

<http://somatosphere.net/2019/03/cross-disability.html>

"Cross-Disability"

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We are interested in the ways that the concept of “cross-disability” has become an unquestioned value and goal in development and advocacy work: organizations, programs, and advocacy efforts are supposed to be “cross-disability” in nature. Disability activists and organizations in India often proclaim that they are “cross-disability.” As such, commonly-used concepts such as “accessibility” and “disability rights” do not necessarily address the specificity of individual disability categories (and their distinct needs). Indeed, invoking specific impairment needs is often viewed as being “selfish” (the three of us have heard disability movement participants use this terminology) while being “cross-disability” is seen as being inclusive. Disability movement participants thus move back and forth between specificity of their own disabilities and generality in the sense of being invested in a “cross-disability” movement. “Cross-disability” serves as a unifying meta-narrative for the mainstream disability movement, and invoking “cross-disability” organizing, needs, and desires is a way of exerting a moral presence and making a claim, especially to international funders (such as members of the International Disability Alliance) that valorize such work.

If one is to consider disability legislation on both national and international levels, most is “cross-disability” in nature, and international disability advocacy is governed by “cross-disability” platforms such as the International Disability Alliance (IDA) and Disabled People’s International (DPI). While IDA, for example, is a coalition of single issue/impairment/identity groups, its members are largely focused on “cross-disability” organizing and goals, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which purports to include all disability categories. (And it is interesting to consider tensions around the creation of the UNCRPD with deaf advocates insisting on inclusion of deaf language rights and the need for residential schools for deaf people—with other disability category members arguing that this is segregationist and exclusionary). This is not to say that there might not be productive ways of and reasons for invoking “cross-disability” status in foregrounding similarity across difference in order to bring about meaningful change. Different disability groups can also band together to support each other, as we saw in 2012 in New Delhi, when deaf people were called to a national book fair to protest the lack of accessible books

for blind people.

However, a focus on “cross-disability” strikes us as problematic because disabled people have diverse needs and desires, and it is also possible and probable that they do not know about the needs and desires of other groups. (*And why should they?*). Indeed, signing deaf Indians told Michele repeatedly that what is most important to them is recognition of Indian Sign Language and the existence of Indian Sign Language interpreters. Yet, Michele has heard blind and physically disabled people talk about the benefits of cochlear implants, a surgically implanted electronic device, and express the opinion that interpreters should not be needed; disability activists themselves do not understand the needs, desires, and preferences of other groups. Furthermore, during fieldwork conducted at a “cross-disability” conference, Michele observed the conference’s organizer lament the absence of individuals with psychosocial disabilities. She also noted that a blind man mentioned that deaf and blind people are often the most neglected groups in discussions of access. Nandini noted that parents of children with intellectual disabilities were very concerned about their children not having protection through guardianship, while advocates without intellectual disabilities were dismissive of these concerns in their demands for full legal capacity.

Furthermore, there is a disconnect happening in India: “cross-disability” is at odds with a legislative and judicial structure based upon “compensatory discrimination” (Galanter 1984) that includes specific quotas for specific diagnostic labels. India’s two disability Acts in 1995 and 2016 have been tightly tethered to specific disability categories, such as blind and low vision, deaf and hearing impaired, and orthopedic disability, for example. And one has to be a member of a specific disability category in order to benefit from quotas in education and employment. These quotas are also contested within categories: for example, blind people were concerned about having to share their category with people with low vision, while deaf people were concerned about having to split the category with people who are not completely deaf. What kinds of compromises by disability activists are required to create “cross-disability” harmony and inclusion?

While disability studies has productively inserted the category of disability into scholarly conversations[1], we argue that it is important to consider the work that the category does and the kinds of differences that it obscures, as well as the disconnects between academic and activist use of discourses (as discourses do circulate from academia into both activist and everyday spaces). Disability is unique in that its associated legislative-judicial structure and accompanying social and political movements include diverse conditions and embodiments such as cerebral palsy, schizophrenia, and deafness. People are required to engage in different kinds of social, communicative, representational, and political

work to come together under this category.

Our concern is that the logic of “cross-disability” deliberately obscures differences. People with different disabilities are required to mitigate their differences and focus on the commonness of their discrimination, which is difficult to identify, as it varies from disability category to category. Deaf people might need Indian Sign Language interpreters while orthopedically disabled people might need ramps, for example. More than this, “cross-disability” benefits the state in that concrete material claims are unable to be made on “cross-disability platforms.” “Cross-disability” also benefits NGOs that have largely moved away from impairment-specific work to being one-size-fits-all disability NGOs, whereby they are able to increase the numbers of people served and demonstrate their impact to funders. In addition, we call for more attention paid to the work that diverse disabled people engage in, in order to assemble themselves into a “cross-disability” platform. More research is needed on the kinds of social and political work in which disabled people across impairment categories engage in order to make themselves legible to each other and to actualize some kind of universalizing “disability identity.” In addition, while we have attended here to the deployment of “cross-disability” discourse, additional research is needed on how disabled leaders and activists themselves understand and feel about this discourse. It seems to us that this is crucial in a “global South” context where funding can come from international organizations and where differentiation between disability categories is less established—either due to more limited diagnosis and categorization regimes in the biomedical realm and/or fewer resources are devoted to the specificities of disability access in its myriad forms.

Work Cited

Galanter, Marc. 1984. *Competing Inequalities: Law and the Backwards Classes in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Note

1. For information on disability studies in India, see [this Reader on Disability Studies in India compiled by Nilika Mehrotra](#).

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["Disability from the South: Toward a Lexicon"](#) is a series edited by Michele Friedner and Tyler Zoanni. Contributors in this series consider what changes in theorizations of disability when research is located in places marked "Southern" and offer reconfigurations of keywords and concepts typically utilized in the study of disability.?

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