

A Soft Landing Place

Exploring disability justice in India



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The first time I remember feeling sad about being sick was when I was 5.

I didn't want to be in bed anymore. I wanted to be in class, eating lunch with friends, listening to stories.

Years later, most of my days, like of many other disabled people, still center around my bed and a bouquet of heating pads. But now, we have somewhat of a love story.



Everything else feels too prickly and coarse when your body is screaming with pain and falling apart.

I'm not sure why they call it an invisible illness. Maybe it's because, for the rest of your life you will sit at doctors' offices in front of their doors, pleading to just be seen and heard, only to be told it's not real.



Or maybe it's an invisible illness because you're expected to shrink yourself to be in the world: don't occupy any space here.

For many years I didn't have the language to articulate my body, its crumbling, and the way it felt to stagger through the world.



I spent hours writing poems about feeling isolated when my migraines wouldn't leave.



I drew about staggering through the world, depersonalized.



I cried about waking up with my face on fire, and then felt embarrassed about not having a good enough morning routine.

But thanks to endless internet deep dives during pain flare ups, I came across so many sick and disabled people – talking, sharing, being, and crying together.



I didn't know this then, but one thing opened up into another and soon it felt like I'd found the map to a glorious garden.



Finding disability justice turned my most arid days into a blooming summer.



And on days I was sinking, which were so many – a soft landing place appeared.

"A disability justice framework understands that: all bodies are unique and essential; all bodies have strengths and needs that must be met; we are powerful, not despite the complexities of our bodies but because of them; all bodies are confided by ability, race, gender, sexuality, class, nation state, religion, and more, and we cannot separate them."*

Patty Berne, Sins Invalid, a disability justice-based performances project

*Sins Invalid: What is Disability Justice, sinsinvalid.org, 2020

Many years before I'd found disability justice, I'd stumbled into the feminist movement. And in many ways, it saved me. It was the first time I'd experienced the power of solidarity, youth leadership, and collective transformation. But it felt like there were a few missing pieces.



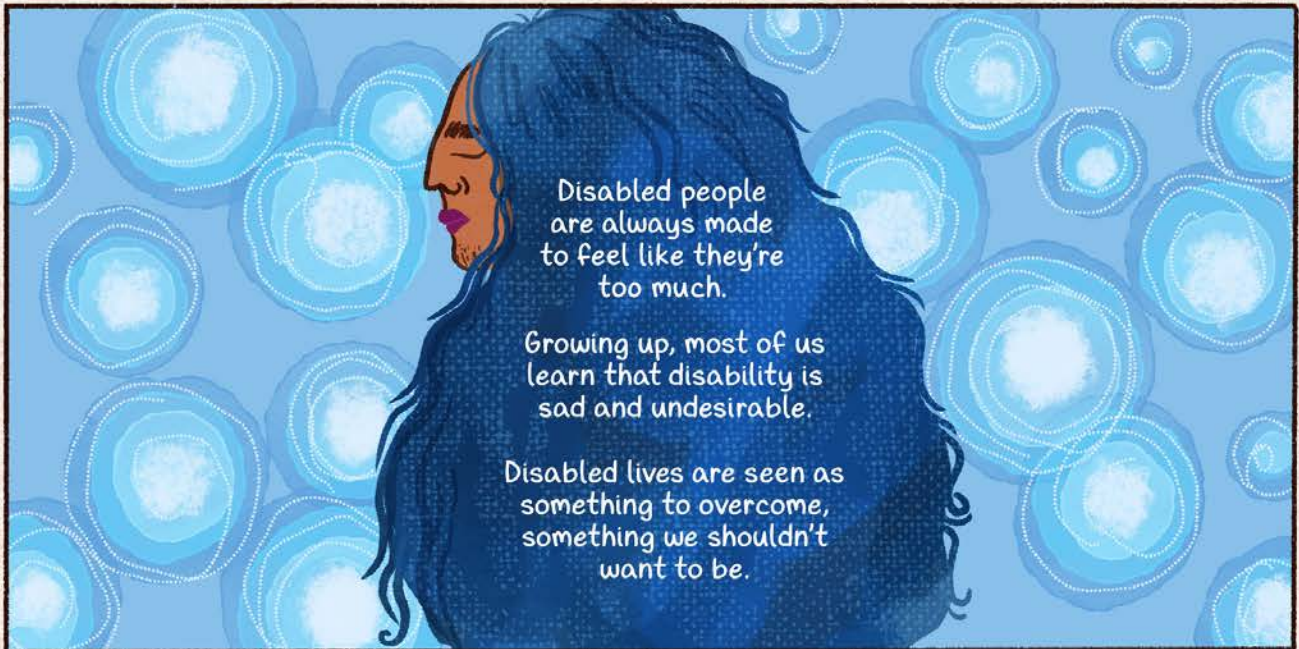
When I came to disability justice, I'd already realized the power of social movements. The ways in which we struggle, celebrate, hold each other and through it all keep moving – together. But I was dreaming of more.



Disabled people are always made to feel like they're too much.

Growing up, most of us learn that disability is sad and undesirable.

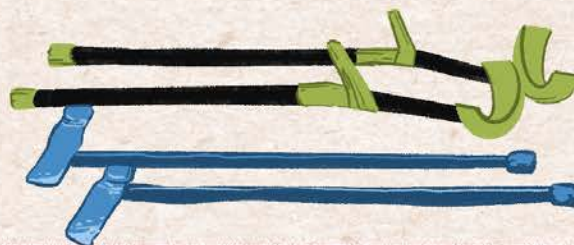
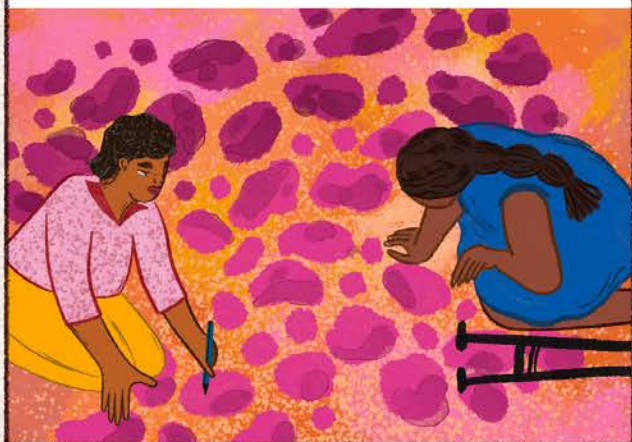
Disabled lives are seen as something to overcome, something we shouldn't want to be.



We rarely learn about our disabled elders and ancestors, and even if we do – it's under the guise of cures and inspiration porn. But what we long to know about are the ways they've paved the way with their generosity, ideas, and work towards the pursuit of creating disabled futures.



While the disability rights movement has done important and historical work in advancing the rights of people with disabilities, its framework does not include various forms of oppression.



Like Patty Berne, the founder of Sins Invalid says: "It centers people with mobility impairments, marginalizing other forms of impairment; and centers people who can achieve rights and access through a legal or rights-based framework."*



*Disability Justice: A working draft by Patty Berne, sinsinvalid.org

And the important question is: who does this leave out, how many of us does it invisibilize?



In response to this, disabled activists of colour: Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, Stacey Milbern, Leroy Moore, Eli Clare, and Sebastian Margaret began discussing a second wave of disability rights and launched a framework they called Disability Justice.



10 PRINCIPLES OF DISABILITY JUSTICE

intersectionality

Leadership of those most affected

anti-capitalist politics

cross-movement solidarity

Recognizing wholeness

sustainability

commitment to cross-disability solidarity

interdependence

collective access

collective liberation

*10 Principles of Disability Justice, sinsinvalid.org; Disability Liberated, Skin, Tooth and Bone: The Basis of Movement is Our People

Finding the language of disability justice was affirming in the ways it drew upon legacies of resistance.



It celebrates the work largely done by individuals within their own settings, but also highlights the importance of the leadership of queer and disabled people of colour.



But I was aching to find something closer to home. While the disability rights movement in India has a rich history, the disability justice movement is still in its nascent stages.



Discrimination and inequity cannot be understood by a single axis of identity. In India particularly, this also means evaluating the way experiences are varied across caste and class lines, in addition to gender, sexuality, religion, race, and ability.



And so, the emergence of disability justice on the path to liberation is crucial.

With a map to the glorious garden in my hand, I wandered through nooks, crannies, and fragments of erased histories, exploring sparks of the slow and steady building of a disability justice movement in India.



Shivangi Agrawal, a queer and disabled artist and activist, spoke about the way caregivers or family members of people with disabilities occupy a lot of space and lead many initiatives in the disability movement in India.

"That is not our voice, and in fact so many of us are abused by our caregivers and biological families."



Nidhi Goyal, a disabled feminist activist, stand-up comic, and the founder of Rising Flame articulates how safety includes accessibility, and the ways in which gender, violence and disability are intertwined.

"For many people, home is considered a safe space, and so the violence that goes on at home is either not recognized...or there is no possibility of an exit."*



The reality, like Nidhi says, is that "We don't consider that seeking consent from a disabled woman is required at all."



*Nirantar Video, Disability, Gender, Violence, Home and the City, The Third Eye Portal

There is no disability justice without access, but the shifts in how we understand and expand this access are essential. Disabled feminist, writer, researcher, and educator Srinidhi Raghavan, in her column for Firstpost said: "To a large extent, we find that non-disabled people view the entirety of the disabled experience through the lens of dependence."*



*Interdependence should be valued beyond disabled community, Srinidhi Raghavan, Firstpost

Every day we're told that our sick and disabled bodies are a punishment to those around us. We're seen as burdens, and so it's not strange that so many of us internalize these messages.



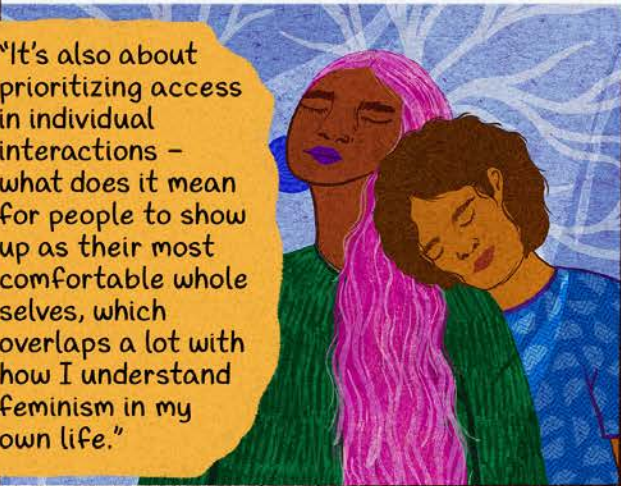
But I'm dreaming of a world where we're able to cultivate interdependence as a gentle yet fierce response to this deeply entrenched ableism.

As Mia Mingus says: "Interdependence moves us away from the myth of independence, and towards relationships where we are all valued and have things to offer."

And every time I've been in community with other disabled and queer people, I've witnessed the ways in which interdependence is transformative.

Kim Fernandes, a disabled, queer researcher, writer, and educator reflected on overlaps in the ways they think of disability justice and feminism.

"It's also about prioritizing access in individual interactions – what does it mean for people to show up as their most comfortable whole selves, which overlaps a lot with how I understand feminism in my own life."

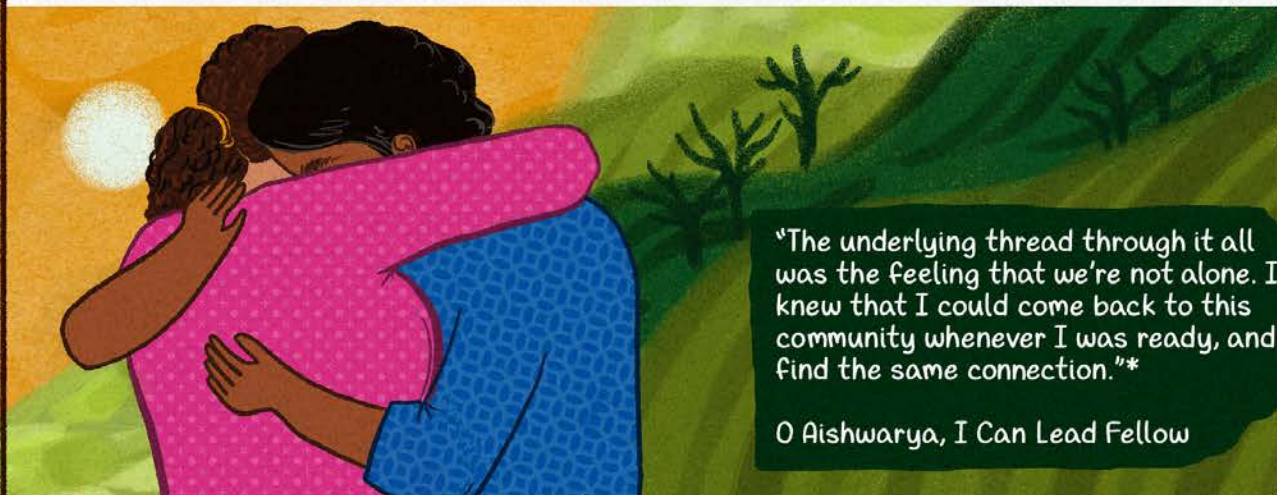


In 2019, Rising Flame, a nonprofit based in India, launched 'I Can Lead', a first of its kind national leadership program for women with disabilities in India.



There's something so powerful about spaces built and led by and for disabled people.

Through the program, fellows articulated their positions on feminism and disability justice, received mentorship, increased visibility by publishing their writing and took political action.



"The underlying thread through it all was the feeling that we're not alone. I knew that I could come back to this community whenever I was ready, and find the same connection."*

O Aishwarya, I Can Lead Fellow

*Finding Community by O Aishwarya, I Can Lead 2020, Rising Flame

Collective liberation that leaves no one behind is built on engaging with each other, sharing responsibility, and working together to meet each other's needs. It's about pacing ourselves, but showing up when and as we can, sometimes with solutions, and sometimes just to be frustrated together.



Dr. Aiswarya Rao, public health consultant and founder of Better World Shelter for Women with Disabilities, shared about going to church simply because it's a community space.



She further explains: "When we go out of our way, and allow ourselves to be involved in matters that affect those in the community, there is a certain amount of self-healing too."*

*Blending Art, Friendship & Advocacy: A Conversation with Dr. Aiswarya Rao by Greeshma Kuthar, No Niin Issue 17

An illustration of an open blue envelope with a white patterned interior. The envelope is surrounded by several colorful flowers: a large orange flower on the left, a yellow flower on the right, and a pink flower at the bottom right. The background is green with some foliage.

Disability justice is expansive: for Shivangi it looks like getting together with their disabled and queer friends sitting on the bed together, for Kim, it was having their world split open with possibilities. For me, it has meant looking for doctors for each other, laying on heating pads together, emergency food delivery, and flowers on pain days.

Because like Mia Mingus says, disability justice is after all simply another term for love.