

Include 'purple' to energise economy

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As one of us prepares to go to the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting at Davos-Klosters to speak about the economic benefits of disability inclusion, our long-running conversations have begun to focus more sharply on how we can strengthen the disability-inclusive economy in India.

The Return on Disability research states that persons with disabilities can influence \$8 trillion in spending. This is an extraordinary number. The number is based on direct disposable income, non-disposable income, and funds possessed by families that persons with disabilities can influence. To understand this number in our immediate context, imagine eyeglasses without which some of us cannot see, are disabled. The eyeglass market today stands at around \$147 billion.

Ignoring users of such products and services can cost economies a foregone GDP of 3-7% according to research by the World Bank and the International Labour Organization. Applied to India, a recent Impact Future Project report refers to such percentages and notes that inattention to a disability-inclusive economy could translate to a lost opportunity of over a staggering \$210 billion.

Our own work has made real for us how attention to persons with disability can energize the economic ecosystem. We will mention one example here – Pravin (name changed), who was trained and placed by one of us. Pravin cannot see, hear, or speak. He is deaf-blind. He uses tactile sign language to communicate alongside a refreshable braille display and a screen reader. With these workplace solutions, Pravin works at a multinational organization. He has also trained other deaf-blind persons to use technologies so they can be economically independent like him.

Pravin's journey towards economic independence was enabled by several players in what we refer to as the purple sector. Purple is the color of disability inclusion. The purple workforce that has enabled Pravin includes rehabilitation specialists, special educators, braille teachers, sign language teachers, accessibility providers, job coaches, mobility trainers and employability specialists. Thanks to their efforts and his grit, today Pravin is the sole breadwinner for his family and a proud taxpayer who believes he is giving back to society. Pravin pays the rent, spends on daily goods and services, and drives broader economic activity with his disposable income. In fact, we suspect that a particular biryani and juice vendor near his residence owes his economic stability at least in part to Pravin's frequent visits!

Pravin's story allows us to reflect upon the positive multiplier effect of disability inclusion within the economy. There are three zones of positive impact. First, and most obviously, his

own life and that of his family's. The other two are less immediately visible – his workplace and the broader society. As for the first, Pravin's father worked as a security guard earning a pittance. Upon his passing, if not for Pravin's work, the family would have descended into extreme poverty. Second, at his workplace, Pravin contributes not only to work tasks but also serves as an inspiration to those around him who now focus on their abilities and are learning to maximize business value from diverse employees. Third, in the larger society, those supporting him as part of the purple workforce earn an income and others like the biryani vendor benefit from his disposable income. Further, those with a disability who are trained by him aspire for and secure their own place in the economy. And his tax rupees build our country.

So, how can we enable more such people toward a purple economy? We need to design inclusion into three areas: Education, Workspaces, and Infrastructure.

First, education. We must invest in and recognize the many groups – teachers, specialist trainers, and so forth – who support the likes of Pravin. Our census data suggests that the literacy rate of persons with disabilities is around 55 percent. Much lower than our national average of 74 percent. This must change.

Second, we must create inclusive workspaces to increase the workforce participation of persons like Pravin. Universal design and unique requisite workplace solutions can help those with diverse abilities contribute toward the aims of organizations. A recent UnearthInsight report suggests that of the about 3 crore persons with disability in our country, 1.3 crore are employable, but less than 35 lakh are self-employed, employed across organized and unorganized sectors, and through our country's governmental schemes. Inclusive workplaces are key to involving more employable persons with disabilities.

Finally, we must develop inclusive infrastructure. Transport facilities, assisted living, financial services, online marketplaces, and many such infrastructural elements and platforms must be inclusive. The Impact Future Project report indicates that such infrastructures are projected to create revenues of USD 6 Billion by 2030 for our country.

Initiatives in these areas can not only help ensure the economic rights of persons with disabilities but also drive broader economic growth. Disability inclusion not only benefits persons with disabilities, but also helps move our country forward. The more such initiatives we have, the better it is not just for Pravin and his family, but also for his neighbourhood biryani vendor.

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