

AT THE CROSSROADS OF THE PHYSICAL AND THE SOCIAL: REFLECTIONS ON THE DOUBLE DISABILITY OF THE SUBALTERN

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Let me confess at the very outset, that this the foray of a novice in disability studies, made as a dilettantish effort, not because there is any expertise to be shared here, but because it is felt that there are some aspects of disability that are not properly appreciated, at least, not as much as they deserve. The issue considered to be worthy of problematization here is the problems arising from disability among the section of people who already belong to the subaltern sections of the society. As these sections already suffer from the systematized discriminations of the society, which could be conceptualized as a kind of social disability, it is no exaggeration to designate this as double disability.

As is well-known, the concept of the subaltern plays a pivotal role in describing history told from below; the term *subaltern* derived from the concept of *cultural hegemony* originally worked out by Antonio Gramsci, which identified the social groups who are excluded from a society's established structures for political representation, the means by which people have a voice in their society. In a broad sense, disadvantaged sections of people, based on their class, caste, gender, race, region, age, language etc. can be regarded as belonging to the subaltern. The central contention of this paper is to underscore the fact disability in these sections should be viewed as double disability, and the suggested means of sensitizing and amelioration of their condition should take this particularity into account.

Like any other problem in society, disability should not be taken in a stereotyped manner, but should be recognized as an ensemble of different aspects of society that are articulated in a specific way in every particular society. Against this backdrop, one needs to appreciate the fact that disability has different repercussions in different

social contexts. The gradual predominance of the social model of conceptualizing disability in the modern times has obvious advantages over the biomedical conception. As Bill Hughes remarks (65) appropriately in his essay "Disability and the Body":

[In] the social model of disability, the disability movement and disability studies are all manifestations of the fact that, in the last twenty years disability has been transformed, and that the dominance of the biomedical conception of disability has been contested by a political discourse. Demarcated disabled people have refused to accept the view that they are victims of defective bodies or that they need care, cure or charity. Passivity and disability are no longer synonymous. Disability politics is no stranger to direct action, and slogans such as 'Rights not charity' represent criticisms of traditional views of disabled people.

A prerequisite for the proper understanding of this struggle for rights is the awareness of the nature of the problem characterized as double disability here. A common misunderstanding about the incidence and acuity of the problem arises from the mechanical understanding of the disability of the subaltern as a mere subset of the problem of disability and consequently underestimate its prevalence. In fact, the problem of disability among the underprivileged sections of the people occupies an unmatched place in the overall prevalence of disability. In their "Introduction" to the book *Disability and Poverty: A Global Challenge*, Benedict Ingested and Arne H. Eide, aptly figure out the reasons that exacerbate disability among the poor people (5):

What is sometimes less obvious is the way that poverty influences, or creates, disability. Being poor may delay people in seeking help with health problems that are normally curable. Thus, for instance, eye or ear problems may lead to permanent blindness or loss of hearing. Difficulties in labor may be brought to medical attention at a stage where it is too late to save the baby from permanent brain damage, leading to cerebral palsy and/or mental disability or epilepsy.

This interlacing of the social and physical disability is not restricted to the incidence of disability alone, which explains the prevalence of disability among the subaltern groups. When it comes to the ramifications of disability also, the interfacing of the social and the physical takes an unexpectedly cruel turn. For instance, in the case of a disabled girl, especially in the rural context, physical disabilities pose problems that are related not only to movement but also to her matrimonial prospects. For a tribal man living in the fringes of modern society, getting the governmental welfare assistance for the disabled is not so easy. For a person of minority religion, it may not be easy to get the empathy and understanding even to the extent that other people experience.

What is remarkable here is the complex way in which the disadvantages and/or disabilities intertwine with each other; and the methodology of the critique of this should also be equally multidimensional. When one considers some kind of disability, concomitant aspects of social disability should not be left out of consideration. Paulo

Freire, the outstanding Brazilian, educational thinker, makes a very thought-provoking statement in this connection, in his book *Ideology Matters* (15): "one cannot reduce the analysis of racism to social class, one cannot understand racism fully without a class analysis, for to do one at the expense of the other is to fall prey into a sectarianist position, which is as despicable as the racism that we need to reject". It is this avoidance of sectarian thinking which is the imperative for a correct understanding of this problem that presents itself as an intricate complex of social oppressions and deprivation.

Last but not the least is the issue how this approach should enrich the philosophy and methodology of teaching. The significant matter here is the general concept of education itself. In the contemporary time, people tend to take education as a knowledge transforming process. But, as Henry A. Giroux, aptly said in his essay "Towards a Postmodern pedagogy" (384): "Education must be understood as producing not only knowledge but also political subjects. Rather than rejecting the language of politics, critical pedagogy must link public education to the imperatives of critical democracy". If the system of education should play this proactive role the whole educational system should be oriented towards a thoroughgoing inclusive model. Only such an inclusively reoriented model of education can incorporate the problem of disability, along with the social disadvantages that characterise the subaltern.

The teachings of Critical pedagogy subscribed by writers like Giroux are significant in this connection. As Giroux puts it succinctly in the seminal essay cited above (387): "Critical pedagogy needs to develop a theory of teachers as transformative intellectuals who occupy specifiable political and social locations". This theory of teachers not only as stakeholders in the society but as the transformative forces will help develop a more democratic society characterized by large-scale proactive participation of the people. Only such an education that plays an active role in the society is required for the modern society rift with social and physical disabilities, because, as Richard Shaull says in his "Foreword" to *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (34):

There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

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