

Disability of Language: Disabled People are not Blessed with Divine Organs

Jagdish Chander

Introduction

This short article deals with the familiar issue of terminology in the field of disability, but more specifically, it is about a recent controversy in India with regard to “labelling” a person with disabilities. The issue of terminology may seem superficial at one level, but within a discipline dealing with one of the most well-known but the least talked about human conditions, such labels are deeply-impacting and significant within the larger social context. On a rather practical level too, a multiplicity of terminology only creates more confusion about a field that is in any case not very well understood. Among the various sectors, it is in the field of education that this confusion can have far deeper consequences, for in this field, labelling has a deep, psychological impact on the “labelled” person for the rest of her/his life.

The Legend

Having acquired independence at the end of the first half of the 20th century, India lately witnessed several socio-political movements relating to the hitherto marginalized sections towards the end of the latter half of the century. These movements include the Dalit, the feminist, the queer, the transgender, and the disability rights movements, etc. Like all such movements in various parts of the world, these movements in India have not only challenged the misconceptions and social construct related to the respective communities (which these movements sought to represent), but, in many

cases they have even challenged the traditionally used terminologies related to their respective sections.

While there has been a vibrant disability rights movement in India since the early 1990s, which was preceded by the self-advocacy movement of the blind for their rights during the 1970s and 1980s, there has been an intellectual vacuum regarding the use of language in the field of disability in India. Consequently, we have been borrowing terminologies from the English-speaking western world to describe Persons with Disability (PwD) in English. The translation of these terminologies has often resulted in misperception, or at times completely unacceptable use of terminologies in Hindi and other vernacular languages.

Lack of indigenously developed perspective and language relating to disability in India, has resulted in a lot of confusion in this field. The coinage of the term *divyang* (people with a divine organ), to replace the existing Hindi word for the disabled—*viklang*—by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is a glaring example of the use of not only confused but a completely unacceptable terminology to describe PwDs in India.

The intellectual impoverishment regarding the innovation of indigenous terminology and to some extent the lack of an indigenous perspective to challenge the interpretation of disability has resulted in an excessive dependence on the use of terminologies produced by the West not only in English, but even in Indian languages.

Consequently, a crude translation of these terminologies from English to Indian languages, particularly Hindi, has paved the way for wrong “labelling”. For example, the word “disabled” has often been translated as *aksham* (‘incapable’) by the vernacular press as opposed to the traditional and more acceptable term *viklang*. In the vocabulary relating to disability, the word *viklang* corresponds to the English term “impaired”, which is a perfectly acceptable term in a context where there is physical or mental functional limitation. The adjective *viklang* or impaired becomes *viklangta* or impairment when converted to its noun form.

The Social Location of Disability

The indigenous terms *viklang* or *viklangta* have been acceptable terms in the Indian context so far, perhaps due to lack of any better terminology developed indigenously. Similarly, the terms, “impaired” or “impairment” are also very acceptable terminologies when used in English in the context of one’s physical or mental functional limitation. However, the Western disability rights discourse has made a distinction between “impairment” and “disability”. For them, the word “impairment” connotes actual physical, intellectual or mental impairment/functional limitation and the word “disability” connotes physical, attitudinal and physical-environmental infrastructural barriers resulting in a disabling environment, thereby, shifting the location of functional limitation of the disabled from the individual to the society. Hence, the term “disabled” is used to denote a person having any kind of impairment. The person therefore is disabled not so much due to her/his impairment per say, but due to a negative social attitude, lack of accessible infrastructure or the absence of the required support system to enable such a person to function independently.

The above-mentioned argument can be substantiated through an illustration of the following two examples in a given context. A wheelchair user would be completely disabled if she/he is asked to climb the fifth floor of a building which does not have a lift. On the contrary, the same person could function quite independently and efficiently in a building which has lifts and/or ramps wherever needed. Likewise, a blind student would be severely constrained if the reading material is available only in print medium and she/he does not have the option of typing her/his exams. Again, she/he could be quite independent and pursue education as effectively as a student who can see, if the books are available in formats such as Braille, audio-recordings or electronic text format, which could be read through a screen reading software and she/he is trained and equipped to type her/his exams. That is to say, a wheelchair user is not disabled if the building is fully accessible, with ramps and lifts wherever needed, and a blind student is not disabled while pursuing education if she/he can read books independently in an accessible format and can type exams independently. This means, being on a wheelchair or being blind happen to be the impairments. However, these impairments are converted into disabilities in the absence of appropriate infrastructure or support systems to meet the needs of such people, depriving them of their independent functionality, and preventing them from participating fully in their desired activities.

So, given the distinction between impairment and disability, it is perfectly alright to use the word “disabled” or “disability” in the western context or even in India when we are using these expressions in English. However, to translate the word, “disabled” literally into Hindi as *aksham* and to replace the existing Hindi word *viklang*, without first preparing the ground for it, would be completely out of context and highly misleading.

In the West, rehabilitation professionals engaged in the field of disability and to some extent the disabled people themselves struggled for appropriate terminologies to replace the earlier terminology “handicapped”, which was associated with begging in medieval Europe. Several alternatives such as “physically challenged”, “differently abled” and “people with special needs” were considered until the disability rights activists came up with the term “disability” or “disabled”. A terminology such as “differently able” sounds politically correct, but it does not communicate the discrimination and the oppression that a disabled person has to deal with, nor does it relocate the disability from the individual to the society, the way the word “disability” does. Hence, the disability rights activists chose the term “disabled” or “disability” to replace the erstwhile derogatory term “handicapped” not only to connote the discrimination and oppression associated with it, but also to relocate disability from the individual to the society. By doing this, they shifted the blame for the discrimination and oppression that a disabled person faces on the society rather than on the person with the disability.

Just like the English-speaking Western world, India too is struggling to evolve an alternative terminology to replace the word “handicapped”. The political leaders as well as the Indian media often use English terminologies such as “physically challenged”, “differently able”, etc. Sometimes, they resort to describing a specific disability such as blindness or deafness by using terminologies such as “visually challenged”, “visually impaired” or “deaf-mute”. Most of these terminologies however, are not approved by the disability rights activists as well as scholars engaged in research or studying disability from a disability rights perspective.

The greatest blow to this confusing, or in many cases erroneous use of the terminology related

to disability is the coinage of the term *divyang* by the current Prime Minister in a speech which he was supposed to read out before an audience at Vigyan Bhawan on the occasion of world Disability Day on 3 December 2015 at the time of launching the Accessible India Campaign. In the absence of Mr. Modi, the speech was read out by the Finance Minister, Mr. Arun Jaitley. However, the use of this word went unnoticed by the larger world outside Vigyan Bhawan, as well as the media, which in any case hardly pays attention to the issues concerning a highly marginalized group such as the disabled. However, soon after, Mr. Modi made an appeal to use this term instead of the existing term *viklang* during his last “Man ki Baat” radio broadcast of the year 2015, on 27 December, and this time it caught the attention of the disability rights activists and a small group of scholars working on disability. Mr. Modi again officially used the term *divyang* while flagging off a luxury train in Varanasi in January, 2016. Lately, the official electronic media has also been using this term, and attempts are being made in the government quarters to consider replacing the currently used term *viklang* with the term *divyang* officially.

Problems with the Term *divyang*

Let me outline three reasons for why I find the term *divyang* unacceptable:

(1) The term has no substance and conveys no information to describe the target group of people. Moreover, it neither conveys the meaning of the word “impairment”, as the currently used Hindi term *viklang* does, nor does it convey the meaning of the word “disabled” as the word “disabled” does in the context of disability being perceived as a social construct. Going by traditional religious interpretations, all living beings with or without any kind of disability, are creations of God and they all possess divine organs. So, to say that

people having a disability possess a divine organ would imply that those who do not have a disability have been deprived of a divine organ. It would also imply that disabled people have been bestowed with a divine organ as compared to those without disability, thereby making the disabled people highly “blessed”.

(2) As Mr. Modi mentioned in his “Man ki Baat” radio broadcast of 27 December 2015, the idea of describing the disabled as *divyang* is inspired by his belief that if God takes away any part of one’s body, He bestows upon that person another part, or He creates an additional sensory body part. The idea that God bestows an additional sense or what is popularly described as the “sixth sense” on a person who has a sensory loss, is an age-old myth based on misconception and ignorance regarding the functionality of a disabled person in India, which has led to a widespread belief about their having a sixth sense. However, what is even more objectionable or unacceptable is that instead of challenging and demolishing such a myth through a scientific explanation, it has been reinforced. It may be true that a disabled person with a sensory loss is more dependent on the remaining senses and tends to use them more as compared to someone without a sensory loss. For example, a blind person could be dependent on his power of touch, hearing or smell, and in many cases, she/he may use them more than a sighted person, but it does not mean that she/he has got an additional sense or what is described as the “sixth sense”.

(3) Finally, describing a disabled as a person with a “divine organ” sounds as patronizing as describing Dalits as Harijans or identifying woman as *devi ka roop* (‘incarnation of a Goddess’). However well-intended these expressions may have been in a given context, they are no longer accepted by Dalit rights activists and feminists today. Similarly, however well-intended the coinage of the word *divyang*

may be, it sounds as patronizing to the disability rights activists as the word Harijan to the Dalit rights activists, or woman as an incarnation of a goddess to women activists.

Conclusion

To sum up, we should stick to the currently used terminology in the field of disability in India, i.e. “disabled” or “disability” in English and *viklang* and *viklangta* in Hindi. If this terminology sounds objectionable, then we have to come up with an indigenously developed alternative to them. But the alternative terminology has to be innovated and evolved by the disability rights activists through a bottom-up approach rather than through a top down approach which led to the coinage of an erroneous term such as *divyang* which reinforces the age-old myths regarding disability rather than demolishing them.

Jagdish Chander is Associate Professor of Political Science in Hindu College, University of Delhi. He has done a PhD from Syracuse University on the history of the movement of the organized blind in India. His research interests include the history of disability rights movements in India and disability studies.

jagdish100@gmail.com