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ARADHANA LAL

INTERVIEW

Woman Power
Equitable employment generation - key to accelerating sustainable socio-economic development

in conversation with
Dr. Rajeshwari Narendran

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Equitable employment generation - **KEY to accelerating SUSTAINABLE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

You have believed in the immense capabilities of human being in such a way that your initiatives at Lemon Tree Hotel for inclusive work environment for differently abled has become an exemplary initiative in sustainability. These initiatives

have won many national and international awards and recognitions as well. Please share how it all started and what were the challenges within the organisation to accept such beautiful yet nearly impossible looking feat?

AL Diversity at the workplace revolves around appreciating individual differences along with enabling every employee to reach his/her true potential. It plays a crucial role in bringing unique ideas to the forefront, fostering innovation and strengthening employee satisfaction. By instilling this mindset, Lemon Tree has been consistently working towards building an inclusive workplace wherein everyone, irrespective of who they are and where they come from, can work collectively towards shared goals.

We recognize that equitable employment generation is the key to accelerating sustainable socio-economic development of the nation. We have been working diligently in the domain of diversity and inclusion by hiring ODI (Opportunity Deprived Indians) i.e. citizens who do not have access to opportunities to grow and prosper in life. ODIs include Employees

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ARADHANA LAL, Vice President - Sustainability & ESG of Lemon Tree Hotels in conversation with HR expert, a renowned Psycho dynamic analyst, global trainer and academician, **Dr. Rajeshwari Narendran**, Aradhana talks about how hotel chain created a supportive environment that allows persons with disability to deliver their best and redefining roles where required to make their disability irrelevant and played a part in social inclusiveness, opportunity/livelihood creation. Excerpts of the interview :



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 We believe that persons with disabilities (which can be physical, social or economic disabilities leading to an opportunity deprivation) must be provided the same opportunities as others to realize their full potential and live with dignity.

with Disability (EwD) and the Economically/Socially marginalized segment (EcoSoc). Through our hiring practices and initiatives, our goal is to mainstream ODIs into our workforce, thereby empowering them to lead their lives with dignity.

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We believe that persons with disabilities (which can be physical, social or economic disabilities leading to an opportunity deprivation) must be provided the same opportunities as others to realize their full potential and live with dignity. By creating a supportive environment in the organisation that allows them to deliver their best and redefining roles where required to make their disability irrelevant, we are able to play a part, however small, in social inclusiveness, opportunity/livelihood creation and therefore nation building.

Lemon Tree began its journey of hiring employees with special needs in 2007. This includes individuals with:

- ◆ **Physical disabilities** : Speech and Hearing Impaired (SHI), Orthopedically Handicapped (OH), Acid Survivors, Low Vision and
- ◆ **Intellectual and Developmental Disability (IDD)** : Down Syndrome, Slow Learner, Mild MR, IDD and Autism.

From 2016 onwards, we have also focused on hiring people who belong to socially and economically weaker sections of society. This includes individuals who fall below the poverty line, widowed or destitute women, orphans/abandoned girls, transgender persons and those from select states that rank low on education and employment opportunities.

In order to implement a comprehensive initiative such as this and to create a culture change within the company, Lemon Tree faced and mitigated these challenges:

- ◆ **Social taboo and the cultural context of disability** : This was addressed by sensitizing our employee base from 2007 onwards. The goal here is to help them understand why Lemon

Tree believes in inclusion and that there is a compelling business sense in doing so. Every employee today understands that this is not an effort of charity but of equal opportunity. The sensitization sessions also seek to build awareness about specific disabilities so that when employees work with a person of a particular disability they know how best to engage with him/her as a team member/ supervisor/ manager. The objective is to redefine the cultural context.



- ◆ **Role assignment and skilling** : For each disability type it is important to know which role/s in the hotel can be performed by that person, without his/her disability coming in the way of performing those tasks. We have built a practice of "job mapping" where all 25-30 tasks that an employee has to perform (in any specific role) are studied by Operations/Sustainability/HR/L&D along with a strategic NGO partner who is a subject matter expert and helps us map each role accurately. Then we build our training plan in a way that supports that person's learning process and allows him/her to fully understand the tasks to be done. Once they are members of the team they must contribute to the outcome just as a person without disability does. That is when we achieve true equality and inclusion.
- ◆ **Preparedness of ODIs and their family for a full time job** : This aspect is a fundamental one and requires work over a period of time. It starts with our NGO partners and the pre-work they do with candidates around professional skilling and life skilling. Their goal is to prepare candidates and their family to re-orient themselves to mainstream employment. They are enabled to focus as well as fulfil the responsibility "doing a job" involves i.e. to contribute

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Our eco system is a combination of several types of organisations including large multinationals, big (and growing) Indian business houses, mid-sized and small companies on a growth trajectory, start-ups, etc.



to the team and deliver results 6 days a week, 9 hours a day.

You are an IIM A graduate professional, what motivated you to move in roles around Sustainability? Was the journey easy? Who or what inspired you the most?

AL My career has revolved around Sales and Marketing across 3 companies and 29 years. The ability to interact with ease with different kinds of people, to observe and listen to what the consumer is saying and gain insight from what he doesn't say and to be willing to experiment to create impact and deliver results - have all helped me grow in that space.

The opportunity to switch over to Sustainability presented itself unexpectedly at Lemon Tree Hotels and my lack of education/experience in that subject area was no bar to my learning process. I spent ~1 year learning - through dialogue, observation, visits (to NGOs/training centers/schools), online research, training programs and by asking questions. Many questions.

It turned out that engaging with people of diverse backgrounds and skills, building insight through observation and experimenting to innovate was exactly what was needed to build a robust Sustainability/ESG practice. My seemingly unrelated lived experience served me well in this new field.

What message you would like to give for younger generation of aspiring managers across all genders in changing work environment to break the glass ceiling and maternal walls?

AL For those of you who are starting out and hold a dream, whatever that may be... to excel in a corporate environment in a field where intuition can be your single

greatest strength or conversely where slicing data, analyzing it and projecting possible outcomes leads you to success or to become a true artist in a creative field like design, art, dance, music, theatre or to ride the entrepreneurial wave and build your own company... all require you to have faith over fear. The faith that you have the ability to learn and excel at the path you have chosen. The courage to manage your fear of failure (in some cases even ridicule). And most of all the faith that if you take the right people along in your journey you are going to achieve your dream. To put it simply (and to borrow from an iconic brand), Just Do It.

There is no dearth of talent on one hand and on the other, the industry always feels a void in acquiring and maintaining talents. In your opinion, what is lacking in our eco system and how can we overcome this challenge?

AL Our eco system is a combination of several types of organisations including large multinationals, big (and growing) Indian business houses, mid-sized and small companies on a growth trajectory, start-ups, etc. The learning and growth environment in each type of company is unique and a one-size-fits-all solution cannot meet this challenge. Each company - depending on its stage in the company's life-cycle - needs to provide persuasive reasons for talent to 'stay' with them and these include (and are not limited to) up-skilling, a fast-paced individual career growth roadmap, flexible work structures (including WFH, flexible hours, project based options, sabbaticals to pursue education/up-skilling/personal growth and well-being) and more. We have found that building an equal opportunity and inclusive organisation also motivates our employees to continue working at Lemon Tree, together with the quick growth they witness as the company grows speedily. **BM**

About Aradhana Lal

Aradhana, an MBA from IIM-Ahmedabad with 29 years of experience in sales, marketing, corp. communications and sustainability is also a TedX speaker. Currently she leads sustainability/ESG initiatives in Lemon Tree Hotels. She has also worked with Hindustan Lever Network and Taj Group of Hotels.

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