

REVIEWS

Memories that linger... my journey in the world of disability by Padmani Mendis: an autobiography

The longer I was reading this book, the more I realised what a tremendously rich and fulfilling life Padmani Mendis had and still has. As one of the 9 children taken care of by her mother who got widowed at the age of 34 years (!), Padmani became that famous ‘mother’ of Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) I first had been reading about in the year 1984. This was back when I myself was facilitating, or developing, a programme that turned out to be called CBR. The CBR training manual of the WHO – co-authored by Padmani – next to David Werner’s manual *Disabled Village Children*, formed the only resources that I had, and which guided me in my work. Now almost 40 years later, I am having the privilege to write a review about the many memories that are captured in this book. We met in person at the WHO building somewhere before the (what I call) ‘new CBR’ was introduced by the WHO. I remember the photographs that were taken at one of the workshop days of the gurus of CBR (Padmani Mendis, Gunnel Nelson and Einar Helander) and felt both honoured and at the same time a young and still inexperienced CBR worker. We had our small side talks when we both felt that the old CBR got too much criticism and that the reality of the lives of people with disabilities in many parts of the world hadn’t changed that much. We were both critical about the CBR matrix which got so much attention but basically is a simple incomplete representation of what life is all about for people with and without disabilities. There was that bond between us which again comes to life when reading her book.

For those who want to know more CBR and its history and the role Padmani played as a physiotherapist in so many parts of the world, I can only say that this is a book about an extraordinary woman; someone who hasn’t been looking for fame. Rather, it is the extraordinary story of someone who wants to serve and make this world a better place. The book is about the memories of a child having grown up in Sri Lanka, and later on of a student, a nurse, a physiotherapist; someone who served mankind in many ways.

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The chapter about testing the CBR model in Botswana was a highlight for me. I recognised much of it as I worked myself 6 years among the Batswana in an area in South Africa bordering Botswana. Other readers may associate themselves more with other countries that Padmani visited. The beauty of the book is that there is eye for detail; details which one may have forgotten – at least her Botswana encounter was a reminder for me – and brought back many nice memories. I of course enjoyed the paragraph about Marjorie Concha from South Africa with whom I personally worked for a period of 4 years as consultant in a CBR programme at Tintswalo hospital in South Africa. The world is sometimes very small!

Padmani's book is also a beautiful book for those having an interest in the history of CBR. CBR as it was in those early years has been criticised as being too medical. For those who still feel this is the case, I would strongly advise to read the book and understand why and how CBR developed the way it did; start appreciating the new – radical approach in those years – and realise that even in the year 2023 we cannot do without the commitment, the passion and the love for community-based approaches. Disability as much as rehabilitation takes place in a certain context and if one tries to ignore that – and thus ignore tailor-made approaches both for working with individuals as well as communities, one makes a serious unforgivable mistake. Geneva-based solutions for non-Geneva based situations will lead to detrimental developments.

The last chapter is a chapter of thankfulness and a song about that Wonderful World that we live in. The world in which one woman played such a remarkable role; remained positive, with dreams of a continuing development of CBR – or CBID, as some may prefer to call it, as long as people with disabilities, their families and communities are being served.

Huib Cornielje