

Whose Disability?

A Centrifugal Quest to Confront the Stereotypical Views on ‘Disability’

SHANKHA SHEKHAR RAKSHIT* AND SUMEDHA MUKHERJEE**

Abstract

The word ‘disability’ is generally associated with a negative connotation, i.e., ‘the lack of ability to do something.’ But it is not necessarily true in all circumstances. The level of disability of a person does not always determine the limitations of their activities. Many people have succeeded in their lives overcoming their difficulties by proving themselves as differently abled in such activities which are supposed to be impossible due to their disability on those contexts. But every human being should realise the potency or ability of those people who have the power to fight against any adverse situation. So, our paper aims at analysing in detail the stories of success of the so-called disabled people. The quest of the paper is to find out how the people with physical deformities have challenged and surpassed the notion of common people regarding disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

‘Disability’ is often understood as the lack of ability of a person due to any type of physical or intellectual deformity. It is an age old concept and customary to treat such people either with sympathy or with apathy or with antipathy. Some people in the society are sometimes found

trying to favour them thinking that without their assistance that affected person can do nothing. Some people are indifferent to such people and the words like ‘sympathy’ or ‘empathy’ are hardly included in their dictionary of humanity. In this race of dehumanisation some people have surpassed the former type, as

*Assistant Professor, Department of Education, North East Regional Institute of Education, NCERT, Umiam, Ri Bhoi District, Meghalaya.

** Research Scholar, Department of Education Central University of Jharkhand.

these kind of people usually treat the physically and intellectually challenged people with hatred or mockery.

Despite so many endeavours undertaken by the government and NGOs, if a baby is born with any kind of deformity or later becomes affected due to illness or accident, many families, even till now treat them as a burden and do not pay much attention to their upbringing. The above-mentioned facts require no research-based evidences to be believed, as these things are experienced by us in our surrounding, may be within families, or in neighborhood or during transportation or in any public institution. A large portion of the society often spend their time to scrutinise the problems of the physically or intellectually challenged people. They sometimes do it out of concern or sometimes their purpose is to criticise those so-called disabled people regarding their performance in a particular task. We are most often worried about the efficiency or inefficiency of other people but we seldom think of our abilities and inabilities. But we seldom think of our abilities. First, we must understand that there is a difference between inability and disability. Inability denotes failure in a work due to lack of skill. But disability indicates failure in a work due to physical or mental obstacles. This indicates that inability may be decreased or removed by acquiring skill, while disability may

be coped with treatment or using any complementary equipment. On the other hand, some inabilities cannot be defeated or it is till now impossible, like to fly in the sky having two wings like a bird, or to land on the sun. Similarly, there are some disabilities which cannot be mitigated despite the intervention of sound medical support. It depends on the nature and the adverse effect of disability. Like, if a person who has lost his power of speech completely is asked to recite, it is an impossible task to him. But history witnesses how many great persons have surpassed their 'disabilities' which is assumed as their disability by common thought and this 'disability' has been converted into their strength. Like, the brave conqueror Timur, lamed for life never gave up and crossed his physical limitations. Social or religious prejudices and hypocrisy often snatch the basic rights from the people suffering from impairment. Indian philosophy believes in the shloka "*Mūkam karoti vācālam pangum langhāyate girim*" (Kumar, 2013), i.e., a speechless person can speak and a lame person can also climb the mountain. We may attend spiritual lessons but the social and religious biases and fanaticism follow the principles of segregation and thus, directly or indirectly we have made the society paralysed. Bengali poet Jibananda Das uttered in a poem, "*Advut andhar ek esechhe e prithibite aaj,/jara andha sab theke beshi aaj chokhe dekhe tara*" (Das, 1954), i.e.,

a strange darkness has come upon the world today; those who are blind can see the most today. So, who is disabled and why and how are they disabled is very ambiguous and relative.

When we hear the term 'disability' or 'handicapped', the first picture that flashes in our mind is of a person having some kind of deformity of his or her organs. Surprisingly, many a time those people who are supposed to be disabled for doing a work surpass our one-dimensional view exhibiting their excellence in those works while challenging the so called physically or intellectually sound people. Thanks to some reality shows which depict such examples and, we also sometimes get the chance to witness such cases such as some 'disabled' person without hands or feet performing some unthinkable tasks like swimming, or cutting vegetables with the help of feet in the absence of hands. The time has come to rethink the circumstances in a reverse way. Are those people really disabled due to the loss or impairment of their organs or it shows our disability due to the lack of power to envision the latent or overt talent already in them? No person is handicapped but situations made them so. We may interpret that in such cases where a person cannot prove his or her ability due to some physical or mental challenges most of the times situations are handicapping. Human beings sometimes create such situation themselves due to their

negligence towards infrastructure, or the surrounding ambience.

OBJECTIVES

- To find out the achievements of the people suffering from any type of physical or intellectual disabilities.
- To provide reflective suggestions to the members of the society who regard the people suffering from some kinds of disabilities, as not worth of doing any work properly.

METHODOLOGY

Based on secondary database collected from epics, literary pieces, movies, and telenovelas (mega-serials) and real-life incidents in our society the entire paper has been written through critical analysis using qualitative approach.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

It is customary to think that a person having active organs can perform better than a person having any impairment of the organ necessary for a particular task. But such conception is not necessarily evident in every case. Already some examples have been displayed in the above discussion. We may also travel to the kingdom of history, myth, and literature to visit the characters that have already proved that any kind of impairment cannot be a parameter of disability or inability. If a person has talent, potentiality and will power s/he can even perform the unthinkable tasks. Throughout his

whole life Dhritarashtra, the Kuru prince, played the role of an acting king but never had he experienced his coronation. His blindness had robbed him of his right to be a king as it was against the tradition to select a blind person as an official king. But Dhritarashtra was a brave fighter and skilled archer. Without eyesight he could easily pierce the target. On the contrary, Pandu, undoubtedly being a good archer once missed his target. Pandu had the ability to hit the target only hearing the sound just like king Dasharatha. But both the kings mistakenly killed human beings in lieu of killing animals. They had no problem with vision and they were well equipped in throwing *shabdabhedhi baan*. Still, they committed their worst sins. But Dhritarashtra despite being visually challenged by birth had the ability to identify each person separately hearing his or her footfall. Eklavya was another example from the same epic. Guru Dronacharya asked him to cut his right thumb as a tribute with the evil intention to stop him from archery. But despite losing his right thumb which was supposed to be an essential limb to grasp the arrow, Eklavya never gave up hope and kept on practising archery well and was eventually followed by many archers, specially from the tribal community, to throw arrow without using the right thumb as a tribute to their ancestor Eklavya (Bose, 1997). These instances from the great epics point out the abilities of so-called disabled people and the failure of

doing the same by the physically gifted warriors.

Seldom people concentrate on their own deficiencies. It is easier for them to stamp someone as mentally 'ill' or physically 'handicapped.' But how many of us look at the weak points of ours? When a person avoids the difficulties faced by a person with physical disability while crossing the road or trying to do something, the person mirrors his or her mental poverty and disability of his or her affective domain. Many a time, it has been observed that a so called mentally challenged person offers a separate angle of thought, which is philosophically sound also, while the people with 'intelligent' brains fail to decode such explanations from that matter. If we turn towards literary domain, we may also experience such things. Like, from the famous play *King Lear* by Shakespeare we get such examples. King Lear misjudges the reality when he has been mentally stable but the moment he loses his sanity, he discovers the bitter truth. So, he is compelled to undergo a journey to insanity to gain the rational mind. Lear's madness here certifies his normalcy, his rationality, and his introspection. Another character in the play, i.e., Earl of Gloucester who also cannot understand the reality lying in front of him and when he loses his eyesight and faces the harsh reality utters, 'I stumbled when I saw' (Shakespeare, 1888). Men can be blind without losing eyesight if they lose rationality driven by blind faith.

On the other hand, when we witness visually challenged people playing cricket, executing household works properly, travelling alone, etc., we can understand visual disability has not hindered their life spirit. Such people are more alert than a person having proper eyesight, just by tracing people nearby just hearing and assessing the footfall of the comers. Many times, the latter person fails to identify who has come secretly. The visually challenged people can do this using the vision of their mind. Thus, a visually challenged person faces no problem in a sudden power cut which seems to be a tough hindrance to the people with proper eyesight as they have not experienced such situations. We must think who is really disabled or handicapped in this situation. The blind person is then differently abled. These examples also show the efficiency of the person with disability and the weakness of the so-called mentally and physically fit people.

The same things happen in the case of other forms of disabilities also. Like, many people consider that a person who is deaf or dumb or both would be unable to perform many works which depend on hearing or speaking. But they forget that if such a person is trained properly in lip reading, they can understand the words through lip reading. A person who is unable to speak can also express feelings through body gestures and facial expression. When we go to watch mimes in the theatre hall, can we not understand what

messages are being delivered by the artists? But when we judge the off-stage scenario, we often express our anxiety regarding a dumb person. Most of the time, we overlook the other qualities in them which may establish them in the society, if they can achieve proper guidance. Like, many of them can be a good painter, good dancer, good mime artist, or even they can act in serials or movies where such characters are necessary. We must utilise their potentialities. If they are properly communicated, they can play in team sports also.

Impairment cannot always be overcome even after proper medication or treatment. But the rest of the people of the society can dig out their talent and potentialities and must utilise them through proper channel. To outskirt them in the name of their disability projects, our disability to identify their potentialities and to use them in proper way. If despite having all the physical and mental abilities, we fail to do this work, we must rethink who really are disabled.

Helen Keller was not only visually challenged but also deaf and dumb at the same time. Still, she crossed all her limitations, handicapping situations and achieved world-wide fame (Keller, 1903). It might be astonishing to common people that a person specially a lady can be so successful suffering from multiple disabilities. Milton also lost his vision in his later life but had not given up writing (Rumrich, 2019). Homer was a born blind (Beecroft,

2011). But both Milton and Homer composed their classic epics in the absence of their eyesight. At present also we find Ravindra Jain, a famous singer, lyricist, and composer, born with visual impairment (Pandya, 2015). Being a sufferer of blindness, Louis Braille first created the Braille Language which is till now one of the most important and widely used assistive devices for the visually impaired students to study by on their own (Bullock, Galst, 2009). These great people might have lost their eyesight but not their insight.

There are many inspiring instances which compel us to question whether the people seemed to be disabled are really disabled or not. Briefly we can remember a galaxy of stars shining in various fields overcoming all their difficulties which once seemed to be their disabilities. Despite losing both legs, Masudur Rehman Baidya became entitled as the first physically challenged Asian swimmer because of his success in crossing English Channel and achieved the position of the world's first physically challenged swimmer to swim across the Strait of Gibraltar (Imtiaz, 2021). Born with right hand only, Bharat Kumar became a world champion in para-swimming contests (Panwar, 2016). Sudha Chandran became a famous dancer with amputated leg (Singh, 2020). Arunima Sinha became the first Indian amputee to conquer Mount Everest with a prosthetic leg (Chakraborty, 2015). Stephen

Hawking, one of the most brilliant British theoretical physicists, was a patient of rare motor neuron disease and used to speak with the help of a voice synthesiser (Rawlins, 2018). In his childhood, Abhishek Bachchan attended special school to get rid of dyslexia (Varma, 2018). Being autistic and deaf in one ear Lewis Carroll became a renowned writer and a storyteller (Gilmore, 2015). American president Roosevelt guided America in World War II sitting on a wheel chair as he had suffered from a paralytic illness known as Guillain-Barre Syndrome (Ott, 2020). Keeping aside her problem with dwarfism, Jyoti Amge achieved her success in many TV shows (Strohm, 2020). Peter Dinklage is also a promising Hollywood actor who is a dwarf (Gallagher, 2019). Being quadriplegic, H. Boniface Prabhu is an internationally acclaimed wheel chair tennis player (Chakravorty, 2016). All of them have proved that the word 'disability' cannot hinder our progress if we properly use our insight or vision. The other members of the society should also think over these facts and nurture their own humane qualities.

Whatever the types of disabilities are, it would no longer keep a person or the situation handicapped for the person when these loopholes can be properly channelised. Even if we cannot minimise their physical deficit always, we can at least remove the obstacles before them. Like, if we create another way for the

physically challenged person, they will also no longer feel segregated. If we arrange a ramp instead of stairs, an orthopedically challenged person who faces difficulty to go upstairs or downstairs can easily move. Thus, we must open our eyes all the time so that no person is deprived of displaying their talent. Most of the people unfortunately till now are indifferent to the problems faced by the physically or mentally challenged people. And apart from this, the problems which are not directly visible remain unnoticed most of the time. How many of us are there to think about the problems faced by a dwarf? Dwarfism has got entry into the list of disabilities under 'The rights of persons with disabilities act, 2016' (RPWD Act, 2016). Do we think how the dwarfs manage the urinals in a public toilet where there are no several provisions for them, like a separate urinal according to their height? How many of us are bothered about the problems faced by them while they get on the bus? There are so many problems lying before our eyes but due to the lack of empathy, these things cannot stir our mind. Is it not our disability in dealing with our affective domain fruitfully? Is it not our lack of ability in using our emotional intelligence or social intelligence? We need to focus on these quests and also decentralise our stereotypical thoughts on disability to confront our own conscience.

CONCLUSION

We must remember that every person is unique from the point of individual difference. Every person has certain limitations as well as qualifications. So, it will not only be a crime but also be foolishness to place the mentally or physically challenged people in a segregated compartment. Not only from this perspective but also from another dimension it is also true. Often, we come across some guardians, relatives, or other people and sometimes even teachers who judge the merit of a student by their academic score or sometimes even the subjects undertaken by the students. If we follow Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligence, we see there are many types of intelligence (Gardner, 1993). Failure to prove excellence in Math or Science subjects does not indicate the low merit of a student. If their mathematical intelligence is poor, they have had merit in other fields be it in music, in sports, in literature etc. Such stereotypical belief also mirrors the void of knowledge of those people to who have framed some benchmarks and are used to judge a person by those predetermined yardsticks. This indicates the lack of our rationality, power of thinking critically over a matter. Are those not also disabilities of those persons? The time has arrived to think from such perspectives also. Before thinking about or pointing out others' weakness, every member of the society should analyse themselves.

Transcending the rigid stereo-typical views towards disability, every member of the society must join hands to make an inclusive society which will be just for all. Every person is special having certain qualities to succeed in life. Instead of demeaning others, everyone should learn the

positive factors from others and inculcate the constructive qualities within themselves and in others. If this symbiotic relationship is maintained, the society will be able to move beyond disabilities as every person is able to do something as per their inner qualities.

REFERENCES

- BEECROFT, A. 2011. Blindness and literacy in the lives of Homer. *The Classical Quarterly*. Vol. 61, No. 1. pp. 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838810000352>
- BOSE, P. 1997. Mahabharater maharanye. Vikalpa Prakasani.
- BULLOCK, J. D. AND J. M. GALST. 2009. *The story of Louis Braille*. *Arch Ophthalmol*. Vol. 127, No. 11. pp. 1532–1533. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archophthalmol.2009.286>
- CHAKRABORTY, R. 2015, MAY 10. How the worst tragedy of her life turned Arunima Sinha into a world champion. *Yourstory*. <https://yourstory.com/2015/05/arunima-sinha-world-champion/>
- CHAKRAVORTY, R. 2016. Quadriplegic wheelchair tennis player Boniface Prabhu: On a long journey. December 11. *Deccan Chronicle*. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/sports/tennis/111216/quadriplegic-wheelchair-tennis-player-boniface-prabhu-on-a-long-journey.html>
- DAS, J. 1954. *Jibanananda daser shrestha kabita*. Boi toi.
- GALLAGHER, S. 2019. Game of Throne's Peter Dinklage says being 'politically correct' about dwarfism can be 'damaging'. December 09. *Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/peter-dinklage-game-thrones-dwarfism-interview_a9238771.html?amp#aoh=16226331283938&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com&_tf=From%20%251%24s
- GARDNER, H. 1993. Multiple Intelligence: Theory in practice. Basic Books.
- GILMORE, N. 2015. 10 Random Facts About Lewis Carroll. Jan 27. *Publishers Weekly*. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/authors/article/65414-10-random-facts-about-lewis-carroll.html>
- IMTIAZ, M. 2021. A 'hero' to Sachin, he was first person to swim across English Channel without both legs. January 18. *The Bridge*. <https://thebridge.in/featured/hero-sachin-swam-across-english-channel-without-both-legs/?infinite=1>
- KELLER, H. 1903. The story of my life. *American Foundation for the Blind*. Retrieved May 17, 2022.
- KUMAR, A. 2013. Gita Dhyanam by Madhusudan Saraswati [Blog post]. October 16. <https://iskcondesiretree.com/profiles/blogs/gita-dhyanam-by-madhusudan-saraswati>

- MITTAL, S. S., S. H. MITTAL, R. SHEKHAWAT, AND S. MANTRI. (WRITERS), S. H. MITTAL, R. R. GOYAL, M. KHAN, A. CHHETRI, S. KOTIAN, R. BEG AND J. KADAM (DIRECTORS). 2015, JUNE 12. *Diya aur baati hum* (Season 21, Episode 11) [TV Series Episode]. In S. Mittal, and S.H. Mittal (Executive Producers), Shashi Sumeet Productions Pvt. Ltd. <https://www.hotstar.com/1000061666>
- MINISTRY OF LAW AND JUSTICE, GOVT. OF INDIA. 2016. The rights of persons with disabilities act, 2016. Government of India.
- OTT, T. 2020, JUNE 04. How Franklin Roosevelt's health affected his presidency. *Biography*. <https://www.biography.com/news/franklin-roosevelt-health>
- PANDYA, H. 2015. Ravindra Jain, musician. October 13. *Outlook*. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/ravindra-jain-musician/295572>
- PANWAR, P. 2016. Bharat Kumar, the World Champion para-swimmer, with 50 medals, forced to wash cars! January 28. *Oneindia*. <https://www.oneindia.com/india/bharat-kumar-the-world-champion-para-swimmer-with-50-medals-forced-to-wash-cars-1995917.html?story=3>
- RAWLINS, R. 2018. What Stephen Hawking Taught Us About Living with Disability [Blog post]. March 19. <https://www.brainline.org/blog/learning-accident/what-stephen-hawking-taught-us-about-living-disability>
- RUMRICH, J. 2019. The cause and effect of Milton's blindness. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Vol. 61, No. 2. pp. 95–115. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/724464>
- SINGH, S. 2020. Women who inspire Sudha Chandran: A tale of passion, courage and inspiration. April 6. *Sipping Thoughts*. <https://www.sippingthoughts.com/sudha-chandran-tale-of-passion-courage-and-inspiration/>
- STROHM, E. 2020. Meet the World's Shortest Woman: 26-Year-Old Actress Jyoti Amge. July 31. *People*. <https://people.com/tv/worlds-shortest-woman-actress-jyoti-amge/>
- VARMA, L. 2018. It cannot be detected most of the times: Big B puts the spotlight back on dyslexia. February 26. *Deccan Chronicle*. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/entertainment/bollywood/260218/amitabh-bachchan-puts-the-spotlight-back-on-dyslexia.html>