

# H-Net Reviews

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**Asha Hans, ed.** *Disability, Gender, and the Trajectories of Power*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2015. 292 pp. \$16.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-93-5150123-7.

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The introduction to *Disability, Gender, and the Trajectories of Power* draws attention to the isolation and oppression of women with disabilities and calls for “a non-discriminatory” approach that can protect the needs of women with disabilities as well as give them equal human rights within feminist movements (p. 1). Providing an overview of the injustice and discrimination against women with disabilities across the globe and highlighting some specific discriminatory practices followed in India that target women with disabilities, such as how disabled women in India are seen as asexualized beings yet at the same time are believed to be carrying the “disabled fetus,” the introduction sets the context for the chapters that follow (p. 10). Asha Hans also highlights the lack of research on women with disabilities in conflict or disaster situations and the lack of research on the gendered issues of autism.

The first section of the book includes three chapters that examine disability as a gendered problematic and conceptualization. In chapter 1, Upali Chakravarti provides a comparative analysis of the oppression faced by the disabled population and observes how academic discussions pertaining to disability are still at the nascent stages in India in comparison to Western countries. Chakravarti concludes her chapter by highlighting the paradox of the disabled community in India, especially with regard to their reproductive rights, which often remain unrecognized amid discussions on basic survival of the community. According to the Indian Prenatal Diagnostic Technique Act of 1994, it is illegal to have an abortion on the basis of the sex of the child but permitted on the basis of disability. This, according to Chakravarti, not only stigmatizes “disability” in India but also legitimizes

“one kind of selection versus another” (p. 36).

In the second chapter, S. B. Agnihotri and Amrita Patel examine the status of women with disabilities in four prominent Indian states: Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and West Bengal. Using Amartya Sen’s “entitlement framework,” the authors first explore how impairments turn into disabilities and then interrogate the role of gender in “aggravating disability further” (p. 46). Through their data analysis, Agnihotri and Patel provide critical insight into the socioeconomic conditions of women with disabilities in these four states. They argue for the need to study the pattern of allocation of government funds in the field of disability, which, if done consistently over time, can emerge as an important tool for disability advocacy. In addition, the authors suggest implementing gender-neutral aspects of government schemes and emphasize the urgency of addressing the problem of sexual vulnerability of women with disabilities in younger age groups.

The third chapter examines how women’s psychosocial disability is often a result of their socioeconomic circumstances. Examining historical research on health in India, Nilika Mehrotra and Mahima Nayar argue that, in addition to such factors as poverty and geographical location, the “caste-system” acts as a crucial determinant of women’s health in India. The chapter ends by making a case for acknowledging different cultural and healing practices and advocates for designing collaborative methodologies between medical health movements and cultural practices of healing to empower women.

The second section takes a narrative approach and provides experiences of living with a disability or being

a caregiver for a disabled person. In chapter 4, Malini Chib documents a comparative experience of growing up as a disabled person in India versus living in the United Kingdom as a disabled adult. Chib, as did the disabled Indian author Firdaus Kanga, moved to the UK in the 1990s and was impressed by her experience of accessible environments and sensitivity toward her disability. She was able to navigate on her own in her electronic wheelchair and, with the help of her voice synthesizer, was able to communicate with people. This made her feel accepted, independent, and empowered in the UK, but when she returned to India eight years later she encountered disappointment. She felt paralyzed in “multiple ways—social, cultural, political, and economical” (p. 97).

Chapter 5 examines the psychiatric oppression of women and recommends a more active role by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) to take immediate action to stop violation and harassment against all persons with disabilities. In chapter 6, Santoshi Halder shows that normality should be seen as a relative concept that changes from country to country and argues for reconsidering the ways in which society tags a person as disabled. Halder documents the discrimination faced by married women who have disabilities and calls for constant efforts to eliminate the innate socio-cultural conditioning and mindset that fails to appreciate the “unique abilities” of women with disabilities in India (p. 130). In chapter 7, Sandhya Limaye, brings forth a series of parenting experiences of disabled mothers—a topic that, surprisingly, has attracted little attention within critical disability and feminist studies. Commenting on the dearth of research and available data on the number and experiences of disabled parents in India, Limaye observes the challenges and prejudices faced by mothers with disabilities.

Shubhangi Vaidya in chapter 8 argues that, unlike in Western countries where institutions play a major role in an individual’s developmental disability, the family and kin group continue to be a part of an individual’s disability experience in India. Focusing on twenty families with children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder in Delhi, Vaidya observes how caregiving duties for the autistic child often fall on the shoulders of female family members. In the absence of parental support organizations, reliable community networks, or counseling services for caregivers of children with developmental disabilities, these caregivers often find themselves isolated and juggling multiple roles. While many mother-caregivers have become disability rights activists and volunteer at multiple organizations that work toward help-

ing disabled children, the father-caregivers mostly see their roles as breadwinners. The familial involvement in a child’s developmental disability is also extended to siblings, who, according to Vaidya, are seen as the “custodian and future guardian” of the child with a disability (p. 168). Vaidya ends the chapter by pointing to the critical role of family-style support groups in a country where autism has just started to be identified as a disability despite having one of the largest populations of people with disabilities in the world. Vaidya’s exploration focuses on urban families, but the lack of research on rural autistic children demonstrates the lack of awareness of this disability among the masses—and the significant amount of work that still needs to be done in India.

The final section is titled “Toward Nondiscriminatory Gendered Strategies.” In chapter 9, Stephanie Ortoleva calls for the inclusion of girls and women with disabilities in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields in both education and employment. Using wide-ranging data and statistics, Ortoleva cites various factors that act as barriers to inclusion of women and girls with disabilities in these areas.

In chapter 10, Renu Addlakha uses socio-anthropology to examine the intersections between work, disability, and gender in contemporary India. Unpacking the history of the rights of the disabled population, she argues that “instead of giving rights to disabled citizens and empowering them, a culture of charity and welfare has been systematically promoted in India since the colonial period” (p. 218). Addlakha notes that the Indian political system, in combination with the electoral politics of caste and gender, systematically disenfranchises the disabled population. Commenting on the link between disability and employment, she illustrates how disability in some areas of the country is defined, not by medical conditions but by the capacity to engage in productive work. Citing caste, class, and gender as deeply embedded categories in the Indian workforce, Addlakha calls for a more nuanced perspective that can examine the contribution of disabled people in the workforce. She also draws attention to problems in the government-led initiative of reservations in employment for people with disabilities. She terms it as a “self-defeating and illogical” initiative as it fails to address basic challenges faced by the disabled community, such as accessibility, accommodation, and inclusivity issues (p. 229).

The final chapter of this book examines the Indian reform process of disability laws in compliance with the United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons

with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The chapter has one author, Bhargavi V. Davar, but the author frequently uses the pronoun “we” to make her arguments. It is unclear who the “we” in this chapter are. Commenting on several codes and conventions that Indian legislation, drafted with an aim to address the challenges faced by the disabled community, Davar observes that, in reality, they do not serve their purpose. She provides examples of recent

case law to highlight the discrepancy between “the inspirational mandate of the UNCRPD and ground-level realities of women with psychosocial disabilities” (p. 255).

Overall, *Disability, Gender, and the Trajectories of Power* is a significant addition to scholarship on disability studies pertaining to India. The book is well-balanced and covers a wide range of issues faced by women with disabilities in India.

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