

The Non-Bengali

JOYEETA DEY



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Stereotyping

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Illustrations by Priyanka Kumar

**Peace
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Stereotyping is easy, which is why it's called a 'mental shortcut'. One way we do it, almost without thinking, is by generalizing that everyone from a certain group (like girls or Malayalis or Muslims) has certain characteristics. We might do this because we feel a need to slot people we meet—or never will meet—into neat categories, so that we feel we understand them. Because really getting to know people can be so difficult, most of the time we are just mentally lazy. Daniel Kahneman, the Nobel winning psychologist, in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* describes how the unrigorous, impressionistic part of our brain, 'the secret author of many of the choices and judgments you (we) make'. He advises that, on important matters, we make a concerted effort to think slow. Here, that would mean not blindly trusting our 'experience'

of certain groups, based on a lazy pattern recognition system, to make *predictions* about people.

Some defend the truth of stereotypes by citing statistics. With statistical figures, the conclusions naturally vary depending on what questions you are asking or what methods you use to interpret the data. The release of census 2011 data had one group of media houses panicking about the rise in the share of the Muslim population while some ran headlines about how Muslims have a 50% greater decline in growth rate than Hindus. Everyone may not feel qualified to judge or argue against the methods, but we could try to ask ourselves why certain questions are important to us at all, and why we feel the need to believe certain stereotypes and repeat these statistics at every opportunity.

Does stereotyping always have to be a problem? What about those stereotypes, like that of Tamilians being good at math, which are complimentary? It's true that such compliments don't make everyone uncomfortable, but people who have been stereotyped, even positively, often feel frustrated and restricted by it. Even for Tamilians, whose rich, diverse interests go from loving dance to making salad, people can't seem to see them as anything beyond the whizz-kid who is good at math.

What about people who are not actively prejudiced, but do have a preference to be around people they identify with and understand, who are usually from their own community? Thomas Schelling, an economist, explains in his paper called 'Dynamic Models of Segregation' (1971) how even a small bias in individuals gets amplified at scale and starkly fragments society. The good news here is that a similarly small check on individual bias can substantially improve integration. This can allow people a better chance at interacting and understanding difference and make it harder to hold onto insensitive, shallow stereotypes.

The Marwari community of Kolkata is a soft target for stereotyping. As a Bengali, who grew up in this city I wasn't immune to hearing such caricatures, and unfortunately even participating in the activity sometimes. Having returned to the city after five years, a wish to revisit and understand this phenomenon struck me. I tried taking the 'slower' approach of talking to people, asking questions and reading those who are unlikely to share my biases. It grew on me how much deeper than fanning inter-community conflict the dangers of stereotyping went.



I played a free association game with many of the children I met where I threw out words and asked them to respond without thinking too hard. After opening up the conversation about Marwaris, I'd say "food!" or "housing!", and wait for their responses. Many would respond with "Alipore!" to housing. This happened so often it got a bit puzzling, so I decided to check up on the facts. A little bit of personal research confirmed the claim made by Amita Prasad's essay in *Calcutta, The Living City* that the Marwari population in the city was scattered in areas ranging from Howrah, Lake Town to Ballygunge and Salt Lake. Why were the children saying this then?

A simple answer, of course, would be that they were generalizing from what they had seen with some Marwaris in elite private schools. But on further I found that many of these children didn't even know where their Marwari classmates actually lived (most of them do not live in Alipore). What seemed to have happened is: having grown up with the belief that all Marwaris were rich in a particular way, this 'fact' which fit in with a commonly held stereotype, was accepted unquestioningly and gleefully repeated.

Stereotypers risk sounding like fools.



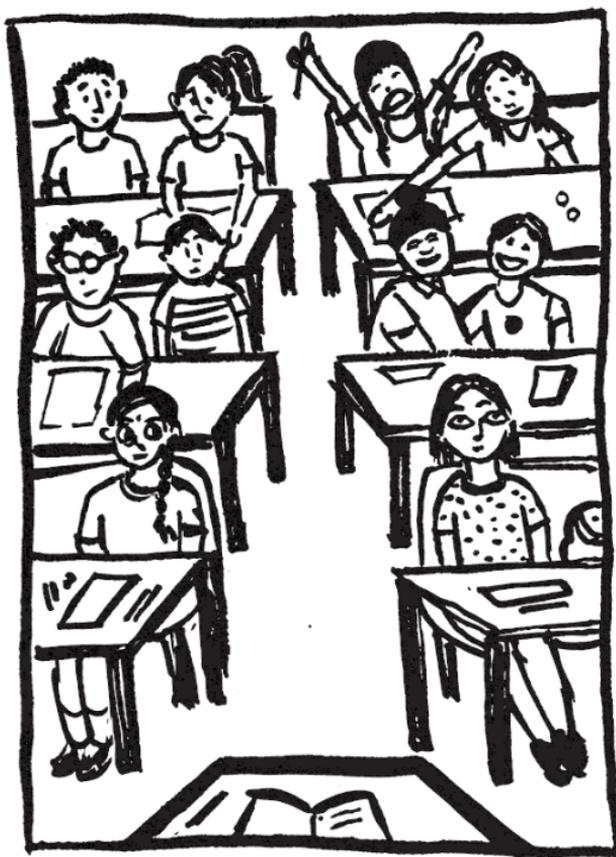
Another game I'd play involved children and teachers listing out what they thought were the negative and the positive traits of the community. I often saw 'not very cultured' and 'not very interested in studies' in the column for negatives. One of these children sagaciously listing out flaws to me turned out to have never interacted personally with anyone who is Marwari. These were just things she had heard . . .

What was particularly interesting to me is how close many of these ideas were to earlier representations of a Marwari as a paan-chewing, money counting, and patriarchal, Hindi/Marwari-speaking trader or businessman. The 'Jews of India'. A people lacking refinement. Omkar Goswami notes, in his paper 'Sahibs, Babus, and Banias: Changes in Industrial Control in Eastern India, 1918-50', that these representations first began to appear during the colonial era. When British companies in Kolkata like Andrew Yule and Bird and Company started selling their shares to Indians, large portions were bought by Marwari traders. The anxiety amongst the British shareholders about losing colonial power and their racist aversion to sharing the table with the 'natives', led to a poisonous description of these men (who had the gall to turn up in dhotis at board meetings!) as uncultured boors. These stereotypes with a racist

history were carried forward even by the likes of Satyajit Ray (whose villainous character Maganlal Meghraj in *Joy Baba Felunath* was a Marwari) and the contemporary director Anik Dutta with his portrayal of a scheming, corrupt promoter Mr Bhutoria in *Bhooter Bhoishyot*, a wildly popular comedy. In both these Bengali films, the Marwari identities of the characters fit the popular views regarding the community.

In stereotyping we risk carrying forward the legacies of racism.

Early, arranged marriages and a low priority given to women's education/profession, I'd hear, were typical in Marwari families. It was clear that children from many communities tend to bracket Marwaris as socially conservative. Anne Hardgrove in her book *Community And Public Culture: The Marwaris In Calcutta* discusses the question of education of Marwari women, and talks about how the anti-colonial struggle fired social movements around Marwari women's emancipation which in the 1950s culminated in a common desire for english language education for Marwari girls. To quote Hardgrove: "The first such Marwari girls' school was Modern High. Both Modern High School for Girls and Rani Birla Girls' College were started by Hindustan Charity Trust of Braj Mohan and Shrimati Rukmani Devi Birla . . . Other such schools include G.D. Birla Girls' School, Mahadevi Birla Shishu Vihar, and Ashok Hall Girls' Higher Secondary School, which are part of the Ashok Hall group, looked after by Manjrushee Khaitan, the daughter of Basant Kumar and Sarala Birla. The Birla family now owns a great many of the private schools in Calcutta, including South Point, which is the largest high school in the world." In the twenty first century, these institutions continue to produce women who go on to pursue diverse and successful careers. The prevalence of arranged



marriages is not surprising in a community that is often unified through business interests, as marriages help strengthen business relations. However teachers who had been in these schools for twenty years or longer unanimously confirmed that the community has experienced a sea change in terms of gender relations over the years, and is now undergoing a transitional phase. Given this complex history, 'conservative', which means resistant to progress, is a misleadingly slippery label to apply to an entire community.

In stereotyping we ignore the reality of change.



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When talking to some older people, a recurring stereotype was that of the Marwari as an immoral and corrupt moneylender. One such person gave me the historical example of the 'traitorous' Jagat Seths of Murshidabad who allegedly conspired with the British against Siraj-ud-daulah. This 'fact' was coolly said to me without any mention of how the merchant classes of most other communities too had collaborated with the British colonizers. As he moved on to other more contemporary examples, I gently brought up the Sarada scam. His reaction suggested that he hadn't heard me.

In stereotyping we exaggerate differences.



Pre-liberalization, in some quarters there was an active celebration of the Gandhian ethic of austerity in consumption and lifestyle. While I am generalizing this point, it would not be very inaccurate to say that these ideas have largely been eroded in our society. Whether or not one endorses ‘conspicuous consumption’, one can hardly any longer ascribe it to just one community. The modern Marwari, who is often seen as ‘crass’ and ‘flashy’, cannot be singled out in a larger culture in which all communities participate, depending more on their economic means than on distinctive cultural preferences. If anything, frustration with relative differences in means could be behind the negative stereotyping, as had happened with the Jews in Nazi Germany.

Since this question of ‘good taste’ was coming up so often in my exchanges about difference in communities, I conducted a small exercise with some children asking them what kind of clothes they didn’t like. The responses ranged from ‘greys and browns because they are boring’ to ‘shiny sequined clothes because they look gaudy’. From these comments a conversation arose about why they dislike qualities like ‘gaudy’ or ‘boring’ at all and many began to fiercely defend why they in fact prefer such clothes, with everyone eventually

agreeing on nothing. That inconclusive conversation though, left them with a sense of how deeply arbitrary the idea of 'good taste' is and how many interesting factors go into making up people's preferences. Acknowledging the complexity and randomness of why we think certain things look good and others don't, does not deter one from enthusiastically pursuing their idea of what is beautiful but from forming simplistic derogatory opinions about those who believe differently.

While stereotyping, are we merely trying to congratulate ourselves?

One of the things one hears very often in any discussion about stereotypes is how playful and harmless they often are, as surely they can be. At the same time, where do we draw the line for harm?

Some would say that assumptions of cultural superiority are largely harmless. However, they have had the unfortunate effect of preventing many of Kolkata's Bengalis from either knowing about or celebrating eminent and award-winning Marwari writers living and writing about the city like Prabha Khaitan, Alka Saraogi, and Madhu Kankaria. These writers have received much of their recognition from Delhi-based intelligentsia and researchers from universities abroad. Could the same thing be happening to budding writers in our classrooms?

Study after study goes to show the importance of teacher attitudes to student performance. That when girls are expected to be poor at math or science, they in fact turn out to be so. When lower-caste children are seen as uneducable, they in fact tend to perform below capacity. What could be happening when a teacher responds to a student's academic apathy with 'what difference does it make, after all, they have papa ka business, haha'?



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A preference for the familiar is understandable impulse, but does it count as harm that in far too many schools I visited friends groups were separating out, almost unconsciously, along community lines?

In stereotyping, we all miss out.

Illustrations by Priyanka Kumar

‘Illustrating this, I was struck by how much my school-days in Kolkata reflected most of what Joyeeta's written. We're talking a decade or more spent in a private Marwari-run school with a significant Bengali population (I was neither), watching differences unfold over exams, classes, games and lunch breaks. Some were entirely cultural, others entirely created. Both were upheld.’

I'm always happy to contribute towards questioning stereotypes, considering we grow up with so many (a tiny caveat here: an innocent childhood is most definitely a myth: younger humans absorb a whole lot more than older humans give them credit for). The fine line between "us" and "them" is often witness to words, weapons, insinuations, caricatures, cruelty - and I like to believe that a land as diverse and varied as ours deserves better.

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