

Research Article

**Exploring the Concept of Disability as a Karmic Outcome in Greek & Hindu Mythologies:
A Comparative Analysis**

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Abstract

'Disability' refers to a characteristic (mental or physical) that is regarded as impairment. Associating disability with *karma* is nothing strange, even in contemporary society. The roots of this notion lie in the mythologies. The ancient cultures often saw disability as a divine punishment for a person's deeds, either in the present or previous births. This belief has survived even to the modern era, and it has led to the mistreatment of the disabled. This paper intends to analyse certain Hindu myths from ancient India to bring out the karmic perception of disability. The study also serves a few glimpses of Greek and Mesopotamian myths to support the statements made. It shows the archetypes of the disabilities born out of *karma* in the myths above can lead to an ethical society. The present work will study mainly the characters of Ashtavakra, Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Lord Ganesha, to name a few. The commonality among the characters mentioned above is that they all were disabled as a penalty for their deeds.

Keywords: Disability, *karma*, penalty, ableism, Greek Mythology, Hindu Mythology, sustainability, morality

1. Introduction

Even after centuries of rational thinking, it is relevant to note that the human being is not free from the clutches of religion. Studying the prominence of worship places and the followers of man-gods and spiritual gurus among the millennials, one can discern that religion still is a controlling force that governs human's actions. Most religious people believe that religion helps them attain peace and abide by cosmic law and order. They tend to perceive life as a divine gift that can take them on a spiritual journey. Therefore, the human tendency to associate every simple and complex matter of life with religion cannot hold one by surprise. In all the religions practised in the world, one of the most practised ones is Hinduism. Being a polyethnic religion, Hinduism is propagated widely. Among the various doctrines practised in Hinduism, *karma* is recognised as one of the prominent doctrines for the broad recognition worldwide.

Karma means deeds or behaviour. According to Hindu philosophy, one will be rewarded or punished for their deeds depending on the nature of their actions. The result of one's deeds is called *karma phala*. We often tend to apply these philosophies in our social life. Living by the law of *karma* can bring one peace and bliss. Various sub themes that lie close to *karma*, like *ahimsa*, can aid in building a benevolent society. However, it should be advised to embrace the

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ideology of *karma* at the individual level rather than the social level. Advocating the law of *karma* at the social level shall cause disparities among people.

The present paper discusses the social perception of disability as a result of *karma* or as *karma phala*. It becomes a matter of concern when social problems like discrimination of the disabled, stigmatisation of the difference etc. emerge from the concepts like *karma*.

'Disability' refers to a characteristic (mental or physical) that is regarded as impairment. According to 'karmic philosophy', the disability or impairment of an individual is the result of their *karma*. This paper intends to analyse certain Hindu myths from ancient India to bring out the karmic perception of disability. The study also serves a few glimpses of Greek and Mesopotamian myths to support the statements made. The present work will study mainly the characters of Ashtavakra, Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Lord Ganesha, to name a few. The commonality among the characters mentioned above is that they all were disabled as a penalty for their deeds. The study involves close reading and re-interpretation of instances from the texts through the lens of disability studies theories. The paper explores how society borrows rigid and callous stereotypes and prejudices about the disabled from mythologies.

Haley R Graham (2019) studies a few Greek mythological characters through critical disability studies in her work. She tells how the portrayal of disability in myths gives negative and flawed notions about the disabled. GokhanKagnici (2018), in his article, talks about the Sumerian recreation myth. He emphasises how Enki, the Sumerian God of wisdom, wanted man to recover from his disability psychologically and maintain societal integrity despite being born different from others. In her essay, NehaKumari (2019) speaks about the wrong ideas and beliefs of disabled characters in Hindu mythology. She finds how the disabled characters have a deep past that feeds them with the motives of revenge and loyalty and how they play a crucial role in unfolding the events in the plot. Surbhi Kumar and Ananya Yemeni (2018) talk about the severe involvement of cultural construction in developing antipathy towards disabled people concerning the portrayal of disability in Hindu mythology.

Ajit K Dalal (2002) writes about the approaches made towards disability and rehabilitation in traditional times. His work throws light on the relevance of understanding and adopting the ancient practices in the current social scenario of India. M Miles' (2002) paper deals with the "community based" practices related to assisting the disabled people concerning ancient texts. Miles argues that people are little aware of the South Asian cultural-historical heritage of taking care of the disabled. He also states that a more profound understanding of the histories can aid those who intend to import new practices in disability. Maya Thomas and M J Thomas (2002) talk about certain unique disadvantages faced only by disabled women in their paper. The paper suggests strategies to eradicate these disadvantages in a community-based rehabilitation setting. It tells that disabled women are triple handicapped by the disability, gender and developing world status. In her work, Donna Reeve (2004), discusses the merits of Thomas' model social model of disability which deals with structural and psycho-emotional dimensions. Reeve (2012) discusses how psycho-emotional disablism has more potential than structural disablism in her later work. HemachandraKarah's (2015) paper deals with the different frameworks of audism, visionism and sanism. He discusses how people with sensory and cognitive disabilities share an emotional investment against a foundational view.

2. The Models of Disability

The models of disability are different perceptions of disability. Three significant models of disability are the religious model, the medical model and the social model. The religious model identifies disability as the act of God. It perceives disability as a penalty for one's own or one's parents' or ancestors' sins. This outlook may result in the ostracism of the disabled by society (Henderson & Bryan 7) At times the myth of disability elevates the disability to mysticism, or it portrays disability as something metaphysical. This perspective voices that when one of a person's senses is impaired, it augments the function of other senses of the same individuals. For that reason, the disabled are considered blessed with some power (Black 27) The Sumerian Recreation Myth exemplifies this aspect of the religious model.

In the mid-1800 emerged the medical model of disability and replaced the religious model. Thomas Woods called it the 'personal tragedy' model of disability to refer to the pitiable condition. The medical model observes disability as a 'medical problem that resides in the individual'. (Olkin 25-26)

The social model of disability emerged as an influence of the British Disability Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. (Retief & Letsosa 3) The social model "defines disability as social creation- a relationship between people with impairment and a disabling society." (Shakespeare & Watson 283) The model suggests that since society makes an individual with impairment disabled, the right term to address the impaired individuals must be 'disabled'.

Pre-modern India's outlook on disability was a fusion of the religious, medical and social models of disability. However, the most predominant ones were the religious and social models. The literary works from the era put the burden of disability on the individuals affected. *CharakaSamhita*, one of the most celebrated texts on Ayurveda of ancient India, which survived into the modern era, relates disability with *karma*. Also, *Manusmriti*, a law code for the right of ways of living, advocates that being disabled in the present life is retribution for past sins. This perception about disability makes others think that people with disabilities are undesirable or undeserving. This is when the concept of 'ableism' comes into existence.

3. Sumerian Recreation Myths

Cambridge Dictionary defines 'ableism' as unfair treatment of people because they have a disability (an illness, injury, or condition that makes it difficult to do things that other people do). In light of the Sumerian recreation myth, one can understand that 'ableism' existed before disability came into existence. The myth goes on like this -

One day, Enki, the Sumerian God of creation and his consort Ninmah, the Sumerian goddess of fertility, were having a verbal contest. The Sumerian gods were finding it difficult to do their tasks alone, and they requested God Enki to create someone to help them out with their works. Therefore, God Enki created the first humans who could help the Sumerian gods with their works. Thus, it can be derived that all their abilities had a purpose.

However, seeing the perfect creations of Enki, goddess Ninmah said to the former that she would create human beings with a 'disability so that they would not be completely purposeful. But Enki replies to her that he would give them another ability to compensate for their imperfections. They would not be treated imperfect or 'disabled' and fit into society without facing any discrimination or prejudice. Accepting the challenge, goddess Ninmah created seven humans with one disability

each. However, God Enki succeeded in proving what he had challenged, and ultimately, God Ninmah accepted her defeat.

From this myth, one can understand how goddess Ninmah advocated the perception of 'ableism' way before the concept of 'disability' came into existence. Although the creation of the disabled happened due to the presence of the concept of 'ableism' in the subconscious of goddess Ninmah, the Sumerian society treated both the 'disabled' and 'abled' on equal standards. People with physical impairments participated in various administration systems like the rest. Most importantly, Sumerians did not perceive disability as a punishment for the sins committed.

Unlike Sumerian mythology, Greek and Hindu mythologies incline towards Karmic Philosophy. In Greek and Hindu mythologies, some stories associate *karma* with disability.

4. Karma and Disability in Greek Mythology

A few instances from Greek mythology narrate how a person is cursed or punished with disability for a deed that infuriated a superior person or God. These kinds of myths function as the bearers of the insensitive and inconsiderate belief that disability is a penalty for a person's sin or deeds. The following are two instances from Greek mythology that portray disability as a punishment.

4.1 The Myth of Larunda

Larunda was the daughter of the river god Almo. She was so loquacious that her father always warned her of this trait. One day she found out that God Zeus had constantly forced her sister Juturna to a union. Realising her sister's plight, Larunda helped her to run away and save herself from Zeus' compulsion. Later, Larunda informed Hera (Zeus' consort) about Zeus' tendency for infidelity. This infuriated Zeus, and he ripped out Larunda's tongue since he believed that her loquaciousness created a situation that was unfavourable for him. After ripping out Larunda's tongue, Zeus commanded Hermes to take Larunda to the underworld and appoint her as the nymph of the river of hell. On the way to the underworld, Larunda was sexually assaulted by Hermes.

If we analyse the myth of Larunda, we can see how a disability (mutism) is imposed on Larunda as a penalty for something she did against the God Zeus. "Women with disabilities tend to be more vulnerable to exploitation of various kinds, such as sexual harassment, domestic violence and exploitation in the workplace" (Thomas, Maya & M J Thomas 28).

4.2 The Myth of Tiresias

Tiresias was a blind prophet of Apollo. He was known as a wise man before his disability. He visited Zeus and Hera while the duo was arguing about who (man or woman) experiences more pleasure in the act of sex. Zeus opined that a woman experiences more pleasure, while Hera opined that a man experiences more pleasure than a woman. As Tiresias approached, both the God and the Goddess asked Tiresias to settle the argument by giving a wise answer since at one point of his life he had also lived as a woman for seven years as a curse by Hera before. Tiresias reasoned with his prior experiences and says that it was women who experienced more pleasure.

Displeased with his answer, Hera cursed him to go blind. Later, after her fury was settled, she gave him the ability to see the future to compensate for his blindness.

There is another version of the story about how Tiresias got blind. One day Tiresias accidentally saw Athena bathing naked in a pond. Realising that Tiresias saw her naked, Athena cursed him to become blind. Later, when his mother approached and begged Athena to undo her curse, she gave him the power of augury.

It is unfair how the disabled have to be extraordinary to be accepted in the 'normal' society. The instances where the blind Tiresias is given the power to see the future or the power of augury to compensate for his disability re-emphasises how a man who lacks one ability cannot be seen normal in the society unless he possesses a special skill to charm or attract people.

However, if the myths of Larunda and Tiresias are compared and analysed, the concept of 'hybrid intersectionality' becomes visible. Nancy Ehrenreich coined the term to describe "the intersection of an axis of privilege with an axis of subordination" (Hosking 9-10). Here, Tiresias is singly burdened while Larunda is double burdened. Tiresias is disabled, while Larunda becomes double burdened by being a woman and a disabled. Tiresias, despite being disabled, is privileged over Larunda, who is facing gender discrimination and a disability. Curiously, Hera's curse to Tiresias is modified, and he is rewarded with augury, while Larunda, after being cursed with mutism, is raped by another man.

The moment when Hermes rapes Larunda, an 'abled' man (in fact a more than abled man) is unleashing his violence over a helpless individual. This tendency to take advantage of the 'disabled' person by the abled is still seen in society, and it is disheartening to know that the ancient myths propagated these ideas.

5. 'Karma' as a Cause of Disability in Hindu Mythology

A philosophy embraced so closely by Hinduism is *karma*. According to the Hindu religion, *karma* results from one's deeds done either in present or previous birth. AnandaMajumdar explains how *karma* arises from the physical and psychological activities of an individual. According to Majumdar (2019), the birth and rebirth is caused by the *karma* of an individual, and he or she will receive the reward for his *karma* either as happiness or suffering depending on his or her deeds. The following instances from Hindu mythology can explain how *karma* had the power to impose 'disability' as a weakness on humans -

5.1. Ashtavakra and His Eight Bends

Ashtavakra was a sage who lived during the Vedic age. He succeeded in overcoming the obstacles put forward by his disability and composed the book *Ashtavakra Gita*. Sage Aruni was Ashtavakra's maternal grandfather and Ashtavakra's parents Kahoda and Sujatha were sage Aruni's students. They learned the Vedas from the sage when Sujata was pregnant with Ashtavakra. Therefore, Ashtavakra was well versed with all the Vedas. One day while Kahoda was chanting the Vedas in front of other disciples of sage Aruni, he mispronounced the Vedas at eight places. Ashtavakra, who was listening to his father reciting the Vedas from his mother's womb, corrected his father. This enraged his father, and he cursed Ashtavakra to be born with eight bends. The *Karma* of Ashtavakra correcting his father in front of others and thus bringing

humiliation caused him to have a deformed body. However, Ashtavakra's life exemplifies how despite disabilities, one can succeed in life and attain an important status in society.

5.2 Elephant-headed Ganesha

Lord Ganesha, one of the most powerful gods in the Hindu religion is also known as the "elephant-headed" God. The story behind Lord Ganesha getting the head of an elephant is significant in how despite being a god, Lord Ganesha was cursed with a deformation. Lord Ganesha was made out of clay by goddess Parvati to guard the chamber as she went inside to take her bath. The goddess told her son not to let anyone inside the room until she finished her bath. While Ganesha was guarding the chamber, Lord Shiva came there and tried to get inside. Unfortunately, not realising it was his father who came, Lord Ganesha became a dutiful son of his mother and stopped Lord Shiva from entering the chamber. Enraged by the act, Lord Shiva chopped Lord Ganesha's head off without realising that it was his own son. Later, learning about the whole incident, Goddess Parvati rose with fury. She told Lord Shiva to go down Mt Kailasa and bring the head of the first animal he saw. Lord Shiva left to carry out the task given by his consort. The first animal he saw was an elephant. He brought the head of the elephant and fixed it on Lord Ganesha's neck. Thus, Lord Ganesha got the head of an elephant and later came to be known as 'Gajamukha'.

What made Lord Ganesha get this deformity is something thought-provoking. He took the order of his mother and got beheaded by his own father.

5.3. The Blind King of Hastinapur

Dhritrashtra, the blind King of Hastinapur and the father of Kauravas is one of the major characters of Mahabharata. He gained popularity for becoming a king despite his blindness. When dynasties used to rule over the kingdoms in ancient times, there were certain qualities a person should possess to become the king. However, the significance of these qualities diminishes if the person is in any way disabled or deformed. Yet Dhritrashtra was destined to become the King of Hastinapur. The story behind Dhritrashtra's blindness is linked with the Hindu Karmic philosophy.

Dhritrashtra is a child born out of the traditional practice of *niyoga*. Vichitravirya was the son of King Shantanu and Satyawati. He had two wives Ambika and Ambalika. However, due to an illness, he died childless. Later, Satyawati, who was worried about not having a prince to continue the lineage, approached her step-son, Bhishma. She requested Bhishma to perform the practice of *niyoga*. Bhishma, who had taken the vow of celibacy, denied performing it, but redirected his step-mother to Sage Vyasa, her son whom she bore before her marriage to Shantanu. Vyasa agreed to help his mother on this excellent cause.

Nevertheless, although the wives of Vichitravirya had prepared themselves for *niyoga*, they did not expect a dark complexion (which was considered to be something that lacked attraction) sage with greasy hair and a grim beard. When Ambika entered the chamber to perform *niyoga*, she was jolted to see Vyasa and could not accept him, she shut her eyes throughout the act. This caused rage in Vyasa, and he cursed her to bear a blind child.

Later, for a period of time, Dhritarashtra could not access the throne because of disability. "Though elder, since Dhritarashtra was born blind, he was forbidden from sitting on the throne" (Pattanaik 54).

Dhritarashtra's problem is not a unique instance in the Hindu epics. In the same text, there is more than one instance where a person with a disability has to recede from the positions or titles that they deserved.

Another king in Mahabharata had to renounce his throne because he was considered unfit due to his impairment. He was Devapi, the elder brother of King Shantanu. Devapi suffered from leprosy, and the council of Brahmins pronounced him unfit to rule.

"Pratipa, a descendent of Puru, renounced the world as soon as he felt his children were old enough to rule the kingdom in his stead. The crown should have gone to his eldest son, Devapi, but Devapi had a skin disease, and the law clearly stated that a man with a physical defect could not be king" (Pattanaik 40).

It is believed that Devapi himself decided to leave the palace when his younger brother Shantanu ascended the throne. "Devapi chose to become a mendicant, refusing to live in Shantanu's shadow" (Pattanaik 40). However, it could also have been due to the social stigma that existed during that time and still prevails to an extent, Devapi was forced to leave his palace. In ancient times, skin ailments like leprosy or psoriasis were considered a curse or punishment. Hindu classical texts preach that a person suffering from leprosy committed sins of plucking the flower buds, causing despair to one's parents, demolishing the idols of God etc., in their previous birth. These negative behaviours can cause a person to be a leper. The texts also argue that if a person dies being a leper, he or she will take birth again in the same health condition, unless he or she does penance (Staples 4). "Leprosy patients used to be forced to leave home; some were admitted to asylums or sanatoriums" (Joseph & Rao 3).

Nevertheless, the range of the visibility of the disability or the deformation or malformation caused by the disability determines the functioning of an individual in a society. Initially, the blind Dhritarashtra had to give up his right to become the King, and his brother, who had pale skin was made the King of Hastinapur.

5.4. Pandu and His Disability

Like Dhritarashtra, Pandu's birth also happened through the practice of *niyoga* executed by Sage Vyasa. Pandu's mother, Ambalika was Ambika's sister. Like her sister Ambalika too was shocked and disgusted to see sage Vyasa, and she grew pale. Seeing this, the sage cursed her to have a child who matched her reaction. "She (Ambalika) grew pale on seeing Vyasa. The child thus conceived in her womb would be a pale weakling called Pandu" (Pattanaik 51).

The curse came true; Pandu was born "pale" and a "weakling". The paleness of Pandu could be a result of albinism, and by "weakling" it could mean sterility or impotence. In the epic, there is another character that was called a weakling. He was Vichitravirya, Pandu's father according to dharma. "Vichitravirya was a weakling, unable to find a wife for himself. So, it was left to Bhishma to find a wife for him" (Pattanaik 47).

Exploring the Concept of Disability as a Karmic Outcome in Greek & Hindu Mythologies: A Comparative Analysis

During ancient times, a man was called a weakling if he could not perform sexual deeds or get fruit. "The name Vichitravirya is derived from 'vichitra' meaning odd and 'virya' meaning masculinity, suggesting that Vichitravirya was either a weakling or impotent or sterile, or perhaps asexual or homosexual, lacking manliness, unable or unwilling to get bride for himself" (Pattanaik 49).

Whatsoever, Pandu's disability was a result of a curse. However, it was considered something less serious than that of Dhritarashtra. Yet, they had to leave their right to rule, be happy and 'abled' or, more precisely, to be accepted as the 'abled', for something they did without knowing the consequences.

The scenarios of Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Devapi exemplify the social model of disability. All three characters were rightful to be on the throne. However, society built barriers in front of them. Society decided and labelled them unworthy to be the King. It is noteworthy how even after Dhritarashtra being labelled unfit to be the King of Hastinapur by the society; he was installed on the same throne by the same society when the circumstances compelled so.

Dhritarashtra's experience becomes a valid case of 'psycho-emotional disablism'. Psycho-emotional disablism is the mental conflict experienced by an individual with impairment. The term was coined by Carol Thomas in her work *Female Forms* (1999). The concept refers to "being made to feel of lesser value, worthless, unattractive, or disgusting as well as it is about 'outside' matters such as being turned down for a job because one is 'disabled'." (Thomas 40). The coronation of Pandu, his younger brother, when he himself had the right to be the King by birth, but being discouraged for his disability would have caused internal oppression in Dhritarashtra. The royal council choosing Pandu over Dhritarashtra should have made the latter feel worthless and insecure. In the same perspective, perhaps, this internal oppression steered Dhritarashtra's actions in Mahabharata. That explains his unfair treatment towards his nephews, the Pandavas.

6. Conclusion

In all the aforementioned instances, there is glorification of the 'abled' bodies. There occurs a branding of these people, which consequently leads to stigmatisation. It makes humans feel good about one's own human community. It is a belief that one's own group is better than and thus superior to the other. Leyens et al (2002), in their seminal work term this idea as 'infrahumanization'. This, in terms of Disability Studies, is an inhibition towards the acknowledgement of the person with a disability. They are treated as 'other'; different from and inferior to one's self. People who are different from one's self will be perceived with curiosity and with fear. It generally leads to stereotypes. The 'abled' bodies condemn the disabled. The 'abled' live a misapprehension that they are more capable and worthier than the 'other'. This thought makes the impaired one 'disabled'.

Often, the individuals do the deeds that lead to disastrous consequences out of duty or obligation. For instance, Lord Ganesha's action of stopping Lord Shiva from entering the chamber was obligatory. He, as a son, had the responsibility of guarding his mother, and he was carrying it out. Later, for that responsible behaviour, he was deformed by his father. Larunda wanted to save her sister's honour and she stood against the betrayal of another woman by her husband; consequently, she was disabled by the God, who had more power than her. Tiresias, who knew

the truth about the life of both man and woman from his own experience, and Ashtavakra, who was well versed in the Vedas, rectified the errors and arguments made by others. Both of them were cursed with disability for imparting knowledge, which can't be termed as a bad deed.

The cases of Dhritarashtra and Pandu are different from the characters mentioned above. They were cursed for their mothers' deeds.

Thus, Larunda, Tiresias, Ashtavakra, Lord Ganesha, Dhritarashtra and Pandu become the archetypes of the disabilities born out of *karma*. Their tales throw light on how society's stereotypes about disabled people that they are cursed lives or that they have been punished for their evil deeds are rooted in the myths. They succeed in inducing negative ideas about disabled people in society and inducing stigma. These stories and myths develop fear and apathy towards the disabled in the society, for they are said to be punished by the God or the creator for their wrong deeds. Thus, the disabled become the 'other' and are pushed to the darker side. There they remain unattended and their voice unheard. There should exist an equilibrium in the universe that binds everyone together on the common ground. It can be attained by apprehending the true essence of principles like *karma*, *dharma* and *ahimsa*. They teach the ethics of coexistence. One has to internalize the concept of diversity by unlearning the themes of disparity. Once the idea of diversity is understood there will be little obstacles to maintain equality in the social space. Hence, the society will become sustainable.

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Exploring the Concept of Disability as a Karmic Outcome in Greek & Hindu Mythologies: A Comparative Analysis

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