

AN ANALYSIS OF PSYCHO-SOCIAL DISABILITY IN DEVDUTT PATTANAİK'S 'SITA' –A RETELLING OF RAMAYANA

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Abstract: The present paper explores the psycho-social disabilities in the characters of Ramayana. Intriguing past and fascinating future both influence our present. Our mind finds its realization both in remembering past and dreaming about future while acting in present. Cognitive inabilities and psycho-social difficulties create a major disability hiatus that deficits the functioning both of body and mind excluding the will to normalize the needs and requirements of the individual. The present paper explores the presence of psycho-social deficits in the legendary characters of the epic Ramayana. We intend to attend Ramayana and its characters not as heavenly characters but the characters in life and blood who resolve the dilemmas of human lives. The paper explores the horizon and limitations of various mental, cognitive and psychosocial disabilities.

IndexTerms - Psycho-Social Disabilities, Ramayana, Cognitive Inabilities, Sita, Devdutt Pattanaik

At the very outset, it is evidently clear that Indian worldview of 'disability' is quite different from the western world. Indian concept of disability is much more society oriented than the western. For example, loss of virginity before marriage is not considered as a disability as per the western world but the Indian notion makes this loss an epitome of exclusion and rejection for any girl to stand little chance of marriage. It is not physical or mental impairment alone that makes a person disabled but the societal constraints fuel up social exclusion, marginality and so rejection that leads up to disability.

When we peep into the world of myth, disability, as a term, gains a perspective that is above physical boundaries. The Indian mythic world view lands in the metamorphosed physicality and immortality of the soul. As per the philosophical worldview in Bhagvad-Gita, it is stated as:

“As a person sheds worn-out garments and wears new ones, likewise, at the time of death, the soul casts off its worn-out body and enters a new one”.(Mukundananda)

As it is made visible that a mortal shed his worn-out garments and wore new ones at the time of the death. Soul never dies; it just reenters into a new body. For instance, as taken from the Mahabharata, Shikhandi is a transgender who is physically able bodied but to any Indian he is the one who is disabled because Amba (the name and body of her previous birth) is reaping the harvest of the sin of committing suicide and the sin of having revengeful attitude towards Bhishma. So being a transgender is a disability to the feminine body and natural attributes of Amba which is otherwise poles apart from western worldview of disability.

Cognitive disability refers to the developmental delay, mental retardation and a group of other mental disorders. But focussing upon the Indian social perspectives, we would like to view it with the prism of psycho-social disability. Psychosocial is a compound made up of 'psycho' and 'socio' pointing towards the impact of mental illness towards the ways and behaviors towards society.

“Psycho-social disability is a state where individual or collective sense of incapacity restricts optimal use of individual and collective human agency to influence out-groups favourably to achieve self-expansion and communal expansion.

The aspects of psychosocial disability include poor self-concept, low ethnic self-esteem, negatively internalized identity, poor social integration and conflicts in social relations. It results in psycho-social disability that further increases social exclusion, reduces quality of life and well-being”.

(Justin Pallickal Jose, Conceptualising Psychosocial Disability in Social Exclusion: A Preliminary Discourse)

Indians follow the religion which is camouflaged with spirituality as their spirituality entertains the religious rites as well. Our culture and values do not allow us to reject disability as exclusion. Based on the karmic theory disability is feared by us as a way to get penalized by divine and semi-divine powers for all the wrong doings. Excluding disabled and ignoring their needs and necessities will surmount the load of our karmic debt. So the needs of disabled are catered by the caretakers. India has not yet glowed with the gleams of knowledge of issues pertaining to mental health. We are going to unravel the past social, cultural, economic and political milieu of Ramayana with regard to the psycho-social disablement.

The Indian world view of Ramayana is religious. The characters assume the shape of gods and goddess' in real lives of people. So the deviation in the normal mental order as well as activities is perceived in real as the whims and fancies of supernatural powers. Indian perspective regarding these deviations is seen as the boons of gods. In certain cases this is perceived to be a bane for the wrong doings in this birth or in the previous births. Psycho-social disability heralds those deviations from the normal mental phenomenon which in modern medicinal world can be perceived to be a sickness pertaining to limitation of activity.

Shiva narrates Ramayana to “comfort all in turbulent times” (Pattanaik xi). As per the Merriam-Webster's dictionary the word ‘Turbulent’ means causing unrest, violence or disturbance. It further illustrates to be marked by agitation or tumult. It is always enumerated that understanding all these tumults provide us the attributes at the juncture when mind is not at peace and psychological disability is blurring the realistic world around.

Psychosocial disability always shoulders itself in the form of “Amnesia” or “Dementia”. The characteristic features of both Amnesia and Dementia are forgetfulness, as if a person has a tendency towards forgetting things which disables a person. In the true sense of the word forgetfulness effects the proper functioning of the individual. In the epic Ramayana, owing to forgetfulness many a changes happened. King Dashratha was enjoying his life and to be coronation of Ram. He had forgotten the curse of Saravana's parents. On the other hand, Kaikeyi didn't remember the two boons offered to her by King Dashratha in lieu of her saving his life in a battlefield. When Manthara was poisoning Kaikeyi's mind with her venomous thoughts and tells her to demand her two boons. Kaikeyi uttered in utter surprise “Word?”(Pattanaik, 76) on getting reminded by Manthara Kaikeyi further responded “Oh Yes!” (Pattanaik, 76) and smiled craftily.

Sugriva after becoming the king of Kishkindha became overindulgent and forgot about the vow given to Ram. Because of his overindulgence he “lose the sense of time” (Pattanaik, 182). Losing sense of time is a cognitive disability. He was so much lost that Lakshaman went to him as the harbinger of death and challenged him. Under the influence of alcohol, he was not in a stable position of mind to identify the impending danger. Tara, assumed the role of a caretaker and went to Lakshaman on Sugriva's behalf. Sugriva was so disabled that he could not defend himself and his near and dear ones. He was disabled in the drunken stupor.

Hanuman during his childhood used to hurl boulders and mountains and so a rishi cursed him that he would forget the use of his powers. After the curse, he forgot all his capabilities till Jambuvan reminded him. This forgetfulness of Hanuman disabled him of his strength and abilities. The three worlds were happy to see him regaining his powers when he was out of the clutches of disablement by forgetfulness. Short term memory loss may be because of absentmindedness, age or curse challenged and changed the destinies of many in Ramayana.

Psychosocial disability gets manifested in the sleeping patterns of individuals. Good sleep is necessary for optimal health and can affect hormone levels, mood and weight. Insomnia or loss of sleep as well as oversleeping both disables the individuals who are getting affected. Sleep disorders got manifested in various characters of Ramayana. On their journey towards forest Ram, Sita and Lakshman walked for the entire day away from Kosala. Ram and Sita slept near a huge rock next to lake while Lakshman refused the goddess of Sleep 'Nidra' as he was desirous of protecting his brother and his sister in law. Lakshman further begged Nidra to go to his wife Urmilla who was in Ayodhya. He further asked Nidra to make her sleep at night her own sleep while during day time she will asleep on Lakshman's behalf. This way Lakshman did not sleep for fourteen years in the service of his brother.

Tracing psycho-social disability, we can see Lashman suffering from Insomnia- the lack of sleep for fourteen long years while Urmila- Lakshman's wife witnessed oversleeping. She slept day and night and thus she was disabled from performing day to day activities. Urmila's disability can be traced in modern medicalization as being in a Coma .When Lakshman touched her on his return from forest, "she awoke with a start. She looked at him and screamed... she was trembling with excitement and was unable to tie her hair." (Pattanaik, 262)

On the other side we have Kumbhakarna- the brother of Ravana who wanted to dethrone Indra. His tongue slipped and instead of Indra, he asked throne of Nidra. This slip of tongue led him to being asleep all year round. He was also told that if ever his sleep is disturbed, he would be killed that day. Kumbhakarna had an insatiable thirst and hunger. He has endless sleep and uncontrollable temper. "The episodic nature of Kumbhakarna's sleep fits in the episodic nature of Klein Levin. This syndrome is characterized by with periodic episodes of somnolence, hyperphagia, hypersexuality along with other behavioural and cognitive disabilities" (Lakhani and Lakhani, 2015)

Cognitive disabilities are many a times life threatening. A person with cognitive disability remains under the influence of fear and frustration and many a times kills himself/herself. A lurking feeling of embracing death in order to escape real life situations is seen in many characters of Ramayana. Angad couldnot find any clues about Sita when he went on search for her alongwith Hanuman, so they went to the cave of Swayamprabha. Angad was so much filled with fear that he did not want to return Kishkindha without any information regarding Sita. Hanuman and Jambuvan sat next to Angad and silently empathized his frustration and fear.

After Sita's abduction, Ram circled "his camp like a heartbroken lover, talking to the rocks, the trees, the birds and the animals" (Pattanaik, 158). Further he calls himself as "Sita's fool" (Pattanaik, 159).Ram withdraws when sages tried to outreach him to comfort him. He was in deep anguish. Fear and frustration colours ones faculties and makes him/ her disabled.

On being asked by Ram to "prove her chastity publicly before the people of Ayodhya"(Pattanaik,304), Sita invokes earth that "if I have been as true as the earth in my love for Ram, then may the earth split open and take me within(Pattanaik,304) ."Frustrated with the plight of living and proving herself honorable, Sita claims her life willingly. Sita's submission towards death definitely disables her from living a normal life of a householder with a husband and sons. Her invoking earth to subsume her is undoubtedly suicidal.

After the demise of Sita, "a few days later for some mysterious reason, Lakshman left the city and walked deep into the forest and beheaded himself" (Pattanaik,4)it's quite like committing suicide in the wake of depression. A person undergoes such an act only if one is disabled by the morose and sullen attitude of oneself towards life. One is mentally exhausted and so disabled by the sullen faculties of the mind.

Thus it is lucid visible that Ramayana is fully laden with imagery wherein the characters expressed cognitive disability or psycho-social disability. This disability is contemplated to be either the blessings or boon of godly powers in most of the cases. But a remarkable change and exclusivity happens because of it. Had Kaikeyi not forgot about her boons ? She would have asked something earlier. Had Hanuman not forgotten his powers, Sugriva would never have required Ram's assistance to kill Vali. The psyco social disability, hampers not only the day to day activities of the concerned individual but also it can be the cause of death. Frustration and anxiety are definitely part and parcel of human life but when this leads to the

feelings of hopelessness and plunges the individual into the deep dungeons of disablement, then it excludes the individual from mainstream.

This paper has tried to explicate indigenous framework of bringing out the constraints of disability scholarship in India. We do not consider sleeplessness as well as suicidal act of Lakshman to be a disablement we have multiple mentally disabled persons in this category with the same disability. We have set norms for treating Disability in myth. We have debilitating marker increasing in and vice-a versa with regard to social, cultural, geographical and economic constructs.

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