



SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO DISABILITY

Anurag Singh

Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

✉ anuragsingh060186@gmail.com

Anurag Singh: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1427-0832>

ABSTRACT

Disability is seen as a tough issue to investigate. Challenging subject matter, like all societal concerns, it comes with its own universe of questions. Much research has been done, but the majority of it has been done in a restricted capacity and with a specific model in mind. This study seeks to provide a general assessment of past and recent arguments and to comprehend their goals, and objectives. The purpose of this study is to trace the history of disability and the sociological perspectives that have arisen within the subject since its inception. Disability has evolved as a topic of discussion and debate over time, from a period of ignorance or being classed as evil or sin to be disabled bodies, to stages of stigma, acceptance, and maturity, when inhibitions and prejudice bring questions to light.

Keywords: Disability, Disabled, Society, Bio Medical Model, Social Model.

Introduction

Human history is built upon contradictions and accord according Karl Marx. With emergence of society, many beliefs, rituals, norms emerged. These were meant to establish a system for society to function. Like nature, humans were never meant to be perfect beings, men were either born with physical or mental disability or fell to disability during course of their life. With these problems a stigma came to be aligned, which meant to separate one being from other. Separation expanded into discrimination in all walks to life.

The aim of this paper is to trace the genealogy of disability perspectives from past to present times. The essay will try and understand the different perspectives or models of disability that have emerged and evolved theoretically. Finally, the aim is to locate and establish the relation between disability and technology, its significance, and where the discourse stands in current times.

The history of disability whether in western or non-western parts of the world has been defined very vaguely, and even its sources of study. Disability historians have

investigated the sources basis with the notions of ability and disability came to be fixed. From earlier times, human deformities came to be examined through religious events and practices. The church was the moral authority to differentiate between normal and abnormal. Theological work presented abnormality as stigma, where segregation and institutionalization were considered to be the solution. As life was dictated on lines of the church, any form of human disability was considered to be act of God as punishment was sins or reward. Abnormalities were considered to be either sacred or profane, and practices around them defined the level of acceptance in society or discrimination. One of the most pioneering works been done in this area is by Henri-Jacques Stiker's most acknowledged work *A History of Disability* (Stiker, 2019). He examined analytically disability through the ages of western civilization, from ancient time to the present. He does a very broad examination of the five historical arenas: The Bible, The Antiquity, The Middle Ages, The Classical Centuries and the Modern Age of Rehabilitation (Stiker, 2019). His aim is to showcase different attitudes and mindset in relation to disability at different time and age. And further the representation of disability and meaning of the word disability at different stages of history is one of his focus areas of concern.

His analysis traces historically the representation/terminology of disability and how disability has been treated, by different regimes and defined the social logic behind this treatment. It must be pointed out at the beginning itself that Stiker's work is not a 'historical' account in proper sense of the

word and rather more sociological, literary, psychological, anthropological, medical account of study of disability. His comprehensive work, presents the construction of disability from Greece and Roman times to the period of Renaissance and how they came to define disability. During Greece deformity was treated as a curse and were die by exposure, complete eradication was the central social logic.

The word 'stigma' and its application are also derived from Greek practices of marking slaves. In the Hebrew Bible the expression of disability moved towards impurity or profanity, The New Testament shower Jesus coming closer to disabled people and establishing an intimate relation with them, sympathetic if one may call it as. During the Middle Ages exclusion system emerged and hard liners terms them as "crippled". Suffering, harsh treatment, banishment and stigma was associated with disability at the same time, religions also offered the gift of salvation to those who help and offer charity to the disabled. The term disabled, disability, disable beings emerged much later during modern times, but for the contextual ease of readers these terms are being used.

With coming of Age of Science, Enlightenment, rationality, logic and modern state, where man started questioning its own existences vis-a-vis that of God and religion, the question of disabled people also emerged. During the 17th Century, the age of investigation although, many disabled people were treated in asylum and institutionalized. They were categorized as 'madmen' and prohibition of various kinds

Historical Era	Representation/ Terminology	Treatment	Social Logic
Antiquity Greco-roman	Monstrosity of body	Exposure	Eradication
The Hebrew Bible	Defect	Impurity	Interdict of Cult
The New Testament	All Defects		Integrable in God's Kingdom
Charity Systems Middle Ages	Beggar/Cripple	Related Exclusion	Hard Integration
Classical Centuries	Defect and mental disease	Great Confinement	Non-integrable difference
19th Century: Education of Disabled Childs	Blind, Deaf, Backward	Institutionalization	Separation through reproductive prohibition
Late 19th Century	Ugly/Unsightly/ Freak	Exhibition	To remind of our origins
Normalization (Early 20th Century/Post World War I)	Incapacitated/ Invalid	Rehabilitation Rights	To make like the rest/ to lose into the mix
Integration (Late 20th Century)	Handicapped/ Disabled	Integral-ness	Equality with Differences

Stiker, Henri-Jacques. *A History of Disability*.
E-book, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11575987>. Accessed 1 Nov 2020.
Downloaded on behalf of University of Pennsylvania

were placed on them, which continued till the period of industrialization. In late 19th Century and early 20th Century, the disabled beings were beginning to be seen more sympathetically, one of main cause being the wars within Europe and America.

From the American Civil war (1861-65), War of the triple alliance in South America (1865-70), to World War 1 (1914) brought about change in mindset, and disability began to be seen as a socially derived phenomenon. These wars brought many casualties and invalids, which were able bodies before and were not disabled. It was no longer act of God that was to be blamed for the misery of the disabled, rather it was act of Man that made able bodies as disabled. This helped changed in attitude and approach to understand disability. Rehabilitation and hospitalization became a major effort to help disabled individuals after these wars. Another reason along with these wars, we saw extensive Industrialization that brought a rapid change in technology, which further helped in creating confidence, normalisation and change in narrative for the disabled population.

Modern Welfare State saw it as responsibility to work and establish concrete policy for these individuals. But these efforts remained mostly as agendas than being implemented. Medicine came to exploit the disabled causes now. It was argued that disabled could be cured or somewhat, through medicines and technology. As Stiker's also mentions in his work 'Hospitals with their various divisions into specialties became primary sites of collective removal while also deepening their expertise in relation to specific disability prognoses and treatments' (Stiker, 2019).

No longer the orthodox approach to disability remained valid. Medical approach to disability and rehabilitation brought a new phase of assessment on question of disabled and their future. There are two important perspectives in disability studies that emerged, thebiomedical approach to disability was the first step towards understanding the needs and concerns of those disabled from a biological perspective.

The medical disability is within the context of medical sociology, sociological 'independence' has been conspicuous by its absence due to medical sociologists almost slavish adherence to the traditional individualistic medical view of disability or 'personal tragedy theory' (PWDA, 2019. Oliver, 1983; 1990). This model was the first one to approach disability as an issue of concern and helped define the field of study itself. This model was built on the assumption that there exists an ideal healthy body and disability is abnormal. It suggested that disabled bodies need constant support

and attention for them to function as disabled bodies. These bodies are not able to properly function like the rest able bodies and require consistent guidance, treatment and cure. Under this approach, it is believed that disability is a problem and through medical sciences disability problems can be 'fixed' or 'changed'.

The Social model (Oliver, 1983) emerged as a strong oppositional critique to the biomedical model study of disability. The central argument behind this model was the progressive and radical approach of looking disable bodies. Under this model disability was no longer dependent upon the biological arguments made earlier, it presented a paradigm shift in approach towards looking at disability. It was required to be perceived as a 'civil rights issue as central to mainstream sociological discourse and analysis as class, gender, race and sexuality' (Colin Barnes and Mike Oliver, 1993).

This model was presented first in Britain during the 1960's and 1970's as a critique to medical model, and it was in seminal document of Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS, 1976) that this term appeared for the first time. The social model argues that it's not physical conditions that have led disabled to be pronounced disabled, it's the discrimination, stigma, social conditions that have led disabled bodies to remain disabled. The founding statement of UPIAS says: "What we are interested in, are ways of changing our conditions of life, and thus overcoming the disabilities which are imposed on top our physical impairments by

the way this society is organized to exclude us" (UPIAS, 1976). The social context became important point of departure for this model.

The term 'social model of disability' or social context was coined by British disability advocate and sociologist Michael Oliver, who argued that most of the difficulties that people with disabilities face derive not from the individual's physical or intellectual condition, but from the social environment that is constructed in such a way that it is accessible for some bodies and exclusionary of others (whether directly or indirectly) (Mitra, 2016). In other words, it is the social environment that requires change in order to allow people with disabilities to experience a full life (Oliver, 1996). The barriers according to this perspective were socially constructed and defined. There were exclusionary, discriminatory, stereo types that were present in society to keep disabled as an exclusive entity, away for the mainstream society. The social prejudices were fabricated to keep disabled away from the 'normal' and how society produces barriers for the disabled to participate in day-to-day functioning. The disabled are socialized and conditions to keep themselves as impaired being and remain dependent on society for its survival. Disabled studies scholar very much influenced by the materialist perspective of Marx, to explain how industrialization led certain section of society, the disabled into a marginalized groups and pushed them towards economic impoverishment. The fruits of Industrial revolution during late 19th and mid 20th century remained in hands of few. The

markets both for goods and labour exchange were monopolized by few and it made sure that the disabled being remained at the margins and not be able to participate in labour markets.

This debate further escalated into who is 'disabled' individual and who is 'impaired'. The distinction between two became a key focal point of academics during the 1970's and 80's. Both the words have been agreed upon by discipline scholars, the "impairment" is an individual biological condition, whether congenital or acquired (accident, disease, aging etc.) (Shakespeare, 2013), whereas "disability" often began from the individual's social context. It is the outcome of impairment (Oliver, 1996) to execute properly the tasks considered ordinary for a human being (Cook & Hussey, 1995) and this remains a problem of social context.

From Social context debate along with understanding the disabled and impaired complexities, the scholars in the field of disability studies shifted towards more discursive approach to understand notion of disability. The emergence of Postmodernist, Poststructuralist and Neomarxist studies, provided a strong influence to disable theorists like Tom Shakespeare, Simi Linton etc. These and many other disabled theorist of this time, built their discursive approach understanding based on ideas and perspectives of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Under their influence, most scholars of the time argued to move beyond the social construct of disability towards other dimensions that can influence the analysis of disability such as linguistic,

ideology, knowledge, notion of power, authority, domination, hegemony and cultural practices. Intersectionality between these dimensions help built a new perspective of disability, the idea of how subjugation and exclusion manifests itself among those with disability and how it embedded not just in society, but everyday practices around us.

In her work *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, (Simi Linton, 1998) offers perhaps one of the most comprehensive definitions of this emerging discipline that articulates both its theoretical and activist dimensions. According to her, "Disability studies takes for its subject matter not simply the variations that exist in human behaviour, appearance, functioning, sensory acuity, and cognitive processing but, more crucially, the meaning we make of those variations" (Linton, 1998). The field investigates critical division our society creates between the normal vs the abnormal, the insider versus the outsider, or the competent citizen versus the ward of the state. It is an interdisciplinary field focused on a socio-political study of disability that is informed both by the knowledge base and methodologies used in conventional liberal arts and conceptualizations and approaches generated in new scholarship areas. Further, Disability studies has emerged as a logical base for examination of the construction and function of disability. These scholarly explorations and the initiatives have resulted in new paradigms used to understand disability as a social, political, and cultural phenomenon (Addlakha, 2013).

Later half of 20th century, within social sciences one of the criticisms that emerged has been the limitations to not able to produce enough work based on interdisciplinary and intersectionality approach. Each discipline has remained focused on their understanding of the social world and produced their own representation and with limited orientation. These limitations have not led social sciences grow and move along with changing times. As Bruno Latour calls this as 'Crisis' or misunderstanding, in his famous works, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). For him there is a the problem of wrong categorization has been done even by the intellectual culture in which we all live. He writes "The horizons, the stakes, the time frames, the actors - none of these is commensurable, yet there they are, caught up in the same story" (Latour, 1993). While unfolding the conception of modernity, he mentions this limitation of 'representation' that's present within each discipline or field of study.

The word modern has been misleading and wrongly defined as its able to remain distinct based on two major practices (Latour, 1993), the first, the practice of translations (hybridization) which he calls 'networks' and other the practice of purification. According to him till we are able to keep the practice of translation and purification separated we are truly modern.

Latour initiated Actor Network Theory (ANT) (1988). He claimed that objects, machines, technologies and humans are all equal parts in reciprocal networks of connections and joining actions, all actively influencing each other, and all being actors

(Latour, 2008). Actors generate effects. It is this theoretical understanding of Latour, this paper is trying to argue that even disability studies cannot evolve further till we ignore technology out, and a multidisciplinary approach is required to study disability. It is this practice of translations and purification that we are required to overcome. If we look at them comprehensively as a complete hole and not in a compartmentalized form, Latour work can help enhance our understanding of how technology and disability holds the promise to produce a new shift in paradigm.

One of the pioneers in this area are Bodil Ravneberg and Sylvia Söderström and in their work, *Disability, Society and Assistive Technology* (2017) rightly frame this area of study as, 'Social scientists and disability studies scholars have paid much attention to individual needs, equality and societal barriers, but have not dwelled much on the technological side of the disability concept'. Their main objective was to include disability studies with science, technology and society (STS) studies, a new interdisciplinary approach. This paper also trying to argue that STS, ANT and disability should be studies together in one frame as each have analogous relation with the other. This relation will help expand our understanding about the present and future challenges, promises of disability.

Conclusion

While unravelling the history and sociological perspectives on disability, this paper excogitates how the discourse around disability has evolved through different stages—from ignorance, stigma, acceptance, to the stage of maturity where both

inhibitions and various latent forms of discrimination prevalent in society have been questioned.

The questions around disability were earlier debated by the abled-bodies, which included the decisions as to what action and support were required for disabled bodies to live a dependent life were solely at their discretion. However, after years of activism and successful inclusion of disability issues to the forefront of public policy, the praxis has changed. The discourse is now led by the disabled, themselves.

With coming of intersectionality and interdisciplinary approaches the debate around disability according to this paper can become more nuanced and be charged with new perspective. This paper presents a trajectory from past to present of disabled beings. It argues and puts emphasis on why disability questions should be debated through science, technology and society studies (STS). As science and technology has played a vital role in reshaping our society, the way we live, work and how we relate to one another.

It has fundamentally altered the way we see, feels, and interact. Hence, the amalgamation of science, technology and society with a disability as a point of study must not be ignored. The velocity, scope, and impact that technology is creating in our lives is clearly unprecedented. The transformation it represents and the speed at which current breakthroughs are occurring around us are unparalleled. The fusion of technology is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres and the middle of all is centred on the exchange

that is ongoing between Humans and Machines. This supersonic-paced digital transformation that is taking shape is/has impacted the entire human population including those marked as disabled. This paper tries to present convincing arguments as to why more work should be done in this direction. And why the relationship between STS and disability needs to be examined, as according to the author it holds a key promise to define and redefine the question of the past, present and future of disability. It will help bring transparency, traceability and better results on questions around it.

References

- Barnes, Colin & Oliver, Mike (1993). Disability: A Social Phenomenon Ignored by Sociologists. Retrieved from: <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Barnes-soc-phenomenon.pdf>
- Cook, A.M., Polgar, J.M. & Hussey, S.M. (2008). *Assistive Technologies: Principles and Practice* (3rd Ed.). St. Louis: Mosby Elsevier
- Giddens Anthony & Sutton P.W. (2021). *Sociology* (9th Ed). Polity Press, UK
- Handbook of Disability Studies* (2001). India: SAGE Publications.
- Latour, B. (1988). *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Latour, B. (1993). *We have never been modern*: Translated by Catherine Porter (English). Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Latour, B. (2008) *En ny sociologi for et nyt samfund: introduktion til aktør-netværk-teori* (in English: A new sociology for a new society Introduction to Actor-network-theory). København: Akademisk Forlag.
- Linton, Simi (1998). *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Mitra, S. (2016). The Capability Approach and Disability. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 16(4), 236-247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10442073060160040>
- Oliver, M. (1983). *Social Work with Disabled People*. United Kingdom: Macmillan
- Oliver, M. (1990). *The Politics of Disablement*. United Kingdom: Macmillan Education
- Oliver, M. (1996). *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*. United Kingdom: Macmillan Education
- Ravneberg Bodil & Söderström Sylvia (2017). *Disability, Society and Assistive Technology*. London: Routledge
- Report of the ASA Committee on the Status of Person with Disabilities (PWD). American Sociological Association's Council. Retrieved from: <https://www.asanet.org/wp-content/uploads/savvy/images/asa/docs/pdf/Disabilities%20Status%20Committee%20Report%202005.pdf>
- Shakespeare, T. (2013). *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited* (2nd Ed). London: Routledge
- Stiker, Henri-Jacques (2019). *A History of Disability* (Translated by: William Sayers). The University of Michigan Press