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Building Bridges Between (Global) Business and the Rainbow Community in India: An Interview with Pride Circle's Co-founder Ramkrishna Sinha

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As long as business is done, there also has to be a business case for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), says Ram Sinha from the Pride Circle. When it comes to DEI activities, the often invisible nature of the LGBTQ+ community, its smaller size (relative to other minorities) and vast heterogeneity, as well as lack of standardization of basic terminology, make building bridges between MNEs and the community quite challenging. In this interview with one of Asia's leading social enterprises in the LGBTQ+ space, Ram shares his vast experience in the rapidly evolving DEI landscape. He also provides actionable insights for IB scholars, practitioners, educators and policymakers on MNE operations in an emerging market which is quickly becoming a hotbed of DEI innovation.

Pride Circle (www.thepridecircle.com) is one of India's leading Diversity & Inclusion organizations, operating as a for-profit social enterprise. Pride Circle's mission focuses on advancing social equity through affirmative action for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other rainbow communities (i.e., LGBTQ+) in India. Since their foundation in 2017, Pride Circle has partnered with over 300 organizations across India and outside, supporting executive leadership development, conducting diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) audits, running DEI sensitivity seminars and comprehensive DEI training, as well as supporting research and publishing, engaging in advocacy, facilitating job placements of LGBTQ+ talent and contributing to the advancement of safe and inclusive work environments. Today, Pride Circle is the largest LGBTQ+ focused social enterprise in India and one of the largest social enterprises in the LGBTQ+ space in Asia. Organized by the recently established AIB Diversity & Inclusion taskforce, Pride Circle Co-founder Ramkrishna (Ram) Sinha was one of the panelists at the 2020 inaugural DEI practitioner-scholar panel at the annual AIB conference which took place online during the lockdown. In May 2022, Matevž (Matt) Rašković interviewed Mr. Sinha to gain his insights on managing DEI issues both generally and specifically with respect to LGBTQ+ issues. In the responses below, Ram shares his vast experience in the rapidly evolving DEI landscape. He also provides actionable insights for IB scholars, practitioners, educators and policymakers on MNE operations in an emerging market which is quickly becoming a hotbed of DEI innovation.

Interviewer: Matevž (Matt) Rašković [MR], Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

Interviewee: Ramkrishna (Ram) Sinha [RS], Co-founder of the Pride Circle, Intel D&I Hero of the Year, one of 50 Future LGBT

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[MR]: In a 2020 *Harvard Business Review* article, Robin Ely and David Thomas called on companies to “get serious” about diversity, equity and inclusion (or DEI) and stop thinking only about the economic payoffs from DEI. Do we, in 2022, still need to make a business case for DEI to companies? Are we still at a stage where we need to convince companies “you are losing money” because you are not addressing DEI?

[RS]: I think as long as there is business, there also has to be a business case. As long as you're talking to businesses, there has to absolutely be a business case (for DEI). While it's important to be ethical, and there are a lot of wonderful organizations based on the principles of ethics and human kindness and generosity, the majority of them are still not. When it comes to business goals, when we do annual reports, we look at the balance sheet, we look at profit and loss, when we look at how much sales we generated and stuff we did, we don't look at how empathetic we were as an organization.

All stakeholders, be it investors or retail investors, we all have a role to play in society. We consciously or unconsciously build it in a way that it is today. So, we cannot just put blame on a business for how things are. It is a shared responsibility of all individuals of the world. Businesses are in place to make a product, deliver a service, and create value from that. It is thus also important that when we talk about DEI, as a business case, we say: “This is something that is going to help you make more money. This is something that is going to help you cater to a diverse set of customers, be it hyper-customization, be it better quality service, be it improving your performance through stronger team productivity.”

The whole aspect of human capital is a big part of that. Not just how we treat our employees and our customers, but all stakeholders. The better we are able to quantify that, call that out, the more action we will see on the ground. In 2022, there are tons of DEI business cases published across different spectrums and sectors. However, the adoption is still not that great. A very small share of companies is taking it seriously, if you look at the entire population. It is also not just important to have a business case, but it is also important to localize that business case. It is important to show that evidence of transformation. To show that as an organization, we have invested so much time and resources into DEI, which has produced these and these outcomes. As long as business is done, companies will need to put a number to it. We live in a data driven world, where we require numbers and metrics for every single thing, so why should DEI be any different?

[MR]: This “transformational” aspect is really interesting. From what I understood from your description of it, DEI is not just how you can grow sales, or how you can reach new customers. It doesn’t seem to be just about making money. How do you incorporate the transformational aspect into the business case for DEI? Do you use examples of other companies? Do you benchmark?

[RS]: Any organization which is considering starting something for the first time, forget about DEI for a second, any issue you want to really explore, you need to be aware how much work it will take. So, the first question is always naturally: “Why do we need to do this?” The second issue then becomes, “is our competition already doing it?” In the real world, that is how organizations think and behave. They might think that something is the right thing to do. However, how much are we investing in it? Will this really be a competitive advantage? What is happening in the market ecosystem? That is why benchmarking is important, to get a sense of where the organization is compared to others. Some do it because they are a thought leader. Maybe the first ones would do it just because it is the right thing to do without thinking about what other organizations are doing. Others need to see who else is doing it. Different organizations need different reasons to jump in, but they would always ask for a business case. There is no circumventing that.

And, as and when organizations get into their DEI journey, as they evolve, that aspect of the way we work and the way our culture is, that’s how DEI gets integrated into the organization. It becomes how we behave with our peers, with our customers, with our clients, with our stakeholders. That becomes the transformational space where you don’t have to push, you don’t have to preach how it is the right thing to do. It becomes something that people just get, because at the end of the day, it is pure common sense, to treat each other with dignity and respect. Any person who you interact with, if you treat them nicely, they will bring their whole self to work. They will focus all their attention on creating value for the organization instead of self-censoring and trying to minimize their presentation at work. When you are not setting a barrier for acceptance, all that energy

and resources go into creating the product and service and brainstorming. It becomes a baseline, where we enable a space where we don’t have to think twice about sharing an opinion with the content that people might question. Questioning it not for its business value, but because it comes from a specific person who said it.

[MR]: Pride Circle is a social enterprise, not a non-government organization. Do you think because you are a social enterprise, this puts you in a better position to understand the DEI business case? Does being a social enterprise give you more legitimacy and also change the perception among companies that you are not asking for charity?

[RS]: That is difficult to comment. Lots of companies could answer this question in different ways. I think it definitely helps. Both myself and the other co-founder (of Pride Circle) have come from the corporate world, where we worked for over a decade. This allows us to understand how companies work, what is the scope of work, what is the process of getting approvals, what is reasonable accommodation. We have a sense of what is something that companies will push for and what makes sense (to them). Our value as Pride Circle is finding that common ground between the LGBT+ community and the company. And finding that win-win stakeholder relationship, where both communities are able to add value to each other. We become a kind of bridge. Many companies and communities are siloed. A company is not talking to the community, the community is not represented in the company.

[MR]: Now, what about multinational enterprises (or MNEs) and the local communities? Do you think MNEs are better suited when it comes to DEI? Or do they, because they are foreign, have any particular challenges of connecting to local communities?

[RS]: So, MNEs have both pros and cons. The pros that work for multinationals are, that the HQ has already bought into the whole concept of DEI. They’re already doing certain programs and initiatives. It’s easier for you to extend this to a new region. You don’t have to start the conversation from scratch, get the leadership buy-in, since you have a precedent. It has already been implemented within the company in a different region, so it is easier to get buy-in to replicate things elsewhere. And the HQ buy-in also leads to the mobilization of local leadership and getting budgets to do a program, because at the end, it takes resources to do something. The third pro would be that there is already a template, there is potential of learning within the organization from different regions how things have progressed or what worked well elsewhere. However, you also need to understand the context and the history, in order to then be able to localize something for your region.

The thing that could potentially go wrong (with MNEs) is that if you have a sizable local population, you need to listen to the local population for the (DEI) programs you are rolling out. You shouldn’t be rolling out a program from the HQ and making it an exact carbon copy. Localization is very important, especially in the LGBT+ context, where your lo-

cal laws are different, your social acceptance might be very different, the attitudes might be quite different. The employee conversations might be quite different, which is why exact-copy models won't work in most cases. Centralization can also lead to standardized tools or policies and benefits. MNEs tend to roll things out across the region, as long as it is compliant with the laws of the land. This can lead to so-called blind spots, where MNEs are not localizing DEI initiatives enough. HQs can also, sometimes, be impatient. They want to scale things around the world quite quickly. You need to be patient. You have to allow the local environment to find their method to the madness. Language, how you approach it, which topics to do, all this is context specific. For example, in some places, transgender issues are an easier conversation than LGBT+ issues. In other cases, it is the opposite. In some places, hiring LGBT+ talent would be easier, because when you roll an initiative out, people do apply. In other places, no one will apply or you have no way of figuring out if they are LGBT+ or not. It is important to support, if you are an HQ, but also allow the space for nurturing and for the local teams to find their own path.

[MR]: Is there also a feedback loop that goes from the local environments back to the HQ? What kind of learning does actually take place in the DEI space within an MNE? Or is it more of a question of one-way standardization and adaptation?

[RS]: It depends on the organization. However, more and more HQs are noticing that there are solutions coming from non-HQ regions which are now being taken up by the HQ. For instance, there is a company that we work with where India was actually the first country that started Pride ERGs (Employee Resource Groups), and now the US is starting LGBT+ ERGs. Then, there is also the case of the Ally Challenge, which was also first created in India. They loved it, so now there is a global version of the Ally Challenge being taken to the world. I think it's important that the HQ is not arrogant and be like, OK, we know everything because we are the HQ. It should be all about shared learning within the organization and between the organizations. It's important to keep your ears open, just like you would for yourself as an individual. After all, DEI is all about empathy and listening to other perspectives (not just the perspectives of others). Listening to a perspective that is not part of my reality, which is something I don't know about. Hence, that is why I am listening to someone else's perspective.

[MR]: How has in your experience the DEI space changed in the last 5 years? Obviously, you also need to account for a pandemic in the midst of it. However, do you see any kind of changes that have happened in this landscape over the last five years? Any trends that we can pick up?

[RS]: I would point out two, three things. First, there is definitely much more visibility when it comes to DEI. More and more organizations are now committing resources to DEI. Unlike, in the past, it used to be a shared responsibility, where you had a core HR job and then you did DEI on the side. Very rarely, organizations had full-time resources

committed to DEI. More and more, we see organizations now engaging in different DEI conversations. For example, around the world, like the Black Lives Matter and other types of protests, which have gotten the attention of the world connected to racism. Also, more recently, we have started to again talk about abortion laws. All these events are bringing a spotlight to the relevance of DEI and various connected issues. Organizations have also realized that they need to address such issues, that they need to take a stand. Then, there is also the pandemic. It also brought a kind of refocus. A realization that life shouldn't be taken for granted. It can just end at any point in time, which has led people to ask themselves: "What am I doing with my life?" A lot of people have been pondering that question, having seen or experienced loss. They stopped, took two steps back, and now want to work for a company that is really worth their time, besides just the paycheck.

[MR]: Now, let's focus a bit more on LGBT+ issues. Obviously, LGBT+ issues are part of DEI. However, is there any unique aspect that, for example, members of the LGBT+ community face that other minorities wouldn't necessarily face?

[RS]: There are multiple things. One of them relates to the numbers. The number of people who identify as LGBT+ is far smaller compared to other social categories, like gender or race. The second issue is visibility. The LGBT+ community is largely an invisible minority. For example, there might be LGBT+ people in the room, but you won't know unless people self-id. It is very different to race or gender, where things are much more physically evident. This is one of the reasons why a lot of companies don't act. They feel there are no LGBT+ people there, so they don't need to address the issue. Then, the third thing would be the stigma. While there is shared stigma around gender and race, the stigma is much bigger and more complex for the LGBT+ community. Maybe because people are being evaluated based on their sexuality. The fourth thing would be the sheer diversity for such a small community. Within the LGBT+ community, there is a broad spectrum. There are subsections of different identities and needs. Lastly, I would say it is still very much an evolving community in terms of language, identities, needs – all of that is constantly evolving and trying to find some kind of standardization. For example, even naming the community. Do we say LGBT or LGBTQ or LGBTQIA+? There is no consensus. And when we deal with the corporate world and that level of scale, standardization obviously helps.

[MR]: It seems that in business, or in the work setting, people are not supposed to be sexual beings. It seems to be inappropriate to talk about such things. Do you think this also contributes to the stigma?

[RS]: When you talk about LGBT+ inclusion, we are not bringing sexuality into the organization. Sexuality has always been at the workplace, when we talk about kids, discuss partners, when we invite colleagues to a wedding. If I am (a man and) getting married to a woman, it is very easy for me to invite my team to the wedding. When I am get-

ting married to a man, then, that is a very different conversation. Sexuality is embedded in policies, dress codes and existing conversations. The LGBT+ community is not asking for it or introducing it as a new conversation. Gender and sexuality are an inherent part of human behavior and human interactions. We cannot strip them out. However, when we talk about sexuality, no one is talking about sex. There is a big difference between sexuality and sex. People feel like, oh no, the gays are going to talk about sex. But we want to simply talk about our partners, kids, how expensive it is to raise kids. The same things other people talk about. When you talk about sexuality, it is simply important to acknowledge there is more than just heterosexuality, that is all.

[MR]: For the end, Price Circle is doing some really incredible things in the DEI space. Can you perhaps talk us through some of your initiatives, especially in terms of collaborating with the corporate sector and MNEs?

[RS]: For example, we recently (on April 30th, 2022) carried out our fourth RISE Job Fair. We started building a bridge between the Community and the companies. We wanted to create a space for conversations, getting to know each other, and figuring out what works. Slowly, we started getting more and more queries from candidates and companies wanting to hire LGBT+ people. They wanted to know how to go about it. Candidates looking for jobs also wanted to know which companies are inclusive. That made us think: Hey, why don't we do a job fair exclusively for this community, because it addresses three major issues. One, for candidates, it tells whether the company is inclusive or not. Coming to a fair for LGBT+ people, you can rest your fear what will happen if the company learns you are LGBT+. Here, the company already knows you are LGBT+. Building that psychologically safe space before you apply to a company, that was very important. The second aspect, however, was that while we have created a safe space, the idea wasn't for people to be outed to everyone at their workplace. People are more than welcome to stay in the closet, figure out how the company operates, what their colleagues are like, what the culture is. Only when they feel comfortable enough, they can come out or not. It was very important there was no expectation for people to be out. It was important to ensure that only the people who are involved in the job fair share this on a need-to-know basis. The third thing was that when companies try to source LGBT+ talent, they don't know how to reach out to this community. You really need to establish trust and psychological safety with this community, for people to apply. And even when LGBT+ people apply, there are very few opportunities for people to self-identify as LGBT+ in their application process, unless they decide to come out during the interview. We were also very clear that our job fair is for skill-based hiring. We are very clear on this point, this is not a charity, you are not going to hire people just because they are LGBT+. We also tell this to the job applicants. You are not going to get hired just because you are LGBT+. You will be hired because you have a certain skillset and education, which allows you to do a certain kind of job. Well, organizations can also decide that certain skills are coachable and they are OK not having employees that are already at 100%, but maybe at 80% (of those skills). And we en-

courage companies to go for this, since this community has faced so much discrimination, so that they are not put at a disadvantage. However, at the end of the day, the applicants still need to be able to perform a job and will be compared to their peers on how they are performing. While sexuality is just one aspect of a person, skills are a different thing. It should be skill-based hiring.

The first year, it was very interesting. Companies didn't know what kind of skillset this community has, because they have kind of written off this community which doesn't necessarily have a lot of education and might not necessarily fit into a corporate culture. And even candidates were quite unsure if they will be working only on DEI jobs or HR jobs. Now, four years later, there is a really interesting mix. In our last RISE Job Fair on April 30th, we had 66 companies, which is in itself a testimony to the success. For companies to find a space to connect with LGBT+ talent, some companies were able to hire 30 people in the last job fair. So, till now (last year), we have placed around 450 people and we hope that the 2022 job fair adds another 200 placements.

Another thing we also rolled out was the India Workplace Equality Index. We always approached LGBT+ inclusion as a holistic thing. How do we do this right with all stakeholders. Even when we do the community part of the Job Fair, we also run a series of skill-building workshops, for example, how to sharpen your resume and upskill yourself. From a company perspective, we also do a written assessment, we do trainings, we help with hiring and internships. So, we thought about how to help companies also measure how they are doing on LGBT+ inclusion. Because we know DEI is not about getting two sets of policies right, or three hires. That doesn't make you LGBT+ inclusive. Everything you do as a company should be examined from an inclusion lens. That is how we partnered with Stonewall. We always loved their work with the (workplace equality) index, which they have been doing for 15 years. And this is how this partnership came together with Stonewall, where we brought the Index to India. We wanted to provide companies a framework to track how they were doing across the DEI space. The framework has nine sections, ranging from policies to leadership and allyship, to supplier diversity, engaging with external communities, and so on. The Index helps companies to pull together data from all aspects of the organization and it becomes a really wonderful exercise for companies. It also provides a great business case for people to take to the leaders, because it also provides a benchmark to other organizations in India. Last year, 72 companies got involved and the average score went up by seven points from the previous year, showing progress.

We also started a project called the Global Ally Challenge. It's a very simple exercise, but we didn't want it to be boring, like someone teaching you how to be nice to someone else. That is never fun. We built a website where there are a bunch of challenges. Every day, there is a challenge. When you complete it, you get points for it. You can refer your friends and family. You can participate as an individual or an organization. If you sign up as an organization, everyone's score gets added up to the organization's score. It's a fun way of competing with other companies, mobilizing more and more people to do this. It's more fun, because there's an incentive, you're on the leaderboard, you're

completing a task and you're getting points for it. It takes about five minutes per day and it is broken down into different challenges. For example, reading a coming out story, getting localized information about the laws of a country, information about NGOs, about ways you can volunteer. We provide access to localized information in your language. Last time we ran it, we had people from 58 countries participate, even companies, like NASA. We run the challenge for a limited time period. This year, we will have 14 units, lasting for a week in late June. AIB members are welcome to join, as well. Just look us up online, on our website. Search for the "Global Ally Challenge".

Then, we also published a book on allyship, called "equALLY". It is available on Amazon. It is 30 senior executives in India, from different companies, then the parents of LGBT+ people, celebrities and even school kids. 14 and 15 years old, talking about their journey. In total, 45 stories demonstrating that allyship is not just a work thing. We wanted to give a roadmap to people and show that irrespective of who you are, where you are in your life, you can be an ally. You can look at the people and their stories and find a path that works for you. Because that's what people also struggle with: "I want to be an ally but I don't know how". The power of social narration of different people and their stories can be transformational. People moving from a space of pure prejudice and bias against our community to a space of acceptance. Stories resonate with people and provide us with roadmaps and plans of action. They help us build bridges and connect.

[MR]: There are many, many other things the Pride Circle is doing in the DEI space. You can learn more about the Pride Circle at www.thepridecircle.com or by following them on LinkedIn and Facebook. Working with

Fortune 500 firms in India, the various initiatives and innovations rolled out by Pride Circle aren't just incredible sources of inspiration but also offer valuable insights for international business scholars, educators, policymakers and practitioners engaging with DEI globally and locally.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ramkrishna (Ram) Sinha is the co-founder of the Pride Circle, the biggest social enterprise in India with a focus on advancing social equity through affirmative action for the LGBT+ community. Prior to co-founding the Pride Circle, Ram was a LGBT Employee Resource Group Lead for Intel in India. He has been named a DEI Hero of the Year at Intel India and one of 50 Future LGBT Leaders 2017. Ram has a Bachelor's degree in engineering and instrumentation from Birla Institute of Technology & Science, Pilani, India.

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