn't. I am still alive. Being alive, it was because God obviously wanted me to live for some reason."*



Then came a turnaround. "I saw my mother's face. She hadn't smiled ever since the accident had happened. That moment transformed me. I wanted to bring a smile to her face. I thought, if I had to die, I should have died at the time of my accident or in the hospital when the multiple infections ravaged me. But, I didn't. I am still alive. Being alive, it was because God obviously wanted me to live for some reason", he shares. Adil then and there, decided to accept his disability and move forward and do whatever he could. This acceptance opened the door onto possibilities, to opportunities.

Adil was taken for a consultation with Dr. Jacob, a senior physiotherapist in Mumbai, who taught him exercises to strengthen the muscles that showed signs of life. Adil took this up in right earnest and his muscles responded and became stronger, including those muscles that hadn't shown signs of life earlier. Adil began getting more independent, he was able to sit up by himself, feed and shave himself. Later, he learnt more efficient ways of these everyday activities from Rajiv Virat, a wheelchair skill trainer from ISIC. Adil then sat for his 12th standard exams. This was where he met Majida, who later came to his home and proposed marriage to him. Majida continues to be his devoted life partner, supporting him in his every ambition.

Adil then took up buffalo farming to make a living, visiting the farm every day, and





set up a distribution network. But he had to be driven out to the farm and sometimes, drivers weren't available. So Adil decided to modify a scooter and drive it himself. Soon, he set those two driving records. "After I acquired a disability, I found that people did not take me seriously. I wanted to change that", says Adil. That was the motivation for the Adil's two driving records!

Next, Adil turned to swimming, won some medals, and because of accessibility issues, he moved on to archery. Initially, even gripping the bow was a challenge for Adil. He started practicing with a compound bow, and painstakingly learnt to handle it. By trial and error, Adil developed his own technique. Adil has been at the top in para-archery in India since 2016.

"Archery has transformed me. Archers have to be pure souls. The moment your heart skips a beat in anger or hate, your aim is lost", he says philosophically. Archery is an expensive sport, because of the high cost of the bow and arrows, but Adil is 100% sure that he will find a way to

continue in it. If you believe, it will happen, he says.

Adil has societal goals too – besides mentoring new patients with spinal injury, he works to raise awareness on spinal cord injuries and the need to drive safely. "Many of my friends with spinal cord injuries had their accidents because they were talking on the phone while driving", he shares. "I want people to remember that a phone call is not more important than one's life", he says. He targets people in the age group of 18-27, visiting schools and colleges and other places, as it is an age when people are particularly vulnerable to driving rashly and too fast. He rues that the new traffic rules introduced by the central government that mandate heavy penalties for breaking traffic rules are not upheld across the country. He says, "People don't worry about life. It doesn't occur to them that a disability could happen to them. But a heavy fine is a very good and practical deterrent".



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18<sup>th</sup> Edition



# **TINKESH KAUSHIK**

## Cavinkare Ability Mastery Award



The only Asian triple amputee to have bungee jumped from the highest jump site in the world, an adventure sports enthusiast, and perhaps the only triple amputee to forge a super successful career as gym trainer and wellness coach for people with and without disabilities, Tinkesh makes you believe that nothing is impossible!



As a child, after becoming triple amputee, the young boy Tinkesh had spent countless evenings sitting at home watching his friends play, yearning to join them as before. But not for a moment did he allow himself to feel despondent or wallow in self-pity. Rather, he took to adventure sports that not everyone would dare to take up - Bungee jumping, making him the first Asian triple amputee to have bungee jumped from the highest jump site of 160 metres, at Nepal. He is also into para cycling, marathons, swimming, shooting, white-water rafting and what not! He is also the only, or one of the few, triple amputees anywhere in the world to be a super successful gym trainer and wellness coach for people with and without disabilities.

Tinkesh, with no legs and just one arm, is quantified as having 90% disability. He was born in Jhajjar, Haryana, in June 1993. As a nine-year-old, he suffered a 11,000 Volt electric shock while flying a kite on the terrace of his home. His body was literally set aflame and he suffered intense burns. He was rushed to the local hospital and then to the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Sciences in Rohtak. Unfortunately, the institute refused admission initially, wasting four precious hours, saying that there was no chance that he would survive. He was discharged from the hospital after four months. His wounds were then treated at home, with the bandages changed daily. He resumed school, with his mother carrying him to school. He had eleven surgeries, lost two legs and an arm, partly from delayed treatment. Even worse were the reactions he encountered. "People would tell my parents: It would have been better if he had died".

*"Like me, there are many who fight against all odds to achieve and set the highest level of excellence for themselves. When you do things to be the best version of yourself, and it serves as an inspiration to others, you become a role model. This is a huge responsibility. And when you are recognized for it, it is a dream come true."*

However, he stayed poised and got through school and went on to acquire a degree in Commerce in 2015.

Initially, Tinkesh was fitted with wooden legs. These were heavy and required enormous muscle strength to walk and scrapped his skin despite the thick socks he wore. Later, he was fitted with the Jaipur foot and it became a little easier. He commuted to Delhi to attend classes. By then, Tinkesh had become overweight, due to lack of physical activity. Tinkesh decided that he would turn his life around. He began working out at a local gym in Najafgarh. He was greeted by taunts such as "You've got just one arm and now you're going to break that too". Tinkesh ignored them and began running too and started losing weight.

Put it down to the law of attraction! A new gym, EFC Energy Fitness Club came up in his locality and its owner Dalbir Singh Gahlot encouraged him. With their



support he began running marathons with Blade Runners. An occupational therapist, Jessica Threshton, ran a crowd funding campaign for blades which cost 10 lakh rupees. But only one lakh rupees could be raised. Tinkesh decided to use part of it to bungee jump and gave the rest to his parents.

Meanwhile Sumi Shreshta, a lady from Darjeeling whom he had met on social media, who had helped set up his bungee jump, set up a crowd funding appeal for an imported prosthetic leg for Tinkesh. This caught the attention of Aditya Mehta Foundation's Aditya Mehta, a Para cyclist who sponsors and trains athletes. Tinkesh began attending his foundation's training camps, which are arranged by BSF.

In 2016, Tinkesh came to Pune to have his legs fitted by Salil Jain, a prosthetic engineer who does fitments and rehabilitation for amputees. Awestruck by Tinkesh's drive and attitude, he gave Tinkesh an apartment across the road from his own home, which Tinkesh shared with another amputee, Vicky Mehra. He also gave Tinkesh a part-time job counselling patients and training them to use their new prosthetic limbs. He also advised Tinkesh to find a job centred on physical activity, since he was so passionate about it.

The law of attraction played its hand again. When Tinkesh met up with a friend at a restaurant, Amol Khilare, a Pune entrepreneur, invited Tinkesh to work for his brand, Herbalife, as a gym instructor.







Around this time, Tinkesh met Smitha Gautam, at Adventures Beyond Barriers' rappelling and trekking events. Smitha, decided to help Tinkesh in a big way and brought him home to stay. Smitha got him to do a course at INFS (Institute of Nutrition and Fitness Sciences). She introduced Tinkesh to swimming and shooting too. Smitha says, "He is a go-getter and a very hard worker. He knows what he wants, and there's nothing that he feels he can't do".

Tinkesh is nicknamed 'Will' at Cross Strength Fitness Club, where he works now, acknowledging his will power, dedication and focus. Bhushan 'Bad' Dakhate, director of this gym, says, "With Will there, others are more disciplined and committed". Tinkesh is a 'group batch expert', helping groups of people work out on the gym floor. Tinkesh himself does squats with 80kg and more than 120 kg on a leg press!

Tinkesh also volunteers at a local hospital rehabilitation unit. "Like me, there are many who fight against all odds to achieve and set the highest level of excellence for themselves. When you do things to be the best version of yourself, and it serves as an inspiration to others and you become a role model. This is a huge responsibility. And when you are recognised for it, it is a dream come true", says Tinkesh.

Even today, challenges are aplenty. As Tinkesh puts it, "they begin the moment I wake up. It begins with figuring out where I left my legs and strapping them on", he says with an impish grin. When you see him striding up to you in total confidence and positivity, you realise that this attitude is his strength; it is what has propelled him so far, letting him make use of every opportunity he came across and create new ones too.



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# RAKSHITHA RAJU

## CavinKare Ability Mastery Award

A billion Indians' hope rests on this 18-year-old's strides, for Rakshitha Raju is determinedly eying a gold medal at the 1500m track event at the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics. Her phenomenal track record suggests that she will surely bag this crown too!



This young lass has qualified for the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics, and has already done the country proud by winning the 1500m Gold at the Asian Para-Games 2018 in Indonesia, for which she received special appreciation from Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, something she is especially happy and proud of.

Rakshitha is the first blind woman to have won a gold in the track events at the Asian para-games. Since then, she has won several medals for track events across India and overseas, including a gold medal in the 1500m track event at the 2019 Paris Para Athletics Grand Prix – this was her first international meet and in it she clocked her best timing of 5.55 minutes in 1500m! What's more, she also won gold medals for the 1500m as well as the 800m track events at the Junior World Championship 2019 at Switzerland.

It's been quite an incredible journey for this unassuming young woman, from her struggles at a small and remote village (Guddana Halli) in Chikmagalur District, Karnataka, to the highest world stage in para athletics.

Rakshitha Raju lost her parents at the age of four. They were daily wage labourers at the local coffee estate. Born blind and having lost both her parents, she was unwanted by her immediate relatives who did not want the responsibility of bringing her up. Life seemed a question mark for her and her younger brother. Her maternal grandmother's sister (who is herself deaf and mute) stepped in, and took them into her

*"I am very happy that people are recognising my performance and giving me awards. People with disabilities may have some disability, but have great mental strength."*

care. The three managed communication with Rakshitha's younger brother acting as the interpreter.

When she was about nine years old, Rakshitha was moved to a residential camp for children with visual impairment. Here, she acquired mobility training skills, learnt braille, life skills, and athletics. She then began to excel in track events. The physical education coach there, Manjunath, noticed her capacity and began mentoring her and soon Rakshitha was participating in taluk/district level competitions and soon after, in national competitions.

"I started studying from Class 3 at the Asha Kirana School, Chikmagalur. I started participating in sports events when I was in Class 7. My main motivation was from Shavadh, my senior in school who is a 2014 Asian Games Medallist. I did not know much about sports and my PT (Physical Training) Sir Manajanna used to take students interested in sports every year to the Nationals at Delhi. I had not travelled anywhere and wanted to travel. When I got a



chance to travel to Delhi, I participated in the Nationals in 2016 and won my first gold medal in the 400m track event, besides a silver medal in the 200m event. Thereafter, I began participating in the Nationals regularly”, says Rakshitha.

That was when – during the 2017 Nationals – Rahul Balakrishna, a young national level athlete happened to meet her. He recognised her potential and decided to take her under his wing.

Soon after, Rahul, Govind Solanki, Sowmya Savanth – national athletes, all of them, came together, determined to help Rakshitha fulfil her potential. Amongst them, Sowmya, agreed to be her caretaker and guide runner too. They brought Rakshitha to Bangalore early in 2018, and a flat was rented for Sowmya and Rakshitha to live in, with Rahul spending from his pocket for it, and also for her diet, travel, education (Braille material and tutor expenses), training and personal expenses.

Rakshitha was started on a regimented diet, workouts and training. “When Rahul Sir took me to Bangalore in 2018, I had thought that it was for the Nationals’ practice”, shares Rakshitha, her young face breaking into a ready smile. “After that, Rahul sir coached me, and I qualified to participate at the Paris Grand Prix. I was looking for financial support and Suryakala Meganathan Ma’am supported me for this”. Suryakala had been training under Rahul then.



Education has not been ignored either and Rakshitha is now pursuing her education by self-study, under the guidance of Sowmya and Rahul. She is preparing to write the Senior School Certificate exam as an independent candidate. Rakshitha has very minimal vision in both eyes, and she can perceive only light and shadow. “After getting a job, I shall support my grandmother and my younger brother”, she says. Today, Rakshitha’s day includes two four-hour training sessions. Her wish is to make her coaches, guardians, mentors, her grandmother and her country proud by bringing home a Paralympic Gold medal.

“I am very happy that people are recognising my performance and giving me awards”, she says, and adds, “people with disabilities may have some disability, but have great mental strength”. Knowing her capacity for hard work, sincerity and single-minded focus, it looks like Rakshitha Raju has just embarked on a phenomenal career in international sports. ●

***\*Profiles of the recipients of the CavinKare Ability Awards 2020 by Hema Vijay***



# UNITED IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CYBER THREATS.





# A NEW BANDWIDTH



It was a day that had been eagerly looked forward to by candidates, corporates and Team ABILITY. EmployABILITY 2019 was an occasion that saw careers made, networks forged, and horizons expanded, writes Hema Vijay

The air was abuzz with excitement! A long stream of eager candidates were queuing up at Chennai's trendsetting job fair for people with disabilities, EmployABILITY 2019. Some of them had come from far flung locations like Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Assam, besides the southern states closer by, of course. Similar was the atmosphere where the registration of talent acquisition personnel from top firms (some of the biggest names in the corporate sector today) was happening. Microsoft, PayPal, HCL Technologies, the Aditya Birla Group, Reliance, Wipro, Accenture, Virtusa, Verizon, Mastercard and Ernst Young, to name some.







"Happy, though we obviously are, we look forward to the day when such fairs won't be required. A day when people with disabilities occupy their rightful space in the corporate world, all the ways from job fairs to workspaces and boardrooms", said Jayshree Raveendran, Founder and Honorary Executive Director, Ability Foundation, during the inauguration of the fair. She also encouraged the firms participating in the fair to "hire qualified persons with disabilities, taking pride that they are equal opportunity employers, and not with the perspective of offering a job out of sympathy".

*Almost every company participating in the fair – from PayPal and Microsoft to the Aditya Birla Group - averred that EmployABILITY 2019 was one of the most well organised job fairs they had attended.*



The qualifications of the persons with disabilities who had assembled at the job fair, in no way, fell short of the qualifications of any non-disabled person, for that job. Every candidate's qualifications had been matched with the job descriptions given by the company and only suitable candidates were sent for the interviews.

Meanwhile, S Krishnaswamy, member of Lion's Club of Padi ShenoyNagar (LCPS) and Consultant, Ability Foundation, enjoined the companies to hire the best suited talent they saw. "If that can't be done, give the candidates a very serious interview experience and honest feedback that would help them prepare for the next steps in their careers", he advocated.

A corporate entity's main concern is to give returns to the shareholder. Why should a company look at a candidate on the basis of charity?" quipped Ln. Sundar Balasubramanian, President, Lions Club of Padi ShenoyNagar. He told the corporates, "Don't look at hiring disabled candidates from the perspective of

charity. See from the perspective of what value a candidate could add to the company and what the company can pay back". Likewise, the candidates were advised to give their best, be straightforward and positive, and not expect charity.

Thirty plus companies from over 10 different sectors participated in the fair to tap into the talent pool of graduates with disabilities. Almost every participating company – from PayPal and Microsoft to the Aditya Birla





Group - averred that EmployABILITY 2019 was one of the most well organised job fairs they had attended. They were highly impressed by the high-grade qualifications that the candidates held. “We interviewed atleast 25 candidates and found them all to be hugely talented and competitive”, said the talent acquisition team from Verizon. Likewise, the talent acquisition team from HCL Technologies mentioned to us, “We were hugely impressed by the skills and qualifications of candidates we interviewed at EmployABILITY 2019”.

Sensitisation has been happening, we found out. “Our campus is very accessible. From ramps and flexible work shifts to accessible software for employees with low vision, we provide reasonable accommodation for our employees with disabilities”, informed the HR representative from HCL Technologies. In fact, PayPal even has an ‘Accessibility lab’. Srinivasan from PayPal informed us that this lab keeps upgrading the accessibility of their systems and processes.

Praveen and Gayatri, of the talent acquisition personnel from a well-known consulting firm expressed their appreciation for the clarity and the confidence sported by the candidates. They said, “The candidates had very clear ideas about their careers and were able to articulate what they wanted”. “While communication is an area that needs some enhancing for some of the candidates, all of them are technically sound and qualified”, said the talent acquisition team from Microsoft.











One of the most impressive candidates at the job fair was Miranda Tomkinson, a deafblind person. Armed with a master's degree in special education (the first ever deafblind person in the country to acquire this degree through the regular stream), he floored the event by his array of qualifications and articulation. He told us, "Two-way communication with me is perfectly possible with me through the Refreshable Braille gadget that converts speech to braille". Currently, Miranda teaches university students and is also researching for a book he is writing.



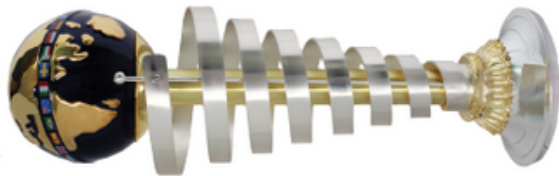
"Today, corporates are ready to hire people with disabilities as diversity is a much appreciated talking point in the corporate sector today", said Prasannakumar Pachaiyappan, coordinator, National HRD (NHRD) Network Chennai Chapter, that partnered with Ability Foundation for this event. "Nevertheless, we don't see as many candidates with disabilities in regular job fairs", said Satish, NHRD, underlining the need for exclusive job fairs for candidates with disabilities. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. EmployABILITY 2019 finished on a high! So many placements made on the spot. Multiple more shortlistings done for further screening. This job fair was all about connecting equal opportunity employers with qualified graduates with disabilities. With several hundred candidates meeting 30 plus top-notch employers, we truly believe this job fair provided a non-discriminating platform. ●





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# They came, they saw, they said...

"This was my first experience of EmployABILITY. It was exciting to see so many companies and candidates participating in the job fair. It was truly a pan-India affair with candidates from different corners of the country participating in the fair. Even before we had arrived at the venue, candidates had arrived and were at the venue, waiting for the event to start. It was wonderful to see a huge number of enthusiastic volunteers trooping in to guide the candidates to different booths to meet the various corporate interviewers. It was heart-warming to see the candidates leaving the venue with smiles on their faces."

*"This was the first job fair I attended and became one which I would never forget. I understood that disabled people are disabled only in our minds, but their spirits are free and powerful as anyone else's. The event had me acknowledge that they never need our sympathy, all they need is an encouraging gesture with which alone they can reach great heights. Thanks to Ability Foundation for this remarkable opportunity. Together let's create an Inclusive Society."*

"Job fairs can be noisy and chaotic for both employers and candidates if it is not well-organised. I have participated in job fairs previously as a candidate, event organiser, volunteer and as part of the recruitment team. I can say that EmployABILITY 2019 was one of the most organised events I have come across. Being part of the team behind the event, we were all in sync to meet the core objective of the event - to provide a non-discriminatory platform for candidates with disabilities to meet potential employers. It was wonderful to see most candidates looking upbeat and confident approaching and talking to employers. I was also happy to see school children enthusiastically volunteering at the event, guiding candidates and employers. I felt it would be a valuable experience for them to not only gain some new skills but also get sensitised about disabilities."



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## THE NOW

December 17, 2019. Place: Chennai. The occasion: EmployABILITY 2019, the 10th edition of Ability Foundation's job fair that practically scorched off a trend, ever since its inception in 2004.

## THE FLASHBACK

December 19, 2004. Place: Chennai. The occasion: The first ever job opportunities fair that India experienced exclusively for job seekers with disabilities who held a minimum qualification of being graduates. Ability Foundation's EmployABILITY 2004 was an event that saw for the first time in the country, qualified persons with disabilities, on a level playing field, accessing opportunities as equals and being hired by big time corporate players – exclusively on merit, not on basis of disability or charity.

## A TRAILBLAZER

A shortlisted number – 800 persons with differing disabilities from among the 1000 applicants and 32 corporates including banks and software firms – participated in the first pioneering event.

Nowhere else had the matching of every candidate's profile with the companies' requirements ever been done before. With this, we ensured that each qualified candidate would be guaranteed of attending six to eight interviews that very day.

Many candidates got their placement offers immediately. Every one of them got the opportunity for interviews with several corporates that same day, as well as the wherewithal to hone their communication skills, understand the job market and expand their professional network. As for the participating companies – not only were they able to source the required talent, they also became aware of the job-readiness of qualified candidates with disabilities and were







sensitised to the extent that they were more enthused the next time they received a disabled candidate's resume. Almost every individual who came to the venue or heard about the event got sensitised about the potential that existed among people with disabilities – who weren't looking for charity, but for equitable opportunities and reasonable accommodation.

### THE CURRENT SCENARIO

Today, 15 years and several editions later, job fairs for persons with disabilities – an idea that has captured everyone's attention – has become a much organised and replicated event. No longer unique, rather more of a norm in corporate recruitment, "and this is exactly what we wanted, although to date, nobody else has even attempted to match the resumes with the job descriptions", says Jayshree Raveendran, Founder Director, Ability Foundation.

Experts estimate that about 5-6% of India's population is affected by disability, though official figures put it at an improbable 2.2-2.3% (as per Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation's National Sample Survey (NSS) during July-December 2018 data). Obviously, it doesn't require a survey to know that, by and large, people with disabilities are still blatantly missing from the corporate scenario, which is why such job fairs are needed even today.

### THE JOURNEY

How did it all begin? EmployABILITY came into being because every one of us needs to do something that's worthwhile, something that harnesses our talents and interests; contribute to society, and above all – to be financially independent.

Just like anyone of us, people with disabilities need opportunities to pursue this fundamental aspect of life.



Ability Foundation's Placement Wing, that began way back in 1997, had always brought together qualified job seekers with disabilities with firms that were ready to give them the opportunities for the positions that they were qualified for. Jayshree Raveendran recalls, "The need to go beyond our own Placement Wing and reach out to the country at large (both corporates and candidates) and extend the benefit of our services to a wider segment, made possible our first job fair – EmployABILITY".

Support for this unique initiative came from Ln. S. Krishnaswamy, member of Lion's Club of Padi ShenoyNagar (LCPS) and Consultant, Ability Foundation, and Ln. S Sankaran, the then President, LCPS. The first EmployABILITY took place and what followed is history.

Edition after edition, EmployABILITY challenged ill-informed prejudices on the capabilities and job-readiness of people with disabilities. It broke disability stereotypes, raised awareness on disability issues, and sparked off awareness into the corporate approach to equality. A move away from a scenario when disabled persons have been refused jobs merely on grounds of disability and lower pay scales for the same jobs to a scenario where people with disabilities are recognised as valuable employees who are more loyal, productive, long-standing, keen and disciplined than their non-disabled peers with the same qualifications.

### CORPORATE ENTHUSIASM

This is why companies keep returning to EmployABILITY, edition after edition. Manikandan and his team from JP Morgan, one of the regular participants at EmployABILITY, told us, "Our hiring is based on meritocracy. There is no compromise. The disabled are passionate, fiercely loyal and have a hunger for success. In fact, 3% of our workforce are persons with disabilities".







Even during the 2009 recession, EmployABILITY saw the usual enthusiastic response from companies. “This is a testimony to the kind of talent that can be sourced from EmployABILITY as well as the commitment of these companies”, informs Radhika Rammoorthy, Deputy Director, Ability Foundation. She underlines another aspect. “Over the years, armed with technology, we notice that the candidates are more confident and ambitious. Rightfully so. Companies participating in the fair too are confident about hiring our candidates and consider them for senior positions as well as sophisticated roles.”



In 2004, when team ABILITY went around talking to companies, the challenge was to convince the companies that people with disabilities can have graduate level (and higher) qualifications.

“The tendency then was to look at roles like a telephone operator, lift operator, etc., for people with disabilities, and here we were talking about blind software engineers! I remember one company tentatively asked us if we could connect them with a candidate with software testing skills. We told him we had 40 applicants with that skill”, reminisces Bharathi Sekhar, Director - Operations, Ability Foundation. Candidates have been equally enthusiastic. “In 2014, we had a blind girl travel to the fair all alone from Rajasthan. That was a moment of truth for us, highlighting the transition”, Bharathi says.

For employers, hiring people with disabilities is not just a step ahead in their diversity and equal opportunities policy and upholding of Article 14 of the Constitution of India, it is also a smart business move.

As Chitra Shyam Sunder, who was General Manager, Diversity and Inclusion at HCL Technologies Limited in 2017 mentioned to



us, “We have observed that employees with disabilities perform just as effectively as their counterparts when provided necessary assistive tools or aids”. She has a simple suggestion for those who are yet to begin this journey of inclusion: “Just initiate an assimilation process and you will see your company's ecosystem transform and accommodate disabled persons beautifully, as inclusion is not just good for business but is also the right thing to do to ensure long term sustainability”. Likewise, Aradhana Lal, Vice President - Sustainability Initiatives, The Lemon Tree Hotel Company detailed to us in 2016 that equal opportunity employment policies and an inclusive work environment have proved to be a win-win proposition for Lemon Tree Hotels. She described Lemon Tree's experience in hiring persons with disabilities, “It has been excellent, and the productivity figures/performance has been very encouraging for the company. For instance, housekeeping room boys with disabilities are 15% more efficient than those without disability and can clean 19 rooms a day as against the usual average of 16 rooms a day”.

### AN ENDURING RELATIONSHIP

Down the years, besides inspiring similar initiatives across the country, EmployABILITY has grown bigger and bigger and now sees participation from over 24 states and corporate employers from every sector – from software and banking to manufacturing and digital media. This job opportunities fair draws both freshers and professionals across disabilities looking to climb the career ladder – candidates with visual and orthopaedic impairments, polio, dwarfism, cerebral palsy, autism, dyslexia, muscular dystrophy and mental illness. The commonality being that every one of the participating candidates is here seeking jobs on merit. Incidentally, Ability Foundation's relationship with the companies

doesn't end with the job fair. Once a person with disability is taken on board, the Foundation supports the company by providing sign language training where necessary, shares inputs on creating an accessible environment in terms of technology as well as logistics, and sensitises the company to the practical issues of the disability, ensuring that both the organisation and candidate are at ease and enhance each other. Meanwhile, along the way, Ability Foundation started conducting the LinkABILITY workshops to enhance the candidates' soft skills.

Today, at a time when technology has made it amply possible for people with disabilities to deliver top quality work output in almost every sector, it is inexcusable that they don't figure adequately in the corporate sector. EmployABILITY, and the scores of job fairs it has inspired, will ensure that people with disabilities get rightful representation in the corporate world.

For a qualified candidate with disability, EmployABILITY has come to be the best place to find dream jobs. The way ahead is exciting...





A low-angle, upward-looking perspective of several modern skyscrapers with glass facades. The buildings are arranged in a way that creates a sense of height and depth, with lines converging towards the top of the frame. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The text is overlaid on the upper half of the image.

# CORPORATE MUSINGS

Where is Diversity?



**Several questions crop up when we analyse the lack of adequate representation of persons with disabilities in the corporate workforce.**

Diversity and equal opportunities have become buzzwords in corporate lexicon. Companies with a diverse workforce have been acknowledged to be better and more successful players. There are government directives and corporate policies promoting a level playing ground and reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities at workplace. The RPD Act 2016 is a talking point. Assistive technological solutions have been game-changers, opening up education and job opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Yet, if you take a quick count of the number of people with disabilities in any company that you know, you will find that these numbers are insignificant. People with disabilities are largely missing from the corporate scenario, especially so, as you glance up the career ladder. Meanwhile, the 2007 World Bank report titled, 'People with Disabilities in India: From Commitments to Outcomes' reported that the employment rate of people with disabilities had fallen from 42.7 percent in 1991 to 37.6 percent in 2002. Why?

And why has our experience at Ability Foundation been different? We find corporates ready to hire qualified persons with disabilities and offer them equal opportunities. One factor is because we sensitise both companies and employees. We insist that disability is no excuse for



**Clearly formed equal opportunities policies and processes, with clear guidelines for the management, staff, and all others concerned, would serve as a foundation and give a framework within which every organizational decision is taken and carried out. This would ensure adequate representation of disabled persons in the corporate workforce over time.**





mediocrity. That done, we recommend that people with disabilities be given the mandated appropriate reasonable accommodation and a level playing field to deliver their job responsibilities. We also offer training and support to the companies, if any needed, in hiring people with disabilities.

### A SYSTEMIC APPROACH

“The RPD Act 2016 mandates that every establishment – be it private, public, or even an NGO – should formulate its Equal Opportunity Policy and submit it to the appropriate disability commissioner, and put it up on their websites, and act by it, of course. The Act also insists on establishments with 20 or more employees to have a liaison officer for this. Such formal systems and practices, once laid out, will eventually, over a period of time,

ensure the mandated hiring of people with disabilities in adequate numbers and their being given reasonable accommodation. With this, the number of disabled people in the corporate workforce will go up in the long run, slowly, but surely. In fact, this would also help ensure that those who acquire disabilities along the way (a sizeable number) do not drop out of the corporate workforce too.

However, At the moment, not many companies have a focused or systematic approach to fulfilling this aspect of the RPD Act. NGOs, I feel, should work with companies to create equal opportunity systems and policies in place”, mentions Rama Chari, Director, Diversity and Equal Opportunity Centre (DEOC).



These policies and processes, with clear guidelines for the management, staff, and all others concerned, would serve as a foundation and give a framework in which every organizational decision is taken and carried out. So, this would ensure that recruitment of disabled persons and provision of reasonable accommodation to them is systematic and not arbitrary, and will eliminate scope for discrimination. Incidentally, DEOC has put up on its website a sample Equal Opportunities Policy that companies may refer to in forming their own policies.

## NEW PLATFORMS

Today, we hear that people with disabilities walk into firms with their resumes seeking employment. These instances are however, few and far between. Should people with disabilities rely only on NGOs working in the sector to connect them with their potential employers? For instance, why aren't more people with disabilities on job portals like Naukri? Is it because of lack of response from the potential employers or is it because of a lack of awareness among people with disabilities? These days, recruitment happens heavily through social media networking such as on LinkedIn. Are people with disabilities adept at these job search avenues, or should NGOs try to fill this gap and sensitise people with disabilities on new modes of recruitment? Should NGOs sensitise generic recruitment agencies too on the talent and high-end qualifications that prevail amidst people with disabilities, waiting for the right break?

One of the reasons for the lack of adequate representation of people with disabilities in



the corporate sector might be the 'one size fits all' mentality. Employers should move beyond comparing the capability of a disabled candidate with that of a non-disabled candidate and instead, focus on deriving maximum value from the candidate with disability based on his/her strengths, not weaknesses. After all, what else is diversity about?

Another refrain often heard, on this issue, is that getting an entry into the corporate sector doesn't really amount to much. That many corporate employers neither offer reasonable accommodation nor opportunities for professional growth.

Such factors do crop up while discussing the dismal job scenario for people with disabilities, despite so much sensitisation being done on the value gained in being an equal opportunity employer, the value of diversity in the workplace and the legal and constitutional direction towards providing reasonable accommodation.

It is by posing such questions and finding solutions to these, that we shall be able to move forward and reach the day when people with disabilities are hired and fired, and rise and fall in the corporate world, just like anyone else. ●





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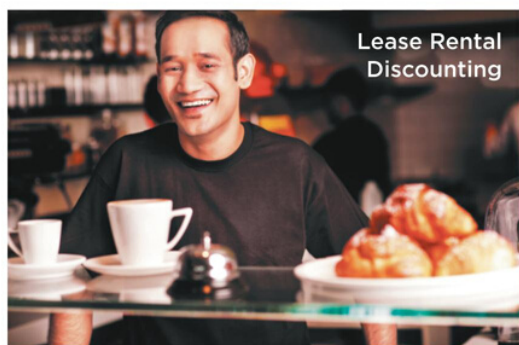
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