

## **At the Margins of Society: Disability Rights and Inclusion in 1980s Singapore**

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A new era focused on the inclusion of disabled people in society has emerged in recent years around the world. The emergence of this particular discourse of inclusion can be traced to the 1980s, when disabled people worldwide gathered in Singapore to form Disabled Peoples' International (DPI) and adopted a language of the social model of disability to challenge their exclusion in society. This paper examines the responses of disabled people in Singapore in the decade in and around the formation of DPI. As the social model and disability rights took hold in Singapore, disabled people in Singapore began to advocate for their equal participation in society. In mapping some of the contestations in the 1980s, I expose the logics prevailing in society and how disabled people in Singapore argued for their inclusion in society as well as its implications for our understanding of inclusion in Singapore today.

**Keywords:** Disability studies; Singapore; inclusion; normalcy

### **Introduction**

In 1981, disabled people from all around the world came to Singapore to form Disabled Peoples' International (DPI), heralding a new era of disability activism and their call for emancipation from oppression in society. The clarion call – a voice of our own – was to have repercussions around the world. As James Charlton (1998) notes, disabled activists internationally attributed their political awakening to the first world congress and the ideas that circulated from there. In spite of this, questions around how ideas espoused by DPI have been articulated and understood in various localities around the world are little studied.

In this article, I examine the new norms heralded by the formation of DPI in Singapore in 1981, one based upon the language of disability rights and the social model of disability. I examine the responses of disabled people in Singapore through an analysis of various incidents and through a reading of various historical archives – newspaper articles, writings by disabled people and articles in *Handicaps' Monthly*, a monthly journal published by a club of disabled people in Singapore at the time. In focusing on this initial moment when the global meets the local, I consider the ways in which disabled people in Singapore articulated ideas around

disability rights and the social model, with an eye towards exposing the logics of how they saw their inclusion in Singapore in the 1980s. I argue that even as disabled people embraced disability rights and the social model, they also embraced the logics of the market in framing their bodies as economically productive and contributing members of the nation-state. The problem with such an approach is that bodies that are not able to approximate such norms will always be cast aside in society.

### **Approaching the study of disability in Singapore**

The inclusion of disabled people in Singapore has gained speed and publicity since the mid 2000s as the state sought to build a more inclusive society (Zhuang, 2010, 2016). As part of this move, Singapore has signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), increased spending on disability services, and built accessible infrastructure. A state-led roadmap was implemented to chart the steps that Singapore could take to develop a more inclusive society, and is now into the third of a five-year plan (2017 to 2022). Complementing these policies are also other state-led initiatives that sought to advance inclusion, such as carnivals like the *Purple Parade*, inclusive community spaces such as the *Enabling Village*, politicians reaffirming the need to build a more inclusive society for all, and public education campaigns such as *See The True Me*. These very visible displays of inclusion have captured the attention of both the mass media and the public. In recent years, to be inclusive has become a way of life in Singapore.

The move towards inclusion in Singapore can easily be linked to transnational initiatives on disability inclusion (Cogburn, 2017; Wong et al., 2017). This can be traced to the activism of disabled people internationally which has seen the propelling of disability as a key part of the international agenda, mostly focused on a language of disability rights and the eradication of barriers (Sabatello, 2013) and the conceptualisation of the social model of disability by activists in the United Kingdom (Oliver, 1983, 1990, 1996). The language of disability rights and the social model has been manifested in various transnational initiatives, key of which is the UNCRPD and the launch of the third Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities in 2013, and the Incheon Strategy to ‘Make the Right Real’ (UNESCAP, 2012). These have been influential tools towards the emancipation of disabled people worldwide.

The social model of disability and the rights approach towards disability have been critiqued for their underpinnings in Western epistemologies. Grech (2009) notes that the social model is concerned with achieving civil rights and anti-discrimination legislation and has been significant in making the exclusion of disabled people a global concern. While useful as an explanatory tool, however, he goes on to note that it is ultimately based upon the experiences of ‘western, white, urban, educated disabled academics in industrialised settings’ (Grech, 2009: 775). The rights landscape is thus problematic when applied to the Global South— it is a western invention, premised upon western values, norms and contexts.

As a postcolonial nation-state formed in 1965 after its failed merger with Malaysia, Singapore is an opportune space to consider not only how disability discourse is understood in the nation-state, but also what Grech and Soldatic (2015) would describe as the neglect of disability in the postcolonial space, specifically the spread of disability discourse from Global North to Global South. The scholar of the Global South is thus faced with two key imperatives; one, to move away from grand narratives of disability based upon Western epistemologies; and two, to allow disabled bodies in the South to speak, so as to enable the understanding of the local and what Soldatic and Grech (2014) would term the ‘experiential embodiment of global violence’ in the local. Thus, while focused on excavating the voice of the subaltern in the global shift towards a disability rights discourse embodied in the UNCRPD, I am also careful not to replicate and simply use western epistemologies as the only mode of analysis.

More important, in the context of Singapore that claims to be inclusive today, I question what it means to be included. As Grech (2009) notes, the meanings of inclusion are never discussed. Inclusion in Singapore has been manifested in ways very different from what other localities would consider as being ‘inclusive’. Despite the increased attention on including disabled people, the Singapore state has not considered enacting any disability rights legislation. Neither is there a comprehensive welfare-state system with the provision of disability services and support. Instead, policies today in Singapore tend towards a system where the family and the individual take greater responsibility of caring for disabled people, rather than the state (Zhuang, 2016). Following McRuer (2010), a key focus is to understand the ways in which some disabled people are included for life within the fabric of inclusion in the nation-state of Singapore by turning to the past.

In this paper, I turn to a particular moment in Singapore which connects disability activism in Singapore to the global shifts of disability and the beginnings of the spread of ‘Western epistemologies of disability’ (Grech, 2011). In 1981, disabled activists from all around the world, such as Vic Finkelstein, Ed Roberts and Bengt Lindqvist, came to Singapore to set up the first international organisation of disabled people. The first world congress of DPI held in Singapore saw the election of an Indian-Singaporean, Ron Chandran-Dudley, as its first chairperson. The period after the founding of DPI in Singapore marked the beginnings of a nascent disability politics in Singapore, one which saw disabled people in Singapore advocate for their equal participation in society.

In re-examining this immediate period in and after the formation of DPI in 1981, I hope to use the case of Singapore to illuminate how ideas such as the social model of disability and disability rights have been taken up and reframed in different localities. The founding of DPI and its international role and impact in spreading the social model of disability and disability rights have been well documented (Driedger, 1989; Enns and Fricke, 2003). Despite this, little attention has been paid to how disability rights and the social model of disability were

understood in Singapore. Focusing on the actions and ideas of the subaltern - disabled people in Singapore - allows us to move away from the epistemological dominance of western theories. While disability rights and the social model penetrated the rhetoric of disabled people in Singapore post-1981, how did disabled people themselves understand such ideas? To do so, I read articles in a monthly newsletter, *Handicaps' Monthly*, published by Handicaps' Welfare Association as well as letters to the media written by disabled people and media reports about disability. The aim is to uncover disabled voices and the logics by which they understood their inclusion in Singapore. The key reasons to turn to these sources and to read history from below are that Singapore has no freedom of information act and official policy deliberations are nearly impossible to access.

As a historical source, *Handicaps' Monthly* provides an opportunity to excavate the voice of the subaltern (Guha, 1997). The publishing organisation, Handicaps Welfare Association, was a club of disabled people promoting self-help and mutual support. It was formed in 1969, with membership limited to those who had physical disabilities. Together with the Singapore Association for the Blind, which changed its constitution to be disabled-led in 1981 and Disabled People's Association Singapore which was formed in 1986, they were the only disabled-led organisations in the 1980s. In August 1975, Handicaps' Welfare Association started a monthly magazine, *Handicaps' Monthly*, with the purpose of outreach to their members and to act as a conduit of views and information with the public at large (*Handicaps' Monthly*, 1975). *Handicaps' Monthly* published a range of articles, ranging from articles on disability activism both in Singapore and overseas to more mundane news about the disabled community in Singapore such as marriage and stories about life. At the onset and influx of global ideas of disability rights and the social model in 1981, *Handicaps' Monthly* was thus a key resource to understand the interaction between the local and the global.

### **Adopting Rights and the Social Model?**

The year 1981 marked a shift in understandings about disability in Singapore. Before 1981, the provision of welfare and aid to disabled people prevailed, and its roots could be traced to the provision of welfare services by the British colonial government after the Second World War (Zhuang, 2010). Disability was also medicalised; Loh's (2009) study showed how the colonial and postcolonial state sought to control leprosy and to create a pure social order through systemic segregation and the use of medical discourse. These views did not recognise disabled people as full and equal citizens. The founding of DPI in Singapore and its election of a Singaporean as the first chairperson saw a marked increase in the activism of disabled people in Singapore. Disabled people sought to address issues in society – transportation, accessibility, education, employment among others – through a variety of actions, such as writing to the press and self-organising (Zhuang, 2010).

At the same time, the 1980s also saw the first cracks in the electoral dominance of the ruling *People's Action Party*. In his study of the Singapore state, Chua (2017) notes how Singapore's economic success has returned the ruling party to power consistently in all elections despite its authoritarian outlook. In fact, politicians from the ruling party had won every seat that was contested since 1968 until it suffered a by-election loss at Anson in 1981 and a 12.9 per cent dip in the popular vote in the 1984 general elections. The erosion of the electoral dominance of the *People's Action Party*, while not challenging its dominance of Singapore politics, saw a gradual shift towards a more consultative style of governance that sought to be more responsive to societal demands (Loh, 1998; Koh, 2009).

The 1980s thus saw various attempts by the state to meet the needs of disabled people (Zhuang, 2010). These attempts culminated in the convening of the *Advisory Council for the Disabled* in 1988 by then first Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Goh Chok Tong. The council sought to look into the needs of disabled people in Singapore and to work out a set of programmes towards the 'integration of the disabled in society' (Advisory Council on the Disabled, 1988). The *Advisory Council on the Disabled* was one of many other councils, such as Youth, Sports and Recreation, Aged, Culture and the Arts, Family and Community Life. The formation of these councils marked the intentions of the People's Action Party towards a more consultative style of governance.

At the end of the 1980s, the *Advisory Council on the Disabled* marked a key moment in statist discourse about disability. The Council acknowledged the influences of the social model of disability with recommendations that focused on eradicating barriers in the built environment and also acknowledged that 'disabled people should have the same right as normal people to take their place in society' (Advisory Council on the Disabled, 1988). From such an angle, it would appear that the Singapore state has accepted and taken on western ideas of disability wholesale. To clarify this, I turn towards the examination of disabled people's activism in the 1980s, focusing on a key issue that they involved themselves in the 1980s – the accessibility of the new metro system.

### **Moving the Nation – but what Nation?**

The clearest articulation of this contestation over how the inclusion of disabled people should proceed occurred over the building of the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system. Today, the MRT system is a ubiquitous mode of transportation in Singapore with over 130 stations spanning five MRT lines and a daily ridership of over three million (Land Transport Authority, 2019). The entire MRT system is also accessible, with all stations retrofitted after 1999 to ensure access for disabled people and with more than 70 per cent of these stations having two or more barrier-free routes (Building & Construction Authority, 2018). Despite this, the 1980s saw extensive debate in society around the question of accessibility and whom the MRT would cater for.

The publishing of governmental plans and the decision to build the MRT occurred after years of extensive planning with the decision announced to the media on 30 May 1982 (Straits Times, 1982). Coincidentally, the May 1982 issue of *Handicaps' Monthly* carried an editorial that highlighted the importance of accessibility. Taking on the language of the social model of disability, it highlighted changes that Hong Kong had made to its public buses and noted that for Singapore and its bus system, 'the answer to accessible transportation for the disabled is the adaptation of the public transport system...' (Handicaps' Monthly, 1982a).

The subsequent announcement of the MRT decision immediately saw two letters by readers published in the June 1982 issue of *Handicaps' Monthly* which highlighted concerns of disabled people. In the first, S.L asked, 'are we handicapped going to have equal rights to use the MRT?' (Handicaps' Monthly, 1982b) . In the other Chee Yuan Cheow hoped that '[the MRT] could provide a place for all the handicapped in Singapore' and that it would be accessible (Handicaps' Monthly, 1982b). The concerns of S.L and Chee reflected the wider community of disabled people which was already disadvantaged by the public transport system where buses were inaccessible and taxis were expensive, and reflected a hope that the state would take into account their needs.

These concerns were noted by the state. Perhaps in response to the formation of DPI and these letters, the *Committee on a Barrier-Free Environment for the Disabled and the Aged in our Land Communications System* was set up to look into these issues. A newspaper article published on 23 February 1983 noted the existence of this committee. It reported that the committee had suggested other alternative modes of transports like modified cars and a special bus service while at the same time, questioning if it would be cost-effective and operationally possible for the MRT to 'accommodate the disabled' (Straits Times, 1983c). More important, the article also quoted another government source that questioned if the phenomenal cost for accessibility could be justified given that it would only cater to the minority of people.

The hope of disabled people for an accessible MRT was eventually dashed in November 1983 when an article titled "Not for Disabled", laid out the stance of the MRT Corporation. While giving updates on different aspects of the MRT, the executive director, Lim Leong Geok, also explained why it would not be possible for the MRT to cater to the needs of disabled people. He stated that 'trains will stop at the stations for only a short time – 30 seconds at the longest... so one has to be reasonably agile to get in and out of the trains...' and hence, the MRT could not 'cater for the *handicapped* [sic], much as it would like to' (Straits Times, 1983b).

The logics of exclusion were further elaborated in a subsequent letter to the media published on 26 November, in response to a letter by a Dr Thomas Tan who opined that 30 seconds was adequate for disabled people to board the trains and that the main problem was not disabled people, but discriminatory attitudes. Stating that 'the needs of wheelchair-bound [sic] persons are more difficult to deal with', the MRT Corporation spokesperson, Tammy Loke gave the following reasons (Straits Times, 1983d):

Those who are capable of moving around on their own should be allowed to use the MRT system... within the station, it is more effective to deal with the vertical movement of large numbers of people with escalators rather than with lifts... escalators are, however, unsuitable for use by wheelchair-bound persons. The confined spaces of stations also do not facilitate the provision of long ramps... the MRT system can only operate effectively if train stop times are rigidly regulated because the train could be running at intervals of only two minutes. Once this rigidity is abandoned for other considerations, the effectiveness of the entire system will be jeopardised... apart from the above reasons, it would also not be in the interests and safety of wheelchair-bound persons to be caught up in the hustle and bustle that is found in MRT stations...

The uncompromising stance of the MRT Corporation towards wheelchair users generated huge debate. An editorial of *Handicaps' Monthly* in November 1983 was prescient (Handicaps' Monthly, 1983), doubting that disabled people's needs would be considered, but hoping that concern for disabled people would triumph over arguments of cost and complexity of design. Subsequent letters to the press were also supportive. One of the letters was by Ron Chandran-Dudley, writing in his capacity as the world chairman of DPI. Highlighting the need for equality and echoing the social model, he wrote (Straits Times, 1984a):

... [1981] had as its main thrust the principle of equality, full participation and solidarity for all disabled people in the community. If we were sincere in supporting this at this time, then we are now morally bound to break down all barriers that will prevent disabled people from participating equally in the community...

Despite these letters, the MRT Corporation stuck to its stance in a separate letter to the press on 20 December 1983. While acknowledging that the needs of some disabled people such as the Deaf and the Blind could be met in the MRT, its spokesperson noted how the needs of wheelchair users would be hard to meet. Again, explaining its logics of exclusion, she gave the same reasons highlighting the need for safety, stating (Straits Times, 1983a):

The corporation is mindful of the fact that no matter how sympathetic it is to the travelling needs of the handicapped, the extent of such facilities must not undermine its ability to provide the highest level of safety and reliability to its users...

While responses have thus far been limited to the MRT Corporation, it was inevitable that the state had to be involved, given its role in the development of the MRT system. Chee Yuan Cheow, who was a member of Handicaps' Welfare Association, presented a letter to the Minister for Social Affairs at a public exhibition on 25 February 1984 (Straits Times, 1984b), appealing for the needs of disabled people to be considered in the MRT system. The Minister's response published in the media on 20 March 1984 stated (Straits Times, 1984c):

The authorities have their interests at heart... to discourage them from using the MRT... in the event of a calamity, handicapped people would be trapped as they could

not easily escape.... other means of convenient transportation were being studied to help disabled persons to commute...

The issue of accessibility to the MRT system was also compounded by the inaccessibility of other aspects of the transportation system like public buses and taxis which also elucidated the logics of exclusion espoused by the state. An impending announcement in 1985 by the Ministry of Communications that taxi fares were to be raised by a minimum of 25 per cent, saw a backlash by the public and led to a compromise of a reduced hike (Straits Times, 1985d). However, disabled people also wrote to *Handicaps' Monthly* to highlight their concerns. In separate letters written in the March/April 1985 issue of *Handicaps' Monthly* (1985), Chee Yuan Cheow, Joseph Chia and Ronnie questioned the systemic exclusion of disabled people in society. They highlighted the inaccessibility of the future MRT system and how the increase in taxi fares would also affect their livelihood. A letter to the press on 20 March 1985 by a person named *The Handicapped* also stated, 'as the buses and probably the Mass Rapid Transit system will not cater to us, where are we to get the extra money for the new taxi fares...' (Straits Times, 1985c).

The concern over the increase in taxi fares and the inaccessibility of the MRT again drew a response from the state. A spokesperson for the Ministry for Communication and Information, Han Fook Kwang wrote in the Straits Times (1985b) that:

...in designing public transportation, it is not possible to have a system that will meet the requirements of the public and at the same time meet the specific requirements of certain segments of the population [meaning the disabled]... for the handicapped and other less-privileged groups, we should like to call on the various organisations to come forward with special schemes to solve their transport needs...

Thus, despite various agitations, it was clear that the state had decided not to accommodate the needs of wheelchair users in the public transportation networks in the 1980s. The eventual opening of the inaccessible MRT system in 1987 cemented this fact. Mirroring the language of the social model of disability and highlighting that the issues were 'a result of obstacles set in place by men and society', an editorial in *Handicaps' Monthly* (1987) lamented that disabled people were being left behind as the nation progressed:

The MRT moves ahead with the rest of the population, the disabled will soon be forgotten, what about the future, will our needs be considered and catered for? As society moves towards greater achievements and civilisation, could we also have the assurance that this will be so?

The debate over accessibility in the MRT system was thus connected to larger concerns over accessibility in public transportation and showed clearly the activism of disabled people within the international move that advocated a more equal society through the eradication of barriers.

This activism adopted the social model to advocate for social change. Following the social model, disabled people rejected the explanation that the cause of disability is located in disabled bodies. Instead, by turning attention to the government's refusal to include disabled people by building lifts or ramps, it exposed social structures that excluded people, locating disability in the environment and not disabled bodies. In doing so, disabled people replicated the language of the international disability rights movement. Yet the stone wall that their activism faced, revealed the logics that prevailed in society – a paternalistic attitude that disabled people were only worthy of charity and welfare reflected in statements about the need to ensure the safety of disabled people.

But more important, the debate also exposed the underpinning logics of the market in Singapore. While Chua (2017) has noted the social democratic roots of the Singapore state, he and others (see for example Low, 2001), have often used the metaphor of a business corporation to describe the Singapore nation. In this corporation, policies and decisions taken by the state were aimed at the maximising of potential and profit through the quest for constant economic growth (Trocki, 2006; Tremewan, 2016). These were motivated by what Chua (2017) would term a collective anxiety over survival – economic growth and development would ensure the viability of the small island-state. In the 1980s, these logics were manifested in policies that sought to further maximise the potential of the population such as in education and increase the productivity of the nation-state. (Gopinathan, 1998; Goh, 1979). The logics of exclusion inherent in the debate over accessibility must be viewed within such a lens. The refusal to build lifts for a population deemed a minority, centres on the issue of cost efficiency. Catering for disabled people in the MRT, it is stated, would cost too much as it would make the system 'less efficient' and hence impinge on the productivity of the nation and the public. Instead, other systems should step up to meet the needs of disabled people.

It is thus inevitable that in the debate around accessibility, disabled people would also fall back on these logics to justify the need to cater to their needs. While the eradication of barriers and disability rights featured, these were ultimately abstract notions. As the letters showed, disabled people also highlighted other arguments around the productivity and contribution of disabled people to the nation-state to justify the building of accessibility in the MRT system. As Ron Chandran-Dudley, the eminent spokesperson of disability rights, would put it (Straits Times, 1984):

Many of us [disabled people] are indeed tax payers and many more could be tax payers if we had access to cheaper, fast, safe, comfortable and easier travel for all to places of employment... to be economically viable, the MRT should aim for maximum clientele...

In other words, while rights were a key part of their language, they were interspersed with a language that focused on the potential contribution of disabled people to the profit-making outlook of the Singapore state. The conclusion to the debate over accessibility, points to this

argument. The convening of the *Advisory Council for the Disabled* eventually led to the passing of a barrier-free accessibility code in 1990 for new buildings, and this was justified as it would only add less than one per cent to the original construction cost (Straits Times, 1985a; Advisory Council on the Disabled, 1988). However, the existing MRT infrastructure was still inaccessible, and debate over making it accessible to disabled people continued over the course of the 1990s. It was only in 1999 that a decision was taken to retrofit the MRT system for access by the then Minister for National Development, Mah Bow Tan (Straits Times, 1999). Coincidentally, Mah was also the Minister in charge of a committee to look into the ageing population of Singapore. In the press report, Mah highlighted the need to make public transport ‘accessible to the growing numbers of old and frail commuters’. Eventually, it was a game of numbers – the number of frail elderly was a huge weight that eventually tilted the balance towards the provision of accessibility. Although disabled people were fundamental in beginning the quest for accessibility in the 1980s, it was only when the state realised that the benefits of making the public transport system accessible for the elderly would outweigh the economic cost of not catering to them that accessibility was realised.

### **Wither Ablenationalism?**

The MRT incident and contestations over accessibility point to what Snyder and Mitchell (2010) would term ‘ablenationalism’; the constant need to conform to the demands of the market and its normative expectations so as to achieve full citizenship. The inclusion of disabled bodies under neoliberalism is dependent upon disabled people’s abilities to approximate historically specific expectations of normalcy. Mitchell and Snyder (2015) go on to explain that normalcy is based upon what they term ‘able-bodied norms, rationality and heteronormativity’. Those that can be included in the nation are then exceptional disabled bodies. For them, the supercrip is the exceptional disabled citizen; the select few that have been able to avail themselves of the supports needed in a neoliberal world and markedly different from ordinary disabled citizens.

Ablenationalism allows an insight into the treatment of disabled bodies in the debate over accessibility to the MRT system in Singapore in the 1980s. According to ablenationalism, the exclusion of disabled people from the MRT system is a result of normative tendencies within the nation, one which upholds particular types of bodies as preferred because of their contribution to the market. Disabled people’s exclusion from the MRT system, then reflects how some bodies are considered unworthy because of their unproductiveness.

The problem with taking an ablenationalist approach is that as a theory, it is developed from the throes of the west and western epistemology. In this context, scholars of the Global South have used ablenationalism as a starting point but added to it so as to focus attention on the local and the ways in which the nation-state excludes particular bodies. Soldatic (2015) in her analysis of Australia as a nation-state shows that the ideological core of ablenationalism sits beside an

interlocking ideology of scientific racism governed by ideas of masculine reason. For her, the able-bodied nationalism thesis masks over and erases indigenous struggles to challenge the white-settler colonial able-bodied masculine rule, even as disabled and indigenous bodies are governed by similar ideologies that denied their claims for citizenship.

Here, I turn to consider the struggles of disabled people to imagine themselves in the nation-state. The nation, as Anderson's (1979) pioneering works show, is a social construct that exists in the imaginary of people in the community. If the nation is imagined, how can we understand the limits of the concept and how disabled people imagined their place in the nation? One way is to examine the material manifestation of the nation in cultural events. As Kong and Yeoh (1997) note, the annual National Day Parades in Singapore serve as a spectacle to construct a specific notion of the nation. Besides serving as means of social control, the parade also signifies various conceptualisations of the nation – multiracial, youthful, pragmatic and aspiring towards success. These significations in the parade elements serve to mould a singular identity of the nation (Chua, 1995).

As the most visible articulation and manifestation of the nation-state, the National Day Parades received widespread discussion within *Handicaps' Monthly*. The August 1979 issue, for instance, noted the significance of 9 August and at the same time highlighted the aspiration of disabled people that the 1980s would be 'momentous years... [and that] perhaps some of [disabled people's] hopes, like greater civic consciousness, improved opportunities for employment, more stress on disability prevention, and better rehabilitation facilities, will be realised...' (Handicaps' Monthly, 1979a).

The September 1979 issue of *Handicaps' Monthly* (1979b) went on to highlight an important milestone, noting that the parade featured a 'handicapped contingent' for the first time. The same editorial noted the symbolism of this event:

It was sight to behold and their debut at such an auspicious occasion has cast away any doubt that the disabled are considered lesser in status than the rest of society... The handicapped have taken their rightful place in the community and it is hoped, strongly, that they will always remain so.

The participation of disabled people in the National Day Parades thus symbolised the demand of disabled people to be recognised in the nation-state. However, it is a participation that also came with particular obligations as various articles in *Handicaps' Monthly* pointed out. These articles noted how disabled people have to fulfil their obligations as citizens. The September 1981 editorial is telling (Handicaps' Monthly, 1981):

The disabled must continue to show that they deserve or have a right to expect such consideration. Not for reasons of charity. But for sound social and economic reasons. Like everyone else we the disabled have contributed to our economic growth. We must

now show that like everyone else we are a part of the team. We work as hard, if not harder, than any other. We must also show that higher productivity is our concern. The pursuit of excellence our goal. Because we, too, are Singaporeans.

The annual celebration of the birth of the nation on 9 August thus presented an opportunity for disabled bodies to reaffirm their place and role in the nation. Across various editorials, *Handicaps' Monthly* called for disabled people to feel a sense of pride and belonging to Singapore, but this was also a recognition that to be included, disabled people also have to play by the rules of the market. Disabled people called upon the rhetoric of productivity and contribution to economic growth to justify how their inclusion. Just as these logics excluded particular disabled bodies from the use of the MRT system, at the same time, these were also used to justify the inclusion of disabled people to society.

The decision to have 21 individuals lead the nation in reciting the National Pledge at the Parade in 1986 was highly significant. For Kong and Yeoh (1997), this move reflected the participation of the public in the parade. By involving 'ordinary Singaporeans', the recitation of the pledge served as a dedication ceremony for those present to reaffirm their allegiance as a part of the nation. If the recitation of the pledge reflected the coming together of the nation, then the selection of a disabled person pointed towards the symbolic inclusion of disabled people within the body politic.

Johnny Ang, who was selected as the disabled representative to recite the pledge at the parade, was coincidentally the editor of *Handicaps' Monthly* at that time. In his editorial, he wrote about the sense of pride he had felt for the community. He also noted that he was chosen as an individual and a Singaporean, and not because of his disability (*Handicaps' Monthly*, 1986b). The editorial in the same issue went on to express hope that after this recognition, disabled people could go on to play a greater role in the job market and show how disabled people 'were as equal and as competitive as their *able-bodied* (sic) compatriots' (*Handicaps' Monthly*, 1986a).

As ritual, the involvement of disabled people in National Day Parades has come to symbolise their inclusion in the nation, and has been repeated almost ever year. Johnny Ang's participation and his editorial remarks also point to more than just an abstract notion of inclusion based on rights and the social model. This was an inclusion that was predicated upon the recognition of disabled people's ability to be as economically productive as non-disabled people. In other words, rather than simply highlighting disability rights and the removal of barriers, what Ang sought to do was to exemplify the possible economic contributions of disabled people.

This twinning of logics, one of transnational ideas around disability rights and the other of local concerns of economic livelihood and contribution, is thus a constant in the discussion of issues in Singapore. In an interview with then *Handicaps' Monthly* editor W.S. Wee in May 1984, Ron Chandran-Dudley first espoused on the logics of rights and the social model on the

question of accessibility, stating the need for legislation towards the attainment of a barrier-free environment. However, he also went on to ask that society recognise disabled people for their possible contributions to the nation (Handicaps' Monthly, 1984: 37):

What is needed is the opportunity for the disabled person to prove his worth... there are groups of mankind, however disadvantaged physically, who can become productive and useful citizens... [government and society needs] to realise that the disabled persons too have talents that could be used for the benefit of the community. Please do not make him feel that you and your attitude are his greatest handicap. Look upon his disability positively as something that can be overcome with modern technology and turned into an economic viability...'

Chandran-Dudley's statement thus reflected a particular embracing of the same logics that excluded disabled people and projected a particular representation of disabled bodies. In other words, disabled people embraced ablenationalism as the means to inclusion. What can we then make of it and what are the implications for inclusion?

### **Conclusions: Inclusion and Disability in Singapore**

The 1980s were indeed tumultuous times for disability politics in Singapore. The influx of global ideas around disability rights and the social model of disability witnessed an upsurge in disabled activism in Singapore. As a result of this, disabled people in Singapore began to argue for their inclusion in society and the removal of barriers for their equal participation. The debate around the MRT and accessibility was thus key to highlight the influx of such ideas. However, as the MRT debate had shown, demands for accessibility were rejected by state bodies and agencies. This, instead, revealed the logics prevalent in Singapore then, one based upon ideas of productivity and cost efficiency.

As an analytic, ablenationalism is useful to expose the working logics and norms in society. The challenging of norms in society has been key in disability studies scholarship, especially for those based in the United States (Davis, 2002, 2014; Sandahl, 2008; McRuer, 2006; Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). But at the same time, disabled people in Singapore also responded to these norms by embracing these logics and using them as a means to contest their exclusion. This embrace of the logics of the market reflected an active desire to shape not only societal logics but also their bodies. The disabled body as projected by disabled people is also productive and is able to contribute to society.

Inclusion in the 1980s took on a two-pronged strategy and perhaps also points towards the prevailing logics of inclusion today. While the rights of disabled people to take their proper place in society has been acknowledged by the state, the abstract nature of rights meant that it would have no place in a society concerned with economic survival. The absence of disability

rights legislation today, and the use of means-tested subsidies and co-payment of disability services which serve to minimise wastage, highlight how ideas of productivity and cost-efficiency still prevail today.

The examination of disabled people's writings in *Handicaps' Monthly* and their activism showed how disabled people conceived of issues in the 1980s and also how they could play a role in a society that has casted them as abject. While aspiring towards meaningful roles in society through the language of the social model and disability rights, disabled people claimed the logics of the market as a rationale for their inclusion too. To be included meant playing by the rules of the game. This meant highlighting disabled bodies as productive and contributing members of society. The problem with this approach is that it only served to reinforce the uneven biopolitical incorporation of disabled bodies in the nation-state. Those who could approximate such norms could claim inclusion; but what about those bodies, which McRuer (2006) would term the 'severely disabled'? If to be included was not to be unable; then those who are unable, will always be disabled. When inclusion happens this way, what we see is the redrawing of the boundary around what it means to be disabled. By reframing their bodies as economically productive, disabled people were able to claim their place in society. This is also the case in Singapore today, where the focus of inclusion follows the logics of contribution and productivity. But there is a flip side to this logic, especially for those bodies that cannot conform to the norms of the market. Thus, while Singapore claims to be inclusive today, it still holds onto a segregated special education system and institutionalisation for disabled people. In the logics of a state centred around productivity, segregation and institutionalisation will always be the most cost-effective options for people who cannot approximate norms in society.

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