



## **DISABILITY AND THE PUBLIC POLICY IN A CROSS-CULTURAL PRESPECTIVE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The phenomenon of disability had been an indispensable part of human experience and it cannot be separated from the social milieu where it is produced. It cannot exist outside the periphery of the social structures. Disability is an outcome of certain principle that makes it a social phenomenon. This implies that disability is a social construct and is culturally exacerbated. That is, the physical, mental and sensory disability does not attribute to an individual but it becomes a complex accumulation of conditions, activities and relationships. Most of these are in fact the by-product of social environment. These individuals with physical abnormalities or defects of some kind or the other were for centuries termed as 'crippled' having some sort of social stigma.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Having an impairment or disability counts in various problems. In a common language, disability implies to the lack, or being less-abled in performing one's activities, or earning one's livelihood. Although we will agree to the fact that many people may be partially or completely impaired at some point and time in our lives. It is because disability and normality are like health and sickness, that is conditioned by various factors like personal traits, family and social environment, and clinical and cultural norms. That is, the concept of disability is intrinsically linked up with various facets of life including medical, vocational, legal, economic and most importantly the psychological, the socio-psychological and the sociological aspects. The psychological face looks at the impact that disability brings upon an individual person, the socio-psychological side reflects to a person's social behaviour, whereas the sociological dimension looks at the normative behaviour, role, status, and sub-cultural features of the individual. All these factors together constitute to the image of disability in totality.

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Based on the diversity of disability based on the cause and type of impairment, severity and prognosis, the condition may span the entire age range despite adhering to any social class. Although there may be acquired or life-long disabilities. However, there lies no strict demarcation where normality ends and disability begins. It is because there are many people who faces bodily defects as short-sightedness, or disfigurement of hands and limbs, but they abide to fall into the strict sense of the term handicap. It only in the traditional approach that looks at disability from a clinical and medical approach focusing on the functional impairments or any psychological impairment that led towards psychological disturbances or adjustment problems emerging out of disability, that may count in the vocational limitations. The disability can be seen in the systemic terms, or even from a minority group approach that sees the disabled like any other minority group. As its result, the disabled person themselves formulate their own paradigms based on the social-oppression.

Coming to the public policy, we see that since time immemorial, human beings have been constantly fighting to have control and exercise over diseases. It is because the quest for health and happiness had always had been a perpetual goal for the mankind. Looking at the significance of health in the lives of individuals, we see health promotion to be an effective solution for the major global problems. But the question of how much health problems have been looked down and had been explained by Signal, in the Western Societies, using three theories. The theories according to Signal are ‘the pluralist interest group theory’, ‘the new intuitionism’ and ‘the neo Marxist theory’ (Karna 66).

- 1.) ‘Pluralist Interest group theory’ or ‘Pluralist’ operates at the micro level- this theory looks at the public policy in keeping the interests of various competing groups, so as to exercise influence over the policy process. As a micro level theory, it examines the influence of individuals and groups on the political process.
- 2.) ‘The New Institutionalism’ works at the meso-level- it holds the view that policy-making is determined by the institutions where it takes place. Thus, as a meso-level theory it concentrates on institutions such as an advisory board to government, government department and the legislature.
- 3.) ‘The Marxist theory’ operates at the macro level- it prompts us to locate health promotion within the broad political and economic contexts of ‘have’ and ‘have not’ members of the society.

Thus, health and disability acquire a social significance in factors such as physical, cognitive, and social, that influences the public perception (Karnar 68). Basically, the point is that health, illness or disability all are social constructions that are culturally bound. They according to Karna, are not the objective realities but are inextricably linked with the way people construct their social realities. It is because the ideas and attitudes are derived from the

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social context that shapes the norms and rules of the public perception. Similarly, illness and disabilities also depend upon the social and cultural contexts of the individual, and is tackled in multiple ways.

In order to understand the public policy towards disability, that is prevalent within the dominant culture of postmodern consumerism society, we need to look at what is called 'the myth of bodily perfection', pervading our culture. According to this myth, one should always strive to achieve perfect bodies. Although this myth of bodily perfection is very old and its genesis could be traced back to the Ancient Greece, where the Olympics originated and the bodily perfection of the Greece God and Goddess Olympians, was seen as a model which the mankind should strive for. In the Greek pantheon it was only 'Hephaestus' who was physically flawed as born lame to Zeus and Hera. And Hera practiced a form of infanticide by 'casting him out of heaven', whereupon he was rescued by Aphrodite, the Goddess of love (69).

Christianity, unlike Judaism divorces body and spirit, treating the body as essentially evil. However, the body is made for the spirit to survive, so they consider bodies to be a temple that must be sanctified. Thus, according to Mairs, the body in the Christian belief is viewed as a source of shame, self-alienation and pain (70). According, to this view, any disease or the dysfunction are also not treated as natural, rather is seen as punishment for the moral failure. However, Christianity is this belief system holds God to be the epitome of perfection, and in His image had created man, thereby implying that humankind epitomises perfection.

Bible alludes to countless allusions to the image of disability as evil. They observe that disability is linked with disease that is brought in by the wrath of God. The Old Testament states that, the human being when punished by God is blinded. In the New Testament, there is an incidence where Jesus curses a man with palsy once his sins are forgiven. Thus, disability is viewed as symbolising corruption and sinfulness of the flesh and the disabled body symbolises the sin and corruption that gets acquired as its result.

Similarly, the Hindu doctrine 'talks about the 'Karma Phala', so disability in that sense is seen to be linked in connection with the retribution of the sins committed by individuals in the past. In the Indian society, the concept of the disease attributes to the extra-biological reasons, such as disobedience of religious and natural and laws by men. So, any disease occurs due to the attribution of sins and crimes committed by a person in the previous or the current birth. Thus notes the psychologist, Evan Pritchard, that any society that is influenced by the religious or magical way, looks at disability either in terms of 'divine punishment' or disabled individual as victimised by the witchcraft.

These belief system forms the basis for the functioning of the modern civilization. It is because they give the impression that there always is such a thing as perfectly flawless body,

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which seems to be totally a utopian quality. As there exists no evidence in the history of mankind where human being ever existed with a flawless body.

Now, comes the role of the public policy to look into the complexities that arises and associates with disability. The history of public policy towards persons with physical, mental and sensory impairments had continuously in flux as per the changes according to the political power and societal attitudes. The term public policy refers to the study of social services that aims towards improving the conditions of individual's life in the family and group settings.

As mentions G.N Karna, about an Indian analyst, Usha Bhatt, who in her work *Physically Handicapped in India: Growing National Problems* (1963) regards four main stages of social attitude towards disability (74). They are:

- 1) Exposure and Elimination: where comes discarding their disabled children on the ground of physical unfitness. Along with the practise of 'Infanticide' in the West.
- 2) Care and Patronage: The immediate stimulus for this approach comes from the preaching of primarily two religions- Christianity in the West and Buddhist in the East. Both these religions reinforce on the care and custody of the under-privileged including the disabled.
- 3) Education and Vocational training: It started as a result of Renaissance.
- 4) Social Assimilation: But despite of all achievements in the field of medical science, persons with disabilities were regarded as objects of pity and fear.

Coming to the public policy in the Indian context, it is observed that since time immemorial there always had been cultural heritage of India to provide help and sustenance to any destitute or the poor. The Hindu religion always laid emphasis on the values like charity, compassion, and mutual aid. As talking about the Classical texts of Hinduism, there are several references of disabled and deformed characters. Like in *The Ramayana* for instance, there refers to the appearance of Vishnu as a dwarf in order to trick the demon Bali out of the land, that was captured by him. In this context, one also sees the appearance of Buddha and Ashtavakra as a gifted dwarf and handicapped.

The illustration of 'Ashtavakra', literally means a person suffering from multiple handicaps. The story of Ashtavakra goes on, as once he was invited to participate in a large symposium, organised by the king. All other invitees were great intellectuals and scholars of eminence. It was only the presence of Ashtavakra with all his physical handicaps, became the matter for ridicule even before he was allowed to speak anything. On being requested by the king to



take part in the debate, he instantly rejected the offer by saying “To whom shall I speak? This audience is not one of scholars and intellectuals, they have already judged me by my skin. This is a herd of traders of hides and skins, who knew nothing of the beauty of the soul and know not how to measure intellect” (Karna 90). This led all the scholars to apologise for their mistakes.

Another instance of the dwarf, hunchbacked and freak appears as the character Manthara, who anticipates in the coronation of Rama, thereby bringing to his exile and subsequent battles. In Ramayana, Manthara appears in an evil light. Yet in different versions of the epic, Rama reflects at some point that as a boy he once teased Manthara about her deformity, which might have led her to take such revenge on him.

*Bhagwat Gita*, mentions to the point that charity should be done keeping in account Desha(place), Kala (time), and Patra (recipient). And the forms of charity are Artha, Vidya and Abhaya. Similarly, *The Rigveda*, also lays stress on providing services and concern for all humans including the disabled and needy people. The greatest Sanskrit Epic, *The Mahabharata*, also depicts how it disqualified the ground that the blind cannot inherit any kingdom, rather it not only discarded the ground but also denies for any competitor, that is that person holds full authority to become a king. Thus, Indian Epics carefully reveals a sympathetic attitude towards the disabled.

There can be no denying of the fact that disability was also viewed as something fearful and ferocious, normally it was seen as a form of punishment for one’s misdeed in the previous of the current life. And it was also believed that the person with disabled body also carries different personality. was given to the equation of a twisted personality with a twisted body. However, unlike in the western culture, there had never been a culture of practicing or promoting the inhuman and barbaric practices like eliminating the disabled children in the Indian society.

According to the ancient commentators of Indian law Manu, he said that it must be the duty of any householder to place food on the ground for dogs, outcastes and chandals that are afflicted with diseases based on their former sins. Manu even prescribed that the king should always offer gifts and do charities for a learned Brahmin, diseased person, an orphan, old and one born in a noble family. However, Manu was never in favour of assigning the disabled an equal status in the society, as from the following excerpts where he says- “Let him (house holder) wed a female from bodily defects, who has an agreeable lame...” (Karna 93).

Manu further prescribes that “With whatever limb a man of low caste does hurt to highest castes even that limb shall be cut off” (93). Thus, on the basis of the above excerpts from Manu’s philosophy, it may be noted that despite pity and compassion that the Indian society





showed to the disabled people, the rights to social equality were never taken into consideration.

Based on the above-mentioned public policy, throughout history we see that the disabled person had always been subjected to various forms of exploitation and oppression. And the roots of social attitude could be seen interlinked in the social values of the dominant majority. However, it is because of the biological inferiority, one fails to place disabled persons under the margins of the oppressed group. It is also because of the social perception that looks at the disabled individuals as someone who violates important cultural values and norms. Therefore, they are always alienated from the mainstream of the society.

Thus, it can be concluded by stating that the two critical values, firstly, the personal appearance and secondly, an individual autonomy shapes the social perception towards the disabled individual. That is persons failing to meet the standards of physical attractiveness and functional independence are not only assumed biologically inferior but also not quiet human. These ideas can provide the basis for major re-conceptualisation of the structure of attitude towards disability.

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