

Disability Studies: An Introduction
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Lecture 6

Stigma and Disability: What can we learn?

Welcome back here to the second part on stigma. This time I have titled it, “Stigma and Disability”. What can we learn. Yes, what can we learn, well disability brings special knowledge about stigma because you may recall, social model of disability in the previous discussion. One said in that model or approach to disability that impairment that is a blindness, deafness and so on becomes disability when attributed or given or called in with some kind of discrimination. Discrimination makes impairment disability. Well some parts of it true, but in many senses, disability can provoke all the three other things that I was talking about fear- affective component, stereotyping, cognitive, and some kind of social control. Why? Because physical differenceS, cognitive differenceS, emotional variationS can invoke peoples’ sense of anxiety. It may, for example, bring them to terms with their own mortality, their own limitation. Have you seen people running away from cancer patients? I have seen umpty number of rituals, I have been in ritual setting and one guy who was doing the ritual said that my presence may be “amamgal” that means it is not auspicious, blindness. You can't see, therefore, you can't have light and there is no light, there is darkness and darkness is certainly “amangalam”. It’s not auspicious, “mangalam”. That kind of reactions, disability, primarily disability alone can invoke. There is this interesting concept, you may like to ponder about. It is called aesthetic nervousness by Ato Quayson.

Aesthetic nervousness what is it? Well aesthetics is the study of, or a field dealing with emotions and preferences and tastes. For example, I like Carnatic music , you may like pop or I like Hindustani and you may like Bollywood and vice versa, and depending on our mood, age orientation preferences, tastes differ. What Ato Quayson here trying to say is aesthetic nervousness can be driven, that is some kind of instability, some kind of negative attitude withdrawal, disgust, fear, and even withdrawal can be invoked by disability. There was a person

who said, watching wheelchair dancers, yes, there are people on wheelchairs who perform dance, it's a dance performance on wheels, and he said well cognitively, I can appreciate that is, I can analyse and appreciate but I can never enjoy this dance. I did not confront him, but I understood the meaning of aesthetic nervousness at that time. Meaning, a thing of beauty is a joy forever they say. To him, persons on wheelchair looked remarkable and act of bravery, act of vigour and may be emancipation everything that has to do with achievement and pride, but never pleasure and enjoyment. Maybe he meant if you have a disability waist-low or up you cannot be a fuller person. Therefore a conversation with that person or a personal, intimate enjoyment of any kind, say friendship may be wrought with anxiety this is what Quayson calls aesthetic nervousness. Well forget about the concept for a second, aesthetic nervousness. We all have friendship or otherwise even enmity. Mostly it is based on our own projection, if you like, it may be true that the other person may be bad or so on, but the badness of the other person maybe actually, primarily is our own projection. May be once we meet a person, we associate that person with an uncle in the neighbourhood who was bad to you for example. Psychoanalysts or psychologists call this projection. Basically, you're attributing to the other person what you think he or she's projecting. It's not there. And the second is projective identification, means you not only say that the other person is bad, you start identifying yourself with other person. So that is when you feel disgust. Oh my God, when I'm in the audience where wheelchair is being performed in the front I cannot enjoy this because it brings into sharp relief not only my bad projection, but I feel bad myself. So this is why disability inclusion can happen as tokenism.

What am I saying? On a table, there is a conference table and the conference organiser wants to feel good about himself or herself by calling someone so that he or she can be called inclusive. They may invite a lower caste person or disable person from a different race and many other identities. That will not only advertise the conferences is inclusive but it is also visible you see. But that's not true. True inclusion is addressing the stigma about that which cause discrimination in the first place, getting into the root of stigmatisation. So in other words, tokenism comes when stigma rules inclusion. Oh yeah include that guy because he is disable and we can get more funding. But venue address aesthetic nervousness, stigma and other things about human difference, then you include that disabled person culturally, aesthetically and morally into one whole or conferences or anything like public business. So this projection business about

disability and stigma is also very special. I will give you an example, I used to use rickshaw sometime ago to go to my office when I was in Delhi I used to use rickshaw. The rickshawala one day said, I could understand some Hindi at the time, well, sir you know only you can understand my problem. I don't think I can meet other passages who can understand my problem. And he felt very good meeting me. Now on hindsight, when I think about it, this rickshawala thought, yes, you may be looking rich or middle-class, but he has a disability, he must understand what it is to be stigmatised. Maybe he may understand what it is to be treated like a fly after all he was a rickshawala in Delhi. So disability can invoke identification across marginal identities, a poor person, a labour, lesbian, gay people who are racialized many other identities may feel I'm saying may, not all the time. Not all the time, may feel potentially connected if you like, with people with a disability.

Now what we learn. I said, what can we learn? Disability can potentially say stigmatisation leads to some kind of master status, what's master status. Well, no matter your achievement. No matter your familial connection. No matter your service to humankind around you, your community and your roles, multiple roles. You may be at the end of the day called a Dalit or a disabled. Look at that, stigma of a deviant kind, toxic kind and unceasing flow of stigmatic attributes can reduce someone or fix someone to master status, you are this. That's it. That's your master status, the rest is subsidiary, we don't care but suit the role. Stigma can do that to people. And once that master status comes, people don't expect much from you. For example, there are moments when people look at me strangely and look at me and many of my students have also reported about themselves. They look at them strangely, when they are in a place where they're not expected. For example, a woman would be looked at very strangely and she will feel the field of stigma around her when she is spotted in a military place. Hey what are you doing here? In Tamil there is a nice saying, that is in iron smith's place, smithery what can a fly do. Hey come on why are you here. There is a role expectation which will reduce the individual to a minimal and that master status will start ruling the roost. Basically, one may be infantilised look like a child, and so on, and this can go on forever about people, communities and other marginalised identities.

So we can expect a particular community to do only one kind of a job may be mending shoes or butchery and nothing more, role expectation will be minimal. How to handle, part of my lesson

about disability and stigma is also about how people handle this. Well talking about master status and infantilised and so on. People with a disability and those who surround them are with them also face this problem, families of people with disability, families who happen to meet and make people with disabilities are family, such as through marriages. They can also potentially experience the stigma, oh my God, you got into this marriage. Why did you not get a better husband or a better wife why should you choose a disabled person. That kind of stuffs. Now, having talked about master status and other thing across identity markers how do they handle it. Well working against stigma may involve two things. One is rejection, if the world rejects me I reject the world, that it. People do that. Lots of caste, race, politics, and much more is about that reject and construct alternative knowledge and reject everything, that's one modality. The second modality involves well building positive attributes for oneself. For example, a disabled person may work incredibly hard to come up, a dalit person may work incredibly hard to have better professional mobility and so on.

The third way of handling stigmatisation is to deny one's own capacity, limitation or even one's identity. In disabilities case, one will pretend to be non- disable, deny one's disability or deny any association with people with disabilities. In caste studies this is because Sanskritization, pretending to be an upper caste. So these responses, as students of social sciences and humanities, we need to be acutely aware so that we can start making sense of what we mean by stigma and so on. Now let me having flagged all these things, let me make a few concluding remarks. My concluding remarks on disability and stigma will involve the problem of disciplinarity. How can we think about stigma from our respective disciplines. After all, this courses about disability studies. Well, I told you how stigma happens and how people come to terms with stigma. This can be a starting point about disciplines. For example, if you were a student of literature then it be such a joy to read autobiographies, fiction, poetry, cinema and so on for traces of patterns of stigma and how people with disabilities and other identities come to terms with their identity or comes to terms or fight stigma fightback stigma.

The other day one was talking about Michael Jackson how he coloured, made himself so look like white because of may be the pressure of pop culture and to pressure caused by or stigmatic attributions that he suffered because of his race, so literature, science, biology, social sciences it

is one can use frameworks such as discrimination, staring and gauze, emotional analysis lots of psychoanalysis can come handy in this regard may be, one can understand geography of stigmatisation. How towns and communities are built based on stigma or rebuilt, a particular caste group may be jumbled into one place and the mainstream caste can be expansively present and this happens in all metropolis, London, New York and so on and Chennai. So there's this social geography of stigmatisation and there is also traces of literary and cultural representations and finally authentically scientific disciplines like medicine can study stigma and how stigma can lead to depression, stigma patients identify themselves to be stigmatised or non-stigmatised and why patients deny certain illnesses that they have. All this can be a huge opportunity for all of you and me to explore further. Thank you.