

Module name/ title: Disability and Media

Paper: Media and Margins

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Component II: Description of the Module

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1. Introduction:

In this module, we are going to look into the different models of disability and its interactions with media. Furthermore, we would also examine the role of media with reference to disability.

Societies have for centuries constructed norms and so has it done to describe bodily structures too. The extent of deviance from the set norm defines the 'other'. It often becomes difficult to assess where this construction ends and the reality begins. Disability for centuries was looked upon as a deviance from the norm, as the 'other' population. It has not been very long since an inclusive approach has been adopted while addressing the needs of the persons with disabilities. The progressive development of various models of disability reflects the history of the disability rights movement (DRM). While looking at the approach of the society in dealing with disability, we may categorize the phases into three models - the religious model, the medical model and the social model.

The **religious model of disability** grounds disability in the context of religious beliefs, myths and texts. In the Judeo-Christian society, the understanding of bodily differences has been rooted in biblical references. Disabilities are looked upon as the result of evil spirits, displeasure of the gods or witchcraft. In the Hindu Doctrine of 'Karma Phala', disability is projected as a result of the sins one may have committed in the previous births. Dr. G.N Karna (1999) in his book, "*United Nations and Rights of the Disabled persons: a Study in Indian Perspective*" talks about this. He further adds that in India where illiteracy prevails, disability and diseases are often linked with disobedience of religious norms or rituals. The Indian epics depicted persons with disabilities in an exclusive manner. For instance, the character of *Manthra* in the *Ramayana* is portrayed with a hunch on her back and is projected as a very shrewd and evil woman. Similarly, *Dhritarashtra* in the *Mahabharata*, was visually impaired and responsible for the war of *Kurukshetra*. The character of *Shakuni* in the said epic had a limping leg and is known to be the most conniving mind in the epic. In this model, it's a belief that any person with disability has taken birth in the disabled form to pay for the sins they had committed in their last life. Persons with disabilities were never allowed to inherit the throne or considered as heir to a designated position with this belief. Though this model of disability is less prevalent today, but there are many cultures which still connect disability to sin and shame. This model has often resulted in ostracism and shame.

As science progressed, the priests and exorcist of the religious model were replaced by physicians and scientists. The defined norm of health remained a youthful, abled body with a rational thinking mind. Those who lacked any aspect of this, was placed at an inferior position of the hierarchy. This is the **medical model of disability**. This

was when human productivity and work came to be the primary focus of human societies. The medical model anchored in the persistent effort to enable the disabled to be a productive member of the society. Further, it also established institutions where the disabled could be placed for care and reform, so that the family can meet their societal obligations. The medical model looked at disability at the level of the body, without taking into consideration the immediate environment. The tendency to label a person with reference to the disability he or she has becomes frequent in this model. It stresses on the functional traits of the individual instead of fixing the external obstacles in the immediate environment.

In contrast to the medical model, **the social model of disability** conceptualizes disability as a problem caused by the society in the manner it organizes itself considering the needs of the majority. This model does not view disability as an individual problem or a 'disease'. It locates disability squarely within a society. It addresses the social, political, psychological, environmental and economic barriers existing in the society which makes it disabling for certain individuals with bodies different from the majority. If we take the instance of a visually impaired person, the medical model would confine its solutions to medically diagnose the extent of the disability. The social model, on the other hand, would assess the barriers in the immediate environment of the individual and work towards removing it, thus making life better for him. The tactile paths, braille, screen reading software, etc. are interventions of the social model.

In recent times, the social model has furthermore taken into account the political aspects of disability. This gave rise to the **rights based model** of disability which has been successful in translating the concerns of persons with disabilities (PWDs) to policies and legislations. Having engaged in identity politics, disability activists are adopting strategies similar to other social movements.

2. The background:

The 70s decade witnessed the first wave of serious concern for the PWD. Though the struggle was mostly between a few individuals and the state, it was able to mark the beginning of the DRM in India. However, it received little attention and was not able to make significant structural changes in the system. At the global level post World War II, an intensive dialogue on disability rights had begun. It is believed that it was triggered by the thousands of soldiers who were disabled by war and their families had joined them in this political struggle.

The larger DRM at the global level facilitated funds to run the campaign in India. Thus, one may observe that in the 80s, the DRM was largely managed by the NGOs with singular focus on a particular type of disability. With the announcement of 1982-1993 as *The Decade of Disabled Persons* by the United Nations, there was a shift of focus on rehabilitation. The Mental Health Act-1987 came into existence which

focused on regulating standards in mental health institutions. The 90s decade saw the rise of disability activists with the campaign going stronger. This resulted in the People with Disability Act 1995 which has substantive provisions related to the prevention and early detection, education, employment, affirmative action, non-discrimination/barrier free access, research and manpower development, and institutions for persons with severe disabilities. The Act also called for 3% reservation of PWD in government jobs.

The disability status was never canvassed in the census from 1941 to 1971. In 1981, three types of disabilities were included in the census only to be left out again in 1991. In 2001, the census revealed that 2.1% of the total population has disability. But, experts argue that this number is understated due to the lack of a proper definition of disability. Several categories, including intellectual disabilities were excluded from the list. In 2011, the number was 2.21% of the total population. In the meantime, the United Nations Convention on the Persons with Disabilities was adopted on 13 December 2006 and it came into effect on 3 May, 2008. This convention gave a broad categorization of disabilities and clarified how all categories of rights apply to persons with disabilities. It further signified the areas where adaptations have to be made to make it possible for the persons with disabilities to exercise their rights. India has ratified it without any reservations and to codify India's obligation under the convention, The Rights of people with Disabilities Bill was drafted in 2011. The Rights of people with Disabilities Bill 2014, extended the definition of disability from 7 to 21 categories. It has presented a rights based perspective to approach disability and expanded its definition from a medical framework to a social one. The 3rd of December was marked as the International Day of Disabled Persons. Every year, the theme adopted is one step ahead to make life beautiful for the PWD.

Year	Theme for Disability Day 3 rd December
1998	Arts, Culture and Independent Living
1999	Accessibility for all for the new Millenium
2000	Making information technologies work for all
2001	Full participation and equality: The call for new approaches to assess progress and evaluate outcome.
2002	Independent Living and Sustainable Livelihoods.
2004	Nothing About Us Without Us " relies on this principle of participation

2005	Interdependence between human rights, development and disability.
2006	accessibility to information technologies,
2007	Decent work for persons with disabilities
2008	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Dignity and justice for all of us
2009	Making the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) disability-inclusive: Empowerment of persons with disabilities and their communities around the world
2010	Keeping the promise: Mainstreaming disability in the Millennium Development Goals towards 2015 and beyond
2011	Together for a better world for all: Including persons with disabilities in development
2012	Removing barriers to create an inclusive and accessible society for all
2013	Break Barriers, Open Doors: for an inclusive society and development for all
2014	Sustainable Development: The Promise of Technology
2015	Inclusion matters: access and empowerment for people of all abilities
2016	Achieving 17 Goals for the Future We Want”

3. Media representation of disability:

Media has played a significant role in constructing the image and identity of the disabled. Sometimes media reflects the existing perceptions of the society while other times it helps to depict an alternative scenario. We have all come across of the representations of disability in various forms of mass media. In this section we are going to revisit some of these and try to critically locate the impact of mass media in constructing and construing popular perceptions on disability and the disabled. The two main questions we are going to address in this section are – 1). How disability is portrayed in media and in what ways? 2). How do audiences interpret these representations?

Almost thirty years ago, one of the most influential disability rights activist Paul Hunt writes in one of the essays in the book ‘*Stigma*’ published in 1960 that, ‘*We are tired of being statistics, cases, wonderfully courageous examples to the world, pitiable objects, to stimulate funding*’. The statement articulates the main hurdle in the path of disability emancipation, that is, the stereotyped portrayal of the disabled in popular

culture. In the 60s and 70s, mainstream Hindi movies depicted a pitiable image of the disabled. The most common form of disability shown in commercial Hindi films was visual impairment. The disabled character would never be the protagonist. It would invariably be a small role, and the depiction would be that of a poverty stricken person in a downtrodden condition. There was no scope for the character to be empowered. This was the general perception about the disabled in the society. In 1991, Paul Hunt identified ten stereotypes that the media used to portray the disabled. These are:

- i. The disabled person as pitiable or pathetic;
- ii. An object of curiosity or violence;
- iii. Sinister or evil;
- iv. The super cripple;
- v. As atmosphere;
- vi. Laughable;
- vii. His/her own worst enemy;
- viii. As a burden;
- ix. As non-sexual; and
- x. Being unable to participate in daily life.

It would be wrong to not mention about movies like ‘Sparsh’ and ‘Koshish’ which made an effort to break the conventional stereotypes. However, such movies came to be categorized in the parallel cinema category which had limited viewership. If we juxtapose the decade with the history of the Disability Rights Movement, we would notice that these were the lean times for the disabled in the real world too. The real world was just depicting the real without challenging any set norms.

In the last decade, Indian film Industry has made some remarkable contributions in portraying disability in an empowering manner. Movies like *Iqbal*, *Margarita with a Straw* celebrated the special abilities of PWD. While *Black*, *Taare Zameen Par*, *Koi mil Gaya*, etc. made conscious effort in talking about other forms of disability and their everyday struggles. Indian Film Industry has finally decided to look at disabled persons through an emancipatory lens.

In the **advertising industry**, one would find two frames in which disability is portrayed. One is the mainstream brand advertising while the other is advertising done by charity organizations for funding. The former is rare while the latter mostly is found highlighting the ‘disability’ in the persons rather than emphasizing on the environment that is disabling. It is still a rare sight to see a PWD in any brand advertisement, in both print and electronic media, except when the advertisement is about any event or object related to disability, for instance, the campaign designed for the Paralympics event. In recent times, however, many multinationals are found to be warming up to the idea of integrating PWDs in the advertising campaigns. One such advertisement is the new KFC advertisement, which shows two friends bonding over fried chicken. One of the friend is hearing impaired and they both communicate in

sign language. Another is a Nescafe ad, which shows how a person with excessive stammer turns it into a matter of strength. These advertisements are different and they do make a difference.

Print media has been utilized by disability activists to take the DRM forward. The newspapers and magazines have a wide circulation and it provides larger spaces to write and debate about various issues of the disabled. The representation of the PWD in print media can be categorized into three groups-

1. Reporting on any harassment meted out to the person with disability;
2. Articles on success stories of various persons with disabilities; and
3. Articles or debates on the rights of the disabled.

In the first category the reportage seems to highlight the disability in the person creating a pitiable picture. This category may include stories of exorcism or the like to treat or ostracize PWD, in an effort to reflect the majoritarian attitude towards the minority.

The second category includes stories like that of Sudha Chandran-the Dancer with locomotor disability or Ajit Kumar-the visually impaired IAS officer. Stories on inclusive models like the restaurant 'Echoes' where all employees are deaf and mute or 'Udaan', the musical band of the visually impaired are a welcoming change. Such stories celebrate the abilities of the disabled and contributes immensely to change the larger perceptions.

The third category is crucial to take the campaign on DRM forward. Consistent engagement with the print media helps in churning public opinion as well as creating awareness. Disorders like Autism, ADHD, aspergers syndrome, etc. require awareness and print media has been doing a commendable job in giving space to columns exclusive to problems and issues related to the wide spectrum of disorders which are little known to people. Now, when a child shies away from socializing or from friends, parents do not force the child to behave in the socially acceptable manner. They understand that the child may be autistic and would require careful handling.

The **new media** refers to the digital media and in this section we are going to analyze how new media plays its role in addressing disability. The role of new media can be examined from two frames: one, when the PWD activists are using it as a forum to publicize its campaign and garner public support; two, new media as a tool to access information and services for and by the PWD.

New media has revolutionized spaces of expression for the PWD. Social networking sites have a catalytic effect on campaigns related to disability rights. It has become easier to mobilize public support and generate positive public perception through sharing, dialoguing and debating in the social media sites. New media has made it

possible for activists to run a campaign in a cost effective and less time consuming manner. Moreover, now it has become possible for PWD to directly participate and sometimes even lead a campaign on issues related to disability rights. Any kind of violation is easily brought to notice through the internet. The reach of information is manifold. The new media platforms have democratized information. As a way to participate in social networks and to advocate for an equitable world, the web becomes an ideal medium. Entertainment, regular service deliveries, financial management, shopping, libraries, etc. have gone on the web and this makes it easily accessible for the PWD.

The PWDs also access digital media as an interface on several platforms. Screen Reader softwares such as JAWS, NV Access, ORCA etc. help the visually impaired to access books and other written material. Audio book libraries can be accessed on the internet. The various service delivery applications have made life easier for the PWD.

The role of media has a great impact in creating and changing perceptions. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the image of ‘disabled’ persons is largely created by media. Thus it is a huge responsibility for the media to take it seriously and make a conscious effort to bring in change.

How do people read the messages conveyed by media? The three theories propounded by sociologists, namely, the limited effects theory, the class dominant theory and the culturalist theory may throw light on what drives the reception of media content? The **limited effects theory** came and was tested in the 40s and 50s. It was at a time when the dominance of media was far less than today. It argued that the influence of media is very limited on peoples’ perception because views and opinions are based on what one already believes. The main critic to this theory is that media goes beyond presenting facts. It constructs opinions through discussions and debates. The **class dominant theory** argues that media is controlled by a handful of elites who manipulates information suiting the corporate interests. One cannot deny that many movements and social issues are brought to the fore by the media. The critics argue that though media may be in the hands of an elite few, the news is churned by journalists who have ethics to follow. The culturalist theory came in 90s, a decade when media was in its prime. This theory considers audience as active recipients of information. It claims that the audience chooses and interprets media contents based on their experience and knowledge. One must take into account the culture and belief systems of the audiences while designing contents. Common perceptions and belief systems concerning disability are not promising to the wellbeing of the PWD. Here, media’s role becomes more important because it would have to focus on attitudinal change. The content should be appealing to the cultural context and should also be conveying a strong message. The inclusion of PWDs in the media workforce is also a rarity. Portrayal of disability is largely in the hands of people who have no

experiences of living the life of a disabled. Increasing the percentage of employees with disability would be a large step in empowering them and also in removing stereotypes. Greenberg's Drench hypothesis, which states that one or two salient programmes can dramatically change the set notions and stereotypes, should be considered in earnest. It would call for exceptional sensitivity on the part of the media and tremendous creativity to come up with such content and if PWDs are involved, the process itself would be empowering and would have far reaching effects.

4. Media sensitivity

Considering the enormous role media plays in shaping the perceptions of people on disability, it should play its role responsibly and sensitively. In this section, we are going to discuss the aspects media must guard while dealing with disability.

Words or terms: Media should use terms carefully when it comes to disability. Words, like 'crippled', or 'retarded', colour the identity of the individual with the disability. Such words are derogatory and do not give any space to preserve dignity. One should be careful in using the correct terminology. Research and dialogue on disability has been going on and there has been changes in the words and terms used to denote certain forms of disabilities. For instance, mental retardation is not used any more. Intellectual disability is the term used commonly. Media should keep itself abreast of these developments. Also, there is a manner in which a PWD is addressed. For instance, instead of saying 'a spastic child', one should say, 'a child with cerebral palsy'. The moment we say 'spastic child', it implies that the existence of the child is not recognized beyond its disability. These subtle aspects make a good deal of difference in ways a message is conveyed.

Media accessibility: Media while constructing content must consider the disabled population in mind. Doordarshan telecasts news in the sign language once in a week. No other content seen on the current day television seems to consider the people with disabilities. Similarly, how many newspapers or magazines are there in braille? In the age of new media, despite the limited choices, audio books are a blessing to the visually impaired. How many of the e-marketing sites sell audio books? One would find kindle version', 'hard cover', 'soft cover', but no audio books. This is because very few books are converted to audio formats. These formats are in no way suitable for intellectually disabled children?

Representation: Media often represents PWDs as heroes or victims. Media must attempt to integrate them in the society by consciously publishing articles to create awareness on the different forms of disability alongside the success stories. The focus should be to mould the general perception of people to bring in an attitudinal change. Media should make a conscious effort to provide a platform to the PWD providing them with equal opportunities.

The next section has two case studies. The first case study is about an organization which uses mass media to talk about disability in rural India. The second case study is about an award winning film portraying cerebral palsy.

5. Some case studies:

a. Case study 1

The Institute of Rural Research and Development (IRRAD) started a project on community radio in the Mewat district of Haryana. Baseline data showed that around 1.5% of the total population of villages has a disability, the most common being locomotor disability. The organization decided to initiate community radio in the villages primarily focusing on disability. The objectives of the project were to generate awareness on disability and to bring the voices of the disabled to the fore. Shiv Charan, a visually impaired man, is a good singer. The community radio recognized his talent and recorded his programme for 30 minutes. A ten year old boy, Nahar, who had lost both his hands in an accident was given a platform to share his story. He spoke about his hobbies, his dreams and his expectations. The audiences gave a very encouraging response to the programmes and the performers gained confidence. The community radio programme contributed immensely in bringing PWD to the mainstream.

b. Case Study 2

The film director Swati Chakraborty made a film on Jeeja Ghosh, who is a cerebral palsy activist. The name of the film is 'I am Jeeja'. The film narrates the life of Jeeja as a person with cerebral palsy and how she had to struggle to make a 'normal' space for herself in this society. She is the head of Advocacy and Disability Studies at the Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy. The story is in first person narrated by Jeeja. This is rare considering her speech impairment due to cerebral palsy. Swati insisted in retaining Jeeja's voice since she wanted the audiences to hear Jeeja's voice. The film bagged the best film award on social issues in the non-film category at the 64th National Awards Ceremony.

6. Summary

The module on disability and media begins by examining the different models of disability. In the following paragraphs, it briefly attends to the trajectory of the Disability Rights Movement in India. It looks into the phases through which the movement emerged and took shape. The next section is about the interaction between various forms of media and disability. It examines the different representations of disability in the media and its emerging patterns. It further looks into the driving forces behind people's reception of the content. It looks into the ways in which media

should deal with disability sensitively. The module presents two case studies in which mass media have been effectively used to tell the stories of PWDs.

