Challenging the Odds: Critiquing the Extraordinary Journey of Malini Chib in *One Little Finger*

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Abstract:

Disability is a physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses or activities. But people with strong determination and will power have overcome these limitations. Many people with disabilities have proven that nothing is impossible before strong determination and dedication. It is just a state of mind, for instance Sudha Chandran, who has been a known figure in the Indian television. She has overcome her disability by getting a prosthetic leg. This paper seeks to bring the journey of such a lady who despite of her disabling condition which is known as cerebral palsy but she established a suitable place for herself in society. She got proper formal education and learnt to type with her little finger. Finally, she worked through unfavourable social systems to get a career as an event manager. In this process of self-realization; she became a beacon of hope and light for others.

The proposed paper seeks to project the journey of Malini Chib, who came across several physical, social barriers to carve a niche for herself. Further, the paper also compares and contrasts the treatment meted out to the disabled people in India, and the abroad. It also brings out the traumatic picture of the sufferings of disabled people to whom people consider as weak and worthless.

Keywords: disability, determination, challenges, unfavourable, dedication, self-realization.

The word disability connotatively carries the cultural baggage of great pain, sufferings and traumatic experiences of the people who are declared disable by social cultural hegemonic structures. Disability is a broader term which has vast canvas includes impairment, limitations of activity and restrictions of bodily movements experienced by an individual in real life situation. Hence, it is complex phenomenon which reflects an individual interaction with society. It occurs as an interaction of a person's ability with an environment. In reality disability is something that is occurred in the external world of the social structures. Internally, every person has same emotions, feelings and conflicts. These structures have played a major role in determining and conditioning socio- cultural practices of a society. As per standard rules of United Nations on *Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* (1985), "the term 'disability' summarizes a great number of different functional limitations occurring in any population, in any country of the world. People may be disabled by physical, intellectual or sensory impairment, medical conditions or mental illness may be permanent or transitory in Nature (Mehrotra 55). The World Health Organisation defines disability by relating it with functional limitation over medical diagnosis. Hence, 'disability' has been interpreted differently which evolved with time and gradually changes its scope and limitations as per changing needs of the social structures. The present paper is the story of such a disabled lady who excelled in her life after overcoming all sort of obstacles and hardships. Malini Chib was born in Calcutta and budding writer of contemporary times. In her autobiography *One Little Finger* she shared all her experiences of life from childhood to adulthood and made an appeal to humanity regarding the need to change the perspective regarding disabled people.

Unfortunately, during the time of her birth, the umbilical cord got stuck around her neck as a result the supply of oxygen to her brain hampered which caused a lifetime disabling condition called Cerebral Palsy (*anoxia*) in medical term. Hence, the condition restricts the physical movement of a person. But Malini Chib was determined to prove the doctor's prediction wrong. Thus, with the dint of her strong will power and hardwork, she was succeeded in dismantling the stereotypical ideology of a society. Although in this journey of empowerment she had to face lot of problems and bear harsh criticism of a society. Hence, the study would be an initiative to expose all the ill treatment mete out to the disabled people living in India in comparison to disabled people residing in abroad.

The birth story of Malini Chib was very controversial as doctor declared that it would be difficult for her to survive "it was a mistake I should have carried out a caesarean . . . let's see if she survives . . . I am not sure if she will survive . . . at the most 72 hours"(03). Fortunately, she survived but she was physical passive which made her mother quite worried. Thus, the condition of Malini Chib made everyone anxious in the family especially her mother. So, the parents wanted to do everything for her and they never missed any opportunity for correct diagnosis. Hence, it was tough phase of her life when she was treated by doctors in India. Due to the harsh treatment from which she had to go through resultant she wanted to avoid to visit to doctors, "There were endless examinations done by doctors. I am told that I hated these examinations. The doctors pulled at my limbs and I shrieked with fright . . . they remained cold, silent, strange, and unsmiling in their white coats; not talking . . . I must have thought I was being punished" (04). Moreover, they were told by doctors that she had to spend her whole life being a disabled person but it was difficult for her parents to believe as they were determined to face this challenge.

She has projected the trajectory of life which is quite adventurous and inspirational for other disabled people as she shared an experience of her childhood during her birthday party when she was so depressed and felt alone as kids were preferred to play with toys and balloons rather than a disabled birthday girl. She observes:

> I think the worst thing that can happen to a child with a disability is to leave them alone and not even talk to them . . . My mother writes that when I met strangers, or entered a room full of people, I began to put my head down, terribly conscious of myself and the fact that I was different from others. The thought that somebody may notice that I was present and ask something about me, was mortifying. (06)

It was privileged for Malini Chib that she belonged to well educated family. As a result they had consultation with the leading doctors of London, "He told them that the Indian doctors did not know much and were extremely negative about my condition which they had diagnosed as spastic with mental retardation. Considering it was brain damage, they had concluded that nothing could be done even in England"(07). But doctors in England were quite optimistic and motivated to deal with the case. Thus, she had highlighted the discouraging and negative attitude which Indian doctors had shown while her treatment. Luckily, she had very supportive and educated family but what about those disabled people who were born in the homes of uneducated and poor families? How would they survive in such type of environment? So, the current paper contemplates upon all these issues critically and thoroughly.

In England she got encouraging environment which made her quite happy thus school at Cheyne Walk which was the best school for special children in London. The school had ample activities which included Speech, Physiotherapy and Occupational therapy and learning through play way methods. She was not mentally retarded as declared by Indian doctors. Hence, she had above average IQ in intelligence which was described in England 'an intelligent mind with a disobedient body'(09). Now, she got good exposure under the guidance of kind, compassionate team of experts who handle such children with utmost attention and care. Meanwhile, she got opportunity to travel all around Europe and England. The new environment brought positive change in Malini as a result her mother enrolled herself for a postgraduate diploma course in the University of London; thus, she became the first special educationist of India. Malini captured the golden memories of London life in her writings, "London was the place where I blossomed, where I acquired stability with excellent management for time since my birth. I had learnt to read, do well intellectually and had begun to walk. People here loved and accepted me for what I was" (15). But in India she had very painful experiences and faced many challenges in order to establish herself in Indian society. The first challenge of her extraordinary journey was that there was no special school for abnormal children moreover when she went for diagnosis she had very painful memory:

> They poked and examined me as if I did not feel any pain. Well, I was just a patient and not a human being . . . She cannot hold a pencil, she cannot tie her shoe laces, she cannot undress or dress independently and cannot feed herself. The paramedical staff treated me as if I did not have ears or could not understand. To them, I was a non- thinking person who needed fixing and fitting into the mould of being human. I hated the whole experience. My experience in Cheyne, of their kindness and sensitivity towards me were fresh in mind . . . Cheyne staff had been so nurturing, friendly, warm, sensitive and egalitarian. They had treated me as a child first, not a handicapped child. I did not have words to express my deep grief and sadness; nobody thought I could understand. Being only six, I collapsed into tears; of course I could understand everything they said.(17)

In India people have different approach towards disable people. The people dealing with disable people are considered themselves as professional, superior and treat them on their own terms and conditions without bothering about their emotions. Thus, the indifferent attitude of the people towards disability completely disturbed Malini's mother and she became an isolated figure and began to questioning about other children having varied disabilities. Hence, she had an idea of setting up a replica school in India resembling with school at Cheyne Walk in London which would suit the needs and demands of Indian disable children. The Centre for Special Education school was the outcome of it as they realized the difference in the treatment of doctors to disabled people between India and London. So, Malini's mother took the initiative that's why she did diploma course from the University of London to be professional in handling disable children keeping in view the pain and agony of Indian children with multiple disabilities and in this journey of becoming a special educationist she was persuaded and motivated by her husband. Although the journey of parents with Malini was equally challenging and hard but they did not leave their daughter alone rather provided her congenial environment to grow and prosperous independently without bothering about society. The author Nilika Mehrotra in her book *Disability, Gender & State Policy: Exploring Margins* observes:

> Disability provides a useful heuristic lens to understand distribution of power in society, between different strata, communities and gendered axis of social inequality which implicate in unequal axis to resources. At this point, there is a heavy dependence on western theories and concepts in research on disability in Indian context. Very little effort towards comparison is being attempted . . . There is lot of research happening within technical and medical institutions but it is seen with skepticism due to its heavy reliance on medically informed definitions and positivist methods where disabled have on voice. A move from medical to social model came long back in western academia but we are still working with older concepts. (Mehrotra 47)

Being disabled Malini had to use wheelchair as no option left for her when she had to go to boarding school. But she hated to sit on wheelchair, "because I felt disabled, but I was; when I was young I was never taught to value my disability . . . If one was disabled, it was expected of him or her to overcome their disability and fit into the able world. This is an oppression that continues till today"(38). She was sharing the experience of her at Thomas Delarue School in London when she returned to England, it was the best time of her life as school building was constructed in keeping the view of disabled people, "The school was fully accessible and wheelchair friendly . . . Additionally, there were two therapy rooms with physiotherapists- an occupational therapy room and a speech therapy room" (39). Thus, this school prepared her to take the responsibility of life and she considered herself ready to get admission in college at Saint Xavier in Bombay. Now, it was a big challenge for her as she was going to get education with normal students. It was really hard to believe when Vice Chancellor of the university gave his reply to her mother on the request of her that university provide some extra time to physical challenged students during the time of exams writing, "Why do these students want to give this exam? . . . These exams are a waste of time. They are useless, and these students would be kept at home" (49). Hence, the statement made by Vice Chancellor seemed to be quite absurd and contradictory in nature. But Malini's mother was determined to fulfill certain demands from authorities and finally succeeded in it. As a result Malini along with the four students with multiple disabilities got admission in the college. Hence, the concept of inclusive education was introduced in Higher education for the first time in Indian system. Now, the real challenges began in her educational career. When she had to study with normal children and she was made realized by others that she was different from them, "It was my first day at Xavier's, and I did not know how others were going to react to my disability. I entered the classroom . . . The silence was interrupted by the irritating, incessant noise of the motor of my electric wheelchair. There were whispers and unsure shuffles. The professor himself looked most scared and apprehensive"(51). It was the first huddle which she had managed somehow and stepped herself on the ladder of success. Now, the next challenge was the 'activity limitation' in executing the task of hand and speech coordination while studying in the classroom and she felt neglected in the class amongst students as they did not incorporate her in their conversation the reason being that she could not speech loud and no one put any efforts to understand her whereas in previous special school in London there proper attention was given.

The next hurdle which she came across was the lack of accessibility and she needed external support to get the things to be done in school. Although she used an electric wheelchair but she needed help to cross the ledges at each classroom. Due to problems of physical accessibility and lack of communication led to her lack of adjustment with her classmates which further created the problem in socialization. Although she wanted to be involved with her classmates but she trapped in the web of her own dilemmas such as:

> Would people understand me? Would they feel embarrassed talking to me? Were they coming up to me just because I was disabled? . . . Generally however, I moved about on my own as I felt shy to initiate a conversation . . . my vocal expression was not quick enough to be included in a dynamic interactive group situation. This was another agonizing experience. No effort was made by those who could speak. My speech became my biggest barrier . . . anybody not speaking like everyone else would literally be rejected and abandoned. Did I have my own personality? Was I just another disabled girl who needed things done for her? I knew that I was different and trapped in a dysfunctional body, but did others realize I had a spirit and a mind separate from this body? My body did not work like others, but did they realize that my mind was normal? Did they consider thinking that my desires were just the same as theirs? (54)

In this way she got upset and the questions always swirling in her mind that why was she different from other people? But, she decided to be part of every activity of her classmates. So, she herself started to take the initiative. Once, a girl named Feroza from her class who asked her for movie to be watched but she was left out which made her felt hurt but she wanted to be part of their activities. Hence, one day she took extra effort to make plan for movie as she was determined to be part of the group. Ultimately, they were influenced and agreed to go. She realized that group enjoyed her company as she managed herself most of the things and did not depend upon them. Now, she urged to attend every activity organized by the group either dance picnic or parties which sometimes again pushed her in the world of deep introspection, “What is normal? Who is normal? Why am I abnormal? Who decides? I cannot speak, I cannot walk; does that make me abnormal? It seemed obvious that I was different; I began to be painfully aware that I was never going to be easily accepted by so- called normal society (56). Thus, she wanted to be treated equally like others although academically, she was treated on equal terms. In her first unit test she got very marks which made her realized that in India marks were given to those who produce same answers from the book. But in England she was trained to conceptualize what she had learnt. So, it was another challenge which she had to deal with in order to attain good marks. Thus, it was clearly evident that emphasis was given to quantity than quality. Hence, it seemed a difficult task for her to mug whole answers which she preferred to reject. Now, they had to arrange amanuensis for writing answers in exam, after large negotiation with officials somehow university agreed to give the provision to select the amanuenses of own choice who could understand her speech well otherwise it was a rule that amanuensis must be younger to a candidate. Hence, it was clearly evident that the education system of India trained students to be like modern gadgets instead of great thinkers of future. It was bitter truth but reality of contemporary times. Although Malini Chib was determined to overcome her disability and no doubt she had attained that height and succeeded in rupturing the stereotypical picture of disabled people. But sometimes during social functions she felt terribly hurt when people did not want her company, "It made me question what I wanted from these social gatherings. Why did I go? Was it the food or the company that I went for? It taught me to be a bit distant from my friends, as I seemed to collapse emotionally if they did something which upset me" (67). In this way, college life put many challenges on various fronts viz. social, academic and personal but she had learnt to grapple with them and gradually overcome all the hurdles which restricted her way.

Conclusion:

Malini Chib had created an example for those millions of disabled people who lost hope in their life. The extraordinary journey of her life taught that one should never yield before hardships created by social systems. She made an appeal through her writings to society and observed that, "Everyone is inter- dependent. If one lives in a family . . . we are all in a way interdependent or co- dependent – socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually (149).Now, Malini is quite confident and empowered woman. She has become fast and expert in writing articles, essays with her small little finger, "I found the years intellectually invigorating and emotionally empowering . . . I would not have gone through this meaningful and stimulating period which brought me to the crossroads of life, as I began to question myself in terms of who I was . . . able to accept my own identity as *a disabled woman and was proud* of being one" (150).Thus the written document projected the issue of disability on the face of vast canvas of stereotypical society.

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