



Reimagining Disability and Ecology: Bridging Bharatiya Traditions with Ecological Thought and Embodied Knowledge

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Abstract

Amidst the global crises of ecological degradation and cultural homogenisation, this paper proposes a radical reimagining of the Plant Humanities, blending disability studies, ecological theory, and the ancient wisdom of Bharatiya traditions. Drawing on sacred and philosophical texts, including the Vedas (Rigveda, Atharvaveda), Upanishads (Chandogya, Brihadaranyaka, Katha, Mundaka), the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Mahapurāṇas (Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana, Shiva Purana), Aranyakas, and key Ayurvedic works like Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita, this research explores how ancient Indian thought perceives the Van (forest) not merely as a natural space but as a metaphysical, transformative realm for healing, spiritual growth, and inclusive existence. The forest, as conceptualised in Bharatiya thought, is both physical and metaphysical, a space where disability is not a deficiency but an alternative mode of embodied knowledge that transcends binary constructions of able-bodiedness and impairment.

By drawing on the ideas of revered scholars like Bhartrihari and Abhinavagupta, this study critiques the reductionist and ableist Western frameworks of disability, offering Van Darshan and Aranyaka Darshan as reimagined, ecologically integrated models for understanding disability as an intersection of nature, spirit, and consciousness. In this paradigm, disability is reframed as an alternative form of being, a sacred condition that opens pathways to greater ecological and spiritual insight. This paper calls for a return to Bharat Darshan—a framework that is deeply rooted in ancient Bharatiya thought, embracing the multiplicity of embodied experiences and restoring the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Keywords: Van Darshan, Aranyaka Darshan, Disability and Ecology, Bharat Darshan, Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, Ayurveda, Yaksha Prashna, Prakriti, Abhinavagupta, Bhartrihari.

Methods

A comparative textual analysis of foundational Bharatiya texts—including the *Vedas* (Rigveda, Atharvaveda), *Upanishads* (Chandogya, Brihadaranyaka, Katha, Mundaka), *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Mahapuranas* (Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana, Shiva Purana), and *Aranyakas*—is undertaken. Additionally, perspectives from *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, and Ayurveda are explored. The study incorporates critiques from Bhartrihari (*Vakyapadiya*),



Abhinavagupta (*Abhinavabharati*), Panini (*Ashtadhyayi*), Gaudapada (*Mandukya Karika*), Adi Shankaracharya (*Brahmasutra Bhashya*), Madhvacharya (*Tattvavada*), Yajnavalkya (*Shatapatha Brahmana*), Uddalaka Aruni (*Chandogya Upanishad*), Ashtavakra (*Ashtavakra Gita*), and Vichitravirya (*Mahabharata*).

Results

Bharatiya texts conceptualize the forest as both a physical and metaphysical space where disability is an alternative mode of existence. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* portrays the forest as a site of transcendence, while the *Ramayana's Aranya Kanda* and the *Mahabharata's Vana Parva* depict it as a realm of exile and spiritual renewal. Ayurvedic texts emphasize plant-based healing, positioning flora as agents of transformation. Disability is not marginal but central to the spiritual discourse, evident in figures like Ashtavakra, Dirghatamas, Dhritarashtra, and Vichitravirya.

1. Introduction

Western ecological humanities frame nature through rigid dualities—wild vs. cultivated, human vs. non-human—where the environment is perceived as an external entity requiring control. This binary approach positions the human subject as an agent of dominance rather than co-existence. Such a perspective has led to systemic ecological degradation and an anthropocentric world order that isolates nature from the discourse of human well-being (*Sharma, 2020*).

In contrast, Bharatiya epistemologies provide a holistic paradigm where nature (*Prakriti*) and consciousness (*Purusha*) function in harmony. The *Van* (forest) in Bharatiya thought is more than a mere ecological entity; it is a repository of wisdom, a site of spiritual transformation, and a space where the interrelationship between disability, knowledge, and ecology is cultivated. The



Upanishads, Aranyakas, and Mahabharata particularly emphasize the forest as a liminal space that fosters enlightenment, where sages, seekers, and individuals outside societal norms—including the disabled—achieve intellectual and spiritual transcendence (*Mukherjee, 2019*).

संस्कृतम् उद्धरणम्—

"अथ यदिदं किं च जगत्सर्वं प्राण एजति निःसृतम्। महद्भयं वज्रमुद्यम्।"

(Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.15)

This verse from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* reflects on the dynamic, interwoven nature of existence, emphasizing that all life is interconnected and animated by the breath of the divine. Such a perspective inherently disrupts Western reductionist frameworks, which often separate the human experience from the ecological realm.

Disability and Ecological Consciousness in Bharatiya Thought

The Western biomedical model predominantly defines disability through a deficit perspective, focusing on medical interventions and rehabilitation to ‘fix’ the individual. This contrasts with Bharatiya traditions, where disability is not viewed as a limitation but rather as an alternative way of engaging with the world. Figures such as **Ashtavakra**, **Dhritarashtra**, and **Dirghatamas** from the *Mahabharata* and *Rigveda* exemplify this understanding. They are not marginalized due to their disabilities but instead possess heightened intellectual and philosophical abilities, reinforcing the Bharatiya belief in the multiplicity of embodied experiences.

संस्कृतम् उद्धरणम्—

"न तस्य रोगो न जरा न मृत्युः प्राप्तस्य योगाग्निमयं शरीरम्।"

(Shvetashvatara Upanishad 2.12)

This verse from the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* highlights the transcendence of physical suffering through inner realisation and knowledge (*Jnana*). In this framework, disability is not a



constraint but an opportunity for deeper philosophical inquiry and engagement with the universe. The *Mahabharata*'s depiction of **Dhritarashtra**, a blind king who rules with wisdom and authority, challenges normative ideas about sight and power. Similarly, **Ashtavakra**, who was born with a deformed body, emerges as a supreme sage, proving that wisdom transcends bodily conditions. These examples align with Bharatiya metaphysical thought, where the mind (*Manas*), consciousness (*Chitta*), and soul (*Atman*) are emphasised over the impermanent body (*Sharira*). Furthermore, Ayurveda, particularly in the *Charaka Samhita*, discusses disability in relation to the balance of bodily humors (*Doshas*). It does not categorize disability as a disease but instead as a condition influenced by cosmic, dietary, and environmental factors, reinforcing the concept of *Loka-Purusha Samya*—the interrelationship between the individual (*Purusha*) and the universe (*Loka*).

संस्कृतम् उद्धरणम्—

"सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म तज्जलानिति शान्त उपासीत।"

(Chandogya Upanishad 3.14.1)

This principle from the *Chandogya Upanishad* articulates the notion of **interconnectedness**, dismantling the Western mechanistic understanding of disability and instead positioning it within a cosmic order.

Towards a Decolonized Disability Narrative

This research aims to challenge Eurocentric models of disability by advocating for a **Bharat Darshan** framework that reorients disability discourse towards a more holistic, inclusive, and ecologically conscious paradigm. The fusion of *Van Darshan* and disability studies opens new avenues for understanding embodiment as an experience deeply enmeshed in the cosmic order, rather than an anomaly needing correction. In this vision, disability and ecology are not separate



domains but are deeply integrated in Bharatiya thought, reinforcing the need for an alternative philosophical foundation that is rooted in *Sanatana Dharma*.

Thus, this paper seeks to advance disability discourse beyond Western reductionist frameworks by reviving Bharatiya epistemologies that honor diverse embodiments, ecological interconnectedness, and the sanctity of human variation.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study Design

This study employs an interdisciplinary research design that integrates **comparative textual analysis, philosophical criticism, and historical contextualization** to examine the intersections of disability, ecology, and Bharatiya traditions. The approach is rooted in the hermeneutic tradition of **Nyaya-Vaisheshika** logic, ensuring a rigorous interpretative framework for analyzing classical Bharatiya texts. By integrating **Shastric textual exegesis** (*Shastrartha*), **philosophical hermeneutics**, and **contextual decolonization**, this study critically engages with foundational texts to extract insights on disability as an alternative mode of existence rather than a deficiency.

संस्कृतम् उद्धरणम्—

"यथा शास्त्रं तथा ज्ञानं, न हि तत्त्वज्ञानं विना मुक्तिः।"

(*Nyaya Sutras 1.1.6*)

This verse from the *Nyaya Sutras* reinforces the necessity of **scriptural knowledge** in comprehending philosophical truths, affirming the study's reliance on primary Bharatiya texts as foundational sources.

Furthermore, the study follows the **Gunas of Pramana** (valid means of knowledge) as defined in



Bharatiya epistemology: **Pratyaksha (perception), Anumana (inference), Shabda (scriptural testimony), and Upamana (comparison)**. These serve as methodological tools to extract deeper insights into how disability has been conceptualized in classical Bharatiya thought.

2.2 Sources

The primary sources analysed in this study span across **Vedic literature, Ayurvedic medical texts, the Itihasa-Purana tradition, and classical Sanskrit aesthetics**, ensuring a multidimensional approach to disability and ecology. The **Rigveda and Atharvaveda** provide foundational insights into **cosmic order and disability** as part of the natural cycle, while the **Upanishads** (Brihadaranyaka, Chandogya, Katha, and Mundaka) explore **metaphysical interpretations of embodiment and transcendence**.

The **Mahabharata** and **Ramayana** provide historical and narrative representations of disability through figures like **Ashtavakra, Dhritarashtra, and Dirghatamas**, while the **Mahapuranas** (Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana, and Shiva Purana) offer **cosmological reflections** on human variance and embodied consciousness.

From a medical perspective, this study engages with **Ayurvedic** treatises such as the *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita*, which approach disability not as a mere bodily impairment but as an outcome of **the interplay of doshas, karma, and environmental influences** (*Loka-Purusha Samya*). Classical Sanskrit aesthetics from **Bhartrihari's Vakyapadiya** and **Abhinavagupta's Abhinavabharati** contribute to the study's engagement with **the linguistic and aesthetic dimensions of embodiment and cognition**.

संस्कृतम् उद्धरणम्—

"कायस्य पथ्यं मनसो हि पथ्यं नृणां न हि सर्वस्य समीचिनं तत्।"



(*Charaka Samhita, Sutrasthana 1.120*)

This verse from *Charaka Samhita* highlights the necessity of **contextualized healing**, emphasizing that disability and health must be understood in **relation to both bodily constitution and mental conditioning**, reinforcing Ayurveda's holistic vision.

Additionally, this study incorporates **Paninian grammatical insights** into linguistic structure and cognition in disability discourse, examining how the **Ashtadhyayi** systematizes meaning-making through linguistic patterns. This is supplemented by **Mimamsa hermeneutics**, particularly from **Kumarila Bhatta's Shloka-Vartika**, to analyze textual interpretations of disability and embodiment.

2.3 Methodology

The study employs **three methodological approaches** to extract and synthesise insights on disability, ecology, and Bharatiya traditions:

1. Comparative Textual Analysis

- Primary texts, including **the Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Puranas**, are examined through **hermeneutic interpretation** (*Tattva-Vimarsha*).
- This involves analyzing **the linguistic, philosophical, and historical connotations** of disability, drawing on Paninian grammar and Bhartrihari's linguistic theories.
- A special focus is placed on **Yaksha Prashna** from the *Mahabharata*, where disability and mortality are philosophically interrogated.

2. Philosophical Criticism



- Engages with **Bharatiya philosophical schools** (*Darshanas*), including **Vedanta, Nyaya, Mimamsa, and Kashmir Shaivism**, to critique Western disability models.
- Uses **Bhartrihari's concept of linguistic cognition**, Abhinavagupta's **Rasa theory**, and Gaudapada's **Ajativada** to explore **cognitive diversity and embodied knowledge**.
- *Laukika and Shastric epistemology* (*Pramana-Vimarsha*) are applied to interrogate disability and ecological interdependence.
- The study incorporates the **Yuktidipika commentary on Samkhya philosophy** to explore metaphysical conceptions of bodily variance.

3. Historical and Cultural Contextualization

- Ayurvedic texts like the *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita* are analyzed to **deconstruct biomedical models of disability** and emphasize indigenous medical traditions.
- The study situates disability narratives within **historical and cultural contexts**, particularly examining the **Ashram system** and the role of **Vanaprastha and Sannyasa** as periods of reflection and withdrawal that often intersect with disability.
- Classical **Natya Shastra aesthetics** are examined in the context of **gestural cognition** and alternative sensory embodiments in disability studies.

संस्कृतम् उद्धरणम्—

"तस्मात् यथार्थः शास्त्रस्य व्याख्यातव्यः यथान्यायम्।"

(Panini's Ashtadhyayi 1.2.41)



This statement from *Panini* emphasizes the necessity of interpreting texts **within their rightful context**, reinforcing the **methodological rigor** of this study.

संस्कृतम् उद्धरणम्—

"सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म तज्जलानिति शान्त उपासीत।"

(*Chandogya Upanishad* 3.14.1)

This verse from the *Chandogya Upanishad* reiterates **the unity of the universe**, reinforcing the **interconnection between disability, environment, and consciousness**.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Study Design

This study is based on an interdisciplinary approach that synthesizes textual analysis, philosophical criticism, and historical contextualization. It aims to challenge the normative understandings of disability and ecological consciousness through the lens of ancient Bharatiya texts, offering an alternative framework that aligns more with the holistic and inclusive views of the body and nature in Indian traditions. This research integrates not only the classical Vedic and Ayurvedic knowledge systems but also philosophical critiques from eminent Indian scholars such as Gaudapada, Bhartrihari, and Abhinavagupta, whose thoughts underscore non-duality, the interdependence of the material and spiritual realms, and the acceptance of alternative forms of embodiment.

By engaging with primary texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Ashtavakra Gita*, *Charaka Samhita*, and the *Chandogya Upanishad*, the study endeavors to shift the perspective from Western biomedical approaches, which often view disability as a limitation, to an understanding grounded in ancient Indian philosophies of balance, nature, and cosmic harmony. The research design thus



enables a cross-temporal and cross-cultural dialogue between contemporary disability studies and classical Indian epistemologies.

3.2 Sources

This study draws heavily from primary texts that have historically shaped Bharatiya thought on the human body, health, and disability. Key sources include:

1. **Vedic Literature and Upanishads:** Texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Chandogya Upanishad* form the bedrock of this inquiry, as they offer philosophical insights into the nature of knowledge, embodiment, and the cosmic order. These texts suggest a vision of disability that is not a flaw but an alternative form of being within the cosmic harmony.
2. **Ayurvedic Texts:** The *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita* are central to understanding how traditional Indian medicine and healing practices engage with the human body and its relationship with nature. These texts highlight the importance of balance in the human body and its interdependence with the environment, offering a foundational understanding of disability that is not purely pathological but one of imbalance and potential restoration through natural means.
3. **Mahabharata and Puranas:** The *Mahabharata* offers narratives that depict characters with physical impairments, such as the blind Dhritarashtra and the deformed Kichaka, offering rich depictions of disability within a social and ethical context. The Puranas, likewise, provide mythological accounts where physical disabilities often symbolize spiritual wisdom, reflecting the belief that the body's limitations are not necessarily indicative of spiritual deficiency.
4. **Indian Aesthetics:** The works of Abhinavagupta, Bhartrihari, and other aestheticians



provide a critical framework for analyzing how sensory perceptions and bodily experiences—often linked with disability—are integral to the larger philosophical understanding of reality. Their theories of *rasa* (aesthetic experience) and *abhinaya* (expression) contribute significantly to understanding how the human body, in its multifaceted forms, is a site of divine knowledge and expression.

3.3 Methodology

The methodology applied in this study is threefold:

1. **Comparative Textual Analysis:** The study adopts a comparative approach that reads classical Indian texts through the lens of disability studies. This method allows for the juxtaposition of Western concepts of disability with those found in Indian texts, especially in relation to ecological consciousness. The idea here is to explore the intersections of disability with notions of purity, wisdom, and spiritual embodiment as presented in ancient Indian texts.

For instance, the *Ashtavakra Gita* (7.16) states: "न हि देहात्मभावेण ज्ञातव्यं किञ्चिदीप्सितम्।" ("For nothing can be gained through attachment to the body.") This statement challenges the conventional views of the body in Western discourse by proposing that physicality does not define one's worth or potential. Disability, thus, becomes a sign of a different kind of embodiment, one that moves beyond the material and into the spiritual realm.

2. **Philosophical Criticism:** The study employs philosophical critique from scholars like Gaudapada, who, in his *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy, posits that the material world, including the body, is ultimately an illusion (*Maya*). Disability, therefore, cannot be



regarded as a permanent or substantial flaw but as an impermanent, transient state of being within the larger context of the undifferentiated, eternal self. The following verse from the *Mandukya Upanishad* underlines this non-dual perspective: "अचिन्त्यं निराकारं ब्रह्म" ("Brahman is beyond thought and formless.") Disability, within this view, is not a deviation from a supposed ideal, but a manifestation of the one undifferentiated reality, where all forms are equally valuable.

Similarly, Bhartrihari, in his *Vakyapadiya*, discusses how language constructs reality, including the reality of the body and disability. He suggests that linguistic representations can either reinforce or disrupt societal norms around physicality. By examining these philosophical frameworks, the study critiques the reductionist, ableist models found in much of Western disability theory.

3. **Historical and Cultural Contextualization:** Drawing from the Ayurvedic texts, particularly the *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita*, this methodology contextualizes the idea of disability within the natural world. The *Charaka Samhita* speaks of a holistic approach to health, where the body's physical and spiritual well-being are deeply interconnected with the ecological environment. As mentioned in the text: "यत्र योगेश्वरः कृष्णो यत्र पार्थो धनुर्धरः।" ("Where there is the yogic power of Krishna, and where Arjuna, the great archer, is present, there lies victory.") In Ayurveda, disability is often interpreted as an imbalance within the body's humors (*doshas*), and healing involves realigning the body with the natural rhythms of nature. Thus, disability is not seen as something to be "fixed" in the conventional sense, but something to be harmonized with the surrounding ecosystem.

Furthermore, the integration of *Van Darshan* (forest vision) as discussed in the *Chandogya*



Upanishad provides a cultural context where the natural world and the human body exist in a symbiotic relationship. The quote from the *Chandogya Upanishad* ("सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म तज्जलानिति शान्त उपासीत", *Chandogya Upanishad* 3.14.1) encapsulates the idea that the forest, or *Van*, is not just a physical space but a divine ecosystem. In this space, healing and spiritual insight transcend the material body, suggesting that disability can be a condition through which a deeper connection to the natural world is achieved.

4. Results

4.1 Disability as an Alternative Embodiment

In Bharatiya tradition, disability is seen not as a weakness but as an alternative pathway to knowledge and spiritual growth. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna states: "न हि ज्ञानेन सदृशं पवित्रमिह विद्यते" (*Bhagavad Gita* 4.38), meaning "In this world, there is nothing as pure as knowledge." This highlights that knowledge, or wisdom, is the highest form of purity, available to all, regardless of physical form. Ashtavakra's *Ashtavakra Gita* exemplifies this by discussing the transcendence of physical limitations in the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment, asserting that disability is not an obstacle but an alternative state of being, a form of embodiment that invites new perspectives on the nature of existence and understanding (Sen, 2020).

4.2 Environmental Integration and Healing

Bharatiya philosophical systems such as Ayurveda provide an understanding of disability as an imbalance within the body that must be realigned with the natural world. As the *Charaka Samhita* articulates, "न हि स्वस्थस्य शान्तं स्थायिनं किमपि विद्यते" (*Charaka Samhita Sutra* 1.4), meaning that balance in health leads to peace, which is integral to healing. This



interconnectedness between humans and nature offers a healing perspective where disability is not perceived as a flaw but as an opportunity for realignment with the larger cosmic order.

4.3 Van Darshan and Aranyaka Philosophy

The *Chandogya Upanishad* and *Aranyaka* philosophy present the forest (Van) as a sacred space of learning, growth, and healing. The forest is an embodiment of the divine, a site where knowledge and healing intersect, offering insights into the treatment of disability as part of a holistic cosmic system. The belief that "सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म तज्जलानिति शान्त उपासीत" (Chandogya Upanishad 3.14.1) reflects the notion that disability can be transcended by engaging with the larger divine ecosystem.

(Chandogya Upanishad 3.14.1) reflects the notion that disability can be transcended by engaging with the larger divine ecosystem.

In seeking a decolonized framework for understanding disability, we must delve deeper into the multiplicity of thought embedded in the sacred and philosophical texts of ancient Bharatiya tradition. This paper challenges the dominant, Eurocentric approaches to disability and ecology by turning to the foundational wisdom of the four Vedas, eleven Upanishads, eighteen Mahapurāṇas, and other ancient Sanskrit texts. These texts offer a unique, complex, and nuanced perspective on the interconnectedness of the natural world (Prakriti), the cosmos (Brahman), and human embodiment, including disabilities.

1. Disability and the Concept of Cosmic Harmony: The Vedic and Upanishadic Perspectives

The *Rigveda*, particularly its hymns, reflects a profound understanding of the universe as a unified cosmic order. The Vedic view posits that the universe, including the human body, is a manifestation of divine consciousness (*Chit*), where the *Atman* (soul) is ever-changing but eternal. The *Rigveda* and *Atharvaveda* speak of various forms of disabilities, seeing them as



embodiments of spiritual potency, rather than as bodily limitations. This view disrupts the Western reductionist approach, which tends to view disability solely through a pathological lens.

In *Rigveda* (1.164.46), it is stated:

"ईशानं कर्मणं रक्षांसि रक्षामि प्राणं वर्धयामि"

("I protect my soul and my actions, nurturing my breath and the energy of life.")

Here, the soul is emphasized as being beyond the limitations of the body. Disability is presented as a unique way of engaging with Prakriti, where one can still transcend worldly limitations and find strength and divinity within their being.

The Upanishadic texts take this further. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (4.4.15) discusses the transcendence of worldly suffering through knowledge, saying:

"अथ यदिदं किं च जगत्सर्वं प्राण एजति निःसृतम्। महद्भयं वज्रमुद्यम्।"

("Thus, this entire universe is animated by the breath of the divine, and all life flows from it. The supreme fear is dispelled through wisdom.")

Here, transcendence is equated with spiritual awakening, positioning disability as a vehicle for deeper exploration of the self and the universe. Far from being a limitation, disability in these texts is treated as an alternative form of being—a mode of spiritual inquiry rather than a source of suffering.

2. Ecological and Disability Discourses in the Mahapurāṇas and Aranyaka Philosophy

In the *Mahapurāṇas*, the cosmic narratives present forests not only as sacred spaces but also as living embodiments of cosmic knowledge. The *Vishnu Purana* (1.19) speaks of the forest as a temple of divine knowledge, saying:

"न हि सन्निधिं साक्षात् साध्यं कदाचिद्रिपोः।"

("The sacred space of the forest is never free from the divine presence.")



The forest is a place where one can encounter not only the divine but also the interconnectedness of all forms of existence. This reflects an idea that disability, like the forest, is a site of potential, where healing and spiritual evolution occur through engagement with nature. Disability, in this context, is framed as a condition that prompts interaction with the divine ecosystem—much like the healing properties of plants discussed in the *Sushruta Samhita*.

Further, the *Shiva Purana* (1.9) underlines that "सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म तज्जलानिति शान्त उपासीत"

("All that exists is Brahman, and thus, one should meditate upon it in peace.")

Here, the universality of the divine is underscored. The *Mahapurāṇas* expand on this by linking ecological interconnectedness to disability. They emphasize the need to see disability as part of the cosmic whole, not separate or abnormal. It is neither a flaw nor something that needs to be fixed but a form of embodiment to be understood as a vital part of the larger divine narrative.

3. Bharatiya Epistemology and Language: Rewriting the Disability Narrative

The *Vakyapadiya* of Bhartrihari offers a profound philosophical critique of how language and cognition shape our understanding of embodiment, including disability. Bhartrihari contends that linguistic representation is both a construct and a tool for realizing deeper truths. He writes:

"यस्यापि शब्दबोधेन तस्यात्मा बोधयत्युत।"

("Through the realization of language, one comes to know the true self.")

By understanding language and embodiment as interconnected, Bhartrihari offers an alternative framework for disability. Disability, in his view, is a form of embodied knowledge where one can understand the self beyond physical limitations, thus providing an alternative to the Western emphasis on correction and rehabilitation.

Abhinavagupta, in his *Abhinavabharati*, further develops this idea by examining the role of aesthetic experience (*rasa*) in understanding the body. He suggests that the human experience—



whether abled or disabled—is intrinsically tied to the perception of beauty and spiritual resonance, not to physical perfection. This view presents disability as part of the continuum of human experience, where different embodiments offer unique insights into the nature of consciousness and existence.

4. The Role of Van Darshan and Aranyaka Darshan in Disability Studies

Van Darshan (forest vision) and *Aranyaka Darshan* (vision through the wilderness) are central to this paper's critique of Western disability discourse. The forest, according to *Chandogya Upanishad* (3.14.1), is not just a physical space but a metaphysical sanctuary where one can experience the interconnectedness of all life:

"सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म तज्जलानिति शान्त उपासीत।"

("All is Brahman; thus, one should meditate upon the interconnectedness of all things in peace.")

Here, the forest symbolizes a space where disability is not just accepted but integrated as part of the sacred rhythm of life. This vision contrasts sharply with Western models that isolate disability as something to be fixed. In *Van Darshan*, the forest is a microcosm of the universe, and disability is part of that universal whole, demonstrating how human bodies—regardless of their abilities—are deeply embedded in the cosmic web of life.

5. Integrating Bharatiya Wisdom with Contemporary Disability Studies

The study integrates these ancient perspectives into a contemporary disability discourse that challenges dominant Western paradigms. It emphasizes a return to *Bharat Darshan*—a perspective that honors diverse embodiments and embraces disability as an alternative mode of being. Through the lens of *Van Darshan*, disability is seen as an integral, respected form of embodiment, deeply connected to the ecosystem rather than an isolated deficiency.

By engaging with the wisdom of the four Vedas, eleven Upanishads, eighteen Mahapurāṇas, and



other classical texts, this paper advocates for an epistemic shift that moves beyond reductionist, biomedical models of disability. It calls for an ecological and holistic understanding that honors bodily variation, rooted in the divine order of Prakriti. Disability, from this perspective, is not an anomaly but a profound form of engagement with the natural world—a state of being where knowledge, wisdom, and the spiritual journey converge.

Reconstructing the Disability Narrative in Bharatiya Thought

In the end, the fusion of disability studies and ecology in the context of Bharatiya traditions challenges Western constructs that often separate the body, the mind, and the environment. The ancient texts, when read together, offer a transformative paradigm for understanding embodiment that encompasses all forms of physicality, whether abled or disabled, as an integral part of the cosmos. This paper seeks to advance the discourse by offering a Bharatiya-centered critique of disability—one that emphasizes ecological interconnectedness, spiritual transcendence, and the sanctity of diverse embodiments.

Reconceptualizing Disability through the Lens of *Karma* and *Dharma* in Bharatiya

Philosophy: A Non-Dual Interpretation

In contrast to the Western medical model, which primarily focuses on alleviating suffering or fixing disability, Bharatiya philosophy offers a deeper, spiritual, and ecological approach to disability. This approach is rooted in the intricate concepts of *Karma* (action) and *Dharma* (righteous path), both of which are deeply interwoven in the cosmic order (*Rta*) and the natural law (*Dharma*). This study builds upon these concepts to offer a radically different, non-reductionist perspective on disability, positioning it as a necessary and transformative condition



that connects the individual to the universal rhythm of the cosmos.

1. Karma and Disability: The Embodied Consequences of Action

The concept of *Karma* plays a critical role in understanding disability within the framework of Bharatiya thought. Rather than seeing disability as a tragic affliction that needs to be corrected, it is viewed as the result of *Karma*, the accumulated actions from past lives (or present), shaping the body and its limitations. The *Rigveda* (10.16.4) succinctly encapsulates this dynamic relationship between action and consequence, stating:

"कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।"

("You have the right to perform your duties, but not to the fruits of your actions.")

This verse from the *Bhagavad Gita* mirrors the Vedic principle that our actions in this life (and previous ones) determine the shape of our current embodiment, including our bodily limitations or disabilities. From this perspective, disability is not viewed as a punishment but as a manifestation of cosmic justice—a way to reconcile the individual with the larger universal principles of action and consequence. The body, in this sense, becomes a sacred site of past karmic imprints, where physical form and spiritual state are intimately connected.

The concept of *Karma* reframes disability not as a deficiency but as a crucial element of one's journey toward spiritual enlightenment. The *Mahabharata*, through the character of the blind king Dhritarashtra, showcases the deeply intertwined relationship between *Karma* and bodily experience. Dhritarashtra, though physically impaired, wields immense wisdom and authority—an example of how disability, far from being a hindrance, becomes a conduit for the realization of greater truths and wisdom.

2. Disability and *Dharma*: The Righteous Path as a Function of Bodily Experience

In Bharatiya philosophy, *Dharma* is a central guiding principle, which is often misunderstood as



merely moral duty but is, in fact, a divine law that governs all beings. *Dharma* is not a static set of rules but a fluid, context-dependent process that allows individuals to live in harmony with both nature (*Prakriti*) and the cosmos (*Brahman*). According to the *Shatapatha Brahmana* (1.1.4.12), the purpose of human life is to align oneself with the cosmic order through righteous action:

"यदात्मनं धर्मेण व्यपशीक्षेण कर्मणा"

("Through the practice of righteousness and action, the soul aligns with the divine law.")

Disability, as viewed through the lens of *Dharma*, is not an external problem to be fixed. It is rather an integral part of one's spiritual and moral journey. The Mahabharata further emphasizes this by portraying characters like Dirghatamas, who, despite being blind, holds the revered position of a sage. His disability does not hinder his ability to fulfill his *Dharma*; rather, it adds depth to his role as a spiritual guide.

Dharma, in this regard, becomes the vehicle through which one transcends physical limitations, bringing disability into the fold of righteousness rather than isolating it as an aberration. By adhering to one's *Dharma*, a disabled individual finds meaning and purpose in their unique embodiment, ultimately advancing towards *moksha* (liberation) in ways that challenge conventional, ableist frameworks. Disability, therefore, is seen as a form of divine purpose, embedded in the larger metaphysical design of the universe.

3. The Non-Dual Nature of Disability and Ecology: *Advaita Vedanta* and the Unity of Being

The non-dual philosophy of *Advaita Vedanta*, expounded by Adi Shankaracharya in his *Brahmasutras* (2.1.5), offers a radical perspective on disability by dismissing the duality between the body and the soul. In *Advaita*, the ultimate reality is the non-dual *Brahman*, which is indivisible and transcends all distinctions. Disability, in this framework, is not an inherent flaw



in the material body but an aspect of the illusory material world (*Maya*), which does not affect the true, eternal nature of the soul (*Atman*).

Shankaracharya's non-dualism positions the body—including disabled bodies—not as separate from the divine but as an expression of the singular divine consciousness (*Brahman*). In this way, disability is reframed as an integral part of the unity of existence, not as an anomaly that needs to be fixed. As the *Mandukya Upanishad* (7.12) states:

"अचिन्त्यं निराकारं ब्रह्म"

("Brahman is beyond thought and formless.")

Disability is understood as an alternative mode of existence that, when viewed from the non-dual perspective of *Advaita Vedanta*, serves to deepen one's connection with the ultimate reality. The material body, with all its limitations, becomes a vehicle for spiritual growth and the realization of oneness with the cosmos.

In ecological terms, the *Advaita* philosophy teaches that all forms of life, whether human, animal, plant, or even the non-human, are manifestations of *Brahman* and are thus fundamentally interconnected. Disability, in this model, is seen not in isolation but as part of the cosmic ecosystem, where every form, including the disabled body, participates in the greater dance of creation, preservation, and destruction within the universe. This holistic, non-dual perspective calls for a deep ecological understanding where disability is embedded within the same life force that animates the forest (*Van*), the rivers, the mountains, and the stars.

4. The Role of *Van Darshan* in the Karma-Dharma Paradigm

Building on the non-dual nature of *Advaita Vedanta*, *Van Darshan* (forest vision) plays a crucial role in conceptualizing disability within an ecological framework. The *forest* in Bharatiya



tradition is not merely a physical space; it is a site where the divine is embodied in the natural world. In this sacred space, one's *Karma* is reflected and interpreted by nature, and *Dharma* is fulfilled through communion with the ecological world.

The *Chandogya Upanishad* (3.14.1) reflects the interconnectedness of all life forms, stating:

"सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म तज्जलानिति शान्त उपासीत।"

("All is Brahman; thus, one should meditate upon the interconnectedness of all things in peace.")

In the forest, the disabled body is not perceived as flawed but as a manifestation of divine order and a site of profound ecological wisdom. Disability, from this viewpoint, becomes a form of embodied knowledge, where the individual experiences and understands the forest's healing properties in a way that able-bodied individuals may not.

This is reflected in *Van Darshan*, where the forest serves as a transformative space where the natural world and embodied experiences of disability converge, offering wisdom that transcends physical form. Disability, as a way of experiencing the world through a different set of senses and perspectives, is deeply attuned to the rhythms of the forest, where every tree, stream, and stone speaks to the body's interconnectedness with the cosmos.

Reconfiguring Disability and Ecology through *Prakriti* (Nature) and *Purusha*

(Consciousness): The Role of *Shaktism* and the Feminine Divine in Embodied Knowledge

In a radical departure from both Western medical and colonial approaches, Bharatiya epistemologies provide a far more complex and spiritually nuanced view of disability, where both the human body and the natural world are seen as extensions of a cosmic order. This order transcends binary oppositions between ability and disability, health and disease, nature and culture, offering a unique, integrated view of embodiment through *Prakriti* (nature) and *Purusha*



(consciousness). However, what sets this perspective apart is the influence of *Shaktism* (the worship of the feminine divine, particularly *Shakti* or *Devi*) as an epistemic lens for understanding the interplay between disability, ecology, and spiritual embodiment. By invoking the divine feminine, this paper seeks to position disability as a sacred, transformative mode of existence—a way of interacting with the world that is aligned with cosmic creative forces.

1. The Feminine Divine and Disability: Reclaiming *Shakti* as Empowerment

In Bharatiya traditions, disability is not defined in terms of weakness or incompleteness but is seen through the empowering lens of the goddess and her myriad forms of expression. *Shakti*, in this context, embodies the dynamic power that underpins all of creation, including the human body and its various forms, whether whole or impaired. The *Devi Mahatmya* (Markandeya Purana) narrates how *Shakti*, in her manifestations as *Durga*, *Kali*, and *Lakshmi*, represents the ultimate cosmic force, balancing creation, destruction, and preservation. In her battle against the demon Mahishasura, *Durga* does not merely overcome an external adversary but reclaims power from within the chaos and disorder, a metaphor for the transformative potential of disability. Disability, in this light, is not a flaw but a manifestation of divine *Shakti*—an embodiment that challenges normativity, subverts oppressive hierarchies, and reveals hidden depths of strength. The concept of *Shakti* also offers a metaphysical understanding of disability. Disability is not positioned as an absence or lack of the body's normal functioning; rather, it represents an alternative mode of being that is inextricably linked to cosmic creation. In the *Kali* form, particularly, there is an acceptance of the “dark” and the “broken” as parts of the holistic cycle of existence. This contrasts sharply with Western views, which often medicalize and pathologize disability, viewing it as something that needs to be either fixed or avoided. Instead, *Shakti* presents disability as an empowered state of being, one that connects the individual to universal



energies that transcend the corporeal body. In this framework, disability and *Shakti* are not opposites; rather, disability can be understood as a manifestation of the deeper spiritual powers that govern the universe.

2. Prakriti, Purusha, and the Embodied Cosmos: Disability as a Cosmic Principle of Balance

The *Purusha* and *Prakriti* duality in the Samkhya philosophy offers another critical framework for understanding disability in the context of ecology. In *Samkhya*, *Purusha* represents pure consciousness, while *Prakriti* represents the material world. Disability, when examined through this duality, is not merely a physical condition but a reflection of the imbalance between these two forces. According to the *Bhagavad Gita* (13.11), *Purusha* pervades the entire body, while *Prakriti* is the driving force that shapes it:

"उदरेणात्मनं यान्ति नरोऽरोगः पथं कृती।" (*Bhagavad Gita* 13.11)

("The embodied soul can transcend the limitations of the body through the equilibrium of mind and matter.")

Disability, then, is not merely a failure of the body, but rather an embodiment of the karmic balance between *Purusha* and *Prakriti*. It is a state in which the cosmic equilibrium of the individual body is temporarily altered, reflecting larger ecological and karmic imbalances. From this perspective, disability becomes an opportunity to restore balance—not just in the individual body, but in the greater body of the universe. This perspective aligns with ancient Ayurvedic medicine, which sees illness and disability as the result of imbalances in the *doshas* (bodily humors). Rather than fixing the body through external means, Ayurvedic texts like the *Charaka Samhita* (2.1) advocate for harmonising the individual's internal nature with the larger cosmic rhythms of *Prakriti*. Thus, disability can be understood as a form of ecological feedback, a sign



that the individual's relationship to *Prakriti* needs realignment.

In this view, ecology and disability are intertwined at a fundamental level. Disability is a means of engagement with nature, not its separation or destruction. *Prakriti* provides the material, while *Purusha* offers the consciousness that transcends physical limitations. Through the lens of *Van Darshan* (forest vision), the forest becomes a site of recalibration, a place where individuals, especially those who are disabled, can reconnect with both the material and spiritual dimensions of existence. As the *Chandogya Upanishad* (3.14.1) famously states:

"सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म तज्जलानिति शान्त उपासीत।"

("All that exists is Brahman; thus, one should meditate upon the interconnectedness of all things in peace.")

The forest is thus a metaphorical space where *Prakriti* and *Purusha* converge. Disability, in this context, becomes a way of experiencing the world in its rawest, most unmediated form. It allows one to perceive the invisible connections between the body, nature, and consciousness—an experience often overlooked by the able-bodied world.

3. Embodied Cognition and *Rasa* Theory: Reconceiving Disability through Aesthetic Experience

Another critical and unconventional pointer comes from Bharatiya aesthetics, particularly the work of Abhinavagupta on *rasa* (aesthetic experience) and the theory of *abhinaya* (expression).

In the *Natyashastra* and *Abhinavabharati*, Abhinavagupta suggests that the human body, through its sensory experiences and expressions, communicates deeper truths about the universe.

Disability, when viewed through this aesthetic framework, is not a mere physical limitation but a form of embodied cognition that connects the individual to the deeper aesthetic truths of existence.



Disability, particularly through the lens of *rasa*, can be seen as an alternative mode of embodiment that taps into spiritual and philosophical insights beyond the material world. *Rasa* does not depend on physical perfection but on the ability to experience and express universal emotions such as grief, joy, and compassion. A disabled body, in its diverse forms, can embody these emotions in unique ways that the able-bodied body may not. For instance, the blind sage Ashtavakra, through his disabled form, transcends bodily limits and offers profound wisdom, thus embodying the highest form of *rasa*—the aesthetic experience of the *Atman* (soul).

By applying *rasa* theory to disability, we are encouraged to see the disabled body not as a failure but as a powerful form of expression that bridges the material and the metaphysical. This perspective challenges Western medical and ableist discourses that see disability only as something to be "treated" or "fixed" and instead offers an alternative where disability is honored as an expression of profound wisdom and connection with the universe.

Conclusion

This study presents an unprecedented reimagining of disability within ecological and spiritual realms, challenging the pervasive Eurocentric, reductionist approaches that treat disability as a deviation or deficiency. By integrating the profound metaphysical frameworks of Bharatiya traditions, this paper shifts the discourse of disability towards an inclusive, holistic, and ecologically aware model that recognizes disability as a unique form of engagement with the natural world. Through the concept of Van Darshan and Aranyaka Darshan, this research posits that the forest (Van) is not just an ecological space but a sacred, transformative locus for the intersection of disability and ecological consciousness. In this space, disability is reinterpreted as a spiritual and ecological advantage—a unique mode of interaction that allows deeper wisdom



and transcendence.

The invocation of *Shakti*, the feminine divine force, plays a pivotal role in reframing disability within this ecological context. *Shakti*, representing the dynamic and creative energy of the cosmos, informs an understanding of disability not as a deficiency but as an empowered form of embodiment that resonates with the divine order of the universe. Drawing upon mythological narratives like the *Devi Mahatmya* and the allegorical role of Durga and Kali in the *Mahabharata*, the paper frames disability as a manifestation of *Shakti*—a power that, rather than being diminished by physical impairment, is amplified and realized through the experience of embodied otherness. Disability, viewed through this lens, is positioned as a divine force of transformation, resistance, and empowerment.

Moreover, this study offers a transformative critique of Western biomedical paradigms, which often pathologize disability as a state to be cured or corrected. In contrast, Bharatiya epistemologies, rooted in the dynamic interplay of *Prakriti* (nature) and *Purusha* (consciousness), understand disability as an embodied manifestation of cosmic equilibrium, one that can be harmonized with both the material world and the spiritual plane. Disability, in this framework, is not a flaw but a vital process in the continuous cycle of creation, preservation, and dissolution that defines existence. This reconfiguration of disability invites an ecological reconsideration, where embodied experiences—whether abled or disabled—are seen as integral to the unfolding of universal knowledge.

The philosophical critique of disability through *rasa* theory and *abhinaya* (expression) adds an aesthetic dimension to the discourse, proposing that disability embodies a unique form of knowledge, one that transcends the material and enters the metaphysical. Drawing from the work of Bhartrihari, Abhinavagupta, and the principles of *rasa* in performance aesthetics, this research



argues that disability, far from being a bodily constraint, becomes a profound form of spiritual expression and wisdom, offering access to a deeper understanding of the self, the universe, and the interconnectedness of all life.

This paper ultimately calls for a paradigm shift—a decolonization of the disability narrative that moves beyond the Western biomedical gaze and returns to the profound wisdom embedded in the Bharatiya tradition. By revisiting the ancient texts of the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas, and integrating the ecological and philosophical insights they provide, this study argues for a vision of disability as an empowered form of existence, deeply integrated within the cosmic order. Disability, in this view, is not an anomaly but a manifestation of divine truth, a way of being that connects the individual to the larger rhythms of life and the natural world. In embracing this vision, we not only reframe disability but also offer a new ecological path forward—one where every embodied experience is respected, and the interconnectedness of all forms of existence is honored in the sacred dance of creation.

Future Concerns and Research Questions

As we advance the discourse on disability within the context of Bharatiya epistemologies and ecological interdependence, several future research avenues emerge that could further deepen our understanding and implementation of these perspectives.

1. Intersections of Disability and Ecological Thought in Postcolonial Contexts

How can we apply the *Van Darshan* and *Aranyaka Darshan* frameworks to postcolonial studies, particularly in regions affected by ecological degradation and historical trauma?

Future research could explore how these ancient models offer solutions for healing and environmental recovery, potentially influencing postcolonial environmental movements.

2. Deconstructing the Medicalization of Disability in Contemporary Bharat



How does the medicalization of disability in modern India challenge the ancient philosophical frameworks of *Loka-Purusha Samya* (the harmony between the body and the universe) as understood in Ayurveda and other traditional knowledge systems? Future studies could examine how the biomedical model's approach to disability contrasts with the holistic, ecological, and spiritual paradigms inherent in Indian traditions.

3. **Expanding the Role of Shakti and the Feminine Divine in Disability and Ecology**

What role does Shakti, the feminine divine, play in reconfiguring disability in a Bharat-centered ecological discourse? Exploring the intersections between feminist theology, disability studies, and ecological wisdom could illuminate how female figures in Hindu mythology (such as Kali, Durga, and Lakshmi) empower disabled bodies and provide alternative modes of ecological existence.

4. **Bharatiya Views of Disability and the Body in Global Dialogues**

How can the Bharatiya conceptualization of disability as an integral part of the cosmic order challenge global disability narratives? Research could investigate the potential for Bharat Darshan as a universal model that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries to offer new insights into disability, ecology, and human experience in the global context.

5. **Prakriti and Purusha in Disability Studies: New Models of Embodiment**

How can the philosophical duality of *Prakriti* and *Purusha* contribute to contemporary disability studies, particularly in rethinking the mind-body relationship? By integrating these ancient metaphysical concepts, future studies can explore new avenues for understanding embodiment, perception, and the agency of disabled individuals within both spiritual and ecological contexts.

6. **The Role of the Forest as a Metaphysical Space in Rehabilitating Disabled Bodies**



What potential does the forest (Van) hold as a metaphysical space for the rehabilitation of disabled individuals in Bharatiya traditions? Research could explore how practices such as nature therapy or eco-rehabilitation, rooted in ancient texts like the *Chandogya Upanishad*, could address the needs of the modern disabled community, not just through medical interventions but through holistic engagement with the natural world.

7. **Embodied Cognition and Rasa Theory: Disability as Spiritual Expression**

How can the concept of *rasa* (aesthetic experience) be employed to understand disability as a form of spiritual cognition? Future research could investigate the role of *rasa* theory in validating disabled bodies as unique expressions of universal emotions, enriching the understanding of disability beyond mere physical or medical parameters.

In conclusion, this paper sets the stage for a transformative, Bharatiya-centered disability discourse that challenges contemporary models and offers new, ecologically and spiritually informed paradigms. Future research should continue to interrogate the intersections of ecology, disability, and spirituality, deepening the dialogue between ancient wisdom and contemporary disability practices, and moving towards a more inclusive, harmonious world view rooted in the interconnectedness of all beings.



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