

The Indian Disability Studies Collective
In association with the
Department of English, Cotton University, Guwahati
And
Centre for Women's Studies, Cotton University, Guwahati
Presents
The 5th IDSC International Conference
Supported by the ICSSR-NERC
6-7 March, 2025

Conference Report

On 6th March, 2025, the conference commenced with an inauguration by Prof. Rakhee K. Moral, who delivered a mind-stirring speech. Her discussion revolved around key themes such as changing pedagogies, decolonizing disability, the urgency of questioning epistemology, and disability and accessibility.

After the inaugural session, esteemed dignitaries delivered enlightening speeches interspersed with discussions. Someshwar Sati, who enlightened the seminar with his keynote address, brought forth the idea that Braille does not disable, a reverberation of a distant voice that resonated for many. Disability is not only a medical phenomenon but also a result of an ableist culture and prejudice.

Dr. Garg, the Registrar, brought forth the matter of the Specially Enabled Forum operational in Cotton University; disability, as he said, would remain as a part of human diversity. He would want to see this made viable by ideas coming from discussion at the conference. Ms. Ketaki Bordoloi, present on behalf of Sishu Sarathi, spoke about the organization's history, beginning with assisting two children with cerebral palsy in 1987. She emphasized their work toward inclusive education, home visitation, and networking for women with disabilities. Ketaki emphasized accessibility as the first right of disability, per the Supreme Court, and raised the issue concerning the implementation of rights for persons with disabilities (PWDs) as well as the need for higher visibility.

Mr. Dipankar Mahanta of the Srimanta Foundation stressed the necessity of mutual respect in the array of inclusiveness. He enumerated the activities of the organization using culture for unification since 2003.

Prof. Shilpa Das shared her concern regarding the Indian academia for its neglect of disability studies, stating India's backwardness in disability studies and research. She discussed the Indian Disability Studies Conference (IDSC) and its work on creating a theoretical framework to understand disability.

Dr. Bedanta Bora, Academic Registrar, Cotton University had presented the vote of thanks, in the inaugural session.

The IDSC Outstanding Scholar Award Panel, chaired by Prof. GJV Prasad, met to review and discuss the research presentations of four exceptional scholars. The panel observed insightful discussions on the convergence of disability, identity, and digital spaces. The presentations highlighted creative research that advances a deeper understanding of disability, identity, and digital spaces.

Ms. Asita Ajith's presentation, "Feeling Crip/Confident? Self-Perceptions and Digital Identities of Select Indian Para-Athletes on LinkedIn," examined the self-perceptions and digital identities of Indian para-athletes on LinkedIn. Her study showed the tension between confidence and vulnerability in para-athletes' online presence. Mr. Rashrab Nath's presentation, "Wheel-Cheer Wonders: Reimagining Women's Travel Narratives through Disability and Queer Perspectives in Digital Spaces," reimagined women's travel narratives using the prism of disability and queer perspectives in digital spaces.

Ms. Sargun Kaur's talk, "Liquid Norms: Disability, Monstrosity, and Otherness in Guillermo Del Toro's *The Shape of Water*," explored how disability, monstrosity, and otherness are represented in Guillermo Del Toro's *The Shape of Water*. Her study revealed the ways in which the film subverts and perpetuates ableist norms. The co-presented paper by Ms. Shirley Goodwin and Mr. Ilhan Israr, "'Becoming Cyborg': Negotiating Identity Beyond Ableist Norms," discussed the idea of "becoming cyborg" as a way of negotiating identity outside ableist norms. The panel had a spirited discussion, commending the scholars for their creative research and insightful presentations. The panelists observed that the research projects were important in helping to deepen the understanding of disability, identity, and digital spaces. On the basis of the presentations and discussions, the panel advises these scholars to further work on their research projects, seeking new possibilities for collaboration and knowledge-sharing. Their remarkable academic ability, and their research can be of major contributions to the discipline of disability studies. The panel hopes to see the future progression of these research studies.

Following that, this conference had ten technical sessions, themed around diverse but intersectional areas studying the idea of disability.

Technical session 1 was chaired by Shilpa Anand. This session had four papers. Mr. Ishan Sharma in his paper Love, Desire, and Anxiety: Cinematic Analysis of the Subject of Intellectual Disability and the Idea of Companionship discusses about intellectual disability. Films on marginalization of disabled are very few in number. Till date, no proper representation of disability has ever happened. Disability in films is never from mainstreams. He also highlights the idea of love, desire, Anxiety, companionship. He discusses web series, "Aap ki Antara" and few more. Another issue discussed by him is about the transition in narratives. He speaks, anxiety is about not finding a companion and also about finding one. He questions the screen trying to represent stereotypes where the viewers also look through those perspectives. No one is the same on the spectrum. Ms. Sayahnika Ganguly in her paper Disability in the Shadows: Exploring Invisibility and Disability in Komi Can't Communicate and Shino Can't Say Her Name discusses the interplay of text and space in graphic literature. Characters with minimal disability occupy a limited space in graphic novels. It is stigma that leads to hide disabilities. She quotes Lennard Davis and says that the problem is not with the disabled but with the normalcy that is created. The societal gaze plays a great role in creating disabilities.

Ms. Preevi presented a paper titled Cinematic Lenses on Blindness: Exploring Bollywood's Evolution in Life-Writing through Sparsh and Srikanth. Her discussion takes into consideration two biopics Sparsh and Sreekant. Her paper positions blindness in Bollywood. She opines that biopics have gone to capture the essence of diverse life inspiring audiences across generations. It was in the 1970s that blindness came to be represented in Bollywood. The blinds are depicted as sympathetic. She discusses two types of biopics: Well known biopics and less known biopics. It's important how blindness is perceived and how the cinema makers depict blindness. The historical, cultural narratives shape blindness. The sighted culture perceives blindness as total blind. Her paper brings to the fore that the dialogues in the films are scripted not as a natural conversation. She concludes by posing questions- Will Bollywood continue to commodify disability or will it tell stories that would reflect the nuances of the disabled?

The paper by Surasree Deb Burman titled Disability and the Aesthetics of Abnormality in Horror Film: Analyzing The Babadook and The Assent discusses the concept of horror films in connection to uplifting disability as horrible. Dyslexia, schizophrenia can get equalized with horror/ being monstrous. Idea of the monster is inseparable from persons with disabilities.

The Technical Session 2 on Disability Caregiving was presided over by Prof. Sushma Lama of the Department of Psychology, Cotton University. The session had two presentations, with the first titled The Rhetoric of Motherhood: Exploring Disability and the Maternal Experiences through a Literary Lens by Dr. Nizara Hazarika dealing with the intersection of disability studies and maternal narratives. It discussed the life of mothers in Geetali Borah's *Antaratma: The Heart's Core* and Malini Chib's *One Little Finger*, focusing on challenges to sexist and patriarchal assumptions of motherhood and on mothers' complex experiences.

The presentation by Dr. Krishna Kumar S titled From Paper Parents to Irritable Invalids: Examining the Affects of Care in “This Kind of Child: The ‘Disability’ Story” in this session presented the notion of "crip assemblage" and highlighted the significance of cohort in care. It also touched on care fatigue, invisible disabilities, and disability as a reality that transforms. The question-and-answer session brought to the fore the issue of appreciating care workers beyond family connections.

On March 7th, eight more technical sessions followed. Technical Session 3, which was chaired by Bibhash Choudhury, considered the representation of disability in folktales, poetry, and life writing. The session had five presentations that compared different texts and contexts, illuminating the intricate intersections between disability, identity, and narrative. Ms. Rodingpuii's paper re-read Mizo folktales through the lens of disability, looking at how disability is constructed and negotiated in these stories. Her analysis illustrated the significance of taking into account the social and cultural contexts within which disability is represented.

Ms. Soma Biswas's talk explored how disabled women resist and appropriate traditional fairy tales, e.g., "The Ugly Duckling" and "Rapunzel." Biswas's reading made clear how disabled women appropriate storytelling as a process of resistance and empowerment. Dr. Madhulina Choudhury's paper delved into the idea of posthumanism in Indian folkloric universes. Choudhury's reading illustrated the necessity of decolonizing disability studies and addressing intersections of disability, culture, and identity. Dr. Anuradha Bose's paper studied life narratives and narrative silences, discussing the ways in which people with disabilities construct their subjective selves through quotidian life episodes. Bose's reading brought forward the significance of hearing and highlighting the voices of people with disabilities.

Ms. Mousana Nightingale Chowdhury's talk wrapped up the session in discussing the meaning of ecosomatic paradigm within Naomi Ortiz's *Rituals for Climate Change*. Chowdhury's analysis had shown the value of examining intersections of disability, ecology, and social justice. Technical Session 3 offered a vibrant and insightful presentation of disability in folk tales, poetry, and life writing and the need to have more diverse and inclusive texts that echo the voices and experience of persons with disabilities. Technical Session 4, led by Pankaj Gogoi, discussed the intricate and multi-faceted nexus of disability and identity. The session included four presentations that examined different dimensions of this intersection. Mr. Vishnu V from the University of Hyderabad spoke about a review analysis on Disability Identity and its Impact on Psychological Well-Being. His talk reviewed the complex correlation between disability identity and psychological well-being, elucidating how disability identity can influence the mental state of a person. Ms. Namya Chadha from NID, Ahmedabad, presented her practice-based research on documentary, *Behind the Ears: An Exploration of Self-Concept in the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Community*. Chadha's talk brought a sensitive comprehension of the self-concept and identity development of the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community and the necessity of inclusive narration and representation. Mr. Anand P. and Ms. Uchchita Joshi of NID, Ahmedabad, presented their work on *The Colour of Colours: Inclusive Design for Colourblindness*. Their talk

reflected the need for inclusive design to meet the needs of people with colour vision deficiency, highlighting innovative design solutions supporting accessibility and equality. Dr. Meghana Rao from Azim Premji University wrapped up the session with her presentation on Care Futures: Intersectional Politics of Caregiving for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in India. Rao's work underscored the intersectional politics of caregiving as a multifaceted issue and stressed the importance of holistic and supportive care systems that advance the well-being and agency of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Overall, Technical Session 4 was a rich and stimulating examination of the complex interplay between disability and identity, emphasizing the value of inclusive design, representation, and caregiving practices that respect the well-being and agency of people with disabilities.

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Technical Session 5, presided over by Boopathi P., discussed the representation of disability in fiction. The session had three presentations that examined different texts, making observations on the complex and multifaceted representation of disability in text. Mr. Aniket Ojha of Banaras Hindu University delivered a narratological reading of Amritlal Nagar's Khanjan Nayan (1981), analyzing the depiction of blindness in hagiographical accounts. Ojha's talk brought to the fore the construction and negotiation of blindness in the text, as well as the interplay of disability, spirituality, and identity. Dr. Sanjukta Naskar of Janki Devi Memorial College, University of

Delhi, spoke about the portrayal of disability in children's literature. Naskar's talk compared and contrasted different texts, pointing out how disability is framed and represented in children's literature. She underscored the significance of inclusive representation and the need for more sophisticated and varied representations of disability in children's literature. Mr. Kaustabh Kashyap of Cotton University wrapped up the session with his talk on Crippling the Physician's Pedagogy: Navigating Precarity and Learning to Die in *When Breath Becomes Air*. Kashyap's reading of Paul Kalanithi's memoir examined the sites of intersection among disability, medicine, and identity, and the ways in which the book resists and deconstructs the conventional understanding of physician-patient relationships and the medical gaze. In general, Technical Session 5 was an engaging discussion of the representation of disability in literary texts, and the importance of creating more varied and sophisticated representations of disability in literature. The session illustrated the significance of analyzing the construction of disability in literary texts critically, and how these representations inform our knowledge of disability and identity.

Technical session 6 was chaired by Shilpa Das. Mr. Neelaksh Pithauria's paper *Access Denied: Creating Accessible Social Spaces for People with Disabilities* dealt with the idea of "access denied". How disabled are inaccessible in public spheres, linking with social activism. The activists design what kind of protest the disabled would do. He also discussed the diversity of tactics. How mobilisation takes place through activism. The public space marginalises the disabled. For example, there is a lack of footpaths in the streets. The ableist consider disability as a problem. Therefore they are excluded from conversations. The disabled activists internalize discrimination and they consider that their representation is not valued. Therefore, the speaker says, an inter - disciplinary approach is needed and this can happen if a non- disabled come together with a disabled. Meena Girish Kumar's paper *Exploring Mobility Issues and Barriers Experienced by Persons with Disabilities* Group explores mobility issues. She says, the Rights of PWD Act, 2016, provides a broad knowledge to enhance social inclusion and participation. Disability is the cause as well as the consequence of poverty. Her paper seeks to identify mobility barriers for the PWD people. Basic amenities are lacking for the disabled in public spheres. There are travel related and public factors which together contribute to the problem of the disabled. PWDs should be made comfortable by offering proper facilities so that they do not hesitate to attend the public functions. Arpita Roy's paper *Inclusive Education Triumphs: The Story of Emily's Journey through Kathleen McDonnell's Emily Included* discusses the significance of inclusive education. Inclusive education produces collaborative learning outcomes. "Emily Included" is a novel that she dealt with in her paper. It reflects post colonial defiance, post - modernist and deconstruction. Her paper talks about barriers to inclusivity. Further she stresses the importance of activism in dismantling discrimination. Institutional structure can transform and construct inclusivity. Technology can play a great part in this regard. Santosh Mahaldar's paper was titled *Braving the Hurdles: Glorifying Indian Athletes with Disabilities in the Context of Paralympics*. His paper questions why people don't know about the success of PWDs in the Olympics. He details the various successful athletes from the PWD. The paper hopes for a balanced society.

Technical Session 7 was on Disability, Language, Culture, and the Everyday, led by Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, examined the intersections of language, disability, culture, and the everyday. The session included four papers that critically examined diverse texts and contexts, revealing the intricate dynamics between disability, care, and identity. The initial talk by Mr. Saikat Ghosh analyzed Han Kang's *Greek Lessons* with an emphasis on the language of care and pathos. The analysis by Ghosh spoke volumes of the assertions made by the "other" and the need for empathy and comprehension. Ms. Anusuya Moitra's talk provided a window into the day-to-day lives of adolescents with disabilities in Kolkata, examining the idea of "cripping care." Moitra's analysis illustrated the significance of understanding intersections of disability, care, and identity in daily settings. Ms. Kriti Gulati's talk discussed Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* and explained how the topic of the book prepares us for transcending the sharing of life experiences. Gulati's interpretation laid greater stress on the use of narrative and storytelling in disability studies. Dr. Amrita Sharma's talk brought the session to a close by sketching disability culture in modern India. Sharma's argument discussed precarious lives and heterotopic spaces, highlighting the value of looking at the cultural and social environments in which disability is made and managed. Technical Session 7 offered a rich discussion of the intersections of disability, language, culture, and everyday life, with implications for more inclusive and accessible representations of disability.

The Technical Session 8 on Disability and Posthumanism, led by Prof. Rakhee Kalita Moral, hosted three papers presenting the convergence between disability and posthumanism. The first by Mr. Ritu Ranjan Gogoi titled *Critiquing the Supercrip Trope of the Cyborg: A Transhumanist Perspective on the Characterization of DC Comics' Victor Stone and Marvel's Cable* explored the cyborg's status betwixt technology and standard human beings and broached the supercrip trope and the burden of transhumanity. The second by Dr. Preeti M. Gachche titled *Critiquing the Supercrip Trope of the Cyborg: A Transhumanist Perspective on the Characterization of DC Comics' Victor Stone and Marvel's Cable* compared cyborg identity for disabled Indian women and technology users' unfriendly environments. The third paper by Ms. Samriddhi Singh titled *Gendered Biopolitics in the Age of Infertility: Reading Future Bodies in Rimi B. Chatterjee's Science Fiction Short Stories* examined gendered biopolitics, bare bodies, and the accompanying, which included the militarization and economization of fertility. The fourth paper by Dr. Bhoopathi P. titled *Gendered Biopolitics in the Age of Infertility: Reading Future Bodies in Rimi B. Chatterjee's Science Fiction Short Stories* discussed about the idea of aids, and concluded with a compact historical narrative of disabilities from the past to the present. Technical Session 9, which was chaired by Saikat Ghosh, dealt with the intersectionality of disability with other social categories. The session had three presentations that examined different texts and contexts, bringing out the intricate interconnections between disability, marginalization, and identity. Dr. Sumadhura Roy and Dr. Reshma Jose co-presented a paper that reimagined marginalization and disability through the reading of *Rosakutty in Ghost*, employing disability and Dalit feminist theory. Their talk brought to the fore the intersections of caste, gender, and disability, and the importance of more complex understandings of marginalization. Ms. Amisa Mahato's talk

explored the writings of some of the women with disabilities that challenge the perception of "stigma" attached to it. Mahato's discussion pointed to how the women writers dismantle the prevailing narratives and reclaim themselves. Ms. Simi Chutia's talk problematized Mahesweta Devi's *The Why-Why Girl* by applying the principle of intersectionality to examine intersections between culture, identity, and disability. Through her analysis, Chutia illustrated the value of taking intersections of disability and other social categories into account.

Technical Session 10, which was chaired by Ritwick Bhattacharjee, discussed the representation of disability worldwide. The session had two presentations that compared different texts and contexts and pointed out the numerous ways in which disability is represented and constructed. Archana Ravi's talk studied the representation of fibromyalgia in *Get A Life*, Chloe Brown to consider the vocabularies of pain and construction of disability. Ravi's reading illustrated a requirement for increased understanding of chronic illness and disability. Priyam Sinha's talk examined the representation of disability in recent Bollywood cinema, examining the politics of diversifying content and pitching a "glocalized" India. Sinha's reading emphasized the need to take into account the cultural and social contexts within which disability is represented. As a whole, Technical Sessions 9 and 10 offered a rich and insightful discussion of the intersectionality of disability and its representation worldwide. The sessions illustrated the significance of examining the intricate connections between disability, marginalization, and identity, and the necessity of a more subtle understanding of disability and its construction. Every session was followed by an interesting and enriching discussion where the participants and the audience engaged in an interaction of ideas, thoughts and perspectives. The conference was wrapped up by the Valedictory Session, which started with the announcement of the result of the Outstanding Scholar Award. The panel declared the winner, hailing their extraordinary contribution to disability studies. Prof. GJV Prasad gave the Valedictory Note, and on considering the theme of the conference as well as discussions held within the conference, reiterated the relevance and necessity of discussions and arguments within the conference and continued pursuit thereof in disability studies.

Ritwick Bhattacharjee, acting on behalf of the Indian Disability Studies Collective (IDSC), offered a deep appreciation to each participant, speaker, and organiser. He recognised the teamwork that contributed towards the success of the conference and was thankful for the valuable discourses and conversations that were engaged in. The Valedictory Session formally closed the conference, but the debates, discussions, and networking undertaken during the conference will continue to inspire and educate the work of scholars, activists, and practitioners in the field of disability studies.



Professor Rakhee Kalita Moral with Guest Faculty Anamitra Bora and student of CWS Department Jyotishmita Devi



Professor Someshwar Sati from The Department of English, Kirori Mal College speaking on sociality of Crip Theory



A Participant speaking on Cyborg Identities: Is blurring the lines between human and machine worth it?



Mr. Ritam Changkakati from Sakhyam Srimanta Foundation talking about his experience of blindness and overcoming difficulties with the right support



From Awareness to Action: Seminar on Disability Justice and Awareness program with all the participants and guests from India