

Manushri Desai

Disabling Divyang: A Critique on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities

The semantics of a single word—how it ebbs and flows and still retains its scaffolding—unearths how vulnerable and impressionable we are in the face of a single story.

“Viklang”—deformed body.

“Divyang”—sacred body.

The greatest enemy of progressive, socio-cultural mindsets—stigma—hammers down a preconception that is oftentimes difficult to override. “Viklang”—broken, limbless, inept—bears a classist connotation interwoven in decades of stigma against persons with disabilities. The word tells someone’s story for them. And that—telling another’s story—is perhaps the most inhumane recognition that we, as able-bodied individuals, can give to a vulnerable population.

India has nearly 40 to 80 million persons with disabilities, one of the highest reported disability rates in OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries. “Viklang,” and the semantics behind how we refer to this population, is reason as to why children with disabilities are less likely to be in school, disabled adults are more likely to be unemployed, and families with disabled members are often worse off than average. Displacing nearly 40 to 80 million people, the veracity of the label “viklang” feeds these individuals a false narrative. This is the danger of a single story. It contributes to our perception of society as a dichotomy—able-bodied and disabled—and the problem with this type of classification, or any classification by that matter, is that it fosters stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

When presented with the opportunity to visit the Blind People’s Association (BPA)—partner of Los Angeles based non-profit organization, Voice of SAP—in Ahmedabad, I gravitated towards the privilege. A professional organization which believes in providing equal opportunities to all categories of people with disabilities, the BPA thrived off of an unfathomable energy of humility and togetherness. I’ll admit, as someone who was ignorant to the rising movement of disabled individuals in India, I too saw the dichotomy. I was impressionable by the mass media, influences of culture, and traditionalist views which all told me the same: do not interact with those who you cannot identify with. I saw, overwhelmingly, similar to our political and economic worlds, stories too were defined by principles of how they were told, who told them, and when they were told; they were defined by power and those who had the power to speak. And this power, whether it be in the mass media or interwoven in our traditionalist culture, became the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. So when I arrived at the BPA, the story I knew of the “viklang” entirely shifted. I remember walking through pitch black darkness in a blindness simulation called “Vision in the Dark” at the BPA. I was led by the hand and voice of a blind man into a liminal space, entirely unknown to my eyes. In the simplest of terms, a loss of vision puts the world in perspective. In the blindness simulation, I was disabled, and the blind individual who guided me through the darkness was not. That selflessness and humility was just part of their complex narrative. To me the “viklang” are not the disabled, but are rather those who don’t understand that “the deformity” lies in our inability to see how

empowering the narratives of these individuals are. It is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging in all of the stories of that place or person.

The consequence of a single story is that it makes our recognition of equal humanity flawed. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar. Implicit bias—the way we subconsciously interpret and label those around us—has vastly contributed to the growing stigma that causes “viklang” to roll off our tongues easier than “divyang.” Before I visited the BPA, I too was subject to knowing only a single story. But, when I engaged in an experience larger than myself and challenged my own implicit biases, I increased my tolerance for ideas and concepts that I did not understand.

In January of 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested, with best intentions, a shift—in how we reference the disabled population—from “viklang,” deformed body, to “divyang,” scared body. This shift, although advocating for a change in the reference of people with disabilities, was frowned upon as it still served as a label for these individuals. With due respect, Modi gave voice to an old fallacy, speaking to how the disabled were touched with divinity. And while the disability rights movement has vastly altered how a disability is perceived, the bottomline is that people who are disabled should choose the words that they want to represent themselves. Again, assigning someone a narrative is perhaps the most inhumane recognition we can give to a person. Rather if we take the power, rooted in traditionalist views, and give it to the population of disabled individuals who haven’t always had a platform to speak, we can perhaps erase the vulnerability of the word “divyang” and expand the inclusiveness of the complex narratives these individuals have to offer.

At the BPA, I remember sitting in a small classroom with six long tables. Four blind children, my age, sat in front of me. They sat around, reading books by themselves, and knowing that I was intrigued by how they dissected brail, they read on, this time outloud, and a kind of paradise was regained. Stories ebb and flow, surfing through waves of people, searching for similarities rather than differences. They enrich our simple understandings and negate our implicit biases. They prompt us to re-evaluate the inclusiveness of society so that when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place or person, we again regain a kind of paradise.