

**Why Disability Studies Matters More for the Non-Disabled**

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### **Why Disability Studies Matters More for the Non-Disabled**

My interest in Disability Studies dates back to 2010 when I joined the University of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, to pursue my Ph.D. At that time, Disability Studies was a relatively unexplored field in India. It was often assumed that this discipline was solely for people who were physically or mentally impaired. However, my curiosity stemmed from a broader interest in the discourse of the body. I wanted to understand why society labels certain bodily differences as “disabled” and how these perceptions are constructed.

During this period, I met Dr. Shilpaa Anand, whose profound insights deeply influenced my perspective. I vividly remember our first conversation in her office. At the time, my understanding of Disability Studies was shaped by the norms of able-bodied people and the assumption that anyone working in the field must themselves be disabled. Challenging this notion, she posed a thought-provoking question: "How do you know I am not disabled?" Her question wasn't personal—it was designed to make me reflect on the way I conceptualized the body and the assumptions I held about disability. It prompted me to question what a “normal” person imagines upon hearing the word “disability.” This conversation marked a turning point in my academic journey.

I subsequently audited a course with Dr. Anand, which opened my eyes to the vast scope of Disability Studies. I realized it extends far beyond the conventional understanding of physical or mental impairments. It interrogates societal norms, examines power structures, and redefines the very idea of the body. This experience solidified my commitment to studying Disability Studies, not just as an academic pursuit, but as a way to challenge ingrained perceptions and contribute to reshaping the discourse surrounding bodies and differences.

In my five years of research, I observed a troubling trend in the field of Disability Studies: most researchers pursuing this area of study were people with physical impairments. The field seemed to be largely monopolized by those with disabilities, leaving very few educators or researchers from the so-called “able-bodied” community. Even within the university, we had a center dedicated to organizing meetings about policies and initiatives related to people with disabilities, yet participation from able-bodied individuals was scarce. The discussions mainly centered around the challenges faced by people with disabilities, but it was disheartening to see that there was little interest from those outside the community.

However, as I delved deeper into the discourse on disability, I came to realize that the issues faced by people with disabilities can only be meaningfully addressed when understood by those without disabilities. To create a truly inclusive society, it is crucial for non-disabled people to engage with and understand these challenges. I became increasingly uncomfortable with the fact that non-disabled bodies often showed little interest in this field. This pattern, I believe, mirrors what happened with Women’s Studies. When the field of Women’s Studies first emerged in India, it was primarily women who showed interest in the subject. In fact, it was often considered inappropriate or even disgraceful for men to engage in Women’s Studies, much like it is still uncommon for non-disabled individuals to take an interest in Disability Studies. Just as disability is marginalized in society, Disability Studies has faced a similar neglect. Unfortunately, this stigma continues to shape perceptions and participation in the field.

As we all know, Disability Studies is not just an academic inquiry; it is also a crucial part of activism. Over the years, many have worked tirelessly to dispel the myths surrounding disability, challenging the assumptions that once limited the scope of the field. By the time I joined Aligarh Muslim University, I could already see that Disability Studies was gaining

traction. This growth was further evident when I conducted a workshop on Disability Studies in 2024 at Banaras Hindu University. Participants from across India—Kerala, Odisha, Bihar, Manipur, and several other states—attended, and to my surprise, the majority of them were people without impairments. This overwhelming response was a clear indication that the field is expanding rapidly and that people from diverse backgrounds are increasingly interested in understanding disability beyond the traditional framework. It was truly inspiring to witness such widespread engagement, confirming that Disability Studies is growing exponentially, with a broader and more inclusive audience than ever before.

In my teaching practice, I encourage my students to critically engage with the medical understanding of the body and to rethink how the notion of the “normal body” is constructed. While discussions about disability are prominent in academia, there is often a conspicuous silence when it comes to interrogating how the so-called “able body” is constituted.

Medical discourses and institutions, for instance, focus predominantly on defining and categorizing what makes a body unhealthy, abnormal, or diseased. Similarly, criminology often revolves around identifying and pathologizing the so-called “criminal body.” Yet, little attention is given to the frameworks and assumptions that define the “healthy” or “abled” body. These concepts are often treated as natural or self-evident, and because of this, they are rarely questioned or scrutinized.

By failing to critically examine the notion of the able body, we risk perpetuating a discourse that marginalizes bodies deemed different while privileging others as “normal.” It is essential to reverse this narrative and explore how ideas of health, normalcy, and ability are socially constructed, contingent, and historically situated. Only by questioning these taken-for-granted assumptions can we begin to challenge the naturalization of certain discourses that otherwise remain invisible and unexamined. This shift in perspective is not just an

intellectual exercise but a necessary intervention. It enables us to unravel the power structures embedded in these discourses and to recognize how they shape and govern our understanding of bodies, identities, and lived experiences. Producing counter-narratives that interrogate the normative body is, therefore, an important step toward creating a more inclusive and equitable academic and social landscape.

In my interactions with beginners who are interested in researching Disability Studies, I have observed that their understanding of the body is often shaped by norms rooted in able-bodied perspectives. This realization made me feel the need to write books that cater to beginners, providing them with a foundational understanding of key concepts such as access, stigma, visibility, aesthetics, alienation, dependency, humanity, freakishness, and technology, especially in relation to people with disabilities.

For instance, many of my students, like society at large, tend to perceive disability as a kind of disease. It became crucial to challenge and correct such misconceptions early in their learning process. This motivated me to write two books specifically designed to address these gaps: *The Discourse of Disability: Indian Perspectives*(2023) and *The Lexicon of Disability Studies*(2024). These works aim to introduce beginners to the critical frameworks necessary to rethink disability and move beyond reductive or stigmatizing understandings.

As educators, it is our responsibility to challenge traditional pedagogies that reinforce normative ideas of ability. Even when texts discuss disability, they are often read through an ableist lens that views disability as unwanted or undesirable in society. I have noticed that students frequently struggle to identify or engage with texts that represent disability. This struggle stems from their understanding of disability being heavily influenced by discourses of ability, which often render disabled experiences invisible. For example, students may assume that certain narratives or characters are not about people with disabilities simply

because the representation does not conform to their preconceived notions of disability.

Echoing Dr. Shilpaa's question, why do they think that certain characters cannot be disabled?

What makes them believe that the narrative does not concern people with disabilities?

The answer lies in how pedagogy shapes their perceptions. Traditional educational frameworks fail to foreground the nuanced realities of disability and instead reinforce dominant able-bodied narratives. If we aim to create a more inclusive understanding, we must actively rethink and reconstruct our pedagogies, ensuring that they critically engage with the lived experiences of people with disabilities and challenge the norms that perpetuate their marginalization.

With the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) across many universities and colleges, I am delighted to see a significant shift in how disability is being incorporated into curricula. In several institutions, disability is no longer confined to an elective course but is being taught as a mandatory paper or as an integral unit within broader courses. This change is crucial because, when disability is offered only as an elective, many students might opt out, assuming that it has no relevance for those who are non-disabled. By making it a mandatory component of the curriculum, universities are ensuring that all students engage with the discourse of disability, regardless of their identification with a particular body or experience.

As someone who has been actively involved in developing courses for my department, I have consistently emphasized that Disability Studies matters for everyone. It is not just a niche field for people who identify as disabled but a critical area of study that invites all students to rethink how bodies, abilities, and identities are constructed and valued in society. A few years ago, although Disability Studies was part of our curriculum, it existed

only on paper—it was neither taught nor actively engaged with in our department. Today, however, I am proud to see meaningful changes taking place.

One of the most transformative aspects of NEP is the flexibility it offers students to choose courses across disciplines. This has opened up opportunities for students from science, commerce, and other fields to explore the body discourses central to Disability Studies. It is heartening to see students from diverse academic backgrounds showing an interest in understanding disability, not just as a medical or social issue but as a complex, interdisciplinary subject that touches on ethics, representation, accessibility, and justice.

Just as Disability Studies is vital for non-disabled people, it is equally important for students beyond the traditional boundaries of the humanities and social sciences. For example, a student from the sciences can gain insights into how technologies can be designed inclusively, while a student from commerce can explore how workplaces can be made more accessible. Disability Studies equips students with the tools to critique ableist structures, rethink societal norms, and contribute to a more inclusive world, regardless of their field of study.

The NEP's interdisciplinary approach has created a space where Disability Studies is not only being normalized but also recognized as essential. This shift has the potential to dismantle misconceptions about disability being relevant only to a specific group of people. It underscores the reality that disability is a shared social concern that affects us all, either directly or indirectly.

By embedding Disability Studies within the curriculum and making it accessible across disciplines, universities are taking a significant step toward fostering a more inclusive and empathetic academic environment. This ensures that future generations of students,

regardless of their discipline or background, are equipped to engage with and contribute to the ongoing discourse around disability, inclusion, and equity.

As a student of Disability Studies, I feel elated to witness the exponential growth of this field and the increasing engagement of students with its nuanced discourses. What excites me most is not just the structural changes being made—such as creating accessible spaces and inclusive education for people with disabilities—but also the gradual shift in people’s attitudes and mentalities toward disability. This dual transformation, both infrastructural and ideological, reflects the growing recognition of disability as a vital area of study and social concern.

It is inspiring to see how Disability Studies encourages people to explore the complexities of the body, breaking down preconceived notions of ability and normalcy. This field challenges us to rethink societal norms and pushes for a more inclusive understanding of human diversity. By examining the intersections of accessibility, stigma, aesthetics, technology, and representation, Disability Studies paves the way for a deeper appreciation of how different bodies navigate and shape the world.

The progress we are witnessing is not merely academic; it is a cultural and societal shift. The growing awareness of disability issues and the increasing willingness to question ableist structures signal a move toward a more empathetic and inclusive society. As this field expands, it has the potential to foster environments where everyone—regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities—can walk, think, and live freely without fear of exclusion or judgment.

Looking ahead, I am optimistic about the future of Disability Studies and its role in shaping a better world. This is a field that transcends academic boundaries, impacting policy,



design, education, and culture in profound ways. As more people engage with the complex realities of disability, we inch closer to building a world that values and celebrates diversity in all its forms. The growth of Disability Studies represents more than the advancement of a discipline—it is a testament to humanity’s capacity to evolve toward greater inclusion and equity. By continuing to explore the intricate relationships between bodies, identities, and society, we can create a world where everyone has the opportunity to thrive. Let us hope that this field continues to flourish, inspiring individuals and institutions to champion the values of accessibility, dignity, and mutual respect for generations to come.