

Visualizing Disability: Cultural Tradition and the Social Representation of Disability

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Abstract: Disability as a condition has been known since ancient times. By and large, it has provided a framework for exclusion and marginalization of individuals by the society. This paper seeks to understand the way disability has been socially represented in relation to the collective consciousness. It is asserted that representations and stereotyping of the disabled are rooted not only in the societal structure, but also in cultural constructs, more specifically in the construction of “otherness.” To this end, the paper considers the portrayal of the disabled in various cultural traditions, the ancient Greek and Roman traditions, the Christian tradition, and the Indian tradition. As these cultural traditions were based on religious principles, the disabled also received sympathy and kindness by way of charity and care. There is some evidence in classical literary traditions which suggest that the disabled were honoured and were considered of the sacred order. The significance of the media in popularizing social representations is emphasized as this influences attitudes, assumptions and expectations.

Key Words: Disability, Social Representation, Culture, Greek tradition, Roman tradition, Indian tradition.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Disability is a condition described as a disadvantage or a physical or mental deficiency that hinders regular achievements, something that disqualifies or marginalizes. The prefix “dis” in the term disability refers to being apart or separate. This implies that the disabled lack ability. Hence, “dis” connotes the act of exclusion perpetrated by the society on the individual (Reddy 2011: 288-289). With this in mind, this paper seeks to understand the way disability has been socially represented globally and in India.

It is contended that the social representation and exclusion of the disabled is rooted in the societal structure. Despite cultural advancements and modernization, the basic structure of the representation has not changed much. It is important to study and understand this aspect taking into account the sociological tradition. This paper does so by focusing on some of the broad theoretical underpinnings. I argue that though there are certain similarities in the social representations of the disability in India with the West, they are not exclusively the same.

The first section locates the social understanding and collective representation of disability with reference to the works of Emile Durkheim. The second section explores the notion of disability as it obtained in the ancient Greek and Roman societies. The next section is a description of the representation in the Christian tradition. This is followed by a discussion of the role and significance of the media in visualizing disability. The penultimate section considers the Indian tradition. The concluding section asserts the relevance of cultural traditions but also urges us to transcend it for the sake of social justice.

2. Understanding Social Representation :

The key to the cultural representation of the disabled is “otherness,” which implies “both the fascination and the repulsion” between different sets of individuals. They might also be considered “dangerous, wild and threatening” in some contexts. Further, they are also seen as “other” because of their “constraining body,” and because they are a “constant reminder of mortality.” (Shakespeare 1994: 292) The disabled are also seen as “liminal entities” and are considered as ambiguous. Due to this, they have a particular significance within cultural representation. Thus, the position of the disabled cannot be separated from the way they have been socially represented within the society (Shakespeare 1994: 293-296).

Emile Durkheim used the term representation for understanding social reality. He sees representations as part of collective consciousness. For Durkheim, the objective reality of society is manifested in the form of social facts. Social facts comprise the level of “collective representations,” which operate externally to individuals and have the ability to constrain individual actions.

Collective representation refers to a symbol or object having common, shared meaning for the members of a social group or society. Collective representation had a life of their own that could not be comprehended by depending on explanations that focused on the individual. There are three basic characteristics of collective representation: (a) they are historical in nature, i.e., they mirror the history of a social group, and (b) they refer to symbols and determine the way in which individuals see and comprehend the reality around them, and (c) individual and collective representations are related to each other, in the sense that the advancement of one causes the decline of the other (Falasca-Zamponi 2014: 47). Hence, if the power of collective representation is strong, then individual representations become minimal. In other words, individuals become subservient to the society.

3. Ancient Greek and Roman Traditions :

The concept of disability is essentially defined by the non-disabled. The “negative” representation of disabled serves able-bodied people to manage the fears of ill-health and death. It may be argued that the desire for a perfect body and the fear of sickness and deformity are rooted in the myths related to beauty and in the historical conditions of the western civilization. Representations of people with imperfections and bodily impairment may be said to have their roots in the Greek and Roman civilizations.

The ancient Greek civilization was based on slavery, and military service for Greek males was compulsory. In this society, it was essential to be physically fit and mentally sharp. Those with any deficiencies were not accepted. The Greek gods represented perfection. As Hephaestus had a physical flaw, he was banished from heaven. In the famous Greek tragedy, Oedipus Rex blinded himself to atone for his sins. In this tradition, impairment was seen as a punishment for sin (Hahn 1985: 93-94). The Romans later absorbed this Greek legacy and as their empire grew, so did the acceptance of the legacy. In both ancient Greek and Roman culture, the deformed and the disabled were put on display and subjected to public humiliation (Trentin 2011: 197). Three reasons were attributed to this, firstly to promote group solidarity at the expense of the “other,” secondly to redress fear and third as an outlet for aggression (Draycott 2015: 202).

Children with deformities were often killed in the Roman empire (Biklen and Bogdan 1977: 4). However, it should be noted that both the Greeks and the Romans had systems of medical treatment for people with acquired disabilities. Sometimes miracles and magic were resorted to as cure for the disabled. In ancient Greece, in the second half of the fifth century, all poor disabled men whose assets were less than three minas would receive a maintenance grant (Bruce 2010: 258).

4. The Christian Tradition :

Subsequently, this Greco-Roman legacy influenced the Christian tradition in the western world. Christianity also viewed disability as a form of sin and a form of divine punishment for sins. In the biblical literature, bodily aberration was considered to be a manifestation of sin or an act of evil (Hahn 1985: 88-89). The blind, mad, lame, cripple, have all found representation in classic western literature, rights from Shakespeare to Edgar Allan Poe (Garland-Thomson 2005: 523).

Disability is equated with evil and is seen as a failure to follow traditions and fulfil duties. In the beginning, Christianity was a religion of the underprivileged. Charity, therefore, was fundamental to its acceptance and expansion. Being subjects of Christian charity, the disabled became the objects of benevolence of priests and the nobility. Until seventeenth century people with impairments were disowned by their families and so largely depended upon Christian charity for their survival. During the sixteenth century as the power of the church declined, the large number of people depending on charity forced the king of England to provide for them. Yet the church remained a power to reckon with in the European culture. It held on to its authority by cultivating a climate of fear regarding the devil and his influence. The biblical link between impairment and sin were projected as proofs to perpetuate the fear. However, the disabled also received sympathy and provided opportunities for the faithful to reveal their kindness by being charitable (Blanks and Smith 2009: 297).

Right from the ancient times, human beings have had the propensity to associate with those who are similar to them in appearance and reject those who are different. The rejection of the unfamiliar has led to a large number of fictional characters with disabilities in mythology and folk tales, movies, literature and the arts, most of them portraying negativity (Hahn 1989: 372-376). However, the history of what constitutes beauty is complex and changes over times. The principle of aesthetic tastes concerning the human is at times based on similarities, and at other times on differentiation (Hahn 1989: 377).

5. The Role of the Media :

The contemporary social representations of disability was an outcome of the concern with the outward nature of the body rather than social behaviour. This led to the portrayal of the disabled as abnormal and aberrant in media and literature (Hahn 1989: 381-385). This was further reinforced with strides in modern medicine and science. Using this framework, writers envisaged disability as impairment, a medical condition, and began to classify it on this basis (Hughes 1999: 165). This resulted in the growth of care and rehabilitation institutions which drew their inspiration from notions of Christian charity and therefore depicted the disabled as sick and dependent. Later on, disciplines such as medical sociology which embraced a social model of health willingly accepted disability as a medical condition of sickness and supported the idea of care for the disabled.

The media is an important medium that spreads ideas. The media, together with medicine and science, and the care and rehabilitation institutions has been at the forefront of promoting the idea that the disabled are vulnerable and thus dependent and deserving of charity. In its portrayal, it often associates the disabled with images of helplessness and pity, but also sometimes with people of extraordinary capabilities. Due to the reach of the media, such images have become forms of everyday knowledge (Bogdan et al 1982: 32-35). This has also given rise to stereotypes which medicalize, patronize, and dehumanize disabled people in books, films, television, and in the press. They form the bedrock on which the attitudes, assumptions and expectations are based. Such stereotypes in turn lead to discrimination and exploitation which the disabled encounter, and their exclusion from mainstream societal life (Barnes 1997: 19).

6. Indian Tradition :

Though the general history of disability representation is one of oppressive and negative forms, nonetheless, there is also evidence in literary traditions which suggest that the disabled were honoured and were considered of sacred order. Further, since cultures vary, different cultures have responded to disability in different ways. Let us now turn to the representation of disability in the Indian socio-cultural milieu.

The traditional Hindu worldview, by and large, considers disability as punishment for sins in the previous births (Miles 1995: 51-54). According to tradition, those who lack in essential elements of refinement are destined to be reborn. In other words, if one has committed acts of transgression, they are reborn to suffer the consequences of their previous life.

The earliest reference to disability in the Indian context can be traced back to the hymns of Rig Veda. It is mentioned that those with physical and visual disabilities could be treated and healed. In particular, visual disability was distinguished from other forms of disability that would require supernatural intervention for any cure.

The references to disability found in the Vedas and other ancient texts were known only to Vedic scholars. The masses derived their knowledge of disabilities and deformities primarily from epic characters in some of the classical texts. Thus, there were representations of disability known to both scholars and the masses that was informed by religion and myths, and shaped attitudes accordingly. In the folk belief, people with disabilities were sometimes considered lucky or holy, having second sight or an extra sense and their presence was considered as a protection against evil (Miles 1995: 62-67).

Historical evidence shows that the Indian system had an elaborate set of rules for the protection of the dignity of the disabled. For example, Kautilya (350-275 BC) wrote against the use of discriminatory language. According to him, those using abusive expressions relating to the body, or using words such as "blind" or "lame" for a disabled person would be fined. If the insult was accompanied with ironical expressions, the fine would increase. This is not to say that the disabled were fully integrated in the society. Some of the negative stereotypes attached to disability probably have their roots in the great epics.

The influence of the classical texts is widespread in India. The textual ideas are passed down from generation to generation through the family and the community, and popularized through drama, dance, music and religious performances and inscriptions. The most well-known and popular epics are the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In both the epics, the role of the villain was played by the disabled. In Ramayana, Manthara, a dwarf was responsible for the banishment of Rama from Ayodhya. In Mahabharata, Shakuni, the disabled maternal uncle of the Pandavas and Kauravas was instrumental in starting the war between them (Chaturvedi: 2019: 71)

The Mahabharata begins with a negative social representation of disability. It depicts Dhritarashtra being born blind due to his mother's fault and the wrath of Sage Vyas. The fault of the mother is used to connote failure in performing one's karma thus reinforcing the idea that in India disability is viewed as a consequence of bad karma. Irrespective of his merits, Dhritarashtra is initially disqualified to become a king due to his disability. Dhritarashtra is often shown to curse his fate, and is helpless in controlling his sons due to his disability. His condition is used both to represent his powerlessness and the pitiable situation of a disabled man, even if he is a king.

Bodily deformity is sometimes associated with diminished moral capabilities as disability is seen as a consequence of bad karma. The concept of karma sees disability as suffering that an individual has to endure in view of the wrong doings committed in previous life. As a result of this, the disabled are subjected to abuse in their daily lives which may result in self stigmatization (Chaturvedi 2019: 71).

However, the Mahabharat also depicts a few instances of positive representation of the disabled as disability is considered secondary to one's status. This is so since ancient times, Indian values attach immense significance to the inner self of an individual. Additionally, where tradition played a crucial role, one's role and status were by and large determined by birth. Thus, it was possible to be seen as objects of honour and respect by attributing qualities of divinity to them, emphasizing the supremacy of inner self.

7. Concluding Remarks :

This paper discusses the social representation of disability in both western and Indian contexts. The discussion of the social representation of disability was preceded by a description of the concept of social representation. The concept was examined in terms of the theoretical approaches given by Durkheim. The theoretical tradition developed by them delineate the genesis and circulation of certain knowledge in the society. Durkheim considers this knowledge as part of the collective consciousness. However, knowledge cannot be separated from its carrier systems. In addition, it is through anchoring and objectification that this knowledge becomes social representations. Keeping this in view one can conceptualize social representations as forms of knowledge, objectified and used for a group's understanding.

Though at the surface level of history, Hinduism has many similarities with Christianity, yet it never considered aberrant bodies synonymous to the representation of biblical evil. Within the biblical tradition bodily perfection is considered as the image of God and impairment as representation of Satan. In contrast disability never figured in creed in the Indian religious and cultural tradition. Rather it was considered as fate, karma (action), misfortune often associated with parental or personal sin (Miles 1995: 49-51).

The present-day social representations of disability have their roots both in the material condition as well as in the psychic embedded in the social structure. Originating in tradition, myths and folklores, they are consolidated by modern medicine, beauty myths and normality in the contemporary society. The history of the representation of the disabled shows that they were often portrayed in negative terms and these images are carried on to the society through media and texts. Irrespective of both material and cultural bases, the attitudinal aversion towards the disabled in India persists in the same way as elsewhere in the contemporary world. As a consequence, the disabled people are consigned to the role of the helpless, dependent and non-participant in the community.

Though one can find certain similarities between the social representations of disability in India to that of the West, they are not exclusively the same. Although the process of modernization has infused the western notion of disability to the Indian value system, yet in India, internal personhood is valued more than the external manifestations of bodily normality. This gives space for certain honour and status for the disabled in Indian society. Perhaps it is the anxiety produced by the visualization of a disabled body that results in the present-day aversion and social exclusion of the disabled in our society.

In our own times, it may be said that the disabled face barriers consisting of negative attitudes, inappropriate expectations and stereotypes. Disability becomes social injustice that needs to be challenged and overcome despite deep rooted cultural traditions.

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