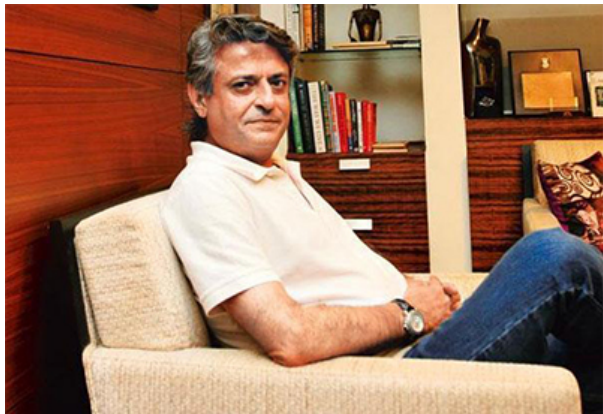




# Different and proud of it

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**Patu Keswani**

**The Lemon Tree hotels giving opportunity to differently-abled persons to work like normal employees. The mission of Patu Keswani, the chairman and managing director of the group, is to employ around 15 per cent of the staff from this section**

I love my job and I am very happy here," says Bikshapathi, who sets down tea and biscuits very carefully on my table and even urges me to have it while it is hot. As I sit comfortably and rest my eyes on the beauty and elegance of the decor and ambience that define understated luxury that is both charming and welcoming.

His face is radiant as he beams a broad smile happy that I understood the message conveyed through the finger drawn on his forehead and the "excellent sign" made holding his thumb and finger together. A tag around his neck shows his name and the fact that he is speech and hearing impaired so that guests understand his disability.

Bikshapathi is one among many differently-abled persons employed by Lemon Tree Hotels one of the fastest growing hotel chains with 27 hotels in 16 cities across India. Patu Keswani, the Chairman and managing director of the group is one of the few entrepreneurs who ventured into the hospitality industry after stints as a senior executive in the corporate sector.

He has made it his mission to employ around 15 per cent of the staff from the disadvantaged sections of the population in all his ventures. The hotel chain, which has Lemon Tree in the mid segment, Red Fox hotel in the budget segment and the Lemon Tree Premier in the luxury four star segment in Hyderabad just

as the Lemon Tree hotels in other cities has employed staff with speech and hearing disabilities, orthopaedic problems, and partial visual impairment, in the front office, food and beverage section, reception, house-keeping and security operations.

“We provide training to these people and also to normal employees in the sign language. This ensures free communication with colleagues as well as guests. Once they are absorbed they are treated like normal employees and are integrated with the rest. There is no discrimination or special treatment,” says Shweta, head of the HR department, as she shows me around the hotel and introduces me to these employees.

It is a Wednesday and employees with disabilities are wearing bright lemon yellow T-shirts with their name tags and the words “Different and Proud of it.....” printed on the rear side. Clearly they are happy to be working aside normal people and being treated normally. Wednesday is also a day of training in the sign language for employees who attend this class in different batches. I spot Krishna, a BSc, BEd from Ongole, who failed to get a decent job despite his qualifications in his hometown because he has only one hand that is functional.

He however, operates the computer deftly with one hand working in the security section of the hotel and has been here for the past one year. “I am enjoying working here and I hope to work hard and grow along with the organisation,” he says. Sudhakar, an employee in the engineering section has a problem with his feet but is able to work diligently seated at his desk and carrying out his assignment.

The Delhi hotels even employ people with ‘Down’s Syndrome’ and makes special efforts to sensitise other employees towards them. “We have a very informal and stress free atmosphere at work. Our top executive’s sport pony tails with yellow ribbons and all our hotels have adopted stray dogs that are cared for by the Lemon Tree team as Keswani believes in animal welfare, being a supporter of PETA (People For Ethical Treatment of Animals),” says Narottam Singh, General Manager, Lemon Tree Hyderabad.

He has been with the group since the first hotel came up in Gurgaon in 2004 and is very proud of the low rate of attrition here with many loyal employees continuing with the group since inception like him. Love for animals is an inherent a part of the Lemon tree Chairman’s life with his dog Sparky being the company mascot and barking partner.

Sparky is also listed as the first employee of the company that now has many

canines as stakeholders. The Lemon Tree group has received the National award from the President of India in 2011 for being the best employer for persons with disabilities and the second National award in 2012 for being a role model in providing a barrier free working environment for persons with disabilities.

Patu Keswani has also received the prestigious NCPDEP-Shell Helen Keller award for belief in equal rights and providing gainful employment to persons with disabilities through training modules that enable them to work on par with other employees. While this fast growing hotel chain is described as fresh, spirited and youthful, the quality that is truly outstanding is its humane approach to both fellow human beings and animals. It is one of those shining examples of entrepreneurship with a social conscience, of a heart that beats for less privileged brethren and a spirit that endures.

**By: Aruna Ravikumar**

What do you think about this?

▲ Interesting

▼ Not Interesting