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The Indigenous Self

Reflecting on Indian Cultural Contributions to Psychology

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ABSTRACT

The conceptualization of pathology or deviant behavior has largely been determined by a group of individuals working within the frameworks of individualistic cultures and largely positivist approaches to research. The present paper has discussed the nature of understanding of the broad concept of 'self' and 'consciousness' in a comparative perspective of the Eastern and Western paradigms of research to see the culture specific assumptions of morality of the self. An attempt has been made to examine how the re-interpretation of these concepts might influence the way mental health professionals define well being and envision desirable goals of therapy in the Indian context. Questions regarding the unique location of youth in the "hybrid" culture of modern India have been emphasized. The paper has utilized analytical papers of K Kiran Kumar; Ajit Dalal; Raja Selvam; commentarial texts on the Bhagavad Gita to see their practical applications in everyday living.

The Indigenous Self: Reflecting on Indian Cultural Contributions to Psychology

The relationship of India and psychology can be explored in two ways. One by looking at how "modern psychology" has been plucked and replanted in India from the West and the other by looking at how human existence has been described since ages in the Indian subcontinent's varied culture. The fact prevails that the institutionalized method of studying psychology has largely been dominated by Western perspectives. Whereas the assumptions and expectations regarding human nature, be it cultural, social and moral, has largely been removed from the focus of study, and sometimes even ignored. Dalal, in his paper, points out very incisively and truly that psychology has been marginalized in India due to the absence of a supportive intellectual atmosphere. Poverty along with politicizing of decisions regarding development policies keeps the scholarly pursuit

in the field of psychology at periphery. The abysmal funding for academic institutions coupled with increasing student enrolment discourages performance in the true spirit of research. But there are some intrinsic drawbacks in psychology as conceived to be a scientific discipline. The primary limitation lies in the methodology which excessively is empiricist-positivist and does not allow the researcher to widen the scope of inquiry. It fails to solve many of the existential and ground level problems of the majority of Indians and curtails application to government and non-government bodies. It has been recognized that science is guided by unstated and untested assumptions and that scientific theory and theorists are themselves grounded in a particular culture (Kuhn, 1970), and that facts and theory are not categorically separate (Feyerabend, 1993) because of the element of interpretation that is involved. Therefore, we should strive for developing a discipline of psychology that is familiar, natural and based upon the Indian culture rather than

blindly replicate or verify studies conducted elsewhere and study concepts that hold qualitatively different ramifications for us.

In the light of this need for indigenization of psychology, the paper attempts to describe and evaluate the concepts of self and consciousness available in the Indian context of philosophy and psychology and thereby derive a framework for how morality is conceived, how problems in living are conceptualized and how well being is defined.

Indian Self and Consciousness

There are six schools of thought within what is called Indian psychology, within which the *Vedanta* and *Samkhya* systems are the most influential. Patanjali, the author of the *Yoga Sutras* (based on *Samkhya*), recognizes the principle of self-preservation (*abhinivesa*) across all living beings. In *Samkhya*, which holds the dualistic mind-body position, the self called *Purusha* is described to be identical in all living beings. It is a passive spectator who is involved with the events around it because of the ignorance of its true nature. The *Purusha* is contrasted with *prakriti* which is the all-pervading and uncaused and eternal principle of the universe. Its constituents are identified as the three strands called *gunas* of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.

Sattva is explained as the experience or knowledge of pure consciousness and thus is the most desirable of *gunas*. *Rajas* is characterized by agitation and desires and is governed by the principle of satisfaction of the same. *Tamas* is a sense of indolence or inertia and leads to the tendency of projecting problems to external causes. A balance of *gunas* may be advocated for growth and functioning in the lived reality of human beings, but it is the ultimate goal of existence would be to achieve realization of the true nature of self as that beyond *gunas* and thus beyond pain or pleasure. The Gita imparts the method of steady contemplation upon the infinite nature of the Self and thus ends our limited, mortal ego.

Advaita Vedanta, a non-dualist position with respect to mind-body reality, holds that the multiplicity of forms that is visible to us is a manifestation of a singular principle called Brahman. Shankara who is the proponent of *Advaita* distinguishes between what is called the *sthula sharira* (gross body) and *sukshma sharira* (subtle body). The gross body is explained in terms of five sense organs, five motor organs and the inner instrument called *antahkarana*. The *antahkarana* consists of mind (*manas*), intellect (*buddhi*), ego (*ahamkara*), and psyche (*citta*). Here *manas* is used in a limited sense as that function, which in relation to sensory and motor organs receives impulses, and then presents to *buddhi* that discriminates, judges, determines, decides, and so on, and later *ahamkara* appropriates the experience to self. *Vijnanabhikshu* and *Aniruddha* regard *buddhi* as the chief ingredient of the subtle body because it is the primary organ of the experience of pleasure and pain.

In a study operationalizing the concept of *ahamkara* by Kiran Kumar et al., an 18-item version of *Ahamkaara* questionnaire was constructed. Four components of *ahamkara* were derived from the scriptures namely, agency (*kartrtva*), identification (*samga*), individuality (*vaishishtya*), and separation (*anyata bhava*). The concept of *ahamkaara* embraces many of the modern psychological concepts of locus of control, self-efficacy, Self-esteem, individuality, relational self, individualism–collectivism, ego-boundary, autonomy etc. The author suggests that under or overemphasis of one or the other component of *ahamkara* may manifest as neurotic symptoms of mental afflictions whereas *vaishishtya* (individuality) that is required for self-actualization is a manifestation of the healthy aspect of *ahamkaara* (Salagame et al., 2005). At the same time it is important to note that the thinkers (*rishis*) advocate developing a sense of detachment from the *ahamkaara* as a whole in order to realize the true nature of Self. This is in contradiction to the Western emphasis increasing self-esteem or enhancing the self-concept for growth because ideal growth is seen as transcending the boundary of *ahamkara* which is self-realization.

Apart from the *Samkhya* and the *Vedanta*, other philosophical schools of thought include the Nyaya-Vaisesika, Mimamsa, Jainist and Buddhist schools. According to Nyaya-Vaisesika school, all psychological functions are attributes of self and they are produced mechanically with mind-sense-object relation. The Nyayasutra (Gautama, 200 AD), which is the primary reference text for this school makes sound theoretical viewpoints. It testifies for psychometrics by claiming that dysfunction is assessable by means of logical proof. Gautama has mentioned five kinds of fallacies of reason namely discrepancy (*sabhyabhichar*), contradiction (*virudha*), ambiguity (*prakaranasama*) and mistimed (*kalatita*). Balodhi (1986) has proposed the use of these fallacies as tools of the assessment of dysfunctional cognitions.

Mimamsa, in contrast to the previous school, claims that all psychological functions manifest from the nature of their objects. When cognition and the object's actual nature are not found in sync, it is because of the incongruity in the conditions. Hence, dysfunctions are primarily due to the defects in the objective stimuli and passions of the mind. The Vedanta school accepts the Samkhya concept of modification of mind as *vrittis* or psychological functions, but diverges from calling the existential reality as illusion or *maya*. Vedanta identifies three types of modification called *vivartha* (*mistaking one thing for another*), *parinama* (modification of matter) and *adhyasa* (projection or hallucination) to explain how the world appears to the person who is unaware of the true nature of the self. Such ignorance distorts the nature of an object, making it appear as something else.

The Jaina philosophy views the self as a conscious being and identifies functions of the mind as manifestations rather than its characteristic. It defines dysfunction as an awareness of an object outside its limitations. Buddhism attributes human beings as possessing traits that naturally condition them and make them suffer. There are three *bhavas* or emotions (desire, aggression and illusion), five obstacles to happiness (craving, resentment, laziness, anxiety

and doubt), and four obsessions or *asavas* (sensuality, ignorance, fear of death and speculation) that make people dysfunctional.

Special Types of Indigenous Psychology Models

The works of the *siddhas* can be classified under eight heads: *vaatham* (chemical), *vaidikam* (sacrificial), *yogam* (spiritual), *jnanam* (scientific), *maruthwam* (medical), *mantram* (psychic), *ganitham* (astrological), and *marmam* (martial). As it is a highly integrated system, the basic terminology, concepts, and definitions are common to all. Out of these *yogam*, *mantram*, and *marmam* directly deal with psychological processes. The most outstanding contribution of *siddha* system is the comprehensive classification of psychotic disorders, referred to as *unmadam*, into 18 *kirikas*. They give precise definition, etiology, dynamics, symptoms, treatment, and exact prognosis of each one of them (Saktidharan & Kumar, 2001).

The unique nature of this system as explicated by its fundamental tenets, principles and applications deserve to be studied separately and utilized locally as Dravidian psychology. This requires special mention as there is variation in the language used in the *siddha* texts as well as in availability of natural herbs prescribed as medicines that have to be handled and studied keeping in mind their context.

Mukhopadhyay and Roy (2004) have proposed an organizational change in rural bank development based on Sri Aurobindo's view of spiritual transformation. Their study on 219 employees aimed at determining the relative importance of organizational, spiritual health variables in predicting differences between high- and low job-satisfied groups. They note that when there is a change in the goal of organization from materialistic to spiritual orientation, employees experience a change from a self with boundaries to a boundary-less self. They termed this as spiritual transformation of the human self.

Dalal, in his paper "Journey to the Roots", mentions the characteristic advantages of studying and applying Indian psychology. Unlike popular opinion, Indian psychology is based on

veridical methods. Though not a traditional science since it includes the area of consciousness and is methodologically different, it is by no means, less stringent than desired. Knowledge is not abstract but is observed and experienced as the same because the subject matter is the true nature of self. The Indian thought systems have ‘experiential–cognitive’ bases. Methodologically speaking, *adhyayana* (study) or *swaadhyaya* (self-study), *abhyasa* (practice), *anubhooti* (experiencing), and *pramaana* (demonstration) are important ingredients of any study. According to Gupta (1999), the emphasis on the practice and experiencing accompanied by analysis makes Indian systems demonstrative, which is central to the epistemology of Indian thought. *It is universal* in the sense that it does not narrow down the scope of inquiry as well as application on the basis of culture despite its origin in a particular culture. It takes into consideration the *inner state* as defined by the consciousness of a person and thus at the same time providing a wider perspective to place problems of individuals as found in empirical research. Indian psychology is *spiritual* in its orientation in the sense that by covering the entire range of human development the distinction between natural and supernatural is removed through realization of their merging. Indian psychology is *applied*. It is concerned with transformations of human conditions from dependence on material objects to that of a state of well-being. The goal of Indian psychology is to help the person transcend from a conditional state (mechanical and habitual thinking) to an unconditional state of freedom and liberation. This is achieved through knowledge, collective progress and a sense of balance involving detachment.

Auluck (2002a) identified another important feature of Indian psychology which involves the examination of both phenomenal and noumenal reality—*vyaavahaarika* and *paaramaarthika satya* in the words of Shankara. Also, it is pointed out by him that the *Mandukya Upanishad* comprehensively analyzes waking, dreaming, and sleeping states, and proves the ‘inevitability of a common substratum’ of *atman* which cannot be identified with our common

sense notion of waking self,’ unlike the western notions of consciousness. Thus the study of the self is called *aadhyaatma shaastra* not *manah shaastra* which is an important point of divergence from the modern psychology.

Thus all empirical knowledge (psychological or otherwise) are considered valid only in a limited sphere and is regarded as false (*mithya*), in the sense that it keeps changing (*anithya*) and is not absolute. Therefore in the tradition, Upanishadic and Vedantic teachings are known as *jñāana yoga* or *jñāana maarga*, because they emphasize on discriminating between true knowledge (*satya*) and false knowledge (*mithya*). If *abhyasa* and *vairagya* are the basis of yoga, *vichara* (enquiry) and *viveka* (discrimination) are the key concepts in Vedanta.

It is interesting that Samkhya traces the whole of cosmic evolution to psychological categories. It is a ‘top-down’ approach, which is diametrically opposed to the contemporary scientific perspectives on evolution that commences with physical substrates and hence, ‘bottom-up’ in its approach. *Ahamkaara* is the individuating principle which underlies the subject–object differentiation and represents the subjective pole.

Suffering, Mental Afflictions and Problems in Living

Verma (1994) identifies the reasons for sorrow to be: (a) the conception of a limited self, (b) the emergence of the quality of restless mobility or *rajoguna*, (c) dependence on external objects as sources of *sukha* (pleasure), and (d) fear of separation from the source of *sukha*. According to Palasane and Lam (1996) the Western approach is concerned with distress or the negative aspects of stress, whereas in Eastern thought, both pleasure and pain are considered stressful, and there is a greater acceptance of suffering.

Anand et al. (2001) note that *Samkhya Kaarika* has conceived three types of human suffering namely, (a) *aadhibhautika*, which involves suffering arising from external physical

factors, such as other humans, animals, and so on; (b) *aadhidaivika*, which arises from a different type of external factors, such as demons or deities; and (c) *aadhyaatmika*, which focuses on dealing with suffering 'pertaining to the self'. The *aadhyatmika* suffering arises from two internal sources: one from the body, and the other from the mind. The three types of suffering (*taapa traya*) mentioned above have formed the bases for all types of healing practices in Indian tradition, where we have well-systematized ones like *ayurveda*, *siddha*, and folk healing practices.

Patanjali in *Yoga Sutra* regards *klesa* as the primary source of suffering. *Klesas* are five in number namely; *avidya* (ignorance), *asmita* (egoism), *raaga* (attraction), *dvesa* (repulsion), and *abhinivesha* (lust for life). They are afflictions that plague a person leading to misery. The factors, which help to overcome suffering, include *dharma* (right conduct), detachment and impulse control, belief in rebirth and *karma*, and transcendence. Coster (1934) compared these *kleshas* or afflictions with the primary anxiety and insecurity in the light of psychoanalysis.

Well being

Sushruta Samhita a well-known *ayurvedic* text defines *swaasthya* with reference to body, mind, and spirit. Not only that it specifies health as a condition of balance of bodily elements (*sama dhatu*), body humors (*sama dosha*), body energies (*samagni*), and unhindered eliminative process, it also insists that one should have pleasant disposition in his/her sensory functioning, mind, and self (*prasanna atma indriya manaha*). The role of spiritual dimension is not fully acknowledged. Following the Indian science of life, – *Ayurveda*, the regulation of *aahaara* (food), *vihaara* (recreation), *aachaara* (routine), and *vichaara* (thinking) is proposed to achieve the state of positive health and well-being.

In an interesting analysis, Shukla (2000) observes that the code of health is culturally constituted. The medical and social discourses often intermix and influence each other to promote notion(s) of health. The Indian notion of health views that a

swastha person is autolocated. Further, he notes that, in the field of health and illness, the basic condition of health is the *swaasthya*, the state of 'being-in-itself'.

A model of pathology of human condition is given very succinctly in the Gita:

When a man thinks of objects, "attachment" for them arises; from attachment "desire" is born; from desire arises "anger" ... From anger comes "delusion"; from delusion "loss of memory"; from loss of memory the "destruction of discrimination"; from destruction of discrimination, he "perishes." Discrimination here means the sense to identify relationships between objects and the self. The "therapy" to this pathology of human existence is given in the subsequent *shlokas*: *"But the self-controlled man, moving among objects, with his senses under restraint, and free from both attraction and repulsion, attains peace. In that peace all pains are destroyed; for, the intellect of the tranquil-minded soon becomes steady. That man attains peace who, abandoning all desires, moves about without longing, without the sense of 'I-ness' and 'my-ness.'* "

The Sufi traditional concepts of innate resources, bliss and serenity (*Tamaniant-e-Nafs*) and the concept of self (*Kashf*) as 'intuitive-empathic understanding' have been studied by Beg and Beg (1970; 1996) and combined with teachings from Vedanta and Logotherapy (Viktor Frankl) to explain the concept of well being. According to them, transcendence and meaning making of the existential reality are what constitute the purpose of the creative force of life.

One of the recent methods in Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy is giving a discourse. A discourse consists of material drawn from one's cultural sources like folklore, scriptures, stories, life examples, and social treatises. In this context, the author considers Tirukkural as one of the best-suited social treatise, which can be extensively used by the counselor. As Venkatachalam observes, the most important REBT principles match well with that of Tirukkural. Tirukkural consists descriptive and

prescriptive messages encapsulated in short pithy statements.

Morality

Purushartha (values), translated as “what are desired by man” by Hirianna (1975), refers to the motivational aspect of human behavior. According to Dalal, *dharma* was first mentioned in the *Rigveda* and later elaborated in Gautam's *Dharmashastra* (about 600 B.C.). It is one of the four primary values in human life the other three being, *artha*, *kaama*, and *moksha*. *Artha* represents material wealth and *Kaama* represents all types of desires. *Moksha* represents liberation and freedom from the cycle of birth and death. The Indian tradition prescribes that human beings should pursue *artha* and *kaama* guided by principles of *dharma*, and strive towards *moksha*. *Dharma* has greatly influenced ways of thinking, perceiving and categorizing experiences. As Kakar (1979) stated, “In its social implication, *dharma* is an inherent force in human being which holds the individual and society together, or going one step further, the force which makes ‘individual and society hold each other together’.” The *Dharma* of a person is believed to be contingent on four factors: (a) *desh* (country/region), (b) *Kala* (period of history), (c) *shrama* (work, occupation), and (d) *guna* (biomental attributes). The concept of *Dharma* is part of the broader Hindu theory of life cycle and developmental stages (*Ashrama dharma*). It is both a process and mechanism of social integration to maintain harmonious relationship within the society. Transgression of *Dharma* is presumed to be the root cause of all social unrest and conflicts.

Summary

Studies of Indian concepts such as yoga have largely been empirical and their focus has been to verify the physiological effects of practicing the yogic postures and breathing techniques. Bhushan (2003) notes that yogic practices help in enhances memory, self-confidence, creativity and adjustment of adolescent school students. It has been recognized (Walsh, 1999; Salagame, 2002) that there exist differences in the ways in which yoga

is practiced and often the techniques are unconnected to the larger theoretical attitudes that the philosophical positions advocate for a healthy life. Nonetheless, the techniques by themselves are beneficial as noted by the quoted study.

It arises in one's mind that life is not always characterized by suffering and thus there is no need to practice detachment. The Indian texts again answer this query that it is our attachment to objects that cause us to believe in happiness or contentment. This is temporary gratification. Thus it advocates that we should not be attached (*anaasakti*) to the fruits or rewards of our actions (*nishkaama*) but nevertheless live and carry out actions.

In traditional Western psychology, morality has largely been dealt with according to the assumption of a particular approach regarding the extent of free will or determinants we have over our behavior. Williams (1992), engages in a critical debate of placing morality in the human context rather than the metaphysical. According to this paper, if traditional psychology chooses to be deterministic, it is precisely demanding to give up our understanding of what is human i.e. freedom and morality and on the other hand free will entails establishing the grounds of choice (determining the reasons of a particular decision) and the problem in distinguishing between freedom and randomness. Both positions are inescapable unless the concept of morality is placed in a human context. If there is something called agency, then its basis is in the moral truth and choices that we as a species have to discover as a collective.

According to Szasz (1960), “mental illness” if in the brain should be called neurological disorders, but if they are stemming from the inherent struggles of human beings then they are “problems in living” and therefore, question the ethics of psychotherapists who “diagnose” and “treat” them. Indian psychology has done just that by uniting human species as having same sort of problems in living but in different degrees as arising in the body, mind and consciousness.

Rao (1997, 2004) observes that the differences in conceptualization of self and the existing body of literature in both the East and the West should be integrated so as to arrive at a wholesome understanding of the human experience. While the Western perspective focused on the 'phenomenal manifestations of consciousnesses', the study of the Eastern perspective is complementary to the Western if the goal is to achieve a fuller grasp of consciousness and 'its role in our being'. Raja Selvam analyzes Advaita Vedanta and Jung's comparison of it with analytical psychology's concepts of self and consciousness. The two major criticisms are that Indian psychology lacks a basis in critical philosophy and the second is the existence of higher states of consciousness. The author points out that with the advent of new evidence from the quantum physics challenges the extent to which unconscious material can be made conscious along with supporting evidence that there exists a common substratum to the universe which is termed as Brahman. The Jungian self is approximate to Advaita Vedanta's *Isvara* than it is to the *Brahman*. Advaita Vedanta goes well with Jungian psychology with another level of self (the *Brahman*) and another goal for human consciousness in *moksa* or enlightenment. Jungian psychology gives Advaita Vedanta the routes for accessing spiritual and psychological requisites for enlightenment.

The import of making a comparison between Western views and findings is to not just critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses

of each but also to make the point that none is better than the other in today's time and situation. Both cultures have amalgamated in a globalised world where the youth in India on one hand are faced with the choice of being completely conditioned to the Western way of looking at the psyche and on the other hand led on to follow blindly whatever one's cultural/religious text preaches. The current generation of youth in general and a student of psychology in particular needs to consider that they are not living in one well defined culture and that an integrated model of their lived reality and desired existence needs to be reformed according to their times.

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About the Author



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