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CASE STUDY

"Only Connect!": Bridging Disability Education and Public Humanities

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Abstract

The city of Indore in Madhya Pradesh, India, is home to over 1 million individuals with disabilities. Despite this significant population, the public schools serving these communities often lack visibility and a dependable online presence. Information about these institutions is usually dispersed through unreliable channels, leaving the pedagogies and amenities primarily misunderstood. This article discusses the ideation, development, and completion of a public humanities initiative, "'Only Connect!' Empowering Public Schools for the Disabled in Indore to engage in a participatory and inclusive online public sphere," a U.S. Alumni micro-grants project initiated and finalized in 2022. Only Connect! is a pioneering online platform that offers verified contact details for all public schools in Indore, catering to children who are Deaf, Blind, and those who suffer from speech difficulties between the ages of 6 and 18. The project's central mission is to dispel the myths and inaccuracies surrounding disability education. Based on the narratives sourced from comprehensive fieldwork, surveys, and extensive interviews with key stakeholders, including school principals and parents, Only Connect! aims to foster a better-informed and supportive community. The goal of this project is to facilitate dialogue about the challenges and opportunities in educating disabled students in Indore, promoting greater understanding and inclusivity.

Keywords: disability; education; public humanities

In September 2016, I participated in a workshop on "Translating Disability across Cultures: The Translation and Representation of Disability in the Modern Indian Short Story," organized at the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Advanced Study (JNIAS) in New Delhi. My paper concerned the treatment of disability by the Nobel Prize-winning author Rabindranath Tagore. Over one hundred and thirty years ago, Tagore authored a Bangla short story on the everyday life of a prepubescent girl who suffered from acute speech difficulties. This story, titled "Subha," was first published in the magazine *Sadhana* in its Magh 1299 issue (January–February 1893). The eponymous character, Subhashini (ironically meaning "sweetly speaking"), is a girl child. She is the third daughter in her family and is often marginalized by both her family and the community because of her speech difficulties. Writing at a time when Subhashini would have been considered intellectually and cognitively deficient, Tagore defied the prevailing norms of his time by portraying Subha as competent, thoughtful, and imaginative, in stark contrast to the

callous and judgmental society of her unforgiving village, Chandipur, in rural Eastern India at the turn of the nineteenth century.

I had read "Subha" as a child and read it again during my postgraduate degree in English Literature. For the conference at the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute, I decided to translate it into English and interpret it in line with the latest scholarship on Disability Studies. I also argued that Tagore's attitude toward those who face acute speech difficulties may have been revolutionary in his own time, but it is also didactic and high-handed in ours. I read the paper, and the conference organizers agreed to publish it in an edited volume titled *Disability in Translation: The Indian Experience* by Routledge in 2019.[1] My academic foray into this narrative reached its conclusion, but my engagement with Disability Studies was merely at its inception.

Tagore had focused on the everyday world of Subha. Her trials. Her tribulations. Her joys. Her sorrows. I concluded that if Disability Studies were to be pursued in India, they must deal with the everyday social world of the disabled. I must, however, admit that my conclusion did not influence me any further than this.

It was only in 2022 that I chanced upon a call for a micro-grant project proposal by the Embassy of the United States of America in New Delhi. I wanted to submit a proposal on Disability Studies but faced a roadblock. The proposal would have to focus on everyday social problems faced by people with disabilities, and I was unsure of the direction to take. For inspiration, I went back to "Subha." In the story, Tagore wrote about the lack of educational facilities available to Subha as a child because special-needs education was not available. Through her character, Tagore explored the silent struggles of disabled individuals, particularly young girls, within the educational and societal frameworks of his time. Subha's inability to speak was misconstrued as a lack of intelligence, leading to her exclusion from formal education and meaningful social interactions. Tagore critiqued the societal neglect and educational deprivation experienced by disabled girls, highlighting the need for empathy and inclusive practices. Poignantly portraying Subha's rich inner world, he suggested that every individual, regardless of physical ability, possesses immense potential and a deep need for understanding and acceptance. Subha's story, thus, ultimately served as a compelling call for an educational system that embraces and nurtures all children, recognizing their unique capacities and worth. I found myself wondering, "How much has changed?" and thus began my inquiry into schools for the disabled.

I live in Indore, in Madhya Pradesh, and decided this was as good a place to begin as any. I proposed a project for schools for the disabled in Indore, and it was accepted. It was now time to engage in the essential work of identifying schools and establishing connections with parents, principals, and students.

1. How "Only Connect!" was conceptualized

My exploration into the resources available for parents of children with disabilities commenced with Mr. Sahil, an amiable and well-informed local businessman. Mr. Sahil, being a long-time resident of Silver Springs, a residential township where I previously resided, like many other IIT Indore professors, was consulted regarding potential connections to parents

[1] Ghoshal 2019, 159–72.

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of disabled children. He subsequently introduced me to Ms. Pratibha, the mother of an autistic child.

During my visit to Ms. Pratibha's home, I inquired about educational opportunities for her child. She was candid in stating that her search for suitable schools in Indore for children with disabilities had been largely unsuccessful. She expressed concern over the high costs associated with such institutions, which were often prohibitively expensive. Additionally, she was still determining whether the educators at these institutions indeed possessed the requisite formal training to conduct special education classes effectively. Though not a Disability Studies educator, Ms. Pratibha conveyed significant apprehension regarding the feasibility of affording private education from the perspective of a parent of a disabled child. Consequently, I learned that many children, including her own, have ceased attending school altogether.

This interaction made me realize that the central focus of my project should encompass the perspectives of parents like Ms. Pratibha, who lack access to comprehensive information about public schools for disabled children in the city and, hence, should be the beneficiaries. It became more and more evident that my inquiry should now pivot toward exploring public schools designed for children with disabilities, as these institutions tend to be more affordable and subsidized by the government. However, Ms. Pratibha had expressed marked uncertainty regarding the locations of such schools and their teaching methods and infrastructure. What could these schools offer?

2. At *Sewa Madir*: The gateway beyond ableist prejudices

Sewa Mandir, the oldest public school for disabled students in Indore, has been operational for over a century, serving a diverse population of Deaf and Blind individuals. Undoubtedly, this was the first school on my survey. My visit to *Sewa Mandir* took place on a rainy day, during which its front entrance was partially submerged. Despite being well-acquainted with the city, my cab driver was unaware of the school's existence, much like the locals in the vicinity. I couldn't help but wonder why these institutions are seemingly invisible. If they are public institutions, to which "public" do they cater, and who excludes them? Following a moment of hesitation, I knocked on the gate and was greeted by a teacher who confirmed that the school was open and the principal was available for a meeting. The entrance felt like a portal, a gateway into a unique environment often overlooked due to ableist prejudices.

In my conversation with the principal, Mr. Nitindra Badjatiya, I gained insights into the school's legacy, which has established it as a central resource for information regarding other public schools for the disabled in Indore. To my surprise, Mr. Badjatiya provided me with a comprehensive database of these institutions, a map that was never available online. He explained that parents often rely on a small informal network to learn about these schools due to the lack of accessible online information.

Along with Mr. Badjatiya, the teachers and students also spoke to me at length about their everyday experiences in school. My conversations with them made me realize that *Sewa Mandir* comprises a diverse student body, with a significant proportion of students experiencing multiple disabilities. On enquiring about funding opportunities available to the school, I was informed that it operated with significant funding deficits.

I do not know Indian Sign Language (ISL). Mr. Badjatiya explained the basic principles of ISL to me and illustrated how it is incorporated into daily instruction. He also advocated for the

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An ISL training session is being conducted in the central hall at *Sewa Mandir*.

instruction of ISL for both disabled and non-disabled students. I learned that regular training sessions were held for non-disabled schoolchildren, including a significant event at the VITS school nearby on International Sign Language Day, where a young Deaf student served as a mentor to his peers. Mr. Badjatiya also proposed that disability awareness should be incorporated into the educational curricula of all School Boards in India through a four-point program:

- Classes 1–5 should aim to sensitize students to the social realities of disability and exposure to non-human worlds, particularly animal interactions, to foster an ethical and inclusive worldview.

- Classes 6–8 should teach the basics of ISL.

- Classes 9–10 should address various disability typologies within the curriculum.

- Classes 11–12 should involve projects designed to cultivate a deeper understanding of disability.

3. Disability awareness: What can the myths teach us?

Mr. Badjatiya had also undertaken another significant initiative to promote disability awareness through the construction of a central hall, which was meticulously adorned with cloth-based paintings that illustrate various scenes from Indian mythology. The training sessions were often held in this hall. During a tour, we paused before a striking painting of Lord Surya, the Sun God, depicted majestically in his chariot.

Demonstrating his commitment to education, Mr. Badjatiya engaged me in a discussion about Indian mythology. He inquired, "Did you know that Lord Surya has a charioteer?" to which I confidently replied, "Why, yes, of course." However, Mr. Badjatiya continued to

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probe, asking, "Well then, did you know that the charioteer's name was Aruna?" I admitted my ignorance regarding this detail. It was at this moment that Mr. Badjatiya identified an opportunity to deepen my understanding. He further revealed, "And did you know that Aruna was disabled?"

This revelation served as a pivotal moment for me, clarifying the significance of the Indian mythological paintings within the hall. Mr. Badjatiya proceeded to explain each artwork, noting that they prominently feature animal characters and individuals with disabilities. Such representations underscored the importance he placed on inclusivity and awareness within the broader context of Indian culture and mythology. I also couldn't help thinking about all the artworks I had appreciated so far. "Just how many of those paintings and artworks had an unconscious ableist bias written into them?" I also wondered how many of these influences are drawn from our ancient texts, myths, and histories.

I realized that this bias has persisted as an unnoticed aspect of our country's narrative, raising questions about our collective responsibility to address it. Although there appears to be a continuous literary and philosophical discourse highlighting the ridicule of disabilities in India, tracing societal perceptions of disability in ancient texts remains complex. While evidence suggests the existence of ridicule, I recognized that there are also instances of acknowledgment and recognition. It was, indeed, a strange conglomeration.

Dating back to around 1500 BC, the *Rig Veda* mentions individuals with physical and visual disabilities in the context of healing by the Asvins, semi-deity twins, or by Soma, the personified magical potion.[2] This indicates that conditions like blindness and lameness were recognized as misfortunes requiring supernatural remedies rather than mere illnesses.

In the *Yajur Veda*, there is a reference that reflects negatively on individuals with various physical differences, mentioning a person with a hunchback, a person with dwarfism, someone with vision difficulties, a person who is blind, and a "dead man devoid of righteousness."[3] *The Upanishads* also discuss disabilities, comparing them in texts like the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* and the *Chandogya Upanishad.*[4] Blindness is frequently used as a metaphor for ignorance, as depicted in phrases like "led by a man who is himself blind" (*Katha Upanishad*; *Mundaka Upanishad*), and remains a common motif in later literature.[5]

Disabilities were also referenced in arguments about the essentials of life: "One lives with speech gone…with eye gone…with ear gone…with mind gone" (*Kaushitaki Upanishad*).[6] *The Manava Dharmashastra* and *Arthashastra* explicitly prohibit sharing secret information with physically challenged individuals, based on the unfounded belief of their low intelligence. They were even compared to parrots, emphasizing the assumption that such individuals merely mimic human speech. These unproven beliefs became legitimized under the guise of administrative efficiency.[7]

Among the *Mahakavya* [epic literature], in the *Mahabharat*, Dhritarashtra, the blind king, is criticized for his "blind" loyalty to his son, Duryodhana, his distorted sense of justice

[2] Jamison and Brereton 2014, 47–49.
[3] Keith 1914, 110–17.
[4] Olivelle 1998, 123, 231.
[5] Olivelle 1998, 383, 441.
[6] Olivelle 1998, 349.
[7] Olivelle 2005, 162; 2013, 231.

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regarding the Pandavas, and his inability to make rational decisions. His fatal weakness toward his misguided son contributes to a devastating war.[8] Conversely, Shakuni, who is physically impaired, vows to destroy the Pandavas, and though he pretends to be a friend, he is ultimately the cause of Duryodhana's downfall. This portrayal of Shakuni raises questions about the literary association of impaired physicality with maliciousness, reflecting the biases of the author and audience.[9] In the *Ramayan*, Manthara, the maid with a hunchback, plays a pivotal role in instigating Queen Kaikeyi against Rama. Kaikeyi's praise of Manthara's deformity as a site of wisdom contrasts sharply with her later brutal treatment at the hands of Prince Shatrughna.[10] This suggests that her physical appearance may have contributed to the failure of her schemes. Additionally, the narrative employs apologetic strategies to address moral ambiguities, including tales of disability, such as Dasharatha's accidental homicide of a boy supporting his blind parents and Kaikeyi's curse for mocking an old, hearing-impaired Brahmin. These elements reflect a broader awareness of the marginalized status of disabled individuals in society.[11] And yet, despite this, there are notable depictions of disabled figures like Astavakra, a sage with multiple deformities who is revered for his wisdom, and Valakhilya, a group of sages afflicted with dwarfism recognized for their extraordinary intuitive abilities.[12]

These representations made me comprehend a dual narrative: one that reflects societal prejudice and another that acknowledges the potential of disabled individuals. It was crucial for me to keep these contexts in mind while I expanded my survey to encompass these schools with a particular focus on the Deaf, the Blind, and those who suffer from speech difficulties.

4. Why "language" matters

I visited each school, met with every principal (and, when possible, the entire teaching staff), and recorded their narratives. I encountered an environment where students are eager to attend school, and teachers demonstrate a strong commitment to education, often extending their efforts beyond the classroom. I understood that as a Public Humanities initiative, Disability Studies is incomplete without considering the contributions of these institutions and their communities. All the information that I gathered during these visits was now slowly being integrated into designing a website: www.onlyconnectindore.org.[13]

During my fieldwork, I also observed that children with disabilities possess a heightened awareness of the misconceptions that are frequently perpetuated regarding their personal and educational experiences. This was most visible at the Indore Deaf Bilingual Academy.

The Indore Deaf Bilingual Academy was founded in 1974 by a Deaf couple, Dr. Usha Punjabi and Mr. Rajkumar Punjabi. The Punjabis conceptualized a school based on the twin values of dignity and respect for the Deaf. The couple still runs the school today. Upon arrival at the school gates, visitors are encouraged to reflect upon a poster, evocatively created by the students, which addresses the nature of ISL. Regrettably, a prevalent belief among both children and adults is that the grammatical structure of ISL mirrors that of conventional

[8] Ganguli 1894, v.1, 16.
[9] Ganguli 1894, v.2, 75–86.
[10] Pollock 1986, 48–63.
[11] Pollock 1986, 48–63.
[12] Stroud 2004, 49; Taylor 2021, 82.
[13] Ghoshal, 2022.

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Indore Deaf Bilingual Academy students work on ISL.

written languages. The students artistically and gently assert the necessity for the non-disabled community to educate themselves about the fundamental principles of ISL. The initial step in this educational process involves recognizing that ISL possesses its own distinct grammatical system.

Furthermore, the students at the Indore Deaf Bilingual Academy advocate for the recognition of ISL as being epistemologically equivalent to concepts of human dignity and ordinary existence. As visitors enter the school and encounter the notice board, they are invited to contemplate a "tree of life." The various multicolored leaves inscribed (from left to right) include Natural Sign Language, Visual Learning, Social Interaction, Communication, Equality, Cultural Values, Accessibility, Freedom, Human Rights, Emotional Expression, Awareness, Development, Comfort, Education, Creativity, Imagination, Moral Values, Identity, and Confidence. At the center of this representation is the word "Proud."

The children aspire to challenge the dominant ableist narrative that suggests they lack pride in their identities and are dissatisfied with their current lives. They seek no sympathy from the non-disabled populace. However, they are eager to emphasize that the path toward understanding and acceptance begins with the acquisition of ISL. They firmly assert that non-verbal languages like ISL are equivalent to all verbal languages.

5. Finding "Only Connect!": A Public Humanities project in action

In September 2022, I completed my survey of public schools and integrated all the information I gathered into the online resource "Only Connect!" My primary goal was to create a website that would offer verified information on all public schools for children aged 6–18

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Students from Indore Deaf Bilingual Academy craft a 'tree of life'.

serving the Deaf and the Blind, as well as those who suffer from speech difficulties. In an effort to counter misinformation about the facilities these schools may offer, I also included a detailed photographic catalog featuring school logos, buildings, classrooms, and infrastructure. However, my other aim was to situate these schools within a broader understanding of the humanities. Three points are important to note here.

The first point is that "Only Connect!" serves as a visual online interface between the schools and the parents. The second point is that there were no online sources available in Madhya Pradesh, and "Only Connect!" attempts to bridge this gap. This has not only made the information available but has also given the parents the agency and the voice to reach out and decide for themselves which schools they want their children to attend. The third point is that the photographs on the website allow for a direct entry into the premises and the worlds of the school administrators and teachers. Since the schools are sometimes located in hard-to-reach and geographically remote areas in the city, the photographs of the inner worlds of the schools themselves are very scarce.

What is the task of the humanities in the world of the non-disabled/temporarily able-bodied? When we look at problems related to disabilities only from the viewpoint of those without disabilities, assuming that disabled individuals should fit the mold of the able-bodied, are we not ignoring the need for a more inclusive and supportive social system for all? The name of the project—Only Connect!—was thus carefully chosen from Edward Morgan

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Forster's *Howards End.*[14] To me, it represents our commitment to fostering understanding and empathy while breaking down barriers between different social groups. This idea is especially important in Public Humanities, which aims to connect academic scholarship with the wider community. In Public Humanities, the principle of "Only Connect!" can guide us in reaching out to diverse audiences and building collaborative relationships beyond academia. This approach is essential for making scholarship accessible, relevant, and impactful in addressing urgent societal issues. Ultimately, this project encourages engagement and understanding, promotes digital access and social equity for people with disabilities, enriches both our academic and community life, and therein lies its significance.

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[14] Forster 2000.

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