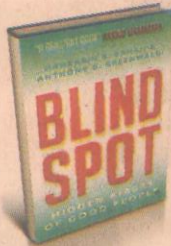# WORDS WORTH

A disquieting journey into self

Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People is a simple, scientifically-assisted journey into the crevices of your mind, into its unlighted hidden corners, transcending you to discover a new 'self'

**BLIND SPOT:
HIDDEN BIASES
OF GOOD PEOPLE**
Mahzarin R Banaji and
Anthony G Greenwald
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Sunil Chaturvedi

"THE MOST difficult thing in life is to know yourself," said Thales, one of the most profound pre-Socratic Greek philosophers. But what if just about the time when you believe you have begun to know yourself, a simple, scientifically-assisted journey into the crevices of your mind, into its unlighted hidden corners, transcends you to discover a new 'self'? And what if this new 'self' systematically smashes your long-held beliefs of being an egalitarian, rational, magnanimous, unbiased human being? The consequence could be fairly disquieting, to say the least.

Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People compels this journey into yourself.

The book represents several decades of copious research by Mahazarin Banaji, Harvard's Richard Clarke Cabot professor of social ethics, and her long-time collaborator Anthony Greenwald, professor of psychology at the University of Washington, on hidden biases or 'mindbugs' that mirror 'ingrained habits of thought that lead to errors in how we perceive, remember, reason and make decisions'. For unravelling such 'mindbugs', Banaji and Greenwald developed a computer-assisted test called the Implicit Association Test (IAT) in 1994 at Yale with their colleague Brian Nosek, then a graduate student of Banaji and now a professor at the University of Virginia. The IAT was launched without fanfare as part of Project Implicit in 1998 'with the hope of getting 500 responses in a month'. In the first month itself, 45,000 poured in with a flurry of media attention. So far, 14 million people have taken a variety of IATs on more than a dozen parameters like race, gender, sex, etc, on the Project Implicit website *implicit.harvard.edu* (I would recommend you devote 10 minutes on this online test before reading this book!). The result of this meta analysis is a riveting book steeped in research that feels intimate, sometimes uncomfortably so.

Elaborating the influence of mindbugs, the authors provide a persuasive account of the causes of stereotyping and discrimination. Using numerous tests and data sets, Banaji and Greenwald demonstrate that while most Americans are not overtly racist, a majority show implicit preferences for whites versus African-Americans, which can lead to discriminatory treatment of the latter and economic and social disparities. The authors argue that while persistence of such negative racial associations may once have had a survival value, in today's world where friendships, collaborations, businesses and economies exist in a highly networked web of interdependence, the ability to create alliances that bypass boundaries of race, nationality and culture can have a bearing on our well-being, prosperity, our productivity, and perhaps, even our survival.

Similar associations can be seen with regard to biased gender views about women, old people and homosexuals, to the extent that even members of these groups have internalised stereotypes. IATs are helpful in pointing out the large amount of inner work that has to be done to eradicate in-group preferences that can create the foundation of blatant prejudice against those who are considered outsiders. These behaviours often occur in ways that are subtle and unintentional, having more to do with a favouritism of one's own in-group, rather than actual animosity towards others. However, collective manifestation of such conducts leads to patent discriminations and disharmony, as our contemporary history would confirm. Therefore, an automatic white preference has been found to correlate with, for instance, suboptimal treatment of black emergency room patients, unfavourable judgment of black job applicants, laughter at racist jokes and voting for John McCain over Barack Obama.

Perhaps, the most interesting aspect of these results is the degree to which these mindbugs then become self-fulfilling prophecies, to the point where 'people... are willing to sacrifice their self-interest for the sake of maintaining the existing social order'. Banaji and Greenwald argue that the discrepancy between implicit tests and explicit statements results in part from reputation management—people don't want to express their biases openly—but mostly from dissonance reduction: an unwillingness to admit their biases to themselves.

In a society developing increasing fault-lines along caste, race, class, religion, wealth, gender, age and many other similar considerations, this peep into self could provide a valuable insight for an individual to identify and work on one's implicit biases, and to the society collectively an intellectual framework to be more realistic and truthfully humane in its approach to disadvantaged, deprived and segregated. At a macro level, such realisation could alleviate discords and disharmony amongst groups, societies, classes—even nations.

Banaji and Greenwald's IATs based methodology is not without critique. Since its introduction into the scientific literature in 1998, a great deal of research has been conducted in order to examine the psychometric properties of the IAT as well as to address other criticisms on validity and reliability. Many psychologists have argued that the IATs perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes; that they validate objective assessment not subjective ones; that IATs could result in significant errors on account of linguistic and conceptual associations, etc. Criticism notwithstanding, the IATs continue to provide the most credible insights into cognitive psychology and there is a larger body of research supporting their psychometric properties. As Banaji herself says "...it's been great for us to have the criticism. It has led to the work moving much faster. The standard the IAT has been held to have been higher than anything I have seen."

Blind Spot is a strongly recommended read for everyone wanting to know oneself more truthfully than ever. For those engaged in decision-making for larger organisations—be it business, social, political or government, it could provide an incredible and honest trigger for introspection—and potential course correction.

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