INTRODUCTION

§ 1.0

Tanmoy Bhattacharya

I have been thinking and talking about ideology quite a bit in the last quarter of this terrible year (2020).[1] When I sat down to trace the origin of this idea in my own thinking around disability, I am taken back to May 2012, when a little, yet significant – as will become clear shortly – event took place. Just a month prior to this, I as the coordinator of the University of Delhi's Equal Opportunity Cell (EOC), along with almost all other members of the Cell (including Anita Ghai), were unceremoniously replaced by a new team with a change in guard at the university – a familiar trope in the administrative workings of organisations and nations all around the world. This was the first EOC at any university in India, established as early as 2006 with Rama Kant Agnihotri of Linguistics as its first Coordinator, who was kind enough to co-opt many of us as members soon after. By the time I took over in 2009, we had collectively made great strides in all spheres of disability and education, so much so, that soon, we became a model for setting up of EOCs at other universities in the country. My own focus at the EOC was always on creating bodies of knowledge; keeping that in mind and realising the even greater need for organising around knowledge structures found expression in forming a loose collective in May, 2012, called SIG-DSU, Special Interest group on Disability Studies at the Universities, literally in my own departmental office at the department of linguistics where six of us re-read Paul Hunt's celebrated essay "A Critical Condition"[2], which I had got informally translated into Hindi a couple of years ago when I was teaching it in the Disability and Human Rights course at the EOC. In the Preamble of the group, I wrote this:

> Disability related activities in India, with its overemphasis on services, is alarmingly close to creating a hegemonic discourse that shrinks the space for the emergence of a Disability Studies discourse, even further.[3]

This sentiment soon found echoes in a significant opening talk of a conference on subjectivity that Anita had organised at Ambedkar University in August 2013. There, I presented a paper titled "Disability Studies as Resistance: The Politics of Estrangement". That talk was formally published in a book titled *Disability in South Asia* edited by Anita, where I continued to take a purported controversial position thus:

> In fact, what feeds each other within the Indian context is not DS and activism but activism and service, the former accentuating the latter. This association is

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[1] I gave a reading of the Gramscian version of ideology in a short presentation titled "The Terrain of Disability Studies and Critical Abeyance", at an event organised by Anita Ghai and the Ambedkar University, Delhi on October 28, 2020; I discuss this further below (see also Note 9).

[2] Hunt, Paul. 1966. A Critical Condition. In Hunt, Paul (ed.), *Stigma: The Experience of Disability*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, p. 145-59.

[3] See the website for SIG-DSU at: https://ijcds.wordpress.com for the full text of the Preamble.

> threatening to develop into a nexus that will steadfastly keep DS out forever. Therefore, it is time now to move away for a while from the excitement of sloganeering and to build a tradition of true scholarship in DS that in fact feeds activism back in various new ways.[4]

Also around this time, I was developing an understanding of the philosophy of inclusion that is based neither on empathy, nor rights, and proposed in a series of talks in 2014 the idea of centring disability knowledge, which found its fullest form in a talk at a history conference in November 2014,[5] to be published early next year (2021).[6]

The reading group sessions, after the initial years of intensive discussions, were somewhat slowing down, mainly due to a constantly shifting student population changing its interest and, sometimes, careers. After nearly six months of inactivity, Yogesh and Avinash, a couple of research students from the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), approached me earnestly to revive the reading sessions as this seems to be the only avenue available where disabled research students working in Delhi on disability studies themes find a liberal environment to discuss, rant and also to relax. Revive of course we did, and read several seminal texts on disability, argued on till late into the evenings for three, four or even five hours on issues that relate to the immediate concerns of the members of the group, which is about the barriers disabled research students face everywhere in all facets of their lives.

This has been my "work", our work, keeping this collective strung together, to read texts and to understand our own predicament, our own positionings amidst the various currents that we are each truly a product of. This is what true intersectionality means to me – working out our own coordinates, and this is what research means to me, it is not something which is alienated from my own self, it *is* me.[7] Through such "works", I see the workings of a Gramscian[8] notion of ideology, especially in a new reading[9] of his idea of ideology as a "a *terrain* of practices, principles, and dogmas having a material and institutional nature constituting individual subjects once these were inserted into such a terrain." Exploring and enriching such little pockets of knowledge is what constitutes the New Intellectualism of our times, and it is sorely needed.

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[4] Bhattacharya, T. (2018). Disability Studies as resistance: The Politics of estrangement. In Anita Ghai (Ed.), *Disability in South Asia: Knowledge and experience.* New Delhi: Sage Publishing India Pvt. Ltd., pp. 75–98.

[5] "Are We All Alike? Questioning the pathologies of the 'Normate'", Paper presented at the Inequality in Education International Conference, University of Delhi, Nov. 2014.

[6] Chapter of the same title as in Note 5 in R. K. Agnihotri, V. Gupta, and M. Panda (eds.). 2021. *Modern Transformations and the Challenges of Inequalities in Education in India*, Orient BlackSwan, Delhi, pp. 431-463.

[7] I explored this in detail recently in a talk titled "Unfolding (of) theories, not programmes (programs?)" delivered at the *Fostering Research in Disability* winter school on 19 December 2020, organised by NALSAR and BITS Pilani, Hyderabad.

[8] The invocation of Gramsci in disability research is certainly not unheard of, and was discussed first (and extensively) by Michael Oliver (1990) in his book *The Politics of Disablement*, Macmillan, London, and then briefly by Bill Hughes, Dan Goodley and Lennard Davis in the concluding chapter of their jointly edited book (Goodley, Hughes and Davis, 2012) *Disability and Social Theory*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

[9] As explored in the talk mentioned in Note 1.

My own interest was noticeably shifting from disability studies to newer flavours of critical disability studies (CDS) around this time. As a result, I brought in more and more of CDS literature to the reading group meetings. Apart from intersectionality, there were other questions that were waiting to be asked at the meetings, about our own conducts, which, in hindsight, I think, sooner or later were bound to be raised. All this while, I could also detect how the focus on interpreting texts – the hallmark of our group – was somehow slipping away.

What happened next, again in hindsight, was a miracle. The setting of that particular evening will be forever etched in my mind, as we sat at a table at an unkempt garden under the setting sun in the late winter of 2018. It was a smaller group that day, and the text I had chosen was of only a couple of pages, but a significant one; it was a blog-size article written by a very promising American philosopher, Elizabeth Barnes, titled "Arguments That Harm – and Why We Need Them," published merely ten days before our meeting that was held on 28 February 2018.[10] This reading and the ensuing discussion that evening, in retrospect, fortunately, brought to surface registers that were not heard earlier, and a classic critique emerged of the sometimes nauseating chauvinistic relating of anecdotes and the associated sexist language use by some of the male members of the group. And in a moment of absolute clarity, I realised a week later, sitting among friends in faraway but cleaner and awe-inspiring Gangtok, that if disability becomes an excuse for gender insensitivity, then most things are not right. Indeed, we had seen and heard and lived through a CDS moment ourselves. In a classic Laclau and Mouffe reading of the situation, it was clear to me that a change in the fabric of our collective social identity is called for as the two articulations (disability and gender) are not contiguous anymore, there is no possibility of forming a 'bloc' thereof.

New pledges were taken as the group reformed in a couple of weeks as CDSI (Critical Disability Studies in India); I wrote the following introductory text in our new group's website:

> It was Spring, new things were bound to happen. And they did. Looking back …, it surely was a good idea, this version of Critical Disability Studies in India (CDSI) or SIG-DSU 2.0 – we are more enriched and aware, that is a substantial gain; it was Spring after all. This newer version of our earlier group was a natural consequence of our interest re-orienting slowly but surely towards a critical analysis of disability studies. 'Question everything', that basic dictum of any critical enquiry, became our guiding light, that led not only to re-christening the group's name and changing its focus but to also a questioning of our own inner souls – our motives and our modus. The first thing that fell to incessant questioning by some of us is our level of gender awareness.[11]

Since then, we have read more, 'relaxed' less and completed more articles than ever before. And now finally, realised a long-pending dream of all of us to come up with a

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[10] See for the full text: https://www.chronicle.com/article/arguments-that-harm-and-why-we-need-them/

[11] https://sites.google.com/view/cdsi/home

journal of our own. Through this journal, we will continue to raise critical questions, and we will continue to insist on precision in interpreting texts – let such an occasion never arise when sweeping generalisations of ideas are glossed over 'sympathetically' only in the disability context, and because it is the same complex world that all of us inhabit, all of us deserve to be allowed to understand and be understood in the same complex way.

§ 2.0

Anita Ghai

All human life begins in a complete state of dependence. Human minds and bodies are always in fluidity, moving from a flawed, imperfect and vulnerable beings to a relatively self-sufficient existence. During this process of alteration, individuals undergo experiences of humiliation and defeat. But persons with disabilities are signified as being irresistibly the 'Other', their disability is symbolically considered a bundle of 'deprivation', 'calamity', 'loss', lack, 'dependency' and 'deviation'. The construction is that of – substandard human beings, powerless, and incapable of independent existence. This experience of disability exceeds fault lines of nation, gender, class, caste, race and myriad other identities.

Approximately one billion people, or 15 per cent of the world's population experiences some form of disability. One-fifth of the estimated global total, or between 110 million and 190 million people, experience significant disabilities (comprehensive information can be found at https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/disability). Prevalence of disability is estimated to be even higher in the developing countries. As per 2011 Census of India, 2.68 crore[12] persons are 'disabled', which is 2.21 per cent of the total population.

The present journal takes up a critical disability approach which stems from a disability theory concerned with a critique of society as a whole. It differs from traditional disability theory, which focuses only on charity, medical orientation as well as the social model approach. Critical disability theories aim to excavate the surface of social life and unearth the suppositions that keep disabled bodied human beings from evolving as a whole and true understanding of how the world works.

The so-called "western" understanding of disability undermines the significance of research in the South Asia and primarily India. It does not mean that we want to negate the knowledge construction in the west, but rather that we are more interested in creating a space where the lived realities of disabled persons can be understood from the vantage point of developing countries.

Disability, like questions of race, gender, caste and class, is one of the most provocative topics among scholars who have an interest in the marginality, both in the west and elsewhere. Over the last ten years or so it has become clear that the knowledge and meaning of disability in India has been understood as embedded in multiple cultural discourses that are subtly nuanced. The understanding of disability has challenged the epistemological ignorance of the social sciences, humanities and science. Bridging the gap

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[12] 2 68 00 000, that is, 26 million 800 thousand.

between theory and practice is significant, as it is critical to enlighten the structures of power and learn how historical and cultural perceptions of the human body have been informed by developing countries. For disability scholars from the global South, there is always an uncertainty about the merging or separation of 'us' (read 'disabled') and 'them' (read 'able'). In many instances, disability theorists have addressed political issues through the constructions of binary oppositions that not only contain prejudice and bias but also fall into the trap of naively reversing the post-colonial legacy and the problematic of oppressed vs. oppressor.

Critical disability studies in our understanding of disability is both an existential reality in which the experiences of people with disabilities are considered predominantly critical in interpreting their own place in the able-bodied society, and too to determine the socio-economic, cultural and power relations that affect disabled persons. Developing from the activism of disabled people in the last three decades, critical disability studies implicates theory, experience, and engaged practice. CDS is an eco-system created to nurture disciplines, areas of knowledge and practice and communities of scholars and practitioners who work in critical human conditions and predicaments, be it heterogeneity of disability, old age, gender, rural and urban poverty, and sexuality. The challenge is that we can negate the pathology of any kind be it physical, mental and sensory, as being in need of rectification, and instead encourage both reasonable accommodation and equality for disabled people in all areas of life. Critical disability therefore transforms the conventional notions of disabled people as products of retribution for past sin, unfortunate, doomed victims who should adjust to the able society around them. Building on Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009),[13] CDS refers to an understanding of disability and impairment in transnational, national, and local contexts as a way of disrupting monolithic discourses of disability in the global South, while at the same time opening up a platform "to think through, act, resist, relate, communicate, engage with one another against the hybridized forms of oppression and discrimination that so often do not speak singularly of disability" (Goodley, 2013, p. 641).[14] The question is: as to why we need to engage in critical disability theory in the global South and invite disability studies scholars to engage with new questions about critical disability studies as a discursive domain of knowledge production? Before we underscore the potential of critical disability studies, it is important to foreground some of the challenges that we believe have led to a development of critical Disability Studies in India.

Aligned with CDS our location is complicated because it raises perturbing yet important questions: What is our stance as academicians and activist? With what authority can we speak about critical Disability Studies? And why? Are we speaking with disabled people or about them? What language do we use to describe critical disability? Who has the power to name? How does understanding of disability studies exclude others from speaking out? The purpose of making Disability Studies an academic discipline is to create a body of

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[13] Meekosha, H., and Shuttleworth. R. (2009). What's So 'critical' about Critical Disability Studies? *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, 15.1, 47–75.

[14] Goodley, D. (2013) Dis/entangling critical disability studies. *Disability & Society*, 28:5, 631-644, DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2012.717884.

knowledge, which can provide challenges towards rethinking and reflecting upon aspects of our comprehension of disability and social marginalisation. Disability Studies exists at the uneven boundaries of the social, concurrently rebellious, and celebratory in its insistence that disability is neither tragedy nor inspiration but a satisfying and enjoyable way of "being in the world" … if only the ableist world would not get in the way! Just like the unforeseen possibilities of a new day, reflecting on the field of disability studies is also loaded with the unknown. For instance, knowledge of disability has to be engaged in the unlearning of traditional thinking's privilege, so that, not only is one marginalised constituency in a position to listen to another, but also one learns to speak in such a way that disability studies academia can rewrite the relationship between the margin and the centre.

§ 3.0

Sharmishthaa Atreja

"I'm a disabled person" may sound matter of fact, but within an Indian set-up, the disability identity is acquired and one is never too sure of what that identity holds. The word itself takes some time to be freely used within the households and more often than not, disability consciousness comes later in life. Even if one is born with an impairment, one is not born as a disabled 'person', but rather grows up to become one. This is often done through residency in special schools, where one learns to grow with a different identity or else one is made to realise the created differences of the normative out in the world. If one does not get the needed 'collective', when people and the system tell you that "you don't belong here" or "you belong to a category", that is the time when either one is forced to grow hostile towards the mainstream or subconsciously grows hostile to oneself or both. From an impaired body to a disabled person, one needs the right kind of talk to be able to acquire the identity that truly represents oneself.

Reading disability objectively was the beginning of my journey towards my own self, to understand myself as a disabled woman, as well as to understand my gender identity more vividly. Critical Disability Studies in India (CDSI) reading group was one informal reading space which made me aware of what prejudices I am holding against my own identity as a blind woman; and how important it was to have an awareness of the internal tussles along with the awareness of what the mainstream thinks of me as a disabled person, as a woman as well as a disabled woman. I realised that engaging in reading as a 'collective', can help place the resentment of the oppression faced at the hands of systemic patriarchy in the right manner. The reading meetings helped me understand the power of academia that can contribute so much to the activism. Although, before getting involved in the conversations in the CDSI meetings, I did participate in the rallies and was a part of some disability organisations, but deep down asking for accommodations and my own rights seemed normal, because as an impaired person it was felt that impairment was my own responsibility. Subconsciously, I had internalised that I was different from others and that it was okay for the rest of the world to behave differently with me even if the attitude felt undeserved. This was because I had internalised the injustice as normal and saw myself as an impaired one for whom 'accommodations' both that at the level of social set-ups as well as that of the systems was a service.

The discussions in the CDSI group gave me all the required questions that I needed to ask myself as well as others. It gave me a chance to have my own expression and language – a language of disability and a 'me' language, where I examine each word which is often used to describe my identity, which helped me express and articulate myself better. This led me to introspectively think, 'why am I here?', this "here" in my head always had a double reference of objects. 'Here' means 'disability studies' and also 'the CDSI meetings'. It is impossible for me to think about 'disability studies' separately from my own journey with the group. Of course, I had questions about disability in general as well as my disability in particular, before engaging with the readings, but I did not have the true motivation to treat 'disability' as a matter of investigation. It was only after engaging with disability academically, where the textual and personal intersected, that I could break free from the patronising organisational vocabulary while at the same time, fully situating myself as an Indian blind woman; and in doing so, bring my subjectivity as a disabled woman back from the systemically imposed identity.

The ever-persistent fact still remains that if my identity – as anything as an academician or as an artist – does not begin with my identity of being a blind woman, then my representation in CDS would be incomplete and inauthentic. If I do not account for the oppression of the internal ableism and that of the external, which has affected each aspect of my life, then who else will do it? This is the alarming noise of the 'disability consciousness' arising out of engaging with the study group and a formal foundation of such a "collective", in the form of a journal, that will turn out to be a great contribution to disability theory.

§ 4.0

Yogesh Kumar Yadav

"When there is a will, there is a way." Having joined M.Phil. at the Centre of Historical Studies (CHS), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), I decided to undertake research on the education for disabled persons in twentieth century India. But only deciding is not enough to conduct and complete the research. One requires proper understanding of the theme and sub-themes. In order to acquire that understanding, proper guidance, academic writings, primary sources are needed. Unfortunately, I was lacking in all of them due to various reasons but one chief one being inaccessibility literally everywhere. Though, we are assigned supervisors to guide us in our research, but none of the faculty members were familiar with the academic writings of disability studies and so was the case with my supervisor. Disability studies as a discipline was also at its nascent stage in India. These were some of the highly challenging circumstances present in front of a researcher who wanted to pursue research in the field of disability.

There were some more students in JNU pursuing research on disability issues and almost all of us were facing the same challenges mentioned above. In fact, few of them were compelled to change their themes from disability to other 'mainstream' humanities and social science topics. It was done as we were associated with different centres and departments of humanities and social sciences. A dedicated centre or department for disability studies does not still exist in JNU and so is the case with most of the Indian universities.

We generally discussed these challenges among ourselves. One day, in beginning of the year 2016, I got an opportunity to attend the talks delivered by Tanmoy Bhattacharya and Jagdish Chander on disability at a function organised by a disability organisation at St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi. Though, Professor Tanmoy is a linguist, he has contributed many academic articles on disability. I was already familiar with some of his work. Having attended the talks, I along with my friends discussed some of the challenges of disability research with him. We came to know that he had already initiated a disability study circle with the name of Special Interest Group on Disability Studies at the Universities (SIG-DSU) in May 2012, where academic writings from the discipline of disability studies were read, discussed and comprehended. However, he told us that the sessions are on hold since sometime due to some reasons. Our fruitful discussion resulted in the revival of this programme in February 2016.

Initially, the sole objective of the group was to undertake comprehensive reading, understanding and discussing the writings on disability studies which is still the main objective. We have read and discussed writings of many writers across the globe on various theories, themes and lived experiences of disability. With the expansion of epistemologies of disability, we also thought to contribute in the discipline. Therefore, we are extremely happy to lay the foundation of *InJCDS* and have now successfully published its first issue.

It would only be fair to acknowledge the sincere hard work, commitment and contribution of our founder and the group as a whole towards promoting disability studies among the disability researchers and scholars of India by providing them an appropriate platform. Professor Ghai is the one whose writings laid the foundation in me to start with disability studies in the first place. Apart from the mentors, I would also recall all my researcher-friends who are and have been a part of this wonderful journey so far. Without their engagement and in-depth discussions, exchange of ideas would not have been possible.

§ 5.0

Santosh Kumar

The role of the able-bodied person has been contested in Disability Studies as Simi Linton (2005)[15] raises the question "who does and who should do disability studies". It is always difficult to position oneself to the stream of identity politics if one does not belong to that identity. Linton offers the solution too, "it is strategically useful to engage nondisabled people in disability studies but find a way for them to articulate their subject position vis-a-vis the idea of disability". The recent reorientation of Critical Disability Studies (CDS) has been remarkable as the binary between abled and disabled bodies is

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[15] Linton, S. (1998). *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity.* New York: NYU Press.

challenged with the knowledge and experience from the Global South. It has also been broadened by studies in ableism (Campbell, 2009)[16] and ability privileges (Wolbring, 2014).[17] This shift in thinking process has been a kind of my recent initiation into CDS. However, I have been a part of the CDSI collective right from the beginning, which has shaped my understanding of disability studies in general and helped me to sharpen my understanding in this area over the many years.

The understanding of the discourses around dis/ability help me understand the apprehensions of common people about disease and disabilities. I will share my anecdote in this connection. The local barber shops refused to give a shave to my ailing father around Rajan Babu Tuberculosis Hospital in Delhi because they assumed my father was a "TB patient" (Tuberculosis). Later on, one of the barbers confessed unapologetically that the other barbers might have understood my father who was looking pale and weak as one of the patients of the nearby TB Hospital and hence pushed us away. Tuberculosis is highly stigmatised in our society because of its infectious nature. Though this behaviour enraged me, to my dismay the barber justified the prejudiced behaviour of his fellow barbers by saying that the regular customers of their shop do not want him to shave and cut hair of patients of *that* hospital. I strongly condemned him for such a biased attitude but he stood by his words and countered me with the rhetoric: "even you will not like to get a hair-cut after seeing the patients at my shop". I remained speechless, however this incident helped me to reflect more on the way prejudice and stigma work in our society.

I have been trained in Linguistics and used my training to understand the representation of disability and gender in language in general and proverbs in particular. While doing the research, I found myself in a kind of journey in which I rediscovered myself as a person who broke the shackles of his biased notions of the world and perceived every person just as a human beyond the notion of ability, gender, caste, and race. However, this is not to be construed as a romanticism like "giving voice" or "raising signage" on behalf of disabled people but rather be a part of the process. I believe that any reformatory politics like Critical Disability Studies requires a self-conscious inclination towards the processes through which ability and disability are established as an identity and a role.

§ 6.0

Ritika Gulyani

The emergence of this journal can be found within the small reading group that came into existence in 2012. The 11th meeting of the group was the first one I attended, partly because it was organised in Jawaharlal Nehru University, where I was then perusing my M.Phil. Over the years, the reading group has evolved from a place to understand the various nuances of looking at disability to an arena where disability is critically questioned. The reading group, and subsequently the journal that has now emerged from it, looks at disability studies with a critical lens and makes an attempt to dwell deeper into why the

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[16] Campbell, F.K. (2009). Contours of Ableism: Territories, Objects, Disability and Desire. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

[17] Wolbring, G. (2014). Ability Privilege: A needed addition to privilege studies. In *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, 12.2, pp. 118-141.

perspectives emerge the way they do, as well as to bring to the fore the idea that there need not be a singular linear understanding of what disability is. By engaging with texts, as well as the authors of the texts, one is exposed to a myriad of perspectives.

Not only is the critical angle of looking at disability studies vital, but also the positionality of the author as well as of the reader. The emergence of voices of the Global South has brought about a change in the way narratives are presented as well as in their content by bringing to light hitherto unknown social factors in the context of the narratives of the North. Issues of caste, class, poverty, gender, development religion, region and the likes are intertwined in the everyday lives of the individual, whether disabled or not.

Finally, it is not just the postionality within a region, but also how one is placed along the abled-disabled continuum that plays a role. As a researcher who is non-disabled and is looking at the questions of disability, constitute a contextuality and positioning that throws open its own set of questions. But reducing this to a question of us versus them, also simplifies a very complex matter. The voices and perspectives and experiences are a very important part of the process, for these to be brought forth by people who themselves might have not experienced it should ideally not rob it of its authenticity.

The journal hopes to question the predominantly existing structures by bringing forth perspectives that constantly question them and hopes to emerge as a platform that may add to work on critical disability studies that is so critically needed within the Global South.

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