

Enunciating Transition in Indian Civilization: An Analysis of Disability in Ancient Indian Texts

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to re-evaluate and reconsider the portrayal of disability by analysing the philosophy of inclusivity in ancient Indian culture through a close reading of the Ancient Indian Texts. Although it is preordained that disability has been regarded as a sin or an outlaw in Indian society, from a vigilant standpoint, it appears to be incomprehensible. This is more of a socio-temporal change that resulted from colonialism. The epics like the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Rig Veda have given space and strength to various disabled personalities, demonstrating the specifics that represent a narrative change in the contemporary era. The themes of unity in diversity, cooperation, friendship, harmony, and power show that disabled characters have played a critical role in their unrivalled capability. The attitude of cooperation during hard times has been inbuilt in Indians, which is depicted through multiculturalism. Ultimately, the positive behaviour of society can be accentuated by a proper understanding of the epics and Vedas, which will help curb the stigma around disability.

Keywords: *Disability Narratives; Cultural Transmission; Indianness; Inclusion; Ancient Indian Texts; Capability Theory.*

India, the land of ancient knowledge and wisdom, stands sinewy with its rich cultural heritage, beautifully woven with diverse ethnicity. Withholding the honour of the world's ancient university, Takshashila, established in 700 BC, to producing scientists like Aryabhata, who gave the number zero to the world, there is no denying India's incomparable proficiency. The distinction of being called "Vishwa Guru" outright indicates the hierarchy of leading before time, for which Indian literature played a vital role by amalgamating every sphere of life in its literature, like the Vedas, Upanishads, and epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana.

Former US President Barack Obama once declared that the Indian epics Mahabharata and Ramayana hold a special place in his heart. He mentioned in his book *A Promised Land* that "India always held a special place in my imagination. Maybe it was because I had spent a part

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of my childhood in Indonesia listening to the epic Hindu tales of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata." (Obama 597)

Into the bargain, with the sweeping passage of time, Indian credentials got lost as the wind blew from the west in the form of the British. "It is certainly true that many have claimed that there was no history in ancient India, and it is also true that people have been saying this for quite some time." (Perrett 308) The Colonial Era exploited not only the riches of India in a materialistic guise but also the incredible knowledge system. "Unhampered by the "fond credulity" such firsthand knowledge might otherwise have inspired, Mill argued for the gross inferiority of Indian (particularly Hindu) civilization to that of the West, hence justifying British rule." (Perrett 308) James Mill's *The History of British India* "was admired by Thomas Babington Macaulay, the architect of the introduction of a system of English education in India from 1835." (Perrett 309) The introduction of western education and the clearing away of indigenous texts were the first steps to vanquish the empire of sagacity named India. The focus of this paper is to delineate the cultural transmission by means of a change in narrative, which has actually desensitised Indian sensibility.

The way we perceive things and behave is governed by our cultural phenomena, which generally result from the narratives passed on through the ages. As recounted by David Frawley, an internationally recognised Indologist, "The modern mind has yet to penetrate the veil protecting the ancient mysteries." (Nair, 2008) This paper outlines one of the numerous problems faced by society, i.e., disability. Solitary disability has existed ever since, yet it has never been accurately contemplated. Though disability is long known and incorporated into the Indian system under the concept of inclusivity, "unity in diversity" is the principle that has been governing India since the dawn. Up until then and now, the influence of western knowledge has made Indians look down upon their own great knowledge bank and follow the narrative set by the rulers, the British. Brazenly visible Greek philosophers like Plato have given no space to disability. They put the screws on disabled people to be killed the moment they were born; consequently, this particular mindset was passed on to Indians.

"Plato's Republic as one of the first, foundational philosophical texts to specifically argue that an ideal city governed by reasonableness should actively kill individuals with intellectual and physical disabilities because such individuals embody injustice as the lack of order." (Kiefer) "Nowhere in the recorded history of India do we find any evidence to prove that this was a general practise. On the contrary, a reference to Mahabharata (an Indian epic) shows that the

handicapped were then treated with sympathy." (Mani 2) Disability might appear to be something completely different and scary to many, but it is as normal as "being normal."

The World Health Organisation (WHO) in its International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) framework, defined disability as: "Disability, on the other hand, is the human experience of impaired body functions and structures, activity limitations and participation restrictions in interaction with a health condition, personal and environmental factors." (ICF Case Studies - Introduction to the ICF)

Indian scriptures have directly or indirectly encompassed and embraced the disabled. Indian literature is imperforate of occurrences with the belief in equality and justice that everyone should delight in the position and facilities they deserve irrespective of any disability. Mahabharata's entangling plot contains:

"within it is all the knowledge and wisdom available in India of its time; all the thought and speculation; all moral and ethical reflection; all custom and hearsay; all code and regulation; all fable and legend; all awareness of beauty and pleasure; all earthly desire, all spiritual aspiration; all moonlight and sunshine; all conflict, doubt and possible resolution." (Bose 11)

The paper's chief objective is to bring to the forefront that ancient Indian texts have been insightful and progressive with disability by granting an appropriate arena and portrayal. The paper targets the depiction of disability in Hindu Mythology through thorough analysis, which can prove beneficial to bridging the social opprobrium spread around this crucial issue. To demonstrate the socio-temporal change from the ancient to colonial periods and later the attitude of post-colonial India, we need to understand the change in narrative followed by cultural change through the agency of Indian interpretation of Hindu mythology, which precisely testifies to ancient Indian History. The paper ventures to answer the plight of the disabled in Indian history, the role of society in interpreting the age-old notion of history, and the effect of reading Hindu mythology in the contemporary scenario from the disabled's point of view.

The methodology used for the analysis and interpretation is qualitative in nature. Looking at the glorious past of India, the paper alludes to how the change of the ruling authorities has backlashed and destroyed the cultural heritage of knowledge. Further, it discusses the notion of disability, its prevalence in ancient India, and then draws the change from colonial to contemporary times. This paper aims to reveal that disability was never regarded as a sin in Indian society, unlike in European societies; unfortunately, the lack of Indian textual knowledge among Indians made them "think" and "behave" like Britishers. In order to

understand society better, three models of disability are discussed: the medical model, the social model, and the biopsychosocial model, of which only the first two have been given prominence.

“The ‘good life’ is partly a life of genuine choice, and not one in which the person is forced into a particular life - however rich it might be in other respects.” (Sen 59) For the purpose of lending credence, the paper utilises the theory of Capability propounded by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. “It represents the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person’s freedom to lead one type of life or another ... to choose from possible livings.” (Sen 40) In connection with the capability theory and characters from ancient Hindu literature, it is perceptible that during those times people were not discarded as incapacitated for certain work but rather were appreciated on the basis of their gifted talent. Texts like the Ramayana and Mahabharata have disabled characters who have played a substantial role in shaping the lives of people around them, and the viciousness of their characters was not the only result of some trespass but showed that if someone lacks one ability, he or she can compensate for it or enhance it in some other vital ability.

The present literature on disability mainly focuses on Western ideas where “Disability is metaphor for “bad” because persons with disabilities receive negative literary press.” (Thurer, 1980). It regards disability as unified and sees the problems of the disabled as the same throughout the world. As each individual is unique, so is the problem. It’s not necessary that two blind men suffer the same hurdle in life based on their blindness. There are many factors, like society, economic status, infrastructure, ease of transportation, etc., that play a pivotal role in arranging the facilities.

We have historical evidences to show that some societies, before coming into contact with religious teachings and humanitarian values were practicing physical elimination of the crippled as they were not thought fit to survive as members of human society. This inhuman attitude towards the handicapped and disabled gradually changed due to the growing impact of the great religions of the world, which required their followers to be considerate and sympathetic towards them. (Mohsini and Gandhi 1–2)

Further, the West regards disability as an evil when Aristotle opines that “Even Aristotle is said to have advocated extermination of imperfect children. The ‘Body Perfect’ image held sway at that time, because fighting was main occupation of the people. Another ostensible reason was to preserve purity of the race.” (Pandey and Advani 69) “Later on, in history, there was a slight change in the attitude, but still the disabled were regarded as a sub-species of the human race- mere objects of pity and charity-and were abandoned to beggary and ridicule.” (Mani 1)

Based on the western eye, Indians too have regarded disability as sin or taboo and have excluded the disabled from society. In the field of social research, medical, social, and charitable models of disability have been given place, but the biopsychosocial model has been completely neglected. “Various conceptual models of disability have been developed. At the extremes these can be characterized as the ‘medical’ and the ‘social’ model, although a number of hybrid models also exist.” (Palmer and Harley 358) The medical model primarily focuses on the cause of disability or impairment and tries to rectify it through medical procedures.

The core of this model lies in accepting the fact that some vulnerability exists that needs to be rectified. In contrast, the social model is more approachable than the medical model because it considers disability as a social construct and deals with changing society's perception towards disabled people by giving them a proper and conducive environment to form their space in society. On the other hand, the biopsychosocial model is a beautiful blend of these two with a step ahead. While agreeing with the medical model that a person's impairment is a part of their identity and can cause hindrance in their day-to-day activity and with the social model that the removal of physical and mental barriers on societal grounds can give disabled people a ray of hope, the biopsychosocial model also takes the psychology of the disabled person into account. Suppose we will have an empathetic attitude without over-exerting a sense of pity, we can definitely boost the mental health of the disabled by imparting them moral support, and a believe in themselves. They will gain the power to become self-reliant and sufficient, thus enabling them to achieve new heights without the support of others. Ira Sehgal, an administrative officer who suffered locomotor disability since childhood, topped India's most prestigious examination of civil services, i.e., UPSC, in 2015.

It is worthwhile to note that Sehgal opined that we certainly need compassionate treatment towards the disabled, and that would make a great difference. For Sehgal, disability didn't prove to be a hindrance in the way of her capabilities. Thereupon, it becomes quite clear that with the combination of capability and the biopsychosocial model, a change can be brought about in society.

This reference calls for immediate attention to delve deep and see how India's history has dealt with disabled characters. Unlike Western ideology, they were not assassinated or caged but were given a proper space to bloom and were also assigned roles according to their capabilities. To date, the researchers have mostly focused on the karmic philosophy behind the evil nature of the characters present in Indian mythology. Karma plays a pivotal role, but it is the same for

everyone. "Studies on physical disability conducted in rural areas in India show that families and other community members more often attribute physical disability to cosmic factors: fate, god's will and karma." (Dalal, 2000)

Almost every person in their life span will commit a mistake or sin, knowing or unknowing, but not all are born disabled. Indispensably, in Hindu mythology, even God is portrayed as a dwarf; the fifth incarnation of God Vishnu was "Vamana", a dwarf. A notable episode happens in the Mahabharata when Narada (a sage) questions Yudhishtira (a significant character in the Mahabharata): Does he treat as father his subjects who have been diagnosed with blindness, dumbness, lameness, deformity, friendlessness, and those who have renounced the world?

Mahabharata, the epic, is the longest-known poem, containing 18 chapters (Parvas) of 200,000 verses. This epic has iconic characters like Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Shakuni, and Bhishma. These are some vital characters who have shaped the Mahabharata. The battle of the Mahabharata was fought between the Kauravas, overloaded by Duryodhana, son of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, and the Pandavas, overloaded by Yudhishtira, son of Pandu. Dhritarashtra, the king of the Kuru kingdom, was born blind; therefore, despite being the firstborn and legitimate heir to the throne, his younger half-brother Pandu was made the king.

Dhritarashtra was physically unquestionably strong, having the strength of one hundred thousand elephants; nevertheless, his blindness prevented him from occupying the throne, as for a ruler, all his senses should be immaculately working. However, Pandu died early, and he received his position on the throne. Once he took hold of the crown, there was no turning back. He governed his kingdom eminently and portrayed that one's disability can't be an unconquerable obstacle with excellent management and leadership skills and great advisers to his aid. His only flaw was his overpowering love for his firstborn son, Duryodhana. Gandhari says. "For Dhritarāstra, their firstborn could do no wrong." (Neelakantan, 2013)

He could incontestably discriminate between right and wrong, but out of overarching love, he couldn't stop his son. This overarching love of a father for his son is something that can be easily seen and has nothing to do with his disability. His blindness might act metaphorically as a veil for Duryodhana's faults, but in reality, he was always aware of what his son was doing. His behaviour and virtues were altitudinous, which made him marry Princess Gandhari; although her father was reluctant at first, his character won out. He was ambitious and loved his sons. His only flaw was his extraordinary love for his son, Duryodhana. This resulted in the collapse of his empire. The colonist's perspective attributes his blindness as a pitfall, which is

absolutely erroneous. His inability to see might stand as a metaphor, but it will not undermine the fact that he was a great king. He had this prestige because he had leadership and management qualities that vindicated the illustrious history of India, which had a blind king ruling. There was no discrimination, and his decisions were respected as those of a king.

Another prominent character with a bodily deformity was Shakuni, popularly known to be the chief antagonist, who was limp-legged. He was intelligent, cunning, sharp, and a champion of dice and chess who fought the Kurukshetra war bravely and died. These capabilities of his helped him throughout his life and under no circumstances appeared as a disability, nor was he ever an outcast. The Mahabharata of Ved Vyasa underlines that Shakuni had no personal hatred or revenge for the Kuru dynasty. In fact, he was not at all the villain. He was loyal to his nephew, Duryodhana, and kept guiding him against his wrongdoings. Incidents like the poisoning of Bhima and the burning of Lakshagriha, which are attributed to Shakuni, find no place in Vyasa's Mahabharata. It was all planned by Duryodhana. Shakuni was a willing shareholder for the benefit of Duryodhana but never masterminded it.

Shakuni was a man of inner consciousness who spoke facts, and he advised Duryodhana when he got jealous of the Pandavas glory at Rajasuya Yagya. "Sakuni said - 'O Duryodhana, you should not be jealous of Yudhishtira. The sons of Pandu are enjoying what they deserve in consequence of their own good fortune.'" (www.wisdomlib.org) Registering that Duryodhana is bound to take revenge and destroy the Pandavas out of obligation, Shakuni suggested the game of gambling as he was skilled in it, not because of the possession of any magical dice. "I am skilful at dice. There is none equal to me in this respect on earth, no, not even in the three worlds, O son of Kuru. Therefore, ask him to play dice. Skilled at dice, I will win his kingdom and that splendid prosperity of this for you" (Chandra 106)

He was also not responsible for the famous Kurukshetra battle but rather advised Duryodhana on the debacle of Ghoshayatra. He was an adroit character:

This concept of multifaceted personalities does not apply only to villains, but also to protagonists. All the characters in the Mahabharat cannot be classified as noble. Each character is bad for his or her motives. For instance, Lord Krishna employs a variety of strategies to ensure the Pandavas' triumph. (P. and M. Saranyaand 4)

Shakuni knew morality and gratitude and was a great advisor. He was wrong in siding with the wrong, but his disability has nothing to do with the evilness of his character, as has been wrongly portrayed for ages. Kollam district of Kerela, a state in India, has a temple dedicated to Shakuni for his passion, determination, and perseverance towards his goal.

Alongside, Gandhari, wife of King Dhritarashtra, mother of Duryodhana, and sister of Shakuni, also played a deterministic role. She was the incarnation of the goddess Mati, which is wisdom. Although Gandhari was not blind yet, she chose to close (blindfold) her eyes and become blind for the sake of partnership with her blind husband. She was "the pativrata who had refused the light denied to her blind husband". (Neelakantan, 2015)

Her sacrifice, empathy, and solidarity with her husband blessed her with immense power. "By blindfolding herself to share her husband's blindness, Gāndhārī attains the status of 'sati' or the perfect wife. Later in the epic, her sacrifice grants her magical powers." (Pattanaik, 2010) This overtly demonstrates that disability can come at any point in life, even when you are trying to achieve something big or are filled with good intentions. Being disabled is not a crime; it is a power many times, which one should admit by not leaving their character whatever happens.

She kept her faith in the moral order even at the time of the supreme crises that she had faced in her life. She fought for virtue and righteousness and stood on the principles of Dharma firmly. She even denied the fortunes of her own sons and all other personal interests for the sake of Dharma. (Nair 424)

She was a just and righteous queen who "never justified the deeds of her sons; she always warned them about their misdeeds. Her basic intention was to find an amicable settlement between the Kauravas and Pandavas." (Nair 425) Her virtuous conduct awarded her with the power that when she had a glimpse of pious Yudhishtira's thumb of the foot, who had killed her sons in the war, her rage burned it. Also, it was the curse of Gandhari that led to the decline and vanishing of the Yadav dynasty, which was ruled by God Krishna himself.

"Till death Gandhari bandaged her eyes and kept all the ideals and moral principles. Her deeds equate herself with righteousness and she remains in the minds of millions as a symbol of Virtue." (Nair 426) She adorned disability with pride, and so should be the attitude of society towards disabled people and of disabled people towards themselves.

Additionally, it should be cognizant that disability, though not taken into much consideration, usually occurs at an old age. By medical definition, incapability in locomotor activity is termed as disability. This later adulthood problem is usually taken as an obvious part of ageing, yet the difficulty is the same as any orthopaedic disability at a young age would cause. Symbolically, Bhishma, a prominent character of the Mahabharata who acted as the guardian of the Kuru empire and supreme commander of the Kauravas during the Kurukshetra war, lied on the bed of arrows, which represents the state of paralysis (inability to make voluntary muscle movement). He was fully conscious but powerless to move his body. Being the eldest of the

clan, he was treated with plenary respect and sympathy by everybody. He was principled and took an oath not to sit on the throne for the love of his father.

Bhishma's first name was Devavrata, the original and first heir to the Kuru throne, who was loved not only by his father but was also popular among his citizens. He was powerful, intelligent, and most befitting for the throne. In spite of that, when his father (King Shantanu) fell in love with Satyawati and her father demanded Satyawati's child be the heir of the throne, he happily gave up the throne for the happiness of his father and took the position of a guardian. Even today, a fast is observed in the name of Bhishma Pitamah, known in India as Bhishma Panchaka Vrata. People observe this fast as they believe they will get a son like him and also as they are filled with the hope of going to heaven or attaining salvation after their death because "a very important place is given in the Mahabharata to Bhishma. In fact, a whole part of it called Bhishma Parva has been devoted to it" (Chander 46). This is evidence that Indian society nurtured its elders no matter what illness or disorder they suffered.

Another epic from ancient India is the Ramayana, which has 24,000 verses. While it is a story about Rama's journey and the victory of righteousness, it has a significant disabled character, Manthara, who played a pivotal role in the exile of Rama, the crown prince, from his kingdom of Ayodhya. Dasharatha was the king of Ayodhya, whose second consort was Kaikeyi. Manthara was the maid of Kaikeyi, who has been her wet nurse. There is no clear mention of how and when Manthara became humpbacked. She instigated Kaikeyi to send Rama, son of Kaushalya (the senior wife), and Dasharatha on exile for 14 years and make Bharata, Kaikeyi, and Dasharatha's son the king of Ayodhya. A thorough examination of Manthara's character reveals that she had bad intentions towards Rama but good intentions towards Bharata. A malicious person will always think of his own benefit first, but Manthara did only harm Rama. She wasn't cruel to anybody else, but yes, out of love for Bharata and Kaikeyi, she devised a false idea and changed the fate of every character in the epic. Manthara was a loyal and devoted

servant to Kaikeyi, who finally realised her mistake by pleading for an apology to Rama, Lakshman, and Sita, and was also pardoned. Aside from the epics, Vamana, the dwarf incarnation of God Vishnu, exists in Indian mythology. When Lord Indra was dethroned by Asur king Bali and sought help from preserver God Vishnu, Lord Vishnu assumed the form of a dwarf and descended on earth. He arrived near King Bali when Bali was distributing charity. As a dwarf Brahmin God, Vishnu requested three strides of land, which Bali granted. The Lord

then covered the entire universe in two steps, prompting Bali to offer himself for the Lord's third step, which forever confined Bali to the underworld. Dwarfism is also a form of disability, but through Indian lenses, it is quite clear that even God appeared in the form of a dwarf to assist humanity and preserve all three realms. This shows how Indians regarded disabled characters as incarnations of God himself who were deserving of saving the entire human race.

Ashtavakra, the sage, was born with eight deformities. (Mahabharata vana parva) He was the son of Rishi Kahoda and Sujata, daughter of sage Aruni. While Ashtavakra was in his mother's womb, he heard and learned the Vedas. One day, he heard his father reciting the mantras with inappropriate pronunciations. He corrected his father from the womb itself, because of which his father got frightened and cursed him to be born with eight physical deformities. Hence the name Ashtavakra, which means having eight deformities. Later, his father went to King Janak, the king of Videha. There he faced a defeat in debate with another scholar named Bandi, and as a result of the defeat, Rishi Kahoda was drowned in water. When Ashtavakra learned about his father's fate, he was merely 10 years old. He decided to go to King Janak's palace and have a heated debate with Bandi, but was stopped at the entrance as only learned Brahmans were allowed and he was too young to be learned. Ashtavakra amused King Janak with his knowledge and was allowed inside the palace. He defeated Bandi in the debate and asked for the same punishment for Bandi as was given to his father.

Later on, Ashtavakra wrote the Ashtavakra Gita, or the songs of Ashtavakra, which beautifully portray the relationship between reality and bondage in dialogue form. From Ashtavakra's story, it becomes evident that a person with eight impairments, which are difficult to find today, can have intellectual knowledge that can surpass even the most experienced scholar and also have the power to earn the lost honour of his father.

“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.” (Kumari 42) In short, if a disabled person can fight and win the honour of others, they can easily earn their own honour, provided that the proper facilities are given to them. Moreover, physical resources, besides the support from society, are indeed paramount and are excluded from the prejudice that if someone is born with a disability, he or she is suffering from some sin or is a burden to society. Once the disabled are allowed to bloom, our

society will be coloured with new colours that might still be hidden from the sight of sighted humans.

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