

REVIEWS

Ghai, Anita (ed.) (2018). *Disability in South Asia: Knowledge and Experiences*, Sage Publishing India, 492 pages, ISBN 9352807081, 9789352807086.

The scholarship in disability studies, akin to its global feature, is growing eclectic in the South Asian context. Disability studies scholarship in South Asia has gained immensely from the contributions of Anita Ghai, the editor of this volume. Her *Hypatia* article in 2002 ‘Disabled women: An Excluded Agenda of Indian Feminism’¹, followed by her first book *(Dis)embodied form: issues of disabled women*² in 2003, had stoked a fire in the academic circles, and research on disability from India with a disability studies perspective came to be taken seriously. Since then, disability studies in India attracted attention from across the fields, from history to law and literature to sociology and several scholars have been actively engaged in empirical research and publication. It is also important to note that the research and activism on disability are coevolving, benefitting a large section of persons with disabilities by influencing policymaking.

In the book under review, *Disability in South Asia: Knowledge and Experience* (DSA), Ghai asserts that this ‘volume brings multiplicities from various scholars in the newly emerging field of disability studies’ (p. xix). Ghai, who has been strongly arguing for the development of disability studies in the Indian academia, through this volume, presents the case for disability studies in India strongly. Quoting Addlakha, Ghai suggests that ‘there is a need for expanding the limited scholarship in disability studies in India to capture the heterogeneous and multi-faceted nature of the disability from various disciplinary and cross-disciplinary standpoints, socio-cultural contexts and lived experiences of people with disabilities’ (p. xxi). The volume includes papers by scholars who have been researching and publishing widely on disability in India and South Asia. She finds that ‘the absence of disability from the mainstream academia creates and maintains a status quo where the ‘disabled’ are incorporated within the existing social patterns as “problems”. And hence, she states that ‘the present attempt is to foreground how the inclusion of disability studies as a field of inquiry within mainstream academia can enrich scholarship and contribute to the understanding of the heterogeneity of disability’ (p. xxiii).

The volume is developed around six themes covering an array of issues ranging from theoretical perspectives on disability, body, care, sexuality, self to the fields of literature, culture studies and law. The apparent aim of the volume is to portray disability as an epistemology, which the editor of the volume achieves through the selective inclusion of papers.

¹Ghai, A. (2002). Disabled Women: An Excluded Agenda of Indian Feminism. *Hypatia*, 17(3), 49-66.

² Ghai, A. (2003). *(Dis)embodied form: issues of disabled women*. New Delhi: Shakti Books.

Ghai argues that the history of persons with disabilities is the history of silence. She also asserts that the historical studies have always remained dichotomous, 'us' versus 'them', which reflects the marginalisation within the academia. Ghai suggests that 'apolitical stance of academia contains an implicit political ideology; and silence or denial of their involvement is no less a political act than explicit political action' (p. xix). She argues that disability studies must focus on studying the process of alterity as expressed in the terms of othering, exclusion, etc. Observing resistance to disability studies within the universities, Ghai exhorts for serious debate on disability which is possible by taking the cause of disability studies to the research programmes in the universities.

Five papers included under the first theme 'Historical and theoretical perspectives' deal with disability rights movement and disability studies. Tracing the origins of the disability movement in India, Jagdish Chander presents the struggle and activism of the visually impaired. He highlights how the 'disability movement began to shift from an initiative of blind activists to a cross-disability effort' (p. 12). The paper brings out the political pressure by the disability activists in influencing the legislation for the disabled. Using the combined methodology of content, event and historical analysis Meenu Bhambhani looks at disability movement in India. She argues that the disability rights movement in India led by self-advocacy groups which emerged after the passage of the Persons with Disabilities Act (PWD) in 1995 vigorously pursued under the ideological framework of 'Nothing About Us Without Us'. She contests the claims of the Western scholars and argues for securing a strong position for disability movement in India among a 'throng of protests'. Fiona Kumari Campbell problematises ableism in her paper titled 'A Refocus and Paradigm Shift: From Disability to Studies in Ableism' and explores the epistemologies and ontologies of ableism critically. She argues that the concept of disability in the ableism discourse 'upsets the modernist craving for ontological security' (p. 51) for the reason that 'disabled bodies are effectively positioned in the nether regions of 'unthought' (p. 52). In the paper on Rawlsian Framework of Justice, Deepa Palaniappan and Valerian Rodrigues attempt to understand how disability is defined and perceived within a justice paradigm. They analyse John Rawls' theory of justice and suggest that the Rawlsian framework is 'valid for contemporary disability movement' (p. 72). Tanmoy Bhattacharya strongly argues for bringing recognition to the field of disability studies and saving it from 'being pushed towards ossification in the form of library archives' (p. 76). Viewing disability studies as resistance, Bhattacharya claims that disability activism shouldn't be solely pursued to achieve services rather must strive towards a strong disability studies programme. He contends that advances in disability studies helped in revising the goals and approaches of the service providers in the country and argues for epistemological inversion to problematise ableism and to 'reconceptualise disability studies through the lens of disability justice' (p. 96).

The second theme of the volume on body, care and sexuality contests the materiality of the body. Nandini Ghosh in her paper on 'Experiencing the Body: Femininity, Sexuality and Disabled Women in India' explores the socially engineered environments embedded in the patriarchal power and gaze and the socio-cultural constructions of ideal women body. Using empirical case studies Ghosh analyses how disabled girls accept and negotiate

normative femininity. In the next paper, 'Shifting and vulnerable terrains of South Asian crip queering: Encounters with localised epistemologies of gender/disability/sexuality' Janet Price and Niluka Gunawardena attempt to build a disability-sexuality epistemological framework through an investigation on regional narratives of disability and sexuality to analyse local manifestations. The authors discuss the disability-sexuality epistemologies of McRuer, which are based in Europe, under the rubric of Northern movements, and present the analysis on southern epistemologies. The southern movements narrative by the authors appears to be heavily based on a singular source of literature without bothering to verify the accounts presented. Colonial perspective is apparent in the article and the authors do not hesitate to dwell on politically sensitive issues which serve very little to the academic discourse on disability in South Asia. A statement such as: 'as globalisation and urbanisation lead to changes in the rural constituency with land being expropriated for mining, forest and other industries, as villages drain of young men and women and are shorn of those who will make them co-productive, who will help them grow both in population and in wealth, only old people, children and those with disabilities remain, the struggle for survival harshens with rural production outsourced to industry' (p. 137), suggests lack of reflexivity. The major limitation of the paper is that it seldom focused on other nations than India in South Asia. The authors take strong political positions as regards the southern epistemologies while presenting an apolitical discourse on northern movements. In the paper on ethics and practice of care concerning persons with disabilities, Upali Chakravarti argues that the ideal model of a family with the woman as carer and man as the provider has become the nub of the problems with relation to care for the persons with disabilities. She claims that for most women caring has become a triple burden: child-rearing, housework and wage labour. In this paper discussing the disability critique of care, Chakravarti highlights the power relations between the carer and the persons with disabilities. She argues that the institutionalisation of caregiving for the persons with disabilities is not only pathologising disability but also oppressive while the need is for enabling independent living for the PWDs.

Presenting the third theme of the volume 'Knowing the Self and Writing Life' Ghai argues that 'engaging with the memories of self and others is critical to understanding disability as cultural discourses' (p. xxx). Under the theme, five papers are included which consider 'autobiography as a tool to highlight personal experience'. Nidhi Goyal in her paper questions the politics of agency and representation within disability rights movements, the perception of disability as a category of structural inequality by members of other marginalised social groups and the way gender intersects with disability in specific contexts of South Asia. In this paper Nidhi Goyal presents her journey into the world of disability, the choices she made afterwards and the journey into the world of women and disabled activism. She dwells upon the intersectionality of the women's rights movement with disabled, marginalised, Muslim identities and, most importantly, she brings out the subtleties of these rights movements vis-à-vis disabled women. She presents her experiences as a woman with disability within the rights activism under several identities and asserts that the normal majoritarianist tendencies are all pervasive. Narrating lived

reality, Nidhi Goyal points out the perplexities with the intersectionality of identities which place her at the cusp of movements.

Sameer Chaturvedi in the paper titled 'Journey so far: My Life with an impairment' presents a personal narrative highlighting the social and institutional idiosyncrasies both within the family and in the wider social context. The paper puts forth the psycho-social yearnings of a student with disability passionately. Asha Singh, in the next paper, presents the journey of a mother and her atypical child through the process of socialisation norms. Located in the school site, the paper highlights the challenges for parents and atypical children in negotiating social constructions of ability. The paper by Sandeep Singh titled 'Life-writing and Disabled Self in the Works of Oliver W. Sacks' critically explores the subjectivisation of disabled in the life-writing method. Presenting a historical account of the emergence of disability scholarship, Sandeep suggests that life writings enabled the scholarship to move into the disciplines of humanities and liberal arts. The paper particularly focuses on the works of Oliver Sacks to put across the immense contribution these works made to the disability activism, identity and scholarship. Hemachandran Karah's paper on blind culture and cosmologies deals with the autobiography of Ved Mehta, particularly the title 'Continents of Exile', a compendium of 11 books. The 'autobiographical recollections, standpoints, political commentaries, and raw imprints of personhood' (p. 227) of Ved Mehta are presented by Hemachandran to benefit the readers on the narrative of overcoming.

The fourth theme of the volume dwells upon disability in literature and culture. In her paper 'Disability and Diversity Across Cultures', Shubhangi Vaidya, using the concept of 'biosocialities', analyses the formation of disabled solidarities and communities with reference to Deaf Pride and Autistic neurodiversity in the age of globalisation and digital networking. It explores the concept of disability through the lens of culture. Vaidya considers that culture also encompasses the dimensions of power and control, which influence the culture of normal or what is called as normative. The paper discusses disability across cultures and informs the readers about the emergence of disability culture. In the paper titled 'Corporeality and Culture' Shilpaa Anand discusses the emergence of normative ideas of corporeality through a detailed discussion on 'treatment' and 'corporeal difference' in the Western and Asian contexts. She suggests that disability as a concept is construed under different epistemic conditions influenced by social, geographic and cultural contexts. Someshwar Sati, in his paper on 'Corporeal Difference in the Post-colonial Indian English Novel' critically examines the representation of disability in the novels: Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* (1990), and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007). This paper has sought to draw attention to the various complex representations of disability, both conservative and progressive, in the postcolonial Indian English Novels and make a case for culturally specific readings of disability to stimulate and facilitate further research in the area. Santosh Kumar critically analyses the role of metaphor in the construction of disability through his paper on 'Materiality as Metaphor' in Jataka Kathas of 'Four Blind men and Elephant' in the Indian Context. He argues that 'the equation between the nature of truth and trope of blindness remains the same in all

versions of this parable' (p. 297) and suggests that 'continuous contemporary ubiquity' (p. 300) of the parable becomes problematic. The author presents the arguments most systematically and methodically.

Shridevi Rao's paper under the fifth theme of the volume 'Discourses of Education and Employment in Disability Studies' focuses on local epistemologies on disability. Her work focuses on how families use the collective identity of a family to resist pressures to feel 'shame' and relent to the pejorative identities imposed on their child. Findings of her empirical work indicate that while the pressure to experience shame exists, not all families succumb to it. Ankur Madan explores the issue of the education of children with disabilities from the standpoint of inclusive education. She argues that inclusive education becomes a hard concept to promote in a mainstream education programme and observes that there are hardly any resources. The author presents her findings on inclusive education through an empirical study in a school in Bengaluru city which embraced inclusive education almost three decades ago. Based on these findings she suggests three important components for inclusive education, namely; readiness, adequate pedagogic skills to teachers, and cooperation and communication among different stakeholders. Suchaita Tenneti's paper attempts to analyse the structural matrix in the education system which impede the researchers to 'understand the tenacity of structures of ableism' (p. 350) and normalcy. The paper discusses Linda Ware's work titled 'Many Possible Futures, Many Different Directions: Merging Critical Special Education and Disability Studies' at length along with other scholars' works on special education while emphasising teacher agency. On the media representations and disability at work, Arun Kumar and Nivedita critically look at the print media for its representation of disability, particularly in the news on corporate sector efforts in employing persons with disabilities. The authors argue that in the neoliberalist market economy 'rights of persons with disabilities are reformulated as privileges to be earned in exchange of performance of key responsibilities, the most significantly through economic contribution' (p. 373).

The sixth theme of the volume is devoted to the discussion on legal discourses of disability in India. Amita Dhandu's paper in this section provides the finer details of the process in the legal discourse. The author, a prominent activist and a member of advocacy groups working for the rights of persons with disabilities presents a critical analysis of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). She argues that CRPD is a watershed in the legal discourse on disability as the lawmaking began to be made from a disability studies perspective. The second part of the paper details the process that preceded the enactment of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 and the Mental Health Care Act of 2017 which is important learning for all to know how the democratisation of lawmaking takes place. She suggests that disability studies approach to lawmaking could be used by all citizens to challenge state monopoly in lawmaking. Rukmini Sen in her paper on kinship in disability specific domesticity, discusses the legal aspects of care for persons with disabilities and explains how care entered into the legal landscape, particularly with reference to the PWD Act 2016. She presents the important dimension of care i.e. the economy of care in the neoliberal economy and the entanglement of care in the kinship matrix. The author discusses the importance of formalisation of caring and

discusses the nuances on perceptions like altruism. She argues for the coexistence of both justice and care instead of looking at them as just binaries.

The last theme of the volume is on constructing disability as diversity. Shanti Auluck, based on her personal experiences with persons with intellectual and other disabilities, puts forth the argument that disability must be seen as a form of human diversity. The last paper of the volume is provided by Anita Ghai who presents a different voice on disability and diversity. The paper, placed at the end of the volume, provides a summary account of what the papers have presented so far. She locates the arguments on diversity in the neoliberal market situation and wider social context, and suggests that though 'diversity works as a manoeuvre in neoliberal political and economic markets that work to ratify the status quo through "feel good" politics' but also cautions scholars that 'this move from disability to diversity is a difficult terrain' (p. 428).

This volume is a contribution to the field of disability studies in South Asia. It, for sure, will help in closing the epistemic ignorance gap in academia. Anita Ghai's vision of evolving an epistemology of disability and development of disability studies in the universities to rectify misinterpretations of disability is well reflected in the volume.

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