

Disability Studies: An Introduction
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Lecture 1

Disability Definition: An Evolving Phenomenon

Hello and welcome all. This is a course on disability studies and it is named “Disability Studies: An Introduction”. Let me begin with a favourite example, maybe I have given it in few instances in conversations with my friends and students. Imagine a competition, say there are three people here. One starts 100 meter relay race on the 50th meter, somehow he got the privilege and he knows a lot of people out there and this chap starts running when ready steady go is announced. He somehow starts at the 50th meter. There is one other person she is so starting at meter zero and there is one more she is starting at 0 too but she doesn't have a sports shoe. She has to run barefoot and yet there is another person who is off the track and is not even at point 0 but 10 m behind or 20 m behind and doesn't have a shoe either. Now when the bell rings it's not rocket science to imagine who will come first. Obviously this chap who is on the 50th meter who knows all higher-ups and has a privileged position will hit the final point followed by perhaps the person at the zero with a shoe. And the rest of the two we can't be so sure. Maybe the fourth person she may end of the track and the third person may have just left now. If you see this example you will agree with me our structures social, cultural, institutional and legal and political there are unequal. One of the things that set things causes disability or any other difficult condition human condition is the structural variations. So this first talk is all about that.

Disability definitions disability is an evolving phenomenon. It is evolving. To get at the heart of the problem straight away let me quote, UNCRPD definition here now United Nations are for persons with the rights of Persons with disability am aware. It recognises that persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical and mental intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with the environment may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. Look at that, person of physical sensory, mental, intellectual, some conditions because of the interaction with the environment, it indicates

its for the rights of people with a disability and the United Nations are definitions. That's the latest available evolved definition available. We had hundreds of definitions running for different millionaire cross cultures but this is the one the latest but this is no means the perfect and the final disability definition is going to be evolved by time. That for example let us consider the following examples for you to understand what I'm talking about here and let's take the word handicap. You might have heard this word a lot. You know he is a handicap. Handicap or may be the word “nundy” in Tamil for lame and “kurudu” in Tamil for blind, “ deveang” which is doing the latest rounds in some circles. Visually challenged are not neutral. They have one evolved differently. Two there connotations are also vague. Let's take the first word handicap. In the disability studies scholarship handicap has various meaning.

In the disability studies parlance too the attributed meaning is this, it seems during the World War and beyond people with a disability were holding a cap in the hand like a begging bowl and people used to drop coins and so cap in the hand became handicap. But you know what this is historically the by way of etymology this is inaccurate this is not true. But it is somehow attributed to that kind of an social episode. There is for the word handicap a precise etymological meaning which is this, in the horse race you know a lot of horses run to glory to win a race. In the world of horse racing it seems the horse that can run the fastest is sort of in an unruly way you sort of control it with a weight on its back and that is called handicapping. Meaning controlling burdening the horse as it were with a weight artificial weight and that burdening evolved again and do what finally becomes an instance in society where handicap, the word handicap bears a meaning the seemingly obvious meaning that's disability is a burden for his handicap, that is burdened with something may be a impairment of blindness or a mental illness is a result. This is the active example of evolution. Let me give one example. There's this word visually challenged yet another disability definition or blindness definition. This kind of this definition is very popular in the Third World such as the Indian society or developing societies.

Visually challenged normally means that it denotes obviously blind people but it seems the blindness is not what belongs to you but somehow in the world of the visual you feel challenged. That is an attribution that blind people are challenged within the runs of the visual spectatorial scopic and so on. So the burden seems to be shifted from a blind person to the visual that is

challenging him or her. That seems to be the driving emotional thoughts behind a definition such as visually challenged. This has some currency even among blind people and long blind people as well meaning sighted people. But it has its irritation as well. For example lot of people do think that this is an euphemism meaning only call a spade a spade, I would be like to call a blind person I don't like to be called visually challenged. One of the disability studies critique and imagine it was Tom Shakespeare makes fun of this kinds of definitions. For example if you or if I were a diabetes for example can you call someone somebody challenged by sugar, that is very funny. So similarly you can't. A disability definition or blindness definition cannot survive this way by calling somebody visually challenged. You just call somebody a blind person. There is yet another problem with the disability definition so far. What is the problem in defining disability? You may argue with me as listeners or you may be thinking now that is so complicated about defining somebody is this not conspicuous. If somebody cannot walk, to say directly that he is disabled or she is disabled, well human conditions don't behave like that. Humanities is a complicated arrangement let's see how.

Some conditions such as mine, I read braille now you know that I'm blind and it may be conspicuous but some conditions may be non-conspicuous. You cannot see the for example I may have acute fatigue so much tiredness that the I need to pause every three minute after or ten minutes after this lecture. I may potentially have that. Or I may be belonging to a society where hyper- masculinity is celebrated where I may not do well or I may be in a work situation where beautifully singing or are a talent for musicians is celebrated there of course I will awfully fail. I don't sing that well or I may be in a situation where I can't really match somebody else's muscular dexterity. Let me get away from this I mode and give some examples from the real world. Think about sweatshops in India and China for example, your fancy gadgetry is made in such sweatshops. People are exposed to asbestos they develop asbestosis. Young children and women work in civil fireworks factory where they get inherent or exposed to sulphur. The rich world dumps toxins in the bore well poor women go to jungles day in and day out to get fire woods. Travel for ten kilometers to get a pot of water. Schools in the poorest part of India they may not have sanitation. Children may be prematurely exposed to illnesses. There are a host of conditions that can traumatise people. The urban varieties people from the suburbs villages they can have or undergo extreme stress on mental health. There may be situations where certain

conditions, say without a limb may be celebrated in a place of worship and so on. The list is endless.

In 19th-century England and 20 century too tuberculosis was a popular killer. It was also an object of imagination lot of poets John Keats included his famous ode to immortality was inspired by his tuberculosis condition and sometime ago leprosy was considered an untouchable disease or condition. Now things are changing. If you enter some pockets of society certain belief systems will make you think about certain mental illness or physical condition differently but if you enter the hospital then you'll be considered different. I know while listening you may be ticking your mobile phone obsessively checking SMS. You know what this is in the diagnostic statistical manual the current edition will call this OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder). I don't think if you were born 20 years ago and you are meddling with something constantly it wouldn't have been labelled that way. I am saying that label attach to particular disability and a score of disability disabilities will vary and it evolved. It is also society specific. I forgot to almost mention the active disability definition that is going on in our society the Indian particularly. Acid attack victims we have plenty of women young women who suffer this problem, it is a consequence of vengeful politics and may call it an evil side of patriarchy and say if a love proposal for example is denied a young woman can be too massive on a face and sometimes it can kill her but she may barely survive with atrocious effects on body and mind. In the latest rights of people with the disability act 2016 we have included acid attack victims too as a disability. Look at this example of evolution this is a typical Indian disability condition. Until 10 years ago I'm sure attacks on women have been happening forever. But because it is so prevalent because it has got a pattern of its own because it has got structural ramification we are willing to acknowledge that this acid attack survival indeed is a disability condition.

Now we have spent a good 20 minutes to address the ongoing or evolutionary characteristic of disability's definition. Now let me quickly introduce you to the field disability studies. Disability studies it is an interesting field I promise you will experience that this series of 20 lectures we have half an hour each. The point is this all identity formations say gender black dalit white and beyond say American south- Asian identity, you can count as many identities as people are actually. In the humanities scholarship identities have given rise to an analytical studies that have

that particular identity as its centre for example in the dalit studies- dalit history, dalit culture, dalit literature that it experience a dalit point of view the dalit orientation persuasion politics interpersonal relationship and everything else is at its center. Similarly in gender, gender makes us what we are what we think of gender power equations relationships opportunities aesthetic values, moral values connected to gender. What we think about our family our school what we think about our womenfolk these are part of gender studies. When gender is privileged are made as a centre then we do something important what happens as a consequence is you suddenly start revising or you get a scope for revising your thoughts on gender for example the way you look at sciences while not there are no not so many women in engineering colleges and why not so women make it to sciences at higher level why don't they make it to court programming what is it that in the real world that makes a difference to sciences geography history how we read our discipline is how we look at ourselves I set gender studies because it can now understand where I am travelling to or we are travelling to.

Disability studies does something similar it also borrows from activism from people with myriad disabilities mentally disable cognitively sensory and so on are the day for disability studies has a unique diversity based on where it is emerging from in America it is different in Britain it is different in from the point of view of literature it is different from the point of view of science it is different from the point of view of language it is different Japan India. So in what follows in the subsequent lectures we will have a taste of this diversity and its density. In this lecture I also talked about physical mental cognitive sensory and even I mentioned acid attack survival as a disability. There is one particular group or community or a professional arrangement that somehow seems to have final authority in defining disability. It has a complicated connection with people with a disability have to go to that professional group to get a certificate. For example, I will go to a doctor to get a certificate that I am hundred percent blind at the same time I don't want to be going to a doctor every time to call myself a blind person. So you see a complicated relationship is emerging between medicine and disability. So in our next lecture entitled the medical mentality will explore this problem. Thank you.