

Disability Studies: An Introduction
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Lecture: 4

Social Model of Disability: Part 2

Hello all and welcome back. This is part two of the module on social model of disability. We just finished by saying that social model has a human rights approach and it also requires lots of resources. I also said that the term social model can be a potential research framework akin to patriarchy that would help feminists to understand or unearth social oppression connecting to gender. Like patriarchy and so on social model has a limitation because it starts and ends with the assumption that disabled people are always already victims of the society. No matter how one deploys social model, it ends up saying that it is because of an ill organised social structure, say, bad democracy, I am impaired or disable. This way victimhood goes in cycles and there is no escape from the cycle. Although a useful way to understand social oppression against people with a disability, victimhood can be counter-productive. In that sense so far moral argument is not a terrific framework to be used in say disciplines like literature, philosophy, cultural, economics, philosophy of science and disability. So we need to really think about its nuances and more importantly where its boundary lies, when we need some other approach besides the victimhood. Social model says, if you provide friendly social structures, staircases, accessible microwaves and the like, impairments can disappear. That is true but there is no one disability in humanity, disabilities are as numerous as humanity is. I maybe not able to see for now but tomorrow I may not have a capacity to move my hand. You as listeners will know an uncle or aunt or friend and even your mom having fatigue or someone as cancer survivor. Many million ways of modalities of disability expression to exist. How do we cater to all? Second, for me this Braille works and notes on the Braille can work. For some other blind person Braille may not work. Maybe they have become blind and in which case training in Braille is a very hard task. In which case, that person would require audio support or a score of readers who can do it on a paid or voluntary basis, CD devices or even screen readers that helps one to read a computer. So computing solutions do exist. It's not as though there is one big idea to solving human problems,

that cannot do the trick all the time. I talked about the human rights problem. Well, human rights is important and some fundamental human rights are inviolable, i.e. Right against torture, right for dignity, right to life. These rights are sacred, sacrosanct and universal. But to say that the resources I need for my teaching career or disables a disabled person's environment should always be accessible and that is a human right will tantamount to problems in the third world like ours, in a developing society like ours, for example. Because, in developing societies money is tight and I told is already. Therefore competing solutions exist for example, friendship, charity, the notion of Seva or Zakat in Islam. Charity here, as a friend of mine and a disability studies scholar Shilpa Anand puts it, is used as a placeholder kind of image and within that multiple notions of giving and taking exist in society. For example, the day I went by an auto rickshaw. I asked him how much it will take for me to go to the nearest library. He said, hundred rupees but I want to help you so for that reason I will take you for 70. In fact, it may only cost 50 but he is saying he wanted to help me. Here he is converting a contract, a social contract, meaning I pay money he takes me by auto, that it. That's how a westerner would look at but here an auto driver is himself in the margins of the society thinks that there is something else in common between him and me as a blind person and therefore he wants to be helping me by reducing the price. But the point is not not about victimhood I am talking here about but the notion of helping, compassion, Karuna, family bonding (in India family bonding is very strong, though can also be violent which can be another matter altogether). Many things, beyond individualism and individual human rights, work in developing societies. So to say that my access to library is a right and therefore you better do it does not work all the time in our situation. I am just running you through the limitations of the social model approach. With its great merits, without doubts, these are the some of the limitations. The next obvious limitation is that if you create friendly structures you can disability which is not actually true. I will continue to be blind no matter one gives me Braille and things like that. In case of a person suffering from Parkinson's disease, pain cannot be removed. Pain needs to be negotiated and handled. Human notions, such as faith, Bhakti, love and compassion, can be more soothing to human pain than a human right approach. Moreover abolishing all human limitations is not possible, in fact, they need to be in some way respected and in some other way celebrated. Well, celebration will come to it in moment but understanding pain and the rest other human limitations cannot be handled by a structural argument alone — it requires an interpersonal approach, strengthening and perusing human

institutions such as family, school, church and even human social formations such as friendship and love and so on. Those are the helpful structures already available which one can make use of. Carol Thomas, one of the finest disability studies scholars, has coined the term 'impairment effects'. By talking in a larger social argument and so on, she argues, how can you remove impairment effects? And disability is also a gendered phenomenon. For example, suppose one is having high diabetes (type II) and so on, there may be an instance that person suffers from (I am underlining the fact of suffering) from acute chronic fatigue or tiredness. How the hell you can remove that by making a social model argument? Impossible! So this is what she meant by 'impairment effect'. Some blood-related diseases such as lupus, diabetes and thalassaemia can cause profound fatigue, maybe with cancer after the chemotherapy too and so on. That needs a different approach altogether, like what I was talking about faith. Moreover, it is also in a sense foolishness to pretend that something visceral as human body with its limitations, strengths, pain, suffering, and even pride with all mood swings, aesthetic orientations and the rest does not exist at all. That is mere foolishness. That said, one can still profitably make use of the social model (this is a social model argument). It is still possible. Talking about Indian situations, most of the disabilities in India is caused by poverty. The other day, I was so reading an essay on Endosulfan use in Kerala and massive protest about it. Harmful insecticides and pesticides get into the food chain causing disabilities, even before we are born actually. It can affect foetus; the infamous Bhopal gas leak is an example. Innumerable mining industries, the adulterated water (sometimes mixed with mercury and so on) can cause debilitating conditions that can go unnoticed for generations. Unless somebody digs out the truth, the truth never come out. The famous Chernobyl nuclear accident went on and on without even state announcing it. That means even state can be a bystander sometimes and allow structural violence of huge magnitude so that disability can emerge out of it. How do we handle that with the social model framework. Well, at least one can say, we need structural thinking. Disability is not a natural phenomenon, it is caused by poverty and acute violence that can go unnoticed for generations. That makes me come to an very important point where we need to think about something very serious. That is, disability is not and should not be a lonely battle. What causes poverty also causes disability. What courses and gender oppression is also an antidote to disability. What makes marginalisation possible can also make people vulnerable. That means, this is why, somebody called social model disability argument a 'last liberation movement'. What do we mean by that?

Well, take for last two hundred to three hundred years. Humanity has seen notorious slavery (slavery has happened for last 3000 years) where humans were treated like animals. Gender oppression is a reality and was a reality. So is the case with racism and casteism (in our situation) and many other modes. There have been liberation movements — lots of countries from early 20th century onwards started becoming free from imperial oppression, India included. United Nations Charter on Human Rights, which includes right against torture and so on, was signed. Gender liberation has been happening for 150 years — it is a work in progress, and let's not forget that. People with different sexual orientation, such as gays and lesbians, and transgender communities have been fighting for a sense of equality for themselves. In this scheme of things, the social model argument is very powerful. Which means it needs to be creatively employed. In Britain, social model means building accessible platforms, pavements, cribs and accessible transport. It may mean that too in India but it should also mean addressing the root cause of disability creation and circulation, i.e. Poverty and industrial pollution. Make no mistake, they all go together. Therefore, it means several things in several places. What am I saying now? There is an interesting coinage to say what I'm saying, i.e. Disability social model is not our atomistic, lonely and singular formation. It is in sync with other battles — battles against poverty, caste, racism and so on. And the ways in which one can handle all of them together, meaning not bringing all of them like a hotchpotch, just disability as politics speaking to the other. For example, if water is polluted with mercury, then it can and it should grab the attention of social modelists because it actually leads to disability and myriad other debilitating conditions. And that approach to life and politics is called 'transformational politics'. To conclude, we began with Britain, where social model originated. We said that in that part of the world it meant impairment and disability distinction. It also meant a parallel between patriarchy and social model argument and so on. And then we slowly moved on to the situations of life in the first world and the third world. Finally, with all the limitations I cited about social model it can still be a framework for transformational politics, i.e. Addressing disability, studying about disability and disability studies will also involve a careful analysis of structural violence that happen beyond disability as well, such as pollution of resources, artificially induced poverty and gender oppression.