

BOOK REVIEW

Mehrotra, N. (2020) *Disability Studies in India: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Edited Book. Published by Springer Nature Singapore. ISBN 978-981-15-2615-2

Reviewed by: Karen Soldatic, School of Social Sciences & Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University Sydney, Australia. Email: K.Soldatic@westernsydney.edu.au

Nilika Mehrotra's most recent book publication, *Disability Studies in India: Interdisciplinary Studies*, is a rich and engaged edited volume highlighting the important work being undertaken in disability studies across the Indian sub-continent. The book's interdisciplinary approach across the social sciences, humanities and education offers a rigorous contribution to the growing body of scholarly work emerging across the Global South. Importantly, this edited text draws together Indian disability scholars, researchers and educators from across the sub-continent. Each of the chapters distills the significance of their scholarly efforts to develop South Asian disability perspectives, and embed disability studies as a legitimate disciplinary endeavor within the South Asian academy. Nilika Mehrotra's opening introductory chapter articulates the critical significance of this combined approach. Mehrotra identifies these twin pillars as critical to the long-term development of a rigorous South Asian disability disciplinary approach that offers a reflexive engaged praxis in its orientation to fully 'understand disability in the Indian context' (7).

The book is broken into three sections: Epistemologies and Representations; Policy and Institutionalisation; and Academy – Activism Interface: Enabling Practices. The first section, *Epistemologies and Representations* draws together interdisciplinary perspectives on Indian epistemologies and representations of disability. The opening chapter of this section by Mehrotra's long term collaborator James Staples, clearly maps out the importance of South Asian epistemologies in situating socio-cultural understandings and practices of disability in India. Significantly, Staples draws out the necessity of negotiating Indian historiography and cosmology in scholarship engaging in the realm of disability, a critical point of departure from western socio-political understandings of disability. The four chapters that follow, including that by renowned Indian disability scholar, Anita Ghai, build upon Staples' proposition that it is the 'particularities that render disability different in different places' (33). For example, Chapter Four by Shubhangi Vaidya, further cements this perspective when they argue that impairment categories such as 'autism' within the Indian context represent the glocalisation of disability knowledges that move in contestation on a continuum of 'disorder, disability and difference' (43). In Chapter Five, Ghai argues that such juxtapositions are reinforced with 'epistemologies of ignorance' where traditional patriarchal norms result in disability's epistemological oppression and suppression within the Indian academy. Chapters by Shilpa Das (Chapter Three) and Shilpaa Anand (Chapter Six), consolidate and strengthen the need for South Asian epistemological standpoints.

The second section, *Policy and Institutionalisation*, is an engaged analysis of the policy and politics of embedding disability studies across the academy through the establishment of disability studies centres within different university settings, creating disability studies as a

disciplinary area of study, and finally in building disability into professional programs such as social work within the Indian university curricula and pedagogy. Encompassing five chapters, all from across the Indian sub-continent, each of the chapters in the section, discuss the institutional politics of navigation involved when bringing in disability disciplinary perspectives into the academy. Whether it is the establishment of a discrete disability studies centre, a specialization in disability within disciplines such as anthropology or sociology, or within professional degree programs such as social work, each of the authors identify the important work that is required to build institutional support. Importantly, each of the authors, Bhattacharya (Chapter 7), Sharma (Chapter 8), Dhanda (Chapter 9), Mehrotra and Gulyani (Chapter 10) and Juvva (Chapter 11) also illustrate the impact of institutional politics and disciplinary cultural norms on the realization of disability curricula and disciplinary specialization.

The final section, *Academy – Activism Interface: Enabling Practices*, consists of six chapters and interrogates the possibility of doing disability research and scholarship that can change the lifeworlds of disabled people across the Indian sub-continent. This is clearly an important question, as increasingly, disabled people across the globe (North and South) are calling into question the legitimacy of participating in research that may not necessarily change their lives directly in the short to medium term. Significantly, this is the largest section of the book, with each of the chapters offering a divergent response to the question about the relationship between the academy and civil society activism. The opening chapter in this section by Jagdish Chander traces the protest movements led by blind scholars and students around the right to education. Chander's chapter (Chapter 12) documents the historical trajectory of this academic movement and the reforms academic activists have created more broadly across the academy nationally for disability inclusive education and curricula. In Chapter 13, Deepa Sonpal and Vanmala Hiranandani argue for the critical importance of emancipatory disability research methodologies to bring the voices of disabled people from across India into policy deliberations and implementation. Sonpal and Hiranandani argue that Indian governments are compelled to be inclusive of disabled people's rights in the policy making process through rigorous evidence based research. N. Vasanthi in Chapter 14 reinstates the arguments put forth by Sonpa and Hiranandani through examining Indian employment policy in line with the right to work, as enshrined in Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Through examining a number of case law examples of disability discrimination in employment, Vasanthi demonstrates the particularity of Indian employment law in relation to the Indian rights of persons with disability law since the Indian Government's ratification of the UNCRPD highlighting numerous shortfalls. The remaining and final four chapters of the book, build upon these chapters by examining the importance of academic research and pedagogy to support the work of Indian disability activists to drive social transformation. For example, Mahima Nayar (Chapter 15) offers a compelling case of the importance of critical disability pedagogies in social work education, a unique aspect of social work professional degrees across the globe. Ritika Gulyani in Chapter 16, provides a critical analysis of the importance of Deaf education within the Indian context to ensure that Deaf Indians are able to fully realise their ability and right to communicate while outlining some of the core political tensions for inclusive education that are embedded within narrow articulations of disability rights. In Chapter 17, Murugkar, Kashyap and Mullick, complete the book through examining the importance of accessibility and inclusion of persons with vision impairments in core cultural sites to transform socio-political understandings of disability within the broader cultural world of the Indian sub-continent.

Nilika Mehrotra needs to be congratulated for bringing together such a rich and diverse landscape of disability scholarship from across the Indian academic context. The careful and thoughtful articulations of disability in its historical and contemporary context will be an essential reading for those engaging within questions of disability within India and South Asia, and for scholars, who seek to rigorously understand the significance of interdisciplinary Southern accounts for their own work.