

NANO ACTION. DIGNIFIED-DISABLED.

Come 3rd December and suddenly the community of persons with disabilities become the cynosure of all eyes.

The poem by India's great nationalist and visionary, Shri Rabindranath Tagore, resonates in my mind even today – and here, it is for an India to awaken to a bright dawn of freedom for people with disabilities; a freedom from slavery of attitudinal and physical barriers and mental chains.

Here is my nano take on this classic poem's timeless verse, in the context of the UN Theme for International Day of Persons with Disability 2021: "Leadership and participation of persons with disabilities towards an inclusive, accessible and sustainable world."

*"Where the mind is without fear
and the head is held high"*

Although many parents and families are initially clueless about the various congenital disabilities, once confronted with new realities, they learn to manage and raise their children with abundant love. Most children grow up with the belief that this life is beautiful and to give it their best shot; challenges will come and go! When young parents without any toolkit or gameplan can manage their children with disability, my question to the resourceful government, private corporate sector and civil society is this - while most of them have obtained a PhD about the types of viruses that created the pandemic, what is stopping them from mastering disability science and creating an enabling ecosystem such that Indians with disabilities live a fearless, dignified life? Everything is possible, and if persons with disabilities are sharp and smart enough to master it experientially, then definitely so too can you! We are always here to guide and help you too.

"Where knowledge is free"

Leadership, vision, guts, and a higher level of consciousness is the need of the hour. Leaders of educational institutions need to approach students with disabilities in a holistic manner. Washrooms, libraries, classrooms, auditoriums, cafeteria, sports fields, gyms, computer labs, yoga centres and other every activity has to be made inclusive. Communication technology, barrier-free institutions as well as trained teachers with a holistic mindset can inculcate the right values in an inclusive setting.

"Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls"

More than the disability, it is the lack of basic amenities that actually disables the community. It is a pathetic situation that young talented friends with disability have to stay cooped up without the provision of disabled-friendly public transport. Whether it is schools, colleges, workplaces, coaching classes or recreational sports activities, there is so much to be made accessible for dignified mobility. This makes people with disabilities dependent on travelling by expensive taxis which burdens them and deters a full life.

"Where words come out from the depths of truth"

India seems to be doing extremely well on paper with ironclad laws and policies; RPD Bill 2016, ratification of UNCRPD, Accessible India campaign, Accessible Elections, UDID and more. Yet in reality, there are discrimination, barriers and a lack of inclusion.

*"Where tireless striving
stretches its arms towards perfection"*

Children with disabilities from slums, towns, villages or cities in India use wheelchairs, calipers, crutches and tricycles. Considering that our social infrastructure and homes are not homogeneous, it is quite a challenge for parents who have to, many times, carry their children. Former president Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam was concerned about people with disability and, along with his team, developed lightweight prosthetics from space-age material to enable disabled children to walk easily. His insight was that the use of space material lessened the burden of the mother carrying her child and this was more rewarding than launching a successful space mission. He definitely had his compassionate heart in the right place.

*"Where the clear stream of reason
has not lost its way into the
dreary desert sand of dead habit"*

Living with a spinal cord injury, a permanent disability, I continue to be an environmentally conscious citizen. My search for an eco-friendly diaper that would reduce my carbon footprint and allow me to follow a sustainable practice has not given me positive results despite several efforts. Innovations and developments in the field of disability too must be sustainable because, as the climate change activists say, "it is everyone's responsibility to protect Mother Earth."

*"Where the mind is led forward
by thee into ever widening
thought and action-"*

The majority of our 80 million people with disabilities in India struggle to access the most basic things for survival - nutritious food, information on leading a healthy life, a dignified disability pension and social welfare schemes, medicines, assistive technology, rehabilitation, hygienic living conditions with modified homes... The list is long. A systemic change and collaborative efforts by all stakeholders can surely accelerate this action agenda.

*"Into that heaven of freedom,
my father,
let my country awake."*

A utopian country where every person with disability can sing their own song, be free to live their own life on their terms, to live fearlessly, to fly, to dream, to explore life's kaleidoscopic colours; in short TO BE. That day will truly be the true IDPD and that would call for a 'real' celebration. Till then let us bask one more day in sunshine as the world 'acknowledges' our existence.

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