

Persons with Disabilities: Social Perceptions of the Meitei in Manipur

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Abstract: The concept of disability and how a society will respond to it depends on the beliefs and perceptions of the society. Such beliefs and perception are shaped by society's cultural values and norms. Attempt has been done to highlight the people's perceptions and attitude held among the Meitei's towards Persons with Disability (PWD). Data were collected by using both quantitative and qualitative method. It has been found that perceptions regarding disability were deeply rooted in the mind of the Meitei people that still in this modern and scientific age people strongly holds the false perception regarding the causes of disability which has been linked to the old traditional cultural beliefs. It is also found that religion and caste status have favourable attitude towards PWD despite the fact that religions followed by the Meitei represent disability negatively.

Keywords: culture, disability, Meitei, perception, religion.

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I. INTRODUCTION

'Disability' is a burning issue in the whole world. Though, it is a natural part of the human experience which can be due to illness, injury, genetic or aging. It can affect anyone at any time regardless of age, gender, culture, ethnicity, or social class (Baffoe, M., 2013).

The English word 'disabled' usually denotes somebody who is unable to use his or her body properly (Talle,1995). The Disability convention defines persons with disabilities (PWD) as those who have long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. International Classification of Functioning (ICF) has defined disability as "the outcome or result of a complex relationship between an individual health condition and personal factors, and of the external factors that represent the circumstances in which the individual lives" (WHO,2001). Ingstad and Whyte (1995) argues that "disability implies a deprivation or loss of a needed competency or qualification, in contrast to inability, which suggests an inherent lack of power to perform a thing". This is how disability is defined and explained from the medical point of view; but a simple layman does not know such definition. To a layman, the idea of disability is connected to culture which means that the concept of disability and how a society will respond to it depends on the beliefs and perceptions of the society. Such beliefs and perception are shaped by society's cultural values and norms.

Anthropologist are taking interest towards the study of disability as it is a socially and culturally constructed category with important implications about how societies differentially distribute power (Kasnitz & Shuttleworth,2001). That is variation in the treatment of the so called normal's or able-bodied towards PWD excluding them from the basic human rights, holding negative attitudes towards them which paved way for stigma and discrimination. Moreover, perception of disability varies between societies and even within multi-ethnic ones (Nicolaisen, 1995). Coleridge also has given the importance in studying the culture since views of disability varies from culture to culture. As "Culture consist of a set of meanings that interpret the world in a particular way" (Whyte, 1995). So, here comes the importance of the anthropological study of disability as the lens of culture may be applied to disability in a variety of ways: Disability may be considered a culture, culture may be considered disability (Cunningham, 2009). Nicolaisen gives the importance of looking into the ways in which societies define and conceptualize personhood and to analyze the cultural perception of the biological constitution of human being, in order to fully grasp the meaning of disability in a given culture and its social significance.

This paper tries to highlight the people's perceptions and attitude held among the Meitei's towards Persons with Disability (PWD).

II. MATERIAL AND METHOD

Data were collected by using both quantitative and qualitative method. For qualitative method, an unstructured interview was conducted to the cultural specialists, *Maiba*. And for quantitative method, a survey questionnaire was taken from 964 individuals from six Meitei field site viz. Uripok (urban), Iroisemba (peri-urban), Saiton (rural), Leimaram (rural), Sekmai (urban) and Andro (peri-urban).

Here, attitude towards disabled person (ATDP) scale form was used which contain ten statements in which the subject/participants has to respond to each item on a five point likert scale which range from strongly agree to strongly disagree from where a mean score is derived. The mean score of the present sample is 40.18 with standard deviation of 3.62. From here, ATDP score was interpreted on three categories which ran as follows

Sl.no.	Category	Score
1	Negative	0-36
2	Neutral	37-44
3	Positive	45 and above

Analysis of data was done by using SPSS in which chi-square test was done to see the association between demographic variable such as caste- status, religion and residence (urban, peri-urban and rural) and attitude towards person with disability as attitude can be influenced by demographic variables.

III. DISABILITY IN MEITEI SOCIETY

The Meitei word which is used to refer and address the PWD is *Shoinaiba* (deformity), *Mimannadraba* (literally speaking, “not same with other person”) or *Namma-shoiba*. A person with any form or level of mental illness is referred to as *Angaoba* (mad person). They are also addressed in terms of specific disability they suffer from like *Mit-tangba* (visually challenge), *Na-pangba* (deaf). Sometimes people also used to refer PWD as *Khongtek-Mitang* (limb & eye deformed). Such language which is used to refer PWD creates a sense of constraints among the able-bodied and PWD depicting them as second-class citizens who are tainted, sick and less than whole (Hebl & Kleck, 2003).

Therefore, every culture poses a challenge to preconceived notions and forces us to ask anew how disability is understood, conceptualized, and dealt with (Nicolaisen,1995). Thus, Meitei society has its own way of concept towards the causes of PWD. As for instance a disabling condition in one society may not be so in another society. Each and every culture has its own influences of imparting our consciousness about everything which include attitude towards disability. It contributes knowledge about what is meant by abled-body and what disabled body. Therefore, going through the root of socio-cultural norms is important so as to understand what constitute a disability. We all know that culture is not static, it change through time but every changes taking place in a society rarely abandon everything they know and everything they practice; some remnants of it always remain. This is the main reason why even though there is enough scientific knowledge of the origin and causes of a disability nowadays, but still the Meitei follows the traditional old concept of defining disability.

The Meitei speak a Tibeto-Burman language. Racially, they belong to Southern Mongoloid with some admixture of Caucasoid race. The origin of Meitei is still controversial. Meitei generally follows two types of religion. One is majority of the Meitei population embrace Manipuri Vaishnavism whose origin is of Bengal. Their religion is synthesis of Hinduism with their traditional religion having partly different features than Hinduism elsewhere. And the other one is Sanamahism (traditional religion). Nowadays due to modernization many of the Meitei has started adopting Christianity as their religion. Before the coming of Hinduism there was no caste system in Manipur, but the caste system found in Manipur is very different from that of the mainland Indian caste system. In other words, it can be said that Meitei society is divided on the type of religion which the people follows. Brahmins are those who are the Meitei Bamons (Brahmins of Indian origin), Kshetriya are those Meitei’s who follows Vaishnavism and for those who follow Sanamahism there is no-caste. And the Loi’s are recognized as Scheduled Caste in Manipur. Therefore it can be said that religion acts as a caste marker in the Meitei society.

The following table will show the relation between caste status and attitude towards persons with disability.

Table 1. Association between Caste Status and Attitude towards Person with Disabilities

Attitude	Negative	Caste Status			Total	Chi-square	p-value
		Brahman	Kshetriya	Scheduled Caste			
		Neutral	61 (78.2)	419 (70.9)			
	9 (11.5)	91 (15.4)	38 (19.6)	138 (16)			

	Positive	8 (10.3)	81 (13.7)	21 (10.8)	110 (12.7)		
Total		78 (100)	591 (100)	194 (100)	863 (100)		

Figure in the parentheses indicate percentage

A glance of Table1. highlights the influence of caste status on attitude held by the people towards PWD. As can be seen from the table that neutral attitude are held most by the Brahmin (78.2%) followed by Kshetriya (70.9%). Whereas it can also be seen that negative attitude are held most by Scheduled caste (19.6%) while, positive attitude are held most by Kshetriya (13.7%). However, the association of caste status with attitude towards PWD analyzed by chi-square revealed non-significant association.

IV. PERCEPTIONS ABOUT DISABILITY IN MEITEI SOCIETY

As explained above that religion is part of the culture and since time immemorial the problems of PWD have been explaining in terms of divine punishment, Karma or moral failing. The Greek and the Romans believed that babies born with congenital deformities were regarded as signs that their parents had displeased the Gods (Braddock & Parish, 2001). Among the Punan Bah, a mother is blamed if the child happens to become blind as there is a strong belief that she might have allowed her husband or any other man to have intercourse with her during her pregnancy (Nicolaisen, 1995). Muslims see disability in the context of Qadar/ Kismat, or Fate (Hasnain et al, 2008). Whereas, Buddhism and Hinduism have the belief system that disability is due to the Karma of the past or present lives. Likewise, there are many astounding perceptions and beliefs regarding the causes of disability in the Meitei society. First of all, as there is influence of Hinduism in the Meitei society the causes of Disability is also belief to be the result of one's Karma. Karma refers to the totality of our actions and their concomitant reactions in this and previous lives, all of which determine our future. The conquest of Karma lies in intelligent action and dispassionate reaction. Here the rule of Karma is *Nije karma phol (what you are is the result of your past deed)*. The concept used here is the cause and effect. There are also general beliefs among the Meitei that a person is disabled because of the sins committed by parents or by other family members. It is here, that the Meitei strictly built up certain taboos which has to be observed by young men and women so as to prevent from becoming disabled

- *Charou Mungnaba* (Marriage with close relatives) is not allowed by the Meitei society as there is beliefs that such marriage will lead to death of the child or their will be increased in birth defect. For example, uncle's son marrying aunties daughter and vice versa.
- Marriage within same *Yek* (Clan) or clan endogamy is not allowed as there is belief that the child borne from such marriages will become disable or their life expectancy will be very short. There are seven *Yek* in Meitei society they are *Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Khaba-Nganba* and *Sarang-Leishangthem*. So, the Meitei prefer clan exogamy. And also among the Meitei-Brahmin marriage between same *Gotra* is also not allowed.

There are also certain taboos which married couple should follow

- Killing of animals or fish by the pregnant woman or husband is forbidden as Meitei beliefs that it will cause disability to the offsprings. Such similar cases are also found among the Punan Bah where the inability of a child to hold his head upright was blamed on the child's father as he has killed a tortoise by cutting off its head during his wife's pregnancy (Nicolaisen,1995).
- Meitei prohibit stealing of ginger or turmeric by pregnant women because of the belief that such behavior will caused the child to be born as polydactyl.
- In the Meitei society, worshipping of Lord *Jagannath*, Lord *Narsimha* and Goddess *Kali* is prohibited when women are pregnant. The Deity which I have mentioned above looks fearful therefore, people believed that if, by mistake, the women became frightened the child to be born will resemble with that of these Gods or Goddess.
- Pregnant women are also not allowed to worship *Umang Lai* (Cardinal Deity). The reason hiding behind is that, the body structure of *Umang Lai* is not complete meaning that it consists of only the face and all other body parts missing. Therefore people believed that seeing *Umang Lai* will make the baby to be born as *Mee-oi shudaba* (incomplete person).
- Teasing to a monkey by pregnant women is also a taboo as there is belief that the child will resemble with that of the monkey.

- If the husband of pregnant women roots out bamboo shoot, it is believed that the whole body of the child will bear hair.

Beliefs about the cosmic intervention of the malevolent and the benevolent vis-a-vis the possession by the spirit also plays a significant role in the conceptualisation of disability (Mehrotra, 2006). In Meitei society, a disability relating to mental problem is believed to be the result of black magic done by others to harm the family members. It is also believed to be the result by the possession of evil spirit. The Meitei also believes that *Sharei-houba* (epilepsy) occur when the person happens to meet an evil spirit usually referred to as *Shahing-Ngahing- Shabok -Ngabok*. In such situation they seek help from the *Maibas or Maibis* to perform certain rituals in order to cast away the evil spirit. Such are the beliefs held by the Meitei society. The following table will also show the association between religion and attitude held towards person with disability.

Table 2. Association between Religion and Attitude towards Person with Disabilities

Attitude	Religion	Religion			Total	Chi-square	p-value
		Hinduism	Christian	Sanamahism			
Negative		136 (16.1)	2 (10.5)	15 (14.9)	153 (15.9)	2.32 ^{NS}	0.67
Neutral		602 (71.3)	13 (68.4)	76 (75.2)	691 (71.7)		
Positive		106 (12.6)	4 (21.1)	10 (9.9)	120 (12.4)		
Total		844 (100)	19 (100)	101 (100)	964 (100)		

Figure in the parentheses indicate percentage.

An examination of the table 2, Illustrates that among the religion, positive attitude were held most by Christian (21.1%), while 16.1 percent of the people who follows Hinduism held negative attitude the most and 75.2 percent Sanamahism holds neutral attitude.

However, on statistical analysis, it was found that there is no significant association between religion and attitude towards PWD.

V. ATTITUDE TOWARDS PWD

PWD often faced negative attitude and behaviours as the barrier in achieving social equality. In the Meitei society, when a baby is born the first and foremost question that struck in the mind of the people is whether the baby is born with the normal human condition. The belief system and the knowledge of disability imparted by the Meitei society towards PWD leads to the development of stigma and discrimination towards PWD. Stigma develops out of an initial, universally, held motivation to avoid danger, followed by perception of characteristics that promote threat, and accompanied by a social sharing of these perceptions with other (Strangor & Crandall, 2000). Such social stigma results in low self-esteem making the life of PWD live in a meaningless lump of flesh in community life (Crocker & Quinn, 2000). The traditional belief system regarding disability which has been transmitted from one generation to another through cultural and religious processes made the people of Meitei society to avoid PWD including parents helping in the development of negative attitude towards PWD. With urbanization attitude of the people are changing and the following table will show the influence of residence on the attitude towards person with disability

Table 3. Association between residence and attitude towards persons with disability

Residence	Attitude	Attitude			Total	Chi-square	p-value
		Negative	Neutral	Positive			
Andro		2 (5.7)	28 (80.0)	5 (14.3)	35 (100)	21.89*	0.016
Sekmai		8 (12.5)	52 (81.3)	4 (6.3)	64 (100)		
Leimaram		28 (26.7)	65 (61.9)	12 (11.4)	105 (100)		
Iroisemba		33 (19.3)	111 (64.9)	27 (15.8)	171 (100)		

	saiton	31 (14.7)	158 (74.9)	22 (10.4)	211 (100)
	Uripok	51 (13.5)	277 (73.3)	50 (13.2)	378 (100)
Total		153 (15.9)	691 (71.7)	120 (12.4)	964 (100)

*Significant at 0.05 level of probability

Figure in the parentheses indicate percentage

A close view of the table 3 presents the influence of the residence on attitude towards PWD. Here, it can be easily seen that all the six residence holds neutral attitude the most. About 81.3 percent of Sekmai holds neutral attitude the most in compared to the other five residence. Positive attitude are held most by Iroisemba (15.8%) whereas, negative attitude are held most by Leimaram (26.7%) However, Chi-square analysis revealed that there was a significant association between residence and attitude towards person with disability at 5 level of significance as indicated by p-value (p= 0.016).

So, there is a significant difference between the residence and attitude towards person with disability which means that people's attitude towards PWD are in one way or other shaped by the place in which they are residing.

In the Meitei society, seeing PWD or making them join in any auspicious ceremony were believed to bring bad luck and such attitude were also placed towards the parents who have given birth to the disabled child. For example, they are not allowed to participate in *Apokpa Khurumba* (worshipping of ancestral deities) which is done to bring prosperity and well being of the family because of the belief that their presence might bring bad luck to the whole family. The term *Apokpa* originates from the Meitei's or Manipuri word *Pokpa* which means to beget, breed or to give birth to. The *Apokpas* are treated as domestic gods in every household under the sole care of the immediate family circle.

In Marriage ceremony, there is a process called *Jatra* in which the women folk have to carry certain things which has to be filled up in the *Phingairuk* (basket) which are to be taken to the house of the bride. In this *Jatra*, raw rice, different kinds of fruits, different kinds of vegetables etc. are taken for the welfare, prosperity and long life for the newly married couples and above all the most important factor that the Meitei society choose is that for carrying these *Phingairuk*, women who have given birth to baby boy and whose child is not disable are chosen because of the belief that by doing this good luck will shower upon the newly married couple. Such beliefs and practices clearly show how the Meitei society rejects PWD along with their parent and as a consequences helps in the development of the self-stigma towards PWD and courtesy stigma towards parents. Courtesy stigma are those "regarded by others as having a spoiled identity because they share a web of affiliation with the stigmatized" (Goffman,1963 cited in Birenbaum, 1970). This is the reason that parents used to hide children with disabilities in earlier time and still now such situation are also found. This shows that the world is very much limited for PWD and their family members as they are marginalized and shunned by the society (Baffoe M.,2013).

VI. CONCLUSION

From the findings it is known that past perceptions about disability has made a good understanding of PWD far beyond the individual characteristics of the person and places them in the framework of a wider social-cultural system (Devlieger,1995). Various old aged cultural beliefs and perceptions regarding disability were highlighted in this paper which has been deeply rooted in the mind of the Meitei people that still in this modern and scientific age people strongly holds the false perception. It is also found that religion and caste status have favourable attitude towards PWD despite the fact that religions followed by the Meitei represent disability negatively. Whereas findings have shown that there is association between residence and attitude towards PWD, this may be because of the difference in development between urban, rural and semi-urban in terms of education, awareness programme done by government and NGO's etc. Society is undergoing social change but people living in it rarely abandon the traditional knowledge system regarding disability. Needless to say, we still have a long way to go to impart knowledge about what actually disability means and without knowing the cultural explanations of disability any development programme taken up by the government or by NGO's will fail. Coleridge (2000) also points out that for inclusion of PWD, there is need for changing the perception of the people, not the culture. Through this people's behaviour towards PWD can be change.

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