

How the Godrej group is creating an inclusive culture to accept its LGBT colleagues

By [Suman Layak](#), ET Bureau | 27 Dec, 2015, 05.00AM IST

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Farah Nathani-Menzies spent her first year in her new assignment at [Godrej Industries Ltd](#) (GIL) making sure the women employees felt more comfortable in their workplace. She had moved to Godrej Consumer Products Ltd (GCPL) from Bain in 2010, and after a couple of international stints in South American nations had taken over as the head of diversity and inclusion at GIL. Gender diversity was the low-hanging fruit and reality dawned soon enough. In a casual conversation with Udayan Dhar, one of her male colleagues in human resources, he explained how he constantly felt left out in the office.

Out of the Closet

Udayan was among the few people in Farah's workplace who had come out as gay. "When people come back to work, after a good weekend they discuss what they did with their families. But, not Udayan, as he was never sure his colleagues would accept the idea of his having a male partner," says Farah. She took this up as her next diversity project, making lesbians and gays feel more comfortable in office. And to help her in this project, she got support from Nisaba Godrej, director, GCPL and daughter of group chairman Adi Godrej. As a kickoff, Nisaba Godrej wrote an email to all employees on May 17, 2014, the international day against homophobia. "At Godrej, we strongly believe that each one of us is unique and we can only truly flourish when we can be our 'whole self' at work... I would be proud if we create a culture where our LGBT colleagues can be comfortable being 'out' at work and every single one of us is inclusive and respectful of it."

Udayan was not the only one in Godrej who was open about his different sexual orientation. Parmesh Shahani, head of [Godrej India Culture Lab](#), is a well-known gay activist, and author of the book *Gay Bombay*. The Nisaba Godrej mail open the doors for others, helping them come out. One of them who crossed this workplace Rubicon was Apekshith Khare. When Godrej announced a change in policy so that people could nominate their same sex partners in a committed relationship for benefits like treatment at the group's hospital, Apekshith was the first one to take it up and nominate his partner.

Apekshith, 29, a graduate from the IIM-Kozikhode, hails from Bhopal and joined the Godrej Group in 2010 straight out of Bschoo. Through his life, Apekshith discovered that being gay in India entails coming out of the closet several times. He came out to himself during his first years in engineering college in Bhopal. "First I thought I was a weirdo. Then by 2005 I was comfortable with the idea. But only at IIM did I find a more cosmopolitan mix of people where I could freely discuss these things. I came out to my friend, this girl who used to sit with me in class," Apekshith says.

By 2012 Apekshith had found a partner and started living in with him. His partner's mother accepts their relationship and, like so many other Indian families, also lives with them.

In 2013 Apekshith came out to his parents. "My father is still not accepting it but my mother is okay with it," he says. Financial stability that his education and his job with Godrej bring in of course helps in this debate, he adds. "Many of my IIM classmates have also landed jobs in Mumbai and we often get together as a gang."

The workplace was the last barrier of sorts. Apekshith did not participate in the Bombay Pride parade for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transsexuals as he was not sure of repercussions at the workplace. However, Nisaba Godrej's email changed all that. Apekshith reached out to the HR department and sought out details of the policies and asked if he could help.

Breaking the Ice

For the Bengaluru Pride parade 2015, even Milind Apte, head of HR, GPL, sent out a mailer encouraging colleagues to support and participate. "I could not go because of other work, but it feels good that the top management is sending these signals," Apekshith says. As a result of this openness, Apekshith, Udayan and others like them are now able to bring in their partners for family events at the office. Both their colleagues and partners are comfortable interacting in a social setting.



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"I would be proud if we create a culture where our LGBT colleagues can be comfortable being 'out' at work," says Nisaba Godrej, director, GIL.

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Farah Nathani-Menzies says the group has already changed certain other policies. The word 'spouse' has been replaced with 'partner' in most documents. If an employee in a same sex relationship were to adopt a kid, he would be eligible for a three-months primary care leave.

While benefits extended by the company like the hospital, have been extended to partners too, there are other benefits like medical insurance that need a more innovative approach. "For someone like Apekshit we are creating a policy where he can buy a health insurance policy for his partner and the company would reimburse it," she says.

As a part of the Godrej India Culture Lab, occasionally an event is organised around the LGBT theme. The auditorium being located inside the Godrej One building, the audience often has a large share of [Godrej employees](#). It adds to the sensitisation. Farah spoke about an event in October where Radhika Piramal, managing director, VIP Industries, recounted her own experience of coming out and Padma Iyer spoke about a mother's journey in accepting the sexual orientation of her son. Iyer had put out an ad in papers, seeking a suitable boy for her son Harish Iyer (Harish is an activist against child sexual abuse).

And there was Joe Zachariah, who had spoken about how a survey done at his former multinational investment banking employer in India (Joe now works for McKinsey in Singapore). The survey threw up a surprising result. More than 60% of the respondents had said they were bisexual, thinking the term meant heterosexual.

Clearly there are miles to go in sensitisation of corporate India to the needs of their gay and lesbian colleagues. Farah and her colleagues in Godrej have however logged some distance.

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