

# Making Diversity Count

# VIEWPOINT



# In Search of a Definition

Here's a definition of diversity we liked:

*The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies. It is the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment. It is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual.*

(Source: <http://gladstone.uoregon.edu/~asuomca/diversityinit/definition.html>)

So, how are we doing in this area? Are we doing enough to embrace and celebrate all the dimensions of diversity? Probably not, but this is not always for lack of trying. Since this question clearly called for some soul searching, we asked our contributors to talk to us about how open we are to diversity, within society and across India Inc.

The result is this introspective and hard hitting issue that takes on gender imbalance, intolerance and regressive laws while making a case for diversity across multiple facets – culture, identity, perspective and more.

## In This Issue:

**Don't Preach to the Converted:** Why our tendency to exclude men from organized discussions on gender diversity may be hurting the cause.

**Making the Most of Diversity:** To really make the most of a diverse employee base, organizations have to go from recognizing differences to nurturing individual perspectives and ways of thinking.

**The Mould Breaker:** The story of one man's struggle to break into a traditional art form with a non-traditional profile.

**Beyond Checkboxes and Comfort Zones:** Is India Inc. ready to take on systems and society in the interest of inclusivity?

**Alterpoint:** A closer look at the origins of human prejudice



# Don't Preach to the Converted

*In all our conversations on gender diversity, we often rope in the group that is fully vested in these initiatives – women. However, real results will depend on inviting the other side to the table.*

There was palpable excitement in the air. Nandan Nilekani, the then CEO, was about to address the Infosys Women's Inclusivity Network, "acronymised", as we "acronymised" everything, to IWIN. The Management Council Room was jam-packed with lady Infoscions who had hustled in to secure the best available seats. Adding to the excitement was the topic itself – The Power of Networking, something everybody concurred was critical for women to grow intellectually and climb the corporate ladders of success.

Of course, it was relevant for men as well. Which is why the gentlemen Infoscions in the lobby were sulking as they had not gained entry into the "No standing space even for women, sir" conference room. Rushing in to catch the talk, I was accosted by one of them, a senior male colleague and dear friend. His rant at the "No Entry" was without malice. But when I gently brought it to his notice that it was after all an IWIN event, he gave me a comeback line which comes to haunt me even today. With a deep-throated laugh he proclaimed: "Hema, you can have your IWIN. But remember ultimately, WE WIN".

While it is debatable whether this particular session should have had a gender-balanced audience, what my friend did gently was state the obvious – "If you want gender-inclusivity initiatives to succeed, don't just woo the minority, carry the majority too." Every time I am invited to an International Women's Day event, or address a session championing

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gender diversity and cast my eyes across the predominantly estrogen-filled room, my wise colleague's words come back to me.

Don't get me wrong. I know it is good for minorities (which women are in many organizations) to huddle. This gives them both the critical mass and that "letting down their hair" time, akin to what gentlemen only clubs do for men. But when conferences, sensitization sessions and serious discussions to push the case for gender diversity are held in gender-biased environments, then both the input and the impact gets seriously diluted. It is common to see speakers and participants ruing this trend at conferences; but improvement takes work.

Nasscom's conference on Diversity and Inclusivity, held annually since 2006, provides an interesting case study. This conference has worked hard at reducing this gap. Sucharita Eashwar, former senior director at Nasscom, has statistics to speak for this. "From 'men as speakers only' in 2006 we have steadily improved the participant mix. 2007 had under 2 % of the participants as men, 2008 had 6%, 2009 15% and most recently in 2010 we had 32%!". (In 2015 the percentage continues to be around 30%).

But participation in conferences is only symptomatic. The question really is whether the nominators champion this? If men who are the majority at the decision-making and operational leadership levels in organizations, are not visibly seen to sponsor and implement gender diversity, these initiatives will remain a peripheral and nice-to-do task to comply with.

To get this buy-in it is critical that organizations evangelize the business benefits of diversity over and over, ad nauseum, to these decision makers and influencers. Ultimately that is what will be the strongest reason for embracing it. Organizations are taking interesting tacks to do this – talent pool availability, better retention indicators and the interesting one of how diversity at the workplace mirrors diversity of the customer and better market perspectives. Nokia's program of embedding gender duality in product design, solution development and product marketing is a great example of this.

Analytics is a great way to understand the issues on the ground. Sometimes the reason for skewed gender ratios is not the most obvious. The case study of a leading consulting organization comes to mind. The selection model that had been adopted at the entry level was a totally gender-balanced one. But at partner selection time, the pool of eligible candidates was 1: 3 in favour of men. The usual reasons were trotted out: attrition, mommy tracks, hesitation to travel. But data ultimately proved each one wrong and gave the right reason. It was actually a question of assignment allocation. Men were getting allocated to the new economy assignments, women to the traditional ones – manufacturing, et al. Come partner selection time, there already were entrenched partners in the traditional lines of business, but not in the newer ones. And hence the skew!

Policies like work from home, crunched work weeks or flex timings alone are not enough to encourage gender balance. Managers must be trained

in how to deploy them effectively. The success of these initiatives requires skill building, especially for front line managers who have to drive the implementation. The manager's ability to reward for results and not just effort needs to be developed. This will provide a level-playing field for both genders and not put a lady team member who steps out early for babysitting duties at a disadvantage vis-à-vis her male peer who handholds the boss late into the evening without much else to show for results. But this also means the said manager needs to consciously develop planning, organizing, resourcing and time management skills.

Lastly, at the risk of repeating myself, let me emphasize the role of the CEO. Organizations take their cues from the corner office. The leader (and I am consciously using the masculine here) must be seen as gender inclusive - not just at work but also in the personal sphere. The question is not just of a working spouse. Infact, it goes much beyond that. In the final analysis this is the greatest catalyst or the biggest stumbling block in driving the message of inclusivity strongly through the organization.

**Editor's note: This article, now updated, first appeared in Mint in March 2011.**



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# Making the Most of Diversity

*There is enough research on how diversity – of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and more – can foster innovation and creativity within companies. In order to tap this, organizations need to move from simply recognizing differences to making the most of individual perspectives and ways of thinking.*

In 1967, Neisser came up with a complex term called "cognitive psychology" to describe the understanding of something seemingly simple – how people think.

Neisser described cognition as that involving "all processes by which the sensory input is transformed, reduced, elaborated, stored, recovered, and used. It is concerned with these processes even when they operate in the absence of relevant stimulation, as in images and hallucinations..."

So, can thinking really be distilled down to a clinical definition? Not entirely. Thinking varies from individual to individual, shaped by the way they interact with their worlds through their experiences. This is what produces diversity of thought, which in turn leads to diversity of perspectives, leading to diversity in the ways that issues are understood and addressed.

The value that diversity and inclusion bring to business is well established. There is enough research on how diversity – of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, geography, education, experience, physical ability and more – can lead to enhanced creativity and organizational performance.

Organizations across the spectrum have adopted strategies to make their workforce diverse. However, in the face of daily business challenges, we often get trapped in standard ways of doing things and fall back on established systems and processes to approach issues. While this may deliver enhanced control and predictability in the short term, it leaves us exposed to groupthink - to the propagation of standard thought processes and similar ideas. Such an atmosphere can stifle creativity and hinder new ways of looking at issues. Groupthink may also keep us from recognizing and preparing for impending challenges, with catastrophic results.

**Each one of us, by virtue of our background, upbringing and experiences, can bring a unique understanding of a complex situation to the table.**

Sallie Krawcheck, the former president of Bank of America's Global Wealth Management division, attributed the 2008 financial collapse to groupthink. When professionals with similar backgrounds who are conditioned to think in a certain way were thrown together, they failed to spot or acknowledge all the signs of a banking system on the verge of collapse.

Diversity of thought is essential when we are working in an environment marked by new dynamics, fresh challenges and constant change. Each one of us, by virtue of our background, upbringing and experiences, can bring a unique understanding of a complex situation to the table.

Sometimes, we facilitate diversity of thought without explicitly calling it out. Look at how popular the concept of "crowdsourcing" has become. Today, crowdsourcing is commonly used in inviting citizens' or experts' solutions for pressing civic problems, public policy or technological advancements. Many of these platforms are complemented by social collaboration tools to facilitate engagement and interaction.

We have also seen the concept of "design thinking" rising in popularity. Design thinking is about taking a creative, yet solution-oriented approach to problem solving by considering both known and unknown parameters of the problem. This is different from the traditional method of problem-solving, which is more structured, systematic and process-bound. Design thinking draws its uniqueness from being exploratory and iterative, and being open to even redefining the problem itself.

Several organizations are beginning to take proactive steps to build a diverse talent pool with the hope of creating greater shared value for the organization and the community. Many companies have established policies for hiring employees with disabilities. DLF, Jaypee and Infosys proactively hire military personnel into their workforce. GMR and Eureka Forbes actively recruit from rural areas to hone their sales and administrative capabilities. Organizations like Scope International, Amway and Kotak Life Insurance work with homemakers to tap their skills and professional commitment within more flexible working arrangements. Punj Lloyd and ICICI Prudential actively induct senior citizens into their workforce.

However, at this point, we need to take a step back and critically reflect on how the lifecycle of facilitating diversity of thought in organizations can be managed for optimal benefits. The above examples still seem to address diversity at the surface level. But we need to dive deeper to explore how different cognitive abilities resting with different talent pools can be leveraged and applied.

A recent study by Deloitte on the subject talks about hiring, managing and promoting strategies to encourage diversity of thought in the workplace. Hiring for diversity needs to move beyond compliance and visible tick boxes. Organizations have to introduce cognitive assessments to gauge the extent to which divergent thought processes are being used in various business situations. Managing for diversity means going beyond regular consensus-seeking approaches to those that encourage



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task-focused conflict and help to unleash creativity. Promoting for diversity entails recognizing that there are different approaches to problem-solving and instituting team-based performance frameworks that foster a culture of inclusion and collaboration.

To quote from the same Deloitte study: “Each human being has a unique blend of identities, cultures, and experiences that inform how he or she thinks, interprets, negotiates, and accomplishes a task. Diversity of thought goes beyond the affirmation of equality—simply recognizing differences and responding to them. Instead, the focus is on realizing the full potential of people, and in turn the organization, by acknowledging and appreciating the potential promise of each person’s unique perspective.”

To enable organizations to steer through the complexities of the current day environment, recognizing and providing for diversity of thought through our human capital is essential. The onus for this clearly lies with our business leaders.

Going back to Neisser, the proposition of cognitive psychology has considerable significance on how we choose to manage our organizations by recognizing that every individual is unique in the way they interpret and make sense of the world around them.

What is interesting here is that cognition or information processing exists even in the absence of relevant stimuli. In today’s environment where there is a high level of overlap between work and personal lives, it is probable that individuals are constantly interpreting information and forming perspectives consciously or unconsciously, with or without stimuli. Organizations need to find ways to take advantage of the diversity and richness that people can contribute, just by virtue of being the individuals they are.

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# The Mould Breaker

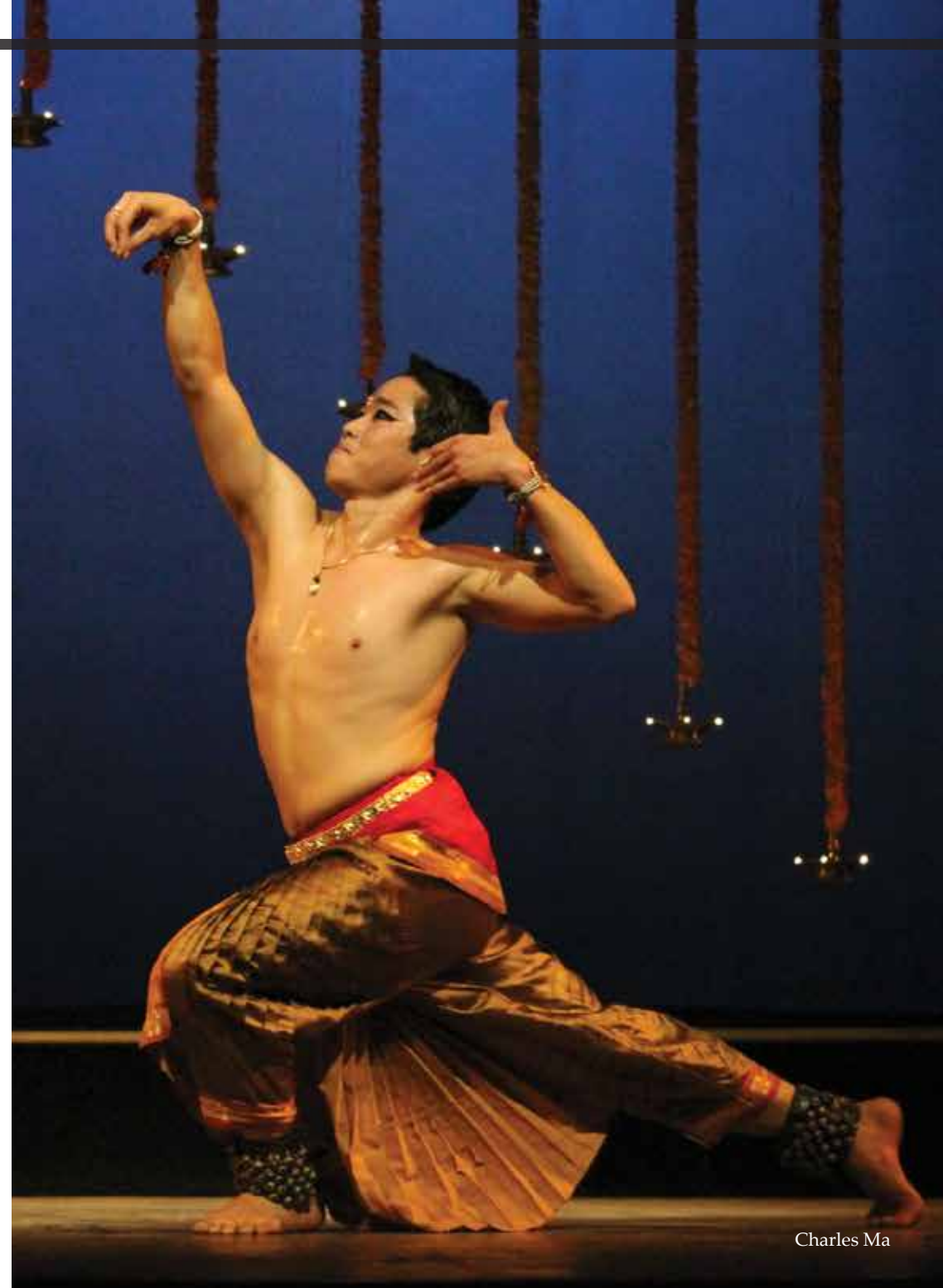
*Charles Ma, a Bharatanatyam dancer and teacher, describes his struggle to break into a traditional art form with an unconventional profile.*

Dance, in my view, is like a mirror. What you release on stage is a manifestation of your collective experiences and emotions. It allows the audience to see right through to you.

My own performances tend to be high on emotion and passion, a reflection of my own journey and struggle for identity and acceptance as a dancer.

Trying to make it as a Bharatanatyam dancer is not easy even for someone who fits the mould – female, Indian origin, large eyes. It was infinitely more difficult for me given my unconventional background – at least as far as Indian classical dance is concerned. For starters, I am not a woman. My eyes cannot be described as large. I can trace my family lineage back to Nepali and Chinese roots. My Nepali grandmother was a practicing Hindu but other members of the family are staunchly devout Christians.

And yet, having grown up in Bangalore with many TAMILIAN and KANNADIGA friends, I felt very South Indian at my core. The multicultural heritage and upbringing, although enriching in many ways, led to an identity crisis that really came to the fore when I was in college. I needed an outlet then, a way to channel my seemingly inexhaustible reserve of physical energy and I flung myself into many pursuits, including karate, football and swimming. However, when I discovered choreography as part of a semi-classical dance troupe, I knew I had found something I truly loved. I was particularly drawn to Bharatanatyam, a beautiful dance tradition from Tamil Nadu.



Charles Ma

There were plenty of taunts to be endured along the way. It was easy for society to brand me as the crazy one, the misfit. My family was more accepting of my aspirations but, even with them, it was one foot forward and two back on a regular basis. “Why do you want to do this?” they would ask me. Sometimes they would attempt to entice me with a picture of a ‘normal’ life with a 9-to-5 job. Predictable hours, a regular paycheck, the security of knowing where my next meal was coming from.

Bharatanatyam originated more than 2000 years ago in the temples of Tamil Nadu and was originally performed by Devadasis (a group of women dedicated to deity worship and service) within temple precincts. A certain amount of social stigma was attached to both the dance and its performers in the early days.

Fast forward to today and Bharatanatyam has evolved in both form and outlook. And yet the typical exponent is still a doe eyed and long haired woman, preferably of South Indian descent. This has a lot to do with ingrained ideas about cultural fit and masculinity in Indian society. The idea of a male classical dancer has yet to gain currency in this female dominated field.

However, perseverance can pay off. I kept at it, training under a guru, Smt. Poornima Ashok, to whom I credit my growth as a dancer. It was a bumpy ride with many stops and starts that involved other teachers also but I never felt completely centered unless I was able to immerse myself in this art form.

In 2007, I participated in a dance competition in Chennai and won it. The judges cited ‘passion’ as the number one factor in picking me over other immensely talented contestants.

In a sense, this win, along with my ability to communicate and talk openly about my experience, helped change the narrative on my struggle. Soon I became the maverick artist, the non-conformist who was determined to follow his own path in the face of prejudice and intolerance. My story was heralded as a victory for brave and passionate souls everywhere.

And yet, all I was trying to do was follow my heart. At one level, I am proud of what I can contribute to the art form as a result of my personal experiences. I am a divergent thinker and I try to incorporate elements of Pilates and Yoga into my dances. I use innovative angles but within a traditional framework. With my own students now, I am constantly working and reworking my pedagogy. I believe that my personal journey has attracted students who have barriers of their own to overcome. For example, I often have women in their 40s – married, with children – come to me to help them learn what they have always wanted to but never had a chance to.

In a connected world, global ideas of diversity and tolerance are seeping into our own culture. The younger generation is clearly progressive in its outlook while many members of the older generation are working on recalibrating their own views. It is encouraging to see these shifts in a complicated and layered societal mindset. We have to give it time but there will soon be a day when a male dancer of Nepali-Chinese origin will be a mainstream member of the community, not an oddity.

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Charles Ma is a Bangalore-based classical dance soloist and teacher.



# Beyond Checkboxes and Comfort Zones

*While many Indian organizations have policies for cultivating diversity, there is still a gap between intent and execution. An incomplete definition of diversity, regressive laws and societal views are largely responsible for this. What can organizations do to change this situation?*

Real diversity management requires a capacity for recognizing and understanding a wide variety of identities and voices. Any organization that does not have a diversity policy is ignoring an important aspect of doing business. However, there is an economic caveat attached to this. The harsh reality is that most organizations do not address this aspect until they have reached a level of stability with their finances. By that time, it may be too late to hardwire an appreciation for diversity into the organization's DNA.

From a societal perspective, the good news is that decibel levels of voices against social injustice and discrimination have gone up in recent times. The kinds of topics that media now regularly talks about were not aired a decade ago. Our willingness to engage in conversations on thorny social and political issues can be viewed as progress.

And yet, there is still a bias in what we feel merits further discussion and action. Women's rights and gender equality have received a lot of press lately and rightly so. As a result, organizations are exploring a variety of strategies to restore and maintain gender balance within their ranks. For other groups, however, the outlook for a life free of discrimination is still grim. There are two groups that primarily come to mind here: members of India's LGBT community and people who count themselves as physically challenged. The reasons for this are tied to both the physical and socio-legal conditions in our country.



For the physically challenged, a woeful lack of urban infrastructure and facilities limits their access to employment opportunities. When it comes to the rights of the LGBT community, the laws in the country are regressive and reflect the still evolving public opinion on this topic.

In both instances, Indian organizations have been unable to show that they are committed to being inclusive. While the intent is there, the broader framework needed to push it through is missing. I personally know of an HR professional who attempted to recruit more transgender individuals into the company. However, this became difficult to sustain in the face of inflexible hiring criteria and requirements. Most organizations are unwilling to bend the rules in trying to promote heterogeneity and diversity.

The hesitation may stem from the fact that they do not feel equipped to follow up on such diversity-based hiring with policies to ensure a healthy working environment for all their employees. At a minimum, such follow up action should root out any potential for emotional violence aimed at these individuals.

Still, businesses have come a long way in this journey. Hiring and promotion decisions are now largely merit-based. The Indian counterparts of multinationals have inherited HR systems that place an emphasis on diversity-based hiring and are trying to adapt these imperatives to the local context.

Organizations are also encouraging employees to form support groups and are making it easier for employees to come forward with concerns and grievances.

For the most part, companies are discovering that it doesn't take much in the way of additional resources in order to signal that they are serious about building diversity in their ranks. Beyond resources, developing a practice of genuine conversations about current and emerging issues can help them progress on this front.

While trying to do more in this area, however, organizations sometimes run up against a few Indian laws that are not framed or intended for modern times. What recourse, for example, does a member of the LGBT community have if he is being subjected to emotional and sexual harassment by a male boss? A system that has decreed homosexuality to be illegal is not likely to examine more nuanced issues of consent in such cases.

We need more social teeth to address these gaps that leave groups of people exposed and vulnerable. Fortunately for us, many celebrities from the entertainment industry are speaking out against such group side-lining with support from liberal sections of our society.

The recent US Supreme Court decision legalizing gay marriage came in the wake of a significant shift in public opinion that was also driven by

cultural heroes and their supporters in the business world. Similarly, Indian laws have historically followed the way we live and work and that is how the gay rights issue is likely to play out in the country.

We celebrate certain forms of diversity – of food, dress, religion - enthusiastically in our offices. But this can become a superficial activity that glosses over the real picture if we don't acknowledge diversity of all forms – gender, sexual orientation, physical ability and more. Perhaps we need to think beyond celebrating differences to cultivating true respect for these.

For now, Indian organizations are doing their bit by checking the boxes and following certain hygiene factors in hiring. By fortifying their policies with more resolve and throwing their weight behind the cultural movement for change, they can demonstrate that diversity is more than a word in a hiring manual. It is the only way forward for business.

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## The Origins of Prejudice

*What does prejudice spring from? Scientists who have tried to tackle the question have been able to link it to our evolutionary past.*

Prejudice is puzzling in some ways because it appears to go against the basic principles that guide natural selection within our species. After all, if diverse traits serve to strengthen the human race, we should be instinctively drawn to diversity. We would seek it out actively - in our partners and within the social circles that form around us. And yet human history is mired in examples of prejudice and bigotry - of people shunning others who are unlike them and of dominant groups edging out ones they view as being different or inferior in some way.

Scientists who have been trying to crack this puzzle now have some answers. In 2011, a team of Yale researchers conducted a series of experiments on rhesus monkeys, a species that is similar to humans in the way its members band together and form social connections.

The researchers exposed the subjects to photographs of 'outsider' and 'insider' monkeys and then tried to gauge their reactions to these. They also ran a simian version of a test used to detect unconscious biases in humans. The results support the hypothesis that prejudice can be traced to our evolutionary past - to a time when our ancestors huddled and moved in groups in order to ward off external threats.





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The Yale study, although widely cited after its publication, has since been retracted due to inadvertent coding errors that may have compromised the results. However, other psychologists have also delved into the origins of prejudice and arrived at similar conclusions.

Steven Neuberg, a professor of social psychology at the University of Arizona believes that prejudice has evolved from a type of 'tribal psychology' of yore. This resulted in anybody who came in from outside being perceived as an invader who could potentially harm the group or rob it of precious resources.

Even those of us who think of ourselves as open-minded are not completely so. If we were to undergo the test for bias described earlier, we may uncover many unexpressed reservations about entire groups of people – the religious, the overweight, the uneducated, and more.

This tendency is partly driven by our need for labeling and categorization. Coke's recent Ramadan ad effectively illustrates how our inclination for snap judgments lies just below the surface. The ad shows a group of strangers seated in a dark room, with each taking turns talking about himself and his interests. When the lights go on at the end, everyone is surprised at the physical appearance of the others at the table as these do not fit the impressions they had formed based on voice and verbal cues.

The problems really begin when our innate biases start manifesting themselves in the form of open discrimination. Many books and movies have explored this theme, with their protagonists taking on sexism, racism, casteism and other forms of 'isms'. The best ones continue to resonate years after they were first released.

A good example is the Harper Lee classic, 'To Kill a Mockingbird', a story arranged around the darkness of racial inequality in Depression era America and the idealism of Atticus Finch, an attorney who risks physical danger by defending a black man in a criminal case. Ever since the book was published in 1960, Finch has been the literary world's best example of racial heroism.

And now suddenly there is a new picture of Finch that has emerged with the publication of Lee's sequel, 'Go Set a Watchman'. This is the version that the author penned before her editor suggested a change in storytelling strategy. The new book portrays Finch as aging, arthritic and – in a shocking shift in characterization – as a bigot with decidedly racist views. For those who love the original book and for others who have watched the movie starring Gregory Peck, it has been unsettling to see this side of Finch. On social media, one of them compared it to finding out that "Santa Claus beats his reindeer".

Finch is a product of one author's imaginative mind and it may be futile to agonize over his change in ideology. What we can take away from this is that even the most open-minded of us could lapse into bigoted ways of

thinking. Given our genetic predisposition, a single experience or a set of them could quickly move our views from moderate to extreme.

Of course, prejudice has no place or value in a modern society that is predicated on acceptance, tolerance and diversity. Experts have floated the 'Contact Hypothesis' – based on meaningful and valuable interaction with members of other groups – as a way to move away from it.

But first, we have to acknowledge that we are hardwired for prejudice in a manner that is not entirely dictated by environment. We could stop pointing to history, social circumstances, religion and more in trying to understand the roots of human prejudice. Instead, we could start by looking more closely at where it all begins - in our minds.

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