

**Headline:** It's all about inclusion at Godrej

**Description:** The Godrej group has emerged as a leader of the movement for LGBTQ inclusion in the corporate space

**Date:** July 31, 2016

**Publication:** DNA

**Author:** Yogesh Pawar

**Link:** <http://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/report-all-about-inclusion-2239553>

It could be the verdant, greenery outside the large windows, the perfectly done noodles or just the fact that the Godrej group of companies is not only writing the rules for LGBTQ inclusion but also embracing it. The mood is joyous as several employees settle down to lunch at the spacious canteen. As they compare notes, discussing partners, in-laws and grandchildren, photographs on the phone are passed around to many awwws. When it's Udayan Dhar's turn, he talks about the long drive and dinner he and his gay partner went for. His friends tease him good-naturedly about the rains and company and he joins in their laughter.

Settling down over coffee to talk about how the Godrej group has emerged as a leader at the forefront of the movement for LGBTQ inclusion, he addresses those who think sexual orientation is a non-issue. "...even without spelling it out, aren't straight people 'out' about their heterosexuality when they discuss their husbands/wives and boyfriends/girlfriends over casual conversations while working? Why should an innocuous question like 'What did you do over the weekend?' lead to emotional stress for someone just because s/he is from the LGBTQ community?"

Parmesh Shahani, who founded the Godrej India Culture Lab, remembers how chance conversations with Nisaba Godrej, director,

Godrej Consumer Products Ltd (GCPL) and daughter of group chairman Adi Godrej, led him to bring up LGBTQ inclusion six years ago.

This was soon followed with existing HR policies being tweaked to create an atmosphere of acceptance and support. These included allowing employees to select gender when they join so they can use gender-appropriate washrooms at work, changing 'spouse' to 'partner' in policies extending benefits to next of kin, giving LGBTQ individuals a three-month paid break for primary care-giving if they choose to adopt, allowing same sex partners in committed relationships benefits like treatment at the group's hospital and even reimbursing a health insurance bought for a same sex partner.

"Knowing one is cherished as much as other employees without bias based on one's personal choices can be liberating and do wonders for morale. When the organisation loves you unconditionally, that love comes back in the form of dedication, drive and hard work," says Shahani, who is author of *Gay Bombay*.

"I am surprised more and more corporates haven't jumped onto this bandwagon given how this strategically a good move for them," the gay rights activist adds. He, however, cautions that this does not mean any pressure on individuals to come out. "We need to only provide an enabling environment and let them feel comfortable to decide about coming out and if yes at what pace."

Many like his colleague in Godrej Properties echo that sentiment. This north Indian, who was the first to nominate his live-in gay partner for treatment at the company hospital, joined the Godrej Group in 2010 straight out of his course. It felt strange, he says, when he first realised his sexual orientation while pursuing his course down South. "It took me a long time to feel comfortable and the cosmopolitan environment in my B-school helped."

Once he found his partner in 2012 and began living with him, he told his parents too. "My mom's gotten around to the idea but my father's still sitting on the fence. Financial independence and the accepting

atmosphere at work has empowered me enough to negotiate this space freely without making compromises," says the 30-year-old.

Unsure of how it would impact them at work, many like him avoided participating in the Bombay Gay Pride march. A mail from Nisaba Godrej on May 17, 2014, the international day against homophobia, changed that for him.

"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," stated the mail. The company hasn't reversed this process despite the back and forth by courts on gay rights. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which was decriminalised with respect to sex between consenting adults by Delhi High Court in July 2009, was overturned by the Supreme Court in December 2013. A bunch of curative petitions challenging the ruling is pending before the apex court.

The creation of the Godrej India Culture Lab, "a fluid experimental space that cross-pollinates ideas and people to explore what it means to be modern and Indian," has helped catalyse the inclusion and integration with several LGBTQ-themed events.

"Since our auditorium is located inside the premises, audiences always include Godrej employees. This further helps in both sensitisation and integration. Once they see we are like them, the 'otherisation' stops," a proud Shahani points out. "We have had Radhika Piramal, managing director, VIP Industries, recounting her experience of coming out and equal rights activist Harish Iyer's mother Padma speaking about her own journey in accepting his sexual orientation."

Shahani's straight colleague Kevin Lobo points out how the sensitising can often open doors to one's own latent deep-seated prejudices.

"When we had the Dancing Queens event with transgenders I realised how much I'd internalised the fear and revulsion for the *hijra* community that we're socialised into from early childhood. After the first

interaction, I realised how wrong I was. They were warm and very friendly to interact with."

Who knew that first baby steps to the big world of inclusion would begin at work?