



Column

# The (Not So) Secret Sauce of Inclusion

We pass on more than we realise, and in a future world of Artificial Intelligence, we risk building our biases, probably indelibly, into the systems of tomorrow

BY NISABA GODREJ

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**I**t is rather ironic that I am writing about inclusion being the future of work. This shouldn't have to be the future; it must be our present. Not just at our workplaces, but in the communities we build, relationships we foster, and people we choose to become.

Godrej was founded during India's Swadeshi movement. Back in 1897 it was freedom and the original 'Make In India'. Ardeshir Godrej, our founder and an ardent nationalist, donated a significant share of our profits to the Tilak Swaraj Fund, making it the single largest contribution back then. We believed – and continue to believe – strongly in the values of trust, integrity and importantly, equality. This was a core idea for me, along with what my father emphasised – trusteeship of wealth; that we don't actually own anything; our job is to make Godrej stronger and better during our years serving it. For me, this translates into continuing to build Godrej as a 'good' company, alongside strong value creation and innovative, much-loved products.

Companies like ours can make real change possible. We have the resources and reach, through our people, partners and communities. There are many powerful examples. Take IBM. They have passionately driven their inclusivity agenda since the early twentieth century, from civil rights to inclusion of women, LGBT+ and the disabled, long before it was fashionable to do so. In the early nineties, automaker Subaru chanced upon the insight that it was the preferred brand for lesbian consumers in the US. They acted on it despite the controversy around the gay liberation movement and became synonymous with the community, years before marketers highlighted the benefits of targeting LGBT+ consumers.

As a multinational conglomerate, delighting over a billion consumers, becoming more inclusive isn't just about DNA or the right thing to do; it makes excellent business sense. There's enough research to show that companies

with greater diversity in leadership roles are more innovative, customer-centric and profitable. At Godrej too, companies with greater diversity in senior management, showed more positive shifts in work cultures. Research shows that people like to work at inclusive companies. So, it helps us attract and retain talent.

This then is our (not so) secret sauce – making Godrej representative of our diverse, global consumers. We are building diversity in different ways – through businesses in new geographies, inclusive stances on gender and LGBT+ rights, and hiring for future-ready skills. Rather than narrowing the definition of inclusion, we are broadening it. Our message to the world is that we want to hire all kinds of people and we want to enable them to bring their 'whole selves' to Godrej.

## Creating Alliances

We are a big supporter of LGBT+ rights and my hope is that Godrej can become a real force for good for our colleagues in the community. LGBT+ empowerment isn't just nice to do. Venture capital firm LGBT Capital pegs the spending power of the global LGBT+ community at \$3.7 trillion. That's not counting the ripple effects on friends, family and allies. If this community were a country, it would have the fourth highest GDP globally, of \$4.6 trillion. Recent studies also show that each successive generation has a marked increase in people who identify as LGBT+. Given that Centennials or Gen Z-ers will define the businesses of tomorrow, we can't afford to ignore their increasingly vocal stand on gender binaries.

Efforts at Godrej started much before the Indian Supreme Court's landmark judgement on Section 377 in 2018. Over the years, we've made policy changes to include an equal opportunity policy, same-sex partner benefits, gender neutral adoption leave, and gender reassignment provisions for transgender team members. We also hosted conversations for people to understand why these

revisions were made.

The catalyst for many of the changes is my colleague and founder of the Godrej India Culture Lab, Parmesh Shahani. Through nine years of innovative programming at the Lab, Shahani has pushed the needle to make not just the company, but India, more inclusive. These conversations were key to enable our policy changes and global collaborations. In 2017, we partnered with the United Nations to host the India launch of the 'United Nations Standards of Conduct for Business on tackling discrimination against LGBT+ people' at our headquarters. More recently, in 2018, the *Godrej Manifesto for Trans Inclusion in the Workplace*, a handbook for companies to enable transgender employment, was launched. Building Godrej as a space for safe, open, public conversations, and creating more alliances for larger scale impact is a big focus area.

At the same time, Godrej is deeply committed to grooming women leaders and ensuring adequate representation. We have specific goals and regularly review them, offer unlimited sick leave, adoption and paternity benefits, work-from-home, flexible working hours, and we also help new mothers bring their child and caregiver on work-related travel.

We recognise that shifts have to happen across levels. So, we have revised the composition of our boards of directors to become more diverse. The number of women on the board of directors of Godrej Consumer Products increased from one in 2007 to five today. I can proudly say that along with Godrej Agrovet, Godrej Consumer Products now has the most women directors in any Indian listed company.

## Work in Progress

As companies, we tend to talk about our 'best selves'. But there is also a 'true self'. At Godrej, we often say we are only as good as what we do next. And there is a lot more to do, given how intrinsically inclusion links, not just to legacy and values, but also growth aspirations.

True, we've made progress on becoming more inclusive for our LGBT+ colleagues, but we are a long way off from real impact. It concerns me that no one so far has used the gender reassignment provisions. I'd also like to see us make a more concerted shift in translating our advocacy efforts into hiring. While we may have better women representation than before, we're not at the level of equal representation we aim for. In India and at Godrej, we grapple with already low and decreasing participation rates of women in

the workforce. We struggle with effective interventions to keep women in the workforce until they reach senior positions. We also face specific pockets of concern in sales and manufacturing, where women haven't traditionally taken on roles. Even basics like mentoring continue to be challenges because we don't have enough examples at the top. Our internal studies show that while there is no disparity on gender and pay, biases, possibly cultural, play out in 360 degree feedback. Trends indicate that men tend to rate women lower than they rate other men, more so in India. Women engagement is also lower than that of men.

There's a difference between being diverse and being truly inclusive. Making that shift in a polarising world starts with having the courage to embrace our true selves and acknowledging our biases. We pass on more than we realise, and in a future world of Artificial Intelligence, we risk building our biases, probably indelibly, into the systems of tomorrow.

Let's go back to the basics. Putting policies in place and having gender neutral washrooms is easy. The hard part that comes next is less glamorous. It's making changes on the field and on the shop floor. It's training and enabling behaviour shifts. It's letting everyone have an equal voice and really listening when they speak. Listening, like I'm realising, is tough. You can't put up posters and expect change. It's hard and you have to train people in it.

Then there's the question of where to focus the change efforts. Ruth Whippman's insightful *New York Times* article *Enough Leaning In. Let's Tell Men to Lean Out* (which I strongly recommend reading) highlights the problem with assuming that gender inequality is majorly caused by female unassertiveness, and the fix is getting women to 'lean in' more. She advocates getting men to 'lean out' more. Perhaps the answers aren't where we're looking for them.

So, yes, it is overwhelming. It is a struggle to find solutions. But that doesn't mean we stop trying. It also

doesn't mean that we must find answers on our own. Instead, we should collaborate and learn from peers, because these issues are so deep rooted that it will require large scale systemic change. We can only achieve that if we work together. Then perhaps, 120 years down the line, when someone writes another such article, they will talk about how we stood for freedom again, this time to create a more inclusive world. ■

The writer is Executive Chairperson, Godrej Consumer Products



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