20

Disability Life Writing in India

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Researchers in the social sciences have assembled a growing body of work on the sociology and politics of disability in India, but the academic investigation of disability in the fields of literary and cultural studies has mostly remained unexplored. There is evidence that the cultural representation of disability has historically occurred at the expense of disabled individuals because they have not been attributed any agency or subjectivity (Couser 2005, 603). In a previous article, we connect the problem of representation to a historical lack of authorship by disabled people themselves: "In the Indian context, the tradition of self-writing or life writing by people with disabilities has been a very recent and contemporary phenomenon. This has been a trend since 1990 when self-writing became a powerful mode of representation for individuals with disabilities to articulate their centuries-old silence and social, cultural, and economic oppression within a caste-ridden social structure" (Islam and Jana 2021, 204). Following the development of the life narrative genre in India over the last three decades, the concurrent emergence of the disability rights movement, a tremendously enlarged reading populace, and more numerous methods of publication than ever before, there is now no dearth of writings related to disability and disability studies. This corpus of writing consists of more than ten literary memoirs, in addition to innumerable smaller essays, oral traditions, web writings, and older theatrical performances such as Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug / The Blind Age*, performed in 1962; *Togalu Gombeyaata*, created by Kathatha Puppet Theatre; *Bhagavad Gita on Wheels*, created by Syed Sallauddin Pasha; and Nondi Natakam, performed in Murugan Temple since the seventeenth century.

Barring some exceptions, disability life writing in India has exposed the link between disability and socioeconomic inequality and questioned the individualist ethos of public discourse regarding disability and the tendency to suppress rather than articulate diversity. In doing so, these writings engage in the cultural and educational polemics of various genres, spanning the fiction of social realism, bildungsroman, and oral traditions; celebrity autobiographies; survivor testimony; and documentary forms of social media and blogging. The narratives in disability life writing shape their authors' ideas of who they are, individually and collectively, and how their texts serve as a cultural repository with a major focus on the constitution of disability memories.

Surveying US and European literature, G. Thomas Couser argues, "A comprehensive history of disability life writing has yet to be produced, but it is safe to say that not much of such literature was published before World War II" (2005, 604). In India, Subodh Chandra Roy's *The Blind in India and Abroad* (1944) and Ved Mehta's *Face to Face* (1957) are the earliest attempts at Indian life writing in English on blindness. These life narratives played a crucial role in the emergence of a cultural history of Indian disability. In other words, Indian disability life narratives help to form our understanding of broader social and cultural issues in Indian disability history, of which the hierarchical and discriminatory caste system is an integral part.

However, there is a paucity of engagement in contemporary theoretical discussions regarding the convergences between disability and the broader sociopolitical context as represented in Indian disability life writings. Some writers (such as Anita Desai in *Clear Light of Day* [1980]) have examined Indian literary representations of disability as indictments of the nation's false promises and have pointed out the disabling metaphors used by British colonizers to justify their arguments against Indian self-rule. Unlike fictional texts that use disability as metaphor, Indian disability life narratives consider and represent a postcolonial, even anticolonial kind of "autoethnography or autoethnographic expression" as an instance "in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms" (Pratt 1992, 7).

Indian disability life writings, particularly in the postindependence period, have the potential to uncover the relationship between disability and social stratification, reshape the tropes of physical and social isolation, and question the institutional hegemony dominating private lives. Jane Buckingham rightly comments, "Written memoirs and academic writing on disability experience are an important element in the emerging historiography of disability in India. However, many people with disabilities are not able to read or write or access resources to support their academic and personal development. These memories and testimonials are as important as the written record in contributing to an historiography which speaks to the needs and hopes of those marginalised not only by disability but by poverty and low caste status" (2011, 425). These self-narratives, oral and written, represent the ways a society envisions and constrains embodied selfhood and disability community. Indian disability autobiographers interpret their individual experiences within colonial and postcolonial contexts thereby contributing to the emerging domain of intersectional and global disability studies. The genre challenges disability studies to go beyond a middle-class and primarily Anglo-Indian world view that is hindered by "a singular lack of specificity as to . . . the nature of cultures shaped by colonization and its consequences" (Barker and Murray 2010, 223).

Within this context, Mehta's *Face to Face* (1957) and Preeti Monga's *The Other Senses* (2012) are remarkable Indian life narratives on blindness. Both memoirs

depict the struggles of visually impaired people who faced adversity from many facets of society. Mehta narrates diverse personal experiences of an intelligent and visually impaired man in a society separated by caste, gender, and economic status. Monga documents her difficult path as a woman in India who chooses to live life her own way, despite her disability and frightening societal and cultural restraints. *Face to Face* and *The Other Senses* offer frames for examining disability from a different sociocultural vantage in India, subverting the conventionally accepted notion of disability as an aberration from normalcy. These life narratives provide witness to the social and cultural marginalization of people who are blind or visually impaired and hence serve as a form of resistance.

The objective of this chapter is to show the contours of history, culture, and memory in Indian disability life writings. These writings challenge and deconstruct historical and cultural understandings in India of disability as "deceit" or "mischief," as well as mainstream Indian society's ableist binary framework of disability and ability, in a culture shaped by colonization and its consequences. By using memory as a tool, these writings provide alternative emancipatory spaces for preserving or recovering disabled perspectives and communities.

Mehta was born in 1934 into a Hindu family in Gujrat, in the province of Punjab in northern India. He lost his sight when he was three and a half years old due to cerebrospinal meningitis. This unanticipated incident looms large in his life, leaving him in a condition of uncertainty and mental instability. Nobody in his family imagined their three-and-a-half-year-old son would become blind because of his prolonged sickness. It was a shocking experience for him, as he could not cope with the idea of being blind. As he affirms, his blindness deprives him of certain experiences valued by the sighted world:

> I started living in a world of four senses—that is, a world in which colors and faces and light and darkness are unknown. . . . I started living in a universe where it was not the flood of sunshine streaming through the nursery window or the colors of the rainbow, a sunset or a full moon that mattered, but the feel of the sun against skin, the air just before the coming of the quiet night, the smell of the stubble grass on a warm morning. It was a universe where at first—but only at first—I made my way fumbling and faltering. (Mehta 1957, 3)

His blindness ultimately becomes a family tragedy, not just an individual problem. He encounters many unanswered questions in the everyday life of a blind person in a culture where the distinction between "normal" and "abnormal" is the norm. His narrative becomes "a saga of a man who is pushed down due to an existential crisis and stands defiant to fight all the trials and tribulations of life with calm" (Islam and Jana 2021, 205). His blindness was a social taboo, and people close to him ridiculed and discriminated against him for something that was no fault of his own. He recollects, "A state of complete inaction therefore

followed my blindness. In part this was due to the immediate shock of the illness, but more important still, the impasse was caused by ignorance of the potentialities of a blind child, since the only blind persons my parents saw were beggars" (Mehta 1957, 4).

At that historical point in time in India, the universe of disabled people was very bleak, with blind people moving from one corner to another corner with begging bowl in hand. Hindus believe blindness is a punishment for misdeeds committed in a previous birth. The religious model interprets disability as a divine act, usually as vengeance for a transgression committed by the crippled person or his or her family (Mahanta 2017, 19). Mehta's mother did not have medical expertise like his father, so she always blamed her past life for his blindness. As a result, Mehta's mother consulted a pandit (priest) and decided to do penance for her previous misdeeds. The pandit took Mehta's hand in his and examined the lines meticulously. Then he stared at Mehta's mother's face and mumbled slowly as he scrutinized her forehead. Mehta writes, "He [the pandit] found himself inadequate, and more pandits would have to be consulted. At his request, they were called and questioned exhaustively as to what atonement could be made. Although their analyses and remedies differed considerably, they all agreed that by doing penance for her sins, my mother could improve my chance of regaining sight" (1957, 5).

Pandits recommended various means of cure ranging from intense prayers to arduous physical exertion, and for a fee, they consented to undertake a segment of the required ritual. Conversely, his father, a doctor, sought to combat superstition by providing him with an education, just like his other children, so that Mehta might become a self-supporting citizen of the world, as he used to say it. To quote Mehta, "Although in my case there was an obstacle which seemed insurmountable, he was determined to leave no avenue unexplored. He read all available literature on blindness. He learned that almost all India's blind people had turned to begging for their livelihood, or had become owners of *pan* and *biri* shops and spent their days rolling nuts and condiments in a betel leaf or tobacco in a cigarette paper" (1957, 10–11).

His father was determined that this would not be his son's fate, and he began to seek the assistance of numerous famous educational authorities. Nevertheless, before Mehta turned five, his father sent him to the Dadar School in Bombay, the country's premier school for the blind, which was nine hundred miles away from their home in Punjab. It turned out to be an orphanage, like the scores of other such schools around the country. In this school, he earned respect and learned the discipline of living life independently. As he recollects, "I preferred the new taste of independence in school, and even the taunts of [classmate] Abdul seemed more bearable than my sheltered, uneventful life at home" (Mehta 1957, 16). Mehta spent three years there, bedridden for most of the time, and then returned home because the school had nothing more to teach him. For years, he

was unable to attend further schooling. All along, his father had been attempting to get him to the West, where blind people could get a good education, but no school there would take him because he was too young.

When Mehta was thirteen years old, India achieved independence, but at the cost of partition that killed a million people and displaced eleven million more, with no fewer than four million people evacuated. Mehta's family was among the refugees who fled from the newly formed Pakistan with only the clothing on their backs. Mehta was concerned that he would be stuck in India for the rest of his life, with little chance of receiving a proper education. Then he had the opportunity to study for a few months at a newly founded Institute in Dehra Dun, India, for World War II troops who had become blind (Mehta 1957, 150). He learned touch-typing there, among other things, and later he wrote a series of letters to blind institutions in England and the United States, informing them of his hardships. No school wanted to admit him, with the administrators now claiming that his training was inadequate and that, in any event, his moving overseas at such a young age would result in social maladjustment. The Arkansas School for the Blind, however, eventually accepted his application. When he arrived in New York, he had very little knowledge of the new world. He felt strange and bizarre in the new environment. But he was greatly astonished that his peers did not ridicule him for his blunders, unlike in India, where he would have been scorned or ignored for weakness or imperfection. So he experienced pleasures and warm friendship in the West, and his sense of sound, smell, and touch came alive. It occurred to him, "Living in America is an alluring prospect for me in so many practical ways: the freedom of movement" and "having enjoyed a more understanding, less superstitious, and certainly more educated attitude" (Mehta 1957, 305, 308). Mehta's *Face to Face* documents the intersection of class, caste, and disability in India, ultimately arguing against the religious model. As discussed in our previous article, "The idea of disability as a social stigma or as punishment for an individual's misdeeds in a past life or the consequence of disregarding gods were perpetuated in a caste-ridden dogmatic, and superstition-shaken society in India" (Islam and Jana 2021, 210). In this case, the narrator and his father unequivocally articulate their revolt against these societal norms.

The Other Senses, by Preeti Monga, offers a different trajectory of disability experience in India. Monga was born in 1959 in the holy city of Amritsar in India. She belonged to a touch-typing Sikh family. She was barely six years old when doctors eventually diagnosed her deteriorating vision as a result of optic atrophy. Her family sadly accepted the verdict that there was no treatment available for her condition anywhere in the world.

In her memoir, Monga chronicles numerous instances where she was considered naturally inferior due to her visual impairment. She draws attention to the gruesome realities of disabled women in India: her friends, teachers, and

neighbors looked at her with pity. It seemed as if she had been "transformed into a strange pitiful object to be handled with extra consideration or simply left alone" (Monga 2012, 26).

Monga's initial reactions to her own blindness were a kind of remorse and subdued silence rather than the resistance or protest of her later years. She reminisces about difficulties with transportation and accessibility she experienced while attending primary school:

> I silently endured this horror, terrified at every step I took treading into the unseen, my tiny heart constantly thumping against my ribs. Even so, the thought of sharing my fears or staying away from school never occurred to me, probably because I saw no other child around me create a fuss about getting off the bus and walking to class. Instead, I endured this daily ordeal, thinking about the secrets that would unfold from between my books, the fascinating stories the lessons would reveal, the ramblings around the compound, the fun that I would have chattering and playing once I was through with this treacherous journey! (2012, 19)

Her narrative chronicles the intricacy of social responses to physical distinctions. As Shilpaa Anand has argued, "These responses cannot be precisely fixed as medical model, moral model or social model but suggest that a serious study of literary narratives of the Indian context may uncover conceptualisations of corporeal difference that are yet to be theorised" (2020, 241). Monga's story does not seem to reveal the details of her objectification, but it draws attention to the conflicting responses to the intersections of disability, gender, and education that frame everyday experiences of disablement.

When Monga was expelled from school at the end of eighth grade because of her blindness, she was forced to stay at home and learn music. Disability historian Aparna Nair explains, "As scholars have noted for other spaces, the Blind were popularly believed to have a peculiar affinity for music" (2017, 191). Many stories exist in India of blind musicians who gained expertise with certain instruments, such as the *dilruba*, sitar, *sarangi*, harmonium, tabla, and flute. But Monga did not move on to a musical career.

When she dreamed of marrying a trustworthy and compassionate man, she experienced social rejection and embarrassment for venturing into such a fantasy. Nevertheless, she got married in 1982, believing her dream of a "perfect match" had become a reality. But she soon found herself in an abusive relationship. Her memoir delves into the thoughts of a guilt-ridden husband to try to understand what makes him torture her. The answer is fear. In 1986, she took action to rescue herself and her kids from their domestic turmoil. Monga recollects, "Though I had decided to better my situation and had turned into a fight, life would sometimes seem so unbearable that I would catch myself contemplating poisoning the

children and myself. . . . 14 September 1993 thus witnessed me weeping through the night with Keith relentlessly hurling all manners of vile abuse" (2012, 148).

At the same time, peers and family members made her life even more challenging. They questioned why a blind woman should walk alongside "competent," "non-defective" humans. According to mainstream Indian society, Monga may be offered sympathy and charity, but how can she be empowered to live on equal footing with sighted people?

The pain of being doubly ostracized—first as a woman and then as blind—and the painful abuse she experienced haunted her ceaselessly. But she managed to manifest many of her dreams as reality. She firmly believes, "When life gets cloudy, the trick is to look at the silver lining" (Monga 2012, n.p.). Monga was appointed as the India coordinator, and then nominated as a board member, for the Combat Blindness Foundation India, a US-based organization, working in the area of avoidable blindness in the developing world (2012, 176). She is currently an award-winning trauma counselor, writer, and aerobics trainer, having been the first Indian blind person to successfully clear the aerobic instructor training. Monga describes succeeding in her dreams "in the absence of the sense of sight, clutching on to the rope of faith, depending upon the wings of the other senses" (2012, 177). In 2006, she established a nonprofit organization, Silver Linings, to provide opportunities for blind women to complete their higher education and become equipped with necessary skills and flourish in society.

Mehta's *Face to Face* and Monga's *The Other Senses* have made a significant intervention into the literary-historical documentation of disabled people's experiences in India by challenging the stereotypical religious representations of disability and providing a corrective measure in the form of life narratives of schooling and employment. Furthermore, Monga has provided an ecosystem of new social opportunities for other blind people.

A close reading of these two life writings reveals the entwinement of disability with discriminatory practices of caste, religion, and economic factors. These two life writings open up new spaces of engagement with disability in India, far different from the traditional representations. The texts expose the lack of educational and other support systems for disabled people in India as a result of deep-rooted bias. While the government has provided little to no assistance to disabled people, some individuals have developed affordable creative devices, while others—like Mehta and Monga—combat social and cultural stigmas by publishing their own testimonies.

B. Mangalam rightly states that "narratives of self articulation by the disabled are marked by interrogation of social attitudes towards the disabled and documenting quotidian challenges and struggles of the disabled community" (2020, 149). The quotidian issues surrounding Indian disability have been obscured for so long that much more research is required to uncover the history, culture, and memory of disabled people. Present-day Indian disability life narratives serve as

a significant factor in changing attitudes toward disability, and in shaping socio-cultural history and memory to come.

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