

Disability Studies: An Introduction
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Lecture: 7

Ableism

Today we will talk about very important topic that is called 'Ableism'. It is not a that difficult a topic. You might have predicted already that it has something to do with ability. Yes, you're right. Ableism celebrates, if not privileges, the idea of ability. You may recall that we have already seen the concept of normalcy. Normalcy is a modern invention, i.e. from 18 century onwards, when statistics came so did the notion of normalcy. Now the idea of ability. Okay, what about it? Well, I'm able to give a lecture. I'm already using the word 'able'. It talks about my cognitive ability, i.e. bring ideas together, present them in a very coherent fashion, talk for half an hour and things like that. Or maybe ability to speak, ability to speak in English in particular, and ability of this kind are millions and millions, meaning ability for sport, ability for caring, and so on. one can, in some sense, take stock of it, i.e. what is it, in what way it is important to understand its implications, and so on. That is what you call an ability. make no mistake, ability as a notion is actually not static all the time. For example, the idea of ability during the pre-modern, modern or the post-modern area is not the same. how do I know? Well, consider these examples. let me take a classical Tamil poet - Tamil folks who are listening to this lecture know at least one line from a Tamil poet called Avvaiyar. she is famous for Tamil literature, which has to do with 'Aram', i.e. our way of living and so on. she belongs to the pre-modern, during the era of Sangam literature. so we are talking the range of two millennia. she says about her society. In one such it literature on ethics, she says something like this:

Aridha aridha, maanidaradal aridha

Then the poem goes on. It says, to be born as a human is a rare precious gift. she goes on to say:

kunkuruda sevida, ninge parithal aridha

This means, if being born as a human is rare, even so rare is to be born without a hunchback, deafness and blindness. This is very important. you may say Avvaiyar, as a poet, is ableist and she is having masculine patriarchal ideas about her period. I wouldn't go that far. I would say she is making a sociological commentary about her time, may be there was poverty around and because of poverty people were born deaf and became hunchbacked, or they had spinal-cord issue of some kind and so on.

Let me go to another pre-modern example, i.e. Manusmriti, or the laws of Manu. Laws of Manu actually are about the right mode of living and also about how to live this life with mutual respect among many other things. One of the addicts in laws of Manusmriti says that being disabled, deaf or blind, in this birth is because it is retribution for the sins of the past year. you might be reminded of the Karma. Karma is moral order. If you like, we are all governed by moral order of some kind, assumes the Karma doctrine and the doctrine also says in this larger scheme of things, in large moral order, one is being part of the whole. If you have been bad to someone yesterday, you may as well reap for it today, if not tomorrow. There is no 'one birth' cycle in that moral order, you may be reborn and the rebirth may reflect sins and virtues of the past and so. it is hard to believe in this kind of things in 21st-century, but remember, boys and girls of that period took it very seriously. Karma principle, in 21st-century, is still believed in by many millions, including those practicing astrology and so on. To understand this, it seems, few lines about what is pre-modern, modern and post-modern will help. one of the things that ruled the pre-modern is that it was not modern. I may be said to be indulging in tautology. Well, maybe! but the factors is that pre-modern was not ruled by science, and science has intellectual investment in the idea that senses alone can perceive reality. Senses or rational logic is the way to knowledge. for example, in terms of optical sense, seeing may involve a binocular, a radio telescope that can see beyond 13.6 billion light years away in time and space, or a microscope, and the microscope can see the tiniest of the virus or bacteria. Similarly, it is in the case of hearing and touch. Advaita principle would say, 'God is everything', including this chair and

around. Science would argue, well, this is not really the case because I cannot touch God. so pre-modern, on the other hand, was not ruled by science. I am not trying to say that pre-modern boys and girls of that time did not have a rational mind. No, not at all. It is just that they were ruled by the cosmological order and faith. Moral order ruled them. Sins, virtues, Gods and Goddesses, belief system, and so on. and the pre-modern, among other things, involved interdependence. in the modern time, maximum we can do it to extend to join family. But pre-modern was much more than that -- they had a whole community, a village, they knew each other's family and so on. You may say, "In my village, it is also like that". Yes, pre-modern traces do exist, even now. nothing dies fully!

Let's come to the modern. Modern, by and large, is when disciplines started becoming branches, and sciences became its centre. Modern also gave rise to individualism. What become important was "I", i.e. the individual, my priorities, my heart, my consciousness, my point a view. why am I talking about ableism and pre-modern? Avvaiyar and Manusmriti are placing disability, in some sense, in some kind of a moral order. Although Avvaiyar is a talking about how it is rare to be born as a human without blindness and deafness and so on, she is actually making a social commentary rather than a castigating or negative remark on people with disability. That's not case with the modern. ever since sciences started ruling, ever since disciplines started becoming isolated and autonomous, ever since one's productivity (say, my capacity or ability to give a lecture like this) began being privileged. so became ability as a central point of view. in the classical Past or the pre-modern time, ability may have denoted moral order or even a character. For example, Kaikai had a hunchback and automatically this gets connected to her capacity to deceive people. That reference apart, in the modern time, ability has become intrinsic to one's individuality, sense of attorney, and capacity to perform. If you like, in the modern times, ability also has become synonymous to one's idea of will (and the capacity to enter social contracts with that will), ability to own property, ability to get into a marriage relationship or friendship, ability to sign a contract, say illegal document. now we are getting to the heart of the problem. So if this is the situation after the 18th-century, then ability, more than Karma and the rest, are ruling us. It is a sort of thing that categorises people, for example, many of you are listening to me and among you many would have felt you are a first ranker, you are an IITian, you are a student of medicine, you are more intelligent/less intelligent, you are one of those beautiful kinds, or one of those dull varieties. This is a problem; it can potentially instill bias, if not outright

excommunication or outright discrimination. Though this started in 18th century but more precisely it's an enlightenment idea. I'm not trying to say this as a Western phenomenon and we Indians are free from it. Far from it. Think about this 1727 Oxford English dictionary definition of ability or able-bodiedness. It referred to those who are fit, healthy, physically robust, and free from physical disability. This means that this is not only referring to ability as not being disabled, but it also means that the one is sort of fit, healthy, and so on. If one is fit and healthy, one can work with clockwork precision.

Having described that, why ableism is an important framework for disability studies and much more. In fact, besides normalcy ability may be described as a central notion to describe many problems, i.e. the problems of marginalisation, problems of discrimination, oppression, and even a affirmative action across disciplines and '-isms'. This is because it is a closely connected to the notion of productivity that is doing the rounds today. Well, is it the same ability in 18th century as it is now? No! During the time of Industrial Revolution, ability was firmly committed to one's capacity to deploy body and mind within the industry framework --the factory or the continuity framework. In a 19th-century, in the colonies and beyond, it was more or less same but capacities of the mind got inducted into it so much that women, people who were poor, economically deprived, people who looked different, and racial minorities, were given attribution that their minds have inferior abilities who are called otherwise as "idiots". in early 20th century until mid-20th century, two World Wars shook this world, particularly the Western world. the fallout of the World War was that millions of soldiers came back with a disability. Now people who were hitherto considered perfectly able-bodied people became, alas, disabled. they has a sense of victimhood. they complained that this is unfair, i.e. so far, you have considered me able-bodied but now it is otherwise.

In the mid and late 20th century, with the arrival of electronic technologies, Virtual realities, video gaming and all that, ability is taking new turns. now dexterity of the fingers is much important because even a five-year old is expected to use a mobile. now we have simulations and we simulate ability actually in creating avatars, and in creating ourselves. The idea of ability is getting into the virtual world.

Now what is ability's connection with ableism? Having established that ability as a notion is so important for all the structures of the world, mundane or philosophical, ableism is an idea that to

privilege the ability alone or the able-bodiedness alone is an act of discrimination, is an act of undue disadvantaging someone. to acknowledge that idea in law, philosophy, sciences and many others, we need this notion called ableism. It is somewhat akin to ageism (discrimination based on age) and castism (discrimination based on caste). Having said that, in the second part of the lecture, we will see what are the kinds of ableism. I have three examples and we will see each of them shortly.