

REFLECTIONS

The word soup handicap: Why finding the right way to address people like me is tough

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Abstract

I have been blind in the left eye after a childhood accident, and fall into the category of 'Divyāngjan' (people with divine body parts), but that is not a term I like being described by. I prefer to be known by a handicap that restricts my activity, without any attempt to patronise with pity rather than empathy. This also goes for the several politically correct terms being used to describe people with disabilities these days. Most of these reflect a patronising attitude and serve no purpose. If people sincerely mean well, they need to engage practically with the obstacles faced by those dealing with disabilities. Merely changing descriptive terms, and without consulting those most affected, is like putting a band aid on the disability.

Keywords: People with disabilities, politically correct, terminology, patronage, empathy, aged care facilities

I am blind in the left eye. Totally. No vision whatsoever. That makes me part of the community of those euphemistically referred to as 'Divyāngjan' (people with divine body parts) — and I have a tattered *sarkāri* certificate from 1995 to show it. It's not something I talk about much or something that handicaps me much, but I was asked and so I decided I should, in fact, talk about it.

Why I don't talk about it much is that a) most people have actually no idea how to respond, beyond some kind of horrified curiosity (perverted maybe?); and b) even though it happened a very long ago (I was eight and it was an accident), there is still a *soupçon* of trauma left over. You know, that regular existential grumpiness about wishing it had never happened at all.

Why it is a handicap (I am not afraid to use that word) is because there are two aspects of the enjoyment of modern

life that are beyond me. I cannot watch a 3D movie — all I see are blue films. You might say, that's not such a bad thing after all, people getting eaten by dinosaurs or the Hulk converting villains to laundry is no better in 3D than in 2D. Maybe, but the intangible benefits of being out with friends and laughing and loudly critiquing the film's shortcomings and the general *dostāna* is lost. Sure, they can sacrifice and watch 2D, but why be that one vegetarian friend at KFC? I just sit it out.

The other thing is being denied a driver's license because the RTO says binocular vision is an essential thing for driving and "judging distances". I'm not contesting that — though the standards of Indian driving do not seem to suggest that judging distance is even a criterion for issuing licenses, as opposed to say, who your *baap* has *pehchaan* with. Which makes me effectively dependent on buses and metros and local trains (no problem usually), cabbies and their *nakhrās*, or the generosity of friends.

Now that I managed to speak about my handicap, let me get to why I think the words "handicap" and "handicapped" are something I prefer over whatever else in the giant word soup that has emerged in the last thirty years. I know some people think that these are "politically correct" words invented by namby-pambies who cannot call a spade a spade, but I am not one of those. I understand where political correctness (or its modern avatar "wokeness") comes from, what it gets right and what it gets wrong. But then I feel that "politically" is the operative part of the phrase rather than "correct", because if you did find the correct way to refer to people like me (and most have it way worse than me), you'd not have so many words.

Let's get *Divyāngjan* out of the way, first. I find it offensive. I do not have a divine body part (*Divya ang*) of any kind. I am also an orthodox atheist, so any mention of divinity is religiously offensive. I still have my left eye; it is still mostly alive (barring the retina) and has blood flow and goes through the regular stress eyes undergo. Tears flow from it alongside the right eye when I get too sentimental; it reddens when there is heat stress. It hasn't died and gone to heaven and become a deity looking divinely at me. You may say, "oh no, that's not what we mean by *Divyāngjan*", but people who use that word just intend to be "kind" without being really "clear". But this is the kindness of pity, not empathy. So even though I am entitled, because of the

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To cite: Raamesh GR The word soup handicap: Why finding the right way to address people like me is tough. *Indian J Med Ethics*. Published online first on May 17, 2023. DOI: 10.20529/IJME.2023.033

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sarkāri certificate, to travel by the *Divyāngjan* compartment in trains, I don't. I need you to understand and solve my problems, not feel sorry.

The next is "specially abled" or "differently abled" or versions of that. I'm sorry. There is no extra ability. If we can't walk or see or hear or use our hands, we aren't acquiring any other "compensatory" ability that makes us different. Thirty four years of being unable to see one entire half of the world has not turned me into an X-man or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle or helped me acquire anything remotely like a superpower. I've been told I have the superpower to both write expressively and piss off people in the same essay, but there are two-eyed people who write way better than me (e.g., Salman Rushdie till recently. Now that he is on my side I am kind of perversely happy). This euphemism was really born out of some bleeding-heart pity, and has been more of a hindrance than a help in actually solving our problems.

Then comes "people with special needs" and the like. Okay, this is somewhat useful. Wheelchair ramps and service dogs and audiobooks and braille signages and sign language TV are special needs, after all. Then there are other disabilities (that's what they are) like being diabetic or hypertensive or epileptic or of course, the ones neurologists and psychiatrists deal with — and these create other needs, like low sugar or low salt foods. But the term is ambiguous — it doesn't differentiate between a genuine need versus being a needy drama queen.

"People with disabilities" and its more specific cousins come next. This is way better — it does us the service of recognising that we have disabilities, and implies that something needs to be done about it. Except that nothing is, in fact, done. And that phrase is somewhat clumsy. I am, in this style, "person with disability in one eye" — that's my medical history, not a term of reference. Also, I find no difference between "person with disability" and "disabled person" — though I am told the former puts my personhood before my disability. What I would like before me are more low sugar food choices, because, well, I now have diabetes in addition to being blind in the left eye. Having to eat hospital-like foods just adds disgust to disability.

"Physically" or "mentally challenged" are an absolute no. They came out of a thesaurus with no logic whatsoever.

Then comes "___ly impaired". This is even better — it does say there is an impairment and what kind. Except, I suppose it failed in its time because it used "impairment" as a euphemism for "disability" or "handicap". Not being able to see with one eye is an impairment — in my case, the world left of my nose bridge is invisible. If you appear suddenly from my left, it is likely that you will crash into me and then lash out, *'andhā hai kyā?'* And when I say I am blind in the left eye, you either turn into a blubbling mess, or mutter a quick apology and put a quicker distance between us. But not being able to see with both eyes is not an impairment — it is a disability that strips you of the most vital of the five senses we humans have. And yes, "disabled" is also a better word than "handicap", which is

the same as "impairment" with fewer letters to type.

"Mentally retarded" is now in the dustbin and rightly so, I guess it just became too much of a dysphemism by overuse, once "moron" and "idiot" themselves became radioactive. Though by now any construct with "mental" in it is, to be honest, mental. '*Person with intellectual disabilities*' is the contemporary usage, and while it is clumsy, I don't find anything better. Though I have a feeling it could also apply to those who cannot tell the fine differences between the philosophies of Vasubandhu and Nagarjuna (I like reading Buddhist philosophy).

I understand the reasoning of such phrases. Is there a committee that decides these things that doesn't take the people it affects into account? I find that these are just clever psychological tricks that make the *user* of the phrase feel better about themselves. You think you are being empathetic to the disabled person and making them feel nice, but you're not. You just don't want to step on a mine. I didn't ask you to make me feel nicer about myself by calling me "person with visual disability" rather than "blind". Maybe I can't do some things you think are fun (like road rage), but I am not a sad sack who needs cheering up.

To me this is akin to saying "died by suicide" rather than "committed suicide". For in this phrase, you just turned the deceased into some kind of helpless victim. You didn't recognise them as a person who had agency and chose this "solution" because affirmative choices weren't available. The toxic atmosphere patriarchy creates for physically, physiologically and mentally lesser mortals kills a lot of us — I know for I have had suicide ideation before and been treated for major depression.

What I prefer straight up is "blind". There is no pity in the word (and usually none in the speaker) and no pretence of political correctness. It is easy to understand for 100% of the population. "Half-blind" is even better, though it makes me feel the same as "half-caste". Or half-whatever. But I get the honesty of the word, even if it is brutal. Though I guess, you'd be squeamish about it — the B-word is kinda nuclear like the N-word. But I have no issues using it for self-description. I am not going to use euphemisms — because frankly, none of them is a euphemism at all.

As I wrote above, I have no problem with you being politically correct — because that can, and does, lead to social transformation. But do not pretend to PC-ness: that is just putting a band-aid on the disability. You want to be sensitive? Roll up your sleeves and battle the stigma. Learn to work around the disability and do more concrete things. Ask for a wheelchair ramp in your place of work or housing society, even if there is no one you personally know who needs it. If no one's doing it — build it yourself. It needs a few bricks and a bag of cement, and both are cheap. If your caste/class prejudice comes in the way, now *that's* a disability.

Learn Braille and sign language. They are useful and fun to learn. Insist on having Braille signs in public transport. You have change.org and a lot of other petition-making sites, the emails of government officials are available on *sarkāri* websites, and you have the power of making any number of Instagram reels. If you're in a management position at a TV channel or OTT platform, make sure your shows have subtitles. Commission a whole damn show in sign language. Go to bookstores and demand that they stock the audio version of a book simultaneously. Don't hold back from a punch-up if you see someone bullying disabled people — because my lot does

face a lot of violence, and really does appreciate an ally.

In the long term, people like me would also appreciate policies and facilities for old age care — people like me die 20 years younger than you *hatta-khatta* people. Don't pretend to be helpless when there is even an iota of a difference you can make. For that is the worst disability of all.

Disclaimer: *I only speak for myself. But just as you would nowadays ask people what pronouns they use, do ask people like me what they prefer being referred to as. I don't like the word soup, but others may.*