

**Impressum**

Ashutosh Vardhana: Pure prejudice

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**EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION**

A campaign against racism in England promoted the notion that we should take no notice of other people's skin colour, make no assumptions, and treat everybody as if they were culturally and in every other respect the same. Ashutosh Vardhana argues that the ideal of colour blindness misses the point. Prejudice (prior judgements, acting on probabilities, on the basis of experience with groups) is beneficial and necessary for the functioning of society. What has to be combatted is not recognition of other groups but hostility towards them. The antidote to racism is not colour blindness but that we should learn to love, rather than hate, what is different, we should know as much as possible about other worlds, and take pleasure in exploring the worlds we do not know.

Ashutosh Vardhana attended an amateur production of a community-written play in the library theatre of a Northern English town. In a letter to a friend in India he explains his thoughts about the well-intended, but in his view, naively conceived play.

# **Ashutosh Vardhana: Pure prejudice**

Letter to a friend in India

A critique of, and supplement to,  
a campaign against racism.

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Motto:  
If you aim your  
arrows at  
prejudice,  
they become  
missiles  
which must miss  
the point.  
(Vernère de Brun)

4 Nov 1997

My dear Naresh,

You enquired about cultural life in Rossendale, and it is, I must say, enormous. It is, to say the least, thought-provoking, like the play I went to see tonight (4 Nov 1997) in the Public Library. It ended only thirty minutes ago, I was able to walk home (an indication of the size of Rossendale) and sat down at my typewriter immediately to fix my experiences and reactions quickly, before I forget them.

The play was called "Storm" (not by Shakespeare, nor by Ostrovskij, but the storm of racism, which threatens to sink the ship of humanity and drown us all). It was performed by a local theatre group and incorporated contributions from various local people, some of whom, I presume, were members of the cast. It was a splendid performance, with fitting music and startling sound effects, and I heard from some members of the sparse audience that they felt touched on the raw by the examples of prejudice put forward, recognising that they themselves had at times fallen into some of the traps suggested in the play. I doubt whether any hard-core racist was in the audience. Such persons do not bother to come to such difficult plays (an example of my prejudice), nor are they likely to understand, or to be moved by, the arguments or sentiments put forward in this presentation.

I say "presentation", because in a way it was more like a poetry recital or a Greek tragedy chorus, accompanied by some action or mime, than like the traditional play with a story to exemplify the message. Such a story, perhaps in the Brechtian style (e.g. "The Caucasian Chalk Circle"), might have been more entertaining, more moving and more effective in carrying the message, but the appropriate play for this message has yet to be found or to be written.

I suspect then that this was a sermon for the converted - and for the patient who could bear the gloom which pervaded the presentation from beginning to end.

Mercifully, the play was politically correct. A malevolent observer would have called it sentimental or sanctimonious. But that is not in my nature, since prejudice, racism and violence and its avoidance are one of the preoccupations of my life. It is one's duty to praise, and thereby encourage, projects with such laudable aims, especially since any criticism can be taken up and used as ammunition by narrow-minded people with sinister motives.

However, for private consumption, I think it may perhaps be right to be more critical and consider the outcome and the arguments rather than the effort.

### **WHO AM I: WHO ARE YOU?**

My neighbour during the performance was a Muslim friend who was born in Iraq; in front of me sat an Italian woman. Scattered in the audience of 80 people or so were members of the racial and cultural groups prevalent in Rossendale, including Muslims and what goes for English here, i.e. whites. The programme contained a long list of contributors to the presentation, including English, Chinese, Hindu, Muslim and French names. The cast of nine, whose names were not recognisable, included, at least, two people from the Indian subcontinent, a Belgian man, an Irish woman, and "what goes for English here".

By trying to produce this list (and by knowing who sat on my right and in front of me) I am breaking all the taboos sanctioned by the play, but it gave me a lead to conversing with my fellow-play-watchers. I was aided by the fact that the programme named the contributors rather than assigning them, for truly anti-racist purposes, concentration camp numbers. I also received clues from their appearance, their accents or the stories they were given to tell. I search for these clues deliberately, because taboos are useful in two ways: Firstly because they can and should be observed (like the many taboos prevalent in so many cultures, including class, caste, race, status, age taboos, and some taboos of political incorrectness), and because they can and should be broken.

This play is trying to demolish some taboos and it may, in their place, be trying to establish others. Let us then hasten to break them.

A taboo is a general rule of behaviour which people try to apply without understanding, or wanting to understand, its deeper purpose. When rules are proposed in a general form without having been thought through to their foundations <sup>(1)</sup>, it may be necessary to challenge them, however well-meant they may be. Reason may lead to a change of behaviour and may enable people to abandon old taboos.

But replacing one taboo (rules of racism) by another (rules of anti-racism) is not likely to be effective.

It is therefore incumbent on me to challenge some of the propositions contained in this play.

We were asked to close our eyes, imagine, and wish for, an ideal world, in which we do not perceive skin colour, race, or sex. In which we do not perceive whether a person is gay (homosexual) or gloomy (heterosexual). In which we take no note whether a person is slim or fat, good-looking or ugly, old or young, was born in one country or another. We are not to be interested in where her parents come from. Or what her profession is, whether she <sup>(2)</sup> has been to university or not. Whether she is intelligent or stupid. And so on.

For: all these markers do not tell us what a person **IS**, so we are told.

I **AM** neither a priest, nor a shoe maker (these can only be my professions), I **AM** not Indian, or Irish, all these are only superficial attributes (so the play suggests, without going into the problem more deeply). I am, well, what am I - according to the play? The play does not say who I am, if I am not any or the sum of all those observable attributes which it is politically incorrect to observe, to ask about or to react to. Who am I?

Let me anticipate (perhaps wrongly) an answer that the authors of the play would permit: I am myself. Or I am Ashutosh.

But that does not really help us, for "I am myself" is a tautology, and "I am Ashutosh" is just a naming convention, a label (and "labels" are condemned in the play). These then are trivial answers. Only the God-of-Israel (and the God whom we Hindus call sāt [= existence]) is entitled to refuse giving his name and say "I AM THAT I AM. Thus shalt thou say: 'I AM has sent me unto you'." (Exodus 3:14) Only in His case the answer is not trivial.

The play does not, and cannot be expected to, enter into the deep philosophical issues which it raises with the question "Who am I" (So ham?) in the Upanishads and which occupy such a central place in Hindu and Sufi philosophy.

It is not helpful to debar me from perceiving the attributes of a person and tell me to confine myself to her essence if I am then not told what her essence is and how I am to discover it, and how I am to behave once I have done so.

#### **HOW TO BE ENGLISH IF YOUR FACE IS CHINESE**

A girl of Chinese appearance, born in Bolton, had to complain, not that people attack her because of her physical appearance, but that they are unhappy to regard her as a Boltonian in the same way as an Boltonian with a European face. First they try to make out that she was born in China. When they are firmly told

that this girl was born in Bolton, they ask "Where do you really come from?" How absurd! The answer is still Bolton. Then they want to know where her parents come from, as if it mattered - anything to establish some kind of otherness in this girl, merely because her face is different.

Next they assume that this girl lives completely by Chinese customs, eats only Chinese food, etc.

Then they display their ignorance of Chinese customs. Only this girl knows how stupid, for one who knows Chinese culture, these suggestions are. As she rightly points out, Chinese people (real Chinese people, i.e. those still living in China or at least born in China), do not only eat chop suey. She, in fact, likes fish and chips, and Yorkshire Pudding, or other English delicacies, and is offended by the fact that those who do not know her assume otherwise the moment they see her face, whereas she wants to be considered nothing but British. That is one form of prejudice.

She has at least three things to complain about:

1. people's ignorance about Chinese habits
2. the fact that people assume that she follows Chinese rather than English customs, e.g. in her diet
3. the fact, if it so happens, that people despise rather than cherish these non-English customs.

I understand her frustration. It is not nice that people treat you, because of your appearance, as if you were different from the majority population when in fact you are in every other respect the same.

I fully agree with her third complaint: it is usually indefensible to despise the customs of another culture. Our customs or attitudes (be they Indian or British) are not a priori superior to those of other people. British institutions are not, as is incessantly proclaimed, "the best in the world", even though they may often be "good" or "very good". And even some of the old Indian customs are not of necessity superior or good or divinely instituted only because they have worked well for many centuries, and until recently.

### **IGNORANCE**

However, the first two complaints are not fair. We are all ignorant of some culture or other. The reason why a Chinese girl from Bolton can be so indignant about the ignorance of white Boltonians in respect of her background is that she, by virtue of her origins, is an expert on Chinese culture, which neither her white nor her Indian mates are. In this respect, if in no other, she is different from Boltonians with non-Chinese faces. Those people who assume that she eats only chop suey are not right in

that belief, but they are right in the implied assumption that she is a person who can either confirm or deny that belief and teach them something about Chinese cuisine.

Not all questions come in the form of grammatical questions. If I suggest something that is wrong, I expose my potential ignorance and implicitly invite the listener to put me right. Coming from a Chinese family, this girl then has a chance to spread knowledge of Chinese culture.

We should not despise other people's ignorance too much, even if they are racists, poor sods. We all have our blind spots, and there may well be young Chinese in Bolton who believe (like their white mates) that there is such a dish as "curry" and that Indians eat nothing else. Indians, of course, never eat "curry", but they eat food of many different kinds cooked according to various Indian traditions differing from region to region in India. And even though the young Bolton-Chinese are well informed about Indian eating habits (which is easy, there being so many Indians in Bolton), they might well be very ignorant about the diet of Germans (nothing but pork and potatoes), of the French (nothing but frogs and snails), of the St John Ambulance Brigade (nothing but grasshoppers), of Jews (nothing but Christian babies), or of black Africans (nothing but each other). It is not easy to be omniscient. Unlike normal citizens, travelling politicians are briefed before they meet people from other cultures.

English-looking Boltonians know nothing about Chinese-looking Boltonians because there are comparatively few of the latter and contacts with them are limited. Those whites who ask stupid questions are probably encountering a Chinese-Boltonian for the first time in their lives, hence the ignorance. It is much easier for a Chinese-Boltonian to know about the awful dietary habits of the "white natives".

#### **THE VALUE OF PREJUDICE: PREJUDICE AS A PRECAUTION**

Point 2 deals with making assumptions rather than basing all one's words and actions on knowledge. "Making assumptions" is very close to being "prejudiced", i.e. judging an issue or a person before (pre-) having investigated it properly, and doing so on the basis of (correct or incorrect) prior knowledge (assumptions) about a group of people or a group of events.

Now, if I am at the receiving end of a wrong assumption, which I have been often enough in my life (and at which I may find myself even after having posted this letter to the producer of the play), this is rather unpleasant for me. It would be better for me if people always gave me the benefit of the doubt (an expression which shows how much of our daily behaviour has to be based on assumptions, rather than on knowledge or specific experience). It is not only ethnic minorities who are in this position. Even English people will find that other English

people (to say nothing of members of the "ethnic" communities) will make assumptions about them (e.g. that "we Northerners" are slow and stupid, and Southerners are rich and arrogant and speak with a silly accent), which, in a specific case, may be wrong.

However, it is not appropriate to tell people, as this play and many campaigners against racism do, that it is always wrong to make assumptions, i.e. to be "pre"-judiced".

What **IS** wrong is to hurt another person because of such prejudice, and what is stupid is, not to be prepared to revise one's prejudices in the light of experience!

With this limitation in mind, I have to defend prejudice and the making of assumptions in the strongest possible terms, since campaigners against racism generally show so little understanding of their importance: **one cannot convert a sinner if one does not understand his motives and his way of looking at his actions.**

This is the reason why the much maligned attempt to understand the mind of a paedophile (A M Homes: "The End of Alice", Anchor Books, Transworld Publishers, London, 1997) or the attempt to understand the racist minds of ordinary racist Germans during the Nazi era (Daniel Goldhagen: "Hitler's Willing Executioners". Abacus, London, 1996) are so important. Indignation and revulsion is not enough. Only she who understands can convince, only she who understands can cause change.

This is why it is necessary to understand, for instance, why John Tutuola, or whatever his name may be, from Nigeria would not deign to talk to Mary Lofters from Jamaica, even though both are by definition beautiful, both are doctoral students at Cambridge University and both are equally detested by white racists, but while black may be beautiful only African is pure. And the Jamaican looks down upon the Trinidadian because he is a small-islander and the Trinidadian despises the Jamaican because he speaks English with a Jamaican accent whereas the Trinidadian's English is lily-white British. And the Trinidadian despises the Bajan because he is a small-islander ... ^ (3)

This is why it is necessary to **understand** the Hindu caste system and especially the treatment of "Untouchables", and mere condemnation, especially from ignorant Western quarters, is not helpful. The Booker Prize Winner of 1997, Arundhati Roy, made such an attempt when she tried to explain the psychology of the gang of policemen who beat an Untouchable to a pulp because he had an affair with a Touchable woman. What Arundhati Roy says is paradigmatic for much other violent racist behaviour:

"Impelled by feelings that were primal yet paradoxically wholly impersonal. Feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear - civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness. Man's subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify...



There was nothing accidental about what happened that morning. Nothing incidental. It was no stray mugging or personal settling of scores. This was an era imprinting itself on those who lived in it...

If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that, if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature - had been severed long ago..." (Arundhati Roy : "The God of Small Things", Ch 18, p 308 f. Flamingo, London, 1997) ^ (4)

The actions of the policemen in this incident (set in 1969) are akin in their motivation to the brutalities committed by Germans in Nazi concentration camps (remember the film "Schindler's List"). The offence (against the "Love Laws") for which Velutha is punished is the same that was proscribed by the Nuremberg Laws in Nazi Germany and by the race laws of South Africa. What happened or happens in India is relevant for Europe, and vice versa: we all have the potential for racism in us: racism is human!

All this notwithstanding, making assumptions, i.e. prejudice, is essential for our survival. ^ (5)

1. Not all cars in England drive on the left (occasionally a suicide drives on the right). However, most do and before I step out into the road I will make my checks working on this assumption.
2. The Highway Code (Paragraph 999) tells me to treat every other driver and pedestrian as if she were a lunatic and to behave accordingly. That is a prejudice, and moreover it is insulting to everybody but me: there are a few exceptions. But as a rule it will be better for me to act on the basis of this prejudice until I am safely out of the range of this car or person.
3. If an ox of a man, with an open knife, runs towards me, I will get out of his way. In fact he may have only the friendliest of intentions; he may be putting on an act, he may be teasing me, he may want to show me how sharp it is, or he may be out to kill someone else. But my prejudice against men with open knives protects me. May God forgive me if I have done an injustice to a man with an open knife. It would certainly be stupid of me to set my prejudice aside and to judge his intentions only when I have seen whether he stabs me or passes me by.
4. If I lock and alarm my house, I display a prejudice against all Boltonians, most of them honest citizens (like most Welshwomen, gypsies or "thieving magpies" (a special slur) - contrary to their proverbial reputation), but I am right in assuming that unlocked houses will be burgled. I will relax my guard only towards people whom I know personally and who have proved that they belong to the honest lot. I will be prejudiced until I know better.

5. Insurance companies are prejudiced against young drivers, and rightly so. Statistics show that most accidents are caused by them. Their initial premiums are therefore loaded until they have proved by their driving record that they take fewer risks than their contemporaries. If insurance companies acted otherwise (their whole business is based on the assessment of risk), they would run up losses or have to increase the premiums of groups of drivers who have proved to pose a lower risk. Some drivers in the group of youthful drivers will be unjustly penalised by the risk weightings of the insurance companies, but there will be less injustice if the risk is assessed separately for this group than if it were to be distributed evenly over all groups of drivers. The same applies to increased premiums for drivers in areas where the crime rate is higher than elsewhere.

Much prejudicial behaviour has to do with the assessment of risk. When it is done on the basis of hear-say and ignorance, a wrong assessment may result. Such ignorance has to be corrected and behaviour will then change, but whenever one meets a new person, there will be expectations (assumptions, prejudice) and it will be necessary for us to act on the basis of these expectations. Sometimes they will be confirmed, sometimes they will be proved wrong.

It is, of course, annoying if, because we belong to a minority group, we receive a mistaken "initial assessment" (and have to correct it) more often than members of the majority. But even these will sometimes, and unavoidably, suffer disadvantages as a result of some accident of birth. Such incidents are not always the result of racial prejudice: minorities and majorities alike have to accept them as part of the "vicissitudes of life".

6. If I employ in succession three people from Darwen, and all three steal from my till, I can be forgiven if in my simple mind I think there is a causal connection between their town of origin and their dishonesty. Perhaps people from Darwen are poorer than those in Rossendale and are therefore likely to steal from Rossendaleians. (And why do the youngsters from Nelson come to fight in Rossendale, and vice versa? And why do the Sikhs and the Muslims in Southall fight each other?)

Much superstition and, as some people argue, even certain religious behaviour is of this nature: to mistake sequential events for cause and effect. It is fair enough to be cautious and to wait to be convinced. We would soon be dead if we were not programmed to act on expectations, some right, some wrong. This is fine, provided not too many of our expectations are wrong.

However, it is the duty of all people who strive for self-improvement to study the facts, to eliminate wrong expectations as far as possible, and not to repeat their mistakes.

**THE VALUE OF PREJUDICE:  
PREJUDICE AS A FORM OF RESPECT**

Assumptions are not only necessary for the survival of those people who make them but can also benefit the persons about whom they are made.

"Storm" tells us to ignore the fact that a person comes from a Chinese, or Hindu, or Muslim or Jewish or Proto-Hittite family, and not to assume anything about that person's habits, preferences, &c.

At this stage I must introduce my old friend Luigi. He is widely travelled and knows much about many different cultures.

He used to be active in the race relations scene in London some years ago, was a member of Fenner Brockway's Movement for Colonial Freedom and especially worked with educationally disadvantaged children from the West Indies (or rather children of West Indian parents). He is married to a black (i.e. beautiful) woman from Trinidad.

When his wife took him home to Trinidad for the first time and they were walking across the market square in Arima, a black (i.e. beautiful) youngster yelled after her with his inimitable Trinidadian sing-song accent: "Hey, gaal, where you get that white man fraaaaam?" Gloria invited the chap for a rum and coke and told him how she had acquired Luigi by picking him out of a crowd of pilgrims on St Peter's Square in Rome. She marched straight up to him, pointed at him and said: "I want you." Veni, vidi, vici. ^ (6) She was not prejudiced, asked no questions and relied on what she saw. Luigi did not let her down.

When he was walking alone through the streets of Kingston, Jamaica, a few years later, someone called him, the Neapolitan, a South African bastard. Those were the days. Luigi, who is not a Muslim, had meanwhile learned from Gloria how to fight racism and immediately invited the Jamaican to share a rum and coke with him. In a dark shack, in which a record of Monkey-Man ^ (7) was playing in the background, he shoved his birth certificate under his accuser's nose to prove that both assertions were wrong. The Jamaican youngster was pleasantly surprised. Sometimes prejudice can be corrected by evidence. They parted as friends for life.

Luigi sees this as proof positive that rum-and-coke is a potent remedy against racism. Therefore you can go into any shop in Jamaica and simply ask for "a bottle of proof". Everybody will understand. You will receive a bottle of rum, mind-blowing, more powerful than anything you can get in this country. Luigi also swears that anyone afraid of racist abuse for himself or his mother should always carry his birth certificate with him. "In some countries, this is more important than your passport", Luigi says.

Luigi is one of the most prejudiced persons I know, and I commend him for it <sup>(8)</sup>. He is full of assumptions about cultural groups he has been in contact with. When he meets a stranger, he tries to establish by the best means at his disposal (appearance, name, country of origin, religion, &c.) to which group the individual belongs and then

(when the stranger  
     "is formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
     When she is pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
     Then how should she begin  
     To spit out all the butt-ends of her days and ways?  
     And how should she presume?" <sup>(9)</sup>

treats her as if she conformed to the "norm" for that group. More often than not he is right in his assumptions. If he is wrong, he does not go to confession but simply corrects his behaviour towards this individual and slightly adjusts his assumptions about the group as a whole.

For example, when he meets an Indian couple, he will shake hands with the man but not with the woman. He will not even offer to shake hands with her, lest he force her to yield to his western custom. She will gratefully notice that he knows how to behave towards her, and that he knows and respects her culture. Luigi is not always right in this respect, because once an Indian woman, friendly, beautifully impulsive and fairly westernised gave him a big and friendly hug when he met her. He remembers that effusive kindness with pleasure.

When he invites Muslim guests he will not offer them pork or alcohol, and his Hindu guests will not be offered beef. When he invites a Hindu from Gujarat or from Southern India he will not offer any meat at all. That is a prejudice. It ignores the fact that, as the Chinese character in the play pointed out, there are Indians who are westernised and do not conform to the norms of their parents and of their group. But since he has to make an assumption, either that they conform or that they do not conform, the assumption he makes is the better and more respectful one to make.

Sometimes Hindus who come to Europe on business do eat beef and perhaps look forward to the experience, while they would not do so at home (even Gandhiji as a teenager did so, and was ashamed afterwards); and some businessmen from Saudi Arabia will drink alcohol while in Europe.

Luigi is a teetotaler. He never drinks alcohol. When he goes into a pub with friends, he orders a non-alcoholic drink. But when he has to meet a new Muslim acquaintance, and especially a woman, he will never suggest that they meet in a pub, because even being seen entering one may harm the reputation of the Muslim, even if she does not consume any alcohol while there.

When Luigi enters a Muslim shop, he greets with "Assalamu Aleikum". If he enters a Hindu shop, he greets with "Namaste". He thus shows the shopkeeper and his customers that he respects their cultural identity and that he is very much aware of it. In other countries he greets people in the local language. Shopkeepers and customers usually are pleased with this gesture, and Luigi has extraordinarily cordial relations with many of them.

Luigi uses all the pointers he can to establish a group identity for new acquaintances. These pointers are not always unambiguous. He can often distinguish Hindus and Muslims by their names, but not if they are Patels, who may belong to either religion. He can draw conclusions from dress.

All this would be wrong if we were to believe the injunction of the play that, when meeting a person, we should "close our eyes" and disregard these things.

#### **DO GROUPS DIFFER?**

It is not unimportant where a person was born. It is not unimportant who her parents are. For: English-born children of immigrant parents often differ from their English counterparts. They are, thank God, not completely westernised and a "prejudice" in this regard is a means of respecting their cultural "identity".

Girls (and boys to a lesser extent) are likely to be more restricted in their movements than their English peers. Their marriage arrangements may be different.

The Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Western Secularist value systems all differ from one another. Why do the majority of marriages still take place within the same cultural systems (Hindu with Hindu, Muslim with Muslim, "English with English")? Because of parental pressure or because the spouses still feel a greater affinity to partners from the same cultural group? If the latter, then this demonstrates that these groups are different from one another, and it would be foolish to advise people outside any such group to ignore the characteristics of the group as a whole. <sup>(10)</sup>

If an English person (and it was especially the English majority to which the play was addressed) is encouraged to ignore these cultural peculiarities and treat everybody the same, regardless of race and cultural background, it means treating everybody as if she were entirely westernised. This is also an "assumption", a "prejudice" - in reverse.

This prejudice is an expression of arrogance under the guise of racial generosity. Such expectations put pressure on members of ethnic minorities to conform to the expectation and give up their traditional culture.

Youngsters from minority groups do already have a great problem with developing a "cultural identity". As the play "Waterfall" by Anu Kumar, which was performed on 9 August 1997 at the Ashcroft Theatre, Fairfield Halls, Croydon, demonstrated, young Hindus in this country are not simply British, nor are they simply Hindus, but they are a strange combination of the two. The same goes for children of other ethnic minorities. It is simply not true that they are "the same" as their peers born from English parents. At least in this respect, if in no other, they are different. Denying the difference is wishful thinking and contributes to the destruction of their peculiar cultures.

If it were desirable for all of us to "close our eyes" to racial and cultural differences, then it would also be desirable for these differences to cease to exist.

This is an unspoken (even though perhaps unintended) message of this part of the play. But we have to take the text of the play as it was delivered. We must assume that the play means what it says. If it does not, then the authors have to change the text.

#### **CULTURAL DIVERSITY OR UNIFORMISM**

- We can live in a multi-cultural society. Then we can, and must, contrary to what the play advocates, take note of cultural differences. Then there is no virtue in a descendant of an ethnic minority anxiously demonstrating that she is completely westernised, that she is not different from her peers. Has English culture proved superior and won? That would be indeed a racist's dream come true!
- Or we can wish for a uniformly English or Boltonian society, and blithely assume that colour, facial features, language, name, parentage, &c, do not give any clues about a person's probable mental make-up, that everybody subscribes to the values, pleasures, &c, of contemporary English society - as the play, at least in part, suggests, by treating every observation of a visible difference as prejudice and racism. Then we are practising true racism and white imperialism. May God protect us of such a brave new world!

I for one am a great advocate of cultural differences. I enjoy them. I revel in them. I love seeing them in others. The greater and the more manifold the differences the better. I will do everything I can to help the survival of the culture of my parents in this country, and I hope other groups are doing the same. I do not want all our youngsters to join a uniform jeans, coca cola, mcdonald, "chips with everything", and television culture.

I do not want a world in which nobody is pink, brown, yellow or black, in which everybody eats the same food, believes in the same god, observes the same taboos, wears the same clothes, &c.

I love the multitude of gods which embody the different values of different cultures. I respect and worship them all whatever their names and attributes (especially, of course, the one whom I or my family have chosen [íshta dévata] or who has chosen me), and this is our first step towards cherishing the devotees of all these gods.

My duty is not to have no expectations, no prejudices, about cultural groups

but,

and this, I believe, would have been a more useful message for the play:

1. to like, and not to hate, people who are different,
2. to find out more about the customs of the group, and not to pretend that an individual does not belong to the group from which he comes,
3. to find out more about an individual I meet to see to what extent her behaviour, habits, likes and dislikes, differ from those prevalent in the group
4. to help those people I meet as best I can to realise their potential and their culture or cultures without destroying their different cultural identity.

### **RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE**

One problem which the play omitted to tackle is that of apparent prejudice that may be promoted by strongly held religious convictions.

The point at issue is not so much racial but cultural tolerance. If the gods of different religions and sects are regarded as the exponents of absolute, universal and eternal truths, then the cultures they represent must be in conflict with one another and strive for superiority, even in apparently secular matters; for, what is regarded as secular by one religion may be regarded as sacred by another.

If, by contrast, we interpret the gods of different religions as manifestations and conservative guardians of the values of the cultures from which they spring, then mutual respect, cultural tolerance and gradual (rather than precipitate) cultural change will be possible.

This is the reason why the role of religion must be considered in any discussion of, and campaign against, racism.

It has been argued that some scriptures encourage racism and religious intolerance. This is a wrong accusation which must be strongly refuted.

I am an idolater, and so were my parents, and I do not intend to change my ways or deviate from theirs in this respect. My religion is part of my cultural tradition. For the follower of any other religion I am, by definition, an "unbeliever" <sup>(11)</sup>. The fact that I call my god by a different name or that I worship many different gods or depict their attributes with graven images, does not mean that I am an evil-doer, that I rape my paternal grandmother or my maternal aunt, steal from my employer, defraud the tax-woman, am a mugger, have twelve girlfriends simultaneously, commit bigamy, &c &c. On the contrary, I am not attracted to any of my grandmothers or aunts, I am out of work and therefore have no employer to steal from and cannot defraud the tax-woman, am so puny that I cannot even mug Miss Marples, can, with my dole-money, only afford two girlfriends at a time, and neither of them is so stupid as to want to marry me. In brief, even though (or because, as I prefer to assume) I am an idolater and unbeliever, I am destined for sainthood.

But sainthood or probity are not the prerogative of any one religion or secular ideology. Whatever any scripture may say, I can be honest without being a "believer". And I cannot believe in all religions which claim to be true.

In our effort to combat prejudice and racism we must pay special attention to the interpretation of our holy scriptures. Since they are holy they cannot be wrong, they cannot be prejudiced and racist, they cannot make the wrong assumptions. If they appear to do so, it is the fault of the reader, not of the scripture. We must interpret (= understand) the scripture correctly, especially since it is part of our cultural identity and must not be discarded <sup>(12)</sup>. However strong the impression that a holy text makes out that followers of a radically different religion (e.g. those called "unbelievers" or "idolaters") are all perverts and criminals and will go to hell, it cannot possibly mean that, because if it did, it would advocate cultural prejudice - which no Holy Scripture does. "Racial" prejudice, after all, is not really based on race, but on the behavioural notions which racists associate with a particular race.

We must be aware that God moves in mysterious ways. Every scripture has its mysteries (such as the mystic letters in the Holy Qur'an, or the unforgivable "sin against the Holy Ghost" in the New Testament, of which nobody knows what it is <sup>(13)</sup>, or the question why the Christian God had a son when he could have had a daughter, or why the God of pre-Islamic Arab tribes had daughters when he could have had sons, a notion rightly held up to ridicule by the Holy Qur'an.). We must not impute racism or sexism to a Holy Scripture, nor must we abuse it by imposing our limited



understanding on its text. Satan is always lying in wait to mislead a believer, in the name of God <sup>(14)</sup>. We must use our moral instincts, our common sense and our compassion to expose him.

### **EXAMPLES:**

Here are some examples of Holy Texts which, in the wrong hands, are liable to be misinterpreted. Ours, then, should be the right hands:

1. We send down to the unbelievers devils who incite them to evil... We will drive the sinful in great hordes into Hell-fire (19:83,86).
2. Woe on that day to the disbelievers! Eat and enjoy yourselves awhile. You are wicked men. (77:45-46)
3. Do not pray to idols which can neither help nor harm you, for if you do you will become a wrongdoer. (10:106)
4. Only the unbelievers deny Our revelations (29:47) ... Only the wrongdoers deny Our signs (29:48) ... And who is more wicked than the man who invents a falsehood about God and denies the truth when it is declared to him? Is there not a home in Hell for the unbelievers? (29:68)
5. Yet they [the unbelievers] assign to Him [God] offspring from among His servants. Surely man is monstrously ungrateful. Would God choose daughters for Himself and sons for you [the people of Mecca]? Yet when the birth of a daughter is announced to one of them [the unbelievers] his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. Would they ascribe to God females, who adorn themselves with trinkets and are powerless in disputation?" (43:15-18)
6. Ask the unbelievers if it be true that God has daughters, while they themselves choose sons. Did we create the angels females? (37:149-150) ... Would He choose daughters instead of sons? What has come over you that you should judge so ill? (37:153-154) ...
7. They [the unbelievers] give daughters to God (Glory be to Him!), but they themselves would have what they desire. When the birth of a girl is announced to one of them, his face grows dark and he is filled with inward gloom. Because of the bad news he hides himself from men: should he keep her with disgrace or bury her under the dust? How ill they judge! ... They ascribe to God what they themselves dislike. (16:57-59,62. See also: 17:40; 52:39; 53:21-22)

The Bible seems to prescribe the death penalty (by stoning, or strangulation) to idolaters and to "false prophets" (those preaching religions other than Judaism).

1. "If there be found among you ... any man or woman ...who hath gone and served other gods, and worshipped them, either the sun [surya, as I do every morning], or the moon, or any of the host of heaven, then shalt thou bring forth that man or that woman, which have committed that wicked thing, unto thy gates, ... and shalt stone them with stones, till they die." (Deuteronomy 17:2-5)
2. "If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams... And that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death ..."  
(Deuteronomy 13:1-5)

The Bible can of course not possibly mean what it seems to say to the laywoman's ears and has therefore nowadays been so successfully interpreted that nobody dies for the offences described.

Even the fond belief in the apparent truth of "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (words attributed to Jesus in John 14:6) must lead to a patronising (if not violent) attitude towards other cultures and religions unless these words are "correctly" interpreted.

God is infinitely flexible and accommodating. He is like wax in our hands. Ambitious human beings can easily assert that their desires (however evil or absurd) are His commands, quote scripture to support it, and nobody can prove otherwise. The ignorant and naïve believers are easily intimidated. "The devil can cite Scripture for her purpose" (Shakespeare: Merchant of Venice, 1.3:99) [14].

It is not good to fight wars in the name of God.  
Unholy wars are more honest than holy wars.  
When God sponsors a war,  
he is a puppet in the hands of a politician.  
Thus spake Sarah Tustra.

(Mira Ber: "The Prophetess", p 18)

There was no divine justification for the destruction and fanaticism displayed in Ayodhya (the destruction of a mosque by a Hindu mob). God does not reside in temples or mosques but in our hearts, if anywhere - or he resides equally in all holy places, regardless of whether they be mosques or mandirs. There is no specific spot that is sacred to one god rather than another,

except that our narrow minds want it so. The mob of Ayodhya would have done well to remember the old Sanskrit proverb:

**A thousand Ramas in Ayodhya will do  
No good if He's not born in you.**  
^(16)

By another token the subsequent outrages committed against the Hindu minority in Bangladesh (castigated by Taslima Nasreen in her novel-reportage "Lajja" (Shame), Penguin Books India, 1993) were an unjustified outburst of "communalism" (holding each member of a group responsible, and taking revenge on them, for the actions of some of its members) ^(17). The Hindu book or play denouncing the violence of Ayodhya has yet to be written or, perhaps, it has not yet come to my attention.

Religion is a dangerous weapon in race and community relations because its thinking is not rational and it therefore lends itself to abuse.

#### **THE FIGHT AGAINST RACIST AND CRUEL BEHAVIOUR**

Reprehensible behaviour based on prejudice has to be rooted out by searching out and attacking its causes, such as ignorance, innate cruelty, fear, xenophobia, conformism (including religious conformism), dislike rather than love of other-ness, unwarranted belief in certainty (e.g. in religion), absence of doubt, missionary zeal, belief in universal or divine truths or values which are so high that they override the virtue of non-violence (ahimsa [Sanskrit], which on the positive end of the scale includes the virtue of universal love and compassion). A valid way of attacking cruel or unkind behaviour towards strangers is to propagate the idea that ahimsa (in its full range of meaning) is the highest virtue ^(18); and doubt and the spreading of doubt is the second highest, i.e. doubt in the absolute superiority of one's own culture and its values. Such doubt would have prevented the holocaust and many other man-made catastrophes.

Racism and religion, racism and god-abuse are closely related. The basic rule is: Even if God, in whose name such immeasurable suffering has been caused and in whose name so many crimes are committed, orders you to kill, or inflict suffering on, another human being, say No ^(19). I can never know for certain whether he who claims to be God's messenger is what he claims to be or an impostor, perhaps even Satan himself. One way of unmasking him is to check whether he orders us to commit violent acts in the name of God, for the sake of justice, or of righteousness. If he does, tell him to go back and stuff his dog. ^(20)

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### CONCLUSION

We cannot combat racism by merely preaching a new code of conduct. The antidote to racism is that

we should learn to love what is different,  
rather than hate what is different,  
we should know as much as possible  
about other worlds,  
and take pleasure in exploring  
the worlds we do not know.

The answer lies not, as this play suggests, in ignoring the visible, easily perceivable differences.

They do matter.

Yours, &c &c,

Ashutósh

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**FOOTNOTES**

1. The word "prejudice" has in itself become a term of abuse, which people apply whenever they feel wronged, without analysing the causes of the action of which they complain.
2. In this letter, I am using "she" (and its variant forms) in its generic sense, to include the masculine as well as the feminine.
3. On re-reading this essay on 12 April 2002, I added the following note: The mutual contempt in which the African and the Afro-Caribbean communities hold each other came to the attention of the white public when a 10-year-old Nigerian boy, Damilola Taylor, died as a result of an attack by, allegedly, West Indian boys on a South London council estate in Peckham on 27 November 2000. He had been bullied for a long time by West Indian boys at his school; that's why the suspicion fell on them. The trial is still going on, and the matter may never be resolved. The attacks were called 'racial'; 'communal' would have been a better word. The white community let out a sigh of relief: not only whites practise racism! Members of the Nigerian Embassy complained loudly and rightly about the ill-treatment Nigerians had for a long time received from West Indians and that the problem was not taken seriously by English society. The West Indians voiced similar complaints against the Africans.
4. "The failure to acknowledge the humanity of the other", as Simon Critchley put it when talking about the work of the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995), who devoted his life to exploring the relationships between human beings and by implication the nature of love, hatred and prejudice.
5. E.g. The much admired successes of Sherlock Holmes, albeit white middle-class male, were entirely based on generalisations and making assumptions.
6. Trinidadian patois: I came, I saw, I conquered.

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7. Monkey-Man: see Wikipedia:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monkey\\_Man\\_\(Toots\\_%26\\_the\\_Maytals\\_song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monkey_Man_(Toots_%26_the_Maytals_song))  
 Lyrics:  
<https://genius.com/The-specials-monkey-man-lyrics>  
 [Chorus]  
 Ay-ay-ay, ay-ay-ay  
 Them a tell me you  
 Huggin' up a big monkey man  
 Ay-ay-ay, ay-ay-ay  
 Them a tell me you  
 Huggin' up a big monkey man  
 [Verse 1]  
 I never saw you, I only heard of you  
 Huggin' up a big monkey man  
 I never saw you, I only heard of you  
 Huggin' up a big monkey man
  8. A clarification has been called for: The examples of Luigi's behaviour which follow are, in my view, commendable. This behaviour is impossible without making unproved (but not unwarranted), correct or incorrect, assumptions about strangers. All behaviour based on assumption rather than observation is by definition "prejudiced" behaviour. Much commendable behaviour is therefore impossible without recourse to prejudice. Much unpleasant or reprehensible behaviour can also be based on prejudice but it is not caused by prejudice. It cannot be rooted out by rooting out prejudice (since prejudice is necessary for human survival and for much of commendable behaviour).
  9. With apologies to T S Eliot: The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock
  10. Can a Hindu girl marry a Muslim without being under pressure to change her religion? Or vice versa? Will at least objections be raised against such a marriage? Are there fears that as a result the cultural group identity will be diluted, the cultural (i.e. also religious) tradition will be lost? If any such problems regularly arise in these contacts between groups, it demonstrates that the characteristics of groups are not irrelevant. They have to be observed and to be taken seriously. They make a difference. They are important for the survival of the group and its culture! Not every Hindu who consciously marries a Hindu, not every Sikh who consciously marries a Sikh and not every Muslim who consciously marries a Muslim, is therefore a racist, culturist or religionist.

11. "It's no sin to deceive a Christian; For they themselves hold it a principle, Faith is not to be held with heretics: But all are heretics that are not Jews."  
(Barabas in: Marlowe: "The Jew of Malta", Act 2)
12. See Susan Sontag: "On Interpretation"
13. Mark 3:29
14. 1 Peter 5:8; Qur'an 17:53
15. "You lie, foul villain, making God's word a lie  
To shield your practices".  
(Philoctetes in: Sophocles: "Philoctetes", transl. by E F Watling, Penguin Classics, p 196)
16. Rama is a Hindu deity (incarnation of God), who according to tradition was born in the Indian city of Ayodhya, a Hindu Bethlehem. A dispute arose in 1992 about a mosque which had been built by the Mogul conquerors on the site of his birth, which was demolished by Hindus who wanted to build a temple in its place. Much violence and retaliatory violence erupted in India and Bangladesh as a result.
17. "What, bring you Scripture to confirm your wrongs?  
Preach me not out of my possessions.  
Some Jews are wicked, as all Christians are:  
But say the tribe that I descended of  
Were all in general cast away for sin,  
Shall I be tried by their transgression?  
The man that dealeth righteously shall live;  
And which of you can charge me otherwise?"  
(Barabas in: Marlowe: "The Jew of Malta", Act 1)
18. From the Hindu tradition comes the saying: "Non-violence is the highest virtue": "ahimsa paramo dharma". The Muslim tradition matches this with: "Allah enjoins justice, kindness and charity to one's kindred, and forbids indecency, wickedness and oppression":  
'Innallaaha ya'-muru bil-'adli wal-'ihsaani wa 'iitaaa-'i zil-qurbaa wa yanhaa 'anil-fahshaaa-'i wal-munkari wal-bagy: ya-'izukum la-'allakum tazakkaruun". (Qur'an 16:90). The rider "to one's kindred" does of course not mean that these virtues should only be practised when dealing with members of one's family or tribe or followers of the same religion. A sensible interpretation of all scriptures is essential if abuse is to be avoided.
19. The range of meaning of "ahimsa" and the extremely rare circumstances in which force and violence is permitted or obligatory even to practitioners of ahimsa (like Gandhiji) requires further exploration elsewhere.

20. A perfect illustration of how to do this without being profane is given by a black (and therefore beautiful) girl in Shaw's story "The Black Girl in Search of God" to whom God has just appeared, demanding human and animal sacrifice, to which the girl, rightly, replies: "I am not a piccaninny, nor even a grown up ninny, to believe such wicked nonsense, ..., and in the name of the true God whom I seek I will scotch you as you scotched that poor mamba". And she pounded up the rocks at him, brandishing her knobkerry. But when she reached the top there was nothing there."

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