

## **Words and Worth: The Significance of Inclusive Language in Storytelling**

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During my early days in CSR communications, I sometimes used words like “underprivileged,” “girls from slum communities”, “marginalized children”, “slum children”, and “tribal women”, when preparing content. I recall a specific incident during a program our company was organizing for our support staff and transport personnel. In our promotional materials and press releases, I used the terms "support staff" and “cab drivers” prominently. Until my boss and mentor brought it up gently, little did I know that this choice of language was stripping someone of their dignity, ironically the same people whose lives we were positively transforming through our CSR initiatives.

It was a moment of revelation for me as I felt, of all people, that I should have known how labels can hurt. From a young age like I have been interviewed several times and have been asked for quotes and insights for numerous articles addressing inclusion, accessibility, workplace diversity, and inclusive fashion. However, I've cringed many times when reading those articles due to the choice of words and adjectives used to describe my physical disabilities. I felt phrases such as "wheelchair-bound" and "wheelchair-confined" were particularly distressing and perpetuated stereotypes, sending a misleading message to readers. Ironically, even after becoming an author, journalists covering my book, a collection of personal anecdotes about living with cerebral palsy and confronting societal prejudices and stereotypes, continued to label me as a "disability author," "differently-abled author," or someone "suffering from/ afflicted by cerebral palsy." Such descriptions are inaccurate and fail to capture the fullness of my identity.

Inclusive language acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities. As storytellers and communicators, we must recognize that the insensitive use of language devalues and belittles individuals. It is understandable that as human beings, we all perceive the world through the lens of our unique backgrounds, and that journalists and writers are not exempt from unconscious biases. But one must remember that the words we choose hold power; they can either uplift or diminish the worth of others.

People-first language reminds us to prioritize the person over their identity or condition, as in saying "a person with a disability" rather than "a disabled person." Being sensitive to religious and cultural nuances is essential and avoid stigmatizing language related to economic status. Use age-inclusive terminology like "older adults" or "seniors" instead of "elderly". Finally, exercising respect when discussing abilities and disabilities is key to avoiding ableism.

I recently watched the series "Decoupled" on Netflix, which provided a stark example of what inclusive language is not. The series featured numerous instances of problematic language, touching on issues related to gender, caste, disability, socioeconomic differences, ageism, and body shaming. While exploring complex characters with flaws, it is important for even seasoned writers and creators to remain sensitive to language when addressing sensitive topics.

Interestingly, I find that contemporary children's literature has embraced more inclusive and diverse perspectives in its written content and creative visual representation. For example, in "Catch that Cat!" by Tharini Viswanath, the character Dip Dip is a wheelchair user. The story illustrates how Dip Dip is much more than her disability, portraying her as a mischievous girl who skips school, squabbles with her

brother, exhibits a feisty personality, and happens to use a wheelchair for mobility. This kind of representation not only educates children about diversity but also fosters empathy and inclusivity.

Another delightful example is the recently published book "Maari: A Gift from the Skies," by Anusha Veluswamy, which explores the lives and struggles of a rural community during a drought. A child growing up in a city can understand from the writing and visual art that the '*parai*' is as good a musical instrument as the piano; a piglet is as good a pet as a pug is and that dark brown is as good a skin colour as pale brown or peachy complexion is.

In today's polarized world, inclusive language in storytelling is not merely a matter of political correctness but an ethical imperative. Words have the power to shape perceptions, reinforce stereotypes, or challenge biases. As storytellers, journalists, and communicators, we bear the responsibility of using language that acknowledges diversity, conveys respect, and promotes equal opportunities. When we embrace inclusive language, we contribute to a world where every individual's worth is celebrated, and stories are told with the richness of the human experience.