

Disability Studies: An Introduction
Prof. Hemachandran Karah
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture 10

Models of Disability Activism

Welcome back to the second part. Now very comfortably, having laid out the orientation part, disability activism and its myriad avatars. So for this module let's go around the globe for half-an-hour, maybe 20 minutes and then come back to India to revisit the assumptions and priorities of disability activism here. Let's take the British model, I have already talked about the social model position in Britain, basically saying that it is the ill social organisation or ill organised social organisation that restricts people with impairments and not otherwise, it is not their bodies and minds and so on. But does this British disability activism work? Well they create organizations that plead or advocate independence of blind people, it means the capacity to make choice capacity to live the way they would like to live their life that's the British model. So people with various disabilities come together and form organisation. For example, RNIB (Royal Mass Institute of Blind) for blind people. So RNIB does a human job of making active advocacy for people with blindness and low vision. It aids research endowment in the areas of assistive technology. For example, it facilitates scholarships, it facilitates thinking about hiring, school education, sport and even many other cultural realms, so likewise each disability concerns its own thing and it's also heavily localized.

Talking about Britain, you may all be remembering Stephen Hawkins. Hawkins is a great physicist, but that's not the point of this talk. The point of this talk is about Stephan Hawkins is possible because of the peculiarity of disability activism in Britain and in that part of the world. Here is a scientist who has fuller capacity, but he cannot and he will never be able to function like other colleagues in his department. So what cannot be done because of his bodily limitation is not highlighted here, but what can be done, what he could deliver how he could deliver given what circumstances he couldn't deliver is a point of politics. So, then you do reasonable adjustments in the system to facilitate such a remarkable scientists to carry on and on and of

courses Hawkins is a celebrity and to talk about disability activism just based on celebrity is a total injustice. So what is the British disability activism. How can you call it, it is an activism based on structural thinking like it is a structural model, structurally it is organised around social model. But politically, it is based on emancipatory assumptions about disability. The minority that disabled people are seen as minority and they need special protection, they need special emancipatory measures, and they need to have fulfilling meaningful life. They will need support by the state from cradle to grave, and so on. Of course these are rich countries they can afford that. The point is thousands of people with a disability get into activism based on individual rights model. I have the right to get a Braille display when I become a lecturer in a college will proclaim a young graduate student and that's how it works in Britain.

Let's go to American now. And Britain again, they have borrowed from other activist models available in the country, such as post world social mobilisation different ethnic minorities, different organisations and so on. Let's get into the American model, American model if I could call British model social model and a broader minority based thinking, American model is totally a minority model, the much of disability activism borrowed from other activism is actually. Political moments in the disability politics borrowed from moments like black activism, sexual revolution of 50s and 60s, gender activism and other Civil Rights demonstrations like Gay pride and so on. So here we have not only ethnic minorities, inspiring the disability activism, but also many other minority or perceived minorities driving disability activism in America, for example, sexual rights, human rights, education rights, right for equality, they were doing the rounds from 1940s to 2000, which actually culminated in the disability act the Americans With Disabilities Act 1990, which is one of the most powerful legislations in the world on disability, where disabilities is not only perceived as a condition, physical and mental, but it is also treated as a matter of perception. For example, from perceived to be inefficient, then I have the right to recourse for a law, legal remedy. So in some sense American model of disability activism is interpenetrated, its intersectional. It is made up of and fed by other activisms. Naturally, the minority orientation persist within different disability activism in America.

Let me give you examples, take deafness for example, in the earlier lecture I was talking about deafness, but let's go full-blown now. American deaf people, at least many of them who inherited

deafness would like to think that they are linguistic minority. Look at this interesting point. I use sign language, I don't use verbal language, verbal English. I use American Sign Language, ASL and the language that informs my emotions, my personality and my soul, my community, my orientation and everything should be recognised as a minority language. Why minority? Because its presence is not felt everywhere like English in the classroom. Many classrooms in America there is no sign language interpreter and it may not ever happen too. If they choose to have hearing aids, some of them, they can, but they still claim that their status is like another ethnic minority like Indian in America, for example or maybe Sri Lankan so on. Whatever legal rights that apply for protection that applies to ethnic minority should also apply to us a deaf American would argue. People with mental disability or cognitive limitation also share similar approach to activism some of them at least. They would say, well, you incarcerated us this long, you put us in prison like hospitals, you conducted lobotomy on us. A surgical method to remove a part of the brain to make somebody inert. You cast lots of abuse social abuse on us, look at this, a mentally disabled activist would say in America look, I'm not deficient or not deficient mind. I'm not a non person. My mental capacity is just differently wired. They would rather call their condition as a symptom of diversity, in some sense, to put it precisely it is called neuro diversity, human minds are different, like the races human bodies are different like their colours and so is human mind. Maybe my mind's capacity is different and therefore you treat me as part of this large neuro diversity pool and one that is not popular fully or not available in majority.

So what is the American orientation? Well they talks in terms of law, Civil Rights, right to living and right to space and right to dignity. They also talk in terms of minority politics because American social mobilisation political mobilisation electioneering is everything about ethnic minorities and so on. So do disability activism catches up effectively with it. This is very interesting. Let's see another model to come before we reach Indian thinking. What about Scandinavian model. As stated earlier, any activism particularly disability activism also borrows on its cultural landscape where it is deeply rooted. While a British model aims on facilitating fuller flourishing, the nordic model is about Scandinavian countries are very wealthy they can afford the state to be like an extended all-powerful mother right from the child is born, and upto the child becomes very old state can take full care of the person. That's why in Nordic countries the taxes are very high and people get myriad support from the state and therefore they're fine

with it. It is the special affection they have for the system that state is treated like a supreme mother. In such situation disability activism is all about being full being normal valorising social roles getting full attention from the state. It is not about right or minority it is about how to be having a proper role whichever role you want to play. In some sense, it is about overcoming disability, mental or physical.

For Nordic model I would recommend reading the Pjarnason hope I'm pronouncing his name properly and many others. So we have, in some sense gone around the Western Hemisphere or global North, as it were, Britain and America and Nordic countries. That said, it will be very useful to come to the Indian model, but India is a big country. Each state in India is more than size of many states in Europe and therefore Indian picture of disability activism has to be complex otherwise if it is not then you can always assume already that I'm telling a lie or I do not know enough. Before coming directly to disability activism, let's see the kinds of activism that's doing the rounds in India and Indian social scape. When we got independence, let's start from there, the debates was about discrimination based on caste primarily and establishment of modern citizenship. I strongly recommend that you read constitutional debates surrounding arguments at that period beginning with debates between 1948 and 50 and beyond. It was proposed that there is a historical injustice based on caste discrimination in India and therefore we need affirmative action by the Indian state to support people who have been hitherto historically denied fuller and meaningful life.

Gender activism it was proposed that since millions and millions of women took part in independence struggle, both openly and indirectly, it was thought during constitutional debates that women activism or gender activism can take different shape, not necessarily through constitutional means. And there were other issues such as national integration making sense of linguistic diversity and so on. Now we get the broader picture so you have caste, linguistic diversity, gender activism, national integration, human right preservation and much more.

So you have this complex picture where identities are also entangled and I would dare say disability activism sits well in this broad scale. Let me give an example, take linguist diversity. It was proposed that we should take advantage of linguistic diversity in India rather than

suppressing it because celebrating linguistic diversity will lead to more democratic self-expression, more localised knowledge creation and more freedom for common people to be active political citizens. So states were reorganised in early 1950s based on language, Tamil Nadu for Tamils, Andhra Pradesh for Telegus, Karnataka for Kannadigas and so on. Hindi speaking majority were in many parts of north India and Punjab for Punjabis and it went on. During the independence struggle, I'm sure there were many, many thousands who were disabled in doing the freedom struggle and many would have been beaten to pulp, lost their capacity for limbs and everything, and they might have been tortured and they would have been at least a couple of millions. There is no statistics because people did not see themselves one, active disabled people and second harm to the body based on struggle was seen as an act of bravery, sacrifice and nobility instead of disability.

Coming to the language picture, disabled activists who were seeking jobs were seeking self pride, arguing for self pride, and so on were actually drawing from linguistic activism. For example, I grew up hearing senior people talk about their fright as a person, they may be disabled using vocabulary political language that was derived from Tamil activism, language pride and so on. In some sense, disability pride in activism or advocacy here in Tamil Nadu was borrowed from Tamil crime. I'm sure that was the case with others as well. Apart from language activism disability activism in India also borrowed from not only the vocabulary but modalities of activism from caste related activism. For example, Periyar's movement about temple entry because people of lower castes, Dalits were denied temple entry during early 1950s and even before. But they were ever denied but Periyar took the cause and created a revolution by taking them into temples and so on. Active occupation of sacred places by people from lower caste was Periyar's cause which again was actively used by disabled people to promote the cause about their fulfilling social mobility in places that we're hitherto reserved for people with higher caste higher physical capabilities and out rightly denied to people with disability.

Apart from this, disability activism is also derived from disabled people's own voice, meaning there issues their concerns there engendered problems, jobs, human flourishing, education, and there is also a great difference between people with disability from the rural landscape and from disabled people from the urban side and people with a disability or majority live in a rural

landscape with no facility for water, health, sanitation, rehabilitation and so on. So what is the moral of the story. It's not just in India disability activism on the one hand, it is about self-expression, human rights job and active participation, on the other hand, it is about getting basic requirements which are inter penetrated with other activism such as those of gender. A need for sanitation, transport, rehabilitation, basic education, basic life support all these things also part of disability activism and we cannot ignore this dichotomy and that's the crux of the problem here, right. Final remarks well, disability activism I call this myriad avatars, in rich countries the problems are different and in the poor countries the problems are different or ought to be different, but there is also commonality between them and my attempt was to take you along this differences. Hope it made sense. Thank you.