Blindness in South and East Asia: Using History to Inform Development

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In recent decades a comfortable set of myths has been constructed about disability and service development in the histories of Asian countries. They tell the story that, *in the old days*, before the pale foreign devils sailed up in their little ships, disabled people were cared for in their families and were integrated and accepted in their communities. Sometimes they were involved in religious functions, or had places as entertainers at the ruler's court. Sometimes they memorised the history of the tribe and told the old stories to the children. Some of them were skilled artists or craftspeople. Then came the ignorant colonialists and narrow-minded missionaries, who brutally snatched the land, tricked the rulers, trampled on the local gods and customs, forced people to wear trousers, and banned the simple pleasures of life, such as sex and liquor. Disabled people were herded into cold, segregated institutions, where they either died of neglect or were forcibly converted to foreign devilry. Only now, after long years of miserable exclusion, are disabled people beginning to be rescued by lovely, cool, refreshing Community Based Rehabilitation and Inclusive Education.

Like all well-constructed myths, there are some truths hidden in this set. And like most myths, this set provides simple and misleading answers to highly complex questions. One alternative is to examine some historical sources, to see whether a more accurate, less sentimental picture can be constructed. Ideally, this should be done by blind Asian researchers. However, the sources presented here required much searching of obscure books, journals and archival materials in English, which remain doubly inaccessible to blind Asians. The first stage in retrieving blind Asian history is simply to show that materials do exist and that modern myths can be challenged by stories that are both more accurate and more interesting. This may open doors for subsequent search and interpretation by people with a more personal understanding of blindness in Asia. The self-empowerment of blind Asians, by which they may

take an increasing part in developing their own futures, is more likely when they stand on solid historical-cultural ground, knowing how blind Asians lived in the past and how they interacted with their societies, rather than merely swallowing the conventional myths.

Two different sorts of evidence will briefly be sketched here:

1. Blindness in Bengali folk ballads, suggesting the rural social background and attitudes during the past millennium.
2. Missionary journals showing blind people being taught reading and handicrafts from the 1830s onward in South and East Asian cities, in ordinary schools.

Some discussion will follow about why the latter evidence was neglected for over a century, together with some implications for current developments.

Blindness in Old Bengal

In the early 1920s, a penniless young scholar in chronic ill-health, Chandra Kumar De, criss-crossed the villages of Eastern Mymensing seeking to learn old Bengali folksongs from individual singers – who were mostly reluctant to disclose them to a stranger. Those that could be recovered were translated and published by Dinesh Chandra Sen as the authentic ancient voice of the Bengali rural people, "unadulterated metal of a high quality recovered from the purely Bengali mine".[1] Sen was delighted by the simple rusticity of the folk verses, a little known part of a vernacular literature that was then barely emerging from the contempt in which it had long been held by his own countrymen. The ballads in some cases date back as far as the 10th century CE.

Blindness, usually in male characters, appears in these ballads much more often than other disabilities. This might be because blindness was more prevalent than other disabilities, or was more prominent as a *personal tragedy*, i.e. perceived to render people helpless while not killing them. In each national census 1881–1931, blindness accounted for over 50 percent of disabilities recorded; however, most of those counted were elderly blind people, whereas those in the ballads (originating in earlier centuries) are young or middle-aged. East Bengal, with a damper climate, had less blindness than the Punjab, where the hot, dusty ambience promoted eye disease. Nutritional deficiencies may have played a part in blindness noticed by the balladeers, who record frequent famines and near-starvation levels of subsistence.[2] Perhaps blind singers and musi-

cians laid more emphasis on the disability they knew personally. At least one ballad in Sen's collection was obtained from "an old blind Fakir who begged alms from door to door and earned his living by singing", while authorship of another was claimed by a blind poet, Faziu Fakir.[3] In the latter, the sole mention of blindness compares a son to the traditional guide stick: "He was the sole delight of her unfortunate life and was like the prop of a blind person – her only stay". Another ballad gave an example of happiness as when "a blind man who lost his stick suddenly gets it back while searching it with his hands". Familiarity with the spectacle of blind men deploying sticks for guidance is suggested by the contrasting portrayal of a Raja who gives away his eyes to a blind beggar, so becoming blind himself. Lacking stick experience, he tries to find his way "by feeling things by stretching his hands on all sides".[4] In the ballad of the bloody Nizam Dacoit, a holy fakir disguises himself as an old man, bent with age, tottering along with an *iron* stick in hand. Then Nizam, a criminal turned penitent, uses the stick to smash the skull of a registered sex pest, Jabbar, who is about to exercise his "beastly propensities" upon the corpse of a maiden who had expired after his earlier attentions.[5]

No mention occurs of the *small boy* or other companion, who traditionally leads blind men in some Asian historical tales; nor are medical or surgical solutions hinted at. A specimen of *The Physician* is nicely parodied in one ballad, with his body "polished by constantly rubbing oil over it", his flat nose, trimmed whiskers, and pigeon-like mannerisms – apparently drawn from life. He prescribes with great precision and confidence, then takes his large fee and departs "right glad, and smiling". The patient dies that night. Another ballad depicts a skilled forest healer and his apprentice – the latter outshines his master, who grows jealous and takes revenge. The mass of the populace had no access to any more skilled or organised medical facility.[6] Besides, for the balladeers' purposes, there would not have been much drama in depicting the tragedy of blindness falling upon someone, if an ophthalmological solution were readily available.

The ballad of Kanchanmala, *The bride of a blind baby*, is thought to be among the oldest. The blind baby appears, carried by its widower father, a Brahmin beggar keen to be relieved of the burden. Kanchanmala's father promptly averts an evil omen by marrying Kanchanmala, aged nine, to the baby. A heart-rending tale ensues. Kanchanmala, bewailing her misfortune, heads off into the forest with her new husband or toy boy. The babe's eyes (and other problems) are cured by a sage, but later he is abducted. Kanchan wanders the earth seeking him. Eventually she

finds him now equipped with a new wife. Kanchan gets herself hired as their servant, and re-establishes herself in her husband's affections. The second wife, Princess Kunjalata, learns the whole story and has Kanchan expelled. After further vicissitudes she meets her husband again, now a beggar with eyes blinded by continuous weeping. She resorts again to the sage, who agrees to fix the blindness, only on the rather perverse condition that Kanchan return her husband to Wife No. 2, doing so with perfect tranquillity of mind. Kanchan rises to the challenge; then wanders off into a sombre sunset. The singer falls silent, leaving the audience sobbing. Here, blindness (in a helpless male) provides an opportunity for female devotion, self-sacrifice and nobility of soul. Kanchanmala shows resourcefulness in coping with the twists of fate; her husband is merely two-dimensional, whether blind or sighted. The problem that the *natural* caretaker was the baby's mother was avoided by removing her at the outset. As a woman deemed responsible for producing a blind baby, she would already be considered *guilty*, thus not a good vehicle for nobility of soul. Kanchanmala, on first seeing the baby, asks "Did its cruel mother leave it on the wayside?", evidently not an uncommon solution.[7]

More assertive is the hero of the Ballad of the Blind Lover, part of which is told from the handsome blind youth's viewpoint (or at least, the viewpoint of a sighted person guessing the thoughts of one congenitally blind ...). It opens with him begging alms door to door, proclaiming his isolation and desperation, while his haunting flute beguiles the minds of householder and princess alike. The king, enchanted (but perhaps lacking in foresight or Freudian insight), engages the young man to give his daughter flute lessons. The blind youth describes his life as a fluting beggar:

> I have no name, princess. They call me a *mad fellow* and mock me. There are some who take delight in throwing dust at my person and annoying me in other ways, while there are kind men who receive me well. Some serve me with refuse food and think that the mad man would be glad at such an act of charity.[8]

Of course, the princess falls madly in love with him. True, in her first response to the magic flute she displayed some glimmering of intelligence: after planning to give the blind beggar a lucky dip in her father's treasury, she paused to think "*First let us know what it is that he seeks*" – a question still frequently omitted from the planning processes of modern disability services. That exhausts the princess's stock of perspicacity, so the tale moves inexorably to its soggy conclusion.

Apart from poetry, music and begging (often in combination), the only other occupation for blind men mentioned in the ballads is that of one boatman – but he was blind in one eye only, and doubtless one-eyed people kept many jobs. Among the tribal Garrows, living in the northern part of the area in which the ballads were collected, there was reportedly "in most villages, a lame or blind person, incapacitated from other work, who invokes the deities, and offers sacrifices for the recovery of sick persons".[9] This pragmatic, if slightly cynical, matching of capacity with occupation may suggest something of the calculating rustic approach to religion, rather than any special consideration for including disabled people in the life of the community. The deities must be given their due, for what it's worth – but there is no point in wasting an able-bodied man on the job, when a blind or lame one can just as well chant the prayers, sprinkle the blood, or whatever the custom may be.

The ballads suggest that in East Bengal, as elsewhere in South Asia, blindness was a familiar *personal tragedy*, and one that could be savoured by a public audience. The image of the blind person (usually male) was compounded of helplessness and pitiful begging, with the appeal sometimes enhanced by skills of music and poetry. Mobility was possible with a beloved stick for guidance. Blindness constituted an opportunity (even a demand) for female self-sacrifice in caring for the blind child, husband or sometimes elderly relative. Occasionally it might be relieved by miraculous healing, but usually it was a hopeless, lifelong affliction.

Wider Portrayals of Blindness

Of course, blindness and blind people appear much more widely in the literature of South and East Asian antiquity, but seldom from a humble, rural perspective. Some legal and charitable provisions existed, and blind characters played a role in epic stories. Guilds of blind musicians and fortune tellers date far back in China's history.[10] The central plot of the great Indian compendium of knowledge, Mahabharata, turns on the prohibition against blind Dhritarashtra becoming king, and contains many other references to visual impairment. India's ancient law-code of Kautilya banned discriminatory language, including ironic terms for blindness.[11] Institutional asylums for blind and other disabled people have a history of over 2,000 years in Sri Lanka, and were known in India and China for many centuries, often in connection with a religious order. Nevertheless, most blind people in both countries, especially women,

presumably lived quite constricted lives in their family home. A few occupations such as singing and massage have traditionally been practised, but the most common public image of the blind man has been as a beggar; or the blind woman, especially in China, as a prostitute.[12] To these long and varied histories of social responses to blind people, Europeans brought one simple but significant innovation, characteristic of the Protestant cultural heritage: they had methods for teaching blind people to read, with the aim that they should have the Christian scriptures at their fingertips.

Blind Learners and Teachers

Official dates for the start of formal teaching of blind people have been 1874 in China, and 1886 in India; but in fact, there was well documented educational work from the 1830s onward, in both countries. Two of the key teachers were blind women, one Chinese and one Indian.[13]

China: In 1837, missionary teacher Mary Gutzlaff began adopting young blind Chinese girls in her boarding school at Macau, and teaching them. Though she lacked specialist training, Mrs Gutzlaff can be regarded as the first pioneer teacher of blind girls in China, with the additional merit that this education was conducted in an *inclusive* setting. Four of her blind pupils were sent on to London for education, where three of them died.[14] Only one, named *Agnes Gutzlaff*, survived to complete her education. She returned in 1856, going to Ningpo, South China, then to Shanghai, where she taught blind children and adults. Agnes was the first trained person in the history of China to teach blind people to read, as well as supervising handicraft activities. She herself had learnt to read first the Lucas system, embossed script based on shorthand notation, then Moon's embossed script. The latter was invented in England by William Moon after he became blind. Moon offered to send his teachers to any ordinary school to teach his embossed script to sighted children, who would then teach blind adults or children living nearby. The offer was taken up in many places. Moon script required only a few days to learn, being based on the shapes of English letters or whatever local alphabet was used. From about 1850 onwards, missionaries in many countries made use of Moon script (Braille was not widely known and used until later).

Agnes Gutzlaff was a musician, and also supported herself by teaching English. She bequeathed her savings to found the Gutzlaff Hospital, a small institution which ran for several years until it was amalgamated with St. Luke's Hospital, Shanghai.[15] Meanwhile, in the late 1840s, a class of blind adults had received formal instruction from Thomas McClatchie, an Anglican priest at Shanghai. On the 4th November 1856, another clergyman, Edward Syle, opened the first workshop at Shanghai, for elderly blind people, after various efforts to find useful occupations for blind members of his congregation. The lives of some blind people, and the thoughts of the pioneers, appear in their letters and contemporary journal papers.[16]

India: William Cruickshanks, who went blind during his boyhood in an orphanage at Madras, persevered with his education integrated with sighted boys. He succeeded in becoming a teacher, then from 1838 to 1876 was headmaster of several ordinary schools in South India.[17] Teachers at the Bengal Military Orphan Asylum, Calcutta, were concerned about some blind children in the orphanage school, and asked for help from the London Society for Teaching the Blind to Read. With materials supplied from London, the orphanage school had adopted the Lucas reading system by 1840.[18] This was overtaken by books in Moon script in several Indian languages from 1853 onwards. Missionary women such as Jane Leupolt, Emma Fuller, Mary Däuble, Elizabeth Alexander and Maria Erhardt used Moon books to teach several hundred blind children in integrated classes at Benares, Agra and in the Punjab in the 1860s and 1870s, as evidenced by Government records and missionary journal reports.[19] The first regular teacher at an *industrial school* for blind people was Miss Asho, a blind young woman who had been educated in an ordinary girls' school at Lahore. Asho read first Moon, then Braille, and was competent at various handicrafts. When Sarah Hewlett and Annie Sharp opened a school for blind women at Amritsar, they recruited Asho as their first teacher, and regarded the school as having started properly upon her arrival.[20]

Moon script was much easier to learn than Braille, but much costlier to print, taking up far more space. Both were used in South Asia for several decades. Finally *high tech* Braille, which needed a competent professional to teach its use but also had bigger potential through the growing availability of Brailled books, eclipsed *low tech* Moon script, which most people could learn quickly and then teach to someone else but which had limitations in the cost and availability of materials (Moon script slowly declined and is now unknown in Asia, though it has had a revival in Britain among people who cannot use Braille, and its printing is now less

costly). The cost factor was important in India, as the early work with blind children was seldom supported by foreign mission funds – missionaries had to find their own funding for it – and very little government funding was available. As Braille literature began to be more widely available, and at lower cost, it began to be seen as more attractive for educating larger numbers of blind people, even though it added to the *professionalisation* of special education, and the development of segregated schools. If Braille was used, then specially trained teachers were needed, and these were in short supply. So when they were available, it made economic sense for them to work in specialised schools where their skills could be applied to the maximum number of students. These and many other factors were seldom if ever controlled or planned in a strategic way. In each place, the few people who were developing services used whatever meagre resources, techniques and materials they could find, to get the best results they could with their students, but also sometimes to meet other agendas and motivations of which we get occasional glimpses.

Missing Factors

Later accounts of work by and with blind people in South and East Asia have very largely omitted the earlier cultural background, several decades of experiences with *casual integration* in ordinary schools, and the prominent parts played by teachers who were themselves blind. Many of the pioneers, both blind and sighted, were women, labouring under a double social disadvantage. They were using the successful new reading materials of their times, first the Lucas system and then Moon's embossed script, while Braille's dots slowly gained ground elsewhere. The efforts of some active blind Asians to learn whatever they could, and then to teach others, were appreciated and recorded by their sighted mentors at the time; but these efforts mostly disappeared from accounts given by later chroniclers, or were given a very subordinate place, influenced perhaps by an expectation that good works *must have been* done by sighted missionary philanthropists to *helpless* blind natives. Yet this cannot be the whole explanation, as some earlier sighted pioneers also suffered the fate of being wiped out of history.

The sighted pioneers acted in real, grass-roots situations, and saw the practical benefits and drawbacks that resulted. After them came administrators and managers, who institutionalised the pioneers' work and who

were often one step removed from grass-roots and front-line. After another generation or two, came the spin-doctors, dependent on secondary sources, selecting certain historical points for special emphasis while downgrading others. In mission historiography from 1900 to 1950, the missionaries of the 1880s are recognised for founding enduring institutions. Their actual dependence on Asian colleagues, some sighted, some blind, tends to be ignored. Records of the work of earlier missionaries and blind colleagues, who used innovative methods in integrated situations, have been sitting in journals and archives all along, but were not perceived as a significant contribution. Even now, when institutions have become unfashionable and Integration (now updated as Inclusion) is the buzz-word, one may expect several decades to pass before the 1830–1880 pioneers of integrated education subvert the conventional mythology.

Implications for Development

The main *lesson from history* (a highly unfashionable concept) is that we can expect to be involved in just as big a muddle as earlier generations, but it will not be quite the same muddle, so we should not merely imitate those who appear to have been winners in earlier times. Personal drives among professionals and development agents, such as power-seeking, ambition and curiosity, and the domination of disabled people by able-bodied, of rural people by urban, of women by men, of children by adults, of clients by professionals, and of the poor by the wealthy, all remain practically unchanged. The drive for social justice and the wish to offer disabled people a chance to acquire some education also seem to persist, though these motivations are doubted by certain sociologists (whose own motivations are sometimes hard to discern). Changes are observable in the distribution and circulation of knowledge, and the elaboration of technique; but rural areas and city slums, where most of the world still lives, still suffer apparently permanent information famines while the wealthy parts suffer information overload. Disability service planning has long been damaged by furious battles over method and technique – e.g. the oral/manual controversy in deaf education, battles over embossed scripts for blind readers, behaviourist approaches for people with learning difficulties. The vague, often sentimentalised, Princess-Diana-like desire to *do something for* disabled children easily gets co-opted onto an ideological bandwagon, resulting in wonderful schemes hatched in Geneva, endorsed in New York, funded in Stock-

holm, but never at any point passing across the desk of anyone with practical field experience of disability service development in economically weaker countries.

South and East Asia between them have over 50 percent of the world's blind and low-vision population, mostly living in rural areas where no formal specialised education or training is available. The informal service provided by millions of family members is still seldom informed by modern knowledge and technique. Some hundreds of urban special schools, units and training centres now exist, with access to modern educational and vocational methods, and with some teachers who have been exposed to recent European approaches.[21] Yet these formal services, worthy as they are, still reach only a small proportion of those who might benefit from them. Furthermore, they tend to lack roots within the cultural and conceptual heritages of these vast populations. There is little, if any, feeling of a dynamic continuity with the past, nor any awareness that some blind Chinese and Indians themselves took up the challenges 150 years earlier and contributed to service development, both educational and vocational. That is a gulf needing to be bridged. In the long run, if services are to become culturally and conceptually more appropriate and effective, blind Asians must gather confidence in themselves and make significant and well-informed inputs to planning, implementation and monitoring of services. To know where they are now and where they wish to go, they should know where they have come from.

Notes

1 Sen (1923–32) I (i) xiii–xxii.
2 Sen, I (i) 170; II (i) 41–45; 223–225; et passim. See also Das Gupta (1935), 275–277.
3 Sen, II (i) 379, 391, 424.
4 Sen, II (i) 403; IV (i) 50; see also Sen, II (i) 200, 228. Similarly, "You are the lamp of my house, precious to me as the prop is to the blind." II (i) 450. These metaphors reflect actual observation, in contrast to the other stock images, i.e. the supposed longing of the blind man to regain his sight, or his imagined joy on receiving it, e.g. II (i) 251, 340; IV (i) 105, 389–390.
5 Sen, IV (i) 394; II (i) 286, 292–293.
6 Sen, II (i) 234–235; IV (i) 410–424. Indigenous eye surgery was certainly practised in Bengal. Some European observers admired it, e.g. Breton (1826).

7 Sen, II (i) 79–116. Sen refers to infanticide following adverse astrological predictions: I (i) 250; II (i) 388 footnote. The father, being a Brahmin ascetic, displays his moral worth first by carrying the blind baby around for several months (instead of dumping it in a ditch), then finding it a good home. Thus disencumbered, he can "start for the holy shrines of Gaya and Benares", II (i), 89–90.

8 Sen, IV (i) 211–237, on p. 223. A similar description from an old, blind Brahmin beggar appears in another ballad, see IV (i), 389–390.

9 Note by A. Watson, in: White (1832), 139.

10 For China, see e.g. references to blind people in Legge (1879); Waley (1992); Mackenzie and Flowers (1947) 25–35; Burgess (1928) 66–75, 117–118, 124, 131, 137, 159–160, 164, 193, 201–203; Fairbank (1994) 274 and Plate 15; Milne (1857) 49–55; Tsu (1917).

11 For India, see e.g. Ganguli (1883–1896) Adi Parva, Sect. CIV, CIX, CX, CXLIII, CCXXV; Vana Parva, Sect. XLIX; Doniger and Smith (1991) 60, 62, 220; Kautilya's Arthasastra (1961) 236; Roy (1960); Lehmann (1982).

12 Efforts to suppress begging and to find paid employment for blind Chinese people were reported from the 1570s by Mendoza (1588) 66–68. For the blind woman, however, "when she commeth unto age, she doth use the office of women of love (i.e. works as a prostitute), of which sorte there are a great number in publike places" (68). See also Hoe (1991) 173–176; MacGillivray (1914) 589; Ching (1980) 19–21, 47, 50, 274–275. Blindness became an advantage in a prostitute presumably because the client's own identity and defects were thereby spared any scrutiny. There was only a defenceless body for temporary hire.

13 An extended study by Miles (1998) appears on ERIC ED414701 and at the History of Education Website.

14 E.M.I. (1842; this concerns the blind girl Mary Gutzlaff, not Mrs Mary Gutzlaff); The Blind and their Books (1859); The History of Lucy Gutzlaff (1844); Archives of the Royal London Society for the Blind, Female Register.

15 Female Missionary Intelligencer (1855) II: 110–119; (1858) new series I: 110–111, 125; (1859) II: 64, 96. London Society for Teaching the Blind to Read, 20th Report (1858) 8; 21st Rpt (1859) 7; 40th Rpt (1878) 15–16. CIM/OMF Archives, CIM/JHT 74–81, Bundle 3214, letter from Dr Moon. Society for Supplying Home Teachers, 3rd Rpt (1859) 20; 5th Rpt (1861) 13–14. Church Missionary Record (Nov. 1861) 348. North China Herald (18 Apr. 1874) 331–334. China, Shanghai: Customs Gazette, Medical Reports, (1873 onwards), No. 4: 100, 103; No. 7: 43-44; No. 8: 64–65; No. 11: 57–58; No. 12: 10–13; No. 14: 45–47; No. 15: 6–9; No. 17: 18, 28–31; No. 18: 82; No. 19: 19, 21–24; No. 21: 83–84, 92; No. 26: 18–19.

16 Chinese Recorder (1868) I: 138–140; (1877) VIII: 308–310; (1890) XXII: 23–25. Spirit of Missions (1849) XIV: 343–346; (1850) XV: 185-187; (1851) XVI: 73–82; (1852) XVII: 201–205, 304–307, 445–451; (1857) XXII: 26–37, 275–279, 385–390; (1858) XXIII: 194–197, 335–339, 483–485; (1869)

XXXIV: 604–608. Missionary Register (Jan. 1851) 48; (Mar. 1852) 119, 155; (Mar. 1853) 118. North China Herald (6 Feb. 1869) 72; (9 Jun. 1870) 428–429; (6 Feb. 1873) 118.

17 Church Missionary Gleaner (1879) 6: 65 & 76–77.

18 London Society for Teaching the Blind to Read, 1st Report (1839) 11; 3rd Rpt (1840) 11; 7th Rpt (1845, misprinted: 1844) 12.

19 Society for Supplying Home Teachers, 5th Rpt (1861) 12–13. Fison (1859) 19. Fund for Embossing Books for the Blind, 5th Rpt (1853) 9. Leupolt (1884) 243–247. Annual Report of the Dispensaries of the N.–W. Provinces, 1869, Appendix II, 26A–27A. Female Missionary Intelligencer (1864) VII: 24–26; (1865) VIII: 149–151; (1866) IX: 24–27, 37–40; (1871) XIV: 164–165; (1880) XXII: 24–26. The Friend (Oct. 1870) 10: 232.

20 Hewlett (1898). Indian Female Evangelist (1880) V: 1212–1215; (1882) VI: 221–225; (1885) VIII: 103–109; (1886) VIII: 212–214. India's Women (1881) 1: 89–90, 169–173; (1890) 10: 221–222; (1898) 18: 114–115. Progress of Education in India (1904) I: 396.

21 For India, see e.g. Punani & Rawal (1987); Singh (1990) (listing 98 references); Prasad (1994); For China, see e.g. Wu (1993); Lewis et al. (1997); Vaughn (1992); Zhang Ning-Sheng et al. (1995).

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