

A Panoramic view of the History of Disability Studies

Anjana R B^{1*}, Dr Beena S Nair²

¹Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri, India

². Assistant Professor (Sr. Grade), Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri, India
anjanaanju094@gmail.com

ABSTRACT (Times New Roman, bold, 10)

All emancipatory movements and theories trace 'history' to establish a tradition and Disability Studies is no exception to this. Disability, as a concept, has existed from the time of human evolution. The perception of it differs from one period to another and also from one culture to another. There are several factors responsible for the transformation of the perception of disability. The culture, society, time frame, socio-political milieu, economic condition and history of perception are some of them. Disabled bodies are always looked upon since deformity is not an accepted norm in the society. The disability historiography does not have the tradition of ages. Recently, disability studies scholars have made an attempt to trace the history of disability from different standpoints, since the ancient texts like the *Mahabharata*, *Manusmriti*, *Vedas* and *Upanishads* which feature instances of disability, have the same impact throughout the continent. Also the laws, movements and activism have the same effect on all parts of the country. Disability studies as a discipline flourished first in the Western countries. As result, it seems that disability rights activism or movement in the world has been influenced by the Western disability history and activism. However, disability in India has its own significant characteristics which stand out from the western definition of disability. This paper explores the origin and history of Disability and the evolution of Disability Studies.

Keywords

Disability, History, Disability Studies.

Introduction – Defining Disability

It is worth noticing that the word “disabled” mostly carries the image of a person with some orthopedic impairment. This opinion varies from one person to another. Often, disability is associated with beggars in India. The word “disabled” generates very fixed images of a person with disability. Words such as evil, devilish, cunning, *Bechara*, *Papam*, *Pawam* are associated with disability in India. Why do we have such fixed notions and associations of disability? How do we understand disability? Is lived experience the only way to understand it? Does the perception of disability change with time? What are the current debates in disability studies?

The definition of disability, both as a concept and as a notion, remains difficult to formulate. This has led to its problematisation of definition and meaning. Historically, the term ‘disabled’ referred to the kind of inability in daily functions. Later, the definition and meaning of disability evolved over a period of time. The definition of disability is conceptualised by physical, sensory impairments, psychological, mental conditions. The two models of disability played crucial role in formulating the definition of disability. However, the World Health Organization defines disability as

an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity, limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. (WHO who.int)

This is the revised definition of disability. In the 1980s, the World Health Organization classified disability into three groups – disability, impairment and handicap. However, these words are used interchangeably in common language. In the Indian context, the Persons with

Disabilities Act, 1995, defines disability entirely on the basis of the medical model of disability. This act categorises disability as blindness, low vision, leprosy-cured, hearing impairment, loco motor disability, mental retardation, and mental illness.

There are visible variations in the definition of disability in India. The PWD Act, population census and National Sample Survey Organization differ in their approaches to disability. The Population census of 2001 announces that “the concepts and definitions of disabilities coupled with measuring its extent and its types contained in the PWD Act, 1995 were found to be extremely difficult to canvass even in normal circumstances assuming people had time, were willing and forthcoming to share this information and there was an expert investigator to elicit this information” (qtd. in Gujarati). The population census compartmentalised disability into five categories such as seeing, speech, hearing, movement and mental. The PWD Act mentioned a wide range of disability, including leprosy, mental retardation and mental illness, whereas the 2001 census mentioned disabilities like hearing disability, mental disability, etc. This might have occurred due to the time limits given in carrying out the census and other obstacles. However, the differences between PWD Act and the census are visible. Adding to this, the 2011 census modified the definition of disability given by the 2001 census which certified a one-eyed man as disabled, whereas the 2011 census removed these categories. In the latter census, the additional categories were introduced. *Mental retardation* and *mental illness*, which were covered under Mental Disabilities in the 2001 census, and *multiple disabilities* were introduced in the 2011 census. There is also a new category called “any other” to ensure overall inclusiveness. Some disabilities were not featured in the mentioned categories in the census. As a result, the “any other” category was introduced.

The National Sample Survey Organization has defined disabled person thus:

A person with restrictions or lack of abilities to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being was treated as having disability. It excluded illness/injury of recent origin (morbidity) resulting in temporary loss of ability to see, hear, speak or move.” (Manual of Disability Statistics 8)

This definition gives a different idea of disability. The 2001 census and the 2002 NSSO estimate differ greatly. According to the 2001 census, the total number of disabled people in India was 21 million, whereas according to the NSSO it was 18 million. This difference was due to the variations in the definition. The confusion is inevitable due to the lack of a unified definition of disability. As a result, we have no exact estimate of disabled population in India. The need is to be more inclusive about disability.

The recent Bill, Rights of Person with Disabilities Act 2016, however, appears to have considered wide range of disabilities. According to this Bill, a person with disability means “a person with long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders his full and effective participation in society equally with others” (RPWD act 2016, 3). Shri Thaawarchand Gehlot, Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment, conveyed the new recommendations on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (3rd December). He said that the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Bill re-defines disability since the notion of disability is “evolving and dynamic”. The RPWD Bill was passed in the winter session of the Parliament in December 2016. As per the new recommendations by the Standing Committee, the types of disabilities were increased to 21 from 19 as proposed in original bill in 2014. The acid attack victims, Parkinson’s disease, Speech and Language Disability, Specific

Learning Disability are new additions taken into consideration. However, the government has power to add more types of disabilities.

Literature Review

Mary Anne Prater's article "Learning Disabilities in Children's and Adolescent Literature: How are Characters Portrayed?" (2003) argues based on her survey that one out of every ninety children's books portray at least one character with a learning disability. Her study aims to look at how learning disability and related topics are addressed in children's literature. Her survey further indicates that the fictional characters, primarily the main characters with learning disabilities, were dynamic and grew through the plot. Their stories were told from their point of view and their learning disability had a major impact on the plot. She also observes that the most common learning disability portrayed were related to reading and writing.

Social and Medical Model of Disability

Historically, disability as a concept or notion has been modified over time. To understand disability, we need to probe into the history of disability as well as the two models of disability – the social and the medical. These two models have marked the significant transformation in the discipline. In the beginning, disability was understood only through the lens of the medical model. This model looked at disability as an individual's medical problem which can be treated or cured. It appears that the negative perception of disability articulated through the medical model of disability. Of course, one cannot get rid of the medical model as such. But the approach can be more adaptive and accommodative. The social model of disability is a recent phenomenon compared to the medical model. It is also a reaction against the medical model of disability. The social model of disability argues that disability is a social construct. The roots of the social model were developed in Australia, the UK and the US. The theorists argued that disability is an imposition on us along with our impairment. Disability is the lacuna of the society to provide proper facilities for the disabled community. For them, disability in itself is not the issue. Rather, the attitude of the 'able-ists' constructs the stereotypical notion of disability. Scholars of Disability studies claim that disability is the result of the way in which the society is organised. The 'able-ists' are the priority of the social organisation. They argue that the society has to be more accommodating in terms of facilities, infrastructure, education etc. so that the stagnant negative perception of disability changes over time. The establishment of disability studies as discipline is the result of activism and disabled person's rights movements. Definitely, the movements are grounded on the social model of disability. However, the medical and social models of disability co-exist at some level or the other. For example, mental illness can be cured with the help of medicine. At the same level, the social model of disability works towards erasing the negative representation of madness in society.

History of Disability in the West

Disability studies as a discipline has its roots in Western countries. The study of the history of disability in Western countries becomes the ground for comparison. This portion of the

chapter attempts to explore the history, disability rights movements, laws, approaches towards disabled persons and the transformation in the West. It also attempts to analyse the western history of disability in comparison with the Indian disability history.

If we study the history of disability in ancient Europe, the fit and fine bodies were preferred since participation in the war was compulsory. In Spartan history, disabled babies were left in the forest. However, a person who became disabled in war was looked after. The Spartans focused on building a strong army where the disabled had no place. Later, during the Renaissance period, people with disability were considered as being 'cared for by God' but this notion did not change anything. Later during this time, the perception changed and the "idiot cages" appeared in Europe, where disabled people were kept in cages as an entertainment for the 'normal' masses. The reason was also to keep away 'trouble.'

Later, dependent and 'unproductive' people in Europe were sent away, as the idea of productivity was attached to the body. The practice was that the family member of the disabled will pay some money to the sailors and ask them to drop the disabled somewhere far away, which was a way of getting rid of the disabled person. This practice later turned into the 'ship of fools,' where a ship of disabled people sails to places and sailors charged money to exhibit them. Psychologically, for the audience, it must be amusing to see people with differences and deformity. Later, after the use, these disabled people were disposed of somewhere in some lone island.

Later, the history of disability came to its turning point as industrialisation took over. At this time, disability became institutionalised. The institutes were extensions of the "idiot cages." People with disability were kept in 'alms-houses' or 'poorhouses.' This was the primary stage of asylums in the world. Basically it was the place for the poor sections of the society who kept their disabled family member in alms-houses. The wealthy families kept their disabled members in the house and they were taken care of. The perception of disability as a 'trouble' or 'burden' became stronger with the introduction of asylums and alms-houses.

Another significant time period in the history of disability appeared during the World Wars, where many people became disabled. The First and the Second World Wars articulated the notion of disability as 'burdensome' and 'unproductive.' Disability became a troubling concern for the nation as the number of disabled people increased and productivity decreased. This was the time when countries were in need of manpower. In this milieu, notions of the disabled body were firmly constructed. After the war, the disabled people united together to demand rehabilitation and services. The disability rights movement began questioning the normativity of the society. During this time, Disability Studies as a discipline came into existence, to articulate the voices of the disabled community.

The history of disability in non-European countries has not been given the attention it deserves. An overall history of disability in the non-European, especially colonised countries, remains similar and unnoticed. Disability in these countries still carries a stigma, and the feeling of being unwanted, of missing out, and also a sense of a stagnant life, and many other socially constructed notions. The major reasons for the perception of the disability as a stagnant state were religion, society, customs, cultures, traditions and lack of legal and social improvement. There is also an argument that disability studies, empowerment etc. are grounded on the western model. However, the experiences of Indian disabled people itself make an Indian way of studying disability different from the western model of disability studies. Also the geo-political, socio-

cultural differences with the west and within India were enough to make it a different discipline altogether.

Perceptions of disability will change if the history of disability is studied and brought to the forefront. It also establishes a tradition which helps in exploring trends in disability. In the colonised countries, the notion of disability differs from that of the West and its perception depends on several factors. However, it is worth noticing the visible transformation which will give us a picture of the transforming historical perceptions of disability in the Indian society. Laws, movies, literature, and movements related to disability have been taken into consideration while studying the history of disability in India.

History and Myths of Disability in India

The representation of disability in India seems to be strengthened due to myths and stigmatised history concerning disability. As a result, there is no strong historical tradition opposing the wrong notions about disability. The existence of disability can be traced in several Hindu religious and Vedic scriptures. The tribal and folk tradition of India record very few representations of disability. The tradition of history of disability could have transformed the perception of disability in India. The diachronic study of the disability will foreground the marginalised existence of disability in India.

Representation of Disability in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*

There are allusions of disability in the epics *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* which are the epitomes of Indian society. The stories of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are part of Indian society, represented through different forms like performance, literature, visual media etc. Seemingly, the representation of disability in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* has contributed to constructing negative notions of disability. It is worth noticing that all evil characteristics are attributed to disabled characters such as Manthara, Shakuni, Dritharashtra, etc.

Manthara, Kaikeyi's maid, is projected as evil because she was the mastermind behind Rama's exile for 14 years. Manthara, the Sanskrit name, means 'hunchbacked.' In the *Mahabharata*, the Kuru king Dhritharashtra is blind. He is not given as much importance as the other characters, who is also used by his children for their own benefit. The concept of a blind king does not exist anywhere in Indian mythology because the king is expected to be strong so that he can protect his subjects.

Shakuni, like Manthara, is projected as evil and wicked in the *Mahabharata*, having orthopedic impairment. He is considered the mastermind behind the Kurukshetra war and the downfall of the Kauravas. Again, in the *Mahabharata*, Trivakra, a maid in the kingdom of Mathura, is ridiculed by people because of her deformity. She is hunchbacked, her knee and neck are disfigured. According to the story, she is waiting for Lord Krishna to make her 'normal.' The miracle happens when she meets Krishna on the road who forcefully makes her stand and she thereby becomes *normal* and *beautiful*. There are several other instances of disability in the *Mahabharata*. Ashtavakra is another character who gets cursed by his father and as a result, is born with eight deformities. Big headed Ghatokacha, Jarasandha and Gandhari are a few characters with disability. In the *Gita* and the other scriptures, it is mentioned that one should help the disabled, which is a notion that appears in almost all religions. However, it does/did not really find application in the world.

Religious scriptures tend to have a greater effect on social psychology. What we hear or see through these scriptures becomes the ultimate normality. In the *Mahabharata*, the characters are identified with their deformities. In the case of Trivakra and Ashtavakra, their names itself

indicate the number of disabilities these characters possess. *Tri* means three and *Astha* means eight. That is, the names refer to the ones with three and eight deformities respectively. This is prevalent in today's world as well as we name someone according to their disability. For example 'Langada Tyagi,' in the famous movie *Omkara*, is attributed the adjective 'Langada,' owing to his lameness.

Other than these characters in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the Rakshasas and Asuras are always projected as being deformed and ugly. This idea also articulates the negative notion of disability. There is always the sense of ugliness, badness and danger associated with the disabled. The media and television shows have made it worse. The projection of the disabled in the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* serials articulates disability as evil. The social psychology is so fragile that whatever we see or read becomes the norm. For example, we have learnt to talk so bad about Ravana that most of us do not know that he was a great administrator and scholar. In fact, Rama asked Lakshmana to learn politics from Ravana when he was on his death bed.

Glimpses of disability can be seen in almost all Vedic scriptures. This also shapes the notion of disability in society. The perception of disability gets affected by these scriptures. The representation of disability is two-fold. On the one hand, it makes disabled characters butts of ridicule and on the other hand, it exhorts the readers to help the disabled, which creates collective sympathy and compassion for them.

There are instances of pity and compassion towards the disabled in several texts. These texts project the idea that the disabled person, because of her/his weakness, must be taken care of. Usha Bhatt argues that the idea of pity also constructs the idea of something lacking in disabled persons. He states:

Pity is so widely prevalent an attitude. . . pity towards the physically handicapped implies that the person who feels pity cognizes the sorry state of affairs, but it also implies that one who does the pitying considers the object of pity less fortunate or less able than oneself. (Bhatt 103-4)

This argument is evident in the case of *Manusmriti*, a Hindu law book. *Manusmriti* discusses the social, religious and domestic duties of a person/king. It gives us a picture of how disability was treated. *Manusmriti* successfully creates compassion for the disabled. However, it also projects the disabled person as feeble. *Manusmriti* lays down the rules for a good king. It says that a king should not insult "those who have redundant limbs or are deficient in limbs" (Ghai 48). The disabled must be given food, shelter, clothing and they are exempted from paying taxes. At the same time, disabled have no right in decision making, nor can they own any property. Also, disabled people must be avoided from attending feasts since it would bring loss of *Punya Karma*.

Magic, Sorcery and Myths about Curing Disability

It appears that the use of magic, sorcery, and witchcraft, etc. in curing disability has connection with the tribal, Adivasi and folk cultures in the Indian sub-continent. The belief that disability is caused by possession by an evil spirit is still prevalent. For example, brides and grooms are restricted from going outside after putting turmeric on their bodies. It is said that there are high chances of getting possessed by a bad spirit which might lead to some disability, stories that are still prevalent in Indian villages. It is noticed that many religious places in India offer the cure for disability. In India, disability is understood in both medical and supernatural terms. Even today, mental illness is treated in temples because of the belief in possession by spirits. There are many *Sadhus*, *Swamis*, *Maharajas*, *Mathas*, gurus and *Babas* who are consulted for disability, especially for mental illness. In this process of curing a disabled person, the psychology of the

person results in a positivity which also helps in healing. Sudhir Kakar claims that “it is the unquestioned devotion in the miraculous powers of the healer, which is at the core of positive outcomes” (Ghai 36). He also argues that the suffering person does not understand the rituals of the healing. However, the process of ritual alters her/his state of mind or being. Other than sorcery and magic, there are several myths on curing madness in India. For example, in Karnataka, a disabled person is buried in sand during the solar eclipse. The whole body except the head is buried in sand at the seashore. It is said that doing this might make a disabled person ‘normal.’

Disability in the Colonial Period

Several scholars argue that the colonial period of Indian history transformed the perception of disability and also brought forth the institutions for dealing with disability in India. The British Raj might have segregated the disabled at some point, but institutionalising the disabled was a major step towards changing popular perceptions about them. Christian missionaries played a crucial role in establishing schools for the disabled. In 1884, the first school for the disabled (deaf) was established in Mumbai. Similarly, in 1887, the first school for the blind was established in Amritsar. Further, these schools were established in Calcutta and Tamil Nadu. By 1947, more than 30 schools were established by the missionaries. They also had vocational rehabilitation. Traditional arts like weaving, doormat making and cane furniture-making were the part of the rehabilitation. The arrangements and facilities for the disabled were limited. However, the introduction of these programmes and schools transformed the perception of disability in the Indian context.

References

- [1] Albrecht, Gary L., Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury.(2001) eds. *Handbook of disability studies*. London: Sage Publications.
- [2] Anil Bhuiimli. (2009). *Rights of Disabled Women and Children of India*. New Delhi: Serial Publications.
- [3] Barnes, C. and Mercer, G.(2004). *Implementing the Social Model of Disability: Theory and Research*, Leeds: The Disability Press.
- [4] Barnes, C., Mercer, G. and Shakespeare, T. (2010). *Exploring Disability: A Sociological Introduction*. 2nd edition, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- [5] David Johnstone. (2001). *An Introduction to Disability Studies*. New York: David Fulton Publishers.
- [6] R.B, Anjana and Beena S Nair, “Traversing Disability Stigma: Re-presenting Disability as a form of Identity in Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.” IJRTE, 8.4(2019).