

## Global Perspectives

### Against Social Isolation: Disability Metaphors and Personal Battles

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#### Abstract

The current COVID-19 pandemic has brought about change in the structures and categories of discursive production, while at the same time has successfully retained the institutionalized difference between bodies, gender, class, caste, and race. This article attempts to understand how the “deviant body” continues to be the marker of one’s disability despite experiences felt collectively as a result of disabling circumstances caused by COVID-19.

*Keywords:* disability, social distancing, isolation

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Isolation, loneliness, gloominess, and dreariness are words that translate the emotions of many individuals at this moment. Confinement, isolation, seclusion, or quarantine. People are finding this difficult to deal with, and social distancing seems like moving mountains. We are told the world is grappling with physical, social, emotional, and economic disability. From availing healthcare facilities, doing grocery shopping, and socializing with families and friends to going to one's workplace, every single activity has become a hard nut to crack.

Different disability metaphors are being used to recount these experiences generated by the current pandemic. The confinement caused by restrictions on movement or travel is often described as physically disabling. Economic slowdown has been referred to as a paralyzed economy. The inability to socialize has been defined as social atrophy. Moreover, collective unhappiness is being referred to as “depression” or “madness.” Casual conversations use disability references at regular intervals. Utterances like “I have gone mad” or “the lockdown has made everyone limp” have gained currency. Due to the lack of words to translate the unfamiliarity of the current pandemic, disability metaphors have come to the rescue to interpret the experiences in familiar terms. These metaphors are not merely linguistic signs. They unfold the tactics of the association between the experiences caused by the situation like the current pandemic and disability experiences in general. This association also unravels the ways in which disability is perceived.

The use of disability metaphors to capture bleakness, gloominess, and despair renders disability as a tragedy and a label to be denied. It fosters notions of dependence, deviance, and abnormality and associates them with disability, as words and phrases such as “normal” and “the new normal” have become everyday words. The association of current experiences with disability further suggests that external factors can cause the inability to carry out day-to-day functions and activities. It also indicates that disability has become a collective experience and hence, various institutions are collectively working on creating a conducive environment which can reduce disability caused by physical and social factors.

However, the use of disability metaphors to make sense of the pandemic does not help in fully grasping the experiences of those living with physical impairment. Occasional and transient episodes of functional impairment, isolation, or dependence differ from those stemming from the interaction between physical impairment and a disabling social environment. The functional impairment caused by the social environment to the persons with

“normative bodies” is not considered as disability, as the locus of their impairment does not lie in their bodies. However, for many people categorized as “disabled,” there is a perception that isolation, despair, and penury are their essential traits. As a result, social isolation or social distancing is something with which many with physical impairments are not unfamiliar.

As discussed above, the clichéd understanding of the disabled as dependent, sorrowful, or burdensome compels many with disabilities to hide their pain behind the camouflage of a happy demeanor. Their requests for modification of their environment to make it suitable to their needs is taken as disability. They are frequently urged to pass as non-disabled or, at times, may be relegated to complete isolation. Be it a workplace, a family function, a festival, or a get-together, many with disabilities have to find ways of coping with social isolation. She or he either suppresses her or his emotions or finds solace in talking to a fellow being who shares a similar emotional state. Moreover, this social isolation felt by those with physical disabilities is normalized to such an extent that it goes unnoticed, and, hence many with disabilities may develop “immunity” against social exclusion and isolation.

A considerable amount of time, effort, oscillation, and negotiation have gone into developing an anti-body for social seclusion. “The normalcy of the body” has always been additive to or derivative of the understanding of disability and people with disabilities, and this understanding has rendered many with disabilities invisible from the social scene. This phenomenon has underwritten, circumscribed, and silenced the desire of people with disabilities. People with disabilities are represented in an archetypal manner in various cultural forms, and these representations keep the stereotypes such as “malnourished, disfigured, untidy, and shabby” afloat. These images reinforce the notion that penury, dependence, miseries, and agony are the essence of disability. As a result, a person with a “normative body” is shocked when encountering someone with a physical impairment who is confident, when having to work under a person with a physical impairment, or when a person with a physical impairment is spotted in a bar, a club, a jewelry shop, a rock show, or a pub or is seen on a date with someone. I will now delve into some of the experiences which I as a person with vision impairment have had.

Once at the wedding of my close friend, I was in a traditional outfit with a little makeup on my face and straightened hair. One of my acquaintances came to me and gave me a tight hug. I could make out that she was in tears. When I asked her why, she replied: “how can god be so cruel! Such a beautiful girl is punished with...” Her tears filed a charge sheet

against my eyes, accusing them of not only rendering me functionally impaired but defacing my otherwise good-looking face. She pitied my eyes not for their inability to fulfill their designated function, but for disrupting aesthetic pleasure. My eyes are always ostracized and are told to vacate the unfitting abode and settle down in an ashram which befits them. If I were in shabby attire with uncombed hair, my look would not have generated so much pity, because blindness and untidiness are seen by many to go hand in hand.

The memories of similar exclusionary remarks are resurrected in my mind. Once I accompanied my friend to the bank. While entering, I was stopped by a stranger. He extended his hand towards me and offered me a chocolate. I was completely baffled by his gesture. In the state of cluelessness, I could not react. Meanwhile, my friend who was also taken aback finally asked why he offered a chocolate exclusively to me. He did not answer but started unleashing a series of questions: “Can’t she see at all? Why has she come to the bank? How does she pass her time?” His questions answered my friend’s question. He offered me a chocolate thinking that it might help me in momentarily relieving myself from the agony and allow me to relish the taste of sensory pleasure. My presence at a public place threatened him, as his eyes were habituated only with having glimpses of imperfect bodies either in a circus or in a fair.

Once I had participated in a drama workshop held by our college and as part of it, we performed a skit. One of my sighted friends played a blind girl, and I played station master. While we were performing, a comment came from the audience: “Such a beautiful girl playing a blind girl!” The girl in the audience could not resolve the disruption caused by surfacing of the image threatening the stereotypical image of the blind. She could not see me playing other than “the blind” and seeing the sighted one playing “the blind.”

All these narratives exhibit our intolerance to bodily imperfection. The intolerance worn by people having so called “normative bodies” shuns those deemed deviant from participating in social life, and, as a result, people with physical impairments may gradually start withdrawing themselves from social gathering and public places, which eventually may leave them *socially disabled*.

The current outbreak of COVID 19 has increased the disability of the persons with physical challenges, but it has not altered the ways in which persons with physical challenges are perceived by persons with so-called normative bodies, despite their feeling ‘disabled’ by the current pandemic. That is to say that the existing obliviousness about the challenges faced

by persons with physical impairment due to the inadequacy of attention paid to their needs (such as accessible and universally designed infrastructure, access to information, healthcare facilities, and so on) is coupled with the complete ignorance on the part of the authorities about the barriers caused by the current pandemic to the physically challenged in carrying out daily activities. Inequities in distributing essential goods, providing essential services, and so on during lockdown has led to the erasure of physically challenged persons from the scene. The very interpretation of notions like “essential goods” and “essential services” did not take into account providing assistive technologies like hearing aids, screen reader software, care giving services to persons with chronic illness, and so on, for example, which are indispensable to mitigating the sufferings and pain caused by physical impairment. These disabling circumstances increase the disability of persons with physical impairments.

As a person with vision impairment, I could not anticipate what would be coming my way. When the lockdown was announced as a precautionary measure to curb the spread of COVID19, I had no idea about its repercussions on my personal and professional life. Like any other citizen, I had to adapt to the new ways of life including behavioral changes at home and in the workplace, buying groceries, availing myself of healthcare services, and attending gatherings. Work from home became the “new normal,” and changes began to be introduced to normalize this new normal. Digital platforms became the substitute for physical architecture, and companies developing various applications began to entice consumers by ensuring smooth functioning and uninterrupted work. Online platforms assumed the role of facilitator of communication, and professionals began to dispense their duties online. Teaching and learning also shifted online.

Being moderately good at internet surfing, I could manage to gather information pertaining to the developments that took place due to the outbreak of COVID19. However, my knowledge of internet surfing was not enough to drive me through this sudden transition. In the wake of COVID19, teachers were asked to conduct classes online. Buzz started around which applications were more suitable to the needs of both teachers and students. I found myself stumbling, completely nonplussed, anxious, and confused. My colleagues started imparting lessons online, but I kept on figuring out which application was friendlier to persons with vision impairments. Struck by guilt, I made desperate attempts to educate myself in the new methods of teaching.

During this time, I realized that the discussion around suitability had hardly taken into account persons with physical impairments. While incessant training sessions were held on the use of online platforms to reduce the disability of persons with normative bodies, persons with physical impairments had started feeling more disabled. The strategic ignorance on the part of the so called “normative people” about the challenges faced by persons with physical impairments left the physically impaired to sink or swim. Unlike some who suffered disproportionately due to the unavailability of a support system in terms of linguistic, human, financial, and technical assistance, I could manage to orient myself with the basics of these applications.

In the midst of these challenges, discussions with others with similar physical impairments served as a ray of hope and motivation. People in disability sub-cultures with sound knowledge of technology came to the rescue and helped me enhance the skills required for new modes and methods of teaching and learning and helped me survive among the fittest. However, digital technology did not prove to be a magic stick in terms of addressing the challenges posed by digital inequities. Inaccessible websites and electronic journals, the closure of physical libraries, and the absence of human assistance all continued to create challenges in searching relevant materials, thereby rendering both teaching and learning difficult. The circulars on continuation of academic activities during the lockdown gave me pangs of anxiety and guilt, as the disabling physical and social environment made me perceive myself as unproductive.

The pandemic brought about unprecedented challenges on the personal front, too. Many with normative bodies, despite feeling disabled by circumstances, continued to exhibit what might be considered eugenic attitudes towards persons with physical impairment. The casual conversations and the debates and discussions on media were rife with remarks on the necessity of being selective in saving the lives of the able-bodied. The strategic decision of prioritizing the lives of young, able-bodied people by many countries made me question the worth of my own life, and this feeling of worthlessness was reinforced by my helplessness in carrying out my day-to-day activities. Being a person with vision impairment, I use my tactile sense in navigating through places. Moreover, touching various surfaces is something which is quite usual for persons with vision impairment. However, the precautionary measures such as maintaining social distance and keeping oneself away from touching possibly contaminated surfaces made everyday life more difficult and challenging. My hesitation in asking for

human assistance grew stronger, and strategies I used during the pre-COVID19 era, such as drinking less water in order to suppress the urge to urinate in order to come across as less dependent, now became the only viable options in mitigating the fear of infecting others. From withdrawing cash from ATMs to buying sanitary napkins, every single activity appeared as a mammoth task. The fear of aged parents contracting the disease, the absence of any other human assistance, and people's fear of touching a person with vision impairment all hampered my ways of negotiating the world.

In her 1996 book *The Rejected Body*, Susan Vendell suggests disability is relative to one's social, physical, and cultural environment. With my privileged subject position, I could reduce my disability by devising various strategies. That is to say that the knowledge of English, good financial support, educated family, and friends combined to serve as a support system in addressing the challenges thrown up by the pandemic. However, the issues and challenges of those whose disability intersects with lower economic strata, lower caste, and marginalized sexual orientation have gone unnoticed. Their challenges were largely invisible during pre-COVID times, and they are now. Many have lost not only their jobs but their own lives or those of family members due to the lack of adequate familial, societal, and financial support. Hunger and sickness have taken a toll on their physical and emotional well-being. I have come across accounts of visually impaired patients who were stranded with their sickness in healthcare centers and hospitals. They struggled not only in orienting themselves to new surroundings but in finding assistance for sickness. Their humiliation and the reluctance of authorities kept them from articulating their needs.

The current pandemic is wielding its power on humanity. Humans are finding ways of challenging this power and in bringing their lives back to normal. Collective endeavors are being made to reduce the disability caused by these unprecedented times. However, in this survival war, ableism has colored the societal attitude, and the issues of bodies deemed 'deviant' have not been paid adequate heed. While a few efforts have been made to save the lives of individuals with physical impairments, many persons with "deviant" bodies have been segregated from the collective of normative bodies. Biological determinism has relegated their bodies to inhabitable zones.

So called "normative persons" expect the civil society and the state to provide them with adequate means to cope with the crisis. At the same time, demands on the part of the persons with physical impairment are considered as dependence. Here I am reminded of the

words of a so-called abled person overheard objecting to the Persons with Disability Act: “Why should government waste money and resources by investing them in a small section of the society which is incapable of accomplishing most of the tasks.” Such majoritarian and utilitarian approaches devalue the disabled community by highlighting their supposed incapability in increasing social, cultural, and economic capital. It is believed that if the factors causing functional impairment are resolved, much of disability can be reduced.

However, the irony is that the attitude shaped by the ideology of normalcy fosters the view that if resources are spent in enhancing the ability of normative bodies during a crisis, it can contribute to the economic growth of the country, whereas persons with physical challenges cannot produce a return. In actuality, the disability of persons with physical impairments can be reduced, and their functionality and productivity can be enhanced by addressing both their needs of accessibility and the challenges posed by rigid and biased societal attitudes. It is high time to understand that developing tolerance for difference is key to the formation of a healthy society. By extending cooperation and support and by ensuring every individual’s participation, we can reduce the impact of ableism and the challenges linked to disability. The state, the society, and its resources belong to every individual, and each body should matter to the society and the state.

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