

AS we progress along life's journey, we inevitably acquire more and more baggage and hardly anyone is spared his (or hers) share of trials and tribulations. For some it may take the form of children being born with congenital defects such as mental retardation, a hole in the heart, while others may be burdened with grave and debilitating illnesses like multiple sclerosis or Alzheimer's disease (both of which are incurable). There are others who may yet face traumas such as financial ruin, professional disgrace or betrayal by one's nearest and dearest. All such who have experienced pain in some form or other must have felt abandoned by their Creator and somewhat disappointed with God (whatever we may conceive Him to be).

While very few would sympathise or waste a moment's thought on the "slings and arrows of misfortune" on scoundrels (after all, they "deserved" their fate as they have been far too long flouting every decent norm of behaviour); the majority inevitably question the Almighty's sense of justice when sorrows fall like heavy monsoons on the good and innocent. Major religions do attempt to answer this age-old question with answers such as "It's a test of faith" or "you reap what you sow and what you are going through now is a result of bad deeds committed in a previous life".

Philip Yancey, a noted author and four-time recipient of the coveted Gold Medallion Award, tackles the three burning questions which many have asked at some point of their lives; in his book, "Disappointment with God".

1) "Is God unfair? Why doesn't He consistently punish evil people and reward good

Tackling the Burning Questions

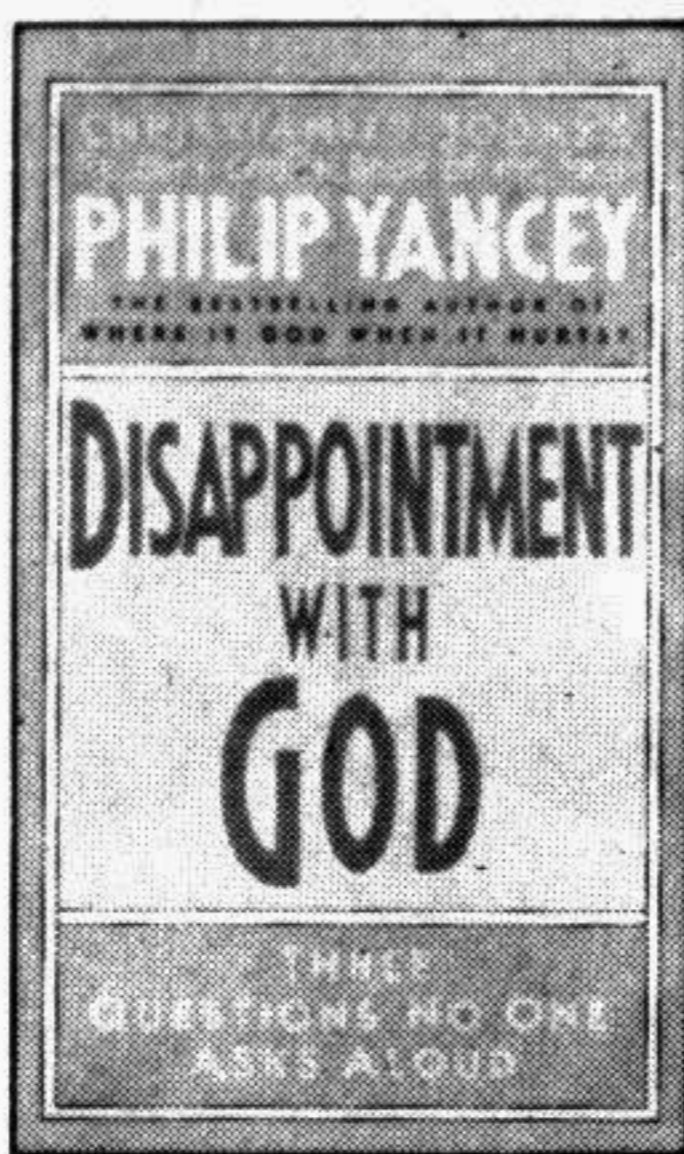
BOOK REVIEW

Disappointment with God

Author:
Philip Yancey

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314 pages US\$5.99

Reviewed by
NANCY WONG



The Israelites were fully aware of these divine meetings but were they interested in participating in them? Not in the least "Speak to us yourself and we will listen," they said to Moses, "but do not have God speak to us or we will die".

There was a covenant between God of the Old Testament and the Israelites, which rested on rewards for good behaviour. However, time and again, this was broken and God's laws violated in open defiance despite His wishes being made clear as daylight. Consider what happened when Moses climbed the sacred Mt Sinai to receive God's word. Upon his descent into their midst, the Israelites who had been direct witnesses to God's bounty, grace and mercy, completely forgot all the mira-

cles wrought for them: they danced, made merry and worshipped the golden calf.

Has human nature changed much since the days of the Old Testament? Would mankind today react differently from the wayward Israelites of those days, if God were to reveal Himself clearly and vocally? Hardly, concludes Yancey as he cites numerous examples of human ingratitude, open rebellion against God's wishes and downright cruelty to fellow human beings; through the labyrinth of books in the Bible.

Central of the human dilemma is the persistent question, "Why do good people suffer?" Yancey deals with this, by examining the book of Job; one with numerous passages of exquisite poetry and profound thoughts. Despite its ancient

setting, the problems Job faced are timeless and universal. Of all God's creations, Job was the most righteous and spiritual one of his day. What counted most was that he loved God with all his being. His earthly possessions far outnumbered any of his contemporaries and he was blessed with ten offspring.

One day however, disaster struck and one calamity after another overtook Job. His fabulous mansion was razed to the ground, all his sheep, donkeys, and camels perished and the deaths of all his children followed with rapid succession. Then, to top it all, his whole body erupted into sores which covered him from head to toe and he was reduced to scratching himself with a piece of broken shard.

Naturally, Job, reeling from all these tragedies, beat his chest in agony, and asked the haunting, agless question: "Why me? What did I do wrong? What is God trying to tell me?"

In the midst of his torment, three old and close friends rushed to comfort him. Their words had the opposite effect for they charged that his miseries must be God's punishment for some dreadful sins Job had committed — for after all God was loving, kind, just and would not inflict suffering on the innocent. Or, He may be sending some kind of message, Job remained bewildered and sorely hurt for he knew in the depths of his heart that he had done nothing wrong.

After much soul searching and deep despair, Job could not find the answer. Nevertheless, he survived his searing tribulations with his deep faith intact. Thereafter, all his former material wealth

was returned — doubled, his health was fully restored, and he was further blessed with ten children.

Although Job's enormous pains form the bulk of the account, the significant part lay in the beginning; i.e. the wager between God and Satan. The latter who probably envied Job's loving devotion to God, declared that the basis of that love was the blessings which had been lavished on him. Take away all his bounty and Job would end up cursing God, instead of loving Him.

Thereupon, God took on this cosmic wager and Job became the unwitting player in this divine drama.

If this tale is about human suffering, it is also about the "freedom to choose". It would be all too easy to love God when everything is rosy and smooth going. But to persist in loving in times of trouble is to grow in one's faith. In giving Adam and Eve "free will", God took the greatest risk of all creation — they chose the path of disobedience which led them out of paradise. Ever since then, mankind is free to choose individually — disappointment with God or disappointment without God.

Yancey's illuminating book on human pain predicated faith in a Christian God. His arguments and discourses are based on the Bible, a book which he has profound knowledge of; and which he uses convincingly to confront some universal predicaments and time less questions. For non-believers and people of other faiths, it would be worthwhile to ponder over this testimony of the great poet, T S Eliot: "I had far rather walk, as I do, in daily terror of eternity, than feel that this was only all the children's game in which all the contestants would get equally worthless prizes in the end."

Cinema Hall

Continued from page 9

another due to the lack of fire-resistant compartmentation.

Response to the fire will be hindered by the absence of any fire detection and alarm system and the lack of staff training on the action to take in the event of a fire.

Fire-fighting equipment may also be inadequate. In many of the cinemas surveyed, we found old, poorly maintained and inappropriate fire extinguishers, with the numbers varying from two to 14. In any case, few personnel were trained to use the extinguishers.

There could also be problems contacting the fire brigade, either because the telephone number is not known, a telephone set is not available, or the telephone system is out of order.

But the major concern is whether the audience would be able to evacuate safely if a fire started during the showing of a film.

Escaping Problems

In a single compartment such as a cinema hall, the audience must be able to make their escape during the early stages of a fire before intolerable levels of smoke and heat are produced.

The maximum allowable time for people to escape from a building such as a cinema is generally accepted to be 2.5 minutes. The longer the period of exposure, the greater the risk of escaping occupants being overcome — first by smoke, and then by heat and fire.

Smoke can obscure vision and induce panic by impairing breathing and hindering escape, thus increasing the risk of inhaling fatal quantities of toxic gases. Many people killed by fires in buildings have first failed to find an exit because of smoke and have later succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning or lack of oxygen.

A successful emergency evacuation within the 2.5 minute time limit will depend on whether the building occupants can use alternative escape routes if the main exits become congested or blocked. Unfortunately, most cinema halls in Bangladesh have only one main route through which the audience can escape to the open air.

Depending on the location of the source of fire, there are three main scenarios regarding the evacuation of the audience:

Fire inside the auditorium: Only part of the audience will be able to escape through either the ground-floor or first-floor lobbies within a safe time as the exit door widths will be insufficient.

Fire in the first-floor lobby: The whole audience on the ground floor should be able to escape through the ground-floor lobby, while part of the audience on the upper floor will be able to escape. Provided the first-floor lobby is vented, no smoke should reach the lower floor. However, if the area is air-conditioned and glazed openings are sealed, smoke will ultimately be introduced to the ground floor and impede escape.

Fire in the ground-floor lobby: This would affect the audience on both floors, with the smoke reaching the upper areas through the unprotected staircase. Escape will be difficult for everybody and there will be the highest number of casualties.

In many cinemas, poor design means that the travel distances to a place of safety are well in excess of recommended values. Closing up to half the available exit doors from the auditorium to the lobby corridors increases the travel distances for the occupants sitting near the inoperative doors still further.

This is not the only problem. The doors that are in use are usually double-leafed, with half the door kept bolted so the ticket collectors can check in one ticket holder at a time.

Many people would be trapped or unable to escape without injury because the doors are only half open. If one or more doors became unusable in the event of a fire, the pressure on the remaining door would increase and attempts to escape would be further frustrated.

In most cinemas, the main entrance to the hall remains locked during the film to prevent members of the public loitering around the foyer, lobby, snack counters etc. This also allows the guards time off during the showing of the film. One consequence is that it is often difficult to locate the keyholder, a factor which could spell disaster during a fire.

This is exactly what happened in Mysore's Premier Studio 7 on 8 February 1989 during the shooting of Sanjay Khan's TV serial *The Sword of Tipu Sultan*. The set caught fire while a firecracker scene was being filmed. The studio was locked and the keyholder had already fled the area. Some 40 people were killed inside

the studio while another 20 died later. Many, including Sanjay Khan, were severely injured.

Even if the main gates are unlocked, they are hopelessly inadequate to facilitate the escape of all the building occupants in the event of fire.

Cinema halls are occasionally located in the same building as rows of congested shops and offices. The load on the escape route in these halls would therefore increase still further.

Action to be Taken

There is a need to develop awareness among owners, architects, engineers and users — both the staff and the audience — that there is genuine cause for concern about the prevailing situation with respect to fire prevention, precautions and control.

The main problem is the absence of a building code. Rules should be enacted to enforce design and administrative actions for fire prevention, precautions and control in all buildings, including cinema halls.

These codes should address the fire hazard, particularly for buildings such as cinema halls and shopping centres where large mixed gatherings are expected. Planning permission should be sought before beginning construction and for any alterations or additions made at any time, including after the commissioning of the hall.

The Design Stage

The design stage should focus on areas such as the following:

Capacity: The number of seats will be the determining factor for the number of doors, size of entry/exits, size of lobby etc.

Layout: The volume per person, aisle width, sight line, slope of floor, distance to exit etc should meet appropriate standards.

Surface and furnishing materials: These will determine the extent of the fire load.

Emergency lighting: This should be installed to aid escape if electrical power is cut off in the event of fire.

Means of escape: The design must ensure that every person inside the hall is able to escape to the open air unaided within 2.5 minutes of a fire starting.

Number and location of fire extinguishers: This will depend on factors such as the size and volume of the hall.

Sprinkler system: The entire auditorium and lobby areas should be protected.

Fire detection and alarm systems.

Traffic: The location of the hall, its surroundings, neighbouring land use, traffic congestion, pattern and behaviour, width and turning radii of roads, bridge clearances etc.

Water requirements: Availability of water, size of reservoir, type of riser (dry/wet) etc.

Assembly points.

Inspecting Existing Buildings

A cinema building should be inspected by fire brigade personnel — or by any other body specially constituted to inspect existing buildings regularly — perhaps on an annual basis. A building declared 'unsafe' because of non-compliance with fire safety rules should not be allowed to continue its business.

In inspecting existing buildings, the following factors should be considered:

Building design, addition and/or alteration: Have any changes been made to the building since receiving planning permission, either structurally or regarding building and furnishing materials, number of exits, size of exits etc?

Number of seats: Has the number been increased?

Housekeeping: Has rubbish been allowed to accumulate?

Smoking: Are people of serving the no-smoking signs?

Staff training: Have staff been trained to take charge during an emergency, to operate fire-fighting equipment etc?

Fire drills: Are drills in which all the staff take part held at least twice a year?

Assembly points: Is there an assembly point sufficient to accommodate all the audience and staff at a safe distance from the hall?

Fire-fighting equipment: Do the extinguishers, sprinkler systems, hose reels etc meet appropriate safety requirements?

Means of escape: Are the requisite number of doors and outlets available for use? Are the aisle paths, corridors, lounge, lobby and foyer clear of furniture, rubbish etc?

New materials: Have any new materials that might have an adverse effect on fire load been added?

Fire brigade: Is the telephone system reliable and accessible to the staff during any emergency?

THE pain is nothing new to her today. Rather it is increasing day by day since the beginning — making it heavy and unbearable, and it seems to have reached its extreme these days, especially in the month of October. On the 23rd, this pain knows no bound in the life of Anita Shabnam Chowdhury.

It was on this day that Anita's husband, Ikram Hussain, left her in his journey to another world — after being torn between her indifference and his own hopeless egotism. In the absence of her husband Anita Shabnam feels like a songbird in a cage as she remembers him every time whereas she inflicted pain of indifference and negligence upon him in every way. It is repeatedly coming to her mind today, how calm and tolerant was that man — how deeply he loved her. Yet, she never tried to understand her husband well; rather she misconstrued him. How many times did she turn cruel to hurt Ikram taking the advantage of his docility!

Her husband Ikram Hussain was a junior executive in a private company. Not only was he calm and naive; he was far from any complexity and tactfulness; even he didn't have the exact idea of the demand of his own family and his responsibility towards it. At the beginning of every month he would lay in repose giving the full amount of his salary to his wife. It was only Anita who used to take care of running the whole affair.

But Anita Shabnam Chowdhury could never be happy with the meagre earning of her husband; moreover, it caused in her mind a little doubt about him. Sometimes it would occur to her mind that her husband wanted to keep her satisfied by only giving her a small amount of money while he kept some for him. Her sly remark often turned impertinent and blunt to express her doubts a number of times, but her complaint hardly elicited any retort from her simpleton husband who couldn't help heaving a deep sigh in silence and was simply hurt. The reticence of her husband would rather confirm her doubt.

Anita got the word 'fussy' for her New Year's title in the university because of her fastidious nature. She could never submit her tutorial assignments in time as she wanted too much perfection in her writing. Sometimes she would make her classmates gasp in wonder with her critical comments on their tutorial writings. That was the reason what distanced her from others — even she couldn't become a friend of Yasmin, her cousin and classmate. Ikram once taunted Anita for her constant craving for perfection that she could rank with the famous French hotelier Ritz who used to check the perfection of each bed by sleeping on it for one night. Anita couldn't get it, on the other hand, she took the wit as a mortifying hint.

Immediately after marriage, her faculty of criticism as well as imagination seemed to have been obsessed with suspicion. She became increasingly suspicious of her husband's character. She had doubts about his love for her either. She used to assume that her husband was

inclined to some other woman and he was spending most of his money there. It was this suspicion of Anita that Ikram couldn't stand anymore. Ikram was demure and could never dare to do two things in his academic years (though he always longed to) — participating in the debates and talking to girls. His avoidance of girls was often teased by his friends who called him chicken-hearted. He was so nervous even on his wedding night that when he sat beside his newlywed bride, he suddenly felt his head growing heavy and he was nearly collapsing! It, however, amused both the parties. The sudden appearance of any unknown woman would still choke his words and would cause uneasiness in him — to escape an encounter — yet there came such a compliment from his wife! What else could he think of himself other than an unfortunate husband? That was the only point that he would go for a verbal fight,

she remembers gradually how she emptied the man until death took him away; whereas his steady love and stoical fortitude were always there to overwhelm her. But she walked away when love came her way. A love that cared and went unshared until at last it died within. Its despair now seems to have come back to let her emotion set in motion. With a strange sensation she turns restless to return his love the way he did — Anita now needs Ikram to drench him completely in the tunnel of her love. Ikram Hussain was denied the love in his lifetime when he needed it most. Who cares if it comes flooding everything now? There may be a few others whose success in love flows like Ikram's who are denied love in their life despite their giving away everything they own.

Here lies only a kind of solace for them who are deprived of love. To love somebody is not unrewarding. Some

nothing despite offering everything to her, the other one can only give her a feeling of pain, though she has given him everything she could. She has got so many things common in Shakil. If she starts singing a song, Shakil would definitely sing the next line if he is around. They have got such deep interest in reading and music that they would check the publishing house and recording company before buying books and records. They have equally common choice in clothes and cosmetics. They would share official joke books on their bed like the kids do. Then where did they go wrong? Anita didn't seem to be able to figure it out.

One day she discovered a piece of paper in Shakil's trouser pocket while taking it for a laundry wash. She first thought it a receipt or something like that. She opened the note that read — "Everyone needs somebody to lean on. If love is blind, my love will be

always there to notice any trifling matter which could have been easily overlooked, and soon make it a point to pick up a quarrel with Ikram.

If Ikram came up with any accusation or a complaint Anita would not listen to him; rather contrive to charge him with other things following her strategy, 'attack is the best defence'. The reasons that often upset her and for which you accuse me; if I want I can always find my reasons ten times more than yours' to attack you — but I'm not in the habit of doing it; I prefer taking time to think something fine and worthwhile that would elevate my subtle feelings. The sadist things that are pleasing you now, can hurt you somehow. Someday you'll regret for the things you said today," Ikram silenced her one day. How right was Ikram! Anita had mad when Ikram hinted at her sadism whereas she is said to be a bit cynical these days. What a secured and valuable

presence he was in her life. She has learnt it through the painful process of realisation. But the process took her so long that she has run out of both time and path. Once you drive away the bird of happiness by a simple throw of stone, you may wait but it will never return to its empty nest.

Anita Shabnam now sees all of her life torn apart. Once she longed to free herself from the predicament with her first husband whom she didn't think to be a match for her. Later, she wanted to relish the taste of freedom in her new life. But she never got the freedom the way she wanted; moreover she feels she is thrown into an abyssal sea of pain and in her restless efforts she is wafting through the waves to swim to the shore. To live a meaningful life one must hold on tight to his dreams. What can Anita do with her shattered dreams? Will her dreams come back through resurrection as did the Phoenix? Ikram was fond of Tagore songs but he could hardly listen to since their music-system was always engaged with Anita's selection. He was not bothered; he bought a one-band radio and used to tune in Calcutta to listen to Tagore songs by his favourite artists. Anita felt pity for Ikram knowing his incapability to appreciate her, favourite western music. She also learned Tagore songs at Chhayaton and came second in the exam. She knew she could have nurtured Ikram's interest in her choice of music but she hardly bothered. However, she noticed the only song from her selection that Ikram played several times was Anne Murray's 'I've run miles in the rain/Faced the nights with no end/Fate has been cheated/All that I needed/Was just to feel this love from you.' She would just wink at his morbid face that moved to the melancholic strain in the song. Quite seldom Anita listens to anything these days. If she does, then it is only classical instrumental numbers and to her wonder it is the only song that she re-

Seasons of the Heart

A Short Story by Salahuddin Akbar

though finally he would be left badly defeated by his wife. Then like a coward Ikram Hussain would find no alternative except letting the teardrops rolling down his cheeks.

Despite all these facts Ikram Hussain loved his wife with all of his heart. He couldn't forget his wife for a while. He would come right back home after his office hours whereas his other friends would go somewhere for a friendly gossip or a 'side-business' checkup. No wonder they would call Ikram Hussain a 'wife-crazy' husband. But all his interest and eagerness would sizzle down as soon as he stepped into the house. Anita Shabnam was right there to bicker over any damn thing. If Ikram returned home happily, Anita would ask with her quizzical, raised eyebrow, "Who did you date today?" If something went wrong in the office that made him sadly trudging his doorway, she was duly standing there to ask wryly, "Who did you have a tiff with?" So sometimes life would appear simply miserable in the case of Ikram Hussain. So many days he imagined he sat by his window waiting for someone to sing him a song. But his nights remained sombre and days knew no end. Rather, sometimes he would pray that his life would come to an end to free his mundane existence eternally from this world. "It then saves me too. I can feel relieved," Anita further burst into anger.

But she is realising every day today, what a lie it was! For the first time Anita Shabnam felt the importance of Ikram Hussain as a husband was the day — 23rd of October, on which he said goodbye to this cruel world, carrying all the pain himself and thus freeing her eternally. But his departure seems to be sapping her strength to live on. The absence of her husband does not relieve her mind at all; it only leaves marks of scar. Quite painfully Anita realises this truth on and off these days. She is filled with remorse as

day there comes a time when it pays off. No matter whether it burns like a candle in the dark, or a candle in the wind — it's worth shining all the while. Ikram's one way journey to eternity from his wife elicits this truth.

But what has Anita Shabnam got till now? She has reorganised her life again after losing Ikram Hussain. At the beginning she thought her remarriage would help her forget Ikram. But she never felt about him the same way as she is missing him today. She expected her new husband, Shakil Ahmed, a wealthy businessman, would fulfil, with his affluence, her need of financial security and stability which was lacking in her life with Ikram.

Affluence now like the Midas shadow follows Anita wherever she goes. She has been living in abundance — her husband Shakil provides her with everything before being asked — which is always much more than her needs. If love means to her sex, care, help and affluence — she got care from Ikram, and affluence in plenty from Shakil. Ikram needed sex but she hardly felt she wanted it; she now needs it but Shakil doesn't seem to want it that way. And none of them helped her potential to grow her way. Moreover, the things she doubted in Ikram are wholly present in Shakil. Although she couldn't love Ikram for a single day, yet she hasn't deprived Shakil of her love but it couldn't draw her nearer to him.

Her love like a river goes uncared as Shakil has so many things of his own to take care of; the tears on her pillow would show that she cried a river. And it was the time when she remembered Ikram most. Everytime Anita tried to compare these two persons — Ikram and Shakil — to judge their merits, she felt dazed and was hurt by herself.

While one took leave from life with the pain of achieving

always for you." She dialed Shakil's number in the office. She was told he wasn't there. Of course he should be out somewhere! She slammed the phone and settled herself on the sofa. She rose from her sofa and stopped the CD player which was playing Handel's water music Suite — Allegro deciso and Air — that was Shakil's favourite too. The Philadelphia orchestra was filling the atmosphere with a seraphic note even a while ago. She stood near the window and holding its grille she looked out to the sky. Her gaze crossed the high passing clouds. She remembered what once she heard someone say 'losing love is just like a window in your heart.' When she asked Shakil at night he said it was not any girl's handwriting neither was it meant for him. It was written by one of his friends.

"It surely looks like a girl's handwriting. If your friend wrote it then why are you keeping it with you? Did he mean it to you? I know all your friends. Tell me who wrote it, I'll check it myself. And if you want to hide the fact it's up to you," Anita held her breath.

"Obnoxious you're assuming wrong thing," Shakil pleaded.

"If my assumption is wrong then you're lacking in communication which should be held all the more responsible. Your answer sounds totally unconvincing — I hate to talk to you further." That was the beginning that set them apart. The more she thinks about the present crisis, the more she feels Ikram. Everytime Ikram's face flashes across her mind. Anita can't think of him anything else but a deeply committed and deserving husband.

But who is to blame for her own fate? Ikram seemed so effeminate to Anita that she used her verbal arson to her heart's content. She gradually tended to be slightly sadist which was pleasing her in dealing with Ikram. She was

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Voice of Asia

Continued from page 10

mental in setting up Australia's first Aboriginal controlled radio station, 4 AAA, in a state capital city. Now, after less than a year of broadcasting, some of Brisbane's commercial stations are complaining that 4 AAA's signal is 'too strong for a community radio station'.

What they are really saying is that the station is taking away listeners from them, says Bayles.

"It can be seen as an example of how we are accessing the wider community," she adds. "We are presenting news, music and information from an indigenous perspective and we are getting a lot of feedback from non-indigenous people who feel comfortable listening to this indigenous station."

For most of the last 200 years, Australia's indigenous people have been described by the mainstream media as savages, says Bayles. In the past two decades, this has given way to a depiction of Aborigines as rioters, drunks or living in squalid conditions.

Rarely are indigenous Australians projected by the traditional media in a positive light, but the 17 media associations owned by indigenous Australians are helping people see the 'other side'.

"I don't think we can change the attitude of the media — (at least) not quick enough for us," Bayles laments. "That's why we need to set up our alternatives. That's why we are setting up Aboriginal radio stations and media associations."

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