

BOOK REVIEW:

Shlomo A. Deshen, *Blind People: The Private and Public Life of Sightless Israelis* (Sunny Series in Anthropology) Paperback, State University of New York Press, 1992–August 17, 1992, \$ 32.46, 214 pp.

Lives of blind people, the challenges they encounter and their cultural, social, economic and psychological developments are somewhat alien to their sighted counterparts. The experience of sightless people in dealing with the sighted counterparts and their life challenges is likely to be unparalleled. In this book, Shlomo Deshen, the emeritus professor of Anthropology at Tel Aviv University, a renowned writer and pioneering anthropological researcher, takes an extraordinary perspective into the lives of the blind people and writes in deep point of view.

This book is an excellent piece of work for those who keen to gain real life insights into the lives of the blind. Though written in 1992, this book provides reliable evidences beneficial to the present day researchers, scholars and people alike, who value a just society. Furthermore, the book is also palatable to general readership who is concerned to be aware about this community of blind people. As a very well written monograph of a qualitative anthropological research study, each chapter is a learning opportunity for qualitative researchers. Amid divergences of the researchers' familiarity towards methodological rigor- whether it is: qualitative or quantitative, positivist or post-positivist- exposure to diverse approaches of research studies would enrich the intellectual enquiry and scholarship of any discipline. Thus, this book make a very valuable contribution to research community.

Contribution of this book for the broad discipline of disability studies is noteworthy. Dr David Bolt, a renowned Professor in Liverpool Hope University, United Kingdom and the Editor in Chief of Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies, speaks of this area of research, thus: "Disability research has the potential to improve understandings of the most fundamental aspect of the human condition – namely, the diversity of minds and bodies. ... Disability, for me, has a uniquely universal importance". Though

this study is based in Israel, one can note many resemblances among the lives of people with visual disabilities in various countries, and how the so called 'able bodied' people connect with the sightless people in nations like Sri Lanka. The author has done reasonable justice to the topic portraying a rich ethnographic detail along with the rich theoretical contribution brought about in this study. In light of the above, this book is a must read for the today's researchers and scholars of business, management and social science disciplines.

Professor Deshen conducted an anthropological research study in which the fieldwork lasted for of nearly fifteen months' duration with the blind people in the Tel-Aviv area during early 1980s. He then published a number of high quality research papers in reputed international journals. This book is based on the literature of journal publications written by the author himself. For example, chapter 5 of this book is based on a paper published in the Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness, volume 84 of 1990 titled "Employment and Disability: The Quest for Work among Blind Israelis", chapter 7 on the paper "Mutual Rejection and Association Among the Discredited: The Case of Blind People in Israel" published in the Human Organization (volume 50 of 1991) and chapter 11 on "Seeking Dignity and Independence: Toward an Ethnography of Blindness in Israel" published in the Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness in 1987. Thereby, while each chapter can be acclaimed as a complete single piece of research, the book presents a well-connected series of topics providing a deep understanding of the lives of sightless people.

The book comprises 14 chapters clustered into four sections, excluding the introduction. The first chapter being the introduction, the overall objective of writing this book is clearly indicated, thus: "purpose of this monograph is to fill a lacuna in ethnographic coverage, the study of people who differ from most humans by having exceptional bodies, and whose culture usually disempowers them." The methodology adopted, and the practical issues encountered have been well documented for the benefit of readers. It states that the field work has been conducted during a period between July 1983 to October 1983, and in January 1984 to January 1985. The methodological approach used is ethnographic

observation. The author presents information on research gaps and objectives, the specific details of the methodologies used, theoretical underpinnings, data and discussions in each chapter in a scholarly approach. As for practical limitations, at one point, the author questions whether Israeli blind people from social groups are amenable to observations, needs to be addressed by the researcher.

Part I of the book named 'The Body' comprises two chapters; Chapter 2- 'The Use of the Senses' and Chapter 3- 'The Use of Guide Dogs and Long Canes'. Chapter 2 unfolds the physiological aspects of blindness and the ways the sightless people manage their lives in the world. As the writer pronounces, the world we live in is governed by the sighted people, and thus sightless people encounter many challenges. This notion can be comprehended well if you read the short story - 'The Country of the Blind' written by H.G Wales (1866-1946). The social problems associated with the usage of the main supporting tools like white cane and guide dogs to compensate for their physical disability are examined in the third chapter.

Part II contains two chapters, (4 and 5) both dealing with relationships between parents and children. Here, the fourth chapter examines the experience of blind children and sighted parents, whereas and the fifth deals with issues encountered by blind parents who raise their sighted children.

Part III titled 'Reaching for Material Needs' is devoted to economic aspects, earning for living and employment, and the welfare systems in place in the area concerning material needs. This section is presented under four chapters as follows. Obtaining employment, a major challenge for the blind is discussed in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 describes the nature of their employment and the experiences of sightless employees. Chapter 8 and 9 explain the nature of the social support systems provided by the state sector, private sector and volunteers, and their impact on the lives of blind people.

Part IV - 'Reaching for Fulfilment: Friendship, Dignity, Intergradation' comprises four chapters that provide details with a range of aspects of public life of the blind people. Issues related to

socializing and reaching out for friendship and quality of life of blind people and how these are placed with other types of abled people, are discussed in these chapters. Chapter 12 focusses on ethnic bonding- nationalism and patriotism in a background where Israel is an immigrant society. Chapter 13, the final chapter of the book, with concluding remarks covers the debates about the major public issue and empowerment that blind people face.

The author's deep understanding of the subject area is well demonstrated throughout the book. For example, the introduction chapter indicates that 'the blindness is more varied than is popularly realized, and comprises a spectrum of visual impairments which include many kinds and degrees of residual sight.' This shows that the author's view of disability extends beyond the 'medical model' which typically focusses only on physical and health limitations of the person. This study looks into the roles and positions that disabled people's standing in the society. Furthermore, influence of culture of both 'able-bodied' and disabled people also has been examined. This view seen throughout the book is in conformity with the broader and comprehensive concept of disability as explained by Bio-Psycho-Socio-Cultural model which was presented by Donald M. Hilty (2015). It is interesting to note that the author maintained this view ahead, as early as in 1990s.

This book is an excellent example of presenting a qualitative social research data including observations, in a very methodical and engaging manner. A couple of instances are cited below to elucidate these observations.

Frequently, blind people face traumatic experiences when they walk with white cane on public streets. Volunteering by sighted persons to provide assistance does not always end up with plenty of positive experiences to the blind. This issue is well demonstrated in Chapter 3 with the following interview transcript with a computer operator:

In line with this transcript, the author supports his inferences related to stigma attached the use of white cane and other aids. This situation is not only specific to the Israel society, but may be common to many societies, particularly in the developing world.

Very similar experiences have been narrated by blind persons in Sri Lanka to us as researchers. Similarly, with stigma attached to the white cane in cultures like ours, young blind people in Sri Lanka too are reluctant to use the white cane. It is interesting to observe the way qualitative data in the form of narratives, text, personal comments and observational records have been presented as appropriate. Furthermore, the author's unprecedented capacity to delve deep into sensitive issues is also well demonstrated.

The challenges of blind parents who raise sighted children is examined in detail in Chapter 4. Here, it is stated that as children mature in terms of age, their discernment view on the 'blindness' increases and they are able to differentiate their blind parents from other people more clearly. Such circumstances lead the sighted children to behave in such a way that they maintain distance with their parents. The relationship between the parent 'Reuven Ovadia' and his eleven year-old daughter, the girl who deemed to be ashamed of her father, is a classic example cited in the book. Father's observation is narrated to establish this fact, Thus:

"At first, as I walked with her in the street holding her hand, she would ask, 'Abba, why does everybody look at you?' Later, when she would see someone on the street whom she knew, she would withdraw her hand and stoop, saying that she had to tie a shoe lace. This type of behaviour indicates ambivalence attitude that is stark. It is evident that the child is ashamed of her father; yet she does not admit to him nor herself why she is disengaged. Rather, she fabricates an excuse."

This demonstrates the how the author's 'eagle eye' works and the capacity to delve deep into sensitive issues through observations by narratives, thereby successfully appealing to diverse audiences.

The concluding chapter presents a concise summary and discussion of the ideas presented in the previous 13 chapters. It is remarkable how the author navigated the flow of content - i.e. presenting observations on anthropological viewpoint in the early chapters and then moving on to the social theory of disability. The theoretical standpoint of Goffman paradigm where the disabled people are viewed as subordinate of the society in general, and the post-Goffman work are established in the later chapters.

The value of this book could be much greater if a couple of improvements could have been incorporated in the following lines. Firstly, a section on prevalence and incidence rates and causes of blindness could be added. It may be noted that Dr. Marilyn D. Farber of Hadassah University Hospital, Israel has published that 18,891 persons have been enrolled in the blind register in 1999. This number amounts to 0.31% of the national population. The next suggestion relates to dissemination aspects. Since, one of the main stakeholder groups of this discipline is the blind people themselves, it is useful if the book is converted to an 'audio book'. Furthermore, converting the text into other readable forms by the blind persons such as brail and daisy format may also be useful. It would have been useful to translate this book into Asian languages like Sinhalese, since the Israeli experiences may be observed in this part of the world too. Regardless of these limitations, rather potential improvements, the overall contribution of the book is praiseworthy.

In summary, this book can be pronounced as an excellent exploration of social, economic and cultural aspects of the Blind People. This is a well written monograph that provide very meaningful and deep insights of persons with visual impairments and blindness. Also, the contribution of the study findings toward building and expanding theoretical underpinning is praiseworthy.

The words of the author, Shlomo A. Deshen in the final chapter makes a good ending to this short review:

"Their (the blind people's) doings were, moreover, not understandable merely in abstract terms of symbolic interactionism, "social construction of disability", and stigma. We learn from this study that by focusing sensitively upon the variety of activities related to disabled people, disability studies can be firmly anchored in general anthropology."

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