Public Humanities (2026), 2, e72, 1–7
doi:10.1017/pub.2026.10180

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

AN EDITORIAL

Disability Justice in India

Rimjhim Bhattacherjee[1] and Nandini Ghosh[2]

[1]Department of English, Udaynarayanpur Madhabilata Mahavidyalaya, India and [2]Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, India
Corresponding author: Rimjhim Bhattacherjee; Email: rb.udaynarayanpur@gmail.com

(Received 31 December 2025; revised 15 April 2026; accepted 16 April 2026)

Over the past few decades, increasing attention has been given to the issue of disability in India. According to the Census of India (2011) and the 76th round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) (2018), of the country's total population of 1.21 billion, 26.8 million people (2.21%) are disabled. The data reveal a gender disparity, recording a higher prevalence of disability among men, with 15 million (56%) being male and 11.8 million (44%) being female. Disabled people often have intersecting minority identities—2.45 percent of India's disabled population belongs to the Scheduled Castes (SC), 2.05 percent to the Scheduled Tribes (ST), and 2.18 percent to minority groups other than SC/ST. A stark rural–urban divide can also be observed in the disabled population, with 69 percent of persons with disabilities residing in rural areas, while only about 31 percent are urban dwellers.[1]

Disability justice in India begins with acknowledging the ubiquity and complexity of disablement. Disability is present in the form of congenital conditions in India, but it is also actively produced and exacerbated through structural neglect and intersectional subaltern positionalities. The term "disability justice" was coined in the mid-2000s by the Sins Invalid, a collective of queer, disabled women of colour. Foremost, it grounds disability theory and activism in intersectionality. Disability justice advocates assert, following Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Disability activism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit." Sins Invalid laid out 10 principles of disability justice. Together with intersectionality, it insists on leadership by those most impacted; anti-capitalist politics; cross-movement solidarity; recognising wholeness; sustainability; commitment to cross-disability solidarity, inter-dependence; collective access; and collective liberation.[2] Disability justice is thus not only a framework but also a method. It does not merely question what disability looks like but how it is practised. Disability justice also reframes disability as a public question rather than a purely academic concern. Disability is produced, lived, and contested in homes, schools, streets, hospitals, digital platforms, and protest sites. It is governed by law and policy but also by culture, affect, technology, and everyday interactions.

[1] See "Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan) in India – A Statistical Profile: 2021" 2021; "Persons with disabilities in India" 2020; "Population Enumeration Data" 2011.

[2] See Sins Invalid 2016.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10180 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1. Why disability justice? Why disability justice in India? And why now?

The urgency of these questions culminated in a conference we organised in Kolkata in November 2024. We sought to understand what "disability justice" means for stakeholders in India—people with disabilities, practitioners, NGO workers, care workers, and those engaged in academic work on disability. Active interactions among participants from varied fields and locations of knowledge form the intellectual and political wellspring of this themed issue of *Public Humanities.*

Public Humanities provides a space for bringing together the situated knowledges of scholars, activists, caregivers, and disabled people themselves as producers of discourse. It creates space for the "pursuit of justice…informed by…pursuit of truth," where "struggles against maldistribution and misrecognition" are "joined with struggles against misrepresentation."[3] The articles in this issue approach disability not as specialised theory or policy domain but as a relational, political, and ethical concern. They question the fixity of disability ideations and open it up as a site of contestation where meanings of vulnerability, access, autonomy, and dignity are constantly negotiated. The essays attempt to capture the multifarious ways in which disability justice can be perceived and understood in Indian contexts.

While often framed through access to material benefits, resources, and services, disability in/justice in India remains complex, intersectional, and inflected by the particularities of lived experiences, stressing the embeddedness of these inequities. NSS and Census Data in India indicate that only 13 percent of its disabled population has secondary education, with just 5 percent being graduates or above, and also record high levels of illiteracy among the rural disabled population, revealing inadequate access to education for a vast majority.[4] Of further concern, approximately 54 percent of children with multiple disabilities and 50 percent of those with mental illness in India never attended educational institutions.[5] Yet such exclusions cannot be fully understood through enrolment and literacy statistics alone. Senjuti Basu's contribution demonstrates that access to education is deeply entangled with care arrangements within families, where care relations themselves become sites through which access to education, labour, and mobility are negotiated or foreclosed. As regards labour, the Census of India 2011 found that only 36 percent of the aggregate disabled population are workers.[6] Disabled people in India routinely experience diminished earning capacity, attributable to factors such as limited access to employment, reduced investment in human capital, discrimination in hiring, and lower wages. At the same time, they are often compelled to incur additional expenses for support needs and healthcare in order to achieve a standard of living comparable to that of their nondisabled counterparts. Here, Amartya Sen's conceptualisation of the "earning handicap" and "conversion handicap" is worth recalling.[7] Sen observes that disabled people experience greater challenges in securing and retaining employment than nondisabled people and are likely to receive lower wages. He terms this "earning handicap." The "conversion handicap," in turn, signifies the economic disadvantage wherein disabled people struggle to convert income into a satisfactory standard of living owing to disability-related costs. In sum, where they need more, they are often paid far less, pointing to an inequitable socio-economic order.

[3] Wilson and Bulaitis, 2025, 2; Fraser, 2005, 11.
[4] See "Persons with disabilities in India" 2020; "Population Enumeration Data" 2011.
[5] See "Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan) in India - A Statistical Profile: 2021" 2021.
[6] "Population Enumeration Data" 2011.
[7] Sen 2004.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10180 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Provisions in terms of state aid are also dismal; 76.4 percent of persons with disabilities in India report receiving no assistance whatsoever, marking a significant failure of state support systems. Many disabled people require state aid for survival, yet they remain unable to access it. This situation highlights systemic barriers, including a lack of infrastructure, financial constraints, limited awareness, and accessibility of services, which prevent many disabled people from obtaining essential support for their well-being.[8]

Justice, as ever, announces itself most forcefully in the presence of its opposite. In India, we observe that the bodies, livelihoods, and identities most consistently warped by injustice are those marked as disabled. Disability in India has historically been formulated through three major paradigms: medical, regulatory, and welfare. During the colonial period, multiple understandings of disability gave way to its classification as abnormality and deficiency. Colonial medical governance focused on the enumeration and segregation of disabled bodies according to Western medical standards, rendering disabled people objects of cure and containment rather than subjects of rights.[9] Post-independence policies largely retained the status quo, folding disabled people into a welfare model that perceived them as "dependents" of family and state. Disabled people remained largely absent from debates on citizenship, labour, and political participation.[10]

Disability activism in the late twentieth century effected a major shift with its challenge to medical and charity models; disabled people and organisations like the National Federation for the Blind insisted on the reframing of disability in India as socially and systemically produced.[11] Legislative interventions such as the Persons with Disabilities (equal opportunities, protection of rights, and full participation) Act (1995) and the Rights for Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act (2016) drew from activism to gradually enforce disability rights, autonomy, and reasonable accommodation. Yet, as Allen Ugargol's article argues, there remains a wide breach between rights and justice. Progressive legislation is undermined by weak enforcement, bureaucratic red tape, and lack of political will. The Supreme Court's judgement in *Rajive Raturi v. Union of India* (2024) exposed this collective failure in its assertion of disability as a prerequisite right rather than an aspirational goal. Without access to education, employment, and healthcare, civic participation remains ostensibly theoretical. Disability justice emerges at this impasse between rights and justice.

Thus, injustice today cannot be located solely in spectacular acts of violence or overt discrimination (although the world continues to witness both in shocking measure). It is equally sustained through the "slow violence" of ordinary, routinised exclusions: buildings without ramps, schools that refuse reasonable accommodation, institutionalised regimes of "care" that disregard autonomy and self-respect, epistemic erasure and economic systems that normalise exhaustion. Exclusions predicated on disability often fail to register as injustice because "compulsory able-bodiedness" routinises them, making violations appear inevitable. Rob Nixon's postulation of "slow violence" is instructive here—not because disability injustice is invisible, but because it is so familiar that it ceases to shock.[12] Over time, however, its effects become devastating.

[8] Ghosh and Bhattacherjee 2025, 73.

[9] See Ghosh 2016, "Introduction."

[10] See Ghai 2018, "Introduction."

[11] Chander 2016, 167.

[12] Drawing from Adrienne Rich's formulation of "compulsory heterosexuality," Robert McRuer coined the term "compulsory able-bodiedness" to draw attention to the social norming of able-bodiedness as natural, universal, and desirable, thereby marginalising disabled bodies and experiences. See McRuer 2006. Nixon uses the term "slow

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10180 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This terrain of injustice extends beyond material exclusion into the affective and representational life of disability, which heavily determines its socio-cultural construction. As Shilpaa Anand's contribution to this issue demonstrates, ridicule of disability in popular media is not a trivial or incidental phenomenon but a form of slow violence, a constitutive mode through which able-bodied normativity is reproduced. What is at stake here is not merely offence, but the normalisation of laughter as a social practice that disciplines disabled bodies, rendering them objects of humour rather than subjects of rights.

In India, disabled people exist at the intersection of slow violence and what Achille Mbembe calls "necropolitics"—regimes that determine who may live, who must endure precarity, and who can be allowed to die.[13] Hrittika Bhowmick's work demonstrates how such violence is imbued in the micro-organisation of everyday life. Accounts of disabled workers in so-called inclusive spaces reveal how labour is silently stratified—who is visible, who interacts, and who remains in the background—reproducing hierarchies even within spaces that claim inclusion. Similarly, studies of assistive technology show that disabled people are continually required to demonstrate competence, patience, and adaptability, producing what has been described as a "burden of proof" that extends from schooling into professional life. In such contexts, injustice inheres not only in the denial of access but in the constant demand to justify one's presence within it. Decisions about access, care, employment, representation, and mobility are, ultimately, decisions about whose lives are worth sustaining. Disabled people in India repeatedly find themselves positioned on the wrong side of these calculations.

To assert disability justice, then, is to register the truth of the systematic erasure of disability from public discourse. It is not to ask for better services within existing systems but to question and demand an overhaul of the systems themselves. It is to question moral and political blueprints that render disability both ubiquitous and marginal. Somsuvra Midya's essay, for instance, stresses that the question is not simply whether disabled people are included within labour markets, but how labour itself is defined and valued. Disabled people often find themselves in Indian urban spaces as visible yet unrecognised workers. In this context, disability justice cannot be limited to a demand for access to employment. It urges a revaluation of disabled people's labour, particularly in creative and cultural spaces, as meaningful forms of social contribution. Disability justice thus requires rigorous social, political, and academic work. In India, as elsewhere, it critiques the frameworks through which disability has long been understood, governed, and managed.

In so doing, disability justice builds on, but moves beyond, the social model of disability. The social model, which effected a "paradigmatic shift from methodological individualism to methodological holism," in its refusal to locate disability in impaired bodies rather than in social arrangements, remains foundational.[14] Yet, disability justice insists that exposure to disablement is not evenly distributed across the world. Postcolonial disability thinkers like Helen Meekosha and Karen Soldatic have charged contemporary disability studies with "scholarly colonialism" for failing to register transnational disability realities.[15] Even within a single nation, disability oppression cannot be understood through a single axis. People are rendered disabled not only by buildings without ramps but through the myriad ways in which the increasingly capitalist world system leaves traces on subaltern bodies. Gendered

violence" to theorise the attritional impact of environmental degradation, often invisibilised in capitalist systems, on marginalised populations. See Nixon 2011.

[13] See Mbembe 2001.

[14] Mladenov 2016, 1236.

[15] See Meekosha 2011, 668.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10180 Published online by Cambridge University Press

care economies, caste-based labour, environmental toxicity, displacement, war, poverty, and malnutrition all contribute to disablement. Disability justice demands that states are accountable to their people and envisions a world in which disabled people are no longer seen as the "negative of the positive," as inferior or defective.[16]

While India's policies on disability are admirable on paper, in reality, constitutional guarantees of equality have little bearing on everyday practices of exclusion, and welfare schemes coexist with persistent structural neglect. Disabled people in India often find themselves grappling with state assistance devoid of accountability; sympathy without power and tokenistic representation without voice. As Latika Khullar's essay shows, access to welfare, education, and institutional support is often experienced not as an enforceable right in India but as a contingent outcome of negotiation. Disabled people are frequently compelled to perform gratitude as a condition of receiving support. Gratitude, in this context, ceases to function as an ethical virtue and instead operates as a form of moral governance—an affective economy through which deservingness is assessed and access regulated. This shifts the burden of sustaining systems from institutions onto disabled individuals, who must continually demonstrate compliance, patience, and appreciation to remain eligible for support.

This moral economy of gratitude is closely tied to the gendered organisation of care. Nandana's work illustrates, through the Endosulfan-affected communities in Kerala, that the burden of care is systematically displaced onto women, particularly mothers, who are discursively produced as "sacrificial" figures. In the absence of robust state-supported care infrastructures, maternal labour is naturalised as inexhaustible and selfless, effectively masking what may be more accurately described as a form of state abandonment. What appears as care is often structured through "paternalistic carelessness"—a regime in which minimal state intervention coexists with expectations of total familial responsibility. Kaustabh Kashyap's contribution, in turn, unveils the unevenness of mental health infrastructure in India, particularly in India's Northeast, and how fragile networks of friendship and kinship offer tentative support in its absence. In the near absence of state support, disability care is a deeply fraught concern in India. Meghana Rao's work complicates the emphasis on marginality by examining caste and class privilege within disability care practices. She argues that privatised, long-term care for disabled people is available only to those with a certain amount of privilege. Yet, these systems of care entrench, rather than challenge, existing social hierarchies.

Even where state provisions exist, they are riddled with inadequacies. Sharannyo Banerjee and Nandini Ghosh's article shows how, despite drawing on international directives, children with disabilities are constrained in multiple ways, being pushed into state institutions where there is little scope for development. This is another form of slow violence, that is couched in the garb of care and protection, yet constitutes injustice at multiple levels—lack of family care, extreme care within institutions that disallows the development of a sense of self, and care devoid of any affective dimension—all of which point to a problem-solving rather than an inclusive approach to disability.

Disability justice in India thus demands a reorientation in which disability is no longer a problem to be managed but a locus from which certain failures of governance, development, and democracy become legible. It also demands that disability justice not be reduced merely to a regional application of a global framework. India is not just a location where disability

[16] Hughes et al. 2005, 269.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10180 Published online by Cambridge University Press

justice must be implemented; it is a context that expands the meanings and scope of disability justice. The unevenness of disability experience contingent on gender, caste, class, religion, sexual orientation, and geographical location within India urges ingenuous, perceptive theory and praxis.

The present moment compels such conversations. Economic upheavals, climate change, democratic backsliding, and the gradual withdrawal of state responsibility disproportionately affect disabled people. During crises such as pandemics, floods, and displacement, disabled lives are among the first to be rendered expendable and the last to be protected from consequences. Emergency planning often assumes universal able-bodiedness, where infrastructures are inaccessible, and care networks collapse under strain. In this context, disability justice is not "service begrudgingly offered to disabled people by nondisabled people who feel grumpy about it."[17] It is a collective demand articulated by those who recognise their conditions of life as unjust and intolerable.

The Kolkata conference, from which several of the contributions to this issue emerge, functioned, in many ways, as a site of praxis. Access was a central concern, and conversations about access began well before the event. Participants were invited to share access requirements, and organisers worked collectively to deliver. Moments of constraint and failure were treated as opportunities for learning. There was something beautiful, even powerful, about organisers and participants willingly working together to meet last-minute requirements and unanticipated glitches. It showed us that access cannot be treated like a checklist. It is a continuous practice and commitment to flexibility, humility, and responsiveness. Michele Friedner's roundtable discussion with stakeholders stressed this by inviting the audience to rethink access as a stable or universal category. Rather than a fixed technical standard, access emerges as relational, negotiated, and often improvised in practice. What might appear as "access failure" at the level of infrastructure may coexist with forms of interpersonal care, adjustment, and repair that make participation possible. Conversely, the language of accessibility—particularly in its institutionalised and Anglophone forms—may obscure the diverse vernaculars through which disabled people in India conceptualise comfort, inclusion, and belonging.

Disability justice in India is thus not confined to repair. It demands imagination, situatedness, and an insistence that the world can be more habitable. This is not a utopian denial of reality but a political critique of the present order as neither natural nor inevitable. Justice, then, is not merely the absence of injustice. It is the presence of systems that nurture all bodies and minds. Disability justice insists that no society can call itself just so long as it continues to exclude and disable its own people. This themed issue of *Public Humanities* is offered in that spirit. The essays collected here offer not a manifesto or definitive statement but extend an invitation to cogitate and debate disability justice in India, to theorise disability beyond inclusion, and to recognise the value of disabled people as epistemic subjects in this world and a world we might yet build.

Dr. Rimjhim Bhattacherjee is an Assistant Professor of English at Udaynarayanpur Madhabilata Mahavidyalaya, affiliated with The University of Calcutta. She holds a PhD in Development Studies from the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, where she was an ICSSR-IDSK Fellow. Her doctoral research focused on the representations of the sexualities of disabled people in Indian writing in English. Her areas of interest include disability studies, medical humanities, gender studies, and the politics of representation in literature and culture. Her recent publications include "Laughing at Empires: Pagla Dashu and the Politics of Madness", in the Palgrave

[17] Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 17.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10180 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Macmillan volume *Reimagining South Asia: Geopolitical Narratives from India* (2026), edited by Anindya Jyoti Majumdar and Souradeep Sen and "Disability, Sexuality and 'Cure' in Indra Sinha's Animal's People" (2025), in *Philosophy, Ethics and Humanities in Medicine*.

Dr. Nandini Ghosh is faculty at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata. She has completed her graduation from Presidency College Kolkata and Master's degree from the University of Calcutta. Her PhD titled "Gendered/ Disabled Lives: A study of Bengali Women" from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai was awarded in 2008. Her areas of interest are critical disability studies, sociology of gender, marginalisation, social exclusion, and social movements. She has published a monograph *Impaired Bodies Gendered Lives: Everyday Realities of Disabled Women* (Primus Books, 2016) and co-authored a book on domestic violence titled *The Violent Domestic: Law, its Practice, and Strategies of Survival*. She has edited a volume titled *Interrogating Disability in India: Theory and Practice* (Springer, 2016). She has co-edited two books, *Pratyaha Everyday Lifeworlds: Dilemmas, Contestations and Negotiations* (Primus, 2015) and *Caste and Gender in Contemporary India: Power, Privilege and Politics* (Routledge, 2018). She has published widely on issues around gender, disability, law, and politics in well-known peer-reviewed journals.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: R.B., N.G.; Writing - original draft: R.B.; Writing - review & editing: R.B., N.G.

Funding statement. This special issue draws on contributions from the two-day international conference *Disability Justice: Looking Beyond Ableist Frames* (November 2024), organised by the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK), with partial funding from the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR–Eastern Regional Centre) and IDSK.

Conflict of interest. The authors declare no competing interests.

References

Chander, Jagdish. 2016. "The Disability Rights Movement in India: Its Origin, Methods of Advocacy, Issues and Trends." In *Interrogating Disability in India: Theory and Practice*, edited by Nandini Ghosh, 167–82. Springer.

Fraser, Nancy. 2005. "Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World." *New Left Review* 36: 1–19.

Ghai, Anita. 2018. *Disability in South Asia: Knowledge and Experience*. Sage.

Ghosh, Nandini. 2016. *Interrogating Disability in India: Theory and Practice*. Springer.

Ghosh, Nandini, and Rimjhim Bhattacherjee. 2025. "Disability: Incidence, Prevalence and Severity." In *Disability and Rehabilitation*, edited by Monika Misra, 64–85. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU).

Hughes, Bill, Linda McKie, Debra Hopkins, and Nick Watson. 2005. "Love's Labours Lost? Feminism, the Disabled People's Movement and an Ethic of Care." *Sociology* 39 (2): 259–75.

Mbembe, Achille. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press.

McRuer, Robert. 2006. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. NYU Press.

Meekosha, Helen. 2011. "Decolonising Disability: Thinking and Acting Globally." *Disability & Society* 26 (6): 667–82.

Mladenov, Teodor. 2016. "Disability and Social Justice." *Disability & Society* 31 (9): 1226–41.

Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.

"Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan) in India – A Statistical Profile: 2021." 2021. *Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation*. Ministry of Planning. Government of India.

"Persons with disabilities in India." 2020. *NSS 76th Round*, July–December 2018. National Statistical Office. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. Government of India.

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. 2018. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Arsenal Pulp Press.

"Population Enumeration Data." 2011. *Census of India 2011*. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

Sen, A. 2004. "Disability and Justice." Keynote address to the Disability and Inclusive Development: Sharing, Learning and Building Alliances Conference, November–December.

Sins Invalid. 2016. *Skin, Tooth, and Bone: A Disability Justice Primer*. Sins Invalid.

Wilson, Jeffrey, R., and Zoe Hope Bulaitis. 2025. "What Is Public Humanities?" *Public Humanities* 1 (e17): 1–7.

Cite this article: Bhattacherjee, Rimjhim, and Nandini Ghosh. 2026. "Disability Justice in India." *Public Humanities,* 2, e72, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10180

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10180 Published online by Cambridge University Press