

[**Vidya Mahambare**] (0:15 - 1:31)

Welcome to What Shapes Us, a podcast series by Great Lakes Institute of Management. I am your host

Vidya Mahambare. In this series, we discuss what are the factors that truly really affect our lives, how our lives shape.

Of course, it can be nature, it can be nurture, it can be hard work, it can be luck, but no single factor explains life's complexities. So, with the help of our guest and with the help of a framework which we call the 5E framework, these E's stand for Endowment, Environment, Education, Effort and Equality of Opportunity. We try to unravel the complexities of life.

So, my guest today to talk about this and much more is **Sirisha** Bhamedipati. Welcome **Sirisha**, thank you very much for joining us. **Sirisha** is a founder and managing director of a firm called Align by Design along with her husband Harish.

It is a strategy consulting firm which helps companies in various aspects as we will figure out. They also co-authored a book in 2023, Hope is Not a Strategy. So, I hope to learn a lot more about the book as well in this conversation.

So, thank you very much **Sirisha** for joining us.

[**Sirisha**] (1:32 - 1:35)

Thanks so much Vidya for inviting me here.

[**Vidya Mahambare**] (1:35 - 2:38)

Yeah, our pleasure. So, as you heard we have these 5 E's and so we will talk about that, we will talk about your life across these 5 E's. I haven't mentioned your education and what and all you have done until now, so we will cover all that, but to begin with the first E which is Endowment.

So, by Endowment, I mean something that we are born with, that is sort of our birth lottery, right. We have no control over it, which family we are born into, which place we are born, whether we are born with good health, good immunity or some kind of talent, really not in our hand, but everyone starts somewhere. I understand you are born in Hyderabad or at least grew up there.

So, to start off with, if you could tell us about early life, now in hindsight, early life and how was that life and which were the endowments if you think which were positive and which were not, then we will take it from there.

[**Sirisha**] (2:39 - 4:33)

Yeah, so I am born in a middle class family in Hyderabad, so typical middle class South Indian family, education was the most important thing and so academics was always very very important in life and also you know things that come with a middle class upbringing right, like integrity, respect and certain values that run in the family. So, this is what I came in with and was lucky to have parents who were, you know, eternal optimists and extremely hardworking and you know books was our biggest asset in the house, so there was no book fair that we never visited, so as children we grew up with a lot of curiosity, I have an older

brother, so me and my brother we grew up with a lot of curiosity, learning about the world and a lot of interesting conversations about the world that we had with parents and also grandparents and the other very great blessing if I look back in hindsight is the ability, you know the parents heeded in us the ability to dream anything.

For that matter when I was in grade 4, I used to sign off on my books as Dr. **Sirisha** FRCS NL to that extent, to that specificity, okay, so you know I wanted to become a doctor, I wanted to become a neurosurgeon, so everything was like, you know, discussed and I used to sign off, you know, at the end of the year, right, in the books I used to sign off as Dr. **Sirisha** and my father used to say, you know, one day you want to become the Prime Minister of the country, so that's what I grew up with, where it is everything is possible and one thing my parents always used to say was, effort is the only non-negotiable that you have in life apart from your values,

[Vidya Mahambare] (4:34 - 5:25)

otherwise you can do what you want, right, yeah, so you know that effort and the endowment of healthy, you know, physical body is something that you lost around the age of 12 or 13, and of course no one would believe that looking at you right now, so huge amount of effort has gone into redirecting, rebuilding your life, so when that endowment massively shifted, you know, you were a very healthy, normal, you know, teenager, bubbling with full of confidence, you know, hoping to become a doctor and so on and then something happened which the physical endowment went to nearly zero, could you explain to us what exactly happened?

[Sirisha] (5:25 - 10:24)

So this was way back in 94, I was 13, I had the fever for a couple of days and, you know, the usual thing, right, like you take a paracetamol and you assume it'll be okay and so my mother came to give me a paracetamol and suddenly I, she gave me a glass of water and the glass of water dropped from my hand and I'm a, I used to be a left-hander, so it dropped from my hand, so we were generally laughing about it, you know, saying I have the habit of sleeping on my left, my parents always used to tell me, you know, don't always sleep on your left and I was like a lean, thin, 36 kilos, like slightly underweight kind of a kid.

I used to be very athletic, I used to run and all and so they always sleeping on one side is not good and also then my father was laughing saying, you know, yeah, something, this is what we were telling you and then we, they took me to a hospital, a nearest nursing home because I was not able to hold anything after that, so they said, it is called Saturday night's palsy, you know, the doctor gave like a near confirmative diagnosis where basically after being drunk on Saturday, oh, when people drive, right, they put their, they have the tendency to put their hand on the glass of the car, right, the window of the car and so because of that it happened, so then further teasing started saying, she's like totally drunk, right, so it was not diagnosed, it wasn't diagnosed properly and then within a span of, after getting to the hospital, within a span of about three or four hours, I went to the washroom, I turn on the light switch, I turned the switch on and I walked in and when I came out, I couldn't lift my right hand to turn the switch off

That's when we realised this is something very complex, so they took me, rushed me to a, you know, in those days the garment hospitals used to be really well equipped with all types

of doctors, so they took me to one of the garment hospitals in Hyderabad called Gandhi Medical Hospital and there they said, okay, something is going drastically wrong, nobody could figure out, right, and again this is 30, 31, 32 years ago, so medical science was also not so advanced, right, so nobody could figure what happened and then they took me to the x-ray department, they said, you need to sit in a wheelchair, I said, I can walk, no, I don't need a wheelchair.

So I went to the x-ray department and there, you know, just when they were about to click the x-ray, it collapsed and that's when we realised I couldn't move my back or my legs, so nothing, no part of my body was moving, so there they picked me up and they put me on a stretcher and as soon as this happened, my body became hypersensitive, so hypersensitivity is like, even if they touch with a feather or with a cotton wool, I was just cream in pain.

I lost complete motor ability but my sensation become, became like hyperactive, so they got me to the, it got me there, then they did all sorts of things, they were trying, testing it out for a variety of diseases but I wasn't responding for anything and the surprising part was, they send my blood sample to three different places for blood tests, one came as typhoid, one came as malaria, one came as pneumonia, so it was, everybody was clueless about what was going on and they were just pumping me with medicines, they did things called lumbar puncture where they take fluid from your spinal cord to test, that didn't show anything, they did plasma where my blood was taken out, it was purified, plasma was injected into it and it was put back into my body again.

So when did finally the diagnosis? There was no diagnosis, so two months I was in the ICU going through all of this and end of two months, the doctor said, first initially the pace at which it was happening, they said, they thought either my brain or my heart or lungs will go next, to that extent that they told my parents that she's not going to survive, so if you want to call anybody, you should call them right now and after two months of being in that state where only my eyes were moving, nothing else and I was completely conscious, I could speak, I could see people, talk to people, everything.

After two months, they said, it could be a combination of, you know, a disease called Guillain-Barré syndrome and another disease called spinal meningitis but the presentation of neither matched what happened to me but they were giving me medicines and end of two months, they said, see good news and bad news, good news, she survived, you know, we didn't expect her to survive, bad news is she's going to be remain like this forever because they were giving me, doing everything possible and I wasn't responding to any kind of medication.

Then they told my parents, you're actually spending a lot of money in the hospital, so why don't you just take her home, you know, because there's nothing much that we're going to do here anyway and whatever we're doing here, you can as well do it for her at home.

[Vidya Mahambare] (10:25 - 10:49)

So, this is what happened. So, after going home because next is the environment, right, and you already spoke about your parents and how optimistic they were and never say die attitude and so on, so how did that and how was your like, you know, maybe broader social environment, how did it help in coping with this?

[Sirisha] (10:49 - 13:13)

Yeah, so when the doctor said nothing could happen, my parents took me home and then my father was a sports person and my parents said, okay, the doctor said nothing can be done but we don't have to, we will try, we'll still try what we can do, right, so that was the most important thing for me that, you know, you don't give up, you know, till the time we can try, we'll keep trying for something and we will figure out what can be done and the biggest thing that I learned and I try to practise it even today is nobody got shaken, there was no rona dona in the house or, you know, everyone being upset, they said this is what it is.

So, they accepted, they internalised the situation. Yeah and actually all through while growing up also me and my brother, everything my parents used to discuss very openly, so it used to always be an open environment where there's nothing that's hidden or, you know, there are no two different versions of a story going on in the house or anything.

So, we always felt part of that conversation, right, in hindsight when I look back at that, that was what brought a lot of trust for me, right, they're saying that, okay, it is what it is, let's figure out, the second part is saying that, you know, you let's start working on your body and third openly discussing with me, okay, saying what do we do now, right. So, all of that made it a lot more confident for me. So, like for the moment they took me back home, it was first about who's going to take care of me and those were not the days when you had somebody to stay at home.

So, it was like a very simple decision, a very, you know, honest conversation my parents had and I still remember that day sitting near my bed because of the steroids and everything that were pumped in, right, from 36 kilos I became a 100 kilos plus. So, I was very heavy and every part of my body was hurting, only my father could figure out how he could pick me, like vertically he would pick me, only he could figure that out and being a sports person. So, the decision became very seamless, somebody had to go back to work to take care of all the bills and my brother had to study and so my father very easily took the decision saying I'm not going to work.

[Vidya Mahambare] (13:13 - 13:15)

So, your mom took that responsibility?

[Sirisha] (13:15 - 13:38)

My mom went to work, my mom was used to work at the bank because my father was, my father said and it was like a very open conversation, right, where he said that my mom can't pick me up, it's impossible for her to pick me up. So, even if my mom was there, my father needed to be there. So, rather my father take that break.

So, very logical, you know, thinking.

[Vidya Mahambare] (13:38 - 13:47)

Very logical, straightforward, no drama conversations. What is in the best interest of family to do and that is how we go ahead.

[Sirisha] (13:47 - 14:01)

Absolutely and you know, those days like 90s, assuming that a man is not working, it created a lot of social stigma but he said I don't really care, what matters is our family right now and this is what we take care.

[Vidya Mahambare] (14:02 - 14:43)

So, but that's very important because even now the, you know, male breadwinner norm in India has not changed, you know, you would know that men unemployment is very high in early 20s in India, among Indian men but by the time they approach late 20s, unemployment among men in India disappears magically because as the, you know, marriage is also norm in India. So, around that time, whatever job you have to find only and you know, you do that because you have to be earning before, you know, you can get married as a man, right, in India. So, 30 years ago doing that, you know, defining social norms and going against the, you know, wisdom that itself tells us like a big lesson in that.

[Sirisha] (14:44 - 16:07)

And that all is also endowment, right? We don't, we don't see the people having, you know, that kind around. Yeah and luckily I was, we had a large extended family and everybody was close to each other and almost all of us were living in Hyderabad.

So, we had a lot of family support and for almost four months, I remember Vidya, after that was where my father was, I couldn't move anything, right? So, my father would just sit and keep moving my fingers and my toes and my legs for almost eight hours a day. So, that just used to be the norm, used to move, move, move and after four months, I started, you know, wriggling my toes which was like a big win because then that basically said, yeah, you could work for, you know, work for a lot of things but you need to have a structured plan, right?

And so, gradually that started. So, initially I couldn't obviously sit or anything. So, put a lot of pillows all around me to just make me come into that position and they would count.

Everyone, you know, from my youngest cousins to my grandparents would start counting. One, two, three, two, see how long you can hold and then every one hour I had to repeat and somebody or the other was always encouraging to make sure you keep doing that. So, gradually I learned to sit, I learned to stand and then I...

[Vidya Mahambare] (16:07 - 16:10)

So, all the skills you had to relearn.

[Sirisha] (16:10 - 16:30)

Started slowly, started relearning. Obviously, you know, there's a limited movement in my right hand because my upper limbs were the first affected. My left hand is still completely flaccid and I have limited movement on my right hand but...

Even now? Even now. But that actually taught me to adapt.

So, that's again another thing, I think, I call it endowment.

[Vidya Mahambare] (16:31 - 16:32)

Endowment, adaptability.

[Sirisha] (16:32 - 17:15)

About adaptability, right? Like everything, it was all about nobody doing it for me, like even when I was studying and everything, right? My parents used to say, yeah, you got to do this, you got to do this.

If you want to study medicine, you have to work that 14-15 hours a day. So, there was no, you know, pity or, you know, some form of sympathy, saying, oh, let it be or, you know, somebody else compensating for your work. A lot of times in today's parenting when I see, we compensate, you know, try doing everything for the kids, right?

And they were like, no, you got to figure out, right? Because at the end of the day, that's your life. Correct.

So, teaching adaptability, it was not easy, definitely not easy for them to see me struggle. Right.

[Vidya Mahambare] (17:15 - 17:29)

But they said, you got to do what you got to do. Correct. Because they wanted you to be independent eventually.

So, finally, you have to do it. So, it took two years or something for you to, how many years did it take to stand again or walk?

[Sirisha] (17:29 - 17:41)

It was almost a year and sitting was about eight months when I started going back to school. So, my one deal was I want to go back to school. So, I used to be very, very...

[Vidya Mahambare] (17:41 - 17:42)

So, you had some goal.

[Sirisha] (17:42 - 17:58)

Socially active. Yeah. Your goal was that you want to go back to school.

I want to go back to school. When my toes started moving, that's when my first dream was I want to go back to school. So, then you need to sit, then you need to, you know, writing was far-fetched because by that time my hands were not moving at all.

[Vidya Mahambare] (17:58 - 17:58)

Right.

[Sirisha] (17:58 - 19:28)

But at least if you are able to sit through the class, then you can go back. So, after about eight months, I could sit with support and that's when I said I'll go back to school. And I was like a very, very active kid in school.

I always used to top academics and sports. So, when my parents approached the school, they said, yeah, you can get it back. We'll figure out how we want to make arrangements.

And that's how I started going back to school. And my biggest win was my first exam that I wrote, I stood first. So, for me, that was getting back to my normalcy.

I couldn't write an exam. So, I was using a writer. So, it almost took me about a year and a half, two years, two years actually to be able to write.

Right. Until then I used to use a writer's help. But again, right, that goal thing where it matters the most was I couldn't, I could never explain constructions and maths to the writer.

Right. The writer was usually, you know, a librarian or a language teacher. So, how to make the constructions, I couldn't explain and I would lose marks for that.

So, then it became a goal for me that I need to learn writing. Right. So, there were thousands and thousands of pages, I think my father got, where I started writing every alphabet.

I remember one full summer holiday, my ninth grade summer holidays, I was just sitting and writing for like, and didn't do any other physiotherapy other than writing. Because my goal at that time was, okay, I want to be able to write on my own because depending on someone else is actually...

[Vidya Mahambare] (19:28 - 19:40)

So, from the beginning, you know, you were very high on, you know, greater determination, you know, willpower. Of course, that situation makes one, I suppose, even increase this...

[Sirisha] (19:41 - 19:42)

Honestly, if you ask me...

[Vidya Mahambare] (19:42 - 19:44)

You didn't feel it that way.

[Sirisha] (19:44 - 19:59)

As a kid I don't know. Yeah. But as a kid I don't know, you know, to be very fair, I think a lot of that I attributed to my parents.

Right. Because the, if the environment or ecosystem didn't support me, I don't think I would have done any of these.

[Vidya Mahambare] (19:59 - 20:13)

So, it's very important in general to have an environment. Some of us are, you know, lucky enough to be born into that environment, but otherwise it's very important to build a supporting environment for everyone.

[Sirisha] (20:13 - 20:22)

Absolutely. Because if your environment is not supportive, then I don't think you would move forward. Right.

Like it's very easy to give up.

[Vidya Mahambare] (20:22 - 20:22)

Yeah.

[Sirisha] (20:22 - 21:21)

I think the low periods was when the environment around me supported. Correct. And the overconfident times was when the environment around me also cut me down to, you know, saying this is reality.

So, for instance, my deal with my dad was I'll start going to school. Like his biggest worry was how would you do physiotherapy if you don't, if you go off to school. So, my deal was I will go to school.

After that I'll come and do for hours. So, there were days I would come back and say, oh, this is hurting, that is hurting, I'm very tired and try avoiding physiotherapy because that was painful. And he stopped sending me to school.

Oh, I see. It's a deal. You do it and then you go.

So, you know, that kind of ecosystem, I think, I think I'm very lucky to have that while growing up. Very lucky to have it even now. Right.

The kind of person Harish is. Yes. He will never let me settle down for something lesser.

Yeah, suboptimal. Suboptimal.

[Vidya Mahambare] (21:21 - 21:21)

Just because.

[Sirisha] (21:22 - 21:35)

My kids will keep pushing me for every possible opportunity to do something better. Right. So, I think, yeah, that's again endowment, probably a later stage in life, but that's still endowment.

[Vidya Mahambare] (21:35 - 22:09)

Yeah, true. The kids. So, so let us a little bit talk from about the environment from the viewpoint of your current work.

So, you have this firm, right? Align by Design. Align by Design.

So, can you tell us a little bit more of that and how do you see, you know, the clients you work with, which are the environments in a company which are say, you know, supportive or enable people to thrive and which are the kind of maybe, you know, leaders or the environment in the company which, you know, doesn't allow them to reach really to their potential?

[Sirisha] (22:10 - 24:01)

So, at Align by Design, basically, we help companies today to actually go through transformations very seamlessly. A lot of companies collapse when they're trying to scale, mergers and integrations when they happen, right? A lot of companies tend to fail at that time or when companies are preparing for going for IPOs, etc.

So, we work with them to actually help them go through the transformation very seamlessly. So, our book, Hope is Not a Strategy is all about every decision a leader needs to

make is all a dilemma, right? And all dilemmas you have to deliberately choose and the difficult part about a dilemma or the beauty of a dilemma is there's no right or wrong.

Everything has its pros and cons, right? So, as a leader, you need to make those choices. So, we help leaders and leadership teams make those right choices to their context and what suits them.

So, for instance, nobody can say they can copy Google's culture or nobody can say that, oh, such and such a thing works in Amazon. So, we want to do the same thing now. It has to be, you know, in your context, suiting your requirement, right?

So, that's what we do with the company. So, to your question of, you know, which ones thrive in when it comes to the ecosystem and which ones don't, I think there are a lot of companies where there's a lot of transparency that is maintained, right? Which translates to role clarity, clarity on strategy.

So, there's no misalignment. Everybody knows what they're working towards. Everybody knows what their role is in the larger picture.

Everyone knows what it means for each of them, right? Places where that clarity is there, they always thrive. Places where that clarity is missing gives rise to a lot of politics, gives rise to a lot of unrest in the organisation, all of which translates to lower productivity.

[Vidya Mahambare] (24:02 - 24:20)

Right. So, transparency, which leads to trust, I suppose, and then people know what they're supposed to do in their job and there is complete clarity on the job roles and things like that kind of environment. If a leader, you know, leadership creates, then people can give their best.

[Sirisha] (24:20 - 24:20)

Absolutely.

[Vidya Mahambare] (24:20 - 24:22)

I suppose. Yeah.

[Sirisha] (24:22 - 24:41)

Because that alignment is key for people to understand and feel part of that whole journey and not feel like they're doing it for someone else, right? That sense of belongingness and also helping them make the right decisions. Otherwise, what happens when that alignment is missing, all decisions keep flowing to the top.

[Vidya Mahambare] (24:41 - 24:41)

Right.

[Sirisha] (24:41 - 24:48)

So, normally what we hear as problems in organisations that, oh, you know, people don't make decisions here.

[Vidya Mahambare] (24:48 - 24:50)

Because there is no empowerment to make decisions. Right.

[Sirisha] (24:50 - 24:56)

Empowerment and also giving the context. Right. Right.

But empowerment without context also will make people make wrong decisions.

[Vidya Mahambare] (24:56 - 24:56)

Right.

[Sirisha] (24:57 - 25:32)

And then the leader again starts doubting the people. So, creating that environment where there is a lot of alignment and transparency and understanding is what makes organisations thrive. And that's what we help them do because in all these changes of context, like high scale journey or mergers acquisitions, it's a lot of change that organisations go through, right?

When they're getting ready for an IPO, right? A lot of transformations happen at that time. So, bringing clarity at that time to ensure whatever journey they're in is successful is what we do.

Right.

[Vidya Mahambare] (25:33 - 26:50)

So, you spoke a little bit about your book now, you know, you mentioned Hope is not a strategy and it is along with your husband Harish. That brings me to the third E, which is where I think you met Harish, right? At a higher education level.

So, the third E is education. So, before we get to that story, in general, your school education and then you went to one of the, you know, premier management school, the premier management school in India, Indian Institute of Management at Ahmedabad. So, maybe you can first of all tell us about that, what that, if at all there was a struggle or the ambition, you know, how you achieved and then which part of, how your experience was in terms of the support in the education system?

I think school you already said was very supportive, but in general, maybe not specific institution where you studied, but in general, what is your experience about the, you know, education institutions in terms of support and which part of your education you feel that even if, you know, you take out, you minus from your CV, it won't make much of a difference or do you think all of it is valuable for different reasons?

[Sirisha] (26:51 - 26:58)

Yeah. So, school was where I, I mean, I studied from my K.O.K.G. there, right? So, they all knew me.

[Vidya Mahambare] (26:58 - 26:58)

Yeah.

[Sirisha] (26:58 - 27:07)

So, it was obvious for them to be very supportive. Right. Because they knew the context, right?

And I was all getting, I was in my 8th grade. So, it was just about two years.

[**Vidya Mahambare**] (27:07 - 27:16)

So, that's important. They knew the context. They had seen you as a, you know, normal thriving, you know, kid and then the transformation.

So, they had the context.

[**Sirisha**] (27:16 - 27:20)

So, because of the context, it was more accommodative.

[**Vidya Mahambare**] (27:20 - 27:20)

Right.

[**Sirisha**] (27:20 - 28:13)

I will, and I'm deliberately using the word accommodative and I'll come to that in a while. Then I went to a junior college for my 11th and 12th because I was preparing for medical entrance. At that point, when I had reached out to a lot of doctors and the Medical Council of India, they said, you know, because one hand is not working, you can still be a doctor, but you can be a physician and be a surgeon.

So, which was okay. So, for me, it was like rewiring my dream from fellow Royal College of Surgeons to, you know, Royal College of Physicians. Yeah.

So, I was okay with that. And then came the point where I wrote my entrance. I got a very good rank.

Okay. In my first attempt itself. And then they said, I went for my interview.

I joined the medical college.

[**Vidya Mahambare**] (28:13 - 28:13)

Okay.

[**Sirisha**] (28:13 - 28:53)

And then we have medical examinations. After you join the college, you have a medical examination. Okay.

In the first week itself. I see. During the medical examination, they said, sorry, your admission is cancelled.

And because the Medical Council of India that year came up with a rule that first year surgery was compulsory. Oh. Which was, I mean, it was a big shock for me.

And for me, that was the lowest point, probably, because that was what I was dreaming for. And everything from recovery, my goal was that. My goal was getting closer to that.

And I was dreaming for it. And so, I was super excited when I got through. I thought, okay, you know, in spite of all of this, I made it.

[Vidya Mahambare] (28:53 - 28:53)

Right.

[Sirisha] (28:53 - 29:11)

And then they said, your admission is cancelled. And this was almost like a couple of months into the academic year. I didn't have any other option at that point.

And there was no point in me saying that I'll write it again next year. There was no point going to the court because none of this was going to happen. They had this new rule.

[Vidya Mahambare] (29:11 - 29:17)

And it is a regulation they have got. Unless they change the regulation, otherwise one has to fight, which is.

[Sirisha] (29:17 - 31:52)

Correct. And to what extent? If the rule is passed and there's a reason why they've passed it, then to what extent?

And I didn't have an option. So that was the year, Bachelor of Computer Applications, BCA was being introduced in Hyderabad. Okay.

And because it's a new course, obviously, there were not too many takers and all. In I, you know, around December, I joined because after I lost the admission, I was completely distracted. I thought, you know, that's the end.

You know, I don't have anything else to do. My parents were telling me to write civil services and all of that. But I said, I'm not interested.

And all of that. So Bachelor of Computer Applications started that year. That seemed very interesting.

And again, probably the curiosity from childhood. I thought, okay, maybe let me give that a try. And you won't believe it, I joined a college and the head of the department first said, with one hand, how will you type?

And he didn't strike me until then. That to type and those were not the days of laptops, right? So type on a keyboard.

She said, how will you type on the keyboard with a single hand? And she said, okay, go give it a try. I sat in the lab and I could barely type anything.

I was looking for one letter after another and she said, you have practical exams in March. So how are we going to do it? So again, there it was like, you know, probably in again, in hindsight, I think it could have been told to me better.

But for me, it became like, oh, this option is also closed. But then I thought, okay, anyway, I've joined. So let me give it a try.

So I studied and I joined a class to actually teach me typing. Okay. You know, so there was this teacher teaching programming.

And those are not the days when you had PCs at home, right? So I had to go to that lab, because he would teach programming and he would leave you in the lab for as long as you want. So then I could sit and practise there.

And then my parents saw that and then they got me a computer home. And I would practise day night and learn typing with a single hand. But what I think what that did to me was this is not okay.

You know, you should not tell that you can't do something, because then the world outside will judge you. So that's when I became very, very close to myself, as in, I would never tell people. And by then I had lost a lot of weight.

And also people couldn't make out that I had a problem. So I realised because this, the moment I went and told them, she said, yeah, you can't do it. I said, no, the world doesn't accept you like this.

[Vidya Mahambare] (31:52 - 31:52)
Right.

[Sirisha] (31:53 - 32:23)
So that was my own, you know, way of rewiring. Then, okay, you know, you, as long as you don't tell people anything, you're okay. People will think everything is normal and they won't discriminate.

And whatever fight you have to put, you put it in the background. But don't tell it to people. That was what it started with.

Then, I was studying then, you know, after my undergrad, I wrote the, I wrote CAD. And so I was very clear that I will not, you know, get a disability certificate or anything.

[Vidya Mahambare] (32:23 - 32:34)
So you got the CAD on a normal merit? Yeah, I got through all the IIMs. Then when I, if you went to IIM Ahmedabad, of course, you would have got through all other IIMs. So then I got through all of them.

[Sirisha] (32:35 - 32:41)
Then I said, I'll go to Ahmedabad. But by then my mental wiring was, you do not tell things to people.

[Vidya Mahambare] (32:41 - 32:43)
Yeah, I will not disclose that I have a disability.

[Sirisha] (32:44 - 33:05)
Yes. And you do not, you don't have too close friends, you know, because when they become very close to you, they'll know about you. So you don't have too big of a friend circle.

You know, you speak to people, but you don't have too close friends. So, you know, there was this very strong guard that I built around myself, where I would never let people in.

[Vidya Mahambare] (33:05 - 33:26)

No, but yeah, before we get to there, but, you know, it's a big lesson for everyone not using the, because people end up using entitlement even when they need not, right? But you took a conscious decision that you will not use the entitlement of disability certificate and you will get through the merit to IIM Ahmedabad.

[Sirisha] (33:26 - 33:47)

Correct. Because there was no problem with my thinking. See, my brain was working well, right?

My brain was working. Whatever was, was with my body. Right.

And that didn't stop me from, by then I could write really fast. So that didn't stop me from thinking or working hard, right? So I didn't have a reason to take it.

So, you know, it was not like I would take a privilege or anything.

[Vidya Mahambare] (33:47 - 33:52)

So it also shows you did not want anyone to show you pity or sympathy or something for a disability. Right.

[Sirisha] (33:53 - 34:11)

And in fact, I think again, credit goes to my parents, because there was no such environment at home. If I had to do something, I had to do it. So for instance, because later my father started going to work again and after I started my undergrad, my mom was working.

So if food needed to be made in the house, I had to learn to cook.

[Vidya Mahambare] (34:12 - 34:12)

Right.

[Sirisha] (34:12 - 34:15)

Because that's why it was independent. Right.

[Vidya Mahambare] (34:15 - 34:35)

So at IIM Ahmedabad, since there was no context to them, right, similar to your undergraduate college, it must have been difficult since you did not make a deliberate choice of not making close friends. And I suppose it's difficult to be accommodative for them since they have no context. How did you deal?

[Sirisha] (34:35 - 36:32)

Yeah. So from an academic standpoint, having context, no context didn't matter. Right.

So teachers wise, it didn't matter to me. But IIM Ahmedabad was the first time I was going and living in a hostel. Oh, that brought a whole lot of challenges, which I, which again, I didn't think through earlier.

I didn't know. Right. You know, you had to wash your clothes.

You had to, you know, go pick food and eat and you have to, you know, climb up, climb down. And IIM Ahmedabad at that point was not an accessible campus. So everywhere you had to climb, I had difficulty climbing stairs.

So then it was like I would restrict to the extent, you know, that I can restrict. So there were classes. Luckily, the classes were on the ground floor.

And all the other things, you know, you had guest lectures and everything used to happen in places where you had to climb flights of stairs. The most difficult part was, you know, going to the first floor to actually put your clothes into laundry, drying your clothes and folding them and keeping them back again. Again, those are all life skills that probably that place taught me.

But it became very overwhelming there, you know, because there was already a lot to do in terms of studying and academic rigour. And there was so much that I had to manage with my own life. So it became a juggle, you know, and it took me time to get there.

I made good friends, but I never let anyone come very close to me. In fact, after 20 years now, when I keep connecting with people, that is when they started knowing about me. So until about 20, 2020, nobody really, nobody, including my work colleagues, my batch mates knew that I had a problem.

Oh, I was like a master of camouflage. I was like, I could give myself that title. So, you know, not letting anybody know that you have a problem.

[Vidya Mahambare] (36:33 - 37:23)

Right. And we will talk about that more, how we are trying to talk more about, you know, this. But going back to, you know, education, did you think being in Ahmedabad, which is like an elite, you know, institution, opened up any opportunities for you in terms of, you know, networking or later in life, you know, alumni network or anything?

What is the biggest, you think, a positive or formal education in India? Because it's not very clear that, you know, we make people job ready or something. Right.

In being, it is many times is just a signal. One gets a certification from a certain institute and they have already selected students who are very good. What is the biggest positive, you think, for you, it was from IIM Ahmedabad?

[Sirisha] (37:25 - 38:16)

The rigour. I think the rigour, what it did to me and what it opened up outside, I'll separate the two. What it did to me was the rigour, the rigour of studying and because it had the case based form of education, right.

The ambiguity, getting exposed to ambiguity, uncertainty and dealing where you have to make these choices while later in life, you know, we're working on the dilemmas, framework and other stuff, dealing with uncertainties and the quantum of work that we did there actually made, you know, everyone there believe that they can go and handle anything in life. Okay. So, that prepared you for the, you know, world outside, which is

uncertain and unpredictable and also where initially, you know, your initial jobs are a lot of grunt work.

[Vidya Mahambare] (38:17 - 38:17)

Right.

[Sirisha] (38:17 - 40:02)

Right. Preparing one for dealing with all of that and working hard towards it and the other thing that it did because we had the case based form of education was interdisciplinary learning. Right.

You don't treat HR as HR only, you don't treat operations as operations, you don't treat strategies separately. Everything comes together when you look through a case. Right.

So, that also helps form that holistic thinking because until then I was only used to reading a subject and reproducing that in the exam. Right. Right.

So, that's what Anandabad did to me. In terms of opening doors, I think it opens a lot of opportunities just with the tag because I think people also know that you've gone through that rigour. There are certain given aspects, you know, when you look at entire, you know, across batches or profiles of all people, there's a minimum common denominator which says they will work hard.

Right. So, that's what I think is the trust that it builds when we look out for opportunities. I missed one part of your earlier question about which part of my education I would take out.

I wouldn't take out anything because my undergrad, my school, it gave me, you know, everything back again. My undergrad was where I figured that nothing is impossible. Right.

It reinforced for me that she said I can't figure out typing and give exams in four months. I actually wrote the exams and I was the first in the university. So, big joke then was there was one, in our college there was one person who failed and one person who got first in the university.

Everybody assumed I was the one who failed till the result actually came to us. So, that actually reinforced my belief in myself.

[Vidya Mahambare] (40:02 - 40:02)

Right.

[Sirisha] (40:02 - 40:30)

So, I would never take that part of my education out and that also taught me a lot of programming and exposure to the technical side of life which otherwise again, right, being a biology student I would never have learned that. I am Ahmedabad, obviously, I will never take that away and even later, 10 years later, 2015, I got the Fulbright scholarship. So, the Government of India gives 14 people every year to go and do a fellowship in leadership and management at Carnegie Mellon.

[Vidya Mahambare] (40:30 - 40:30)

Okay.

[Sirisha] (40:30 - 40:33)

I got that in 2015. So, I went to do my fellowship there.

[Vidya Mahambare] (40:33 - 40:33)

Okay.

[Sirisha] (40:34 - 41:18)

And that again, because that was that, you know, a little more maturity in life. Right. And having seen the corporate world, there it was a complete form of unlearning, relearning, you know, because we studied through a lot, worked with a lot of industries there, but it was learning without actually having that pressure of academics or marks.

But actually looking at what you take away from, you know, the organisations around you, what do you actually take away from your lectures and bring things back. In fact, this whole dilemma resolution framework that we speak about in the book Hope is Not a Strategy originated during the fellowship time.

[Vidya Mahambare] (41:18 - 41:21)

And tell us a little bit about why the name Hope is Not a Strategy.

[Sirisha] (41:22 - 41:38)

Yeah, because no organisation, you know, can work purely on hope, you can't wing it. Right. You have to make certain deliberate choices and decisions, assuming as you go along the way things will happen is not going to work.

[Vidya Mahambare] (41:38 - 41:38)

Yeah.

[Sirisha] (41:39 - 41:46)

Right. So, hope cannot be strategy alone. You know, it's hope in this context, hope is not about not having optimism.

[Vidya Mahambare] (41:46 - 41:46)

Yes.

[Sirisha] (41:46 - 41:50)

It is about, you can't assume that haan ho jayega. Right.

[Vidya Mahambare] (41:50 - 41:50)

Right.

[Sirisha] (41:50 - 42:03)

That never happens. Right. You have to make some conscious decisions.

Conscious decisions and deliberately make your choices in life for an individual and, you know, for a corporate for running that organisation.

[Vidya Mahambare] (42:03 - 42:54)

There are trade-offs everywhere as we, you know, in economics say, but we have to weigh those trade-offs, cost and benefit and decide, you know, in that context, what is the best decision. So, we have talked about endowment, environment, you know, education. So, fourth is effort.

And you have talked, you know, you have explained to us what you went through and your own effort to, you know, to overcome all the adversity and get to where you are now. You also talked about effort of your parents. Right.

But the effort which equally, you know, equal effort is required by your spouse and now your children, I suppose, right, to support you. So, how important do you think is, you know, role of supportive spouse? In general, anyway, it is very important, but especially with, you know, for you.

[**Sirisha**] (42:55 - 43:20)

I think basically everyone has a drive, you have a drive, you have a goal, everyone keeps working towards it. There are times when you feel lost. There are times when you feel lonely.

There are times when you feel like giving up. Those are the times when your support system just pushes you up a little. Right.

You actually get better. The other place where it always helps me is complacency.

[**Vidya Mahambare**] (43:21 - 43:21)

Right.

[**Sirisha**] (43:21 - 43:42)

There are also times when you get into that comfort zone, you know, everything is working, why do you want to change something, disturb something? And that's when the ecosystem around you nudges you saying, are you settling down for something? You can do a lot more.

Right. I think these are two places where my support system makes a huge difference in my life today.

[**Vidya Mahambare**] (43:42 - 44:05)

Right. Wonderful. So, you also work together, Harish and you.

Of course, I see there are a lot of positives since you continue to work together. How do you maintain the balance, you know, as a, you know, partner in terms of business and partner in terms of lives? Do you separate the two worlds or what happens?

[**Sirisha**] (44:05 - 44:51)

So, we have a fundamental rule that we do issue based arguments. Okay. So, when we are talking about a particular thing, if we are disagreeing on something that is disagreement on that, it doesn't spread to other things in life.

The next minute we are talking about a different thing, we are back to normal. Second, we clearly separate work and personal stuff where again, it's a lot of role clarity for us. Even in personal life, we know what role each of us play in different things.

At work, we have very different roles that we play. And we're very brutal when it comes to giving honest, candid feedback then and that doesn't rub off onto the personal side of it. So, we keep saying issue based arguments.

[Vidya Mahambare] (44:51 - 45:02)

So, that's our excellent framework to have, especially with close people, I think if you're working together, family or friends, just issue based arguments, right?

[Sirisha] (45:02 - 45:05)

So, we fight on something, next minute, we're talking about a different thing.

[Vidya Mahambare] (45:05 - 45:05)

Right.

[Sirisha] (45:06 - 45:09)

It's, you start from ground zero. Right.

[Vidya Mahambare] (45:09 - 45:09)

Right.

[Sirisha] (45:09 - 45:13)

It's like that memory of a goldfish kind of thing, you don't carry that too much.

[Vidya Mahambare] (45:13 - 45:49)

Excellent. So, the last is then the equality of opportunity. And I know in this specific area, you want to do a lot more, given your own experiences in the past.

So, where do you see India currently? We know now in many education institutions, it is now many public places, now it is mandatory to have certain facilities so that people with disabilities do not feel excluded. But where do we stand currently, you feel and what should be the conversations that we need to have, you know, much more often?

[Sirisha] (45:51 - 46:00)

So, I'll give you a little context of where this is stemming from, right? From 2021, I started speaking more, especially during COVID time.

[Vidya Mahambare] (46:00 - 46:06)

What made you speak more? Because you had taken a conscious decision not to speak and hide your disability. Right?

[Sirisha] (46:06 - 46:06)

Yeah.

[Vidya Mahambare] (46:06 - 46:10)

What happened that you realised that one must speak more?

[Sirisha] (46:10 - 46:41)

So, 2020 was a very difficult time, COVID time for everyone. And we had lost friends, we had lost people, we knew very closely. And you see that everywhere around there was a lot of distress.

So, at that time, you know, someone encouraged me to actually write, you know, maybe to give a ray of hope to someone somewhere. And for the first time, so, there was this article on me that got published in Telangana today.

[Vidya Mahambare] (46:41 - 46:41)

Okay.

[Sirisha] (46:42 - 49:14)

About rewiring, so you might be going through a phase of rewiring, but rewiring is, you know, for a lot of people, rewiring is always a norm, right? So, we should also look at this phase like that. So, it started like that.

I got fantastic, you know, kind of feedback responses from people saying, oh, this is good, this was inspiring. So, at that point, for me, it was just at an inspiration level. And I kind of kept quiet after that.

Then, 22, 23, I started talking again, somebody said, oh, we read that article. And, you know, some, you know, people said this was very nice. So I said, Can you come and speak here?

So occasionally, I would speak, but I was never comfortable speaking, because somewhere in my head, still speaking was accepting. And I was still camouflaging big time, not letting anybody know, right? 2020, when the article got published, my batchmates, my friends, they approached you thinking that they never knew this.

How come we lived with you for two years and didn't know anything about this? So, and my workplace colleagues did not know. So when the article got published the next day, I was talking to a few of them, they said, we didn't even have a clue that you were going through so much.

So that was going on. And then suddenly, somebody had written to me saying, you know, you don't know me, but I know you. And I was going through such a bad time.

I was on the verge of committing suicide. My aunt showed me your letter, your article. And I read that I thought I'll give myself one more chance.

And today I'm happily married. I'm going to have a kid in a few months. And if it's a girl, I'll name her **Sirisha**.

This is what this person writes to me. And I am, it actually shook me up saying, okay, if you can impact, then why not talk? So I started talking a little more, more from that saying, okay, if it can help someone somewhere, maybe that's a good thing to do.

And then slowly as I was speaking, I realised that in India, we glorify suffering. Right. Right.

Okay. It's a very sad part, right? Anybody suffering, we say it's inspiring.

Right. But suffering has two parts to it. One is what the person goes through, which nobody can trade off, nobody can change anything.

The other is what the ecosystem is doing. Correct. And that's when I realised, had my ecosystem been more open, probably I wouldn't have...

[Vidya Mahambare] (49:14 - 49:19)

In society. Yeah. At home, you had a very good ecosystem, but outside the home environment, the ecosystem was lacking.

[Sirisha] (49:20 - 50:00)

Absolutely right. And, you know, if your teachers were more open, if, you know, everything was more open, and people were more accommodating and not judging, maybe I wouldn't have carried so much baggage. Because for me, it was like every day from morning to wearing a garb.

Right. Wearing a facade that you very closely protect. Right.

Till the time you come back home, that's a lot of effort. Yeah. Right.

That's a lot of mental turmoil. So I was like, oh, why are we glorifying not having accessible places? Oh, you struggled so much on campus, because you had to climb all of these.

Why are we glorifying that? That is not something that needs to be glorified, that needs to be solved for.

[Vidya Mahambare] (50:00 - 50:00)

Right.

[Sirisha] (50:00 - 50:05)

Because that's, that's what we can do as an ecosystem, as a society. And that...

[Vidya Mahambare] (50:05 - 50:07)

It should be just a norm that these things should be there.

[Sirisha] (50:07 - 51:08)

Absolutely. Right. Because, again, whatever people are born with, whatever people go through, it's what happens to them.

Right. But why do you want to exclude? Yeah.

The other aspect to that is, you know, India statistically, you know, in a few years from now, we'll be where Japan is, right, where you'll have a much higher older population. Right. And our medical science is advancing so much, medical science won't let us die.

Right. Right. So we're all going to live, our generation especially will live for, you know, well into the 90s.

Yes. Right. And we don't have a universal basic income.

We as a country cannot afford a universal basic income, which means you need these people out there or, you know, if you include the spectrum of physical disabilities, the majority are unrecorded in India, physical disabilities, you include the neurodivergent spectrum. Right. It's a huge disability spectrum.

Then, and physically, I'm including your visual, your auditory, everything. And you...

[Vidya Mahambare] (51:08 - 51:09)

And the elderly.

[Sirisha] (51:09 - 51:15)

And you include the elderly, that is 20, going to be 29% of our population in another 10 years from now.

[Vidya Mahambare] (51:15 - 51:16)

Wow.

[Sirisha] (51:16 - 51:32)

29% of our population, if you're letting them locked inside houses, because you don't have accessible spaces or accessible ecosystem. Right. Then it's a disaster waiting.

Right. Right. Because the moment that inequality comes, it's going, the whole society is going to break down.

[Vidya Mahambare] (51:32 - 51:32)

Right.

[Sirisha] (51:32 - 52:07)

If you have 29% of people who are dependent. Right. So my view of the initiative that I want, I'm working on, just about to launch is Samaveshi Bharat.

It's about creating an inclusive India, where, you know, every, it's equal opportunity for everybody, irrespective of whatever are their, you know, disabilities. With an older population, you also make sure they come back to the workforce, because how will people sustain till the 90s when they don't have pensionable jobs? Right.

Right. People have to keep working.

[Vidya Mahambare] (52:07 - 52:26)

No, even, that is one thing, like they should, they can come back to the, you know, labour force and work. But otherwise also, even if they don't need to, there should be simply access for them to come out in the open and, you know, be like walking around or wherever they want to go, because if they're healthy, then they should be able to move around.

[Sirisha] (52:26 - 52:40)

Move around and mingle with people. Right. Because we are social animals at the end of the day.

By 2047, I want India to be the most accessible place. Multiple reasons, 30% of the population, if they are going, if 30% of the population.

[Vidya Mahambare] (52:40 - 52:43)

And India's 30% of population is like huge millions.

[Sirisha] (52:43 - 52:43)

It is huge. Right.

[Vidya Mahambare] (52:44 - 52:44)

Yeah.

[Sirisha] (52:44 - 53:31)

And if they are going to be marginalised, if they are not going to come into the mainstream, we have a huge problem to solve, because we will not be able to, you know, have the working population take care of that entire population. And that divide will actually, what is going to make crime and everything rise. And that's what history has shown us.

Correct. Right. So, if for this 30% of the population, Samavashi Bharat will actually make the country very accessible.

Now, there are different pillars in Samavashi Bharat. One is awareness. In India, we lack awareness completely.

We don't understand, you know, what a disability is. We pass judgments. In fact, people don't even know how to talk to someone with a disability.

Right. You know, there are those awkward pauses, awkward silences, changes of topics that happen when somebody says they have a problem.

[Vidya Mahambare] (53:32 - 53:38)

People are not sure whether to show sympathy, pity or behave like a normal person. So, people just are not aware of what to do.

[Sirisha] (53:38 - 54:37)

Absolutely. Right. Like, you know, strobe lights coming from the laptops are very difficult for autistic kids.

Okay, so digital accessibility is something you need to work on. And, you know, people on the ADHD spectrum, right, they have a lot of challenges that, you know, they go through, and mainstream has to accommodate for all those challenges. Physical disability, you look for any place in India, and I have actually gone through cities to look for these places, you look for any place in India, you will not find ramps that are continuous, you will not find ramps that people can walk through, you will not find footpaths that are not one and a half foot high, that is impossible for older people to climb.

And it's a joke when I see early in the morning, I see a one and a half foot footpath is there, but all the older people are walking on the roads because they find it difficult to climb. And no continuous either in India.

[Vidya Mahambare] (54:37 - 54:38)

No continuous thing, right.

[Sirisha] (54:38 - 55:07)

And everything is dug. So visual accessibility, after a point, you don't have the visual cues that are there on the tactile feedback markers on the footpath. And for auditory, we are not prepared.

So there are whole and upper body disabilities. And because I go through that, I see that for a lot of places, accessibility is equal to ramp is equal to wheelchair. Right.

Okay. And they say the place is accessible. Sorry, it is not.

If your lift buttons are very high, it's tough for someone to operate them.

[Vidya Mahambare] (55:08 - 55:20)

So attention to detail is very, very important at every stage rather than doing something just then, like CSR, like I made it just do some basic thing and say that it is accessible, it's not acceptable.

[Sirisha] (55:20 - 55:50)

Absolutely. Right. And it is, it needs design thinking.

So I'm a design thinking practitioner from Stanford. Right. So it, this requires design thinking, this requires to think from first principles to see what is okay.

Right. Right. And you need to make people more aware.

Right. And second is, you know, action for this awareness. Right.

The second pillar is all about mandating that offices and all your public places, your societies have to be accessible.

[Vidya Mahambare] (55:50 - 55:51)

Right.

[Sirisha] (55:51 - 55:57)

It doesn't matter whether somebody is there. It's so much of accommodation that people do for you when it makes you feel very different.

[Vidya Mahambare] (55:58 - 55:58)

Correct.

[Sirisha] (55:58 - 56:00)

I'll tell you, I'll tell you one very.

[Vidya Mahambare] (56:00 - 56:06)

So by design, they are, you know, it ensures as if you know that you are different and that is not at all needed.

[Sirisha] (56:07 - 56:07)

That is not required.

[Vidya Mahambare] (56:07 - 56:09)

Yeah, that is not required. Correct.

[Sirisha] (56:09 - 57:24)

Right. And why, why differentiate? It's equal, equal authority and you have to provide it irrespective of whether a person is there or not.

I'll tell you two, three such incidents that happened. There was one award ceremony and I was getting an award for something which had a huge flight of stairs. I said, I won't go up and take it.

He said, no, no, you sit in a chair, we'll pick you up. I said, no, I'm not okay with any of you picking me up. Why should you pick me up?

If you wanted me up there, you could have made sure you're accommodated. Correct. Okay.

There's another place where I was getting an award. Obviously, the organisers were very empathetic upfront. So they made sure they made the place accessible, the stage accessible and all of that.

The next year, the same event, I wasn't an award recipient. I went for the event and they didn't have anything. Okay.

So that also is not okay because this is tokenism. Right. Right.

And you cannot build a society based on that. What if somebody who were in the awardees had a fall and was coming there on a wheelchair? Right.

What would you have done then? Right. Right.

So this has to become a norm. Norm. Right.

Right. Likewise, even in buildings, accessibility. Sometimes they just put one ply board and they say that, yeah, this is accessible.

You know, instead of the steps, you can use this. Right. It's like, no, why?

[Vidya Mahambare] (57:24 - 57:25)

Yeah.

[Sirisha] (57:25 - 57:40)

Right. And the more I started voicing it out, I'm realising that there's so many such gaps. In fact, you know, anywhere on the street you go out, right, no shop is accessible.

Right. So this is a way of marginalising it. I'll tell you another.

[Vidya Mahambare] (57:41 - 57:48)

So maybe marginalising, sometimes maybe even without realising, right, even without intention, maybe. Absolutely.

[Sirisha] (57:48 - 57:50)

I don't know. And that is why I'm given the benefit of doubt.

[Vidya Mahambare] (57:50 - 57:58)

Because they are not simply aware or they don't simply think from that angle. They, they perhaps don't even realise that this is happening.

[Sirisha] (57:59 - 58:23)

Absolutely. That's why I'm saying, I'm giving that benefit of doubt and saying that awareness is the most important. But after awareness, that action and enforcing that action is equally very important.

People say, oh, this is an old building, this is an old structure, we can't do anything. But you've got to figure out because you have much more older places outside where people have made it accessible. Right.

Right. So we, it's more about the intent then.

[Vidya Mahambare] (58:23 - 58:34)

Does India have any policy, like a goal, like how we have for sustainability or carbon elimination? Do we have any goals towards normalisation?

[Sirisha] (58:34 - 1:01:30)

Yeah. So there is this about making, making, giving equal accessibility and also to a certain extent newer places having the, you know, ramps and everything. But that is a very minimal understanding of it and it is not enforced completely.

Right. Because there's nobody who is questioning about it. I'll tell you one very interesting, you know, anecdote before I go to the third pillar.

So I spoke about awareness and action. I was in a board meeting and there's a very senior board member, she's like very well known. And the CEO often talks about diversity, equity, inclusion, and they're one of our clients for the consulting work that we do.

And I was in their board meeting. And the senior lady says, oh, they said we are not meeting our DEI norms for the top two layers of leadership. We don't have a woman.

So she said, hey, DEI matlab, you just have to do 30% women, no. Get at the entry level. By the time they get married, we can let them go.

We'll keep filling at the entry level. So that's what, like, I was completely shocked hearing that statement coming from a woman. Forget about, you know, disability.

Right. Coming from a woman who's actually talking about, oh, you know, get it at the entry level and we'll be done with that percentage. Yeah.

Right. So there's no respect for some of these things that we're talking about, which is the third pillar, which is about corporate index, creating a corporate index for how many corporates are accessible, not accessible. And they're open.

They're actually hiring people with different, differently abled people. And it's very easy. And I've done this in organisations where there are certain roles that don't need people to move.

There are certain roles that need voice command. Right. Right.

Where it is not about, you know, visually impaired people are great at doing CRM. Right. Customer relationship management, all your, you know, calls and everything, they can handle it if you train them right.

So you figure which are the roles and figure what you need for those roles. Are there any organisations which stand out for you currently? No.

None that do it very deliberately. Lamentry does, Lamentry takes people with neurodivergence, people with down syndrome and all for their support work. But apart from Lamentry, I've not seen many places.

There's this chain of restaurants called Ishara, which are affiliated to Phoenix. So in all the Phoenix malls, you find Ishara, which is basically a restaurant that is run by deaf and numb people. Okay.

And where they come and, you know, that's why it's called Ishara because Ishara in Hindi is action. Right. So what you want to order, every item on the menu card has a symbol that you show to them to help them understand that.

And there's this entire Mithi group, which has cafes in all popular airports, which is completely run by differently abled people. But these are very specific organisations.

[Vidya Mahambare] (1:01:30 - 1:01:35)

And maybe it need not always be like completely run. It is more important to be integrated.

[Sirisha] (1:01:35 - 1:01:36)

Integrated. Exactly.

[Vidya Mahambare] (1:01:37 - 1:01:38)

Into the.

[Sirisha] (1:01:38 - 1:04:42)

That inclusion is missing. Right. And that's why that corporate index to actually say which are not, you know, meeting the norms.

And it's like your taxation. Right. If somebody doesn't meet the norms, they don't get through.

And that is where the fourth pillar, which is public policy, becomes so much more important because reinforcement at the end of the day has to work through the lawmakers. Right. And for that, you know, we're looking at having a, you know, something like an index, you know, every city you rate to actually say what is their accessibility index, etc.

And the fifth, a major pillar is, I've been speaking to a lot of, you know, NGOs and people who work with CSR funds, etc. And I realised that everything is fragmented. Right.

And I don't want Samaveshi Bharat to run like a fragmented effort. I don't want it to learn like a social arm where, you know, somebody feels like giving two hours of their time, they would give it. This is an important national issue that we need to handle, which is why I wanted to be a for profit organisation.

And the whole way of running it, like all of these in terms of certifying organisations for their accessibility, doing assessment of your cities, driving awareness, while some of these could be funded by your CSR funds, large part of it is also creating that Samaveshi Bharat Fund, which is going to, you know, fund a lot of these, you know, support accessories for people with disabilities. So if you see a lot of people who make, you know, different wheelchairs, which are helping people go on the road, the typical wheelchairs don't move on Indian roads, right? So there are people who make those different wheelchairs, the people who are making some auditory devices, but these are NGOs, and they are working with CSR funds.

So they get disbursed to a few people. So they're working in pockets. So that fund becomes the platform where all these kinds of innovation to fund these kinds of innovations, which are required for the future.

Now, if you look at the spectrum I'm talking about, there are a whole lot of innovations. And you know, not having all of those in India means it's an opportunity, right, for innovation to happen. So basically fund those things.

So it becomes a platform or a marketplace of sorts for people to buy, and more innovations to come and impact investors to actually invest into these products so that they're available on a large scale. And because they don't have the volume today, they're at a very expensive price. To scale it up, you need this and you also have a lot of government funds that can come to actually support innovations like this.

For instance, if you look at the possibilities today, right, with AI and exoskeletons, you can actually make your arms move, right? It's as simple as that. You can have an external nervous system kind of a thing that moves your arm based on instructions, and that is already being done.

It's about making it accessible. You have exoskeletons to help older people to stabilise and walk properly.

[Vidya Mahambare] (1:04:42 - 1:04:50)

So but however, it's healthcare system, you know, in general, you know, makes it accessible and reduces the cost is the most important thing.

[Sirisha] (1:04:50 - 1:05:30)

And that is where creating that platform and the marketplace. So it's a grand vision. And it's not going to be mine alone.

It has to be a movement is what I talk about. It's a movement of people coming together to work on this to make this happen. And nothing works if it runs out of charity.

Yeah, it has to be a profitable organisation. So you know, you want that fund to be managed, you need the best fund manager to actually manage that fund to know where to deploy and yeah, because that itself is a, you know, it's a huge skill that you to figure out which ones which innovations to fund and, you know, which ones, which ones to combine with something else and do it etc.

[**Vidya Mahambare**] (1:05:32 - 1:06:19)

You know, superb means even though you said it's a grand vision, true to your book, there is a strategy as a plan. It's just not like a vision and a hope that, you know, this will happen. Yes, you have a very concrete strategy and you know, five pillars.

So very well thought out. And, you know, I just hope you talk more and more, you know about it, of course, we'll discuss, you know, as well as we go ahead more about this. So, it has been wonderful, **Sirisha, to talk** about this with you.

I normally end the conversation with two questions. I think the first question, perhaps your answer will be like nothing, but nonetheless, because, you know, so much you have already done, like, if you had to relive your 20s, is there anything that you would have done differently?

[**Sirisha**] (1:06:20 - 1:06:22)

I would have spoken about this earlier. Okay.

[**Vidya Mahambare**] (1:06:23 - 1:06:23)

Okay.

[**Sirisha**] (1:06:23 - 1:06:29)

And that's something that I think that had I spoken earlier, maybe the change could have happened earlier.

[**Vidya Mahambare**] (1:06:30 - 1:06:36)

The change could have happened earlier. So that's an important lesson that has to be important. Important lesson.

[**Sirisha**] (1:06:36 - 1:06:36)

Yeah.

[**Vidya Mahambare**] (1:06:36 - 1:06:44)

Like, you know, for us in general to be open and to talk about, you know, disability or anything. So more people get help.

[**Sirisha**] (1:06:45 - 1:06:48)

Not just disability, right? Anything, somebody has to start.

[**Vidya Mahambare**] (1:06:48 - 1:07:38)

Yes, any moment, someone has to start. If we feel strongly about something, we have to start that and not just hope that, you know, one day someone else will do it. Totally.

20 years wouldn't have been so stressful. Correct. You know, had I done this earlier.

I can't even imagine having that facade and, you know, having to carry that for so many years. It's just like, you know, too tough. But now the last question to the current youth in their 20s, especially those who could not go to elite educational institutions, because as you said, I am, Ahmedabad opened a lot of doors for you.

Suppose they could not go to, cannot go to an elite institution or do not have as much endowment and support as, you know, you had in terms of your parents and so on. What should they be doing? What should they focus on most?

[Sirisha] (1:07:40 - 1:09:04)

In my view, getting your hands dirty. I think it's not just for people in their 20s. Even those of us in our 40s today probably need to get our hands dirty, be more adaptable and agile.

I think in the current age, two skills that are needed are learning agility and learnability, right? Your ability to learn something and the pace at which you learn something. I think those are the only two things that will let anyone survive.

And I think getting your hands dirty early on doesn't really depend on the, you know, educational institution you're coming from, right? Working on as many things as possible, because in my view, with the rate at which the technology, you know, technology evolution is happening, very soon we'll lose the traditional jobs. Either it's going to be interdisciplinary or it is going to be a deep specialist.

So there was a period when the world around us encouraged, you know, generalists, right? The manager of population, right? You will not have that any longer.

So you need deep specialisation. So that deep specialisation, there's nothing different which an elite institution will teach versus a, you know, a local college will teach. The concepts remain the same.

It's about how deep you go, how, you know, how much you do hands-on to actually learn deeper about a topic. I think that will...

[Vidya Mahambare] (1:09:04 - 1:09:23)

So I have a slightly different opinion on this last part, but we'll discuss that at some other time, specialists versus the, you know, generalists. But **Sirisha**, it has been, you know, wonderful talking to you. Very, very, you know, inspirational and thanks for, you know, coming and giving your time to us.

Thank you very much.

[Sirisha] (1:09:23 - 1:09:26)

Thank you so much. I thoroughly enjoyed speaking about it.

[Vidya Mahambare] (1:09:26 - 1:09:27)

Thank you.