

# The Perception of Blindness in India

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**Abstract**—Various misconceptions about people with physical or mental disabilities still persist among the common people. People harbor many erroneous ideas regarding the visually impaired. Yet, visual impairment is not a new phenomenon at all. From ancient times, visually impaired characters have been depicted in various important literary works, including the 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata'. This is nothing more than a reflection of society's attitude towards the visually impaired. Just as there are various medical causes of visual impairment, there are also different types of visual impairment. However, visually impaired people are broadly divided into two categories: completely blind and partially sighted. However, visual impairment or disability is more of a social problem than a physical or mental one. Almost four decades after India's independence, the first disability law (PwD Act) was passed in Parliament in 1995. Even there, blind and low-vision individuals were mentioned separately. Exactly two decades later, in the amended disability law (RPwD Act) of 2016, these two types of disabilities were again mentioned. Therefore, it is clear from this that these two types of disabilities hold special importance at the social and national levels. Moreover, the lives of visually impaired people are affected in a slightly different way compared to other disabled individuals in areas such as daily life, education, and mobility. Therefore, in this article, I will primarily attempt to explore the prevailing perceptions about visually impaired people in India. I will also investigate how effectively the disability laws have contributed to the empowerment of the visually impaired. Furthermore, I will mention a few Indian visually impaired individuals who have overcome these social barriers and legal complexities to achieve success in life. I hope that this article will be able to present a true picture of the situation of visually impaired people in India.

**Keywords**— Blind, low-vision, social misconceptions, disability laws, famous blind persons.

## I. INTRODUCTION

When one cannot see with his/her eyes, the body language of that person changes very naturally. Unnatural physical behaviors such as keeping head down, turning head, turning face to one side, playing with fingers, shuffling feet, walking with one or both arms raised, etc. can be observed actually among the visually impaired. As those persons cannot see other persons, they express their gestures according to the natural behavior. That is, physical structure and physical activities distinguish the visually impaired persons from other sighted people. In the socialization procedure of the visually impaired persons, both physical structure and behavior are very important. That is why, it will be wrong to analyze blindness or disability only in the medical model. Blindness or disability is not basically a medical problem, but social problem. It is necessary to follow the social model and see how societal barriers isolate the visually impaired and the disabled from society. However, various perspectives of the

social model are currently being studied. It is actually acceptable to analyze the visually impaired and the disabled in the disability model.<sup>1</sup> There is a lot of confusion in society about the nomenclature of the visually impaired person. Some people think that they are blind, visually impaired, deaf, sightless, vision-impaired and so on. There are many stigmas that are common in society. Just like there is a problem with the names of the disabled. Some people with disabilities use names like differently abled, Divyang, Persons with Special Needs, Disabled, etc.

On the other hand, since blind people cannot function with their eyes, there is a tendency to isolate themselves from society and the physical world. In many cases, blind people also prefer to isolate themselves from society. In fact, the body language of those who cannot see and those who can see is bound to differ. A blind person usually tries to experience everything by hearing or touching. Sound and touch are the main means of communication of a blind person with the outside world. As a result, a very natural and diverse way of living isolated from society basically isolates blind people socially. Which also creates an unwritten wall mentally between the world of the sightless and the world of the sighted. In contrast, those who are partially sighted, always try to behave like the sighted and become social. Therefore, the issue of social isolation becomes important from the perspective of society towards the blind and the contempt of the blind from society.<sup>2</sup>

The social and religious significance of the blind in India has been observed since earliest times. Who does not know the story of the blind Dhritarashtra in the ancient epic, 'Mahabharata'? It is believed that Dhritarashtra was a completely blind person and his blind love with affection for his son were the main reasons for the Kurukshetra War. On the other hand, the story of the blind parents of Shraavan in the epic 'Ramayana' is known to one and all. These mythical characters actually reflect the psyche and social attitude of the common people in the contemporary society. Everyone knows the story of the blind Shurdash, one of the pioneers of the Bhakti movement in the Middle Ages. The story of the blind artist Vinod Bihari Mukherjee of Shantiniketan, Bolpur, West Bengal and the famous mathematician Ramanujan of Tamilnadu during the colonial period is well known. Thus a few blind persons set aside an important part in the historical milieu. Occasionally those blind persons became villain and sometimes became hero to our society in due of time. In this context, I will try to analyze the current position of the blind persons and their inclusions in our society.

## II. TYPES OF BLINDNESS

Several types of blindness are commonly observed in India; among them, cataracts, corneal opacities, glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, retinopathy of prematurity, and nutritional blindness are particularly noteworthy. Color blindness, night blindness, and congenital blindness are also vividly observed in India.<sup>3</sup> Major causes of blindness included cataract (66.2%), corneal opacity (CO) (8.2%), cataract surgical complications (7.2%), posterior segment disorders (5.9%) and glaucoma (5.5%). In 2013, the World Health Assembly launched a project called 'Global Action Programme'. Its main goal was to reduce the prevalence of blindness by 25% worldwide by 2019. The Government of India has also taken effective steps to prevent blindness through the Rapid Assessment of Avoidable loss of sight (RAAB) project. A survey conducted in 31 districts of India found that about 57% of the total blind people are illiterate.<sup>4</sup>

India's National Control for Programme of Blindness or NPCB, however, is not in favor of following the guidelines of the World Health Organization or WHO. In this NPCB, blindness has been analyzed from a different perspective. Traditionally, blindness is divided into two parts; Functional Definitions on Disability and Definitions Based on the Measurement and Quantification of V.I. In 1948, WHO suggested dividing these two stages. In the first stage, blindness was mainly analyzed in medical terms. And in the second stage, economic blindness was talked about. That is, special emphasis was placed on the inability to do professional work due to vision loss. However, different types of blindness were prevalent in different countries of the world. According to a 1966 statistic; there were about 65 types of blindness in the world. Among them, total blindness, economic blindness, professional blindness, practical blindness, educational blindness, legal blindness, social blindness etc. can be mentioned. Therefore, it can be easily understood from the name that various distinctions were made based on the work related to blindness. In 1975, the first internationally accepted category of blindness was given. According to I.C.D. 9 or International Classification of Diseases 9, five types of blindness were mentioned. The first two types were low vision and the last three types were total blindness. In 2002, the International Council of Ophthalmology on Revision of I.C.D. The category of blindness was re-defined at the 10th ICD Conference. In accordance with the recommendations of that conference, the ICD 10 was revised in 2006 and a new category of blindness was defined.

There are various definitions of blind at the international level. The World Health Organization, the American legal field, the American Academy of Ophthalmological Department, etc. have defined the condition of blind in different ways. The World Health Organization has divided the inability to see in the eyes into two categories; blind and low-vision. Those who can see 3.60 degrees or less are identified as blind. That is, these people cannot see at all. On the other hand, those whose visual acuity is less than 6.12 degrees but more than 3.60. (ICD-10 Codes 1 & 2) A person

whose visual acuity is less than 6/12 and 6/18 is considered to have mild vision impairment. Those whose visual acuity is less than 6/18 to 6/60 are called moderate vision impairment. And those whose visual acuity is less than 6/60 to 3/60 are called severe vision impairment. According to the rules of the International Classification of Diseases, there is a practice of separating all incurable diseases with 5-digit numbers. For example, the 5-digit code for glaucoma is 365.14, the code for retinitis pigmentosa is 362.74, and the code for complete blindness in both eyes is 369.01. etc. Doctors and medical institutions in different countries basically follow this rule to determine blindness.<sup>5</sup>

In 1970, in India, the term totally blind was used to refer to a person who was unable to see even light. That is, if both eyes were 20/400 degrees of blindness, he was called totally blind. On the other hand, a person with 20/200 degrees of vision was called economically blind. If one eye was 20/400 and the other eye was 20/200 degrees of blindness, that person was called one-eyed. However, the National Plan for Prevention of Visual Impairment and Control of Blindness report of 1976 did not give any classification of blindness. A Central Coordination Committee of India has identified those with 20/200 vision or worse as blind. The NPCB, has adopted the 2006 criteria for blindness, following the WHO's ICD 10.<sup>6</sup>

However, it is not always the case that a blind person can be identified in medical or physical terms, in fact, if blind is identified in medical terms, many types of problems can arise. That is, how much the person concerned can see, whether he can perceive light or not, etc. Therefore, blindness should be determined based on whether there is any permanent vision-related problem in the movement of a person in daily life. That is, blindness should be analyzed functionally or sociologically. Regardless of the term used, blind, low-vision, visually impaired, etc., the basic idea is the same.<sup>7</sup>

There are various types of low vision persons. People who are unable to see very distant objects are called myopic and people who are unable to see close objects are called hyperopic. However, those who cannot read newspapers from a normal distance are called low vision. On the other hand, it can be said that those who use large letters or a magnifying glass while studying, those who use a recorder to follow classes, or those who use any other assistive technology; are called low vision.<sup>8</sup>

In the West, discussions on disability began at the medical level from the end of the nineteenth century. Originally, attempts were made to eliminate disability with the help of various medicines, technologies and assistive devices in medical science. That is, attempts were made to eliminate disability by eliminating biological problems. But after World War II, when a large number of men were maimed due to war, the issue of disability emerged as a matter of concern for various countries. At this stage, the tendency to eliminate disability was observed using the medical model as a tool. But in various Western countries, in the 1960s and 1970s, disability began to be analyzed at the intellectual level. Where it emerged that disability is a social problem. Therefore, it is not possible to eliminate that disability only with the help of the medical model or medical equipment or technology. As a

result, an attempt was made to deal with disability socially from this time. However, in various UNO conventions and WHO reports, the medical model of disability was given more importance.<sup>9</sup>

The British colonial authorities viewed disability from the perspective of charity and social welfare in India. Therefore, from the second half of the nineteenth century, they took several steps using the medical model. However, religious fervor was added to the welfare of the disabled. During the colonial period, two rehabilitation centers for the disabled were established in Benares and Allahabad, which were known as holy pilgrimage sites from a religious point of view. Nevertheless only visually, orthopedically and mentally handicapped people were kept in those rehabilitation centers. After independence, the sovereign Indian government, despite giving importance to the medical model, enacted several laws. Which were adopted for the welfare of the disabled. In this context, the question of 'equality before the law' and 'equal protection of law' mentioned in Article 14 of the Indian Constitution can be mentioned in detail. Apart from this, in various Directive Principles, where the welfare state is mentioned, several state measures have been taken for the welfare of the disabled. But, in this case too, special importance has been given to the medical model. That is, the issue of disability has been viewed separately. It was assumed that it is possible to deal with disability with the help of certain medical methods, medical equipment and technology. The fact that disability is a social problem was not considered by the Indian government at least until 1980. However, several social organizations and NGOs demanded that disability be highlighted as a social problem.<sup>10</sup>

The issue of disability was given importance for a long time in independent India on the medical model and rehabilitation. On the other hand, the independent Indian government, in accordance with the policy of the welfare state, tried to solve the problem of disability by taking several welfare measures. Disability was first analyzed in a social model in England. However, in America, there was a demand for analyzing disability on social and humanitarian grounds for a long time. The 'minority model' has gained considerable importance in disability studies in America. In 1982, the 'Society of Disability Studies' was established in America. Since the establishment of this organization, a unity was established in various genres of disability studies. In the 1980s, a disability law was first passed in America. In this law, the policy of solving disability problems through rehabilitation was severely criticized. However, the medical model was not rejected. It should be remembered that the ground reality of the Global South never matches the Global North. Therefore, the progress made in the field of disability studies in the so-called industrialized countries was not always followed in India or other countries of the Global South. In the Global South, along with poverty, illiteracy, lack of awareness, etc., caste, religion, color and regionalism are of great importance.

Usha Bhatt was the first to publish a book on disability studies in India in 1963. Later, Jagadish Chander, Anita Ghai, Asha Hans, Annie Patri, etc. have made important

contributions to disability studies. In the last decade, various books have been published and research has been done on disability studies. Both disabled and non-disabled people have made important contributions in that field. In current research, gender, ethnicity, culture, etc. have gained particular importance in analyzing the barriers for the disabled persons.<sup>11</sup>

### III. DISABILITY LAWS IN INDIA

There was no such explicit disability law while the first four decade of India's independence. A number of disability rights movements started all over the country for the enactment of particular disability law in India in the last half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. On February 7, 1996, the Act for the Equal Opportunities Protection of Rights and Full Participation of Persons with Disabilities went into effect. It was the first disability law of independent India. This law was enacted on the basis of equal opportunities and full participation of the disabled persons in nation building. Basically, following the medical model, 7 types of disabilities were directly brought under the ambit of this law. Out of which the first 2 types of disabilities were, respectively, blind and low-vision. All those whose visual acuity is less than 20/200 or who are unable to see objects in a range of 20 degrees or less, were brought under the ambit of visual disability. On the other hand, completely blind was said to be those who are unable to perceive light and who are unable to recognize objects more than 10 feet away. It was said that a person with 40 percent or more disability and whose disability cannot be cured by medical treatment or cannot be solved by any assistive device, should be identified as a disabled person. The law said that any government hospital at the sub-district level, district hospital or the authority of the district medical college nearest to the person concerned can issue a disability certificate. The law also provided for the renewal of the disability certificate after a specified period of time and after passing a suitable examination.<sup>12</sup>

As this Act mentioned various initiatives to prevent disabilities, it also mentioned the empowerment of the disabled persons through education, vocational training and suitable employment. It also mentioned the rehabilitation of the disabled, barrier-free environment for their movement. It was said that all disabled people below the age of 18 years should be educated in special schools or integrated schools free of cost. It also mentioned reservation of seats in educational institutions and jobs. Through this, it was said that social security should be provided to the disabled persons. In government jobs, it was said that 3 percent of seats should be reserved for the disabled. Out of which 1 percent of seats should be compulsorily reserved for the blind and low-vision persons. The remaining two percent were reserved for the hearing impaired and loco motor disabilities and cerebral palsy respectively.<sup>13</sup>

The PWD Act of 1995 mentioned a total of 7 types of disabilities; 1 Blind, 2 Low-Vision, 3 Leprosy-Cure, 4 Hearing Impaired, 5 Loco motor Disability, 6 Mental Retardation and 7 Mental Illness. Therefore, the greatest evidence of the special importance given to visual disabilities is that out of the total 7 types of disabilities, 2 types were visual.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps because it

is not possible to analyze the totally blind and partially sighted from the same perspective, both types of disabilities were mentioned in the Act at two different levels. The analysis of blind or low-vision that was previously given in the medical model was basically the same theory that was given in the PWD Act.<sup>15</sup> Section 25 of the PWD Act deals with early detection and prevention. Sections 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 and 31 deal with equal rights for persons with disabilities in education. Sections 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 47 deal with equal rights in employment.<sup>16</sup>

The PWD Act of 1995 basically analyzed disability by adopting the medical model. In addition, disability was presented as a personal problem. The social problem of disability was not given any importance at all. Moreover, many disability activists feel that the law gave some charities instead of legal rights to the disabled. In 2008, the Indian government, like other countries of the world, ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities or UNCRPD. Various disability organizations and disability activists protested that the legal resources mentioned in this UNCRPD for the protection of the rights and dignity of the disabled were not mentioned in the PWD Act of 1995. Due to protests in different parts of the country, in 2010, the Government of India constituted a Drafting Committee under the leadership of Dr. Shudha Kayal. Its main objective was to formulate a comprehensive disability law in India as per the UNCRPD. The committee was constituted by the Ministry of Welfare Department of the Government of India with the participation of various members of the Union Cabinet, members of various state governments, members of various disability organizations, various disability activists, guardians of various disabled persons, etc. After lengthy discussions, the committee prepared a draft of the new disability law. On the basis of that, the Revised Persons with Disabilities or RPD Act was passed in 2016.<sup>17</sup>

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act was passed in 2016. This act was basically a new amendment to the P.W.D. Act of 1995. While the P.W.D. Act mentioned 7 types of disabilities, this new R.P.W.D. Act mentions a total of 21 types of disabilities. This new law mentions people with various physical and mental disabilities. In addition, new types of disabilities like acid attack victims, thalassemia etc. have been brought under the ambit of this law. Different share of mental disabilities and blood related disabilities has been observed in this stratification.<sup>18</sup>

Section 10 of this RPwD Act deals with the right to reproductive power of persons with disabilities. Section 11 deals with the provision of a barrier-free environment for the general elections of the country. This Act provides for the provision of all opportunities for persons with disabilities to vote in accessible formats. Section 16 deals with inclusive education for persons with disabilities. Section 20 states that no person shall be denied employment or promotion on the pretext of disability on the ground of disability. Section 32 states that 5 percent of the seats in higher education institutions shall be reserved for persons with disabilities of all kinds. Section 34 states that 4 percent of the total seats in

government jobs shall be reserved for persons with disabilities.<sup>19</sup>

The new RPwD Act gave more importance to the social and legal models in the analysis of disability. Although the medical model was given due weight in determining disability. However, the suitability of this new disability law as a universal law was debated among disability activists of various types. Although a total of 21 types of disabilities are mentioned, it is believed that hearing impaired, mental disabilities, intellectual disabilities, etc. are far behind in achieving rights and dignity compared to blind, low-vision and orthopedically handicapped or locomotive disabilities.<sup>20</sup> However, according to a 2022 statistic, currently a total of 4.95 million people in India are totally blind and 70 million people are visually impaired. Out of these, 0.24 million children are blind. The plan for Blindness Prevention Management and Control adopted under 'Vision 2020: The Right to Sight' has given more importance to early detection.<sup>21</sup>

#### IV. SOME EMINENT BLIND PERSONS IN INDIA

There are a number of confusions regarding the actual types of blindness all over the world. The disability laws and social measures in India, are not sufficient for the betterment of the Blind, Low-vision and the other disabled persons. In spite of that, we should know about some renowned Blind persons, who become successful in their personal lives with facing huge difficulties. In post-independence India, many blind people are known to have left their mark on society through their work or are still working successfully. Their contribution to the socialization of the blind is undeniable. They themselves were successful in their life struggles and played an important role in the empowerment of the hostages as a whole. A few such people can be mentioned. Sadhan Chandra Gupta was born in 1917 in the city of Dhaka in undivided India. After successfully completing his law studies, he worked as a lawyer in the Calcutta High Court for a long time. During the Second World War, he played an important role in hearing various cases. He won the 1953 parliamentary by-election and was elected to the Lok Sabha as the first and only parliamentarian in India. A believer in left-wing politics, Sadhan Chandra Gupta served for a long time as the first and only blind Advocate General of West Bengal.<sup>22</sup>

Lal Advani lost his eyesight at a very young age. He was born in 1923 in the Sindh province of undivided India. His struggle to establish himself in life was very difficult. He successfully completed his graduation and post-graduation degrees. He played an active role in a conference of the UNO UNESCO in 1950 on the outline of Indian Braille. He taught Braille and music at the National Institute of Visually Handicapped, which was established in Dehradun for the rehabilitation of soldiers who had lost their sight in the war. He was associated with this institution for a long time. He has traveled to various countries in Asia, Europe and America and worked for the visually impaired and disabled. He also played an important role in the establishment of the Rehabilitation Council of India. He even played a leading role in the preparation of the draft of the first Disability Act in 1995.<sup>23</sup>

Ravindra Jain was a famous musician, composer and lyricist of Bollywood. His contribution to music, even though he was totally blind, is an inspiration to people.<sup>24</sup> Beno Zephine is India's first IFS (Indian Foreign Service) officer. He secured 343 rank in the All India Union Public Service Commission examination in 2013-14. He is currently a senior officer in the State Bank of India.<sup>25</sup> Tiffany Brar is playing an active role in spreading education among the blind in the state of Kerala. She has created a unique example by providing Braille and technical education to visually impaired students of all levels through her organization called Jyothirgamaya Foundation. She has been awarded various national and international awards. She has even received the President of India Award.<sup>26</sup>

Srikanth Bolla has created a precedent in life by ignoring the cursed life of his childhood. He was the first in India to graduate with Math and Science subjects. Not only that, he also earned an engineering degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or MIT. He was the first successful student of MIT at the international level. Despite getting many good job opportunities, he returned to the country and opened a packaging company called Bollant Industries and employed many inmates there. Currently, with an asset of about 5 million, he has registered his name among the young entrepreneurs.<sup>27</sup> A Bollywood film named 'Srikant' had been released 2 years ago on the basis of his life story.

Dr. A. K. Mittal successfully completed his education and made an important contribution to the non-violent movement. Dr. Suresh H. Advani made an important contribution to cancer treatment as an oncologist. He lost his eyesight due to retinal detachment. Divyanshu Ganatra achieved fame in paragliding. Dr. Mani Krishnaswamy achieved fame as a Karnataka vocalist. He increased the glory of India through music at home and abroad.<sup>28</sup> Pranjali Patil is India's first blind AAS officer. Y. G. Parameshwara is a successful doctor in Karnataka despite being blind. He is India's first blind doctor. India's first blind chartered accountant is Dilip Loelka.<sup>29</sup> S.K. Rumta is a successful senior advocate in the Delhi High Court. Despite being completely blind, he led the blind movement as the General Secretary of the National Federation for the Blind. It was his initiative that led to the Supreme Court accepting reservation of seats for blind persons in the Union Public Service Commission.<sup>30</sup> Rahul Bajaj, despite being blind, is successfully practicing law in the Supreme Court. He earned his Masters degree from Oxford University. Through his organization Mission Accessibilities, he continues to fight for barrier-free environments for the sightless people.<sup>31</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

The vague idea about the blind and low-vision people still persist in our culture. Blind people are still neglected in the family and society. The disability rights movements since 1970s especially helped the blind and other disabled persons for the socialization as well as politicization. Although, the disability Acts have been passed twice in India after independence. But, the blind and the disabled persons should not only be treated in medical ground. The socialization is most important for the inclusion of those people in the mainstream

society. The social model is much effective for the improvement of the blind and disabled persons, which had been repeatedly championed by the different social activists. Education has spread somewhat among the blind and the disabled in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Apart from the RPwD act, the 'Sarva Shiksha Aiviyan', the 'Right to Education Act', National Education Policy' (NEP) have given some special provisions for the expansion of elementary and higher education among those people. Social awareness has increased somewhat today due to the wealth of the media. Despite this, there is no end to the contempt for the blind. Many still think that those who cannot see, also hear less with their ears. Since the blind cannot make eye contact, many cannot properly connect with the blind. But, it is the fact that, taking advantage of the Disability Act, many blind people are taking higher education today. Many are even doing research. They are successfully earning a living as teachers in schools, colleges and universities, bank employees, Group C and Group D employees of Indian Railways, receptionists and operators in different private companies. Many have been able to establish small businesses and start-ups. However, the contempt for the blind and the disabled has not been completely eliminated from our society. Along with the expansion of education, the effective role of the media, public awareness, the administrative sympathy and appropriate steps of the government can play an effective role in the socialization of the visually impaired as well as disabled persons.

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