Disability Studies

An Indian Perspective

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Edited by
Dr. Dipak Giri



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Dedicated

To

My Father

Late Sri Dinkar Giri

(1 January, 1950-25 June, 2025)

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Introduction

Disability can be defined as a human condition where a person has a certain kind of impairment in terms of locomotor, hearing, vision, or mental state. Defining disabled people in association with terms like abnormality, weak, incapability etc. has caused these people to live in a space, situated outside of the society. A society's perceived "normal" person affects the persons with any disability leading to exclusion in different dimensions. In India, the dimensions of exclusion cuts deeper as we take into account the prevalent issues of caste, class, and sex. As we discuss their exclusion in areas of defined "normal", social, economical and infrastructural, the picture gets clear as in how the people with disabilities have been facing exclusionary attitudes for decades. Low participation in societal settings and political arena, low economic participation and no secure job and infrastructural exclusion often invite undesirable results for the disabled people to sustain in unfavourable environment.

Over the last few years, disability in India has undergone a paradigmatic shift as regards its terminological meaning. With the enactment of The RPwD Act-2016 that traces twenty one types of disabilities with an implication that disabilities are not merely the result of physical impairment as the essentialists believe; rather it may have a cause arising out of many other social and cultural factors, many new avenues are now opened up in the field of disability studies. The PwD Act-1995 was concerned more about physical impairment but after the participation of India in the UN

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Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006 and the nation's treaty in the convention to address disability in an all inclusive way paving path for The RPwD Act-2016 that comprises psychic, chronic or neurological disorder as disability arising out of various visible or invisible factors apart from physical impairment, disability has now become a study of social, cultural and political engagement.

The present book, comprising thirty two chapters, explores disability in India from various perspectives. The opening chapter of this book "Interpreting Disability as a Social Category" is a joint venture of Dr. Shachi Sood and Maheen Rehman. This chapter critically looks into the life narratives of two disabled individuals and points out various social factors such as people's attitudes, prejudices, assumptions, and social institutions etc. that play a massive role to make disabled individuals feel invalid in the eye of their family and the society in which they live. The chapter takes into consideration the shift from the medical model of disability to the social model of disability. It examines the representation of disability through comparative reading of two autobiographical narratives: *One Little Finger* by Malini Chib and *Naseema: The Incredible Story* by Naseema Hurzuk.

Next Dr. Ashique Rashul studies the development of the semiotics, sociology, and narratives of disability within Hindi Cinema (Bollywood) for the last seven decades. This study identifies the aesthetic changes of disability representations in Bollywood films but notes that the structural exclusion of the disabled body has remained unchanged since the post-independence era of pity narratives. The study examined the development of both the "Charity Model" and "Karmic Philosophy" during the post-independence era through "Pity Narratives" and the contemporary "Inspiration Porn" and "Supercrip" archetypes. The study provides an example of how disability is utilized by the commercial Indian

film industry as a narrative prosthetic to meet the emotional needs of the non-disabled audience through a critical analysis of key films including *Dosti* (1964), *Koshish* (1972), *Black* (2005), *Guzaarish* (2010), and *Margarita with a Straw* (2014). The conclusion of this study suggests that true inclusion will continue to be unattainable until the commercial Indian film industry stops emphasizing the spectacle of overcoming over the authenticity of being.

In chapter 3, Dr. Indu P. attempts to analyze the socio-cultural stigma around disability and sexuality. Indian cinema has been instrumental in perpetuating these stigmas about disability. For a long period, persons with disabilities have been depicted as objects of pity and as asexuals, especially when it comes to female characters. An intersectional analysis of disability and sexuality is explored in this chapter. This study analyzes select Hindi films such as *Black, Barfi* and *Margarita with a Straw* to explore the paradigmatic shift that came over the depiction of disability and female sexuality. The chapter employs critical content analysis and close reading of selected Hindi films to argue that disability and sexuality has been considered incongruent identities since the inception of cinema and contemporary Hindi cinema calls for a paradigm shift.

Dr. Vidya Hariharan studies the shifting representations of disability in contemporary Hindi cinema, saying that recent films participate in a process of rewriting disability, from a metaphorical and moralised narrative device to a more complex articulation of difference, embodiment and agency. Drawing on disability studies theory and close analysis of the films, the paper analyses select Hindi films from the mid-2000s onward, including *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), *My Name Is Khan* (2010), *Barfi!* (2012), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) and *Hichki* (2018). Discussing concepts such as the social model of disability, narrative prosthesis, the normate body and complex embodiment, the study situates these films within

broader debates on visibility, ableism and cultural pedagogy in popular cinema. While contemporary Hindi cinema demonstrates a growing willingness to foreground disabled subjectivities, the chapter argues that these narratives remain shaped by commercial imperatives, often relying on inspirational tropes, exceptionalism and able-bodied mediation. The chapter concludes by suggesting that although disability is being rewritten in Indian cinema, it is not yet fully deconstructed, pointing to the need for more structurally critical and disabled-led cinematic practices.

In chapter 5, Dr. Chitra Jha re-examines disability in Indian intellectual traditions critically through the philosophical figure of Ashtavakra whose physical form, traditionally characterized as one bent in eight places, has been long understood as that of corporeal deformity. While contemporary disability discourse in India has come to incorporate a more rights-based paradigm through the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, these cultural and philosophical frameworks that travelled towards an acceptable attitude towards bodily difference have not remarkably been explored in the context of disability studies. Accordingly, the chapter argues that returning to the story of Ashtavakra provides an important opening into an indigenous philosophical understanding of disability that destabilizes the normative connection between body-form and brain-and-intellects-in-command.

Drawing upon the philosophical dialogic discourse of the *Ashtavakra Gita,* the text illustrates how the story about Ashtavakra subverts widespread social assumptions about bodily perfection. In the canonical version of his interaction with King Janaka, the physical other that the sage is, however, can be seen as a locus of epistemological power rather than marginalised. It is the distinction of the material body from the liberated-self that the text is concerned with undermining social hierarchies

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steeped in normative embodiment. This philosophical orientation provides a different ethical lens through which disability can be conceptualised -- not simply as biological impairment, but as a social category either in the social construction of disability, as an alternative social judgement through status of being perceived and prejudiced the social construct. By placing Ashtavakra in a dialogue with modern day disability studies, especially social model of disability and debate and mobilisation surrounding the topic of embodied wholeness, this paper highlights the relevance of indigenous philosophical narratives in rethinking disabled in Indian context. It further argues that bringing into the fold the kinds of views presented within Ashtavakra may help to enrich existing policies and discourses relating to rights of disabled in India and help reconfigure, at an overall level, the story of Ashtavakra as an early philosophical contemplation regarding ableist assumptions but in a fashion that is culturally located, as it may even open for a reimagination of dignity, agency and embodiment within disability studies.

Although Ashtavakra continues to be a key figure in Indian thought, the study of his teachings has largely been restricted to the fields of Advaita philosophy, spirituality and religious studies. His bodily condition-which was often characterised in terms of deformity-has rarely been studied in relation to the theory of disability studies. Consequently, a very important lacuna is addressed in this chapter through the engagement of Indian Philosophical narratives with contemporary Disability theory. By looking at Ashtavakra through the axis of embodiment and social perception, the chapter shows that resources pre-exist in the Indian philosophical traditions for critiquing bodily normativity. Such an approach can expand the scope of disability studies from the Western paradigms and add to the creation of a more culturally rooted understanding of disability in the Indian milieu.

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Dr. Kongkona Dutta undertakes a thematic analysis of selected fables from the *Hitopadesha* in order to interrogate the ancient Indian conceptualisation of disability, its ethical dimensions, and the societal attitudes that govern the care of disabled agents. Drawing upon the rich repository of the Indian Knowledge System—a tradition in which moral and philosophical wisdom has been transmitted across generations through the medium of narrative—this study examines three carefully selected tales from the *Hitopadesha* to explore how disability is framed within the pre-modern Indian imaginative and epistemic worldview. Specifically, the chapter investigates two interrelated questions: first, how does Indian civilizational knowledge conceptualise disability, and in what ways does it critique the majoritarian perception that casts the disabled self as inherently innocent and the abled self as categorically dominant; and second, what do Indian knowledge traditions reveal about the ethics of care and empathy as they pertain to the autonomous disabled agent.

Dr. Mohana Priya A and Dr. Tamilmani K T try to analyse the effectiveness of disability narratives in Preethi Monga's *The Other Senses*. Moonga points out how the text recreates the concept of the disabled not as inability, but as an alternative sense of perception and awareness. This chapter follows textual analysis based on the social model of disability and disability aesthetics. The study contends a serious gap in Indian disability life-writing by pre-empting the way in which personal accounts refute the main ableist presumptions that have become embedded in the visual-centric cultures. This chapter examines how the story of Monga recreates sensory experience, selfhood and agency based on non-visual forms of epistemology, thus making contributions to the disability and life-writing studies. The story of Monga turns ordinary events - movement, learning, relationships, etc. - into places of empowerment, and at the same time, she reveals the institutional and attitudinal restrictions

embedded in the society. Instead of trying to validate themselves by overcoming disability, the text reminds about the validity of disabled knowledge methods, thus disrupting normal hierarchies of ability and perceptions. Therefore, when disability is made a location of meaning instead of marginality, the story asserts itself as a form of lived experience, manifested as an essential form of knowledge within the ability to change social awareness and writing.

Dr. Upasna Roy's "From Margins to Mainstream: The Transformation of Special Education in India" traces the historical evolution of special education in India. It analyses major policies and legislations related to disability and inclusion, understands the shift from segregated to inclusive education, critically evaluates contemporary challenges in inclusive education and examines Indian case examples of inclusive practices.

Dr. Meera K.G examines Zainab Sulaiman's *Simply Nanju* through the lens of Disability Studies within an Indian context. The novel, a young adult narrative, foregrounds the lived experience of a differently-abled protagonist navigating familial expectations, social perceptions, and self-identity. Rather than portraying disability as a deficit, the text subtly shifts the discourse toward resilience, relational identity, and agency. This chapter situates the novel within broader Indian socio-cultural frameworks where disability is often entangled with stigma, overprotection, and moral judgment. By analyzing narrative voice, characterization, and social interactions, the chapter explores how Simply Nanju challenges normative assumptions about ability and dependence. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Disability Studies—particularly the social model of disability—the chapter argues that Nanju's struggles are less about bodily limitation and more about environmental and attitudinal barriers. The novel also highlights the intersections of gender, adolescence, and disability, emphasizing how young

disabled individuals negotiate autonomy in restrictive settings. Through close reading and thematic interpretation, the chapter demonstrates how Sulaiman's work contributes to an emerging corpus of Indian literature that centers disabled voices in nuanced, empathetic ways. Ultimately, this chapter contends that *Simply Nanju* offers a critical pedagogical tool for Disability Studies in India, encouraging readers to rethink inclusion, accessibility, and dignity. It advocates for a shift from charity-based perspectives to rights-based approaches, aligning literary representation with contemporary disability discourse.

In chapter 10, Jaspreet Kaur explores how disability plays a central role in sibling dynamics in the select Indian literary and autobiographical texts. Much of the available literature portrays the struggles of individuals with disabilities, focusing on family narratives surrounding parents and caregivers. This focus often ignores or marginalises the roles of siblings in both disability studies and literary criticism. The chapter foregrounds the dynamics of affective and social labour performed by siblings in families affected by disabilities in *Clear Light of Day* by Anita Desai and Akhil Sharma's *Family Life*.

Next Shankar Lal Seemawat scrutinizes *Trying to Grow* by Firdosh Kanga as a progressive narrative intervention that repositions disability from the domain of pathology to that of epistemology. The pathological conceptuality and epistemological configuration occupy a great deal of relevance in understanding the embedded intrinsic spirits of disability discourse. In doing so, Seemawat exposes how able-bodiedness operates not merely as a medical category but as a theopolitical ideal - one that fuses corporeal integrity with moral and spiritual legitimacy. Drawing on crip theory, disability studies and Foucauldian notions of biopower, this study reads *Trying to Grow* as a counter-discursive text that

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resists the disciplinary frameworks regulating impaired bodies. The protagonist's body, marked by brittle bone disease, is persistently subjected to medical scrutiny, social infantilization, and theological pity. Kanga destabilizes this teleology by presenting a form of becoming that is nonlinear, affectively complex, and defiantly embodied. The text reframes the impaired body as capable of pleasure, longing, and relational reciprocity, thereby resisting both medical pathologization and spiritual sanitization. Finally, Kanga's work enacts a shift from pathology to epistemology by asserting disability as a mode of knowing which reveals the ideological scaffolding underpinning ableist constructions of flesh and spirit. Within the politics of flesh and spirit, Seemawat substantiates that how *Trying to Grow* exemplifies how literary narrative can unsettle hegemonic notions of wholeness and propose instead a radically embodied spirituality grounded in difference, vulnerability and resistant self-articulation.

Abhishek Chowdhury critically analyses the representation of disability in *Hichki* (2018), directed by Siddharth Malhotra. Drawing on critical disability studies and feminist frameworks, the analysis evaluates how the film navigates the tension between empowerment and stereotyping, offering insights into the evolving depiction of disability in 21st-century Indian cinema.

Next Shovan Maity explores how Manik Bandyopadhyay's short story *Pragoitihishik* (Prehistoric, 1937) stands as a pioneering intervention in Bengali literature by granting recognition and affirmative value to disabled sexuality, a theme largely erased, pathologized, or rendered invisible in contemporaneous works. The narrative centers on Bhikhu, a notorious bandit who sustains a disabling injury to his right hand during a confrontation, leading him to seek refuge with his friend. Through Bhikhu's primal instincts—love, rage, desire, and survival—Bandyopadhyay

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explores the persistence of erotic agency and bodily difference amid impairment. Informed by Marxist materialism, the story situates disability not as individual tragedy but as materially conditioned by class exploitation, rural poverty, and colonial legacies in late-1930s Bengal. Bhikhu's disabled body becomes a site of resistance against normative ideals of wholeness, productivity, and sexual propriety, foregrounding how impairment intersects with socioeconomic marginality to produce alternative modes of desire and relationality. The chapter draws on critical disability studies, postcolonial theory and Marxist critiques of embodiment to argue that *Pragoitihishik* disrupts ablest literary conventions, reconfiguring the disabled subject as an erotic agent capable of desire, rage, and affirmation. By linking bodily difference to class struggle and instinctual drives, the text anticipates contemporary intersections of disability, sexuality, and postcoloniality, challenging the bourgeois erasure of impaired bodies in modernist Bengali fiction.

In chapter 14, S. Ramaraju, Dr. C. Vairavan and Dr. P. Kamalesh Kumar re-examines disability from an Indian perspective through a comparative study of contemporary Indian Indigenous writing and the fiction of Louise Erdrich, placing sustained and central emphasis on Erdrich's literary oeuvre. Moving beyond the medical model, it argues that disability in Indigenous literatures emerges as a historically produced and structurally embedded condition shaped by caste hierarchies, racialization, settler colonial law, gendered violence, economic dispossession, and religious intervention. Drawing upon disability studies, intersectionality, and Indigenous critical theory, the chapter offers close readings of *Love Medicine*, *Tracks*, *The Round House*, and *The Night Watchman* to demonstrate how Erdrich represents intergenerational trauma, jurisdictional injustice, and embodied resilience within Ojibwe communities. These readings are placed in dialogue with selected works by Mahasweta Devi and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, whose

portrayals of Adivasi life foreground structural neglect, gendered vulnerability, and caste-inflected exclusion in postcolonial India. By integrating the themes of disability with gender, sexuality, caste, race, religion, and ethnicity, the chapter proposes an Indigenous disability ethics grounded in narrative survivance, community memory, and intersectional justice. Such a comparative framework expands disability studies beyond universal paradigms and situates it within culturally specific histories of oppression and resistance.

Dr. Sana Farooqui's chapter examines the lives and achievements of eminent disabled figures from literature, science, and cinema to argue that disability is not merely a physical condition but a social and cultural construct. By analysing John Milton's blindness, Alexander Pope's spinal curvature, William Wordsworth's eye disease, Albert Einstein's learning differences, Leonardo da Vinci's unconventional working methods, and Boman Irani's dyslexia, Farooqui demonstrates how these individuals transformed their impairments into creative and intellectual power. The chapter situates these narratives within the paradigm shift represented by India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act), which moves from an old understanding of disability to a new socio-cultural model. Drawing on the activist assertion that "disability is not in the body but in the mindset of those who refuse to see our strength," this chapter argues that the greatest barrier to achievement is not physical impairment but societal attitudes that equate impairment with inability.

Barnali Dolai's chapter examines the current literature on literary disability studies, emphasizing significant theoretical frameworks and methodologies present in the field. Societal perceptions of individuals with disabilities have evolved over time. Numerous factors influence these shifting perceptions. Aspects such as gender, education, religion, occupation, and income, as well as nationality, play a crucial role in shaping the awareness of disability.

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Additionally, quantitative text mining methods are employed to identify specific themes, language, and visual representations. In the realm of literature, there are notable and illustrative advancements in comprehending how disability and illness are depicted, including the evolution of character portrayals, the progressions of issues over time, and the distortions that authors' perspectives create regarding images of disability. This research presents an analytical viewpoint that is pertinent to specific disability studies within literature the study also equips scholars with the tools necessary for a thorough examination of literary texts and critiques related to disability, enabling them to uncover the representations of disability shaped by authors. Finally, it paves the way for future inquiries that connect disability studies with literary theory and practices, as well as digital humanities.

Radhika Agarwal examines the impact of the RPwD Act on inclusive education in India, with respect to higher education. It analyzes the statutory framework especially Section 16 (Duty of Educational Institutions) of our constitution and the notion of 'reasonable accommodation', and its working through several Indian policies such as the National Education Policy 2020 and the University Grants Commission's Accessibility Guidelines and Standards for Higher Educational Institutions and Universities 2024. Considering the Government's data, UGC and NEP 2020 guidelines, judicial decisions and several studies, this chapter examines both attitudinal and infrastructural barriers, progress and societal structure. The study argues that although laws has been created in order to build a strong nation, inclusive education and environment for all but this also led to uneven implementation, poor infrastructure, limited accessibility and immutable forms of exclusion. The chapter also touches on regulation and genuine recommendations for boosting and strengthening steps towards inclusive education under the RPwD Act.

Savita and Prof. Nagendra Ambedkar Sole critically analyzes how the legislation of disability has evolved, expanded and been applied in India and anticipates dignity, inclusion, and enforceable rights. The chapter takes a doctrinal and analytical approach, which relies on provisions of the constitution, statutory interpretation, jurisprudence, administrative reports and secondary sources. It traces the change in the perspectives of the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 to the RPwD Act, 2016, which introduced new definitions of disability, better reservation policies, institutional enforcement measures, and penalties. The chapter also places the disability regime of India in the wider framework of international law, comparing the results on disability regime with the UNCRPD, the U.S. Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Equality Act of the UK. The results indicate that there is already an unresolved disconnect between the ambitious goals of the RPwD Act and practical execution. Inequality in federal enforcement, failure to support with budgetary resources, low quota achievement, inadequate accessibility audit, and lack of awareness of legal issues all contribute to the barriers to substantive equality. The judicial actions and advocacy on the part of the civil societies have been corrective but still there are systemic barriers especially to women, rural and those that are marginalized and disabled. According to this study, legislation is only a powerful empowering tool which can be supported with strong institutions, coordinated governance and participatory inclusion. It ends with a provision of policy suggestions to strengthen the accountability, access to the justice, increasing awareness, and streamlining the domestic practice to the constitutional imperative, international commitments, and Sustainable Development Goals.

Richa Lohra and Dr. Kanta examine how the experience of disability reconstructs and reclaims masculinity and femininity by delving into “Trying to Grow” by Firdaus Kanga and “A Time to Dance "by Padma Venkatraman. This study makes the case that

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