

## What makes an inclusive society?

We Indians pride ourselves on being evolved, spiritual and cultured. And yet, when the rights and dignity of Jeeja Ghosh and Anjalee Sharma are violated, we remain mute spectators. We fail them, repeatedly, as a state and as a society. The humiliation, rejection and emotional turmoil that people with disabilities are routinely subjected to cannot ever be compensated suitably. The sooner we recognise that, the faster we will change for the better. It's Jeeja today, who has deplaned from a SpiceJet flight; it was Rajeev Rajan not so long ago, who wasn't even allowed to board a flight because of his disability. Not one to take things lying down, Rajeev filed a public interest litigation that contributed to the redrafting of norms and the establishment of Civil Aviation Requirements (CAR) by the Director General of Civil Aviation (DGHS) in 2008. The rules read well, and include several provisions to make travel of persons with disabilities barrier free, accessible and pleasant. Sounds good, doesn't it? And yet much is lost in translation between the intent, policy formulation and implementation stages. A rule or norm is not sacrosanct in our country and is, more often than not, implemented half-heartedly if not completely disregarded. Rules are rarely ever put into action with a sense of ownership and uniformity in diverse contexts. Nowhere is this apathy more apparent and damaging than in the non-simplistic nature of discrimination. Notions of rights and equity vary from society to society. But in today's stratified and layered world, the value we place on humanism and, for that matter, on human life itself, is fast declining. The weaker a life, the more vulnerable the person, and hence more prone to being dispensed with. Ajay, an 11-year-old boy with cerebral palsy is a testimony to that. Ajay lives in a thatched hut in a small village in Tamil Nadu. Mostly he lies flopped on the floor, unable to attend the community school close by or visit the National Institute for Empowerment of Persons with Multiple Disabilities, located about 25 kms away from his home. Taking him by bus is cumbersome for his mother, whose eyes well up with tears when she thinks of his future after her. They live on a meagre monthly income of Rs 4,000, that his father, a manual labourer in the unorganised sector, brings home. Enthused by the guiding principle of inclusive education and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, I had hoped that an environment of learning would keep Ajay's mind active and happy and lead him out of poverty to a brighter future. But it was not to be. This is not just Ajay's reality, but that of a majority of persons with disabilities in low-resource settings. The first World Report on Disability (2011) states that 20 per cent of the world's poorest live with disabilities and nearly 80 per cent of people with disabilities live in low-income countries. These statistics establish the obvious links between poverty, disability, marginalisation and exclusion. However, all this evidence hasn't made us aspirational to work towards equal, optimal and balanced distribution of resources. How can we grow as a nation when every facet of life, be it mobility, connectivity, access to health, education or employment, is dependent either on our economic status, social standing or levels of ability? While a select few can access most privileges with ease, others face insurmountable hurdles all their lives as they struggle to survive and stay afloat. If divisiveness of the nature we are plagued with today

continues to reign, the barriers between the haves and have-nots, the able and the differently-abled will continue to grow. High-level recommendations, progressive legislation, strategy, punitive action and overarching macro solutions alone will not solve many of the complex problems we face as a society today. The disability sector has risen to the current challenge and continues to rally around Jeeja, Anjalee and others. The state now needs to respond in an insightful, objective and sustainable manner. Much could be done. The Legal Aid Services Authority could be enthused to be proactive in their mandate of empowering communities not just through awareness creation, but also by promoting an environment of social justice and equitable living. A band of motivated leaders with the right values could be recruited and trained to ensure effective implementation of programmes. But will this alone mitigate stigma, rid us of apathy, help us challenge stereotypes, change mindsets and enable us as a people to respond more sensitively to the needs of persons whom we see as different from ourselves? Will this ensure that Ajay, Jeeja and Rajeev find a healing and enabling world? Reforms and inclusivity need a buy-in from society, and herein lies our greatest challenge. We are reconciled to — sometimes complacent or, worse still, comfortable with — a world ridden with disparities. A clannish mentality dominates, and standing out and apart causes awkwardness and inconvenience. I wonder what the captain of Jeeja's flight would have done if all his passengers had felt her pain and anguish and boycotted the flight? Would that have kindled a spirit of oneness? That's the sort of collective action that will turn lives around and make a difference in ways that count most. Humanistic responses are the soul of any social change and they cannot be fuelled by legal reforms or the state. It is social will alone that will inspire such a transformation. Only when Jeeja truly matters to us, when any violation of her fundamental rights is a violation of our rights, and when in Ajay's crumbling hopes and aspirations we see our own shattered dreams, will the battle for the rights of persons with disabilities meet with any real success. The day we will speak up in one voice, confront the sensibilities of our state and society if needed, shake ourselves out of a misplaced sense of comfort and security and do every thing in our control to right a wrong, only then can we pride ourselves on being an inclusive and just society. *The writer is the co-founder of The Banyan, a civil society organisation that works closely with people with mental disabilities and marginalised groups, particularly the homeless*

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