

Historical Perception Of Disability

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Abstract:

The specially-abled would like to be viewed as people with challenges and not condemned as persons with defective body. Physical deficiencies present in the body could be from birth or could have been developed over a period of time, or could have occurred accidentally. They are not ashamed of their disabilities and they do not want to be pitied. But society looks down upon them as products of pity, disgrace and uselessness, there by stigmatizing and marginalizing them. To know the reason for the formation of such kind of negative attitude towards specially-abled and caregivers, it is quintessential to study the historical perception of disability.

Key words: specially abled, disability, mythology, attitude

People's attitude towards disability is pre-dominantly due to religious beliefs and cultural practices. Looking through the lens of genealogy would give us the historical perspective (Foucault et al. 8-12) of disability in India. Baird and Heimbeck authors of *Philosophic Classics: Asian Philosophy* opine that the Vedas are the only sacred texts that Hindus give supernatural heavenly origin to and that they are the oldest living works of literature, it is necessary to analyse them to know the cause of the negative attitude towards disability or disabled (qtd.in Kumar and Choudhury). Vedic literature is divided into ¹*Shruti* and ²*Smriti*. *Shruti* texts are passed on orally whereas *Smriti* texts are recollected and visually perceived. *Manusmriti* translated by Sir. William Jones (1794) British philologist, associates' disability with ³'*Karma Phala*' or 'god's punishment' (Ghai 46). In another translation of *Manusmriti* by George Buehler (1886) Austrian scholar of Sanskrit and Prākṛit, we come to know about the repercussions of '*Karma Phala*' explaining that people endure diseases like 'dyspepsia' for stealing cooked food; 'dumbness' for stealing words (of the Veda); 'leprosy' for stealing clothes; 'lameness' for stealing horse; 'blindness' for stealing lamp; 'one-eyed' for extinguishing a lamp; general 'sickness' for causing injury; 'swellings' in limbs for disloyalty.

The Epics are the second group of *Smriti* literature. The two Vedic epics ⁴The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are exceedingly well-known across India. In these epics, we see that the characters having any disability are presented with negative implication. For example, in the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma's father Shantanu's elder brother Bahlika, had given up his claim to be king due to a physical disability. Following the precept, though Dhritarashtra was the legitimate successor, Bhishma prevented Dhritarashtra from being crowned as a king of Hastinapura because of his blindness. Dhritarashtra was also blamed for not avoiding Kurukshetra war. In another Indian epic the *Ramayana*, Manthara, a lady with hunch back was held responsible in sending Lord Rama to exile. It is projected in these epics that Dhritarashtra and Manthara's mental crookedness was an outcome of their physical deformity.

Even in Greek mythology stories upholding *karma* theory where an individual is cursed or disabled as a result of doing something that enraged a higher being or God. Almo, the river deity, had a daughter named Larunda. Her father often forewarned her about her talkative behaviour. She eventually learned that God Zeus had repeatedly pushed her sister Juturna into a relationship. When Larunda became aware of her

¹ The Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Samaveda, and Atharva Veda are among the Vedas found in the Shruti literature.

² Vedangas, Epics, Upavedas, Puranas, Upanga/Shatdarshan (Six philosophies), Agamas, and Tantras are among the texts that are found in Smriti literature.

³ Karma theory: The sage Yajnavalkya, introduced the concept of karma theory in the ancient book *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, which affirms that the universe will respond to our actions, thoughts and desires, in this life or the next.

⁴ Ramayana and Mahabharata are the two Indian Sanskrit epic poems. These mythologies have a significant influence on Indian society. People relate to the characters and take moral lessons from them and apply to their life.

sister's predicament, she assisted her in fleeing Zeus' command and protecting herself. Later, Larunda revealed Zeus' inclination for adultery to Hera. Larunda's talkativeness irritated Zeus, who responded by ripping off her tongue since he felt it made the situation less beneficial for him. Larunda's tongue having been cut off, Zeus gave Hermes the order to transport Larunda to the underworld and designate her as the river of hell's nymph. Larunda was sexually abused by Hermes on the route to the underworld. If we examine the Greek story of Larunda, we can see how Larunda is reduced to disability as retribution for what she committed against the God Zeus.

Women with disabilities are at a greater risk of being subjected to sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and workplace exploitation, among other forms of mistreatment. Findings from the ⁵UNDP Human Development Report 1995 indicate that specially-abled women are twice as likely to experience divorce, separation, and violence compared to women without disabilities (Thomas and Thomas 4).

Some of the other attitudes inherited by the society towards specially-abled are:

- Fear about disabled people: In the epic *Ramayana*, there is a story that recounts an unfortunate incident involving King Dasharatha. While on a hunting expedition, Dasharatha, known for his exceptional archery skills, heard a sound of an animal drinking water from a river. Utilizing his unique ability to shoot without seeing the target, he aimed his arrow towards the sound. However, instead of an animal's cry, he heard the agonizing voice of a human. Rushing to the source of the sound, Dasharatha discovered a young boy named Shravana Kumara, who was lying in a pool of blood. Shravana Kumara, the only child of blind parents, had come to collect water for them. Before succumbing to his injuries, he requested Dasharatha to inform his parents about the tragic incident. Overwhelmed with grief, Dasharatha delivered the heartbreaking news to Shravana Kumara's parents, who were unable to bear the shock and passed away. Despite the accident being unintentional, they cursed Dasharatha to experience the sorrow of losing a son, known as '*Putrashoka*' in Sanskrit. This curse manifested in Rama's fourteen-year exile to the forest and Dasharatha's longing for his beloved son on his deathbed. The curse, bestowed by the blind parents of Shravana Kumara, instilled a deep fear of disability within the Indian psyche, as noted by Anita Ghai, an Indian disability rights activist (65).
- Pity and charity: *Manusmriti* outlines the responsibilities of the king by mandating that the king should give gifts and carry out various types of charitable deeds for a learned Brahmin, a person suffering from diseases, a young person (and an orphan), a person who is very old, and a person who was born into a noble family. These regulations demonstrate the level of protection and care provided to the disabled. Manu, however, does not accord an equal standing for disabled people (Bhatt 94-96). The *Bhagwad Gita* (Chapter 17, Verse 20) states that generosity is legitimate if it considers *Desha* (location), *Kala* (timing), and *Patra* (receiver). *Artha* (donations), *Vidya* (education), and *Abhaya* (courage) are the three types of philanthropy (Kumar and Choudhury).

The *Rigveda* also emphasises the services offered to the weak and disabled (Karna 91). In the *Mahabharata*, Narada questions Yudhishthira, the eldest Pandava, on how he would treat his people if they were deformed, blind, stupid, lame, friendless, or had given up on the world. In response, Yudhishthira says that he would infer that the state is in charge of guarding and supporting war-disabled and their relatives (Ghai 53).

Even in western culture the treatment of disabled was not friendly. Babylonians believed that handicapped newborns were good indicators of future success; Romans drowned defective infants; Greeks were the first to discuss eugenics; they also believed that those who were born deaf were incapable of thinking clearly. Disability was associated with sin in the Old Testament, yet people were instructed to treat individuals who were born with impairments with kindness and protection. It gave rise to miracles in the New Testament when Jesus cured the crippled. Hitler authorised "mercy killings" in 1935 and continued to encourage the euthanasia of handicapped individuals during World War II. Europeans and Aztecs (1100s)

⁵ UNDP stands for the United Nations Development Programme, which works towards eliminating poverty and combating discrimination and exclusion across over 170 nations.

would exhibit the handicapped in zoos. Disabled individuals in England relied on charity to survive in the 1300s. (Brauner)

- Applause for excellence in disability: Characters with disabilities are rarely portrayed in a favourable way in mythology. One such figure was Ashtavakra, a person with physical impairments from birth. He was raised in a Brahmin family and learned the Vedas and other sacred texts at a young age. He had gone to King Janaka's palace to take part in a *shastrartha* (philosophical debate), but the intellectuals there made fun of him because of his infirmity. He ultimately overcame his critics and received high plaudits from everyone and eventually won the debate. With his wisdom and intelligence, he eventually attained the title of *Brahmrishi* (the greatest status for a sage). He served as the recognised Guru of Sita's father, King Janaka. He wrote the *Ashtavakra Samhita* to disseminate his learned wisdom throughout the world. However, if thoroughly considered, this tale from the *Chandogya Upanishad* establishes a perilous precedent. The underlying implication suggests that intellectual capability surpasses physical constraints. The implied message appears to be that individuals with disabilities must possess exceptional qualities in order to attain even the most fundamental level of respect, acknowledgement, or identity.
- Punishment and desexualisation: Another tale from the epic Ramayana connects loss of attractiveness with weakness. Surpanakha, the demon and Ravana's sister, transforms her appearance to charm Rama. However, Rama declines her advances, citing his marital status. He advises her to propose to his brother Lakshmana instead. Lakshmana, in turn, informs her that she would only be a servant if she married him, as he is Rama's subordinate. He suggests that marrying Rama would be more beneficial, as he is a king and she could be a queen. Surpanakha returns to Rama, who sends her back to Lakshmana. Lakshmana states that only a man devoid of pride is fit to marry her. Feeling humiliated, Surpanakha reveals her true form. Sita, Rama's wife, is frightened, prompting Rama to signal Lakshmana to disfigure Surpanakha. While ancient texts suggest that the gods aimed to eliminate demons, the implicit message here is that deformity is a consequence of overstepping boundaries set by more powerful, godlike 'normal' humans. This incident conveys the idea that sexuality is restricted if the body is deformed.

Thus, the cultural attitude in the society towards specially-abled was constructed through religious practices, scriptures, mythology and folk tales. Some of the historical issues—such as stigmatisation, inadequate awareness, and wrong treatment of individuals with disabilities have remained in practice even today.

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