Disability: A Taboo since Ages
Discussing Disability in Indian Mythological Narratives

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Abstract- A physical or mental condition that prevents a person from doing particular tasks or engaging in specific activities is referred to as a disability. Its effects can vary from person to person and might be short-term or long-term, minor or severe. Different reasons, such as genetic abnormalities, accidents, injuries, or chronic illnesses, can cause disabilities. Disability is sometimes regarded as a taboo subject, something that should not be recognized or discussed. This may be the result of several things, such as fear, ignorance, and prejudice. The experiences of people with disabilities may be discounted or neglected because they are perceived as being different or less capable. Feelings of loneliness, isolation, and humiliation may result from this. This paper aims to present a new outlook towards PWD, who are stereotyped as evil and crooked since ages.

Keywords: Disability, Taboo, PWD, Evil, Stereotype, Prejudice.

The topic of disability is seen as a taboo in many different cultures. Language is one method through which ideology of the masses is formed. Words like "handicapped" and "crippled" are frequently used in a disparaging manner to mock or belittle individuals with disabilities. The impression that having a handicap is something to be embarrassed of is reinforced by using derogatory words and the way PWD are mentioned in age old narratives and epics. The term Disability is defined as follows by the United Nations Convention,

“Long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory disabilities when combined with other factors, may make it difficult for a person to fully and equally participate in society.”

A person who has a disability has a condition that limits them in some manner. Congenital (existing at birth), cognitive (related to the brain), developmental (appearing as the individual matures), physical (for instance, brought on by an accident or infection), sensory, or a combination of factors may be the cause of the disability. Impairments that are not immediately apparent are known as invisible or hidden disabilities. Intellectual impairments, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum diseases, mental illnesses, asthma, epilepsy, allergies, and migraines are a few instances of invisible disabilities.

People with disabilities are frequently seen through the prism of pity in society. They frequently see themselves in terms of their impairments and limitations, which prevents them from participating fully in society. In addition, there is a tendency for views toward those with impairments to be arrogant and demeaning. In most of the societies in the entire world PWD are seen as a burden as are always kept on the fringes of the society. According to the 2011 Census 2.21 percent of Indians have a disability. About 2 crore 68 lakh (26.8 million) persons are thus represented as disabled in the nation. The Indian government now recognizes 21 different forms of disability. Disability is typically viewed in India as the result of sins committed in former life. People with impairments are frequently pitied and viewed as nearly worthless. This paper focuses on description of PWD in Indian Mythological texts as mythology of any nation plays a major role in channelizing the behaviour of the individuals in the society.

The Ramayana and The Mahabharata are the two important mythological narratives in Indian culture. There are many characters and episodes in them which bring forward the disabled characters in the mainstream. The fate of persons with disabilities is depicted in Indian mythology through two main themes. The first stereotype portrays disabled individuals as evil, such as Manthra in The Ramayana and Shakuni in The Mahabharata. The second trope suggests the remarkable participation of persons with disabilities by emphasizing their value via their discernment or grace. As a result, people like Ashtavakra, Surdas, and Kalidas make their impact known by virtue of their skill. First let’s discuss the disabled characters of The Ramayana, the penalty meted out to Shurpnakha, a Rakshasa, for courting Rama in The
Ramayana once more links handicap or deformity with retribution for crimes. Shurpanakha's ears and nose were cut off as due compensation for pursuing a married man. The epics also contain a number of additional representations of disability. Shurpanakha is shown by Kavita Kane as a hunchback in the prologue of Lanka's Princess, whom everyone despies, jeers, and despises.

Gyanwati and Shantanu, Shravan Kumar's parents, are represented as being blind in The Ramayana, and their blindness is equated with dependency. Another illustration of how handicapped individuals were portrayed and projected in the epics is Manthra, the maid of the most brilliant queen Kaikkeyi, who had a bent back. It appears that Mantra's anger caused Rama to be forced into a fourteen-year exile, research on the subject have shown that Mantra is really thought of as the goddess Saraswati, who desired for Rama to be exiled. She acts as a literary need for the development of the story. Mantra simply serves as a tool to accomplish the goal of Ravana's killing by the hands of Lord Rama. According to the narrative Lord Ram was the manifestation of God Vishnu, and his only motivation for taking on human form was to destroy Ravana. A result of Kaikeyi's exacting the two desires from King Dasharatha in exchange for sparing his life on the battlefield, she asks him to make Bharata the ruler of Ayodhya and exile Ram for 14 years. It is shown in the narrative that Mantra plays an instrumental role in this exile of Rama, she is the one to advise this to Kaikeyi. Mantra is shown like a person motivated by cruelty and conceit. She provokes Kaikkeyi and takes advantage of her insecurities. She fits the cliché; her disfigurement is used to reflect her twisted thoughts and motives. This clearly represents that how PWD are taken as a soft target by society since ages and are blamed for every wrong doing. The works Asura: Tale of the Vanquished by Anand Neelkanth and Ravana: An Enemy of Aryavarta by Amish Tripathi this view point of showing Mantra as a device to fulfill the goal of this incarnation is mentioned, this has brought a little sensitivity among the masses for viewing PWD merely as humans, not evil.

The theme of Disability acts as a central theme of the Mahabharata. It begins with Shantanu, who had two sons— Chitrangada and Vichitravirya—from his subsequent marriage to Satyavati and his son Bhishma from Ganga. Bhishma swears never to get married, and sons of Satyavati shall be the king's heirs. Vichitravirya inherits the throne after Shantanu's death. He was forcefully wedded to Ambika and Ambalika at the swayamwara hosted by the King of Kashi through arrangements made by Bhishma. Satyavati wants her first son Vyasa to have children with the widows when Vichitravirya and Chitrangada both pass away without leaving any offspring. Ambika shuts her eyes when she sees Vyasa during their procreation, which causes her son Dhritarashtra to be born blind. Ambalika becomes pale after meeting Vyasa, and as a result, her son Pandu is born underweight and pale. Satyavati requests that Vyasa make another attempt since, in accordance with the Vedas, "a person with bodily faults cannot be made a king." Ambika and Ambalika sent their maid this time instead of going alone. Hence Vidura is born. Vidura is Vysa's third child with the maid. He is born healthy and is one of The Mahabharata's most learned characters.

One of the main characters of The Mahabharata is Dhritarashtra, a blind monarch who is consistently viewed as cruel and prejudiced. His disappointments are what drive him to be nasty and irritated. Bhishma Pitamah prepared him from infancy to become the Kuru dynasty's next ruler, but right before his coronation he was prevented from taking the throne by Vidur, the newly appointed minister due to his blindness. This was the primary factor in Dhritarashtra transformation into a cunning fellow. He accepted his fate and started living a straightforward life, embracing Pandu his younger brother as the ruler. However, because of the sage Kendama's curse, Pandu retreats in the forest with his two wives, Kunti and Madri and dies there in his early age, without leaving any successor. This compelled Vidur to appoint Dhritarashtra as the king of Hastinapur. Dhritarashtra was made to feel like a backup plan by accepting Pandu's abandoned and rejected position since there was no rightful person left other than him. This angered him even more.

In order to express her love and solidarity Gandhari, his wife accepted her spouse's blindness and put a blindfold on herself. She had promised her spouse that she will share his suffering despite her infertility. The story of the Mahabharata battle, is narrated to him by Sanjay. His blindness here is presented as both a real and a figurative flaw. His blindness is connected with lack of judgement and inability to correct the wrong judgments of his son Duryodhana, despite the fact that he otherwise possesses incredible physical power (he shatters an iron statue of Bheema out of rage). His incapacity calls into doubt his right to rule, and his children disregard his counsel on the same basis. Dhritarashtra sons' resistance to his commands and incapacity to manage them demonstrate the link between helplessness and disability. Through his character it is presented that a disabled person can neither be a good father nor a good king. But the real factors contributing to his biased behaviour towards his son are overlooked due to his blindness.

There is also the story of Eklavya chopping off his thumb when Dronacharya orders him to. This was caste-based oppression that deprived the able-bodied outcasts by rendering them physically disabled via body mutilation. It is stated in this epic that people belonging to lower castes were not allowed to gain knowledge, and hence as a punishment for mastering the skill of archery better than Arjun the favorite
disciple of Dronacharya, Ekalavya was made to cut his right thumb, which made him unable to hold bow and arrow for life. This episode shows disability as a punishment for wrong deeds performed by the individuals.

Shakuni is another significant figure in The Mahabharata. He is Gandhari's brother. Shakuni swears to kill the Kuru Clan and inflicts a lifelong injury on his leg as a reminder of his vow of vengeance after learning that Bhishma Pitamah had invaded his Kingdom of Gandhar and forced his beloved sister Gandhari to wed Dhritrashtra. As a result, Shakuni's personality is changed into a clever individual with a handicap stereotype. His limping leg makes him a shrewed person, concretizing the idea of evilness with disability. A malformed woman Kubja appears in the Mathura episode in Kansa's court. She magically recovers from her defects and changes into a lovely maiden when she offers herself to Krishna at his lotus feet. Krishna then accepts her as his wife.

Retellings like Devdutt Pattanaik's Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata, Anand Neelakantan's Ajaya, Mallar Chatterjee's Mahabharat series, Irawati Karwe's Yuganta: The End of an Epoch, Sharath Komarraju's The Rise of Hastinapur is trying to project these characters in new light and to put forward their human existence. Characters with disabilities who are held in some manner accountable for causing or aiding crises may be found in both epics; examples include Manthara in The Ramayana and Dhritrashtra and Shakuni in The Mahabharata. Despite having physical limitations, Manthara and Shakuni are stereotypically represented as cunning and malevolent. In the collective consciousness of today's population, their names connote unpleasant associations. Although the basic words that make up the names Manthara and Shakuni are not inherently bad, popular imagination has given them a bad reputation by mixing evil with incapacity.

Disability should not be perceived as a taboo. PWD already face many challenges due to their body differences. Accessing chances for social interaction, work, healthcare, and education can be difficult for those with impairments. To overcome these obstacles and fully engage in society, they might need extra assistance, modifications, or aids. In order to provide people with disabilities with an inclusive and equal environment, society is essential. This calls for the abolition of discrimination, the creation of equal chances, and the advancement of accessibility in all facets of life. Along with that, it entails appreciating the uniqueness and contributions of those with disabilities. People with disabilities have demonstrated their resiliency, tenacity, and capacity to conquer barriers despite whatever difficulties they may encounter. Numerous people have excelled in a variety of professions, including athletics, the arts, sciences, and activism. Their experiences serve as an inspiration and a constant reminder of the value of inclusiveness and fair treatment for everyone. It is high time now that we should create literature that portrays PWD in a neutral light and frees them from a biased and stereotyped description of being evil or crooked.

REFERENCES: