

Karmic Philosophy and the Model of Disability in Ancient India

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Abstract

Disability has been the inescapable part of human society from ancient times. With the thrust of disability right movements and development in field of disability studies, the mythical past of disability is worthy to study. Classic Indian Scriptures mention differently able character in prominent positions. There is a faulty opinion about Indian mythology is that they associate disability chiefly with evil characters. Hunch backed Manthara from Ramayana and limping legged Shakuni from Mahabharata are negatively stereotyped characters. This paper tries to analyze that these characters were guided by their motives of revenge, loyalty and acted more as dramatic devices to bring crucial changes in plot.

The deities of lord Jagannath in Puri is worshipped, without limbs, neck and eye lids which strengthens the notion that disability is an occasional but all binding phenomena in human civilization. The social model of disability brings forward the idea that the only disability is a bad attitude for the disabled as well as the society. In spite of his abilities Dhritrashtra did face discrimination because of his blindness. The presence of characters like sage Ashtavakra and Vamanavtar of Lord Vishnu indicate that by efforts, bodily limitations can be transcended.

Keywords: Karma, Medical model, Social model, Ability, Gender, Charity, Rights.

History of disability is as old as mankind. According to census 2011, approximately 21 million people in India who are suffering from different kind of disabilities. Disability has been the inescapable part of human society from ancient times. With the thrust of disability right movements and development in field of disability studies, the task of historicizing disability is a genuine task. There are questions, accusations that get its cue in the mythical past of disability in ancient India. There is a faulty opinion about Indian scriptures that they present disabled character in negative light. Characters like Shakuni and Manthara have been stereotyped into the synonyms of villainy in the Indian households. While judging the actions of these characters, their motives and past life are not given much thought. The objective of this paper is to challenge the notion of the negative treatment of disabled characters in the Indian mythology. The time period of this study lies in epic age of ancient India. The timeline of epic age is estimated from 1000 to 600 BC. Disability studies in India did not probe deep into the presentation of disability in our religious scriptures. The primary sources for the paper are the tales as it is present in cultural consciousness of India. To subvert the negative disability myths I have taken the help of sub narratives. To find these sub narratives I held conversation with masses, and took help from researches that support the notion of charity and karmic philosophy with respect to discussion of disability in ancient India.

The evolutionary model of disability asserts the presence of disabled people in ancient societies. The earliest model of disability follows the notion of Karma or actions as the sole reason behind any kind of disability, deformity or deviance from normal behavior. This model is witnessed in almost all culture of the world. The idea of sin and karma takes disability in rubric of religion.

Hebrew Bible mentions a paralyzed man being healed after Jesus forgave his sins. Books of common prayer states ...”Whatsoever your sickness is know your certainly, that it is God’s visitation .”

Koran 47:23 says, “such are the men whom Allah has cursed for he has made them deaf and blinded their sight.”

While explaining the treatment towards disability in ancient India, it is also necessary to discuss medical model and social model. The medical model looks at what is ‘lacking’ in the body of person and not what the person needs. It tries to provide necessary aids for the person. But, It creates low expectations and leads to people losing independence, choice and control in their own lives. The medical model of disability says people are disabled by their impairments or differences. The social model says that disability is caused by the way society is organised, rather than by a person’s impairment or difference. It looks at ways of removing barriers that restrict life choices for disabled people. Limitations are not just physical. Societal behavior towards disabled based on prejudice or stereotype hampers the normal possible growth of the individual.

Social model of disability is a more preferred model to that of medical model. It focuses on the ability of individual rather than inabilities. The traditional medical model did not help to cope with personal experience of disability or help to develop their inclusiveness in society. The social model of disability says that disability is caused by the way society is organized. Social model tries to increase their participation in society.

Disabled, Marginalized or Socially Active

Contemporary disability study is being dominated by European themes and chiefly focuses on European experiences of disability. They focus upon stigma and marginalization faced by disabled demography and popularizes these norms as universal. Disability scholar Usha Bhatt comments,

“From a historical perspective, there are four distinct stages of social attitudes towards physical handicapped; these are exposure and destruction, care and protection, training and education, and social absorption.”

There were tribes in pre modern societies where deformed or inabled children were killed. The ideal state described by Plato depicts no place for any kind of impaired human body. Looking towards Indian texts, Bhagvadgita appeals for charity towards disabled members of human society. India mostly followed the later three stages of social attitude towards its handicapped citizens. The treatment of disability in Indian context is inclusive rather than that of being kept marginalized. Disabled in ancient India had active social and economic participation. Context of disability is defined by society and culture. Maximum number of society value uniformity over diversity but the intrinsic quality of Indian society believes in retention of its diversity.

In context of Indian myths the portrayal of disability is neutral; dominated by karmic philosophy it stumbles between active and passive behaviour. There is a beautiful story associated with Mesopotamian mythology which can aptly be ascribed to Indian mythologies too. Enki , one among creator of the world created first human beings; who were very active, workaholic and quick. The other goddess Ninmah one day planned to create imperfect human beings. Enki accepted her challenge saying that she will ensure still they will perfectly fit into human society. Ninmah made a blind man, Enki gave him melodious voice . Ninmah made a man without hands. Enki made him capable to deep observation and he became a spy. Ninmah made a barren woman; Enki turned her into courtsean. This battle of creation continued and finally Ninmah gave up. This story brings home a point that despite bodily limitations, one can adapt and survive.

But the social commentary about disabled, handicapped or impaired people is not uniform. It is based on charity and they respect a disabled person according to his efforts of transcending physical barriers. M. Miles, the British scholar found in his studies that in ancient India the persons with disabilities were imparted quality education in the communities in which they lived. Indian scholar Jeyachandran also added that education was given in the mainstream institutions along with the normal pupils in a gurukul setting. Individualized instructions were given based on the individual child’s needs and age. These findings suggest that

disabled were not treated as marginalized community in pre modern India. M. Miles also indicated that the infamous shrine of Dhola Shah in Punjab of Pakistan would have originated as a charity institution for the disabled in ancient India.

There is a general opinion about Indian mythology is that they associate disability chiefly with evil characters. Scholars like Anita Ghai also condemn the negative portrayal of disability in Indian myths. Hunch backed Manthara from Ramayana and limping legged Shakuni from Mahabharata are negatively stereotyped characters of Indian households. In popular vocabulary, their names are understood as synonyms of villainy. Before accepting this accusation about Indian mythology it is needful to look at sub narratives related to these stories. Behind their negative actions they were guided by motive of revenge or, sense of loyalty. It is their actions that bring the necessary change in unfolding of plots.

Famous Disabled Characters

The only disability is a bad attitude towards disability or, the bad attitude lived by the disabled. Indian myths praise a man according to the deeds done by him. Mahabharata is considered the longest epic of the world and carry almost all human emotions and actions in it. In this epic Dhritrashtra and Shakuni are presented as two disabled character at powerful positions. Dhritrashtra is the blind king from kuru dynasty of Hastinapur. Despite his blindness he was able bodied, judicious, scholar king. He had immense physical strength, he could fight with 100 elephants alone. But his sovereignty as a king is being doubted because of his blindness. Time to time his frailty as a human being is blamed to his inability of vision. There are instances, Duryodhan his son feels wronged because of Dhritrashtra's blindness. Any behavioral fault that is perceived in Dhritrashtra is not because of his inability but the way his blindness was perceived by people around him. Bad attitude of society aggravated disability in his case. Dhritrashtra remains a passive character owing to social barriers.

Shakuni is considered the chief antagonist of Mahabharata, who instigated prince Duryodhana against Pandavas. Shakuni was a limping legged man with miraculous pair of dice. He was maternal

uncle of Duryodhana. None on earth could defeat him in game of chess. The real name of Shakuni was Saubala and he was prince of Gandhara. He felt himself humiliated as Bhishma asked the hand of her sister gandhari for his blind brother Dhritrashtra. This made him revengeful towards the whole kuru clan. Behind his instigation lied the wish of destruction of kuru dynasty.

Shakuni's character also acts as a dramatic device. Mahabharata is remembered for its Dharmayuddha between Kaurava and pandava and the chief action of game was enacted by Shakuni. Despite the assumption that his name is associated with villainy, there is kuravar community in kerala that worships him. An ancient temple is built in his name at Pavithreswaram in kollam district of Kerala.

Manthara and Ashtavakra are two characters who finds their crippled yet potent existence in the world of Ramayana. Ashtavakra gets mention in Mahabharata, Chhandogya Upanishada and padma purana too. Little is known about the chronology of the life of Ashtavakra life or century in which Ashtavakra actually lived. The chief versions of the legend place him with Janaka, the ancient king of Videha. Ashtavakra is known for the authorship of Ashtavakra gita or Ashtavakra Samhita. A vakra is credited as the author of the Ashtavakra Gita. the Vana Parva of the Mahabharata, the legend of A vakra is described in greater detail. : also mentions the story of Ashtavakra. He acquired his disability in womb of her mother, as his father who was telling her mother stories, miss spelt some words. The foetus corrected his father got cursed by. The curse led him towards eight deformities in his body giving him the name Ashtavakra. He learnt Vedas and other holy scriptures at a tender age. In the court of King Janak, he faced humiliated for his physical deformity. But winning the Shashtrarth or, debate; he did earn respect of everyone along with a scholarly position in court. His story has a moral that if a disabled man transcends his limitation he will be recognized in society.

Manthara was an old maid servant, who was hunch backed. She was lady in assistance and was considered among favorite of queen Kaikeyi. In general perspective, she becomes the sole agent behind the Ram's exile. After she listens the news

about coronation of Ram; she instigates Kaikeyi against Ram, kaushalya and others. She felt that her rank among servants will get lowered. Kaikeyi coming into her talk demands two wishes from king Dashratha which led Ram in 12 year exile. One sub narrative related to Ramayan depicts Manthara to be a very intelligent lady who was protective towards kaikeyi as she had been living with the queen from the time she was not married to Dashratha.

Other sub narrative says that Goddess Saraswati sit on tongue of Manthara to bring the necessary change in coronation plot. Tongue is the human organ, considered to be the tool of speech via knowledge. There is a shloka recited even to the day in praise of Goddess Saraswati, with a mention of Manthara, for the role she played in the killing of Ravan by Rama.

नामु मंथरा मंदमति चेरी कैकड करि।
अजम पेटारी ताहि करि गई गिरा मति फेरि ॥

Kaikeyi had a low witted servant named Manthara

Saraswati changed her mind to change the story.

On the announcement of Rama's Coronation, the Gods were worried that kingship will keep the lord's avatar in Rama away from the incarnation's chief objective, which is destruction of the evil king Ravana. On the behalf of godly kin, saraswathi is known to pervert Manthara's brain and mainly her spoekn words, which became the cause of Ram's banishment from the kingdom. Her one act made her ill famed in Indian history. The pressure of being good was more heavy on shoulders of those who were disabled.

Disability in Divine World

Scriptures, folktales and mythologies of ancient India does include divine world in discourse of disability. The deities of lord Jagannath in Puri is worshipped, without limbs, neck and eye lids which strengthens the notion that disability is an occasional but all binding phenomena in human civilization. The poem Mahabhav praksha by the Orien poet Kanai Khuntia describes the confidential meaning behind the form of jagnnatha. He is the embodiment of Krishna's pang of separation from the residents of Vrindawana particularly Radha. Scriptures explain

that deep feelings of spiritual ecstasy, especially in this mood of separation from a loved one, produce transformations in the body.

The god of dawn Aruna described in Rigveda has deformed lower half. Without legs and genitals the gender of Aruna is unspecified. Sometimes he is called as Usha. This deformity in his body took place because of mother's Vinata hastiness for delivery of the child. Vinata the wife of kashyapa led two eggs. Vinata had to wait for 100 years for hatching of the eggs but one day she broke one egg which resulted in birth of Aruna.

The Narsmiha incarnation of Lord Vishnu and Goddess Durga are naturally deviant from normal human morph in their physical description. Narsmiha combines of half man and half lion; while Goddess Durga has eight hands. The sixth incarnation of lord Vishnu which is famous as vamanvtar in India is of a dwarf Brahmin. To destroy the arrogant evil king Bali, he incarnated as a dwarf Brahmin asking for land. He measured whole universe in three steps only. These stories inspired common mass to accept disability in positive spirit.

These religious narratives related to kingdom of God and Goddesses bring forward the idea that the only disability is a bad attitude for the disabled as well as the society. Association of disability with divine also helped in softening mass's attitude towards the crippled and helpless. Sage Narad who is famed for his communication both with the mortal and divine world asks Yuddhishtera, "Do you treat as father, your subjects who are afflicted with blindness, dumbness, lameness, deformity and those who have renounced the world".

Conclusion

Indian heritage has made efforts to present persons with disability as contributing members of society. Rock edicts of King Ashoka, Zakat system in reign of Akbar and separate instutions by Sher Shah Suri and Chandra gupta Maurya, Zakaat show that handicapped were well cared in history of India. But their efforts were based on charity and it could not lead the disable community towards their full potential as human beings. Disabled do not form a homogenous society. Considering this point government of India brought the person with

disability act 1995. PWD Act 1995 focused on equal opportunities, protection of rights and full participation in societies. Still there is a lot to work, support, discover and create awareness about the wrong messages which have been associated with disability. It is neither divine nor diabolical. Despite their impairment they are ordinary human beings in terms of their good deeds and bad deeds. Human body is not fixed, it is tentative. An accident or long time ailment can lead towards a crippled condition or impairment. The strategy of disability should be focused towards their more inclusiveness in mainstream society. Theorist John Turner opined in 1986 that social participation of the disabled brings a new discourse in the state of citizenship.

The share of gender discourse has a weak status in ancient Indian society. Only one female character is known to the general eye that is Manthara. While male characters are placed in powerful position; Manthara has a weak status of maid servant. Anita Ghai discussed that how disabled women have to face double discrimination in society.

Disability study is not supposed to be uniform; Eastern countries have different context. Studying the Asian domain of disability on western themes will not bring the judicious findings. Such studies will perhaps deviate into some misunderstanding again. Charak Sanhita mentions disability in relation

with Karmic philosophy. It suggests that the results of past karma can be transcended and improved by present karma. The law of karma is imbued with the spirit of acceptance of problem and efforts of coping with it. It is true that law of karma associated with disability evokes feeling of guilt and shame but, there are stellar characters like Ashtavakra who transcends the mental and social obstacles caused by their deformities. Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism are eastern religions which have this notion of karma and disability in cause and effect relationship. Portraits of disability in ancient India leaves some room of negativity still, it is not completely inhumane. Karmic philosophy dominates the social attitude towards disability in ancient India.

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