

Conversations at the crossroads – Disability & Intersectionality

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It was in the year 1989 that Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American professor, lawyer, civil rights advocate, and philosopher, published numerous articles that would go on to redefine conversations around the world.

She introduced the term ‘intersectionality’ to the world. In the years since, Crenshaw has written and spoken extensively on this subject across both academic and non-academic platforms. Her TED talk, where she describes how “many of our social justice problems are... often overlapping creating multiple levels of social injustice,” has over a million views. What began as a conversation at the crossroads of race and gender has now grown to become the language of marginalised communities all over the world.

The intersectionality between disability and other identity markers is one that is slowly gaining attention in India and overseas. The conversation on the subject describes how the experience of disability is one that cannot be understood alone. Instead, every individual’s lived experience needs to be read at the intersection of all their identities – age, gender, disability, caste, class, sexuality, and so on. Far from being a theoretical conversation, this is an idea that has the power to influence how we frame our policies, handle our classrooms, manage our workspaces, publish our content, design our technology, and much more.

This commitment to intersectionality lies at the core of initiatives like “[Skin Stories](#)”, for example: the first and only platform in India dedicated to publishing perspectives on disability, sexuality and gender. Conversations about universal design and the benefits of accessible infrastructure for persons with and without disability has been reflected in governmental initiatives like the [Accessible India Campaign](#). Online tools like [Stark](#) “make the world’s software more accessible” by helping designers inspect contrast levels, pick appropriate colour palettes and so much more. Intersectionality has found its place in bubbles, silos and conversations all over the world.

If these kind of conversations are happening, why are we talking about it now, you may ask. The task ahead of each of us today is to grow these bubbles and expand these conversations. This edition of *Success & ABILITY* seeks to do just this, by bring to you the voices and stories of three renowned women disability activists.

Dr. Anita Ghai, Professor at Ambedkar University, speaks about her journey from the women's movement to the disability movement and the recent introduction of a PhD in Disability Studies at Ambedkar University. Dr. Sruti Mahopatra's work both as a societal leader in her own right and through her organisation Swabhimaan has bettered the lives of tens of thousands of people in the areas of inclusive education and employment, legislation and politics, and accessible cities. Through her organisation Bapu Trust, Bhargavi Davar has been instrumental in driving the conversation around the intersection between mental health, gender and much more.

Women like these are inspiring, powerful role models for us all. However, the buck does not stop here. Each of us has a circle of influence and intersectionality has its place in each of these circles. Here is what each of us can do to champion the cause of intersectionality every day:

- Have conversations. Conversation is powerful. In her interview, Bhargavi Davar says "my mother did not speak, I did not speak, but Bapu Trust [her organisation] will speak." Conversations around disability and how it interacts with other identity markers will go a long way in achieving the goal of an inclusive society.
- Ask questions. [In their blog](#), Diversity & Ability identify four key questions that each of us can ask ourselves at any point of decision making. Which communities are (not) served and why? Who can (not) participate and why? Who can (not) access resources and support and why? Whose voices (do not) get heard and why? Asking ourselves these questions will act as the reminder to make more inclusive decisions. A self-confessed teacher, so much of Dr. Sruti Mahopatra's work has been about asking the right questions and challenging status quo in all walks of life.
- Learn all the time. Articles, talks, podcasts and so many more resources are available to us today, if only we seek them out. Becoming more informed will automatically help each of us take more inclusive decisions. In this issue, Dr. Anita Ghai speaks extensively in her interview about her learning journey; through gender studies, disability studies, body politics and so much more. One good resource is the [report on intersectionality in the South Indian context](#) by Centre for Law and Policy Research.

By talking, questioning, and learning, together we can grow the spaces of intersectionality in the world. Together, let us make our conversations reflect diversity, difference and the commitment to inclusion.