



## DISABILITY IN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY: A POSTMODERN STUDY

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India is a country of myth, religions and folklore. Mythological texts, teachings and religious fervor largely govern and shape the collective consciousness and ideologies of people here. Hence, this research paper explores to understand the prevalent attitudes of society towards disability as it affects the social and religious model of disability within the Indian context. In India, one finds the idea of *karmamoulding* the narrative around disability. (Kumar43). Disability is a 'saved-in-store' formula applied in cases of demerits and curses. (Kumar 43) On analyzing disabled characters from mythological texts like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*, it is found that disability is largely portrayed in negative shade where the characters are either shown as sympathetic or as evil. The idea of karma is prevalent throughout these texts where being disabled is shown either as a punishment or as a result of sins in previous life. Here, even the good deeds are rewarded with the reversal of disability which becomes highly problematic. The discourse that is homogenized, therefore, marginalizes and further deepens the othering of disabled people and leads them to their de-humanization.

The narrative of Dhritarashtra, the visually impaired king of Hastinapur in *Mahabharata* demonstrates the trope wherein disabled people are regarded as incapable and seen as pitiful human beings no matter how worthy, educated and talented they are. Taking his disability as his inability, he is not crowned as the king (initially) homogenizing the belief that disabled people cannot hold significant positions whether it is being the head of the family or the country. The stigma of having an impaired king is pretty apparent where initially he is denied the position of king owing to the questioning of his disability by Vidura, the chief counselor in royal court. But later the situation becomes paradoxical after the death of Pandu, when he is crowned as the king out of the compulsion. Even though Dhritarashtra is learned and well trained academically and skill wise, still he has to face prejudices in terms of his capabilities as he is questioned repeatedly. This questioning, however, becomes a fatal exercise when no one actually notices that for substantial amount of time that he rules, the kingdom grows pretty well. Thus, Dhritarashtra's narrative shows that impairment even for royalty is treated with internalized prejudices wherein having all the required attributes are not enough to destigmatise the stereotypical behaviour associated with disabled people.

Gandhari, the wife of Dhritarashtra, on the other hand, represents the trope of voluntary disability which is also associated with karma theory. Both these tropes are highly problematic because of the ideologies they seek to internalize for the people who follow such texts. For instance, she voluntarily chooses to be disabled by blindfolding herself for the rest of her life after her marriage to Dhritarashtra. This act on her part can be interpreted both as a means of sacrifice and that of protest (Kumar 44). However, both the interpretations have their own set of issues. The first case represents the problematic nature of karmic theory where Gandhari is rewarded for the so-called sacrifice she makes. She is gifted with powers to make a person harmless. The second case can be read as a protest firstly for being married off without her choice, and secondly, it conveys the conventional idea of normal bodies where she seems to be protesting because she is married to a visually impaired person. Thus, Gandhari's narrative also homogenizes disabled people as not-normal. She too finds them pitiful and sympathetic beings and reinforces the popular belief of showing pity and sympathy towards people with disability. Such attitudes further lead the disabled people to become othering.

The character of Shakuni, brother of Gandhari, also becomes seminal in the discussion as he represents the popular stereotypical trope of associating cunningness and evil intents with disability. Shakuni, regarded as one of the greatest antagonists in Indian epic tradition, has a locomotor disability. Though, he is witty, smart and someone whose disability does not stop him to materialize his wicked and evil intentions. This suggests that ambition and disability do not go hand in hand. The disabled person has to serve some evil function only then they can be accepted as someone ambitious, as someone who might wish to lead a life of purpose like any other normal human being. This inculcates the impression that disabled people, however, smart and powerful they may be, would still have bad impression in the minds of people.

The karmic law again comes into play in the case of Astavakra, the Vedic sage in Hinduism. It represents two tropes i.e., the trope of disability as a punishment and that of reversible disability, both highly problematic in their own ways. As per references in the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*, he is born with eight curvatures in his body. This impairment is a result of him correcting his father as a foetus, and hence 'cursed' to be born with eight bends. Later, he is also given the chance to reverse, rather 'cure' his

disability after winning a scholarly debate. His narrative relates to the idea of disability revered as a punishment. Moreover, being rewarded for his good deeds with an opportunity to reverse his disability again reinforces the idea of associating good karma with disability. Thus, by showing that disabled people have to be extraordinary, to be something more than conventionally normal, only then they can be heroic and worthy of respect. This problematic nature of the representations of disability is highlighted through Astavakra's narrative.

Another important character for the discussion is that of Manthara from the *Ramayana* whose narrative like Shakuni relates to the trope of associating disability with evil intents and also with the trope of disability as a repercussion of sins in the past life. With orthopedic disability of hunchback, she is usually seen in a negative light as she is infamous for being responsible for having sent Lord Rama into exile. Some narratives, like that of Ramopakhyana, shows that her disability is a result of sins from her previous life and that in her next life she would be relieved off her disability by Lord Krishna. Here again, like Astavakra, disability is shown as something that is a result of punishment and can be 'cured' if one repents through pious acts. In other words, the narrative becomes important and at the same time highly problematic as usually people assume hunched back people as being evil or cunning in nature because of the internalized prejudices against disability.

To conclude, it can be said that Indian Hindu mythology largely stigmatizes and marginalizes disabled people. Disabled characters usually oscillate between two extremes either as sympathetic pitiful beings or beings with evil intentions. "The 'disability archetype' is a case in point with representations swinging primarily between two extremes with pity, fun, discrimination, and sympathy at one end of the spectrum and heroism and excellence at the other end" (Kumar 43). Skills and disability do not go hand in hand for instance. "The convergent themes showed us that while the characters were different in the types of disabilities they had, they were largely portrayed the same way—the focus was on their karma, and their names were symbolic of their disability" (Kumar 47) The karmic philosophy is cited as the idea behind the portrayal of disability interpreting it as a result of sins in previous life. The resultant problem is with the stereotypical narrative that is homogenized because people tend to base their entire belief systems on mythological narratives, and hence the characters suffer. Usually, people tend to justify their discriminatory and exclusionary behavior with disabled people using the narratives from mythological texts. Thus, it becomes extremely important that the conventional idea of normality and portrayal of disability is questioned today so that there arises hope for better situation in the future for disabled. Living in the twenty first century and still having all such prejudices against disability does not make sense. "However, how archetypes become stereotypes, and how the phenomenon shapes the process of 'othering', needs to be researched further" (Kumar 47). Hence, mythology becomes an important field of research to reinterpret these mythological texts so that the marginalization of disabled people can be done away with their acceptance in society.

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