

# Disability, Marriage and Stigma: A Sociological and Socioeconomic Perspective

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## Abstract

This paper examines the interrelationship between disability, marriage, and stigma within the socio-cultural context of India, drawing on insights from the Sociology of Disability and gender studies. Moving beyond biomedical understandings of disability, the study adopts a social constructionist perspective to argue that disability is produced and sustained through societal norms, institutional practices, and cultural attitudes. Central to this analysis is Erving Goffman's conceptualization of stigma, which frames disability as a socially devalued identity, leading to exclusion from key social institutions, particularly marriage.

The paper highlights how marriage in India, as a deeply normative and socially regulated institution, reproduces ableist and patriarchal values that marginalize persons with disabilities, especially women. Disabled women experience "double marginalization" due to the intersection of gender and disability, where their bodies are constructed as undesirable, asexual, or incapable of fulfilling normative marital roles. The study further explores how legal frameworks, cultural beliefs, and practices such as dowry and arranged marriage reinforce exclusionary attitudes, despite the presence of welfare schemes and policy interventions.

By critically engaging with themes of stigma, embodiment, and social exclusion, the paper argues that marriage becomes a site where structural inequalities are reproduced and normalized. It calls for a shift toward rights-based and inclusive approaches that recognize persons with disabilities as equal participants in intimate and social life. Ultimately, the study underscores the need to transform societal attitudes and institutional frameworks to enable dignity, autonomy, and full citizenship for persons with disabilities in India.

**Keywords:** Dowry System, Gender, Disability, Marriage, Patriarchy, Social Stigma.

## Introduction

Disability is an impairment in the function or structure of the body, limitations and restrictions in involvement. An activity limitation is a challenge a person encounters when accomplishing an act or job; a participation limitation is an issue a person with a disability experiences when engaging in different activities in life. It is not just a health issue; it is a complex matter that reflects the interface between an individual's body and the society in which s/he resides (Goffman, 1963). Disability challenges our basic concepts of nature, the world, society and, most significantly, our own bodies and minds. Some examples of disabling conditions are spinal cord injury, cerebral palsy, blindness, voice and deafness disorders, amputation, mental retardation, autism, Polio, and muscular dystrophy, to name a few etc. perceptives and

opinions go beyond seeing disability as an individual restriction; it is a social issue emerging from social discrimination and stigma (Connel,1995).

There is no single, unified definition of disability in India. This lack of uniformity is a critical problem because, without consonance among policymakers, recipients will never receive their due. Disability definitions cannot be expressed at face value alone, as the lived realities of disabled people are similarly essential for understanding disability. The archaic word 'disabled' derives from the phrase 'cap in hand' - often presumed to be the only feasible means of charity living. Society analyses the wheelchair, the cane, the hearing aids and the speech synthesizer rather than the individual, thereby establishing an unseen attitude barrier based on inert and over-determined causation, which could be the biggest obstacle facing individuals with disabilities in society as a whole. (<http://www.eveway.org//q=uttar-Pradesh>).

In general, there also exists a gendered differentiation while defining disability. Male disability implies that he is perceived to lack strength or sexual ability, which are significant features that make him predominantly male. Female disability means she is considered unattractive, asexual and/or lacking in an idealized body form (Connell,1995; Fine & Asch,1988).

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative research design grounded in the Sociology of Disability and feminist sociological perspectives. The research is primarily based on secondary data analysis, in a way analysing the current policies with respect to disability and marriage. supplemented by theoretical interpretation to examine the intersection of disability, marriage, and stigma in India.

### **Research Design**

The study follows a descriptive and analytical approach, aiming to critically examine how social norms, cultural practices, and institutional frameworks shape the marital experiences of persons with disabilities, particularly women. The analysis is informed by the social model of disability, which shifts the focus from individual impairment to socially constructed barriers.

### **Data Sources**

The study relies on Government reports such as the Census of India (2011) and policy frameworks, including the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, reports from international organizations such as the WHO and the UN. Online articles, newspaper articles, and peer-reviewed journal articles, including recent work on women with disabilities and marriage. Existing literature on stigma, gender, and disability. Additionally, the present paper integrates insights from contemporary academic discussions on disability and marriage in India to contextualize evolving socio-cultural realities.

### **Method of Analysis**

A thematic analysis has been employed to identify key patterns such as Social stigma and marital exclusion, Gendered discrimination, Policy contradictions and Cultural norms surrounding marriage. These themes are interpreted within broader sociological debates on ableism, patriarchy, and social exclusion.

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

This study is anchored in the Sociology of Disability, drawing on interdisciplinary insights from feminist

theory, critical sociology, and disability studies to examine the relationships among disability, marriage, and stigma in India. The framework moves beyond biomedical explanations and situates disability within broader structures of power, culture, and social inequality.

### **Social Model of Disability**

The study adopts the social model of disability, which distinguishes between ‘impairment’ (a biological condition) and ‘disability’ (a socially constructed barrier) (Oliver, 2023). Unlike the medical model that locates disability within the individual body, the social model emphasizes how societal arrangements, such as physical, institutional, and attitudinal barriers, produce disability.

In the context of marriage, this perspective reveals that exclusion is not a consequence of impairment but of socially constructed norms of “ideal” bodies and roles. Marriage as an institution privileges productivity, reproductive capacity, and normative gender roles, thereby marginalizing persons with disabilities. Thus, disability becomes a product of structural exclusion rather than individual limitation.

### **Disability, Social Stigma and Identity**

Stigma and discrimination from the community in which they reside are experienced by persons with disabilities. Most individuals look at them and treat them as unique. Persons with disabilities may find it hard to interact with members of society, if not checked, which can lead to both depression and self-pity. It is an oppositional framework to describe impairment as something which needs to be "overcome", and it's something that a person will continue to succeed "regardless". It indicates that to be disabled is a shameful thing, but it shows that if you try hard enough, it won't hold you back – that persons with disabilities who fail in life just have to blame themselves; they should also have tried harder, they should not have "given up", they should have had grit and determination.

The notion of stigma, as introduced by Goffman, is perceived as a traditional mark or blemish indicating ‘moral inferiority’ by the rest of society. He also indicated that ‘stigmatised’, for instance, a blind man, a dwarf, a disfigured person and a person with a mental illness are usually considered as not quite human. To Goffman, the application of stigma is the consequence of psychological variables and social activities around ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’. The use of stigma is a subject of oppression and exploitation instead of avoidance. He first defined three stigma categories: tribal identity (e.g. race, ethnicity), physical abnormalities, and individual personality defects (e.g. mental disease) (Disability limits marriage choices, May 11, 2011).

Thus, stigma is known as a social relationship of devaluation; it arose when a disabled person failed to meet the social expectations due to their physical identity and embodiment (Goffman, 1963).

### **Feminist and Intersectional Perspectives**

The World Bank reports that 20% of the poorest people in the world are suffering from one or the other form of disability and tend to be considered the most disadvantaged in their own communities. In India, as per the Census 2011, 26.8 million persons are identified as persons with disabilities, with approximately 44% being women ( Reddy & Sree, 2015). It is recognized that females with disabilities are doubly disadvantaged and excluded owing to their gender and disability.

The study draws upon feminist theory, particularly the work of Raewyn Connell (1995), to analyse how gender relations shape the experience of disability. Disability is not gender-neutral; rather, it is deeply embedded within patriarchal structures.

Women with disabilities experience intersectional marginalization, where gender and disability intersect to produce compounded disadvantage; They are perceived as asexual or unfit for marriage, their reproductive capabilities are questioned, and they face greater exclusion from family and social life. There is a distance between these so-called "normal" and the disabled. They are seen either as pitiable or as superhumans; the normal things of everyday life are not associated with them. "They are out of social things like dating", said Nidhi Goyal, a Mumbai-based disability activist. "In our society, a woman is supposed to be sarva gun sampanna. The same is not expected of a man. You find more men with disabilities in a relationship than women with disabilities," she added.

When the disability strikes a wife-mother, an especially challenging condition is expected to occur because they are the focus of the family around whom most of the significant home operations take place. The balance of all family members, as well as the stability of the family as a social unit, is severely jeopardized when her health is impaired, and she is unable to fulfil her usual function. Conflict and stress between family members are likely to happen in this sort of scenario; this may interfere with individual needs and normal satisfaction (Skipper & Hallenbeck, 1968).

Intersectionality highlights that disability cannot be understood in isolation; it interacts with gender, class, caste, and rural-urban divides. This layered marginalization explains why disabled women are often denied agency in marital decision-making and are subjected to heightened stigma (Connell, 1995).

### **Foucault's Analysis: Power, Body, and Normalization**

Drawing on Michel Foucault (1979), the body is understood as a site of power and regulation. Foucault's concept of normalization explains how societies construct standards of what is considered "normal" and "acceptable". Within Foucault's framework, Disabled bodies are positioned as "deviant", Institutions like family and marriage act as regulatory mechanisms and social norms discipline individuals into conforming to idealized bodily standards

Marriage becomes a disciplinary institution that reinforces bodily norms, excluding those who deviate from them. Disability, therefore, is not just a condition but a category produced through power relations and social control.

### **Indian Disability Scholarship and Context**

Indian disability scholars such as Anita Ghai (2002) emphasize that disability in India must be understood within specific socio-cultural contexts marked by caste, patriarchy, and family structures. Disability is often viewed through moral and religious lenses - as fate, karma, or divine punishment, which further reinforces stigma. The study also resonates with contemporary Indian research, highlighting: The invisibility of disabled women within both feminist and disability movements, the centrality of family in regulating marriage choices, and the persistence of ableist norms despite progressive legislation.

By integrating perspectives from stigma theory, feminism, intersectionality, and critical sociology, this framework demonstrates that disability in the context of marriage is not an individual issue but a deeply socially constructed phenomenon. It highlights how structural inequalities, cultural norms, and power relations collectively shape the marginalization of persons with disabilities, particularly women, within the institution of marriage.

### **Social status of marriage with the disabled in India**

Drawing from broader sociological theory, marriage is not merely a personal relationship but a social insti-

tution that reproduces norms, hierarchies, and inequalities. It regulates sexuality, reproduction, and social status.

In this sense, Marriage reinforces ableism by privileging “normal” bodies. It reproduces patriarchy by controlling women’s roles, and it sustains social exclusion by limiting the participation of disabled individuals

Thus, disability and marriage intersect at a critical juncture where social norms, power structures, and cultural values converge.

In India, marriages are governed by special marriage acts and by religious personal laws. According to that, a sound mind and the ability to understand the implications of marriage are a prerequisite for a valid marriage. This is found to be a major reason for stigmatizing people with disabilities in marriage ([http://Disability affairs. Gov.in/upload/upload files/files/first % 20 country %20 report % 20 final.Pdf](http://Disability%20affairs.Gov.in/upload/upload%20files/files/first%20country%20report%20final.Pdf)). The concern of marriage equality for the society with disabilities is strongly interlinked with the motion towards eugenics, where individuals with disabilities were not only sterilized against their will but also banned from marrying.

In India, indifference to the disabled runs deep within the culture, a prejudice that is even more pronounced in villages and small cities. The latest survey indicates that 59% of females and 48% of males refuse to marry someone with a physical impairment. Approximately 34% of females and 37% of males said it depended on the extent of impairment. Only 7% of females and 15% of males said they would marry a physically disabled person (Disability limits marriage choices, May 11, 2011).

Under Muslim law, however, an individual with a mental disability's marriage is valid if consent is provided by the guardian on behalf of the individual.

Unhealthy thinking, which is incurable or combined with a kind of behaviour and which is not sensible to expect the petitioner to remain with the respondent, is a normal strategy for allowing divorce. In rural India, where marriage is often a business transaction involving dowries, young women with disabilities are married off into the poorest families. Women who can’t labour in the fields are expected to bear children and end up in a government health system that is ill-equipped to treat them. Others end up with husbands who demand a steady stream of financial payments or even property from their families.

### **Government Assistance and Policies**

It is a well-known fact that in India, marriage between disabled and able-bodied persons is not encouraged; matches for the disabled are often made only with a person with a disability. This trend is a major obstacle to the inclusion of disabled people in the mainstream. To get around this problem, the government of India and multiple state governments provide the couple with a financial incentive if one of them is a disabled individual to get around this problem. The concept is to encourage capable individuals to enter into marriage with disabled individuals.

The recently established Telangana government is likely to offer the greatest incentive to marry an individual with a disability, providing the couple with Rs. 1,00,000. Disabled people must have a benchmark disability in order to take advantage of the financial incentive; that is, s/he must have a certified impairment of at least 40%. Equal financial assistance is also provided by the Madhya Pradesh government.

Odisha state government, Maharashtra and Goa governments offer Rs. 50,000 to a state resident if s/he chooses to marry a disabled person. Uttar Pradesh state government provides an incentive award of Rs. 14,000/- in the case of a female partner or both spouses are disabled. But if only the male partner is

disabled, then the amount is Rs. 11,000/- (<http://www.eveway.org/?q=uttar> [Prasesh\\_schemes](http://www.eveway.org/?q=uttar) persons\_welfaredepartment). Chhattisgarh government provides a financial assistance of Rs. 50,000 / - lump sum amount for the couple if either of them is PwD, and if both of them are disabled, a 1,00,000 / - lump sum amount is provided. Tamil Nadu government provides a concession to normal persons marrying locomotor differently abled persons: 1) A certificate of Appreciation, 2) Cash payment of Rs. 12,500/-, 3) National Savings Certificate for Rs. 12,500/-, 4) 8 grams of Gold Coin in 22 ct. purity. If either the differently abled person or the normal person has passed a degree/diploma, the marriage assistance amount is Rs. 50,000/- (for marriage expenses Rs. 25,000/- + NSC for Rs. 25,000/- + 8 gms of Gold Coin) (<http://www.Swavlambancard.gov.in/schemes/search>).

Andhra Pradesh marriage incentive is Rs. 1,00,000, to be given to either of the spouses who are differently abled, if a normal person marries a differently abled person (<https://apdascac.ap.gov.in/schemes/schemedetails/o>). However, some individuals raise doubts about this project; their argument is that such schemes can encourage capable individuals to get the incentive to marry financially stable disabled people just to get the incentive.

India's many online marriage sites, like Inclov, iMilap, getmeMarry and divyangjeevansathi.com, allow users to search for physically handicapped partners, giving the disabled a shot at marriage. A non-profit NGO, Narayan Seva Sansthan, arranged free "mass weddings" of 52 couples with disabilities in Udaipur on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2018. The aim of these weddings is to find partners for low-income people with disabilities, who ordinarily would be marginalized in Indian society (Cordeiro A, 2014, livemint).

Further, the Supreme Court of India has upheld the right of motherhood of a girl with an intellectual disability who desires to keep her child. The Court took note of the UNCRPD (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), "in respecting the personal autonomy of mentally retarded persons with regard to the reproductive choice".

While in some instances such statements could be true, we think providing economic support to the newly married pair is a good idea. The disability may interfere with one's earning capacity; a little economic support can give the new family a quick start (Incentive for marrying a disabled person in India, Lalit Kumar, 25 September 2018).

### **The contradiction of policies for the disabled**

To improve the status of people with disabilities, society and government have taken some steps that may be against the law and practices. For example, dowry is illegal in India since 1961, but remains commonplace with tragic consequences. As stated above, the Telangana government offers dowry in the form of an incentive to marry a disabled person. This is in contrast to the law, which makes dowry illegal. A school textbook in the state of Maharashtra caused an uproar because it stated that it was more difficult for "ugly and handicapped" girls to get married, and the bridegroom's family would demand higher dowries in such cases.

In 2005, an AC Nielsen and World Bank study surveyed more than 1,400 households in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, which believed the disability was "a curse of God." Almost half believed an adjustment in dowry was necessary if a disabled person married a non-disabled spouse. Women are among the worst hit (Incentive for marrying a disabled person in India, Lalit Kumar, 25 September, 2018).

### **Examples of the Happy Married Life of Persons With Disabilities**

1. The famous actor Abhishek Bacchan had suffered from this tormenting disability, dyslexia and

has successfully overcome it and lived a happy life.

2. Sudha Chandran is proof that nothing can dampen the spirit if someone is passionate and unwilling to be defeated. A highly talented dancer, Sudha, who the country knows for her famous character "Ramola" in a popular daily soap, lost her leg to a disastrous bus accident, followed by hospitalisation and ensuing negligence. She went on to become an inspiration for the country when she mastered classical dancing, despite being an amputee.
3. Rana Daggubati, a critically acclaimed actor, famous for his role in the Baahubali series, is actually blind in one eye. He showcased immense courage, which turned into admiration, as he had not let his impaired vision be any deterrent in carving out a successful path for himself as an actor.
4. Pramila, who had quite a severe polio condition, met Vijay in the hospital, and they hit it off. Her parents died young, and her conservative grandparents were starkly opposed to their union. Regardless, after a long time, they accepted, and the two got married, proving there is hope for everyone.
5. Kamlesh Vaishnav and Geeta are a couple, both of whom have polio, who didn't just have to face the parental stance against natural love but also had to overcome their crippling polio to see each other. They met in a hospital, fell in love, and finally got married ([https://www.scoopwhoop.com/inothernews/Indian.couples](https://www.scoopwhoop.com/inothernews/Indian.couples_with_real_problems;) with\_real\_problems; [https://www.cosmopolitan.in/celebrity/news/a10742/7-celebrities\\_who\\_successfully-overcome\\_their-disabilities](https://www.cosmopolitan.in/celebrity/news/a10742/7-celebrities_who_successfully_overcome_their_disabilities))

There are many more courageous stories of people with disabilities that society should admire. Disabilities come in all shapes and forms, and while it is important to work on bettering people in every way possible, it is all the more important not to let disabilities define disabled.

## Conclusion

People with disabilities, from the minute they are born or acquire their disability, are smothered in coats of stigma, prejudice, and misconceptions. This is because, despite progressive legislation on disability rights in India, societal attitudes are locked in the ancient past. There are millions of people who have never “seen” persons with disabilities, much less engaged with them. All derogatory remarks or taunts and thoughts reflect some commonly held beliefs in our society: the belief that there is a hierarchy of what persons with disabilities can want, ask and feel, the belief that there are things that they should do, and there are ‘normal’ things that ‘normal people do’, the belief that they need to always negotiate. Society needs to change its perception related to disability and stigma, despite the fact that more actions and practices are in action to propel out the ancient thinking of society. Time has considerably changed since the marriage laws were framed. It is now possible to treat almost all cases of mental disorders and many more disability, except for a tiny fraction, who are able to lead normal lives. Therefore, it is quite unreasonable and discriminatory to consider mental disorders as a disability to marriage.

Everybody should aim to change the negative societal attitude toward disability, which plays an important role in their stigmatization. Mention of words like “recurrent attack of insanity”, “inability to live a normal life or procreation of a child” is derogatory and stigmatizing. It is necessary to change all these. The law should play a facilitative role in society and should not discourage persons from seeking treatment for disability. Marriage is an important event in one's life, and in the Indian context, it is also a religiously sanctioned necessity. It is unreasonable to deny this right to persons with disabilities.

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