

From the Spectrum of Inclusivity

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It takes a lot of love to build an environment or space that accepts people across diversities equally. While the world can be a very perplexing fast-paced place, a space like Café Arpan, run by differently-abled people, acts like a safe and inclusive space providing a therapeutic experience to its customers through the common denominator of happiness - food! We got into a conversation with Ashaita Mahajan along with her cousin sister Aarti Nagarkar. Ashaita is the co-founder of Café Arpan; her biggest inspiration is Aarti, whom she has grown up with. Aarti is a person with autism, and they share a beautiful sisterly bond - which is ever-growing with their shared love for music! Café Arpan is one of the initiatives of Yash Charitable Trust - a non-profit organization with a vision to provide opportunities to PwIDDs (persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities) to live and work in the community of their choice with dignity and self-respect.

Aarti moved back to India from the United States a few years ago with her mother, Dr Sushama Nagarkar. When she lived there, Aarti worked at a sheltered workshop and had a routine life that seemed fulfilling; but here, she missed engaging with people from different walks of life. Sushama (who is a psychologist by profession with a PhD in special education), having worked in this field for many decades, was determined to move back home to set up an organization that would work with PwIDDs, specifically adults. At the time, there were only exclusionary programs available to these specially-abled adults - who are the most marginalised segment of the disability population. This is why Yash Charitable Trust started. Ashaita joined her aunt as a trustee when the NGO was registered in 2014. They started with strategically planning and implementing inclusive programs to create meaningful opportunities for adults with developmental or intellectual disabilities.

Yash Charitable Trust focuses on working with adults with autism, Downs syndrome and other intellectual disabilities to provide them with an enhanced quality of life. These disabilities occur at birth and are lifelong. People who fall within this spectrum are just differently-abled; they perceive and process the world a little differently than others. PwIDDs are capable of many things - all they need is the opportunity, support and guidance to achieve what they set out to do. "The idea is to focus on their abilities - what they can do, what they like to do, what they want to do. We ignore the disability and consciously focus on empowering the individual to live the life they want for themselves."

In 2015, YCT started with its journey by entering the Food & Beverage (F&B) industry, as food is the ultimate common denominator of happiness that brings people together. They first launched the Arpan Dabba Service, a supported employment initiative that only employs PwIDDs. After successfully running the tiffin service for two years, they reached maximum capacity and therefore needed to expand. That is how the idea of Café Arpan was conceived. The café was to be the perfect example to showcase a supported work environment that focuses on inclusion and diversity.

While Aarti worked at sheltered workshops, her tasks were very menial and mundane - what she was doing did not add much value to her life. Everything at YCT is meaningful and has a purpose. Ashaita mentioned that when they started training the team, the team members (that is what they call the PwIDDs) that were going to work at Café Arpan, had their own say on how they wanted to do certain things. For example, they decided how they would greet customers as they walked in. This is just one way they practised inclusion - giving the team a chance to think for themselves, make decisions, and then be responsible for those decisions. All their inclusive practices have created an ambience that is welcoming and therapeutic.

The café's interior is also designed in a way that is welcoming to everyone. The operational tasks have been curated in accordance with the employees' abilities so that they can operate the entire café on their own with the aid of two support staff. Since Café Arpan started in 2018, it has gained a loyal customer base, received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the community at large, and even attracted famous personalities like Kiran Rao, who was also a part of their inauguration.

When asked about how large organizations can include and employ diverse people, Ashaita mentioned that it starts with having an open mind. Recently, Accenture India reached out to YCT to set up a café like Café Arpan inside their office premises. This was a part of their diversity and inclusion initiative. The next step is to create awareness through sensitization and learn to be empathetic towards PwIDDs. She mentioned that even in the disability certificate that the Government hands out, PwIDDs are identified using derogatory and outdated language. Change needs to start from something as crucial as that. The current terminology used to refer to this disability category is 'Mental Retardation'; the correct and appropriate term is 'Intellectual Disability.'

Creating an inclusive environment is extremely important, where one needs to be informed and be aware, which will eventually lead to acceptance. Ashaita's co-trustee, Sia Mirchandani is a parent to a young child with Down syndrome. In her experience, enrolling her daughter in an inclusive educational program has been very beneficial - not just to her daughter but all the children in her class. It has taught them to accept differences at a young age. Making education more inclusive would also be a great place to start to make a change.

Café Arpan in itself stands out as the perfect source for awareness and advocacy. It is a live demonstration of how capable PwIDDs are if they have the opportunity. They may view the world from a different lens, but that does not make them any less than the rest. Sometimes seeing things from a different perspective can lead to new ideas, new experiences and new beginnings. They hope that many such inclusive spaces open up everywhere in the world, and persons with these disabilities are deservedly given the opportunity to shine!