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Industry leaders chant the diversity mantra

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Bangalore: Affirmative action programmes to eliminate job discrimination and increase employment of sundry disadvantaged sections have for some decades been an integral and fairly widespread part of the US business landscape.

But in India, this is only now beginning to make some headway. Even then, the focus is largely on women and to a limited extent on the physically challenged. And then again, it is the MNCs that are seen to be leading the way.

Nirmala Menon, who worked with IBM and has now set up a diversity management solutions company called Inter Weave, says Indian companies are beginning voluntarily to look at diversity issues. "Some are recognising that diversity of people leads to diverse ideas and perspectives that in turn result in greater creativity and innovation, better products

and solutions," she says.

IBM India, she says, has a variety of support structures for women, including a women's committee that looks at things like how to give women the skills required and help them become more assertive. "Several organisations, especially MNCs, recognise that more women must reach higher levels in the organisation. And such support structures help this process," Menon says.

Romi Malhotra, MD of Dell International Services, says Dell values diversity and encourages people from different backgrounds to come and work with the company. "This is as true in India as it is globally. While we continue to be a strong meritocracy-based organisation, all other things being equal, we would look at diversity candidates favourably," he says.

In many cases, the scarcity of talent itself is compelling companies to look beyond

their traditional hiring areas, as also to adopt measures to retain, for instance, women talent. Thus, more and more companies are becoming increasingly flexible with women who go on maternity leave or who may need more personal time after marriage.

Infosys says it has always believed in diversity in hiring. However, it has no set policy in place to consciously ensure such diversity. Diversity then becomes the consequence of the company's belief in hiring local talent, because such talent is seen to be the most aware of local nuances.

Diversity experts like Nirmala Menon say an important issue is also preparing organisations to accept diversity. "Organisations have to create a culture where everybody has equal opportunity, where people are willing to accept differences. Otherwise, there will be a different form of caste system within the organisation," she says.