

In Conversation with the Differently Abled Champions who Live Among Us

Interviewed: Eshaan Kudtarkar, Himanshu Mittal, Jagadeesh Muthusamy, Pratap Bala and Prof. Rajaluxmi V Murthy

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December 3rd is recognized as the International Day of Disability across the globe. Although we shouldn't really need a specific day to recognize the magnitude of mettle that these people show on a regular basis, it is still worth to dedicate a day to celebrate their strength of character.

Being at IIM Bangalore gives you an even deeper respect and appreciation to these community of people, given that the institution takes in persons from such backgrounds as well, trying to give them as much of equal opportunity as possible. You may wonder how the challenged students cope with the pressures and competition of being at one of the best b-schools in the country but year after year, we see them contradict all of our preconceived notions to come out with flying colors. And it's not easy to do that. But they still do which really makes taking a look into their world an intriguing endeavor.

Himanshu Mittal is a second-year student of IIMB who is physically challenged after an accident left him confined to the wheelchair. But that hasn't deterred him. He says, "*After the accident, my life changed completely. I faced a lot of challenges specially in terms of accessibility. But I never lost hope and kept pushing my boundaries.*" Another second year student here, Eshaan talks about his physical disability condition, "*I have tried to include in everything, academically, as normally as possible, nothing out of the ordinary. If physical training, drawing, craft, and others were a part of the curriculum, I was doing it. My drawing and a first graders drawing of a scenery would be indistinguishable. Retrospectively, these institutes could have told my parents to admit me to another school where my needs could be met better, but they did not, and I am happy about that.*"



Himanshu Mittal, PGP2, IIM Bangalore

Even the first year batch has these deserving candidates like Pratap Bala who has had shoulder misalignment since childhood, leading to stunted growth and restricted opportunities. Despite the initial hesitation with his structure, the support of his family and friends led him to become the successful student doing MBA that he is now. *“I remember of this one time when I was walking with my father on the streets and I asked my father why I am like this, different from other kids, different from my brother. My father replied that I am not any different from other kids. I am as normal as they are. The outer structure doesn’t define who you are, it is the inner self that defines you”*, he remembers. Another story is that of Jagadeesh Muthusamy who is visually challenged. But that doesn’t stop him from taking every challenge in life. There were always concerns that created self-doubt, but he never shied away from putting in that extra effort. In fact, Jagadeesh has achieved so much with his strive that he might be the first ever differently-abled candidate to be selected as a Placement Committee Representative at IIMB. He says, *“The one thing my parents were particular from the beginning was they would never isolate me from other people or treat me special. If I had been part of a special school, I might have developed a sense of inferiority and introversion. I have obviously also had my share of disappointments and difficulties. Eventually however, I got myself a Monocular Telescope, my third eye as I would like to call it, that assisted me in several ways. I was able to secure good grades and even go the extra mile in terms of helping others. It helped me overcome most of my eyesight problems and helped me become independent.”*



Pratap Bala, PGP1, IIM Bangalore

As we get a peek into their world, we understand what they want more than anything is to be a part of the society, get equal opportunities. Thus, as co-citizens we shoulder that responsibility and honor. IIMB has been striving to make this step of inclusion better with each year by taking on more and more students with disabilities. Pratap quotes his opinion on the institution, *“IIMB is doing an incredible job in looking after the disabled students. I remember that after getting selected for IIM Bangalore I received a mail as well as call regarding my nature of disability and the assistance required to deal with it. Right at that moment I felt I am a part of something good. There are ramps and lifts, recordings of classes, separate washrooms and urinals for the disabled students and much more. IIMB also conducts special lectures and motivational talks to help us reduce stress and be motivated.”* Eshaan too ponders about IIMB saying, *“What IIM Bangalore does with inclusion is commendable. Many places are rarely informed about the policies for the disabled. For example, all are not aware of the extra time that can be allotted for a particular exam but IIMB ensures these details. Additionally, at IIMB, it is not only restricted to making the environment accessible but also promoting gender diversity and supporting people of different sexual orientations.”* For Jagadeesh as well, IIMB was the top choice during his CAT preparation days because of the excellent job the B-school does at assessing and providing for the needs of differently abled students.



Eshaan Kudtarkar, PGP2, IIM Bangalore

The Committee on Inclusion was established first at IIMB at 2010 and is still one of the most active ones among the IIMs. Right from the shortlisting phase, the office of disability services is in touch with all the applicants to make the on-boarding as smooth as possible. The committee came into existence because of a visually impaired student called Michael who spoke up for the cause, as told by Mrs. Rajluxmi V Murthy, chair of the committee. *“There has to be commitment from the directors and the administration, presence of processes. We have been really lucky to find such supportive people within the system. Even the culture amongst the faculty has changed with more awareness and inclusion coming in. That has been one of the biggest learnings for me – how the culture in organizations can change for the right cause!”*, she contemplates.



Jagadeesh Muthusamy, PGP1, IIM Bangalore

Whether or not the society supports them, these students have gone ahead to chart their path for the future as well. As told by Jagadeesh, *“I want to be an advocate of this cause, that disability is never a barrier. I want to secure a high position in an esteemed organization and use my power to promote and inspire others. In the long run, I would like to pursue a career opportunity in the education domain as a professor.”* Himanshu wants to leave his message to world to never lose hope because he wants to show how specially abled people have a different way of doing things and that’s what makes them special, while Pratap says, *“I want to make good use of the knowledge that I am imparted here and gain a position in the society from where I can help people like me in overcoming their challenges. I want them to see more dreams and help them turn into reality.”*



Prof. Rajluxmi V, IIM Bangalore

But how ready are we for such gifted go-getters? Are we promising them a mirage of equality but actually misleading them? Mrs. Rajluxmi deliberates, *“What is required the most of us is to create an environment where these kind of students can confidently come up and ask for their rights. It will help them later in their life as well when they go out in to the corporate world because we must make socially sensitive managers. Mr. Vineet Sairawala, Deputy Manager at Future Group, has been one of those successes who is now working at Big Bazaar to ensure accessibility at the retail outlets in terms of shop assistants and disability ramps. But first as an institute we must see what the gaps are which we can close. There are many disabilities that we still don’t know of or we still don’t understand. For example, visual disability is relatively easier to accommodate than learning disability. How do we cope with that, how do we test such students? It is still a long way ahead, but we are now trying to reach out to experts in UK and see how we can better equip ourselves as a premier educational institute to ensure equitable outcomes.”*

The shrewd thing about disability is that it throws up the innate but invisible disability that is there in the so-called normal people who subconsciously discriminate persons with disabilities. There is a lot of pre-conjecture that happens around such people because we inherently start assuming that we are better judges of what they can or cannot do. Interviewers presumptuously reject applicants, teachers put them on the spot by being over-cautious and as a society, we tiptoe around them when actually we should be beckoning them to realize their full potential – potential that they might be still discovering, and we might be surprised to find out about. On a closing note, Eshaan voices the wish of every person with disability across the globe, *“I look forward to the times when even People with Disabilities are treated equally and not sympathetically.”*

Eshaan and Himanshu are students of PGP 2017-2019 batch of IIM Bangalore while Jagadeesh and Pratap are students of PGP 2018-2020 batch of IIM Bangalore. Prof. Rajaluxmi V is Assistant Professor of Decision Sciences department, Chair of Committee on Inclusion and Chair of NSR Pre-doctoral Fellowship at IIM Banaglore.