

“Future Life How?": Destigmatization of Disability at Titan, India | Text Transcript | CIRCLE

This is a text transcription for the recorded event “Future Life How?": Destigmatization of Disability at Titan, India” presented by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Guelph. The event was recorded on February 24, 2025, and was moderated by Bharat Punjabi. The guest speaker was Dilshan Fernando.

Transcript:

Bharat Punjabi:

Right. Welcome everyone to this webinar at the Canada India Research Center for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). My name is Bharat Punjabi. I teach at the University of Toronto, and I'm also affiliated to CIRCLE as a kind of adjunct faculty at Guelph. It's my great pleasure to introduce CIRCLE to all of you. For those of you who are joining us for the first time, I'll give you some background to what CIRCLE does and what it plans to do.

It aims to be an interdisciplinary nucleus in Canada for cutting edge research on India and the Indian diaspora, and to showcase, advocate, catalyze and foster an equitable, respectful, and sustained exchange of knowledge between Canadian and Indian scholars on complex and emerging topics related to sustainability and social and economic well-being. I'll be sharing a web link to circle in the chat box very soon.

We are also on social media: on Twitter, on Facebook and Instagram. It's my great pleasure to welcome Dilshan Fernando, someone whom I've known for some time. He's been very active with us at the centre and also in the international development faculty as a PhD candidate in sociology and international development at the University of Guelph. He's been working on a topic which, to my mind, doesn't get treated in a very systematic way in international development, but is becoming more and more important, and his webinar focuses on his PhD work.

The title is “Future Life How?": Destigmatization of Disability at Titan, India where he's exploring how Titan, a leading Indian organization, is navigating the destigmatization of disability and employment within the context of rural South India.

Again, you know, something I've been witness to in the Indian context, where disability and disability research and disability organizations have become very prominent and are excellent at whatever they do, whether it's advocacy or treatment. So I'm really looking forward to this presentation by Dilshan, and before I, you know, hand over the platform to him, I just remind you all that you can share your questions in the chat box, or you can wave your hand at the end of a seminar, which will last around 30 minutes, and everyone's going to be on mute.

And, you know, we're going to be waiting until the end to ask questions so... or you could send the questions to me. And I'll, basically, you know, pass it on to Dilshan, and please keep your questions, comments, and brief. So, this is just an hour seminar and Dilshan will be talking for 30 min, and we'll have the rest of time for questions and answers. So, Dilshan, the platform is yours.

Dilshan Fernando:

So, thank you so much, Bharat, for the kind introduction. Thank you for being here to moderate this session. Hello, everyone. Good morning if you're in Canada, and good evening if you're in South Asia. So, like Bharat said, today's presentation is... I've titled it "Future Life How?": Destigmatization of Disability at Titan in India. It's about disability inclusion in South Asia, broadly speaking. And that's the topic.

In today's conversation, we're going to discuss how people with disabilities survive and thrive in India, how stigma curtails their employment options, and I think more importantly, a complex and a promising story of a large organization that has integrated disabled employees since the 1980s. That's what this conversation is about. And so let me start with a story.

It's Rajeshwary, whom I met in 2023 for my research. Rajeshwary is a deaf worker who works at Titan in the jewelry factories... Sorry, the watchmaking factory. She joined Titan in 1990, after completing her 10th grade, and she was one of those... the company's early hires through targeted outreach to rural schools. She was recruited from her rural deaf school. She moved alone to the state of Tamil Nadu from the state of Andhra Pradesh [and] faced enormous communication and safety issues while living in a hostel.

So imagine if you're deaf in the 1990s and you're living in a hostel in Tamil Nadu at the time. She started a job in the watchmaking assembly line, started with limited skills since she didn't have higher education and made early job errors on watchmaking assembly line; managers were accommodative. Today she resides in Titan township with her family. Her husband is deaf,

she has 3 children who have gone on to do university degrees, lives in a spacious house built with Titan's own financial support.

This is a rare story in the South Asian context from a disabled person. And this got me into thinking about disability, inclusion more broadly, like Bharat said, systematically. So I asked the question, how does a complex organization destigmatize disability over time? And what are the limitations?

Here are a few key disability statistics. 15% of the world's population have some form of disability, and 80% of them live in developing countries in the Global South. Well, 174 countries have ratified the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disability. That's one of the highest ratified conventions in the world, having almost unanimous support, but take a look at this figure: employment rates for disabled people [are] 50 to 75% lower than non-disabled people. It's staggering. In school attendance, 1 out of 3 of the 58 million children with disabilities are out of school.

Let's look at the person with disabilities statistics in India by disability type and work status.

On screen content:

Horizontal bar graph entitled “Persons with disabilities in India by disability type and work status.” Categories include multiple disability, mental illness, in-hearing, etc. Overwhelming majority in every category are non-workers, represented by grey.

Dilshan Fernando: I'm using the Indian census data here, using the same terminology used there. As you can see, the yellow bars are unemployed people. The orange are people who have been employed just for 3 months in the considerate period of the past 6 months, and the grey is for 3 to 6 months. As you can see in each type of disability, unemployment levels are staggering. For example, in disability, in movement. Look at the number of people who don't have jobs. Similarly, look at hearing and seeing and mental health related disabilities. The unemployment levels are really staggering in India.

And that is why, looking at an organization that has integrated disabled employees since the 1990s helps us to understand what we can do to include and reduce unemployment and reduce

disability-based inequality. Let me talk to you about the key concepts that I use to understand the problem. Stigma involves labeling. It involves stereotyping others, separation from us versus them of a lower status group. In this case, disabled people, and higher status groups, non-disabled, agile workers.

And that leads to discrimination and exertion of power by higher status group on the lower status groups. And that's what happens normally in the situation of disabled people. Now, the opposite of that is destigmatization. It's a social process by which low status individuals or groups gain recognition or cultural membership over time.

I also understand disability in a more positive manner. As a positive identity. I use the Basotho ontology of disability, which is an African ontology against the predominant Western models that talk about disability as universal frailty. Very important is recognition. The affirmation of positive qualities of groups and recognition gaps are therefore disparities of cultural membership among social groups.

The key point I want to emphasize is that without closing recognition gaps in the workplace, stigmatized individuals or workplace groups either risk losing their jobs or being isolated without any recognition, and sometimes not getting hired at all, in the case of people with disabilities in India.

Let me outline the problem a bit broadly in terms of labor force participation and the policy environment. So firstly, there's a lack of regular jobs; when I mean regular jobs, competitive openings, not jobs that are specifically created for a disabled person. So lack of regular jobs in the labor market to match the demand. So, for example, adults with disabilities are 5 times less likely to be working compared to those who don't have a disability.

As a response governments and civil society organizations implement upskilling programs to bridge the skills gap, but those programs have really failed to increase employment at scale. The problem is disabled people hide their disabilities due to fear of stigmatization, fear of disclosure. They fear that if they disclose their disabilities they will not get hired at all. They don't disclose them. And so what happens is stigma influences hiring practice by creating mental states in employees that people with disabilities cannot do regular jobs, and this feeds into the labor for labor force participation barriers. Remember.

The unemployment rates are very high in India. It's about 60 to 70% for people with disabilities. In terms of the broader disability policy, environment, targeted disability policies are less commonplace in India and have failed to address employment. There are laws, several laws, in

fact, but those are soft laws that only aim to set a framework for inclusion; but that has helped to gradually sensitize disability as a social barrier, and guess what?

The main uptake from that is disabled people's organizations. The DPO's have thrived in this space because of sensitization and created a culture within itself. So, although the laws are progressive, there are significant gaps between laws and the implementation and the social protections that they provide.

So how does a complex organization destigmatize disability over time, and what are its limitations? We're looking at organizations, large organizations to understand how they can reduce disability-based inequality and at the end, reduce unemployment, give a independent life, autonomy for people with disabilities. And that's why I look at Titan.

I used an extended case study approach, focusing on in-depth interviews and participant observations. I interviewed about 50 people for this research used a stratified, purposive sampling strategy. That means I interviewed people from different strata, from workers with disabilities, managers and coworkers, civil society advocates, for example.

It covered a broad spectrum of sites, the watches factory, the jewelry factory in Titan. I talk about Titan in a second. But these are the sites in Tamil Nadu, corporate headquarters, warehouses, and retail stores in Bengaluru and civil society organizations that operate in Bangalore.

What's Titan? Titan emerged under Tata's legacy during the post-independent modernization in Tamil Nadu, setting a progressive tone for industry. Tatas have been known for their people-centric approach, and Titan is a product of that. In the 1980s, Titan broke norms by actively recruiting disabled workers from rural areas, creating new opportunities for people, especially in the Southern Indian states.

Over decades, Titan refined its practices, providing tailored training and supportive policies to empower disabled people. It's an institutional commitment that is ongoing. Most importantly, Titan is a public-private partnership. It's a public-private partnership between the Tamil Nadu State Government, the Tamil Nadu industrial development corporation, TIDCO, and Tata Company, that leverages government support and private innovation to drive sustainable industrial development.

I went to all these factories. These are a couple of pictures from the watches factory in Hosur, Tamil Nadu that borders Bangalore. So there's an affirmative action policy at Titan. These are some of the assembly lines in the watches factory in Hosur. In many ways, the Titan factories are a typical 4 disk factory; clearly demarcated assembly lines, tightly controlled, with a disciplined workforce.

So what do we learn about destigmatization from Titan? Let's talk about stigmatization for a bit. There are enormous data gaps in disability in India, and they're shaped by the fear of disclosure. There are data gaps. And people don't disclose their disabilities when government agencies collect data because they feel that there will be repercussions of that. And because of that, there's lack of evidence for government policy making and that stigmatizes more disabled [persons], especially disabled workers. Somatic differences, bodily differences, overlap with recognition gaps. I'll talk... I'll give you a quote from a person in a bit. But differences between the so-called visible disabilities, hearing, visual mobility, disabilities versus mental health related disabilities. These differences create different recognition gaps.

For example, people who have mobility disabilities, those who use a wheelchair or a cane, have been slightly destigmatized over time; people understand what those types of disabilities are. But when it comes to neurodiversity, mental health related disabilities, it's not the same. There are key differences.

Most of the workers that I interviewed at Titan were deaf people. They were deaf workers and "Deaf deaf same" is an Indian sign language expression. It captures the similitude of deaf people and their problems and their issues and their cultures. Deaf with a capital D is a deaf culture, thriving in Bangalore, and deaf similitude also feeds into stigmatization, especially, you know, of, of related to deafness.

Poverty in villages, and family dynamics, and at times, abuse in families are affected by stigma and stigma affects poverty in Titan, so poverty... the relationship between poverty and stigma is reciprocal in many ways. As we have seen, because of the poor school attendance, education disparities of disabled children shape recognition disparities when they enter the labor market, so poor achievement gaps shapes the employment disparities that they face.

And finally, "future life how?" is also a sign language expression. It is about uncertainty about the future that deaf people sign, uncertainty about the future. This uncertainty is also an expression of their stigma, not knowing what comes next.

Here are a couple of quotes. Cyrus, a very active, disabled filmmaker, told me, who is also a physically disabled person, told me how mental disorders are most marginalized and the most taboo of the lot, he said; it requires its own special expertise, because if you consider autistic spectrum, you know, within them there are more than 20 to 25 different types of disorders, Cyrus told me.

According to Cyrus, they face a whole host of issues where they're worse off than even the physically disabled people. So the somatic differences, mental disorders, physical disorders, affecting the recognition gaps, who are recognized more and less in the disability spectrum.

Here's a "Deaf deaf same" situation. Baskaran, who has visual and hearing disabilities, told me about how a situation that most deaf people have. In most disabled families, there is more than one member who has a disability. In this case, Baskaran said he is deaf, his sister is deaf, and he's married to a deaf person. Baskaran said "I had a lot of challenges communicating with managers at Titan. They just write instructions on a piece of paper. They didn't have sign language instructions. Only during lunchtime do I meet other deaf friends to communicate.

In those days, learning sign language was very difficult, because all the teachers used to speak, not sign, and very few teachers did signing, and only with the deaf community did we learn share deaf... sorry sign language. So, sign language was learned among the community. They were not taught in school, talks about stigmatization of the deaf community or in the deaf culture.

So what does destigmatization entail as a social process? Well, what I learned from Titan's experience is that it starts with symbolic claims, very important. Destigmatization starts when leaders, managers, co-workers, and unions repeatedly challenged stigma by equating low status with high status. Examples include affirming the worth of disabled people, not just the worth of people who are self-reliant, agile, competitive, highly competitive workers, no - affirming the worth of also disabled employees. That's why Titan employed these people.

Drawing equivalences, removing low status, high status barriers. Removing shame and blame. You know, shame involves where involves a perception that the disabling condition cannot be changed, and that feeds into blame. Who's to be blamed for this situation? Advocating for change. These are very important symbolic claims that feeds into other domains of the destigmatization process.

Strategizing is a primary function of an organization, and destigmatization takes root in organizations when organization strategy is shaped by symbolic claims. Strategizing concerns the identity of the organization and how it wants to be recognized by external stakeholders. And in return, the strategy becomes part of daily life through established practices and policies that embed accessibility and inclusion into everyday aspects of the organization.

For example, Nirupama, an EDI leader at Titan, talked very highly of a new blind employee, an example of setting worth. Nirupama said "he's a management trainee, and he's a very different animal. He's highly tech savvy, he's super sharp. He's done coding and he's done a whole lot of stuff. He worked with Tata Click, and then now he's moved back to Titan", asserting the worth, a symbolic claim.

Dilshan Fernando:

Here's an example of drawing equivalences. Saleem, who is a blind person, who is a manager at Titan told me, "There are, of course, some areas of marketing..." Now, Salim works in CRM, customer relationship management, he said, "some areas of marketing which are highly, very visual in nature, which requires creative feedback. So I do have to lean into my team members to get those things done." And in this quote, Saleem emphasizes importance of having good team members to feel included, to feel a sense of belonging.

That's a form of drawing equivalences in a large organization, another symbolic claim. Well, the business case of disability inclusion is a paradox because it tries to balance profit versus principle, because Titan, at the end of the day is a profit-making organization. While inclusion is often justified by potential gains, this approach risks reducing disabled workers to economic assets rather than recognizing their inherent value.

Emphasizing business returns can improve an organization's public image, but may overlook deeper ethical and social commitments, and that reinforces inequality. Focusing solely on profitability might perpetuate power imbalances where inclusion becomes a tool for market advantage, rather than genuine equity.

So Titan is battling both of these trends. While it is having this promising story of including people with disabilities, it is also having to balance its market forces, its conservative side. And this - the balancing, the dual goals, the challenge lies in merging financial rationality with the true commitment to social justice and human dignity as it has done in Hozur area in Tamil Nadu.

For example, this quote from Nirupama demonstrates this; she talks about return on investment for disability inclusion, which is a form of thinking about disability inclusion, as a business case. She said "If I don't have the numbers, if I'm not showing ROI, return on investment, to leaders, I think it's crazy stuff to deal with. And all of it, every leader is, they're evaluated on the top line and the bottom line only. But it's important [because] if we can show those numbers of an assembly line that runs only with people with disabilities or an assembly line that runs only with women. But I'm so convinced that I need to have a business case." So Nirupama here is highlighting [that] while it's important for organizational strategizing to include people with disabilities, they nonetheless have to make a business case. That's the nitty gritty, nuts and bolts, when symbolic claims transition to strategy. That's what we learned from Titan.

Strategy informs accessibility, accessibility, I understand from the experience of Titan, as a social process. It's based on social relations of focus with disabilities, unions, managers, coworkers, civil society organizations, and many other actors. And accessibility isn't just about facilities. It's holistic. It's everyday social practice. And that's what we learn from Titan, and it's embedded into daily routines. Organizational systems, flexible work schedules, assistive technologies, inclusive recruitment, make accessibility a norm. And that's what has happened at Titan.

This transformation accessibility informs organizational culture. Regular practices and policies shift workplace culture to close recognition gaps and uplift marginalized voices, like the case of persons with disabilities. And continuous ritualized actions ensure accessibility evolves with changing needs and reinforcing genuine inclusion.

While there are problems at Titan, of course, like any other organization problems with the built environment, communication challenges for deaf employees and in the factories, it has also achieved considerable accessibility as an organization.

So, for example, Saleem, the blind manager, told me how he thinks about accessibility. He said "I was trying to find a free solution or an open source solution" for the JAWS software, the screen reading software that he uses, he said, "to remove one more barrier for hiring me basically. Otherwise, the company would feel even more hesitant to hire me, because now there is an extra cost element to it." So for Saleem, accessibility and finding accommodation by himself is a form of autonomy.

It contributes to the social process of accessibility. He wants to help the organization, but at the same time cooperate with the organization to negotiate accommodations, and this has helped

Saleem in this case to have... to feel a sense of belonging. Now, let's complicate the picture of Titan a bit.

Today, Titan employs an equal proportion of permanent and contingent workers. Permanent, on-roll workers, and contingent, off-roll workers. Off-roll workers experience precarity because they don't have the permanent full time, unionized jobs and benefits that, you know, some of those early hires in the 1980s, 1990s period have - unionized full-time, well-paid jobs, permanent jobs.

The roots of precarity in Titan's workforce is to be found in Titan's change from being a manufacturing-led organization. Titan began manufacturing watches, and even today, it is the 5th largest watch manufacturer in the world. And it has now transitioned to jewelry and other accessories. But, it has decentralized and outsourced this manufacturing, and only 5% of manufacturing is in-house and only design creates value in the... in the value process.

So, for example, a senior manager Himal told me "Contract employees for roles which we don't see to add significant value. Our retention value, where we believe that retaining that skill is not going to add to the richness, and they are transactional in nature." He's talking about off-roll contingent workers. "We have such employees on contract just to ensure that we have the right mix and eventually move from contract roles to company roles." So essentially, there is a two-tier in the employment workforce at Titan; on-roll, off-roll, permanent and contingent.

And although Titan has achieved so much in terms of disability inclusion, what this two-tier structure has done is to risk re-stigmatization, so it... while it has achieved a level of destigmatization for deaf and other disabled workers at Titan, the two-tier structure creates a low status, high status difference. The permanent full-time workers are high status. They have certainty about their jobs, and that itself is what has helped to destigmatize disability, whereas the low status workers, the contingent workers, share a low status in the organization. And this risks re-stigmatization of disability.

Right? So on-roll, like I said, on-roll workers, they have a high sense of belonging - unionized, permanent staff. Off-roll workers, contract workers with low wages, unstable contracts, limited benefits, and increased vulnerability. The two-tier system creates clear disparities in recognition, support and career progression and addressing these gaps is crucial to prevent re-stigmatization and ensure inclusive, fair workplace practices.

How can policy help? So, in conclusion, we've learned from the Titans experience that symbolic claims lead to authentic strategizing, but the market... balancing market forces is a struggle and

sometimes social justice goals conflict with market goals. That's the paradox of the business case of disability. But still, symbolic claims lead to strategizing, leads to ritualizing accessibility with ups and downs. Essentially, that constitutes a destigmatization process. With the risk of re-stigmatization because of the two-tier structure, what can we do? Well, here are some thoughts.

Titan is a public-private partnership, and because of that, it has depoliticized the policy implementation process, and it has included people with disabilities. It has included them and made them participatory in the process. And so public-private partnerships can drive collaborative, tailored solutions for accessible workplaces.

Reforming education is important. It is key because of the changing nature of work from manufacturing to knowledge-based work, so inclusive education programs. Remember, I mentioned that education disparities lead to recognition gaps, so inclusive education programs destigmatize disability and equip diverse talent for evolving work environments.

Aligning PPP initiatives, public-private initiatives, with educational reforms creates a cohesive framework for lasting change. Combined efforts enhance social inclusion, empowering disabled workers and driving economic equity.

So with that, I'll conclude my rather long presentation. If you have any questions I'll take [them], but thank you for listening.

Bharat Punjabi:

Thank you. Thank you, Dilshan. It was very, very interesting presentation on a topic which is so important. And it had a very, very interesting political economy framework, which I thought was the highlight. For those of you who are joining us as guests, if you have any questions, you could unmute yourself and go ahead and ask, or you could type your questions in the chat screen, and I'll read it out to Dilshan and the others. We have around 20 min for Q&A. And you know, please, please don't hesitate to ask any questions to Dilshan. Are there any questions?

Shabnam Sukhdev:

Yes. Hello. My name is Shabnam. I'm at York University. I'm sorry I came in a bit late, so I'm not sure whether Dilshan spoke about what he means by genuine inclusion. Like, what does genuine inclusion look like if one can spell that out? That might be a good idea.

Dilshan Fernando:

Yeah, thank you for that question, Shabnam. It's a tough question. My answer is only based on what I've learned from Titan. It means that it's... genuine inclusion is a process, as I understand, and it is tied to the destigmatization process. So it takes time.

In the case of disability, inclusion means destigmatizing the stigma, and that depends on the types of disabilities that people have, and therefore it involves changing narratives, attitudes, behaviours, and that means starting with symbolic actions, reaching out to the villages, reaching out to the rural areas and recruiting, going to the deaf schools, blind schools and rural impoverished areas and recruiting, talking to people, that changes [things]. And in many cases, when I interviewed these workers, they said, the company came to their villages in 1980s and 90s interviewed them there, so went through a recruitment process. It might just not [be] sympathy, and that asserted their value.

It drew equivalences. It meant it was advocating the change. And in the context of an organization, those symbolic claims... Symbolic changes must affect strategy. That's the main function of an organization. It can't be just a side project or a corporate social responsibility or a philanthropy. It is core to the organization strategy, whether it being people-centric or not. And in the case of Titan, that's what we learn. It is core to its philosophy.

But you can't accommodate people with disabilities without accessibility. If that's how it is different from other forms of social identities like gender, race ethnicity, and so on. People with disability need accommodations and universal design. And in the case of Titan that you've learned. You know, digital accessibility. There are gaps, at least, but they're trying to address some of those, you know, providing flexible work schedules.

Giving housing, and accommodations go beyond the workplace. It goes to their livelihoods. Where do they live? Do they have transport? Workers with disabilities get transport to their factories. And the meal provision, they're helping their families. So that's thinking about accommodations and accessibility from a more holistic perspective. So from my research, that's what I understood, found that genuine inclusion for disabled people involves all of these stages, symbolic stages, strategy as an organizational identity and ritualizing accessibility as a norm, as a day-to-day practice.

Shabnam Sukhdev:

Thank you for your response. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Thank you.

Bharat Punjabi:

Thank you. Thank you, Shabnam. Thank you, Dilshan, for that answer. There are 2 questions actually, one, Sharada Srinivasan has raised her hand, followed by a question by Hannah in the chat box. So you want to take Sharada's question first, maybe.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Maybe Hannah's question [first]. And yeah, thanks.

Bharat Punjabi:

Hannah, go ahead. I mean, you can read the question in the chat box. I'll read it out. Does Titan receive any financial support from the government for the inclusive... inclusion program? Are you aware of any subsidies which they receive?

Dilshan Fernando:

That's a very good question, and I think that speaks to why the public private partnership model at Titan is different. It has not, is the short answer, but it has... but in a different way, because the Tamil Nadu State government, in the form of Tamil Nadu Industry Development Corporation, has invested in the company. So it's not a subsidy. It owns, I think, closer to 30% of shares of the company, and Tata Company owns less than the Tamil Nadu State Government's share percentage, and the rest... the rest is public shares. So it has invested in the company's shares, doesn't give subsidies, but the chair of the Board of Directors of Titan is the chair... the industry secretary of the Tamil Nadu State Government.

That's the way the government is structured, but no subsidies. But I believe land agreements may have been signed when Hosur was being developed in the 1980s... there are a lot of other industries that have come in. And Tamil... And my research shows that Tamil Nadu State government at that time implemented a decisive rural development policy, especially developing Hosur. But no, no financial incentives, as far as I know.

Bharat Punjabi:

Thank you. Thank you, Dilshan. So for those of you who don't know Titan, it's an enormously successful company, and for a time it was as competitive as Swiss watches are in that particular niche segment in terms of the market share of Titan watches, even in the global market, and the Tatas are obviously well known. Big corporate house in India, very, very committed to social causes and philanthropy for a long time, for more than a century. So this obviously comes from a tradition of commitment to looking at the economy as a social economy, which Dilshan's work highlights very well. Sharada, would you like to go ahead and ask your question now?

Sharada Srinivasan:

Yeah, sure. Thanks, Dilshan. I have actually two related questions. First is, you know, not all public private partnerships are successful, let alone being compassionate. Right? So what you basically talked about is through a very deliberate strategy at disability inclusion. What Titan offers is more or less as sort of a compassionate model of doing business right? So when you say PPP is the way forward, can we have some qualifications? Because PPP by itself is not going to produce the sort of results that you are seeing in the... in Titan right? So that sort of is my first question.

The second question is very specific to Titan. So you talked about the two-tier workforce, and how that means workers with disabilities actually have very different entitlements. So how does Titan navigate this current, you know the sort of the two-tier system to actually go towards disability inclusion. So two questions.

Dilshan Fernando:

Yeah, thank you Dr. Sharada. First, about the public-private partnership. That's one of the most exciting policy implications of this research. There are many models of public-private partnerships, not in social development, but in infrastructure projects, energy, road

construction, and so on, when I looked at that public-private literature. But there are like, for example, in Europe, in the Volkswagen Company, I think the government of Lower Saxony is a significant shareholder of that company. And so there are many examples in Scandinavia, too. But this approach is less common in South Asia, and, so to speak, in the global South.

What Titan has done to the disability inclusion incentive, motivation was more from the Tata side than the TIDCO side, than the Tamil Nadu state government side, though the Tamil Nadu state government was more interested in creating jobs in Osur, at that time a backward area. But Tata brought to the Tamil Nadu state government the whole ethos of people-centric rural development and helping people community development. And that led to... And at that time Tata also, you know, was innovating and finding its own path... [it] led to hiring disabled people. At that time, it was... no one knew, and even last year Tamil Nadu state government gave the disability inclusion award to Titan for 2024. So it has been doing this forever. Titan has been consistently performing well for disability inclusion.

Going forward, if the PPP model that Titan has, is this an approach to address disability inclusion, and equity, diversity, inclusion more broadly? I think that is one approach, because in this model... You know, the main problem with policy implementation is corruption and politicization, and in this case the Tamil Nadu state government has done none of that, because it's the private sector that implements the policy goals of job creation in this case. And that has helped people.

The private sector brings in the... especially the Tata company in the private sector, brings in the ethos of people-centric management, and the government has job creation goals, so that marries pretty well, and that has done pretty well in this instance. So I think... And since, I also argue that you need to create jobs in formal sector, large organizations, not just in the informal sector. This looks as a promising model to replicate elsewhere. Not just in India, I'm from Sri Lanka. So, Sri Lanka, too, like in other areas of South Asia, and then global South.

About the two-tier structure... That's a more complex thing because it is, it is not disability specifically, So it's not only disabled workers in the contingent workforce that face stigmatization. No, it's the whole and most of the off role, as Titan calls, is these contingent workers, are support roles like cleaning, warehouse maintenance, you know not the core, assembly line work and the core... Apart from the 5% core assembly line work that Titan holds, [the] rest of the stuff is given to vendors, outsourced.

Titan's management view [is] that some of the contingent off-roll workers can be absorbed to the main permanent workforce, and some of them may not be. But even those contingent workers, and I spoke to a couple of disabled contingent workers, they said still, they have this

sense of belonging to the company, and they think this helps their career. They were unemployed, so they got a job. At least this experience can help them to, you know... Go to another job with, you know, having worked for a, you know, highly regarded company.

Is it good to have a two-tier structure? Probably not. And the explanation is to be found if the policy environment and the political economy changes. And I was looking at the statistics recently, and it looks like there's a manufacturing comeback in India. So there are some, you know, hiking job creation. So you know, it's a highly volatile, changing environment. I think we cannot give, like a stable prognosis as to what will happen to manufacturing jobs. But it looks like if there is ever an organization that can tackle this problem, it is PPPs like Titan, and I have trust in that, and that process where the government and the private sector is involved in a socially progressive course.

Bharat Punjabi:

Thank you, Dilshan. Are there... Are there other questions from the audience? Hannah, please go ahead.

Hannah Nguyen:

I'm sorry my questions might not relate too much to the result of your study, but I want to ask, was it... If it is possible, you can share some of your experience when you do your research in India, but not in Canada... While you are a student in Canada, like the reach out difficulties or any problem about ethicals, approvals, or things that you have during the time you conduct these studies. Thank you.

Dilshan Fernando:

Yeah, thank you for that question, Hannah. I am from South Asia, and I'm from Sri Lanka. And my PhD work is not the first research that I've done in India. So I've done previous disability work in India, and as well as in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, so I was familiar with the common problems associated with interviewing disabled employees, disabled people, like there are recruitment challenges, and so on.

But working with an organization, I got access to a pool of, you know, people with disabilities in one place, and I must admit that a great facet of my success in data collection was due to Titan's own cooperation, and they were very forthcoming and helping in terms of, you know, helping me to collect data. And they were keenly interested in the result, you know, what to do. And in terms of ethics?

Probably not. I think it's fine. The only challenge, I guess, was... it's not a challenge, but it's a... a situation [I have to] navigate is translation. So I don't speak Tamil, but I have to have translation, then I have to use sign language interpretation and translation. So that's a key challenge.

Bharat Punjabi:

Shabnam, you have a follow up question on that.

Shabnam Sukhdev:

Yeah, just like the term, reservation has different meanings. But in the context of India, like, are there certain jobs like, is there a mandate to offer a certain percentage of jobs to disabled people?

Dilshan Fernando:

Yeah, that's a good question, too. So there... there is. But in the public sector, there is a disability inclusion law that states certain quota is, you know, dedicated for disabled people in certain public jobs. And my research is kind of contesting that because that doesn't solve the problem of unemployment and disability-based inequality at scale. And we want to create jobs for disabled people, for regular jobs, not ones that are created just for them, those are called special jobs.

So what Titan's experience shows is that you can go beyond especially created jobs for regular jobs, and Titan interviewed, and you know, on boarded, and done all the regular process, and that's helpful.

Shabnam Sukhdev:

Yeah, thanks for your response. But I also think that disability is very complex. It's not just what is visible, but a lot of invisible nuances in their experience, so they still need to be addressed, not equally, but maybe in an egalitarian model, where you're more sensitive to the recruitment process.

Dilshan Fernando:

Absolutely, and I couldn't agree with you more, because it also talks to the situation where disabilities can be acquired. You're not only born with a disability. So while you're working, you can acquire a disability. And there were a number of instances in my research that found certain individuals, you know, diagnosed with autism, diagnosed with ADHD. You know some of those so-called invisible... you know invisible disabilities are not just mental health. For example, if you have MS or multiple sclerosis, you may not see it in the body of the person. but it is there like you, said Shabnam.

It's very important, and that's why destigmatizing disability as a lack of preparation to do a job, like you are not able to do a job that is needed for a company to hire people. You have to do the destigmatization work first in order to implement an inclusive hiring strategy. I'll stop with one example. There's an employee that was recently diagnosed with autism at Titan, so when he entered he didn't have that.

But he was given a job that he's able to do, for example, doing surveillance. You know, you know, some of the people with autism are able to do one task over a long period of time, and this individual is able to do surveillance, security, and all of that. And the company has to be flexible with that, with those kinds of things. And Titan is... it has its problems with the precarity and some of those issues, but we have a good starting base, I guess, to address this, you know really less thought about problem in the global South, especially in South Asia.

Bharat Punjabi:

Thank you, Dilshan. Are there more questions from the audience?

I was wanting to ask you, Dilshan, this is obviously a very novel theme to research in international development. Could you... Could you speak to some of the history of this, you know, very novel approach to employing, or actually developing a model, a very unique model of, you know, of including workers with disabilities [at] what is obviously a very successful commercial firm, and why we didn't know much about it until now, and you know, if you could just speak to the history of that, and who was involved from the Tata side, and you know, whether there were philanthropic arms of the Tata group which played a big role in this and the philosophies behind that.

Dilshan Fernando:

Yeah, thank you, Bharat, for that question. Well, in the disability community it is a famous story. Consistently, Tata wins... Titan, especially Titan, within the Tata group itself; Titan wins the award for the national disability inclusion award, and even like I said, in 2024. Also, it won the Tamil Nadu award as well as the national award, because it has done over time. That's the other important time thing.

It's not a recent EDI strategy of having one or two employees since the 1980s, over 30 years. That's long term. And so you have an institutional repository of knowledge [of] how to do something over 30 years. and part of my research is to bring this story out as a breast, because in Canada and in the West, you have this best... No, there's a lot of research on finding what the challenges are. But we don't have a lot of research on finding what to do about those challenges.

Bharat Punjabi:

What the solutions are. Yes.

Dilshan Fernando:

Yeah. But in this case, we know one, and we also know it from its complex story of political economy, manufacturing knowledge, and all of that. I think a key contribution to the Tata-Titan story is that it was not a philanthropic purpose. It was done from a corporate strategy point of

view, and that's what I was trying to argue. It was done as a corporate strategy. It helps the organization in its identity, and it creates accessibility, not as "We are this company. Let us also do some good things." No. I think that's key.

Also, [to] add to what, you know, what Sharada said earlier, and that defines this PPP model from others. Bringing private sector innovation and social development with government incentives to create jobs in a place in manufacturing, and that, too. Not sure if I answered the question, Bharat.

Bharat Punjabi:

No, you did. You did. Given I was a graduate of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, I was curious as to whether there was any... there were any philosophies of social work and/or human resource management. These were two important you know, faculties at the Tata Institute.

Very influential throughout the country in shaping, you know, all kinds of social interventions, and I was wondering if your work has found any information through the Data archives, or you know, or any such resource on, you know, where the roots of the strategy lie. Because I think, as your research highlights, it seems like a story which has many complex shades, you know, of, of influence, opinion on the design of the company. and the fact that it is not known outside the disability community is a big shame.

Dilshan Fernando:

I'll just tell one thing - even in Canada, in the disability space. If you were to tell a leading Canadian organization, "Hey? Hire 150 deaf people." That's going to be such a huge challenge because you need all the mechanisms of sign language interpretation [and] that too in complex watchmaking assembly line. You know, how to take instructions, and so on. So Titan has done that over time, and that has given the sense of belonging. And you know, developing families, you know, living, basically coming out of poverty. And all of these people.

Bharat Punjabi:

I agree.

Dilshan Fernando:

All of that right. So what were the alternatives that normal in the in the political economy literature that we had job quota systems, affirmative actions, upskilling.

Bharat Punjabi:

Yes, yes.

Dilshan Fernando:

Right? So those are individual-centric. Right? You're trying to fit the individuals to the problem.

Bharat Punjabi:

Right, right.

Dilshan Fernando:

Titan, we are looking at the employer doing its work and showing that they didn't do sympathy work. They hired these people for jobs that they can do, and they have shown that they can do, and they're better at them. And that industry knowledge, that they can do... I think there are some other companies that are taking these cues like Lemon Tree Hotels and so on... But in manufacturing, it's a success story.

Bharat Punjabi:

Yeah, no, it's a very thought-provoking story, I should say. And the fact that it's been done in the state of Tamil Nadu itself is very interesting and symbolic, that it's a state with a lot of social intervention, history of social intervention, and it speaks to my own training in development

studies. You know, there's a time when Amartya Sen's Capabilities Theory was very influential, and I think your story speaks to that as well, in a very powerful way.

Thank you, thank you so much. And you know, thanks to everyone for a very thought-provoking discussion, and thanks primarily to, you know, Dilshan for bringing us some very interesting information through his PhD work on this issue. I really wanted to thank CIRCLE as well too for organizing an event on this theme, a webinar on this theme, and to all of you who took the time out to attend, and you know, give and ask questions, and give feedback to Dilshan on his research.

I also wanted to take the opportunity of promoting CIRCLE's Masters Research Fund before we disperse, you know, for those of you who are Guelph students, the application deadline is March 17th and more details can be found on the CIRCLE website. And I'm just sharing that announcement with you all in the chat box. CIRCLE is a very dynamic centre, and please feel free to join our list serv as well. And thanks again, Dilshan and CIRCLE for organizing this webinar. Please stay in touch on our website for future events. And again, thanks for a very thought-provoking webinar.

Dilshan Fernando:

Thank you, Bharat, for moderating this. Thank you.

Bharat Punjabi:

Thanks.