

Calling Persons with Disability as Divine: Exploring and Critiquing Meanings of Divyang (The One with a Divine Limb) in the Indian Context

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Abstract : In India, the official nomenclature used by the State for persons with disability is divyang (literally, the one with a divine limb), a word coming from the Sanskrit language. Disability thus gets portrayed as divine, at least in the welfare sector from where it flows down even to the popular imagination where it gets equated to divinity. This paper looks at reference to persons with disabilities as divyangs and goes on to discuss what such usage for an already marginalized group achieves and misses out. The issue of nomenclature and language has always been a contested one when it comes to disability. At the same time, there is also an issue of who determines these labels for the persons with disability. Nomenclature and language used for disability can have real consequences for the population of persons with disability as it may empower or disempower them. Thus, this paper looks at the issue of what it means for persons with disabilities as 'exceptionally gifted' and hence divyang. Language can be a powerful tool to communicate meanings and messages associated with a term. When the persons with disabilities as a group are described as 'exceptionally gifted, talented and the source of inspiration', it essentially stereotypes and marginalizes them by putting a burden of performance that all of them ought to be achievers, and it is only then that they would be assimilated in the larger society. This paper also argues that such a situation creates a 'double bind' where the person is always trying to match up to the labels (the disabled as 'achiever, overcomer, inspirational') created by somebody else and looks at self through the eyes of others. This conceptual paper also presents an overview of disability labels while simultaneously looking at projecting disability as divinity which has the potential to wrongly portray the lives of persons with disability in India due to the official usage of the term. It also explores the question of visibility of disability since the idea of divyang implicitly assumes that all disabilities are visible. In reality, however, it may not be the case simply because all forms of disabilities are not visible, people may choose not to visibilize their disabilities if they can and pass as able-bodied, fearing the stigma that surrounds disability. Finally, it argues for an increased focus on understanding the everyday lived realities of those with disability in order to regard it as an important form of difference which could be a potential resource for the society.

Keywords : persons with disability, labels, language use, divinity

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