A Critical Review
Of Evolving
Perspective In
Disability Studies

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Abstract

In the recent decades Disability studies is vibrant in the academic disciplines. The advent of interdisciplinary approach in disability studies and a developed understanding of disability through sociological, cultural & political lens frame have helped develop the new conceptual understanding of disability. Disability studies is an emerging concept in India. In India although plethora of disciplines exists, but, disability studies as an academic discipline requires an undivided, focused attention. This article attempts to critically examine the process of emergence of disability studies in western countries and discusses the related issues and possibilities in Indian context.

Key words: Disability studies, Disability, Disability right movements, academic disciplines

1. Introduction

Recently ‘Disability studies’ has become a vibrant issue in academic discipline of western countries. During late twentieth century in western countries like UK and USA, the magnificent movement of people with disability fighting for their rights and work of scholars in the field of disability led not only to an understanding of their self-advocacy and demands for their mainstreaming but also reconstruct the conceptual understanding of the disability which was earlier restricted to few impairments. It was the reflection of the disability right movements that resulted in change in the attitude of the people towards disability and it also changed disability discourse from disability being an individual’s issue to it being a human right issue. “Self-advocacy by members of the disability community in the Europe, the united states and Canada, over the past three decades, has not only led to enabling legislation and public policy measures to ameliorate the life conditions of persons with disabilities but it has also resulted in unravelling the epistemological underpinning and ontological status of the taken for granted conceptual categories”(Addlakha.2013).

Some of the people with disability who experienced discrimination and institutionalisations and various scholars stepped towards changing view of the society in terms of accessibility rather than extraordinary care. Various models were introduced to elucidate the concept of disability. This initiated change in understanding of people towards disability and encouraged few people with disability to share their views and experiences through their own voices. Vic Finkelstein in 1996 in his article highlighted the difference between work of disabled activists in past decades and recent years. He explained three major differences; “firstly, focus of the disabled activist has been shifted from political pressure to developing identity of people with disability. Secondly, attention has been given to changing disability barriers and thirdly, he argued that lack of engagement of disabled academics and disabled researches in inspiring the movement”. He explained various models of disability in detail to clear the ambiguity in understanding the concept of disability. In 2007 he
argued on his own paper on modeling disability that “I wanted to show that social models only really make sense when understood in particular contexts. Change the context and the model may well become inappropriate. I tried to illustrate a whole range of models – all associated with ‘disability’ but all very different”. These models were introduced to trace the condition of the people with disability and how the understanding of disability underwent transitions with the changing societies.

Earlier the epistemological understanding of disability was based on the information provided by the historians. The focus of disability studies was mostly on the medical approach where the focus was on impairments and biological aspect of disability and their segregation in the society. The understanding of disability was the result of representation of the people with disability as poor and less capable people. “People with disabilities have been represented in many different ways over the years— as special, as holy, and as sub-human to name a few. Clearly, many of these representations have been less than respectful, useful, and positive” (Kluth, 2006). The emergence of disability studies as interdisciplinary approach started during mid-1980’s when the scholars started conceptualising and theorising disability with analytical approach. This resulted in the construction of an interdisciplinary approach of disability studies. Simi Linton in 1998 argued that disability right movement as well as various dimensions of disability explored by the scholars led to a development of new understanding of disability. The advent of interdisciplinary approach in disability studies developed understanding of disability through sociological, cultural and political lens frame. Although disability study has been acknowledged by the sociologist many years back. Tanya Titchkosky in 2000 in her article tried to uncover epistemological understanding of conceptualizing disability in new sociological researches and contrasted it with the traditional sociological studies in disability. She argued that disability studies are not new emerging field giving the example of Goffman in 1963 in this field. She further argued that sociologists had acknowledged disability as a problem numerous times but it is a new concept in academic curriculum of sociology.

With the work of different anthropological researchers, new concept emerged within the definitions of disability which lead to the interdisciplinary phenomenon of disability. Till then the understanding of disabilities was based on the functional limitations like impairment of body parts which restricts them to participate in the societal deeds. The definitions of disability were laden with the terminologies like ill, impairment, and handicapped which reflects the medical approach and created the pattern of otherness for the readers. “To researchers in the social science and humanities disabled people and disability, like sick people and illness in the past, are becoming increasingly compelling examples of otherness. Severe, visible, physical disability is even more compelling” (Shuttleworth and Kasnitz, 2001). “The language of disability demonstrates that people with disabilities are frequently perceived exclusively in terms of their disabilities.
The community of disabled people is rarely contrasted or balanced with able bodied people. They are limited to a "handicapped role" in which they are seen as recipients of medical treatment” (Dajani.2001).

“However Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) formulated a definition of disability in 1975 that for the first time shifted the issue of causality away from a focus on something being wrong with an individual to the difficulty created by society” (Andrews.J.et.al.2006). The definition of UPIAS reflects the mindset that it is the society which makes a person disabled rather than his/her physical impairments. Definition given by disability discrimination act (DDA), American disability act (ADA) and international Classification of Impairment, Disability and Handicapped (ICIDH 1980) also reflects disability as a result of physical impairments. “ICIDH 1980 describes a conceptual link between, disease and disablement, defined as a temporary or permanent limitation in the ability to perform daily task and role” (Townsend.et.al, 1990). Definitions given by different organizations play significant role in the construction of the meaning of disability.

Later on World Health Organization (WHO) on its website has defined disability as, “Disability is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. Impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. Thus disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which he or she lives”.

This definition reflects that limitation of a person for doing some task is due to impairment of his or her body part which restricts the person to participate in the societal activities. On the other hand both the above definitions are of different viewpoint and reflect different perspectives in understanding disability and make it more complicated for the readers. “The problem of definition is complicated by confusion in the meaning of terms used in everyday communication and literature, due both to differences in perspectives and the complexity of the concepts” (Altman. 2001). Varied perspectives for defining disability influenced the viewpoint of many scholars. Consequently the researchers are now looking towards the cultural and social aspects of the discrimination faced by the people with disabilities.

Disability studies underwent changes from mid 80s when more disciplines were incorporated in the researches of disabilities. “Much of the new works springs from disability studies, an interdisciplinary field dating from the mid-1980s that invites scholars to think about disability as not an isolated, individual medical pathology but instead as a key defining social category on a par with race, class and gender”(
Scholars involved in the field of medical anthropology must be praised for evolving the sub disciplinary approach in disability studies. These areas that emerged were of huge importance as they created a springboard for an interdisciplinary approach benefitting the field of disabilities studies. “These medical anthropologists helped carve out space in the sub discipline for the study of cognitive, behavioural, and physical difference and impairment-disability. Most kept their primary focus within anthropology, which, as a discipline, is only now more widely engaging with interdisciplinary disability studies scholarships” (Shuttleworth and Kasnitz 2004). Anthropologists tried to look upon how the society and culture created the otherness in the people having disability. These researches helped to overcome the notion of otherness and social stigma that has been created tangentially by the studies based upon the disabilities due to impairments of the body.

Although the shift in these studies also came with time as reflected by Schacht (2001) “Anthropologists before 1964 sometimes included important information regarding disabilities in studies that were not focused on disability per se. Washington Matthews (1902) description of the complex nine day Navajo Night chant includes the tale of the “Stricken Twins” that has much information about Navajo ideas about disability. One of the twins’ sis blind, the other is "crippled," i.e., cannot use his legs. In brief, it is a story of repeated rejection, eventual redemption, and healing”. Traditional recognition of disability was based on medical standpoint where functional limitation emanating from the physical impairments restricts them to contribute in mainstream society. With the emergence of disability studies, political discourses as well as academic discourses are shifting towards more complicated issues of the disability which led to the reconceptualisation of the understanding of disabilities by adapting interdisciplinary approach. “The evolution of Disability Studies as a separate field of academic discipline in the aftermath of the disability rights movement reflects the change in conceptual framework of disability. Recent decades have seen the issue of disability becoming a hotly contested issue in the political arena, with the development of the disabled people's movement, and in academic debates” (Karna 2003).

In recent years many scholars are using analytical approach in understanding the concept of disability. In 1999 Thomas argued “In sociological and disability studies literature the term disability is used ambiguously and authors may conflate impairment and disability”. In 2004 Thomas examine the sociological understanding of disability and tried to comprehend how disability is constituted. He explored and analysed some papers of authors like Shakespare, Watson and Bury who holds the view that impairment also plays an important role in constituting disability and others like Finkelstein who holds the view that disability is the outcome of social oppression. Thomas concluded “In my view, a social relational
understanding of disability is sorely needed within Disability studies. It needs to be rediscovered and reasserted”.

In most of the developed countries like America and Europe disability studies has become vibrant in various academic disciplines. The onus goes to the researchers and writers who provided voice to the experiences and struggle of the people with disability. Disability studies are underpinned by these literatures and led to shift from theoretical approach to more analytical approach. The voice of people with disability reflected new ideas in the emerging field of disability studies. “It is important to emphasise that disabled people have played a leading role and developing new ideas and putting them into practice within academic institutions” (Watermare et al.2006). Mike Oliver in 1997, while writing about his book Disability politics in Britain, describes how he and his co researcher Campbell worked both as activists as well as researcher to unearth the reasons for the emergence of the disability movements by taking in depth interviews of the activists participated in the disability movement of 1960.in his words...“Crucial to the production of the book were our own roles as both activists and researchers. This we tried to summarise in the following way: ‘We approach the research task as activists trying to make sense of our actions, not as researchers trying to be where the action is’”. In addition to these studies other scholars like, Armstrong 1960, Barnes 1991, Barnes and mercer 2005, Alur and Timmons 2009, Welsby and Horsfall 2011, Blackie 2010, Ghosh 2012, explored different dimensions and tried to ameliorate the understanding disability. The work done by these researchers provoked to crystallise the ideas of researchers and paved a way for introduction of sub disciplinary approach by the engagement of gender, race, inequity and culture as a dimensions in disability studies rather than studying disability as a disease as perceived for several decades.

2. Disability Studies In India

In western countries the disability issues in academics have seen a constant shift from clinical to socio political and cultural issues. Disability right movements and various scholarly works done by disabled activists in western countries have also influenced Indian researches. Various researches in Indian context, shows that, there is still a need to look at disability issues from interdisciplinary approach. Even though having plethora of research areas in India, there seems to be a little scholarly attention in disability studies as an academic discipline. Most of the work done in this area seems to be based on medical approach. Also there is a lack of literature which portray the feelings and experiences of people with disability in their own voice. “Apart from a few exceptional books written from a Disability Studies perspective, most of the Indian literature falls in the category of the medical model”(Chander, 2008).
According to Mani 1988, “In India, the state has always assumed responsibility for providing the welfare of disabled citizens. Thus in historical texts, there are references to residential institutions and hospitals for the physically disabled (that included the references to blind, crippled and deaf people) and the infirm”. Review of researches illustrate that little work has been done in India which covers the disability right movement in India. One of the most pioneer work done in this area was the physically handicapped in India by Usha Bhatt in 1963. In her work she mentioned how Indian societies perceived disability as punishment of previous birth and how the attitude of the societies changed over the period of time. Recently scholars working in the field of disability in India are adopting disability studies approach. Jagdish Chander while writing about the history and disability in India argued that none of the literature in India earlier to 1990s dealt with the struggle of the people with disability. Most of the studies revealed the welfare approach of the Indian state. In recent decades scholars like Anita Ghai tried to bring the concept of disability into the realm of academic discipline with respect to Indian context. In her essay she explored the meaning of disability in Indian context. She tried to pinch the issues of “disabled women”, as well as addresses the issues to trace women, in disability right movement in India. She argued “predominantly elite and educated group of disabled activist within the disability right movement does not inquire into the subtle conceptual and cultural nuances that influence nature of the survival”(Ghai, 2002). She also argued that most of the agendas were burrowed from the west which was not relevant to the Indian context..In 2003 she tried to bring up various issues related to women with disabilities. In 2003 Asha Hans and Annie Patri explored the existence of women with disability in various disability and feminist movements. These articles provided the theoretical and critical analysis of women with disabilities in society and also are enlightening for scholars to understand disability through various dimensions. In 2007 Miriam Ittyerah and Nimisha Kumar explored the self concept of disabled children, adolescent and adults. In the same area In 2012 Santoshi Halder and Poulomee Datta in their study explored the self concept of adolescent who were sighted and blind with respect to gender in India. Subhash Chander in 2012 tried to look upon the pedagogical aspect in disability. In his study he explored framework for teaching science to visually challenged learners. Singh in 2010 explored the level of consciousness of different types of people towards disability. He concluded his study “That gender, education, religion, occupation, income, nationality have a significant impact on the level of consciousness, but it is limited only to the parent’s perception. However, presence of disabled member in the family did not have any impact on the level of consciousness of the respondents”.

In 2011 Nilika Mahrotra argued that “ the meaning of disability in India is embedded in this basic struggle for survival and cultural understanding. Prevention and rehabilitation models continue to be relevant in such circumstances”. In her view there is an urgent need for researchers to recognize disability as an important marker of social inequality. According to Rama Mani 1988 In India despite having plethora of disciplines, the
field of disability and rehabilitation policies has not been viewed through interdisciplinary approach. The issues of disability are restricted to specific disciplines only. Karna 2003 argued that “the major obstacle for the development of disability studies in India is the unbending curriculum in academic institutes which restrict the exploration of various research areas”. Scholars in India need to broaden their understanding about disability so that disability studies could progress as a distinct academic discipline in Indian universities. Dewsbury.et. al.in 2004 In their article “The anti social model of disability” suggested that empowering and empathetic research methods supported by informed ethnographic researches broaden understanding of disability.

3. Conclusions

However during recent years in India some scholars and universities are focusing their areas in the field of disability still there is a lot of work needs to be done in this field to make holistic interpretation of disability in Indian context. In the country like India having rich social and cultural diversity disability studies must unravel the disability discourses keeping in mind the local and cultural realities in Indian context. There is an urgent need to address the various aspects like caste, gender, culture in the field of disability from Indian perspective. Promoting interdisciplinary approach in researches related to disabilities and various ethnographic researches would develop a holistic understanding of disability. It will also be beneficial for deeper epistemological Underpinning in disability studies within the Indian context.

4. References


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