

Disability Studies: An Introduction
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Lecture: 9
Disability Activism

Hello welcome back. Today we will cover the topic themed “Activism” or “Disability Activism”, to be precise, it consists of two parts. The first part I am going to call it disability activism and orientation. In the second part I would call it disability activism and its myriad orientation or myriad 'avatars'. Alright, so what is activism? Let's start with that question, activism is a practice of or orientation towards taking action, often implying the context of a social or political movement. When I say such things you may say in what way it is different from advocacy, not much. Anybody can be an activist right from a homemaker in a village to a famous party member. There is no limit and people do slip into activism at various points in life. Basically breaking status quo is the purpose of any activism and disability activism to come to the point has some specific features. And that's the purpose of this lecture. Simi Linton, a famous activist from America puts it this way, one of the purpose of disability activism is to say or proclaim nothing about us without us. Look at that statement, well, you can't always talk on my behalf because I can't see or I can't hear or I cannot articulate well that doesn't mean I can be invalidated, my point of view or our point of view or perception orientation and so on can be invalidated. No way, it should be nothing about us without us. That's the crux I would say. And when saying this a disability activist would demystify the idea of approach or a point of view by a non disabled, who can be called able-bodied as well. There is an interesting term you may like to see, you might like to hear its called TAB, temporarily able-bodied, it means the well nobody is always able-bodied, always normal, always extraordinary. If I ever had to live with such a person always perfect, always normal, always able, always perfect, I am sure I will get pissed off with that person. Such boring person that should be. So it seems in forwarding in such points of view disability activism recognises the point that 97 of percentage of disability is not congenital, not inherit it is acquired. And that said, let's see what are the specific points of views that emerge from disability activism.

Paul Longmore, a critic, disability historian actually put it this way, disability activism one of the primary function of viewpoint is to challenge the medical viewpoint that not necessarily challenge medical viewpoint, but challenge the reductionism that comes with a medical point of view of disability. Meaning my blindness or somebody's incapacity to move limbs is mere condition, a medical condition. It is much more than that, it is just not the description is not a mere vocabulary disability is a lived condition, lived reality. Second point that emerge from activism, disability activism specific, is shifts from correcting an individual to reforming the society. This is very interesting. There may be instances, there should be instances actually, people commit mistakes. For example, a disabled person. If you hold a meeting among your friends in second floor and do not bother to think about how your disabled friend will manage to make it to the second floor and then blame him or her for coming late to meeting then it tantamount to correction. You are basically giving "Gyan" to the person, you should be punctual, things like that.

On the other hand, you take a reformist position well to make the field level playing, you need to have different affirmative actions wheelchair for a person who cannot move his legs, or making lift, ramps possible. If one is not having sufficient memory then give everyday notes for everyday life, so that the everyday life management becomes easy. So basically recognise that deficit or lack of capacity or human limitations need not necessarily entail correction, but a change in social orientation a reformist position. Basically shifting the burden from the disabled person to the society as it were the reformist position. Third position about disability activism Longmore identifies is Civil Rights position, well he is from America. Rights approach, I have a right to be heard. I have a right for education. In India basic school education is a universal right now. We have the made it a law, so giving education, even basic one to a poor child is no more an act of charity it a right. Basically, activism, no matter what is its orientation, disability, race, gender, gay pride wherever it emerges, it is in defense of the identity to which it is attached to. That's by and large the nature of any activism. And next it is about self-determination in achieving a fuller citizenship, what do we mean by that?

Well, we all or most of us who are listening to this lecture, are citizens of this country and

citizenship comes with certain duties. It also comes with certain entitlements for example, you cannot be asked by a police suddenly to show your passport or you cannot be refused, no authority in this country has the right to refuse you or curtail you're right for voting or for example, curtail your mobility to move from one place to another, curtail your self-expression, practice a religion and so. Well what does that have to do with the self-determination? On account of disability thanks to disability activism the boundaries of law gets pushed. 20 years ago or 30 years ago, a lecturer with my disability was rare and almost impossible in many places. Thanks to disability activism or blindness activism in this country I am able to be here in front of you talking about the phenomenon on which so many people worked on. In a nutshell disability activism wherever it happens, it takes a political position.

Like other activisms, but here it is about removing political barriers and barriers of other kinds say barrier to mobility, barrier to a fuller embodied expression. For example, if you deny someone with a limitation in using legs from using wheelchair, then you basically prevent that person from having a free mobility and creating environments where wheelchair can be beautifully maneuvered is also potential problem that disability activism always talked about. I have given some kind of broad sweep on the idea of disability activism, what is it, what is its range. Now let's concentrate on how it works. Let me first talk about diversity in disability activist. Well each one his constituency or her constituency in some sense, survival of the fittest does play a role in political activism of people with a disability like other human identities. For example, I grew up hearing about GAB, Graduate Association for the Blind in Chennai, which has been in this job business for blind people last 40 years. Basically folks out there went around strikes, hunger strikes and this and that myriad petitions, street protests, silent writing and many other forms of activism that helped states, Tamil Nadu, particularly to realise that blind people can work in some areas and can be imagined to work in areas that are unexplored as well. Each disability group like this make different bargains about the idea of citizenship, fuller and meaningful participation in society, cultural expression, activism and human flourishing.

For blind people broadly activism may entail the following, one availability of knowledge in accessible format- braille, digital materials, tactical maps say Indian map accessibility of sciences and accessibility of seemingly difficult disciplines, such as engineering, medicine,

lawso on. Blind activism may also entail taming or harnessing the scope and expansiveness of visual world in favour of people with low-vision or blindness and their community and communities that surround the make them like their families, schools, church towns, et cetera. Take another instance deaf activism,deaf activism has different varieties within it. Actually, when you mention the word deaf one doesn't have to imagine total deafness, where one doesn't have any hearing capacity at all, deafness varies. Some people can become deaf midway in life. Old age can inevitably lead to hearing loss in which the case, they can have a hearing aid of some kind, and some children are born deaf. Naturally, activism connected to deaf, deafness will weigh. It may vary, making this lecture for example, in sign language. A totally deaf person and a person who inherited deafness and the communities which is surrounded in the deaf community who have a similar condition may choose to come up and flourish in life using sign language gestures and so on.

Sign language is as much natural language as verbal language. So sign language activism may be specific and those who became deaf or partially deaf in the later period of life, then activism may be about accessing, using and having a fulfilling life with the remaining hearing capacity or it may be in the form of a demand for technologies that support their hearing loss. Meaning get jobs and other requirements based on their hearing loss and capacities. So it seems people with chronic conditions, disabled people with the diversities within them beyond bodily impairments and cognitive limitation, they get into activism differently as well. For example, women with a disability. They inherit or run into challenges that may differ from men. Some people call it double disability or doubly disabled. You experience patriarchy or male dominance as a woman and you also get marginalised within the disable community because of your unique difference. There is another possibility, or when talking about diversity disabled people can gather activism based on what they want and that context and not necessarily based on the limitations unique to their body and mind. People with cognitive or mental disability for example, may say, well, you have this ideas of will, memory, cognition based on a perception of self or based on cognition and all, but I refuse to buy it. I have equal right to citizenship as much as people who can “normally think”. So what is the conclusion?

Disability and diversity can also lead to diversity of activism. What else is there about activism

to speak, well disabled people also have this parental activism. For example, when a child is born in a family with a disability or child inherits a disability or there is a marriage between a disabled and nondisabled person. The nondisabled parents or nondisabled spouse become activists. They start talking and raising voice as caregiver. Some say that the talking on behalf of somebody else involves ethical issues and even not be always correct, so be it. Care giving is a human problem, mothers for example, nourish the voice of the other person. And therefore being activist is and should be and ought to be second nature to them because that is one demonstration of courage against structural violence that happens everywhere against their endeavours in bringing their child. Disability activism also involves embodiment, meaning thinking with the body and the mind, naturally, people's deafness, visually all the other things come into the picture.

Well, how do I conclude now, I'm an academic, I am a teacher therefore I want to leave a little bit of note, tiny notes about activism and academia. That's an interesting topic to take in the lecture. Well all academic persuasions that are based on identity, they draw from popular activist moments for example, great amount of gender scholarship promoted by feminism. Philosophical and literary treatises anthropological insights and many, many, many more books draw on women's movements around the world and so does academic disability activism. It can intervene in recovering troops about the past disability discrimination and so on in a particular context. It may involve discovering new teaching styles and learning styles that are more level playing. It may also involve doing coalition, what did I mean by that? Well, just now I said, myriad identity movements drawn their activism. See the commonality, for example of disability conditions. Lots of conditions connected to disability in India is due to the degree of degradation of environment so a disabled activist academic actress can draw richly from environmental activism, do eco criticism with disability and so on. Hope you got this broader picture. In the next part, we will deal with what are the other avatar of disability activism. We just got an orientation will see how it gains different shapes or avatars in different parts of the world. Thank you.