



Bhargav
Sundaram
Enterprise

“A true friend knows your weaknesses but shows you your strengths; feels your fears but fortifies your faith; sees your anxieties but frees your spirit; recognizes your disabilities but emphasizes your possibilities” - William Arthur Ward

Callidai Motors founded in 1998 is India's only manufacturer of motorized and customized wheelchairs, stairlifts and other mobility aids for the physically challenged. Their products are different from others in that, the aids are designed from scratch taking into account the nature of the disability of the client and how it could change his lifestyle. For instance, a woman of 55 years who is the sole guardian and caretaker of her 20 year old disabled son; having carried her son around for 20 years, her will finally gave way when she saw an advert of a maker of customized mobility devices - Callidai Motors. She approached them with her request and in two months, she was provided a floor level device that she could simply roll her son onto, reconfigure into a chair, and wheel him away like a regular wheelchair. The man behind Callidai Motors is Mr Bhargav Sundaram.

Hailing from a family of pioneers in the Indian automobile industry, Bhargav could not have dreamt anything short of innovation and pioneering in manufacture; Bhargav is the grandson of Late K R Sundram Iyer whose name is synonymous with Enfield India and who gave India her very first indigenously manufactured motorcycle. He watched as his grandfather built the company from an assembling unit into a full scale manufacturing giant. With Automobile Manufacture and Marketing coursing through his veins, he joined the family business armed with an MBA from PSG college of Technology, Coimbatore. He was given charge of the Sales and Marketing in Coimbatore.

Even as he successfully fulfilled his responsibilities, the innovator in him was thirsting for more- it began drawing him towards opportunities outside the Enfield empire. A major business strategy change diluted the family's stakes in Enfield and Bhargav found the momentum to step

away and look at his own passion from a different perspective. “Do what has not been done before and bring about a positive change. Be the best in what you do”, was his new tune. While he forayed into and out of various spheres of manufacture and into the realms of alternate-energy, he was watchful of the needs of people who lived and worked around him.

One such need was that of a mode of transport in between the cycle and moped. “Even today there are people in villages who at retirement own only a cycle; a motorcycle or moped is not affordable. Also, being farmhands or construction workers, they have to cycle nearly 50 kilometers daily, toil for about 10 hours and cycle back home. They look weather-beaten and aged from their labor. This disparity and unfairness which was a legacy of the rural population motivated me to address the gap - to develop something more affordable than the moped but better in features than the humble cycle; something that would drastically improve their living.” This led to the development of the motorized electric cycle; they made and sold 200 such cycles over a year and a half.

The electric-cycle design did not really take off but gave Bhargav his much needed confidence. Around this time-1998, he found his calling-betterment for the disabled. He began employing persons with all kinds of disabilities and began motorizing their three wheelers and other modes of transport. This is where the organization took on the name “Callidai”- short for Kallidakurichi, the town Bhargav's family hailed from. They took on motorizing of wheelchairs initially, so that clients could move around on their own; and then on request started fitting aids that could serve the other needs of his clients.





Bhargav declared in all humility, "I had no technical knowledge at first but with every new client we learnt and improved our designs. Our understanding of human spatial requirement, movement and adaptability increased as did the variety of functions that we could deal with. We then moved on to specially designed mobility devices. Once the devices with new functions were created, we tried to improve it using different materials. We now have clients from all over India including hospitals and hospices for whom we design and manufacture bed cum wheelchairs, stairlifts, swimming pool lifts for physiotherapy programs, specialized mobility aids and even some customized MUVs."

Callidai's beneficiaries also includes the under-privileged. "Imagine the pathetic plight of a family where the lone bread winner meets with an accident; the spirit of the entire family is crushed and their future appears bleak. By providing that disabled person with a mobility device, we bring a ray of hope to the family. It gives me and my team tremendous joy to bring about that difference." Bhargav's wife and partner Priya who is an advocate by profession helps the company in the legal aspects, in administration and marketing. In Bhargav's words, she is his soulmate and provides the much needed confidence and drive to thrive in this unconventional business. Early on in the industry, when he encountered

heart-rending cases, Priya was his source of courage and strength.

With various standards arrived at from 15 years of being in the field, a larger client base and also with an intention to scale up operations Callidai set up a factory that can manufacture up to 100,000 wheelchairs a year. "The factory has taken care that I am able to meet deadlines, though customization still takes its own time. But that is where my speciality lies- in taking apart a problem and finding a solution for my client in his own environment which has its own complexities, but nothing beats the pure joy of giving

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freedom of movement to a person who was bound to a bed or the confines of his home."

Having come across numerous physically challenged people in his profession, Bhargav has a different view of disability. His employees many of who are challenged physically and have adapted so well to their circumstance that Bhargav calls this a triumph of the human spirit. He talks with amusement about his office assistant who runs up the stairs faster than others despite the need to use heavy crutches. He talks with pride of his Marketing Manager who also doubles up as his Brand Ambassador; though physically challenged, he travels to far off places to deliver, install and service equipment. His clients feel

motivated when they are serviced by such persons who can empathize with them.

Bhargav supplies to the "International Wheelchair Foundation"- its a division of Global Health and Education Foundation, a charitable foundation, whose goal is to provide a free wheelchair to every child, teen and adult worldwide who needs one but has no means to acquire one.

Bhargav believes that any disability that can be reversed with a prosthetic limb or mobility device should not be considered a disability, just like faulty vision is corrected with spectacles, and the capabilities of these persons should not be doubted. The grit and determination that they have developed to overcome their disability makes up for any other shortfall; he walks the talk in that he runs an NGO "The Wheelchair Trust of India" where they maintain a database of disabled persons, their skills and qualifications besides providing vocational training and career guidance. Through the organization, they are able to provide the physically challenged with gainful employment and any other kind of assistance that they may need. They also proactively try to locate avenues in organizations where disabled people could be employed.

Bhargav appears to have transferred his "innovation" gene to his daughter who is a student of Biotechnology- an area of science that is a melting-pot of out-of-the-box thinking. Although he is himself a commerce and business graduate, love for technology and innovation has brought him into the manufacture sector. His spirit of service has kept him wedded to it.

He declares in a carefree manner, "show me one other person, who can do what I am doing better than me, and with a sense of service and devotion- and I will quit this industry. There are other avenues to be explored!" When asked, what is next on his to-do list, he dismisses it with a quiet smile saying, "Wait and watch!". Bhargav Sundaram, a pioneer and path-breaker in the manufacture and customization of wheelchairs in India is a true friend of the disabled. He is a Champion of Chennai!