

# Societal Perceptions Towards Persons with Disabilities: A Historical Perspective

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## Abstract

*This study critically analyzes disability and communal attitudes towards it across different societies throughout history. Existing literature has been extensively reviewed to understand disability in a historical context. The study demonstrates that disability has existed throughout human history, with societal responses shaped by cultural values and the prevailing mode of production. It reveals discrimination against persons with disabilities (PWDs) during the Greek and Roman periods, where disabled individuals were often deemed unfit for society. The emergence of capitalism exacerbated the marginalization of disabled people, relegating them to institutions. In contemporary society, persons with disabilities continue to face ableism and violations of their rights.*

**Keywords:** Persons with Disabilities, Capitalism, Discrimination, Society, Culture, History.

## Introduction

Understanding disability in its historical context is essential to examine the societal responses to persons with disabilities over time. Archaeological evidence, such as skeletal remains, indicates the presence of disabilities as far back as the Neanderthal period. The historical treatment of disability reflects broader societal values, cultural norms, and technological advancements.

Throughout history, the perception of disability has been deeply intertwined with spiritual, moral, and cultural beliefs. For instance, in Neolithic societies, trepanation—drilling holes in the skull—was practiced, often under the belief that it could release "evil spirits" thought to cause disabilities (Russell, 1981). Similarly, during the Middle Ages, disability was frequently viewed as an expression of divine displeasure or a punishment for sins, further stigmatizing those with impairments (Kendall, 2004).

These beliefs were not confined to Europe; in regions of South Asia, including Indo-Pak, disability has historically been linked to the notion of karma or punishment for past sins, often perpetuated by close family members (Rathore & Mansoor, 2019). The economic structure of a society has also played a significant role in shaping attitudes toward disability. In hunter-gatherer societies, where physical ability was closely tied to survival, impairments were often interpreted as divine punishments or moral failings, sometimes resulting in exclusion or even the killing of disabled individuals (Barnes, 1991). However, the rise of agriculture and industrialization led to societal changes, allowing greater acceptance and accommodation of persons with disabilities. This reflects

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a reduction in stigmatization as survival was no longer precariously linked to physical capabilities. However, industrialization and urbanization brought new challenges and opportunities, while social welfare systems and disability rights movements fought for inclusion.

This evolving perception of disability highlights the complexity of societal attitudes influenced by economic modes of production, prevailing cultural narratives, and moral frameworks. Tracing these shifts across historical periods, we can better understand the deeply rooted biases and the progress—or lack thereof—made toward an inclusive society.

### **Statement of the Problems**

Throughout history, persons with disabilities have faced widespread discrimination across various nations, cultures, and societies. The intensity and forms of this discrimination have varied, yet the consequences have consistently marginalized the disabled population in social, cultural, political, and economic spheres. Harmful customs and practices rooted in ignorance and prejudice have often led to inhumane treatment, further exacerbating the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities.

This study seeks to investigate and analyze how dominant non-disabled discourses have historically shaped societal attitudes and practices, often perpetuating exclusion and misery for disabled individuals. By critically examining these hegemonic narratives, the research aims to uncover the deep-seated biases and systemic barriers that have historically relegated persons with disabilities to positions of disadvantage and neglect.

### **Methodology**

This study aims to investigate disability and societal reactions to it, focusing on how discrimination against persons with disabilities has manifested across different historical periods. The methodology is designed to critically examine societal attitudes, cultural practices, and historical narratives surrounding disability. The research adopts a historical-analytical approach. The following steps were undertaken to achieve the study's objectives. A comprehensive review of existing literature, including books, scholarly articles, and journals, was conducted. This helped in tracing historical attitudes toward disability and identifying recurring patterns of discrimination and marginalization.

### **Greek and Roman Periods**

The evidence of a consistent negative representation of disability is quite visible in the pre-capitalistic economic structure in Western societies. This negative representation ran in three pivotal themes, i.e. Cultural understanding, religious belief and Pagan myth. In addition, art, drama, and movies portray negative images of such groups to make socio-cultural and political points. Examples of such representation are in ancient Greek culture, Judeo-Christian and European art and drama before the Renaissance (Barnes, 1991; Shearer, 1981; Thomas, 1982). Furthermore, ancient Greece laid the foundation and basis of what is known as modern Western civilization. However, the Greek economy and its triumph were dependent on slavery and violence. Although they were asserting the rights of individuals and their dignity, these were limited to some privileged groups, while vulnerable groups such as women, persons with disabilities and disease-driven individuals remained trapped in slavery and violence (Cahn, 1990; Russell, 1981). In this regard, there was little room for imperfection or any flaw. Therefore, the Greeks used to kill babies with impairment, and it was a widespread practice at that time. The elders of the city inspected children, and if they were found weak or impaired, they were left

exposed to death (Tooley, 1983). In addition, the arts and philosophy of Greek culture reflected the total beauty. Besides, in Greek mythology, gods and goddesses were assumed to be role models on whom every individual based their success and achievement. Hephaestus, the only disabled god, was Zeus's son and was banished by his father from heaven. However, Aphrodite took pity on him and married him, though she found another lover, Ares, due to disability of Hephaestus (Risebero, 1979). Furthermore, inaccessible Greek architectural designs greatly influenced the West's built environment (Risebero, 1979). The exclusion of disabled people in the Greek era was evident, followed by the Romans.

After conquering Greece, Roman society took up many cultural aspects of Greece. They perpetuated the treatment of Greeks who were disabled or sick. For instance, the impaired children were drowned in the river. Similarly, in the coliseum, dwarf people were used to fighting with women for the entertainment and amusement of the crowd (Graves, 1934). However, ironically, both of these two great nations made some severe efforts to treat the impairment of persons with disabilities. For example, Aristotle investigated deafness, while Galen and Hypocrites attempted to cure epilepsy (Thomas, 1982).

Moreover, Roman developed therapeutic and fitness treatments for physical disability such as arthritis. However, such treatment was not for the downtrodden people but for the affluent segment of Roman society (Russell, 1981). Disability activists believe that this was the beginning of the medical model of disability, which represented the treatment of persons with disabilities and not their acceptance in society. This is well reflected in the literature of that time (Abelson, 1986). Disabled individuals in ancient times faced discrimination and exclusion during the Greek and Roman eras. With the rise of capitalism, the forms and patterns of this discrimination and exclusion evolved, adopting new structures and forms.

### **Capitalism and the Post-World War Period**

The emergence of capitalism further decreased the chances of survival for the disabled people. Owing to capitalism, the mode of production and social hierarchy were all geared up towards physically and mentally fit people. Consequently, persons with disabilities were excluded from the mainstream society. They became more dependent upon the rest of society, which Marx describes as the "reserve army" of workers (Offe, 1976). The "reserve army" of industries consisted of not only the disabled but also the unemployed, seasonally employed, immigrants from other countries and housewives (Gough, 1979). Similarly, the progress of the nineteenth century witnessed the transition from light industries like textile to much heavier capital goods industries such as steel, railways and iron, known as the second phase of industrialization. This transitional phase further worsened the position of persons with disabilities in a capitalist society, as the demands of capitalism favored fit and non-disabled individuals.

World War I and II necessitated a radical change in terms of social policy regarding disability due to the injuries and impairments received by well-to-do people during the war conflicts (Thomas, 1982). In this connection, persons with disabilities were assumed passive recipients of assistance and were not considered active members of societies. For instance, the establishment of special educational institutes means to exclude students with disabilities from mainstream institutions. Keeping in view all these concerns, after the Vietnam War, some disabled veterans initiated their struggle to organize themselves in social and political groups (Abelson, 1986). Therefore, during the 1970s and 1980s, the disability movement emerged to fight for the rights of persons with disabilities. Owing to the continuous efforts of these groups, Disability Discrimination Act was enacted in 1995 that guaranteed equal civil rights to persons with disabilities in terms of accessible

environment, employment, education and other related services in the USA (Abelson, 1986). Despite these efforts, they were inadequate in addressing the pervasive challenges faced by people with disabilities.

### **Focusing Discrimination**

Discrimination against persons with disabilities in some form or other has been evident in almost every society throughout the history of humanity. However, with time, the intensity of forms of discrimination, such as violent persecution and infanticide, disappeared to a great extent. However, it is undoubtedly evident that their quality of life remained lower than their non-disabled counterpart. Moreover, it is tough to find the exact root cause and origin of discrimination against persons with disabilities. In primitive societies, people lived very tough lives in a harsh and hostile environment. There could be no option to help disabled people or focus on the basic survival techniques for those unfortunate segments of society, including the sick and disabled. Thus, such vulnerable people were ignored and left helpless (Thomas, 1982).

In addition, some primitive societies followed harmful customs to treat disabled people. In this regard, an anthropologist, Evans (1956), argues that religious tribes such as Nuer considered the birth of large, unusual children threatening the natural division between humans and animals. For such a tribe, the child's unusual appearance in physique was an accident of nature and needed correction. Consequently, such children were returned to their natural environment, i.e. the hippopotamuses and river. Similarly, Thomas (1982) argues that some ancient religious institutions overtly rejected physically and mentally impaired people. Such prohibitions and rejections were associated with gods. Haffler (1968) points out that during the Middle Ages in Europe, disabled children were considered changelings (substitutes for human children), which was assumed because of parents' involvement in sorcery or black magic. As a result, individuals with physical disabilities remained the recipients of ridicule, superstition and persecution.

Further, Malleus Maleficarum of 1387 announced that physically disabled children were the result of the intercourse of the child's mother with the devil (Haffler, 1968). Moreover, the protestant reformer Martin Luther King (14835-1546) possessed discriminative ideas regarding persons with disabilities. According to him, he saw the devil in such people. Subsequently, because of such beliefs, disabled people became a shameful stigma in the view of society (Shearer, 1981). Similarly, Thomas (1982) argues that in England, many jokes were devoted to physically and mentally disabled people, and it was well illustrated in joke books of the Tudor and Stuart periods, in which every disabled was a source of amusement.

Furthermore, they were kept in freaks and remained a common source of entertainment for the people, especially for the aristocracy. However, Thomas (1982) argues that a philosophical approach to disability took place when William Hay, a justice of the peace and a member of parliament, wrote an essay titled "deformity" in 1754. He wrote about himself as hardly five feet tall with a back bent in "my mother womb". He articulated himself on the subject very well. The purpose of his essay was to highlight the problems and miseries he had encountered in his life. He believed his physical condition made him bashful, uneasy and unsure of himself.

### **Disability in Contemporary Society**

In today's world, the number of persons with disabilities is on the rise, and it tends to increase for many reasons. With advancements in the medical field, people who formerly would have died from illness or any accident now get treatment and survive, although with disability. As more people live longer, the chances of experiencing disease increase, which ultimately leads to

disability. Children born with severe disabilities survive due to advanced medical technology. However, this estimate is very low compared to the number of people getting disabled by accidents, diseases and wars (Russell, 1981).

Anyone can become disabled at any time, but some people are more prone to it due to their social, economic and health conditions. People in developing countries with lower incomes have more chances of becoming disabled (Nolan & Gannon, 2006). However, disability knows no socioeconomic boundaries; poor, wealthy or middle-class can become disabled, whether from their mother's poor nutrition, diseases, accidents or wars (Keller, 1994). Similarly, in contemporary societies, employees in the lower tiers of the labour market are at high risk of disabilities (Russell, 1981).

Today, societies take pride in tolerance and the promotion of integration of all groups. Furthermore, laws are being made regarding equal treatment of persons with disabilities. However, they still experience feelings of rejection and discomfort during their interaction with non-disabled people (Lee and Rodda, 1994). Young children in their childhood categorize people as disabled and non-disabled. They show their support to the majority while disfavouring persons with disabilities. Such negative attitude starts in the early development process, especially in childhood (Maras, 1993; Richardson et al., 1961).

Similarly, Lee and Rodda (1994) describe that such beliefs about impairment result from a socio-cultural setup. Today's modern societies and their socio-cultural conditioning are geared towards the body's fitness and maintaining its beauty. Furthermore, the media portrays persons with disabilities in negative ways, such as suffering, helpless and sick with multiple needs (Ruffner, 1990).

In this regard, awareness regarding the problem of negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities is essential to modify and reduce such attitudes, as empirical studies support it (Roehner, 1961). However, Lee and Rodda (1990) state that providing information is not enough to shape the attitude of people regarding persons with disabilities; instead, interaction is equally important in changing the negative attitude. In addition, negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities affect their family members. It will negatively impact the relationship of the entire unit of the family. At the same time, the effects of disability fall unevenly on the family and its members, which is, in any case, never negligible (Lee & Rodda, 1990).

Being disabled, such persons face social, economic, environmental and attitudinal barriers that create obstacles regarding social inclusion in society (Nolan & Gannon, 2006). Furthermore, they are forgotten people and are being excluded from many spheres of life through active discrimination and barriers created by an environment designed by persons without disabilities (Kornblum & Jullian, 2001). A Report of Common Wealth of Australia (2010) describes that such people experience transport, employment and education barriers.

Moreover, the indicators of Millennium Development Goals do not address the pressing social, educational, health and economic concerns of millions of disabled people. A growing body of opinion and data suggest that unless persons with disabilities are included, none of the MDGs' indicators will be met (United Nations, 2011). In this regard, Stubbs (2002) reports that the slogans of poverty reduction, education for all, and economic growth cannot be met until and unless persons with disabilities are included.

Women with disabilities experience oppression in a male-dominated society. Such a situation pushes the knowledge and concerns of women with disabilities into feminism and feminism in disability rights movement. However, feminist perspectives on disability are not widely discussed in feminist theory. At the same time, women's writings do not offer insights into disabled women's

experiences, especially in the context of theorizing about the body (Wendell, 1989). Similarly, Davis (1987) acknowledges that people who have a disability in a society that glorifies physical conformity and fitness are being forced to understand more fully what bodily integrity means. Moreover, women with disability suffer more than disabled men due to the patriarchal structure of society that assumes women more by their physicality as compared to disabled men. Furthermore, disabled women are not being considered as sexual human beings and as a consequent, socio-psychological forces affect them (Asch & Fine, 1988; Kleinman, 1988). Considering these historical facts, it can be argued that socio-cultural and historical factors have led to the exclusion of disabled individuals from economic and mainstream societal spheres

## **Conclusion**

Archaeologists, by using skeletal remains, documented the presence of certain types of disabilities as early as the Neanderthal period, which shows that disability has existed throughout the history of humankind. Historically, societies have dealt with disabilities based on their values, culture, and technology.

Mode of production and subsistence remained a significant determinant of disability and societal response. In hunting and gathering societies, impairments were viewed as punishment for the violation of the moral code, and consequently, persons with disabilities were killed or banished (Barnes, 1991). Similarly, in pastoral societies, nomadic life negatively affected those with mobility disability. In contrast, such persons fully integrated into mainstream groups in other institutions. Discrimination against persons with disabilities in some form or other has been evident in almost every society throughout the history of humanity. However, with time, the intensity of forms of discrimination, such as violent persecution and infanticide, disappeared to a great extent. However, it is undoubtedly evident that their quality of life remained lower than that of their non-disabled counterpart.

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In the past, disabled people have been discriminated against and demonized by non-disabled people. There was no concept of their rights, and they had been pushed to vulnerability and marginalization. Such persons face problems and discrimination in today's world, too. However, policy formulation and its implementation need a holistic approach to include persons with disabilities in mainstream communal activities. Community-based rehabilitation and development can be a panacea to solve the problems of persons with disabilities; such programs should be established and encouraged. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted people with disabilities, contributing to challenges such as limited access to services and increased social isolation. It is crucial to prioritize the assessment and resolution of these emerging issues.

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