

Socio-Cultural Exclusion and Coping Mechanisms among the Visually Impaired: A case study from Odisha

Harapriya Samantaraya*

Urmila Bhaina* *

* Reader, P.G. Department of Home Science, Berhampur University, Berhampur, Odisha, India, pin-760007.

**RGNF Scholar, Dept. of Home Science, Berhampur University.

Abstract: *Visually impaired suffer from a wide range of socio-cultural exclusions and exploitation. This includes physical and psychological differential treatments, human rights violations including their right to dignity and inhumane behavior and thus, creating further vulnerability and exclusion. To cope, many visually impaired adopt strategies that are discussed in this paper. For this study, we gathered information from secondary sources and to substantiate the statements stated, a few case studies have been taken. It is found that socio-culturally exclusion led the visually impaired to force into high-risk behaviors. Some young victims are coerced into sexual and non sexual practices contributing further vulnerability and exclusion.*

Keywords: *Visual impairment, Socio-cultural Exclusion, Coping Mechanisms, awareness.*

Introduction:

About 80 per cent of visually impaired live in developing countries (Tobias and Mukhopadhyay 2017). Irrespective any nation, the prevalence of persons with disabilities of different kinds is on the rise exponentially primarily due to chronic health disorders. Of them the visually impaired share a substantial percentage. India has housed the world's largest number of blind people. Of the 37 million people across the globe who are blind, over 15 million are from India among whom 75% of cases of blindness could have been avoided. Blinds perceive a world different from non-blind. The kinds of blinds are the product of situation, be it congenital or accidental. To combat the difficulties, individuals with visual disadvantage develop unique skill within their limitation. Their sensory organs respond externalities with much care yet their vision inadequacy and inability put push them to margins of the society. Often they become subjected to treatment not much different from the treatment given to the pets. In human society blind being the weak and dependent seeks empathy and support from fellow beings. However, often he/she gets exploited by the members of his/ her kin and also non-kin. Many elderly persons rationalize such a menace as a natural phenomenon and outcome of providence. Visual impairment may cause people difficulties with normal daily activities such as driving, reading, socializing and walking. The paper intend to observe and record the type of exclusion and rate of exploitation and also the coping strategies adopted by the such otherwise challenged to overcome their menace due to blindness. Legally people with visual impairments are marginalized minority mass and coming under socially exclusion groups. Bio-culturally visual impairment refers to the functional limitations and restrictions of eye-sight at the individual level.

Literally vision impairment or vision loss refers to decreased ability to see the object to a degree that causes problems not fixable by usual means of support such as glasses. Due to economic poverty a few have decreased ability to see because they do not have access to glasses or contact lenses. Thus, scientifically blindness refers to complete or certain degree of complete vision loss. Becoming visually impaired can be a life changing experience and is likely to have far reaching consequences for the person affected (Horowitz 2004). Novell took up a study to understand the strategies of coping of blind and visually handicapped adolescents (2002). In India such studies are rare. However, the National Program for Control of Blindness (NPCB) in India defines blindness as vision of 6/60 or less and a visual field loss of 20 degrees or less in the better eye, after spectacle correction. This means, a person fail to count fingers from a distance of six meters is categorized as "blind" in India, against the WHO's stipulation of three meters. Unlike physician's sphygmomanometer in hospital, the blinds in urban sector are symbolized by white stick in hand that demands empathetic response of the society. However, the responses vary across types of society and person's age and sex they are exposing to. Studies reveal that the loss of vision at different age and sex bears testimony of differential experience and adoptability. These experiences are qualitatively different for those blind by birth from those blind after birth.

Their coping mechanisms are also subjected to various types of socio-cultural setting where they are being groomed, be it rural, urban, formal institutional settings (Novell 2002). Events of menace are being reported from various welfare agencies that the blinds are subjected to verities of harassment. Keeping this in view to honor the rights of the citizen with such menace Government have taken a few welfare measures for effective integration of socio-cultural excluded group. Governments established national programs and regulations to prevent and control vision impairment; eye care services increasingly available and progressively integrated into primary and secondary health care systems. Government has also focused on the provision of services that are high quality, available and affordable; campaigns to educate about importance of vision function and raise awareness, including school-based education; and stronger government leadership on international partnerships, with increasing engagement of the private sector. It has created a reservation policy for blinds to be inducted into varieties of jobs like announcers at railway stations, bus Stops and airports, cane weavers, instrumentalists (staff artists), messengers, musician, music teachers, music composer, office superintendents, packers, stenographers Braille type writers, teachers (primary), telephone operators press operators, weavers, drillers, teachers in social sciences. dak messengers, dispatch clerk, gardeners, liftmen, office ministerial help, receptionist, retiring room attendants, sweepers, waterman, waiting room attendants, small stationary items sellers and other such activities etc. .

Review Literature:

There are not much empiric studies undertaken by scholars on socio-cultural exclusion of the blinds in rural and urban non-institutional setting. A few researchers found that many visually impaired students were individually equipped by institutions to get around obstacles, rather than the

obstacles themselves being removed (Tinklin and Hall 1999.). Vickerman and Blundell (2010) stressed that institution of higher education need to show to potential students that impairments will not affect their opportunities and that they will receive support and understanding. How motor skill functions among the blind has been studied by Brambring (2016). A few scholars in their study considered both students and staff viewpoints on what is reasonable for visually disabled students (Hopkins 2011). Some stated that blinds face varieties of biological and psychological problems in their day today life. The blind as a category is not homogenous. There are a few studies on psycho-social adjustment of the blind and their rehabilitation for integration into the main stream of national life (Batra, 1981 and Bhagotra, Sharma and Riana 2008). Thus, the problem seems to be that the response of staff cannot be predicted and therefore levels of support vary even within the same institution of higher education (Hopkins 2011). This demonstrates the inequality within the system. Many visually impaired students drop out of higher education due to not being able to get materials in time. This is compounded by the fact that reading Braille is slower and that the reader can neither scan-read nor highlight important sections for later reference (Lourens and Swartz, 2016).

Objectives of the study:

To document the patterns of social exclusions, coping mechanism adopted by blinds, the process of integration of the blinds in school; to record the forces of integration in the Sample area in favor of the blind children; to assess the support system extended by the Govt. / NGO for the welfare of the blinds in school and outside the school as a part of integration process

Hypotheses:

1. Socio-culturally exclusion of the blinds is directly proportional to high-risk behaviors.
2. The traditional socio-cultural beliefs of the society have greater impact in maintaining both exclusive and inclusive tenets thus act as barriers to integration of the visually impaired school students into greater society.

Method adopted:

The study being an explanatory cum descriptive in orientation treats individual subject as unit of analysis and blind population housed in educational institutions of west Odisha is the universe. The study banks upon the secondary data available in school and with the State authorities, although there were 50 members as our sample with 37 men and 23 female within the age group of 08 to eighteen years of age. To substantiate the finding a few randomly selected case studies have been considered from within the blind population housed in schools. The observation, group and individual interview as techniques have been used to elicit data.

Table: District wise Disable (blind) Distribution in Odisha.

Sl No	Name of the Districts	No. Of person With Disability	No. Of Special School	No Of Students	No. Of Teacher
01.	Anugul	34183	1	83	12
02	Baleswar	70736	1	119	14
03	Bargarh	42139	2	258	44
04	Bhadrak	42085	6	425	40
05	Balangir	57028	3	173	19
06	Boudh	12828	2	69	11
07	Cuttack	10201	6	312	37
08	Deogarh	8662	-	-	-
09	Dhenkanal	37096	4	215	29
10	Gajapati	16433	1	87	15
11	Ganjam	103573	5	348	28
12	Jagatshingpur	34284	1	136	15
13	Jajpur	54195	5	438	109
14	Jharsuguda	21158	4	316	30
15	Kalahandi	44121	4	244	39
16	Kandhamal	24620	2	66	21
17	Kendrapara	40110	2	82	4
18	Keunjhar	42799	3	299	22
19	Khordha	63949	-	470	81
20	Koraput	36291	3	230	21
21	Malkangiri	164	1	113	22
22	Mayurbhanj	68387	2	189	16
23	Nabarangpur	31932	3	108	12
24	Nayagarh	336624	3	108	12
25	Nuapada	20596	3	145	19
26	Puri	53667	9	563	61
27	Rayagada	28334	1	25	3
28	Sambalpur	35561	1	26	8
29	Sonepur	18011	3	189	31
30	Sundargarh	49497	6	374	40

Source: District Social School Security Statistic/ Activity 2018:-

The above table reveals that tribal districts are least represented by special school. The districts like Ganjam and Nayagarh have housed higher number of disables whereas special schools are more in Puri, Bhadrak, Cuttack and Sundargarh followed by Ganjam and Jajpur. There has been disproportionate ratio of schools and teachers in districts as compared to the number of students. Thus, one can infer that the State administration has adopted welfare schemes lopsidedly. This implies that developed pockets of Odisha have greater accessibility for the blinds to avail benefits; however, even in developed areas they are not free from discrimination and inadequacies in school life due to lack of sufficient and timely supply of Braille books, other reading materials and safety measures.

Result and discussion of the Sample:

Almost all the sample belongs to rural background whose parents belong to low and middle income group. The boys and girls have been divided into two age groups keeping in view the approximate age of puberty. The behavioral components below 10 years are distinctly different from the age group of above 10 years. Of them, 67% sample fall under avoidable blindness. Congenital cases are very few in our sample only two boys and a girl found to be the sufferers due to congenital disorder. 17% (11% boys and 6% girls) had seen the world during childhood when they were at natal home. 16% (equal number of boys and girls) of them are partially blind but come under the stipulated blind category. Younger boys and girls applied a number of different strategies to overcome their loss of vision and its associated consequences. However, their syndrome of dependency on hostel/ school mates found to be more than what they depend on outsiders including parents. Girls are found to be proactive coping than boys. Girls of above 10 years are found to be at high risk behavior as they are susceptible to sexual exploitation and psychological trauma in the male dominant school ambience. Thus, they for security reason adopt group solidarity and group interaction. Coping strategies varied from learning new skills, goal setting, integrating the use of low vision aids in their daily routine, withdrawal from group interaction and to avoid substance misuse. The case studies substantiate the tenets. Braille books are found scanty in supply. Vision loss affected on all aspects of daily life and individual experience provide mental strength to combat on-going struggle to accept and adjust situation that are becoming cumbersome for being visually impaired.

Conclusion:

The study has lot of limitations and the size of the sample is one among them. However, basing on the examination of data derived from primary and as well as secondary sources the following is the conclusive remarks made. Hand and hearing ability are two most effective gifted tools the blind has to make them adoptive and manage day today activities. The white stick supplements them in their movement and their imagination and memorizing obstacles of everyday activities in schools and hostels help them a lot to safeguard themselves from possible injury. When they get confused, they produce sound and call the name of some of their friends or office assistants/ school attendants as support seeking strategies. From group interview and observation it has been derived that the effectiveness of the coping effort depends on the type of stress/ menace the individual face and the circumstances he / she confronts. Further, it is also ascertained that coping responses are partly controlled by individual personality traits, but also partly by the organizational climate of the institution. The school ambience also has a significant role to play where young girls and boys are relatively managing their life as captives. The hypotheses taken, by and large, found to be supportive by the data collected from the sample blind schools of West Odisha. Coping with a visual impairment is a continuous struggle even after a considerable amount of time has passed, although needs for emotional, social, practical and physical support may still be present (see two representative case studies mentioned).

Recently amended Disability Act 2016, along with the rules for implementation by our Government, is a powerful piece of legislation that has the capacity to enable blind and partially sighted people to enjoy employment, goods services and premises and education without discrimination and with the provision of reasonable adjustments. Any act / law shall be powerful when it gets public proclamation. Since majority of them are unaware of the rights conferred by the act in favor of the blinds, it needs that the students be imparted constant and continuous awareness tips. Besides motivation and awareness inputs, self defense skills need to be imparted to visually impaired school goers. The vulnerability among the visually impaired can be minimized with the use of protective application of advance technologies if made available to their advantage. Their human rights can be protected with the intervention of state authorities in awarding punishment to the guilt that willfully violated the rules of law and harass/ assault the blinds. Since visual impairment is almost an equalizer among the inmates and does not reckon the origin of their ethnic or class identity. Unlike kinship at home frontiers that comes to rescue for the visually impaired, the hostel ambience promotes friendship ties with whom they share their experience of life. Thus, group cohesion among them with intent culture of share and care will not only liberate them from vulnerability but promote their inner strength and courage and help them enjoy constitutional and human rights in right perspective.

Case.1: N. Meher, a boy, aged around 15, born to a lower class weaver's family and lived for almost eight years along with other siblings. To his unfortunate he completely turned blind when he was at the age of two due to pox and wrong treatment. He does not remember the visible world but remembers the sound around. The mother was too much caring and seems instructing other children to render support and care. He was allowed to acts equal to other siblings. However, he remembers the merciless beating by parents when unknowingly he fell down on a bucketful of lukewarm water that fall on his two months younger sister. Every moment he was reminded of by his surroundings people that he is blind and therefore incapable of doing anything. It hurts him often. Every one shows sympathy for his loss of vision but hardly had he got any empathy from any source except his mother. He was made to feel that he is a burden to the parents, while they interact with other co-workers and villagers. After he was admitted into the school at the beginning he was taken care with a difference. Initially was frequently attended by parents and gradually they come to enquire about him after a gap of few months. A few of my senior's friends chide me and call me by caste name But they are the persons who gave the courage and accompany while reading ,feeding , playing and moving inside the school premises. Teachers complain parents about his wrong actions but never spoke that he acquired skill of art and reading and singing. Often they take food not worth eating and forced to remain mum when inspecting authorizes, mostly male members, visit the school. They face problems of learning due to lack of infrastructure facilities along with books and other reading materials meant for them. Often they are being disallowed to ventilate by the care takers during periodic inspection by the concerned authorities..

Case: 2.The girl by name Drupadi aged around 13 from an agrarian upper caste of middle income category family has been continuing her studies in school for the last five years she is the eldest daughter in the family of a household with six members including her father and step mother. She

realized that her father is too much concerned for her future. He wanted her to be highly educated so that she could become a News Reader or a teacher in the local college. As per her statement she was never misbehaved by the step mother that could affect her dignity. She realized the loneliness when got admitted into the school and stayed in hostel. The feelings of her mother she assessed was relaxed as her stay was fixed in hostel. Drupadi said that she was told that she was looking beautiful during early childhood. She said that *“I remember, as I was growing in age and marked changes in physique, many started extending their soft supportive words to encourage me to remain cheerful”*. Further she said that *“I recollect when I was at home during vacation, the highly risky behavioral experience the day when some male member of my family silently came from behind and grabbed me and started molesting which I never expected and experienced. It pained me and I cried loudly. After I reported that horrific event to my mother who took it lightly and in the evening my father was abusing at my mother”*.

Similar things happened in school recently as she heard from her peer. ‘When she discussed with peer group, almost all members of her peer expressed similar recent experiences that they encountered. She said that she was advised by friends to remain mum and tolerant and not to be reactive. Further, she stated that in the meantime when she heard National TV News that a young blind beggar was gang raped, her apprehensive behavior made her perplexed and at times reactive against male world of the so-called developed society. Women in general and visually impaired women in particular feel that women insecurity is in rise and male supremacy in Odisha still in practice. Seeking freedom and protection for visually impaired is by and large is a day dream and thus in Odishan society the socio-cultural exclusion perpetuates. For the welfare agencies, including state authorities there it is necessary to scan the problems and seek solutions contextually in order to benefit the visually impaired. While approaching for remedial measures from regional/ community cultural perspective it is essential that the cases be examined contextually. To treat the socio-culturally dependents, such as visually impaired, the developing agencies need to become proactive in approach to save the individual dignity and social esteem of the concerned category of otherwise challenged.

References:

- 1) Aref, Zaman (2009), “An anthropological study of the disabled in Guwahati” (Ph, D Thesis submitted to Guwahati University (Unpublished).
- 2) Elina I. Tobias Sourav Mukhopadhyay (2017) “ Disability and Social Exclusion: Experiences of Individuals with Visual Impairments in the Oshikoto and Oshana Regions of Namibia” in Psychology and Developing Societies Vol.29 No. 1 Pp 22–43
- 3) .Batra, S.(1981), “Social Integration of the Blind, Concept Publishing House” New Delhi.
- 4) .Bhatta, Usha (1963) “The Physically handicapped in India: A growing national problem” Popular Book Depot Bombay..
- 5) Bhagotra S, Sharma, A.K, Riana, B.(2008) Psycho-social adjustments and rehabilitation of the blind. Social Medicine Jan; Vol. 10 No (1).
- 6) Brambring M.(2006) Development of gross motor skills in children who are blind or sighted. Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness Oct; Vol 10 No (1): Pp.620-34.
- 7) Horowitz, A (2004); ‘The prevalence and consequences of vision impairment in later life’ In Top Geriatr Rehabil. Vol. 20, No (3) Pp. 185–95.
- 8) Lourens, H and Swartz, L 2016 Experiences of visually impaired students in higher education-NCBI-NIH <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5130161/> Mar 17, 2016
- 9) Novell CC. Coping and blindness: A study of the strategies of coping of blind and visually handicapped adolescents. Alicante, Spain; 2002
- 10) Safir, A. (1972) The blind person’s problems. Modern Ophthalmology Vol. 4 No (2) Pp. 199-202.
- 11) Tinklin, T. and Hall, J. (1999) Getting round obstacles: disabled students’ experiences in higher education in Scotland, Studies in Higher Education, Vol 24, Pp183–194
- 12) Vickerman, P and Blundell, M (2010)-Disability and Society,- Taylor & Francis, New York, USA
- 13) World Health Organization (2009); Global initiative for the elimination of avoidable blindness-Pp 97:61.

Acknowledgement: Earlier version of the paper was presented at the international seminar on “Recent Trend in Management, Commerce and Social Sciences (RCMCSS-18)” held at Raurkela Institute of Management Studies, Raurkela, and Odisha during the month of Sept, 2018. We acknowledge the academic support of Dr. Premananda Panda, Professor Social Anthropology while preparing and shaping the paper to present status.