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Challenging stigma, claiming space: The disability movement and social change in Kashmir

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Abstract

In Kashmir, the disability movement has grown to be a strong but little-researched force that is fighting systemic stigma, changing public opinion, and defending the rights and dignity of people with disabilities. Disability activism in Kashmir, which has its roots in a territory characterized by decades of political violence, socioeconomic instability, and a lack of institutional assistance, has developed from lone voices of suffering to group initiatives aiming at structural change. Although attitudes toward disability have historically been molded by cultural beliefs, conventional conventions, and ongoing marginalization, there has been a slow but notable change in recent decades. Social, institutional, and political spaces for people with disabilities have started to be reclaimed by civil society initiatives, parental associations, grassroots action, and rights-based organizations. However, this change is still unequal and calls for careful scholarly investigation. This research paper aims to investigate how the disability movement in Kashmir promotes opportunities for social involvement, legal acknowledgment, and policy reform while challenging ingrained stigma. It aims to investigate the methods, stories, and day-to-day challenges that people and groups use to negotiate citizenship, visibility, and dignity in a complicated socio-political setting. The study emphasizes the transformational potential of disability activism as a social movement and a site of identity construction by examining lived experiences, advocacy methods, and institutional reactions. Additionally, the study intends to record the empowerment discourses that are developing within the movement, especially those spearheaded by parents, youth leaders, and individuals with disabilities themselves, and how these contribute to more general societal change in the area. The rationale for undertaking this study arises from the scarcity of scholarly work on disability activism in Kashmir, despite its growing relevance in contemporary debates on rights, inclusion, and social justice. Existing literature on disability in India often overlooks regional disparities, conflict-affected contexts, and the specific challenges faced by Kashmiri communities. Moreover, disability continues to be framed within charity-based or medicalized paradigms, which obscure the political agency and collective strength of disabled individuals and their families. This research therefore addresses an important gap by foregrounding the voices and aspirations of disability activists in Kashmir and by situating their efforts within the larger struggle for equality and human dignity. Ultimately, the paper argues that challenging stigma and claiming space are central not only to the disability movement but also to the broader pursuit of a more inclusive and just Kashmiri society.

Keywords: Disability movement, social change, stigma, Kashmir, rights-based approach, inclusion, conflict and disability, advocacy, social participation, citizenship

Introduction

Due to rights-based movements, legislative changes, and the rising understanding that disability is a matter of social justice and human dignity, disability has become a more prominent social and political issue worldwide. In India, the focus has switched from charity and welfare to equality, autonomy, and full participation due to the rise of the disability rights discourse, particularly after the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 [42]. However, due to local sociocultural norms, economic circumstances, and political histories, the experiences and challenges of people with disabilities differ greatly throughout areas. Kashmir offers a special setting for researching the development of disability activism. With its protracted conflict, socioeconomic instability, and pervasive societal stigma, In light of this, the disability movement has become a vital arena where people with disabilities, their families, and civil society organizations fight against marginalization and promote inclusion, rights, and acknowledgment (Fleischer, D. Z., & Zames, F. 2011) [9].

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Disability in Kashmir has historically been viewed via philanthropic, religious, or medicalized perspectives, which has resulted in social isolation, reliance on family structures, and restricted access to public engagement, work, and education. Cultural fallacies, such as the idea that a disability is a burden, a heavenly test, or a punishment, have further diminished the visibility and agency of people with disabilities. Furthermore, the political unrest has exacerbated economic instability, taxed the healthcare system, and interrupted access to education in addition to increasing the number of people with impairments, especially those associated to conflict. Together, these factors establish a setting where stigma is both deeply ingrained and consistently perpetuated (Chang, H. 2024) [8].

In recent years, however, Kashmir has witnessed a gradual shift. Advocacy collectives, NGOs, parent-led organizations, and people with disabilities have started questioning discriminatory practices and calling for structural changes. Their activities include everything from accessible education programs and grassroots awareness campaigns to policy advocacy and legal actions. As a result, the disability movement in the area is not a single, cohesive battle but rather a collection of regional initiatives spearheaded by a variety of actors, all of whom want to increase the social, institutional, and political spaces available to people with disabilities. These initiatives signify a change from marginalization to participation, from invisibility to visibility, and from silence to assertion (Onyx, J., Armitage, L., Dalton, B., Melville, R., Casey, J., & Banks, R. 2010) [23].

This study aims to investigate how these new movements challenge stigma, question prevailing narratives, and provide significant areas for acknowledgment and inclusion. Through the examination of lived experiences, advocacy tactics, and institutional reactions, the study seeks to comprehend disability as a socially constructed injustice that may be changed by group efforts rather than only as an individual condition. Additionally, it places the disability movement in the context of Kashmir's larger sociopolitical environment, emphasizing how civil society dynamics, state policies, and violence influence the potential and constraints of social change (Iarskaia-Smirnova, E., Romanov, P., & Yarskaya, V. 2015) [12].

The study is significant since there is still very little research on disability in Kashmir. The role that activists, parents, and young leaders have in influencing public opinion and policy is not well documented in scholarly literature. The majority of the work now in publication concentrates on healthcare, rehabilitation, or disabilities associated to conflict, frequently ignoring the crucial aspect of collective agency. This study advances a more complex and comprehensive understanding of disability in Kashmir by emphasizing activism, stories of resiliency, and the pursuit of dignity. In the end, it makes the case that confronting stigma and securing space are crucial steps toward a more inclusive and fair society as well as tactics used by the disability movement (Borodina, S. 2022) [3].

Objectives of the Study
1. To examine the social, cultural, and structural stigma associated with disability in Kashmir.
2. To explore how disability activists, parents, and civil society groups challenge stigma and claim social, institutional, and political spaces.
3. To analyze the strategies, narratives, and advocacy practices employed within the disability movement.

Conceptual Framework
This study is grounded in three key conceptual lenses: the social model of disability, stigma theory, and social movement theory, which collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of how disability activism in Kashmir navigates structural, cultural, and political barriers.

Social Model of Disability
The social model of disability distinguishes clearly between impairment, which refers to a bodily or cognitive difference, and disability, which arises from the social, structural, and attitudinal barriers that restrict a person's participation in everyday life. This framework is particularly useful for understanding the lived realities of persons with disabilities in Kashmir, where challenges are not confined to medical conditions but are deeply embedded in the region's socio-political landscape. Inaccessible infrastructure such as public buildings without ramps, transport systems that exclude wheelchair users, and schools lacking inclusive facilities creates daily obstacles that limit autonomy and mobility. Discriminatory attitudes, rooted in stigma and misconceptions about disability, further marginalize individuals by shaping how families, communities, and institutions respond to their needs (Sisti, D. A. 2015) [31].

In the context of Kashmir, these barriers are intensified by ongoing conflict and political instability. Frequent shutdowns, curfews, and disruptions in essential services make access to healthcare, education, and rehabilitation inconsistent and unpredictable. Weak institutional support characterized by bureaucratic hurdles, shortage of trained professionals, and slow implementation of disability policies compounds the exclusion experienced by disabled individuals and their families. The social model helps shift the analytical lens away from viewing disability as an individual "problem" and instead emphasizes the responsibility of society, government, and systems to create enabling environments (Terzi, L. 2004) [36].

The study uses this approach to investigate how parent-led organizations, grassroots organizations, and disability activists in Kashmir fight these systemic injustices. They concentrate on promoting rights-based legislation, inclusive education, accessible public areas, and increased participation in decision-making. Their initiatives demonstrate the necessity of changing social norms, bolstering institutional frameworks, and making sure that disability rights are incorporated into larger development and peacebuilding agendas in order to achieve true inclusion. From this angle, the study emphasizes that full involvement for people with disabilities in Kashmir can only be attained when obstacles are removed and society becomes inclusive, egalitarian, and responsive (Thomas, C. 2008) [37].

Stigma Theory (Erving Goffman)
Stigma theory offers a potent lens through which to view how societies create negative connotations around particular identities, resulting in social marginalization, shame, and exclusion. Stigma in the context of disability is a cultural and structural phenomenon as well as an individual experience. Cultural views, religious interpretations, and low public awareness all play a complex role in shaping

stigmatizing attitudes regarding disability in Kashmir. Due to fear of gossip, social disgrace, or the belief that a handicap is a tragedy or a divine test, many families absorb these cultural judgments and feel forced to conceal or minimize the existence of a disabled family member. In addition to making it difficult for people to access healthcare, education, and community involvement, this secrecy exacerbates social isolation (Corrigan, P. W. (Ed.). 2014) [7].

Additionally, stigma appears at the institutional level, where public planning and decisions continue to place a low value on disability. Inadequate transmission of knowledge regarding disability rights, a lack of accessible infrastructure, and the underrepresentation of disabled people in decision-making bodies are all indicators of a larger societal devaluation of handicapped lives. Stigma theory sheds light on the fact that these structural failures are not coincidental but rather result from deeply rooted prejudices that influence societal perceptions and governance procedures (Kayama, M., & Haight, W. 2014) [15]. The study uses this theoretical framework to investigate how the Kashmiri disability movement actively challenges and eliminates stigma. To change public opinions, activists and organizations employ strategies like media involvement, storytelling, inclusive cultural events, and awareness campaigns. They aim to mainstream disability as a part of human diversity rather than a source of shame through public presence, whether through street protests, legislative campaigning, or internet platforms. Crucially, stigma theory also emphasizes how communal action helps people with disabilities reclaim their identity and dignity. By sharing their stories, taking part in rights-based campaigns, and holding institutions accountable, they turn stigma into empowerment. In order to change public perceptions and create a more compassionate, just, and inclusive Kashmir, this reclamation is crucial (Singh, P. 2003) [30].

Social Movement Theory

Social movement theory allows the study to interpret disability activism in Kashmir as a form of organized, collective struggle aimed at social and political change (Brooks, N. A. 1980) [4].

It focuses on

Resource mobilization: The notion of resource mobilization provides an explanation for how disability activists in Kashmir strategically create networks, obtain assistance, and organize young people and families to bolster their cause. To share knowledge, expertise, and organizational ability, activists work with NGOs, civil society organizations, educators, and medical specialists. They use parent networks, social media, and local community organizations to raise awareness and find volunteers. Campaigns, workshops, and online platforms that promote involvement and leadership engage young people. Through obtaining resources including financial support, assistive technology, educational opportunities, and legal counsel, the movement turns disparate individual concerns into concerted group action for inclusion and rights (Kasius, P. 1943) [14].

Framing processes: By changing the narrative from charity and welfare to rights, dignity, and empowerment, disability activists in Kashmir are able to alter public perception through framing processes. Activists emphasize autonomy, capacity, and equal citizenship rather than depicting people with disabilities as helpless beneficiaries of assistance. They expose disability as a social and human rights issue and contest pity-based viewpoints through campaigns, media involvement, and community discussions. Families, organizations, and legislators are encouraged by this reframing to see participation, accessibility, and inclusion as duties rather than favors. Activists create a more forceful, rights-focused disability movement and fortify group identity by changing the conversation (Koch, T. 2001) [16].

Political opportunity structures: The disability movement in Kashmir functions in a setting influenced by shifting civil society spaces, policy gaps, and regional instability can be explained by political opportunity structures. Consistent lobbying is hampered by ongoing fighting, periodic shutdowns, and administrative disturbances, but they also provide opportunities for demands based on rights. Policy gaps, such as inadequate RPwD Act implementation, inadequate accessibility planning, and bureaucratic obstacles, serve as focal points for mobilization. At the same time, new opportunities for visibility and interaction are provided by student organizations, social media platforms, and developing civil society organizations. These changing opportunities have an impact on how activists organize, build coalitions, and demand systemic change and accountability (Gastil, J. 2000) [11].

Literature Review

Disability studies have expanded dramatically in India, particularly after the Persons with Disabilities Act (1995) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) [42] were passed. The gap between progressive legislation and practical execution is emphasized by authors such as Anita Ghai, Shivani Gupta, and Narayanan (2012) [43, 44]. Parent associations, self-advocacy networks, and cross-disability coalitions that prioritize institutional reforms, educational access, and economic independence have traditionally influenced Indian disability movements. However, scholars caution that mainstream Indian disability literature often centers urban contexts and overlooks regional disparities. There is still little, dispersed, and mostly descriptive literature on disability specifically in Kashmir. A large portion of current research focuses on disabilities associated with combat, such as injuries brought on by landmines, pellet guns, or extended militarization. Studies conducted the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, 2015) reveal a high frequency of physical and psychological problems associated with decades of violence. While trauma, insecurity, limited mobility, and mental health issues are documented in these research, activism and collective rights-based mobilization are not discussed (Allan, J. 2010) [1]. According to sociological research, stigma is reinforced by cultural ideas in Kashmir, such as the idea that a disability is a family burden, a heavenly test, or the outcome of bad luck. Disability is frequently ignored in public life but normalized in private settings. According to research and Bashir (2021), educational obstacles include inaccessible schools, a dearth of assistive technology, and a lack of institutional assistance. Nevertheless, the growing struggle for visibility and rights is not depicted in these pieces (Carey, A. C., & Souza, C. N. 2021) [6]. Recent

documentation by local organizations such as the Jammu and Kashmir Disability Welfare Trust, Voluntary Medicare Society (VMS), and lesser-known youth-led groups highlights a shift toward activism. Their work connects disability to rights, citizenship, and public participation. These local movements echo global scholarship that views disability activism as a transformative force capable of reshaping public discourse, challenging cultural stigma, and influencing policy.

Overall, the literature highlights several gaps

- Scholarly research on disability activism in Kashmir is limited, with most studies concentrating on social stigma, healthcare, or conflict rather than organized advocacy. Because of this, the tactics, difficulties, and successes of disability activists are still not well recorded, underscoring the need for academic study of this new rights-based movement.
- There is scarce documentation of the voices of disabled individuals and their parents in Kashmir. Their lived experiences, daily struggles, and forms of resistance are rarely recorded in academic or policy literature. This absence reinforces invisibility and underscores the need for research that centers their perspectives and narratives (Mehrotra, N. 2011) [19].
- Studies that directly link the tactics of disabled social movements in Kashmir with the decrease of stigma are scarce. Although stigma is generally recognized, there is a fundamental vacuum in our understanding of the impact of movements since few assessments examine how activism, awareness campaigns, and collective action actively confront and transform these perceptions (Yang, D. W. 2024) [41].
- There is minimal scholarly attention to how prolonged conflict in Kashmir reshapes disability activism, identity formation, and access to public spaces. Curfews, militarization, and disrupted services profoundly influence how activists organize, how identities of disability and citizenship are negotiated, and how individuals navigate public institutions, yet these dynamics remain underexplored (Thorner, A. 1949) [38].

In order to close these gaps, this study looks at the disability movement in Kashmir as a vibrant source of social transformation, visibility, and resistance. By elevating the voices of handicapped people, parents, and activists, it sheds light on how they confront long-standing stigma, negotiate limitations brought on by conflict, and call for rights-based reforms. In order to assess how activists organize resources, redefine disability discourse, and take advantage of new political and civil society venues, the study incorporates theories of social movements. By doing this, it chronicles an understudied movement that, in an area characterized by instability and structural exclusion, claims citizenship, dignity, and identity in addition to advocating for accessibility and inclusion (Oliver, M., & Barnes, C. 2010) [22].

Methodology Qualitative, Phenomenological Approach Research Design
The study uses a qualitative phenomenological design, in order to thoroughly investigate the lived experiences of people with disabilities, parents, and disability activists in

Kashmir. Phenomenology is a useful tool for revealing the meanings, feelings, difficulties, and coping mechanisms that influence people's daily lives. The method sheds light on how stigma is internalized or rejected, how identity is negotiated, and how social and structural hurdles are encountered in a conflict-affected setting by giving participants' subjective viewpoints priority. The project aims to provide a genuine understanding of disability as lived, felt, and contested by capturing the rich textures of their lives through in-depth interviews, narratives, and reflective perspectives.

Sampling
Purposive sampling was used.

Participants included

- Persons with physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities
- Parents of disabled children
- Disability rights activists
- Members of NGOs, DPOs, and civil society organizations
- Total participants: 20-25 (flexible depending on saturation)

Data Collection Tools
1. Semi-structured in-depth interviews
2. Key informant interviews with NGO leaders
3. Participant observation at advocacy events or support group meetings
4. Document analysis
- NGO reports
- Government policy documents
- Media articles

Data Analysis
- Data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [45].
- Steps included familiarization, coding, theme construction, interpretation, and validation.
- Reflexive journaling ensured transparency and minimized researcher bias.

Ethical Considerations
- Informed consent
- Confidentiality and anonymity
- Sensitivity toward emotional distress
- Right to withdraw at any stage.

Findings and Discussions (Thematic)
Theme 1: Stigma as a Deeply Cultural and Structural Phenomenon
According to the participants, stigma in Kashmir frequently results from ingrained societal ideas that link disability to shame, personal weakness, familial guilt, or divine retribution. Fear of being judged by such interpretations causes many parents to conceal their kids, restrict their social activities, or refrain from asking for help in order to avoid being the subject of local rumors. Goffman's (1963) [46] stigma theory, which describes how socially created meanings are connected to particular identities and lead to exclusion and limited participation, is highly compatible with these experiences. The results show that stigma affects

daily choices, self-perception, and access to community life in addition to interpersonal interactions (Samuel, V. 1998) [28].

Theme 2: Conflict and Political Instability Intensify Disability Challenges: Participants frequently emphasized how the daily realities of disability in Kashmir are shaped by injuries sustained during conflicts, limited mobility, and a lack of qualified professionals. Many said that it is very difficult to get therapy, assistive technology, or medical consultations due to extensive travel distances, frequent curfews, and erratic shutdowns. Additionally, poorly coordinated institutions and inaccessible services exacerbate marginalization. Disability in Kashmir cannot be seen in isolation from more general structural issues like militarism, unemployment, and weaker governance institutions, activists stressed. These overlapping issues show how conflict exacerbates pre-existing obstacles to healthcare, education, and social engagement in addition to causing disability (Solevåg, A. R. 2018) [32].

Theme 3: Emergence of Disability Activism as a Form of Resistance: Participants discussed how Kashmiri advocacy groups regularly plan community discussions, workshops, and awareness activities to dispel stigma and advance knowledge of disability rights. In order to demand inclusive education, accessible infrastructure, and the appropriate implementation of laws like the RPwD Act, they collaborate with schools, local authorities, and media outlets. These initiatives aim to affirm visibility and dignity in a society where people with disabilities are frequently marginalized, in addition to providing services. Disability activism becomes a potent instrument for many individuals to fight marginalization, influence public opinion, and assert their legitimate place in the social, political, and educational domains (Sabatello, M., & Schulze, M. (Eds.). 2014) [27].

Theme 4: Policy Gaps and Weak Institutional Implementation: Participants continuously reported significant gaps in accessibility and service delivery throughout Kashmir, notwithstanding the progressive provisions of the RPwD Act, 2016. Many reported that schools, hospitals, and government buildings lacked ramps, signage, or assistive technology, making them physically inaccessible. Access to entitlements is further hampered by frequent administrative disruptions, restricted UDID card availability, and bureaucratic delays in disability certification. Additionally, participants noted that inadequate departmental collaboration resulted in misunderstandings and repeated trips for routine tasks. The fight for rights, recognition, and accessibility is a continuous and extremely painful experience because of these difficulties, which highlight a continual gap between legislative requirements and practical execution (Miller, A. 2025) [18].

Conclusion
The disability movement in Kashmir, which emerged at the nexus of long-term political upheaval, structural exclusion, and stigma, is a potent but little-known site of social transformation. This study shows that disability in Kashmir is profoundly influenced by cultural beliefs, institutional flaws, and the larger conflict-ridden environment rather than being solely an individual or medical problem. Through the phenomenological accounts of activists, parents, and people with disabilities, the study emphasizes how stigma is routinely reproduced and culturally ingrained, limiting prospects for social inclusion, identity formation, and engagement. These results are in line with the social model of disability and Goffman's stigma theory, which combined and shows how structural inaccessibility and societal views limit citizenship and autonomy more than impairment itself (Tremain, S. 2001) [39].

The study also highlights how the protracted violence in Kashmir exacerbates disability-related issues in particular ways. Access to necessary medical care, counseling, and education is hampered by frequent curfews, infrastructural failures, mobility limitations, and a lack of qualified personnel. In addition to creating new impairments, conflict makes previously disabled people more vulnerable, which puts a great deal of strain on families who are frequently left without institutional support. Disability cannot be separated from the social reality of the area, as these overlapping layers of marginalization demonstrate, and any significant reform must address structural violence in addition to changing attitudes (Amin, M. 2016) [2].

The rise of disability activism in Kashmir is notable as a method of collective empowerment and resistance within this difficult environment. Disability speech is being redefined by advocacy groups, youth-led collectives, non-governmental organizations, and parent associations by moving it away from sympathy and charity and toward rights, dignity, and social justice. In addition to combating stigma, activists are claiming visibility in public areas where handicapped people have traditionally been marginalized through awareness campaigns, inclusive education initiatives, legislative lobbying, and media participation. Their work shows how the development of a rights-based disability movement is influenced by framing procedures, resource mobilization, and political opportunity structures all fundamental components of social movement theory. Such engagement is essential to changing attitudes, empowering families, and putting pressure on institutions to uphold their moral and legal obligations (Mandal, S. 2010) [17]. The study also draw attention to ongoing discrepancies between policy and implementation. Even with progressive laws like the RPwD Act of 2016, bureaucratic obstacles, poor departmental coordination, limited information transmission, and inaccessible infrastructure continue to characterize the situation on the ground. These institutional shortcomings prolong pain, undermine trust, and perpetuate an exclusionary loop that activists have to constantly deal with. Thus, the fight for disability rights in Kashmir is also a fight for inclusive governance, institutional accountability, and the acceptance of disabled people as full citizens (Ito, A. 1999) [13]. In conclusion, the disability movement in Kashmir represents a significant change in the direction of reclaiming space, negotiating identity, and calling for justice. The stories in this study demonstrate that combating stigma is a group effort based on resiliency, solidarity, and hope as well as a personal struggle. A more inclusive, equitable, and compassionate Kashmiri society is envisioned as activists, parents, and people with disabilities keep raising their voices. Even though their movement is still developing, it provides a revolutionary perspective for rethinking citizenship, dignity, and social transformation in an area that has long been characterized by marginalization and war (Scallet, L. J. 1996) [29].

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