

Dreaming through Reflection

Inclusive Society for Divyang - My Dream

Two children, Ramesh and Lalita, arrive at their local park and see other kids running around the playground, having fun. Excited, Lalita joins the fun and starts running around with the other kids. Also excited, Ramesh wants to partake in the fun. But, he cannot have fun with the other kids because he is in a wheelchair and thus cannot run around. Unfortunately, in many places around the world, the reality for people like Ramesh is that they are left behind or ignored simply because they are specially abled. When I started thinking about what an inclusive society for Divyang should be like, I realized I would first need to understand how they are currently being excluded from multiple aspects of society. Consequently, I chose to take the approach of dreaming of an inclusive society by reflection on society's current status.

We, as a society, should primarily focus on a person's personality and what they can do, rather than fixating on what they cannot do. In an ideal inclusive society, community members would not view each other based on their race, gender, religion, marital status, physical and mental abilities, or other such distinguishing characteristics. Rather than seeing a difference between two people as a reason for separation between them, a difference should be perceived as an opportunity to gain new insights via a diverse perspective. For example, many believe that deafness is an obstacle that has to be overcome. However, deaf people may not agree with that. In fact, there have been some cases where a deaf person may not want cochlear implants because they don't believe that deafness is a problem. Rather, they see it as a particular way of life (or alternatively *their* way of life), and there is nothing necessarily wrong with that mindset.

The best way to develop an inclusive society is to create a society in which community members are accepting of others, irrespective of their capabilities. I believe that an inclusive society should continue to highlight excellence in academics, athleticism, and other capability-dependent areas. After all, competition is a significant driver and source for inspiration for humans. At the same time, there should not be a practice of disregarding or discounting someone simply on the basis of their abilities, or lack thereof. For instance, if someone is mentally specially-abled (e.g. he/she has autism), they may not do well in typical academics. However, as Albert Einstein once reminded us, "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." Instead of seeing an autistic job candidate as burdensome, many companies are recognizing the unique skill set that such a candidate possesses. As a matter of fact, a number of companies looking for cybersecurity professionals have learned that candidates with autism are particularly well-suited for these in-high-demand positions.

Stephen Hawking once said, “Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change.” Those that are (or become) specially abled have to learn how to perform various tasks, many of which are mundane tasks for those deemed “normal”, in their own separate ways. As an example, many of us do not think twice (if at all) about typing a SMS message on our mobile phones. However, for someone like Stevie Wonder, he/she has to memorize the exact layout of every single key of the small keyboard on his/her phone. As seen in that example, being able to adapt undoubtedly requires intelligence. Technology has come a long way and has made significant strides in enabling specially-abled people to do things that were impossible or extremely difficult beforehand. Currently, in places like India, overall accessibility is being hampered due to the lack of accessibility for specially-abled people to the technology that they need. In light of that, just as technology is already an integral part of society in other respects, an inclusive society for Divyang should include accessibility to tools, devices, and machines that can help empower them.

The ideal inclusive society includes specially-abled people, especially specially-abled youth, who sincerely have hope that they can achieve what they want. They understand that they may need to do things a little differently or work even harder than others just to catch up to someone who is not specially-abled. Currently, specially-abled people, notably those who live outside of the U.S. and Europe, may lack hope and ambition because they are often faced with barriers when attempting to do even the most basic of daily tasks. Doors that must be pushed, stairs that must be climbed, price tags that must be seen, and other typically unnoticeable features of a grocery store can be quite intimidating to a specially-abled person. And when one has to live with such a reality day in and day out, being hopeful for change (or anything) can become quite difficult. That is why, at least from an infrastructure standpoint, an inclusive society should be more like the U.S. and Europe where a person can usually take the elevator from their apartment to the ground floor, get into a specially-abled-friendly public transit bus, roll their wheelchair up the ramp to the store entrance, glide through the sliding doors, and be just as bored as everyone else while grocery shopping. All without significant frustration and much limitation.

In regards to hope, hope can be spread via numerous mechanisms, but one of the most influential mechanisms is society. This is because society consists of family, friends, culture, and religion, all of which are individually such influential forces within a person’s life. A key component for promoting hope is giving someone a purpose. Simply instructing a person to become optimistic and to start working hard is not sufficient; for, as John F. Kennedy described, “Efforts and courage are not enough without purpose and direction.” An inclusive society (e.g. parents, siblings, teachers, religious preachers, friends of specially-abled persons) can explain to specially-abled people that they can in fact flourish and achieve great things, not despite, but in spite of their special abilities. A gym teacher could describe to a wheelchair-bound student that

though they may not be able to jump hurdles, they can certainly work hard to receive valuable recognition by participating in athletic events such as those of the Paralympics. All in all, creating an inclusive society does not require a sudden leap of fate or the development of the next big thing in technology. We, as individuals, need to look within ourselves to make sure that we are capable of being accepting of others and that we help others in any way that we can. Because an inclusive society for Divyang starts within each of us.