VISIBILITY OF BLINDNESS: INTERROGATING ABLEISM IN THE SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Anirban Mukherjee* & Ishan Chakraborty**

ABSTRACT

Socio-cultural discourses and forms of activism, which engage with the issue of participation of disabled persons and the barriers faced by them in higher education, usually tend to focus on solutions such as installation of adaptive technologies and implementation of inclusive design in classrooms, toilets and libraries. When analysed from the perspective of spatial politics, we can see through the hierarchy of space in a given campus, created by such strategies of prioritisation. Accessibility to the broader physical and academic atmosphere of university and college campuses often remains unaddressed. This centre-periphery structure of space in the present context is essentially an outcome of ableist assumptions. Attempts to promote disabled friendliness in canteens, union rooms, common rooms, playgrounds, seminar halls, etc., receive a disturbingly limited attention, if any. In other words, participation of disabled persons in community activities, co-curricular activities and entertainment is treated with least importance, especially in the field of higher education. In the context of a developing country such as India, where scarcity of resources is a major challenge, speaking about such overlooked areas of discourse might appear as an instance of literary utopia. However, we think it is useful to make these unseen areas visible in order to thoroughly disrupt the habits and attitudes endorsed by ableism. In our paper, we shall endeavour to show how increase in visibility and representation of disabled persons in a given space can bring about changes in societal approach towards disability. The scope of our paper would also encompass a selective discussion of the various models of disability, an understanding of which might help us in developing resistance against ableism in a more specific manner. We also intend to discuss how inadequate visibility of disability in curricula promotes misconceptions, which in turn lead to 'othering'.

* Assistant Teacher, Kaswara Yeasin Mondal Shikshaniketan High School, Chinsurah, West Bengal. Email id- sparsha.anirban@gmail.com

** PhD Scholar, Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Email id- wrick.ishan@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Attempts to define disability often encounter the problem of causing further exclusion and marginalisation. For instance, in The Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995[1] (which stands repealed following the enactment of Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016)—"Disability means

- ➤ (i) Blindness;
- ➤ (ii) Low vision;
- ➤ (iii) Leprosy-cured;
- ➤ (iv) Hearing impairment;
- ➤ (v) Loco motor disability;
- ➤ (vi) Mental retardation;
- ➤ (vii) Mental illness."

(PWD Act of 1995, Chapter 1, Section 2, i)

Undoubtedly such a list is neither exhaustive nor inclusive. In The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, it has been stated that—"Person with disability means a person with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which hinder his full and effective participation in society equally with others." (RPD Act of 2016, Chapter 1, Section 2, s).

Legal discourses and activisms have often articulated the need to define and redefine disability in order to minimise confusion. It is beyond the scope of our discussion to elaborate on the problems and/or the subtle complexities of the definitions of disability presented in various discourses and legal literature. Nevertheless, it needs to be clearly spelt out that in the subsequent discussion, we shall use the term 'disability' in the sense in which it has been described in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). While defining what constitutes 'disability', the Convention states—"Recognizing that disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with

---

[1] Since this article was in the form of a working paper submitted in November 2016 in a National Seminar on Disability and Education, most of the arguments in this paper are made in light of the provisions of the PWD Act, 1995 and not in light of the provisions of the RPD Act, 2016, which was passed in December 2016.

impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others." (UNCRPD, Preamble, e). This definition marks a significant departure from the prevalent notions of disability, constructed and endorsed by the apparatus of ableism.[2] Here we wish to take the opportunity to briefly comment on three of the many models used to interpret and react to the concept of disability.

2. The Three Disability Models

The model that dominates any discourse on disability is the Medical Model.[3] According to Ciara Doyle, the Medical Model sees disability as "a failure of a part of the body (very specifically), which must be put right… because only normality is acceptable… and normality must be strived for at all costs."[4] This model scrutinises the 'defective' body, and subsequently quantifies and certifies the disability. In the Indian scenario, it is this certification which enables a disabled person to access institutionalised education, employment, etc. In this context, it may be mentioned that the PWD Act of 1995 clearly states—"Person with disability means a person suffering from not less than forty per cent of any disability as certified by a medical authority." (The PWD Act of 1995, Chapter 1, Section 2, t). Thus, a rejection of the Medical Model in the present legal situation would strip a disabled person of the basic facilities necessary to pursue his or her higher education. For instance, a blind person lacking a disability certificate would be denied the services of an amanuensis, essential for him or her to write in the examinations.

---

[2] Ableism is a way of interpreting the issue of disability. According to the ableist notion, a disabled body or mind is essentially inferior to that of a body or mind without disability.

[3] The Medical model of Disability advocates that disability is located in the impaired body. Therefore, the focus is to cure the body of that disability or lessen the degree of disability. Disability is sought to be quantified in this model.

[4] Ciara Doyle, "Lecture Two Models of Disability.mpg." Accessed November 25, 2016 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ifv-WfDut7k.

The other model which needs to be resisted more strongly is the Charity Model.[5] Here, a disabled person is seen as an object of pity and sympathy, and 'helping' him or her transpires as an act of charity and benevolence.

Finally, the model which has been widely accepted and advocated by many disabled persons and disability rights activists is the Social Model. The essence of this model is perhaps best summarised in the meaning of 'disability', put forward in the Preamble of UNCRPD, which has already been cited earlier. This shifts the focus of scrutiny from 'impairment', located in the body of an individual, to 'barriers', located outside it—the 'barriers' that these bodies and minds have to run up against in order to interact with the society. In other words, it is the 'barriers' imposed by the ableist societal forces which hinder their 'full and effective' participation. This paradigm shift in the discourse of disability gains all the more significance in the field of higher education, for it is one of the most effective fields that has the potential of creating newer socio-political discourses.

A cursory look at the spectrum of disability, which as stated in the UNCRPD is "an evolving concept", would reveal intricate diversities. An attempt to contain and examine all these intricacies and diversities within a single set of parenthesis is impossible. Therefore, keeping in view our limited scope, we shall confine our attention mainly to the category of blindness and the lived experiences of blind persons.

3. **Education and the Legal Provisions**

In order to sketch out a general idea about the scenario of recognising education as a universal human right, we wish to provide a few citations from legal literature.

---

[5] The advocates of the Charity model of disability are of the view that one must do something good for persons with disability out of pity or sympathy. Doing something for the disabled people, they feel, is an act of benevolence.

- "Recognizing the importance of accessibility to the physical, social, economic and cultural environment, to health and education and to information and communication, in enabling persons with disabilities to fully enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms." (UNCRPD, Preamble, v).
- "We raise the flag for education as a universal human right. No one must be denied access because of disability." (UNESCO, The Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities, Introduction).
- "States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and life-long learning…" (UNCRPD, Article 24, Section 1).

4. Revamping the Curriculum

Now, we shall move on to focus on the politics of constructing curriculum and how it influences disabled persons and the disability movement in general. It needs to be clarified that in the present context we use the term 'curriculum' to refer to the content, the instructional formats, the assessments and also the environment which are needed to get to the desired outcome in an institutionalised educational set-up. Here we have two interrelated areas to be addressed—

- Incorporating elements related to the issue of disability in the curricula.
- Designing the curricula in such a way that it can be accessed by all students, irrespective of their disabilities.

One of the most effective ways of creating newer discourse is by propelling students and young scholars to engage with the concept of disability through their curricula. Discussions on disability, works featuring disabled characters, works by disabled authors, etc., should be included in various curricula, especially in the ones which deal with cultural studies. This can help in creating a more critical and nuanced understanding about disability, a domain which often remains less addressed in academia. In academia, which highly encourages interdisciplinarity, it is both necessary and feasible to merge disability studies with many other

strands of humanities. For instance, the departments of literature, social sciences, philosophy, etc., should encourage more scholarly attention to the issue of disability. In other words, disability studies should not be treated in isolation. Rather, disability studies and other related disciplines should make parallel attempts to mainstream the discourses, directly or indirectly associated with disability. This may contribute an important step towards increasing the visibility of disability.

Now we proceed to the other aspect of curriculum, which deals with its accessibility. If we observe the distribution of disabled students across the different disciplines in a given university, a predictable pattern becomes evident. The number of visually disabled students in the engineering and science departments is far less than those in arts or humanities departments. The few students with visual impairment enrolled in science or engineering departments have the degree of their disability ranging between mild and moderate. Here, it needs to be mentioned clearly that the authors made these observations on the basis of a list of disabled students enrolled in Jadavpur University, Kolkata in the academic year 2015-16, provided by The Centre For Studies and Rehabilitation of Differently Abled Persons. In other words, blind (profound visual impairment) students have their choice of disciplines restricted to the Faculty of Arts. Science subjects which involve laboratory-based practical work or extensive field work automatically renders themselves inaccessible to blind students. As a result, we note a concentration of visually challenged students in departments such as Bengali, English, Philosophy, History, International Relations, Comparative Literature, etc. These departments should design their curricula in such a way that the blind students (or disabled students in general) do not face discrimination in terms of accessibility.

With development in Cultural Studies, the concept of text has undergone a remarkable change. Any form of semiotic expression/symbolic system, which has the potential of being studied and interpreted, can be considered a 'text'. Films, documentaries, paintings, photographs, maps, diagrams, graphic literature, comics, artifacts, etc., form a major part of the cultural and arts subjects. It is not difficult to comprehend that these texts cannot be independently accessed

by persons with severe to profound visual impairment. If the content of any such text is communicated to a blind student through a stage of mediation, it is undoubtedly going to influence/hamper his/her independent reading of the texts.

From this discussion, it is evident that the choice of subjects which can be accessed by visually impaired students in higher education becomes alarmingly limited, which in turn constitutes another factor that hinders their full and effective participation in society. Having recognised this barrier, The RPD Bill of 2014 holds up the need for "redesigning courses in cultural and arts subjects to enable participation and access for persons with disabilities…" (The RPD Bill of 2014, Chapter 5, Section 28, f). Here, it is further to be mentioned that The RPD Bill of 2016 has also promoted the need for making "art accessible to persons with disabilities" (The RPD Bill of 2014, Chapter 5, Section 28, c). In this context, it must be admitted that in The PWD Act of 1995, the need for "restructuring of curriculum for the benefit of children with disabilities…" (The PWD Act of 1995, Chapter 5, Section 30, g) has been acknowledged. However, the use of the phrase 'children with disabilities' which becomes 'persons with disabilities' in the RPD Bill of 2014, by implication confines the focus within the limit of school education.

In the above discussion, we have attempted to argue that the system which strives to make education accessible to all, irrespective of their disabilities, must consider with adequate importance the issue of accessible curriculum. A disabled student/scholar should not be compelled to compromise and conform to a structure of curriculum designed by ableism to sustain itself.

5. **The Spatial Politics in College and University Campuses**

Socio-cultural discourses and forms of activism, which engage with the issue of participation of disabled persons and the barriers faced by them in higher education, usually tend to focus on solutions such as installation of adaptive/assistive technologies and implementation of inclusive designs in classrooms, toilets and libraries. When analysed from the perspective of

spatial politics, we see through the hierarchy of space in a campus, created by such strategies of prioritisation. Accessibility to the broader physical intellectual and cultural environment of the college or university campus often remains unaddressed or even ignored. This centre-periphery structure of space in the present context is essentially an outcome of ableist assumptions.

Attempts to promote disabled friendliness in places such as canteens, union rooms, common rooms, seminar halls, auditoriums, playgrounds, offices, etc. ,(which constitute an integral part of college or university campus and its functioning) receive an extremely limited attention, if any. In other words, participation of disabled persons in community activities, co-curricular activities, cultural and recreational activities, and also political activities is treated with least importance. In the context of a developing country such as India, where many (if not majority) of the institutions for higher education hardly have any disabled-friendly atmosphere, and where scarcity of adequate resources is a major challenge, it might appear quite ambitious to speak about such overlooked areas of discourse. Nevertheless, we think it is useful to make these invisible and, therefore, unseen areas visible in the realm of dominant academic discourses, in order to thoroughly disturb the habits and attitudes of the ableist society.

The two barriers, identified by UNCRPD, as the cause of disability are 'attitudinal' barriers and 'environmental' barriers. The former, owing to its extensive involvement of human elements, is far more complex, subtle and abstract than the latter. Both these factors are interrelated. If any one of them is addressed efficiently and effectively, it would consequently influence the other. If environmental barriers are eliminated or minimised through strict implementation and enactment of legislation, it would positively influence the participation of disabled persons in various social activities. Increase in participation means increase in visibility. Again, increase in visibility and representation of disabled persons in a given space (university and college campuses in the present context) can bring about progressive changes in societal attitude towards disability. Inadequate visibility of disability promotes 'othering' and stereotyping of disabled persons which in turn gives rise to misconceptions, prejudices and presumptions about them.

In the PWD Act of 1995, the issues relating to the participation of disabled persons in higher education are addressed most inadequately.

> ➢ "… The removal of architectural barriers from schools, colleges or other institution, imparting vocational and professional training" (the PWD Act of 1995, Chapter 5, Section 30, b)

> ➢ "All Government educational institutions and other educational institutions receiving aid from the Government, shall reserve not less than three per cent seat for persons with disabilities." (The PWD Act of 1995, Chapter 6, Section 39).

These are perhaps the only two areas in mainstream higher education which have been addressed in the present Act. To make education accessible and disabled-friendly, we must strive to take the entire system into consideration. Removal of architectural barriers and ensuring a reservation of not less than three per cent seats may be important steps to begin with, but if the focus is restricted merely to these areas, then it would take us away from the Social or Rights-based Models.

6. Conclusion

Education, which itself is a multi-dimensional process, must be seen as an integral part of the larger matrix of socio-cultural exchange. Increasing the participation of disabled persons in this process and using it to increase the visibility of disability are two complimentary mechanisms for disrupting the politics of marginalisation, endorsed by the oppressive structure of ableism.