

Disability Life Writings in India: A Critical Discourse

Michael Bérubé asserts that disability “demands a story,” while David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that it is disability’s “very unknowability that consolidates the need to tell a story about it.” These critical insights foreground the narrative impulse that lies at the heart of disability life writings, which seek to articulate experiences often marginalized or rendered invisible within dominant cultural discourses. Unlike fictional representations that frequently rely on stereotypes, sentimentality, or metaphorical uses of disability, life writings introduce an experiential depth that challenges reductive portrayals and affirms lived realities. Yet, a striking paucity of disability autobiographies and memoirs is evident prior to the 1980s, especially in the Indian context. Apart from a few notable exceptions such as Helen Keller’s *The Story of My Life* (1903), Christy Brown’s *My Left Foot* (1954), and Ved Mehta’s *Face to Face* (1957), disability life narratives remained largely absent from literary and academic discussions. This absence itself points to the social silencing of disabled voices and the lack of enabling spaces for self-representation. However, the last few decades have witnessed a significant proliferation of disability life narratives, signaling a shift toward greater visibility, self-assertion, and critical engagement with issues of access, dignity, and rights.

This paper seeks to trace the evolving discourse of disability life writings in India by examining key autobiographical and memoiristic texts that foreground lived experiences of disability from multiple perspectives. It begins with a critical engagement with Ved Mehta’s autobiography, in which he recounts his struggles for education, accessibility, and inclusion within the Indian socio-cultural milieu. Mehta’s narrative exposes institutional neglect, social prejudice, and the emotional labor involved in negotiating a world designed for the able-bodied, while simultaneously asserting his intellectual agency and resilience. The paper then turns to *Climb Every Mountain: Radhika’s Story* (1997) by Indeera Chand, which documents the first ten years of Radhika’s life from 1972 to 1981. This memoir is particularly significant as it not only narrates the life of a child with Down syndrome but also foregrounds the lived experiences of a caregiver navigating stigma, taboo, and systemic inadequacies in India. Through Chand’s narrative, disability is revealed as a relational and social experience that deeply affects families and caregivers, challenging the notion of disability as an isolated or purely medical condition.

Recognizing that disability cannot be understood as a uniform or monolithic experience, this paper proposes to examine a broad spectrum of disability narratives by juxtaposing first-person accounts of persons with disabilities with caregiver perspectives. In doing so, it interrogates the politics and ethics of representation in disability life writings and argues that such narratives powerfully affirm individuality, agency, and selfhood, while also contributing meaningfully to disability activism and the larger struggle for social inclusion and justice in India.