



Trapped Between Ableism And Neoliberalism: Critical Reflections On Disability And Employment In India

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Abstract

Despite affirmative actions such as reserved government employment, incentives and subsidies for employers, tax exemptions, skill development training etc., employment opportunities for persons with disabilities in India continue to be characterized by lower work-force participation, lower wages, lack of or limited career advancement, and discrimination in the workplace. While there has been some research on the presence of persons with disabilities in formal employment, such studies have lacked critical assessment of the underlying conceptions of (dis)ability and its interface with changes in the wider political and economic context. Using a case study approach, this article examines the outcomes of three employment initiatives in India. We contend that work and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities remain trapped in constructs of ableism; while neoliberalism has resulted in complex, often adverse outcomes that have received little attention. The article calls for developing a more critical research agenda and building capacities for wider contestation against ableism and neoliberalism.

This article examines the outcomes of recent efforts to employ persons with disabilities in India. It attempts to unmask the underlying ableist assumptions of such efforts and to critique the complex interface between ableism and neoliberalism. We begin with a brief overview of the present employment status of persons with disabilities in India, followed by a brief account of recent efforts to increase their employment opportunities, which highlights the popularity and

pervasiveness of such endeavors. The second section presents a contextual account of disability and employment in India around three key foci: the social construction of (dis)ableism; the role of religion and *karma* in Hinduism (the dominant religion in India); and neoliberalism, the prevailing development model. In the third section, we present three case studies in which interviews were conducted with employers and their employees with disabilities. The fourth section comprises a detailed discussion around conceptions of ableism and *karma* in the context of neoliberalism. We find that the interface between ableism and neoliberalism in India results in ever more complex forms of workplace marginalization for persons with disabilities. In the final section, we outline a more critical research agenda to fully unearth these influences.

Building Skills And Reserving Jobs: Disability And Employment In India

Estimated to be nearly 15% of the world's population (WHO, 2011), counts of persons with disabilities in India are both ambiguous and much lower than global estimates. For example, the National Sample Survey (2003) reported a total of 18.5 million persons with disabilities in India, while the 2001 Census identified 21.9 million persons with disabilities (Registrar General of India, 2001), which constitutes a 20% difference in government estimates. The workforce participation rate of persons with disabilities is as low as 37.6% compared to 62.5% for the general population (Mitra & Sambamoorthi, 2006). Moreover, there are considerable variations across gender, rural-urban disparities, type of disability, and state of residence. Men with disabilities are three times more likely to be employed than women with disabilities. In rural areas, 38.4% of persons with disabilities are employed compared to 34.9% in urban areas. The employment rate of persons with hearing impairments is 58.8%, while it is as low as 10% for those with mental illnesses. Wide variations exist across states: only 18.4% of persons with disabilities in Lakshadweep are employed while 46.8% of persons with disabilities in Sikkim are employed (Mitra & Sambamoorthi, 2006).

In recent years, a range of efforts has aimed to increase the workforce participation of persons with disabilities; this has been one of the prime concerns of the disability rights movement in India (DEOC, 2009). These efforts have come from various institutional quarters, and will be discussed briefly along with their outcomes.

Affirmative action by the state has taken the form of the 1995 Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) (PWD) Act. The legislation reserves 3% of all government and public sector employment for persons with disabilities and has relaxed employment selection criteria while also ensuring the health and safety of workers with disabilities. The central government has identified specific jobs and positions where persons with disabilities can be employed - these are mainly restricted to peons (low-ranking office assistants), administrative roles in accounts and finance departments, and technicians and assistants in various technical departments of the government, such as archaeology, pharmacy, soil testing, etc. (Government of India, 2007a). The Act encourages local and state level governments to formulate economic incentives or 'schemes' to encourage private and public sector organizations to increase employment of persons with disabilities to no less than 5% of their total workforce (Government of India, 1995). One such scheme undertaken by the central government is the payment of employers' contributions to a provident fund and the provision of certain tax exemptions to persons with disabilities employed in the private sector (Government of India, 2007b). More specifically, the central government makes the employers' contribution to the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) and the Employees State Insurance (ESI) for three years. The scheme was launched in April 2008 and all persons with a monthly salary of up to Rs. 25,000/- (USD 500) are eligible. Nonetheless, these and other efforts have yet to garner

their intended positive impact. While the PWD Act 1995 made it mandatory for all government and public sector companies to reserve 3% of jobs for persons with disabilities, the reserved vacancies have not been filled (Society for Disability and Rehabilitation Studies, 2008). Indeed, studies indicate that persons with disabilities hold only 0.44% of all positions in the public sector (World Bank, 2007). What is more, there remains a general dearth of independent assessment and research that maps the overall status of implementation of the Act.

Unlike the public sector, the 3% employment reservation for persons with disabilities is not mandatory for private employers under the PWD Act (Mishra & Gupta, 2006). Private corporate sector and industrial associations' responses continue to be characterized by a lack of adequate regulation and a continued dependence on the provision of incentives from the central government. Corporate social responsibility and diversity management initiatives by businesses and industrial associations have resulted in the institution of numerous awards to recognise exemplary initiatives and the development of vocational and/or soft-skill training programmes. Examples of such initiatives include the ITC's Disability Handbook for Hospitality Industry (ITC-Welcomgroup, n.d.), which promotes the employment of persons with disabilities in the sector; the Royal Dutch Shell's Shell Helen Keller Awards, designed to promote role models and to foster the mainstreaming of disability in India (Shell India, n.d.); and the CavinKare Ability awards, which recognise the individual successes of persons with disabilities (Ability Foundation, 2009). A number of organizations for people with disabilities and other non-governmental/civil society initiatives have developed similar training, placement, and post-placement support programmes for workers with disabilities. These programmes are typically implemented jointly by leading rehabilitation institutions and industrial associations or prominent industries. Common examples of these programs include Project Jeevika run by FICCI-SEDF and AADI (FICCI, n.d.), and job fairs and placement services organized by Ability Foundation, Chennai and Blind Persons' Association, Ahmedabad, and others.

These initiatives are, however, recent developments within the disability rights movement in India (Mehrotra, 2011). Despite the development of such endeavors to enhance employment of persons with disabilities in the private sector, any assessment of their relative success is limited due to the lack of availability of differential data on persons with disabilities in the organized and unorganized sectors (DEOC, 2009). Among the limited survey studies available, the oft-cited survey of the 'top 100 multinational companies' in the country, conducted by NCPEDP (1999), found that the employment rate of persons with disabilities in the private sector was a mere 0.28%, 0.05% in multinational companies and only 0.58% in the top 100 IT companies in the country (cited in DEOC, 2009).

These low rates of employment can be understood through an examination of the factors constraining employment opportunities for persons with disabilities in India. Excessive regulation in the public sector restricts the nature of work available to persons with disabilities. Disability-specific employment reservations are limited to the public sector and a large number of the reserved positions continue to be vacant despite nearly two decades of enactment of the PWD Act. The private sector is primarily focused on corporate social responsibility initiatives and diversity management, which are limiting in their own ways (see Kothiyal & Kumar, 2012). Among non-governmental organizations, the excessive emphasis on skill building (including vocational and soft skills) and employment access does not focus adequately on questions of decent work and workers' rights. Finally, employment of persons with disabilities is marked by a lack of regulation and social protection in the informal economy, which employs the vast majority of the country's population (ILO & WTO, 2009).

The Three Foci: An Overview

In this section we elaborate three key foci that undergird employment outcomes and experiences of persons with disabilities in India: (i) the social construction of ableism, which frames the understanding of disability; (ii) the role of religion and, specifically, the theory of *karma* and its implications in conceptualizing disability; and finally, (iii) the onslaught of neoliberalism over two decades and its outcomes for marginalized populations, including persons with disabilities. While the economic impacts of neoliberalism, such as the dismantling of social security and the privatization of essential services, have important consequences for persons with disabilities, we build our argument around neoliberal governmentality and its narrow conception of citizenship. More generally, we maintain that employment outcomes for persons with disabilities must be contextualized if they are to be adequately understood.

Since India's independence from colonial rule in 1947, a charity and medical model of disability has informed policymaking under the aegis of the welfare state. To date, these models are mired in the 'ableist' worldview, which holds that the able-bodied are the norm in society, and that people with disabilities must either strive to become that 'norm' or keep their distance from able-bodied people (Griffin, Peters & Smith, 2007). According to Wolbring (2008), ableism relates to "a particular understanding of oneself, one's body and one's relationship with others of humanity, other species and the environment, and includes how one is judged by others" (p. 252-53). Ableism produces preferences for certain sets of abilities and discriminates against those who do not possess these abilities or are 'marked' by deviations from them. Throughout history, ableism has been mobilized by certain social groups to assert and justify their elevated status over others (Wolbring, 2004, 2008), a process which pushes others to align and modify themselves to achieve the norm. Wolbring (2008) asserts that ableism is one of the most "entrenched and accepted ism[s]" (p. 253) that has spanned many others 'isms'. Wolbring (2008) further contends that

[j]udgement based on abilities is so ingrained in society that its use for exclusionary purposes is hardly ever questioned or even realized. To the contrary, groups who are marginalized due to some form of ableism and disableism often use the sentiment to demand a change in status (we are as able as you are; we can be as able as you are with accommodations) (p. 257).

In India, cultural and religious myths, which play a predominant role in the framing of attitudes and approaches to life, have contributed to the consolidation of an ableist notion of disability. In this Hindu dominated country, the theory of *karma* particularly plays a significant role in perpetuating ableist attitudes. The *karma* theory is based on the principle of birth and rebirth, where the present incarnation of a soul and the form it takes is determined by the deeds or misdeeds conducted in previous births/lives. In this way, deeds conducted in one's present life, whether good or bad, determine what one becomes in the next life. Impairment (by birth or acquired), poverty, terminal illness, and birth of a girl child or birth as a *dalit* (someone who belongs to the 'untouchable' community as determined by the *varna jati* or caste system in Hinduism) is attributed to one's bad deeds from previous lives (Miles, 2010). This tends to instill low self-esteem and a feeling of guilt and shame amongst families and individuals with these traits. The community attributes the suffering of the individual or family to their *karma*. The result is pity, negative societal attitudes, stigma, and, at most, the extension of charity. Interestingly, charity (denoted by the giving of alms in earlier times) is viewed as the antidote to impending *karmaic* reactions of one's own misdeeds in past and present lives. Receivers of charity are expected to be grateful to the benefactor. The *karma* belief system is strongly embedded and ingrained in Indian society. A contrasting and yet prevalent Hindu belief is that God inflicts suffering on good people to test their resilience and inner strength (Dalal, 2002). This tends to glorify the state of persons with disabilities: they are seen as the chosen one; this belief is then used to justify

their present condition and any lack of efforts to ameliorate it.

Ableist attitudes, Hindu belief systems, and the resultant stigma and shame have historically rendered people with disabilities as one of the most marginalized and invisible groups in the country. In the post-Independence era, most socio-political responses have focused mainly on medical intervention in the form of treatment and rehabilitation to cure the 'disease' or the 'problem' (Addlakha & Mandal, 2009). These forces, operating in mutually conjunctive and complex ways, have served to exclude people with disabilities not just socially and culturally, but also from the workforce, resulting in their economic and political exclusion (World Bank, 2007; Thomas, 2005).

The disenfranchisement of persons with disabilities has been further complicated in contemporary times by processes of neoliberalism that have gripped the country since the 1990s (Hiranandani & Sonpal, 2010). India adopted a range of macroeconomic policies beginning in 1991 which led to an unbridled market economy; increasing transnational capital flows; a weakening of the role of governments and greater privatization of government-owned entities; reduction in public expenditure; increase in imports and foreign investment; liberalization of trade regulations; and structural changes in the economy aimed at export-led growth (Chandrashekhar, 2010; Upadhyay, 2000).

With the adoption of neoliberal economic policy in India, employment has become stagnant with considerable reduction in the number of permanent jobs in the public sector and extensive use of contract and sub-contract work in the private sector (SAPRIN, 2002). The proportion of workers in the unorganized sector has steadily increased since economic liberalization. According to Joddar & Sakthivel (2006), 92% of the workforce in the country belongs to the informal sector, with 80% of the informal workforce in the non-agrarian sector. The informal economy falls outside the scope of state regulations, and workers do not have fixed employment, salaries, or other social security benefits. A mere 3% percent of the total workforce is unionized and even these unions face consistent attacks from the corporate sector (Harriss-White, 2002). Most informal sector workers are illiterate and unskilled or semi-skilled workers, with women constituting the majority. Patriarchal norms, gender bias, and caste factors all contribute to the making of a cheap labor force comprised largely of women and *dalits* (Harriss-White, 2002).

Neoliberalism has major implications for persons with disabilities; however, disability research and discourse in India have paid insufficient attention to these changes. From the information available, privatization has led to mixed outcomes for persons with disabilities in the employment sphere (see Hiranandani & Sonpal, 2010). While technological advances have reduced job opportunities for persons with disabilities (for example, telephone operators, stenographers, and typists positions once available to persons with visual impairments have declined (ILO, 2003)), privatization has opened new avenues for employment of people with disabilities in highly-skilled and service jobs. Nonetheless, these opportunities are limited to those with access to higher education and adequate training. Most training programs do not match their services to respond to actual service sector demands, leaving most persons with disabilities unequipped and unable to qualify for highly-paid jobs (ILO, 2003). Furthermore, the growth of the informal economy and the resultant increased participation of persons with disabilities — particularly women — within this economy has further marginalized people with disabilities.

The effects of neoliberalism, however, are not restricted to the economic sphere. Neoliberalism, according to Brown (2006), has come to establish itself as an "achieved and normative" (p. 694) political rationality whose values and influences are far more pervasive. This political rationality involves "extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, even as the market itself remains a distinctive sphere" (Brown, 2005, p. 40). This form of neoliberal

governmentality has come to re-organize governance practices and citizenship (Brown, 2005; Rose, 1996). Individuals are conceived of as

entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life [...] whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for "self-care" — the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions [...] [T]he rationally calculating individual bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints on this action, e.g., lack of skills, education, and childcare in a period of high unemployment and limited welfare benefits (Brown, 2005, p. 42).

This hyper-individualized conception of citizenship casts the individual into the roles of "consumer" and "producer" within markets and posits individual rationality as the site and basis for mediating one's citizenship (Dagnino, 2003). In this way, neoliberal economic policies have not only resulted in further marginalization; they have recast individual citizens into consumers, with rights to be earned in exchange for individual economic contribution to the market. These consumers must make little demands on the rapidly shrinking state as well as bear full responsibility for their own actions, inactions, and care.

Discussing the effects of this neoliberal governmentality on disability, Galvin (2006), drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, suggests that neoliberal reforms appear to offer emancipatory potential by facilitating the restoration of passive, dependent individuals to their roles as active citizens in the economic sphere. However, in reality, neoliberal mechanics remain individualistic, paternalistic, and perpetuate the norm of the able-bodied rather than challenge it. Since the outset of modernity, the concept of work has been key to organizing and dividing disability from normality. It has focused on "what disabled people can do rather than on what they cannot do" (Galvin, 2006, p. 507). Neoliberal policies and practices have entrenched the individualization of normative values which necessitate a dichotomous 'other' in order to build the notion of the ideal self, thereby maintaining the disabled identity. Thus, the conditions of employment of persons with disabilities in India is affected by the underlying ableist conceptions, the embedded theory of karma in Hinduism which perpetuates dependence and neoliberalism: both as a set of policies and as neoliberal governmentality. It is within this framework, that we wish to examine the employment outcomes of persons with disabilities in India.

Interrogating The Field

While much of the previous research has been quantitative in nature, focusing on the workforce participation rates of persons with disabilities, research on the quality and experiences of employment has been sparse. There is a clear need for a critical examination of employment initiatives, especially in the context of neoliberal globalization. This article reports the findings of research conducted with the objective of understanding the context behind the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) 'at work', and mapping good practices and challenges associated with the inclusion of persons with disabilities in two key sectors, education (Article 24 of CRPD) and employment (Article 27), as well as along the cross-cutting themes of women with disabilities (Article 6) and accessibility (Article 9) (United Nations, 2006).

To briefly outline those aspects of the CRPD which relate closely to this research, Article 6 on Women with Disabilities recognizes the multiple forms of discrimination faced by women and girls, and holds States Parties responsible for their empowerment. Article 9 emphasizes equal access to persons with disabilities, including access to information and communication systems. Article 24 on Education requires States Parties to take measures to ensure non-discrimination, inclusion, and reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities in the

general education system. States Parties must also ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education, and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. Article 27 on Work and Employment recognizes the right to work for persons with disabilities, which is chosen freely and accepted in the labor market, in an environment that is open, inclusive, and accessible, through necessary legislations, trade unions, access to training and placement services, the promotion of enterprise and self-employment, and the prevention of slavery, servitude, and forced or compulsory labor. India ratified the UNCRPD in 2007 and is in the process of revising the PWD Act of 1995 to bring disability law in harmony with UNCRPD principles. Hence this is an opportune time to undertake an exercise to understand the actual implementation of inclusive practices (or lack thereof) in the current socio-cultural and economic context.

The present analysis critically examines the underlying conceptions that have come to characterize employment for persons with disabilities in India. The analysis contextualizes emerging experiences within the wider realities of neoliberalism: both in its economic sense of deregulation of labor protection and withdrawal of social security, and its more substantive manifestations of individualized self-care and market-mediated citizenship. Adopting a multiple case study design, we report and analyze the outcomes of three organizations — a public sector company, a private enterprise, and a disability rehabilitation institution. The case study approach was adopted for its potential in yielding rich data with high validity and for the opportunity to examine the wider context of the practices (Yin, 2003; Mitchell, 1983). Case study designs do not claim generalizability; rather, the aim is to examine selected cases intensively to conduct theoretical analysis. Yin (2003) emphasizes that multiple case studies, though time consuming, can produce more robust research.

Each of the three selected cases in this study is, in certain ways, an exemplar in the field and has been widely recognized, awarded, cited, and documented for its contribution to increasing employment of persons with disabilities. Data was collected from annual reports, company newsletters, and website information, as well as through observation and face-to-face interviews with key informants such as employers, senior executives, and workers with and without disabilities. A total of 24 interviews was conducted, 20 of which were with employees with disabilities. Four interviews were conducted with senior colleagues, recruiters, or owners. The interviews were typically between 30-70 minutes long and were completed within one session. Two focus group discussions were also conducted for cases 1 and 3, listed below. These were undertaken with the objective of establishing initial contact, explaining the aims of the research, accessing data on the number of employees with disabilities, detailing organizational policies such as human resources procedures, identifying potential interviewees, and scheduling interviews to minimize intrusion. Questions were framed on the basis of interview and focus group discussion guides prepared by the authors at the beginning of the research project, which were themselves developed on the basis of the specific provisions of Article 27 of the UNCRPD (Work and Employment). The anonymity of all participants has been maintained in order to protect identity. The following entails a brief discussion of the three cases studied.

Case I: Samarth Corporation (SC) is a leading public sector company which manufactures and distributes petroleum products. It features in the international 'Fortune 500' list, with consolidated revenue of US\$30 billion. In compliance with the PWD Act, SC has struggled towards reserving 3% of its positions for persons with disabilities. Of its present staff strength of approximately 14,000, there are 218 employees with disabilities, of which 45 work in management.

Senior managerial personnel interviewed explained that when SC's selection

board encounters a person with a disability while recruiting, special efforts are made to create equal opportunity for selection and if need be, 'special recruitment drives' are conducted to recruit persons with disabilities. During the initiation process, special support is extended informally in the form of early allotment of houses or arrangement of transit housing. Jobs are suitably re-designed, with lesser time spent at the refineries. This is done from an occupational safety perspective, given the highly volatile nature of materials used on a daily basis. Persons with disabilities are often stationed at administrative offices and assigned to departments such as finance, human resources, information technology, and sales. In specific cases, jobs are re-designed within the same department to ensure that the employee with a disability is able to perform according to his or her interest and potential.

Employees with disabilities interviewed shared that they are treated like all other recruits, with no obvious display of concern. None of them recalled any situation where they were forced to perform a task they found inappropriate. For example, SC frequently deploys its employees to oil refineries and plants. However, persons with disabilities interviewed during the study stated that their deployment to such sites occurred during training periods only. Their seniors often encouraged them to share any discomfort about undertaking specific jobs. This ease of interaction across hierarchies and encouragement from superiors is often identified as the critical characteristic enabling employees with disabilities to perform their assigned roles and to progress within the organization. Colleagues were stated to be supportive and help was offered intuitively. Persons with disabilities mentioned they have never felt discriminated against either positively or negatively and are not discouraged from pursuing their career interests.

Even though the work environment seemed congenial, in our observations as researchers, none of the employees with disabilities appeared comfortable revealing their feelings openly lest it jeopardize their future in the company. Physical accessibility at SC, a company of high stature in India, is presently a work in progress. In the case of refineries and other on-site buildings, accessibility was mentioned as especially difficult and not easily reconciled with oil industry safety standards. On probing, SC executives acknowledged that security staff ought to be trained to evacuate persons with disabilities in the case of an emergency, but that such procedures are currently lacking.

Senior executives interviewed believed that the creation of an inclusive work environment for persons with disabilities depends on organizational socialization. By demonstrating ways and means of including, by creating constructive work conditions, and by displaying sensitivity to the specific needs of persons with disabilities, younger generations of management trainees learn from their superiors, and they in turn, it was hoped, will pass on an inclusive organizational culture to their juniors. Senior management did not see the need to codify or formalize rules, regulations, or norms for persons with disabilities (either for recruitment processes, housing allotments, induction processes, job redesign, etc.). Instead, senior management indicated it preferred to rely on learnt behavior in order to ensure a work environment conducive to employees of all abilities.

Case II: Located in the western region of India, **Mica Enterprise (ME)** is a private manufacturer of plastic fasteners and markers for the defense and space research, heavy engineering, and automobile industries. The company was launched in the early 1980s by a trained engineer-turned-entrepreneur. It is ISO 9002 and QS 9000 certified, and touts efficient production cycles and effective working capital management. In 1988, the owner began employing persons with disabilities, driven by his belief that persons with disabilities can be encouraged to participate in the workforce when jobs are modified to suit

ability. He was inspired, in part, by the tenacity and positive attitude of his niece, who had a hearing impairment. The owner wished to "engineer an experiment in human resource management" where he could prove that he could make "the best out of the waste" (sic). At present, 24 of ME's 80 employees are persons with disabilities, most of whom have hearing, mobility, and developmental disabilities. The workers have little or no education, and limited access to vocational training opportunities.

The office is located in an old bungalow with work stations on the first and second floors, and can be accessed only by climbing a steep staircase, followed by a wooden staircase to the second floor. Work is designed by matching impairments with skill requirements, thus trying to "overcome" the disability in performing assigned tasks. For example, those with hearing impairments are made to work on noisy machinery, those with developmental disabilities are assigned the task of pulling fasteners apart, and those with limited mobility are confined to single rooms. There are no common spaces, and the workers take their lunches at their work-stations. Some of the workers do not even have a mandatory weekly rest-day and often work for long hours - from nine in the morning to seven in the evening, and longer when an order needs to be shipped. Wages for shop-floor workers range from less than Rs. 1800 to Rs. 3500 (between US\$ 35-70) per month, with supervisors often paid more. The owner has helped some of the employees to purchase their scooters and houses, and to pay their medical bills.

Previously, the company employed persons with visual impairments, but when accreditation agencies informed the owner of the lowering of the company's performance standards (owing to perceived higher probability of errors), the employees were laid off. In the formal interview, the owner mentioned this was the key reason for relieving employees with visual impairments; however, in a subsequent informal conversation, he quipped "those without vision are very suspicious and therefore most likely to cause unnecessary hassle." Obviously, the company does not view this as a case of blatant discrimination. Interestingly, ME has won several national-level awards for employing persons with disabilities.

Case III: A Special Placement Cell, **ICan** was established by a rehabilitation institution in western India. ICan offers employment placement and training services to all persons with disabilities, irrespective of the type of disability or skill level. Training and placement services are provided free of cost. Based on market demand, skill-upgrade training is organized for interested persons with disabilities. By working with(in) the free labor market, ICan has ensured that persons with disabilities are able to access wider work opportunities beyond those stereotypically available to them, such as cane weaving, basket making, motor winding, etc. ICan has provided support to persons with orthopedic, visual, and hearing impairments, cerebral palsy, and mental illness. Persons with disabilities who have participated in ICan's programs earn in the range of Rs. 3,000 to 25,000 (USD 60- 500) each month.

Approximately 300 persons are placed in an employment setting each year. Of these 300 persons, about 150 persons with disabilities are placed in formal employment, with the rest finding work through self-employment at, for example, telephone and photocopying booths, grocery stalls, vegetable vending, tea stalls, and mobile phone voucher kiosks. Self-employed persons with disabilities may earn from Rs. 2,000 to 6,000 (USD 40-120) each month. The option of self-employment is preferred by persons with disabilities as it provides them greater autonomy. When specific grievances arise concerning earnings in a formal employment setting, ICan clients report their concerns to ICan, which then mediates between the employer and the employee. ICan prefers to resolve grievances amicably, turning to legal action only as a last

resort.

We visited two large employers that utilize ICan's placement services: a city government hospital and a private animation studio. At the city government hospital, ICan has successfully placed two different groups of persons with disabilities as case writers - writing and filing patient histories at the out-patients' department. One group operates as a self-help group (SHG) attending to generic departments; the other group works as contractual staff. Persons with disabilities interviewed expressed their gratefulness to ICan for having managed to arrange some work for them. However, many respondents mentioned they do not have vacation time, sickness leave, or retirement benefits.

The private animation studio develops interactive educational kits for high school students and has won several awards for employing persons with disabilities. The majority (180) of its 250 employees are persons with orthopedic impairments, of which nearly half are women with disabilities. Persons with disabilities who have completed high school are often recruited as animators. The minimum starting animator salary is Rs. 5,000 (USD 100) per month, with additional facilities such as a guest house, provident fund, gratuity, health insurance, paid leave, and an annual vacation. However, persons with disabilities were unwilling to openly discuss their relationship with the employer as well as their workplace experiences. Rather, employees continually expressed their gratitude to the employer for "giving" them work.

Trapped Between Ableism And Neoliberalism

In this section, we offer two essential points of criticism on the practices of employing persons with disabilities in India. The first hinges on the formulation and organization of work and the workplace based on dominant ableist conceptions, much to the disregard of disability itself. The second criticism is derived through an examination of the interface between neoliberalism and ableism and points to new challenges for persons with disabilities.

In the case of ME, work is allotted to employees by matching their impairments with the working conditions/requirements of the machines/tasks. For example, persons with hearing impairments are made to work on noisy machines. The employer cites their abilities to cope with noise which "enables" them to work for long hours. In the packaging unit of the same company, persons with hearing and speech impairments are employed on account of their ability to work undisturbed, since they do not "talk" to each other. Similarly, repetitive tasks, such as pulling fasteners apart, are assigned to persons with learning difficulties and developmental disabilities. The owner also stated that "others" (referring to the non-disabled) would get bored owing to the monotonous nature of the task, but employees with learning difficulties or developmental disabilities never make such complaints. Employees with disabilities at both ME and SC who agreed to an interview repeatedly stated that although there were no instances of discrimination, there was never any recognition of their disability. According to one employee, "I do all the work that others do. I was never asked by the DGM (his immediate superior) if I could (or could not) do it..." In the case of ICan, the leader of the organization responded that they chose not to focus on the individual's disabilities while identifying potential placements and employers. Rather, what mattered to ICan and the prospective employers were the abilities of persons with disabilities. According to him, this explicit focus on the abilities of the participants of the employment exchange program has helped them attain jobs.

While this erasure of disability and focus on ability has helped persons with disabilities secure employment, the terms of work remain precarious. On the one hand, reasonable accommodation and other employment benefits are withheld in

the guise of providing persons with disabilities "equal opportunities" to employees without disabilities. This is construed as a "level playing field". On the other hand, employees with disabilities are expected to work longer hours and to produce more, but at wages equal to or less than others. In the case of ME, for example, workers with hearing impairments are made to work longer hours than others at no additional compensation since, according to the employer, "the noise does not bother them". Whether this is tantamount to economic exploitation of the person's impairment remains unsettled, particularly in a socio-economic environment where it is difficult for persons with disabilities to find and retain jobs of any kind. Similarly, a couple afflicted with polio employed in ME "drag" themselves up two flights of steep staircases to get to their work areas. This is unsurprising, since reasonable accommodation in India has mainly been provided only upon court orders (Government of India, 2012), and since the PWD Act mandates accessibility and reasonable accommodation only for public sector organizations. Employees' disabilities remain conveniently forgotten and unattended. Additional costs for installing ramps and elevators are thus saved by ME's owner.

This obsession with ability has resulted in rejection of employees' disabilities. In the case of SC, for example, health benefits and insurance cover for all employees are equal, with no regard for additional costs borne by employees with various disabilities. To the company's credit, it has made many provisions for persons with disabilities in their recruitment and selection processes, in accommodation and induction and with the task design and work processes. However, there are no efforts at institutionalizing such provisions for reasonable accommodation through codification and amendment of service regulations and organizational policies.

Ableism continues to be the pivotal conception around which job design and employment for persons with disabilities are organized. With their disabilities "cast [aside] as a diminished state of being human" (Campbell, 2001, p. 44), employers and related employment exchanges focus exclusively on the 'ability' of persons with disabilities. Jobs are designed according to the abilities of the employees and not re-designed according to their disabilities. This obsession with ability has severely compromised the rights of persons with disabilities as workers. In denying them any additional benefits in the guise of equality, employers violate conceptions of reasonable accommodation. Persons with disabilities are never encouraged, and are often openly discouraged, from speaking about their disabilities. This over-articulation of ability and of persons with disabilities cast as achievers who attain employment by 'overcoming' their disabilities in a 'normal' world has been extensively criticized in the field of disability studies (Clogston, 1994). The 'supercrip' stereotype, for example, renders disability invisible and somewhat irrelevant, and designates persons with disabilities as superheroes for others to follow.

Another underlying theme — that of gratitude - was commonly found across the three cases. Persons with disabilities are expected to remain indebted to the employer for providing them a livelihood, and in isolated cases, bestowing some benefits. For instance, the couple afflicted by polio at ME repeatedly stated that they were indebted to the enterprise owner, who had helped them purchase a fitted scooter and a house in their names. While this is praiseworthy, the owner has forced them into gratitude for life, preventing them from raising any demands whatsoever. They now work at very low wages (less than 50 dollars each per month), leaving them with little choice and autonomy. Given that they work long hours without any leave or child care, the couple has been forced to send their only child off to their parents. Demanding reasonable accommodation (for example, a ramp) is considered out of the question by this couple who at the workplace must hoist themselves with great difficulty up and down two flights of steep staircases.

In an interview with an employee with a hearing impairment, when asked if he had any suggestions to improve the workplace or the nature of work assigned to him,

the owner translated the employee's response from sign language as "What more can I possibly ask for? This is like heaven for me. There is nothing after heaven." The photocopying kiosk owner, who had been placed by ICan, shared that he was "doing well, thanks to the blessings of ICan". This sentiment was shared by an employee with a visual impairment in the human resources department of SC, who repeatedly and profusely thanked his seniors for guiding him to where he has gotten so far. Another employee with a disability in SC's human resource department cited that the company's efforts "must be undertaken out of love, and not forced because there is any law or regulation." He further suggested that persons with disabilities "must never make any demands on the senior management." Deeply influenced by the theory of *karma* and fatalism, the employees often thanked God, their friends, relatives, and colleagues for making their lives livable, and for providing them with the opportunity to contribute to the family income, even though it may not be substantial.

These findings indicate that persons with disabilities are steeped in gratitude to those providing them with employment, most often the able-bodied. This precludes them from making any further demands on the system, although minimum wage, equal remuneration, reasonable accommodation, and exercise of trade union rights are all enshrined in Article 27 of the UNCRPD. Fear of retaliation and of being perceived as ungrateful or not grateful enough often prevents employees with disabilities from articulating their needs, negotiating any increase in wages or access to opportunities, and registering any complaints against discrimination.

The effects of ableism are further compounded by contemporary processes of neoliberalism. Our findings corroborate with the sparse existing literature (eg. Hiranandani & Sonpal, 2010): that neoliberalism has substantive and adverse outcomes for persons with disabilities in India. The case studies demonstrate that the terms of employment are increasingly contractual or wage-based, making it easier for the senior management or employers to layoff employees. Employee benefits such as health insurance, gratuity, and provident funds are often not paid. Where such benefits are paid, there are no specific benefits or additional social security covers for persons with disabilities. In order to prevent any auditing, ME's owner does not avail of the government-supported contribution to the provident funds of persons with disabilities. By doing this, he is able to maintain low wages (often lower than the minimum wage rates specified for each state in the country) and circumventing labor laws, auditing and compliance. Thus, employees are made to work longer hours without breaks, and on holidays. Similarly, SC's reluctance to codify provisions for reasonable accommodation can be understood as efforts to prevent support measures from becoming entitlements, discourage demands from persons with disabilities, and reduce management's commitment to provide for persons with disabilities. Benefits are thus kept low, which in turn keep costs low.

Even ICan, which speaks of disability rights and entitlements while participating in disability-related conferences, workshops, seminars, and other public forums nationally and internationally, refrains from raising questions of workers' rights and entitlements at the workplace. Through its training and placement services, ICan has placed a number of persons with disabilities, particularly those with orthopedic disabilities, at the reception desks of a large public hospital. However, all the employees work either on a contractual basis or as a self-help group that charges the patients for case-writing services, which were provided free of cost before the advent of neoliberal policies. Employees with disabilities are expected to work on Sundays and public holidays and all leave has to be taken as leave without pay. Despite these precarious terms of employment, the head of ICan remarked that attention to and concern for working conditions does not form the core of the organization's work when placing persons with disabilities. In case of any disputes with employers, employees with disabilities are encouraged to return to work with appropriate compromises, and there is no question of entering into litigation.

With its untenable emphasis on the individual, neoliberalism emphasizes integrating the individual with the market and its institutions as the only means of development. It has dismantled social security benefits and steered the discourse away from entitlements and rights to privileges that must be earned and acquired (Brown, 2005; Dagnino, 2003; Kabeer, 2005). In the case of the couple afflicted with polio at ME, state social security benefits are not utilized; instead, the couple relies on the generosity of the owner. For their "loyalty" to the owner for a certain number of years, the couple was provided with a fitted scooter, and a few years later, a down payment for their house. The dismantling of social security under neoliberal governmentality has meant that needs are met mainly through private charity. This serves to reinforce the culture of privatization, and more significantly, of charity when dealing with disability.

The dominant imagery of the 'supercrip' has found an excellent ally in neoliberalism. Instead of organized and communitarian care, individuals are expected to prove and re-prove themselves as "no less than the others". The mediation of one's world is organized around the individual and not a collectivity, a defining characteristic of neoliberalism which outmodes organized and solidarity-based dissent. In none of the three cases was there any collective organization of persons with disabilities. Furthermore, supervisors and employers (all able-bodied) repeatedly highlighted that there was no requirement for conducting any form of organized, one-on-one dialogue with employees with disabilities since their needs were met. Similarly, employees with visual impairment at ME were "made to leave" the organization. On the first day of the interview, the owner had informed that the employees had left of their own will. Later he stated that the authority that certified ME's performance quality had reported that ME's certification would be discontinued if employees with visual impairment continued to work in the sorting department. However, on the last day of the interview, the owner revealed his inhibitions, by commenting that persons with visual impairment have "an innately suspicious nature and are unable to trust others". In the case of ICan, the placement exchange officer stated they prefer not to initiate any litigation even if there has been some contractual violation or non-payment of wages. Instead, they prefer to diffuse such situations by counseling the concerned employee with disabilities, or encouraging the employer to give the employee another chance (sometimes at lesser pay), or to give one of the other persons with disabilities listed at their exchange, a chance. There exists a general disinclination towards any organized interventions such as collective bargaining to protect the work-place rights of persons with disabilities. In extreme cases, any possibilities of future resistance are curbed: employees deemed to be 'troublemakers' are made to leave, with no effort at dispute resolution.

In these ways, ableism and neoliberalism create a particularly precarious situation for persons with disabilities in the workplace. They are forced to consider themselves privileged to have the opportunity for paid work. Those who begin to demand their rights are made to leave on various pretexts, as was found in the case of ME. All forms of resistance and dissent are silenced, another characteristic of neoliberal governmentality. Disregarding the person's impairment and focusing on abilities has been used to the advantage of the employer, as it helps to curtail costs and to maintain a competitive advantage. However, this approach severely disadvantages persons with disabilities, who are trapped in a situation where obligation and the pressure to prove themselves as "equals" discourages these workers from making any demands on management and/or their employers.

Beyond Ableism And Neoliberalism: Researching Inclusion Critically

This article has argued that efforts at enhancing the employment of persons with disabilities continue to remain trapped between the dominant constructions of

ableism and neoliberalism that have come to establish themselves as the overriding development framework (Berthoud, 1997). We emphasize that the processes of neoliberal subjectification of persons with disabilities in the work sphere is an arena that needs further research.

Unfortunately, the disability rights movement in India has not critically engaged with the dominant wave of neoliberalism and the obsession with economic growth that has swept the country. While many other grassroots movements are campaigning against the fallouts of neoliberalism, disability activists are fighting for inclusion within the very agenda that "causes poverty and disables people" (Yeo, 2005, p. 26). It is hard to question the benefits of employment for persons with disabilities, particularly in the Indian context, riddled as it is with poverty and inequality. However, the disability movement has focused on removing barriers to employment without questioning the ableist and normative assumptions upon which the world of work rests - and which obfuscate and further marginalize the disabled identity.

Undoubtedly, more research and awareness-raising is required. This is especially true for India, where in the name of neoliberal development and economic growth, violation of labor standards has become the norm (EPW, 2010). Moreover, the interface between neoliberalism and ableism in a diverse country such as India varies according to the social positioning of the individual. Hence, more in-depth studies are required in various locales throughout the country that take into account the diversity of contexts and disabilities and interlocking forms of oppression, including gender, age, race/ethnicity, caste, class, patriarchy, marital status, etc. A comprehensive understanding of the experiences of workers with disabilities is needed more than the usual focus on increasing workforce participation rates. The concept of ableism (Wolbring, 2008) as an analytical lens is of considerable utility when it comes to critically examining employment initiatives and their impacts on the rights and dignity of workers with diverse disabilities. Religion's influence on the concept of ableism in India adds another layer to the complexity of employment and disability, demanding further in-depth research.

Our case studies were concentrated in the urban locales. However, around 75% of persons with disabilities in India reside in rural areas (Registrar General of India, 2001). Although statistics show that a higher percentage of persons with disabilities in rural regions participate in work compared to their counterparts in the urban areas (Mitra & Sambamoorthi, 2006), these rates say nothing about the working conditions, wages, job security, or other qualitative dimensions of the workforce experience in agriculture and non-agriculture sectors. That neoliberalism has deepened the crisis in the agrarian realm has been well-documented by many studies (eg. Hardikar, 2006; IATP, 2006, Madeley, 2002; Rosset, 2006; Sharma, 1999; Shiva, 2004). Field-based reports have forced the government to take cognizance of the structural factors of the agrarian distress that have led to an epidemic of farmer suicides since 1997 (Jeromi, 2007; Sainath, 2007a, 2007b). Not much is known about the consequences of neoliberal changes in rural areas for persons with disabilities.

There is a dire need for multi-sited ethnographies and narratives of the 'self' to unearth the implications of the interplay between ableism, religion, and neoliberalism in diverse regions. This article makes a small start by contextualizing employment of persons with disabilities within the hegemonic development discourse of neoliberalism and in interrogating its intersections with conceptions of ableism and karma in India.

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