

Emergent Disability voices on Social Media during COVID -19 times

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Persons with disabilities are invisible and almost silent in the Indian media. This paper examines the emergence of articulate expressions of persons with disabilities (pwd) in the social media over the months March to June 2020 during COVID Lockdown. While technology has been seen as a great leveller for persons with disabilities, the digital divide, however, remains very real for masses of disabled persons, whereby it is largely the educated middle class who have access to internet facilities and presence on social media. This paper draws from observation and analysis of posts on Facebook by different categories of persons with disabilities. There appear to be a number of discourses emerging and imageries running almost parallel. Accessibility and support appear to be very important issues especially in terms of access to domestic workers, regular medical checkups, and procuring daily provisions as well as access to online teaching. On the other hand, little concern is being paid to the huge humanitarian crisis of returnee workers from cities to villages. Interestingly, disabled persons appeared more connected, participating in discussions and Webinars and voicing out their experiences with greater clarity and also analysing the COVID situation through Disability Studies (DS) perspectives.

Keywords: India; Disability; Social media; COVID

Introduction

“For a person like me, social distancing is impossible due to the dependence on others to fulfill physiological requirements.” (Malhotra, 19 March 2020)

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and many other international organisations declared the recent COVID 19 pandemic as one of most difficult calamities for marginalised people of the world. The majority of persons with disabilities across the globe, especially in the global south, continue to live lives marked by deeply entrenched inequalities, poverty, underdevelopment and scarce access to symbolic and material resources. COVID 19 has exacerbated inequalities and compounded challenges for persons with disabilities.

The Government of India announced COVID 19 related lockdown on March 23rd for a month with a notice of just 4 hours. Though there was discussion through media on the possibility of Lockdown, the suddenness of the announcement took most people by surprise. Suddenly, the country came to a halt, with public and private transportation stopped. Some of the most important implications were felt in terms of being locked down at home, a total freeze on any physical movements except for buying medicines and essentials and large-scale job losses and confinement to the home. The protocols of “Social distancing, no social meetings with outsiders, fear of spread of the disease and the protocol of washing hands” were being circulated through television news, WhatsApp messages and social media. In a significant way, millions of people in India took to technology since print news was altogether stopped. Mobile phones and social media technology became instrumental in social communications globally and locally.

To understand the implications of lockdown and the pandemic, we need to use an intersectional lens which allows for an analysis of power, privilege and discrimination being experienced differentially by people belonging to varied social and economic backgrounds. Since technology took a centre stage during the pandemic in most societies, this paper tries to examine the patterns of emergence of new digital disability socialities and activism on the social media. This is to understand how disabled persons navigated and found stronger individual and collective voices in the virtual world. I argue in this paper that technology has enabled a crystallisation of pan Indian Identity of cross disability community of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in India through regular contacts, conversations and activism during the Pandemic. To understand the dynamics of disability activism, I believe class, gender and disability intersections provide us with clues to decipher nuances of finding and registering voice in the public domain.

Persons with disabilities, like others, have been connected through social media from earlier on, but their presence and activities became much more visible and far reaching during the continued lockdown period from end of March to this date of writing of this paper (August 2020). Technology facilitated the bondings over the virtual platforms and one saw the individual and collective resistant voices storming the social media. PwDs bonded with one another and found a new collective voice in the absence of physically close group meetings. The activism manifest on social media presents an interesting tapestry of realisation, acceptance and action within Disability Rights Movements (DRMs). It also needs to be noted that some of these activists were very vocal on social media regarding other local socio-political issues in pre COVID times as well. The activists tried to raise several issues which directly affected PwD individually and collectively and looked for solutions. Through virtual activism, support mechanisms emerged which raised awareness about new norms and protocols, resisted the state and shared information to help PwD to cope better. The access to social media of persons with disabilities has to be understood in terms of intersectional perspectives with regard to class and gender.

Persons with disabilities and the digital divide

On the question of disabled persons and digital media, there are several debates in the Indian Context, the dominant being that concerning digital divide. This is because the majority of people with disabilities, who account to at least a few millions in the country, have little access to the internet and thus to social media. Though there is a wide digital divide owing to widespread poverty, locational disadvantages and other structural inequalities, lack of education and unaffordability of smart mobile phones and wifi connectivity, PwDs' access to mobile technology is still facilitating their connections with public institutions and spaces.

According to rough estimates and in line with the new Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2016 (RPD), more than 3% of the Indian population is disabled with a large variety of physical, cognitive and psychosocial impairments. More than 70% of disabled persons live in rural areas and small towns. More than 67% of them are unemployed when it comes to the formal economy, but a large number of them who have mild to moderate impairments, work in the informal and agricultural sector.

Methodology

This paper is broadly based on my analysis of two social media discussion platforms. The first is Facebook which has several pages and profiles of many disability activists and scholars. There are also some pages of Disability rights groups such as the National Platform of Rights of People with Disabilities (NPRD) and the Javed Abidi Foundation which consistently post on their activities.

The second is a Google group titled 'Disability Studies in India' founded by Shilpaa Anand. It functions as a community of disability scholars and activists working in India. This is a platform to exchange information and facilitate discussions on various themes and issues. This group has grown and evolved in the last five years or so.

At a personal level, I have seen myself as an ally and friend of disabled activists and scholars for approximately two decades, researching about disability issues. Gradually with ageing-related chronic pain issues, I also see myself as more of an insider with invisible impairments. I have been part of many networks that I mention here, and am friends and colleagues with many from whose lives I have taken leaves from. I have been regularly interacting in these communities and drawing my insights as a quasi-participant observer. For ethical considerations, I have taken due permissions from the participants from whose pages I have drawn directly, though Facebook (FB) is a public platform. In addition, I have read and analysed blogs, posts, and news items that the activists have written over four months since the beginning of the Lockdown (March- July 2020). This mapping of activism is drawn from the

posts of individuals as well as group pages. I am fully aware of the limitations of this study as I was observing a minute slice of the reality of the lives of people with disabilities, and also, these are the most prominent faces of disability rights movements. Nevertheless, this gave me an opportunity to also observe the rise of active young disabled activists.

The activist friends on FB are highly educated professional upper middle-class people with disabilities. Some are care givers as well. Their ages range from 25 to 65. They are academics, social workers, and civil society professionals running their own organisations. Middle class is loosely defined here in terms of their access to higher educational opportunities, technology, middle income locations through white collar and private sector occupations and ability to speak and write English.

They are very articulate and vocal about expressing their opinions. Not all of them are very active on FB, but some had important opinions on many issues. Gender break up is also almost equal. Their disabilities range from psychosocial to physical impairments. Persons with orthopaedic, psychosocial and visual disability are more active. Very recently, a group of deaf women has also begun discussing issues. This paper tries to find the ways in which individuals negotiated with their self and identity on Facebook as well as raised issues and spoke for others during the Pandemic period.

Finding a voice

Reshma Valliappan (Val) who identifies herself as an artist, writer and mental health advocate wrote the following on her FB page:

“Not a month since the lockdown, but I see many "non-mad" people ridiculing, demeaning & putting others down. From political debates to religious questioning-against the government, authority onto those who are different to acknowledge one's right way of doing things or how wrong they are. The need to correct everyone and everything.

I see how difficult it is for SO MANY people to live in such conditions, in how they are losing their sanity, getting on another's nerves. I see the demand for solutions, many finding it so difficult & require support, need people in front of them, promises of surity, certainty, care, acknowledgement & the existence of each other. I can relate to this & feel I wish I could do something other than what I already am.

Then I also recollect those weeks, months & years spent in isolation alone. When my family was not allowed to participate, were uninvited because there was someone with schizophrenia. Businesses would get affected if they married in or merely associated with us. The expectation was placed on the "mad" person to accept the world, it's

authority, the stigma & find our way back to social norms in order to function in the same society that rejected us for having a very different/chaotic mind & behaviour.

I'm reminded of friends locked inside institutions never having the right to even a phone, leave aside an opinion. I am reminded of her telling me "Look, they count us like sheep because they fear we will escape and infect others with our *pagalpan*" (Italics added, madness)

I feel now people all over the world will know what millions of those like me have lived through. Where our acceptance & existence relied on you not even the government but we were outcasted literally."

Many others who I was in personal conversations with, also corroborated the above. One student with OD spoke about how she was left alone to wallow in pity, but now feels a kind of sadistic pleasure in seeing others almost incarcerated.

Val further wrote:

"This strange feeling of sadness yet equality was not something I thought would ever happen. This is not written out of spite, revenge, judgement or to convey a lesson. The melancholy that comes with it I also experience it along with others who have found our way back. But hey, at least instead of 1 in every 100 of people having schizophrenia now every single person has to experience the same conditions. Perhaps this is what unity and solidarity feels like without having to ask for it."

One can infer from the post above how a Disability Studies (DS) perspective allows us to see the idea of 'normal', which is frequently used in DS, suddenly find currency, and how conversations were geared around the 'new normal'. DS conceptions of ability, disability, stigma and exclusion, seemed to come alive in such discourses.

Abhishek Annicca writes brave accounts of his impaired body and compromised social life.

"But there is so much fear out there.

I have posted and deleted pieces because I have been so uncomfortable with people's response. They mean well, but I don't even know them. Just because I express my vulnerabilities, doesn't mean I am weak. It's generally the opposite. And writing about them is a form of therapy for me.

If all of us were not so afraid and shared our experiences and stories with each other, it could be so much better. Social media could be a source of peer counseling. But for the

time being, I think I would rather rely on books for therapeutic relief. And writing to get it all out.”

One student with psychosocial disability wrote on FB how at first she was not very affected, but then started maintaining a diary where she wrote about every day activities. Gradually she wrote about how her savings were dwindling and how she would have difficulties in managing essentials. Abhishek wrote on how his immediate support structures dwindled as nobody visited him. He too turned to writing to document his experiences. He had difficulties in fetching groceries and maintaining personal hygiene. Cooking was a stress buster.

Some posts spoke about the concerns with violations of democratic rights in the context of growing communalism, and the State-inflicted violence in Jammu and Kashmir, where physical impairments are caused by bullets, and where mental health is affected by curfews and lockdowns. Children’s education is affected and daily life is disrupted. The impact of recent communal riots in Delhi and the disability caused by these, were also mentioned. Overall, there was a general sense of unease and anxiety which was being shared on FB among disabled people and with others.

Issues: accessibility

This sudden announcement hit many disabled persons badly. For instance, people with hearing impairments did not get the correct information in time due to inaccessible TV and other news portals:

“Few of my friends told me everything is shut. I did not know what the problem was, but later on I learnt from ISH news - which is a news channel for the deaf community. I learnt from there that the virus is going around and to stay home. In the starting I was told to stay back at home, that is it. They just said, if you got out, you would die.”- A 35-year-old Deaf woman, Delhi” (Goyal, 2020)

Many PwDs complained about the insensitive way in which the lockdown was announced, leaving people feeling anxious about accessibility especially those people who lived on their own such as students and single persons’ households.

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare issued the first advisory on March 5, 2020. Comprehensive disability-inclusive guidelines were issued. The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPWD) recognised that PwDs were more vulnerable to the virus because of their physical, sensory and cognitive limitations (Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, 27 March 2020): “In late March, the Central Government introduced “Comprehensive Disability Inclusive Guidelines For Protection and Safety of Persons With Disabilities (Divyangjan) during COVID 19” (“Guidelines”). However, very

few people had this information. NGOs tried to raise awareness around these issues.” (Iyengar, May 2020)

A number of short articles and blogs appeared which spoke about how people with disabilities are going to be affected by lockdown. Specifically, many persons with disabilities having chronic illnesses have compromised immune systems, and are therefore more susceptible to infection. Their higher medical needs are both general as well as specific to their impairments. However, their access to health care facilities is limited especially in the rural areas and poorer habitats (Singh, 2018). Compared to persons without disabilities, persons with disabilities are more likely to have poor health: among 43 countries, 42 per cent of persons with disabilities versus 6 per cent of persons without disabilities perceive their health as poor. (United Nations, 2020)

Malhotra wrote:

“A common fear among many Persons with Disabilities is what happens if they are forced to go into a quarantine centre or worse still, get the virus. Most quarantine centres are inaccessible and have a dormitory-style common bathroom completely unusable for those with most disabilities. Also, how will Persons with Disabilities manage alone in quarantine centres or Covid wards without access to their attendant or caretaker? Fear of living with Covid is so high that a favourite topic in some spinal cord injury groups is “Do not resuscitate” — with some PwDs even arguing the merits of euthanasia” (Malhotra 25 May 2020)

To help PwDs, Chronic Pain India (CPI), a non-profit organisation took the initiative to provide Online Physiotherapy by connecting people with mobility and chronic pain issues to the physiotherapists directly from their homes. Samarthyam, another NGO in Delhi, helped some PwDs who needed urgent health care with transportation and help in the hospital.

Domestic and care work

Many PwDs especially elderly people in the cities, wrote about their suffering as their care takers were not allowed to get into their homes. In fact, access to care takers appeared to be one of the major issues for disabled persons. Many activists complained of not having access to domestic workers/help, as lack of access to support staff together with their physical condition, did not allow them to do cleaning and other household chores. Women from so-called marginal castes, i.e. Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), are employed in middle class households in India since their women employers are professionals not used to doing any manual work at home, and depend heavily on paid help. It appeared to be a middle-

class phenomenon where people were forced to do everything on their own. On FB, in several women-only groups, this was one of the most often discussed topics and advices and hacks were circulated around.

Anjalee Agarwal, Founder of the Delhi-based NGO Samarthyam and Anita Ghai another prominent academic and activist, both wheelchair users spoke on their FB pages about the plight of middle class PwDs as their care workers were not allowed permission to visit them. Samarthyam wrote to the Delhi Government and got special permission to allow caretakers into such households. In this discourse, no mention was made about women with disabilities from the lower classes and how they managed the housework and care work. An ableist discourse on prevention of the entry of household help was pronounced in the middle-class housing societies. It is interesting to note how care work is not only gendered, but also class specific. Mehrotra (2011) has mentioned the existence of multiple social worlds within which persons with disabilities exist and how their needs are articulated within the disability rights movements in India. In the following paragraphs I look at the responses of some activists to the plight of poor persons with disabilities.

Working class persons with disabilities

Many posts showed concerns about the national government's proclamation of 'Lockdown' which almost ensured that those marginalised poor working-class people who lived on their own were worst affected. Prolonged lockdown, loss of jobs, and fear and anxiety about catching the virus alongside inaccessibility to regular health care services, put PwDs into a seriously compromised situation. They became totally dependent on the State's provisioning of rations and charity of philanthropists. PwDs in almost all states are reported to be the worst affected as they needed support in accessing provisions. Absence of transportation and often lack of physical support entailed a situation of helplessness.

On 26th March, just after the lockdown was imposed, The National Platform for the Rights of the Disabled (NPRD) issued a strong statement about the announcements made by the Indian Government. A onetime ex gratia amount of Rs. 1000/ (US\$14) to be given to disabled persons through direct transfer in two installments spread over three months, was slammed as being too meager. NPRD also pointed out that this was also limited to those with more than 80% of disability and who came from BPL families, hence excluding everyone else.

The post mentions how:

“The vast mass of the disabled, who come from the most socially and economically deprived backgrounds and who are amongst the worst hit during such times are left to fend for themselves.

What else to expect from a government which has long abandoned its responsibilities towards the weaker and marginalised sections of society. They demanded ex gratia payment

of Rs. 5,000 per month to all disabled, till the lockdown is lifted and the country is rid of the Corona virus.”

According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), an estimated 122 million Indians lost their jobs in April alone, and three-quarters of them were small traders and wage labourers. While salary cuts, unemployment, tenant evictions, and heavy losses in businesses and start-ups have adversely affected the daily lives of many Indians, the migrant daily wage earners like taxi-drivers, rickshaw pullers, factory labourers, and domestic workers, are the main victims of the lockdown and the pandemic (Ghosh, 2020). The overwhelming majority of the disabled population, that is 65%, is unemployed. Even those who have some form of employment, as stated earlier, the majority are in the unorganized/informal sector, and who now have no source of livelihood. They do not possess ration cards either:

“It also needs to be borne in mind that disability entails extra expenditure and social protection measures when being formulated, unfortunately, do not take into consideration these restrictions, accentuating their further marginalisation” (NPRD, 12th May 2020).

On the migrant crisis

In the months of April and May 2020, immediately after the lockdown was eased, India saw one of the worst humanitarian crises in the form of working-class persons (who formed the backbone of urban economies) reduced to the economic brink. In the absence of any public transportation like buses, trains and flights, the labourers started their journeys back to villages on foot with young children, pregnant women and the elderly. Seeing this unprecedented humanitarian crisis, Malhotra wrote:

“The most heartbreaking story for me in the Covid-19 migrant labourers’ crises came from Rajasthan. A helpless father stole a bicycle to take his disabled child back to Uttar Pradesh. He left behind a painful note saying, “*Mujhe maaf kar dena* (please forgive me)”. I was as shaken by the woman who walked from Gujarat to Madhya Pradesh with her disabled son on her shoulders. Or the 1,200-km journey Ajay Kumar Saket, disabled due to polio, undertook. These stories made national headlines. Most didn’t.” (Malhotra, 25 May 2020).

NPRD India in its post on 17 May at 20:52 titled #Bashan Nahi Ration (No rhetoric, Grocery!) asked the Government to provide food security to persons with disabilities.

Abhishek Annicca was reflexive and acutely aware of his privileged position:

“Perhaps we will follow the Indian model where your class determines what rights you have. Flights for the rich, sticks for the poor. There is nothing new about this. Our framework of rights is borrowed from western countries where the standard of living is much higher. And the same goes for disability rights too. And that means, the ambit of rights has never been truly universal.

With the shrinking conscience of the nation, our rights are shrinking too.

I am not sure if the coming years will be better or worse for persons with disabilities. But I am sure the privileged will fight to keep their rights. People like me will continue talking to newspapers, writing columns and living in a world which is cut off from the world of starvation.”

On July 7, 2020, an NPRD post bulleted the following points to raise a number of demands:

1. One - Give Ex-gratia of Rs.5000 per month per disabled person during pandemic period.
2. Two - Free rations to all disabled
3. Three - 200 days of work under MNREGA to all who register.
4. Four - Introduce Urban Employment guarantee scheme.
5. Five - Give unemployment allowance.
6. Six - Implement Commitments made under Section 24 of RPD Act.

They consistently repeated their demands, and in many places, and state governments took note of those issues. In the deliberations, it was however noted that no special effort was made by the state governments in specifically reaching the PwDs.

Webinar culture

Many activist groups, started organising webinars, which were an easy and quick way to reach larger numbers of PwD. The power of the webinar was felt as participation of PwD from different parts of the country became possible in a short time and without much financial implications.

Most of the webinars organised were on gender and disability, followed by those on Mental Health, and then on COVID 19 and people with disabilities. Discussions on education for the ‘Disabled in the Pandemic Situation’ were highlighted. Students with disabilities spoke about how those coming from marginalised sections were lagging behind. Disabled students in higher education settings were very concerned about the future of pedagogy. They made a video as well and posted on social media how their concerns like the need for sign language interpreters, captioning, recording, empathy and such, should be taken into account in online teaching

modules. The University of Delhi came out with a notification that it would be holding an online examination in the end of June. This was fiercely opposed by visually disabled students and activists. National Federation of Blind, India approached the High Court of Delhi to ask for resolution the problems of VD students who had pointed out that it was impossible for them to find scribes during the Pandemic. Blind activists posted several messages on social media and mobilised a favorable opinion by the disability community.

The Javed Abidi Foundation post goes into the process of making videos, part of the series “Know your rights.” While they navigated different challenges such as connecting people and ensuring that deaf blind people could access content, a major constraint remained that of poor connectivity. In fact, many complained that due to the slow internet connection, a large number of PwD from smaller towns and rural areas remained excluded from virtual information. Another barrier was language, as most of the videos were made in Hindi and English, hence excluding those with vernacular languages. Translations and captioning are big challenges, but Disabled People’s Organisations (DPO) are trying to connect to a larger audience. The panelists were prominent disabled activists. The following are some of the sessions organised by Javed Abidi Foundation over the last few months, and which were attended by large numbers of PwDs:

1. Session 1 Taking Stock of Disability Rights Advocacy in India & the steps ahead
2. Session 2 Visible and Invisible Disability Perspectives on Art and Poetry as Tools of Advocacy
3. Session 3 Data & Disability
4. Session 4. Youth Leadership for Advocacy
5. Session 5. Political Participation & Accessible Elections
6. Session 6. Grassroots actions for Disability Advocacy
7. Session 7. Media & Social Media Advocacy
8. Session 8. Gender & Disability

Action for Autism, a prominent origination in Delhi held a number of webinars to connect with parents and trainers, in order to continue their programmes. Webinars of autistic individuals where they reconnected with each other through technology were also seen as instrumental in reaching out to disabled people during lockdown.

Gender and disability

The pandemic brought with it one of the deadliest challenges to women with disabilities- seen to be the most vulnerable to violence against women. Women activists were very vocal on how the Pandemic has further compromised the situation of women with disabilities. Shampa Sengupta who runs an organisation working with women with disabilities spoke about her

experiences as a person with psychosocial disability during the pandemic. She was a very familiar face on FB participating in several webinars.

“Rising Flame,” an organisation working with women with disabilities, carried out a quick survey and issued a report titled “Neglected and Forgotten: Women with Disabilities during the Covid 19 crisis in India”. Nidhi Goyal, founder of this NGO has been very active on FB, writing about this repeatedly on various pages on social media. The report was released virtually on the 14th of July by a panel of disabled women activists from across India. From their research, the gendered faultlines around the areas of accessing food, essentials, healthcare and rehabilitation services, education, and employment became starkly apparent. The barriers in access are said to have worsened due to the lack of social security mechanisms (Goyal, 2020). The limitation of this study was due to a lack of an intersectional and class perspective on the issue

One webinar on queer people with disabilities and the COVID situation, examined the impact of medical institutional violence on them. A queer person with psychosocial disability dwelled in her posts on caste and class location, bringing in an intersectional perspective. The issue of care giving and the difficulties faced as a result also appeared in multiple posts highlighting its gendered aspects. One queer disabled person from an indigenous community became a familiar face on webinars, speaking about the intersectionality of disability with caste and sexual orientation.

Mocking the normative standards of ability, masculinity and sexuality, Abhishek wrote on 16th June, 2020:

"Dear able bodied world,
I have said it before, I will say it again. Diapers are great and there is nothing weak or abnormal about wearing adult diapers. For me, diaper means freedom to go out, to perform. It doesn't effect my sexuality and masculinity. It definitely changes how people look at me. But that's on you. I will keep doing my thing."

Psychiatrists and mental health activists have been stressing a mental health pandemic in the Indian context due to loss of freedom of mobility, livelihoods and social connections. Posts reported differential impacts on varied categories of people and PwD were said to be among those most seriously affected. Several webinars were conducted where MH survivors talked about their personal experiences of surviving the pandemic. Loss of physical meetings, mobility, and dull every day routines are drowning persons already suffering with mental illness.

Resistance

It is important to emphasise that social media has also acted as an asset of protest and activism on a very important issue affecting scores of PwDs. In the month of July, 2020, the Department for Empowerment for Persons with Disabilities, Government of India sought the response of seven select Disability rights organisations to its proposal to amend the penal provisions in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPD) Act 2016 in order to create ease of doing business for the industries. It would have meant to dilute the RPD Act 2016. The way Government acted in a sudden and selective way taking advantage of the pandemic angered the disability community.

Unprecedented protest followed this event. Facebook was packed with people with disabilities and their allies signing petitions and circulating them. Several activists wrote quick responses in blogs and articles in the news media opposing any attempts to make amendments in the Act. The Government, in a rare move, conceded and withdrew the proposal within a week. This was seen as a major victory by the disability community. The power of social media was pretty palpable. It has moments of finding voice, while critiquing the ableist discourses of what constitutes the ‘normal’.

Malhotra wrote how:

“...Covid has been a chance to see that the way I and others with disabilities work has benefits. I know there is a feeling to rush back to “normal”, but “normal” was exclusionary, divisive and frustrating, not only for people with disabilities but for people who live in rural and remote communities, people with parenting and caring responsibilities, people who are interested in creativity, innovation and being more productive. We now have an opportunity to finally listen to the disability community – the experts in problem solving, adapting, flexibility, resourcefulness and resilience – and ensure that the “new normal” benefits everyone.

Concluding observations

A brief outline of the dynamics of disability activism in the Indian context, clearly reveals how the agendas and discourses about disability and rights of people with disabilities were framed during the pandemic. What is clearly visible is how access to technology and participation in the virtual world enhanced the capacity of people with disability and helped them to experience a sociality and a community in cross disability lines. The new language of entitlements enabled by the RPD Act 2016, translated into a demand for all PwD, even if the gender and class dimensions of these deliberations is hard to miss. In August 2020, a big row broke out after the death of a prominent activist whom some women disabled activists had indirectly accused of sexual harassment two years back in the wake of the “Me Too” movement. In fact, gendered and disability-specific fault lines appeared on the virtual space, again threatening the

community sentiment among disabled persons and the opportunity to find a collective identity. Through this genealogy, I have tried to show how the intersectionality of gender and class dimension of persons with disabilities needs to be debated in the deliberations on agency and disability activism which became so visible during the COVID 19 pandemic.

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