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Indian Psychology: Retrospect and Future challenges

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Abstract: The paper attempts to trace the development of psychology as a discipline in India and in this process, it also attempts to focus on the vast potential of issues leading to the development of indigenous psychology in India. The authors have attempted to analyze different concerns studied by Indian Psychologists drawn from different sources, which reflect the concerns of Indian Psychology. Using this as a base, it has been pleaded that there are very many sources in the rich culture and indigenous literature, which still needs to be exploited in order to enrich Indian Psychology, which is a great challenge to Psychologists.

Background:

It is interesting to trace the history of psychology being taken up and studied by Indians. As Sinha, (2002, pg. 441-442) says, “Western empirical Psychology was introduced in India quite early in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. However its growth remained slow and sluggish till the independence in 1947, as research facilities were almost non-existent..... Papers published at that time were “Superficial, devoid of any serious research and followed more or less the beaten tracks.” (Bose, 1939, p.345).... Research activities picked up momentum in the fifties and the sixties.... Slowly, Indian psychology started gaining grounds.... There were three factors that shaped the nature of Indian Psychology during this period. *First* was the construction of Indian Personality and culture by the foreign scholar,” (which was derogatory to say the least, and surprisingly was endorsed by some of the Indian Psychologists themselves of that time.) “*Secondly*, separation of psychology from Philosophy departments, that deprived Indian psychologists from the opportunity to draw from the ancient and rich Indian body of knowledge. *Thirdly*, in the absence of their own conceptual framework, they became highly susceptible to western influences” and way of thought and methodologies. “By the seventies, Indian psychology was found to be in a ‘crisis’.” (Pareek, 1980, p. 7).

Sinha, (2002, pg. 443) is of the opinion, that the crisis arose out of the realization that (a) Psychology had failed to have any impact on the life of the people, (b) Its tests

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and measures were culture blind, and (c) There were too many inconsistent and unexplained findings to be brushed aside. The realization, coupled with the advent of a new generation of psychologists who were less constrained by colonial experience and supported by a number of problem-oriented studies, led to explore more appropriate concepts, theories and methods which initiated Indian Psychology into a phase of indigenization. (Sinha, D.1998).

Sources for the Study of Indigenous Psychology:

There are many sources from which one can draw, to study Indian psychology. One of the sources “for developing Indigenous Psychology is the ancient Indian wisdom enshrined in a variety of texts and scriptures spanning from approximately 1500 BC to the nineteenth century AD.” (Sinha, 2002, pg. 444). The practical knowledge that has been enshrined within these texts is still being understood in different ways and contexts today, with all our so-called advancements in science and technology. But, even so, our understanding of these *Practical knowledge-based Psychological ideas* is limited to say the least. The sheer scope of empirical studies that need to be undertaken to come to a comprehensive understanding and linking of the knowledge bases and their further applied aspects is mind boggling to say the least. Though there have been initial forays to empirically prove the truth that have been stated in these texts and scriptures, and which have been handed down to us from many millennia, a very vast majority of the statements that we have taken for granted is yet to be scientifically tested; what has been done has been sporadic and insufficient for a thorough understanding of the subject—in this case, the human behavior and its why’s and wherefore’s.

“The spiritual propositions in the *Bhagavad Gita* look into the primeval urges behind the history of human mind, his behavioral nature and history of the unconscious behind the observation he makes. Hence it is an attempt to study the “observer” *per se*.” (Menon, 2002, pg. 327). “The observer... (*drashta*)... in people’s minds enables them to integrate the various activities and emotions, expand consciousness, acquire purity in thought and action and transcend, (rather than suppress or repress), id-like impulses to become fully liberated of all those concerns which constrain self-transformation.” (Sinha, 2002, pg. 445). The “observer” and the “observable phenomena” that we are attempting to study, has to undergo a thorough study for us to come to any sort of an understanding of the various nuances that are involved and their relevance in daily life.

According to Sinha, (2002, pg. 445), similar ideas are propounded in *Dhammapada*, the narratives of *Jataka Kathas* and the Jain Literature. “The narratives in the epics, like *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, *The Bhagavad Gita*, *Jataka Kathas*, *Puranas* and other texts tend to externalize and validate the thoughts, gain insights into the ways of resolving serious life issues, and create mythic models for emulation.... Further more the mythic characters are depicted to have multi faceted nature having blends of virtues and vices reflecting the complex nature of human beings.”

Furthermore, Sinha (2002, pg. 445) is of the opinion that in the *Panchatantras*, in which animals and birds think and behave like human beings, “the characters do not

indulge in divine and spiritual activities. Rather they function at gross and mundane levels. They demonstrate how to safeguard against the evils in jungle like situations, by cultivating practical intelligence in order to identify faithful and skillful friends and relatives who may help accumulate wealth and prosperity.”

On the other side, it is interesting to note that Kautilya’s *Artha Shastra* is a text of state-craft, the main concern of which is to create, augment, distribute and protect resources of the society for the well being of all by creating a secular administration which is based on merit, rationality, and judicious use of power. In contrast, *Manusmriti* presented an orthodox Brahmanical misogynist world-view and a rigid caste system indicating how a hierarchically structured society can become exploitative (Kangle, 1986).

While, “There is another tradition, the *Lokayat* Tradition, of *Charvak*, that manifests a purely materialistic and secular world view about how one should live, enjoy pleasures, and relate with others.” (Sinha, 2002, pg. 446). Thus, there are very many sources and treasure of sources for Indian Psychology.

As Sinha, (2002, pg. 444) says, “another major source for developing Indigenous psychology is the *Vedantic* Tradition which provides the most integrated and comprehensive psycho-spiritual world view which is so ingrained in the minds of Indians that unless it is taken into consideration, “it is virtually impossible to comprehend Indian Psychological make-up, society and culture.” (Roland, 1988, p. 289).

While explaining how Culture could be treated as a source in psychology, Misra, (2002) writes, “So far, psychological discourse and culture have been intimate strangers. The preoccupation with the western, scientific modality of disciplinary practice does not permit the realization of alternative possibilities of understanding the person, new views of knowledge, and new modes of inquiry. The intellectual scene is slowly changing. The deterioration of positivistic mode of inquiry, and the emergence of interpretive modes of knowing, have opened new possibilities and forms of understanding. We hope that in this changed epistemic context, psychologists can respond by treating culture as a resource and not as an error source, and most particularly as a vital source of a pluralistic social science.” (pg. 439)

Apart from the above all, the authors feel strongly that the other important source, which can enrich Indigenous Psychology, is *Ayurveda*. One can say for sure that it has not been seen from the Indian Psychological concerns’ viewpoint as much as it has the potential. Though a few concepts and concerns are studied, a lot of it remains to be understood and empirically validated. Hence, there is a need to focus on Ayurveda in a big way.

While capturing what constitutes ‘knowing’ and how it is different from western empiricism, Misra, (2002, pg. 207- 208) writes, “The.... knowing in the Indian context reveals a very rich and complex meta-theoretical framework, which has a potential to offer insights into the intricate processes of human understanding. The diversity in

Indian thought is remarkable. It shows considerable similarity with the western mode of intellectual inquiry up to a point. It is more rigorous and inclusive than western empirical approach as currently practiced in the psychological science. Also, it goes beyond the Western approach in many ways. Belief in multiple but interdependent worlds, use of discursive practices, significance of language, perception, reason and *sadhana* to obtain empirical truth on the one hand and realization of transcendental reality on the other are very important for holistic understanding. The Indian perspective is a matter of contemporary relevance and practical utility. It generates new, different and more comprehensive theoretical perspective and concepts in which values are central and pursuit for knowledge is more engaging.” The above implies that in the Indian Psychological perspective, there are some concerns, which are experimental in nature and are amenable to empirical testing, while and there are many, which are only experiential. This makes Indian psychological framework different from the West.

“In sum, the ancient Indian Wisdom provides a wide range of concepts and ideas that may be retrieved to develop a number of psychological principles and laws of behavior” (Sinha, 2002, pg. 446), from a rich framework of culture and deep rooted tradition which has stood the test of time, through millennia for research. From the above one can infer that in Indian Psychology there are many concepts and issues, which could be empirically tested, and there are many which are amenable for only experience. Now the challenge before psychologists is to discern those, which are amenable to empirical testing, and those, which can be considered only experiential in nature.

National Contemporary Concerns in Indian Psychology:

In the current context, Psychologists in India are concerned about strengthening Indian psychological bases by consolidating the cultural heritage of this country. Efforts are on to collect different Indian perspectives, which can strengthen the Indian Psychological roots. If one looks at the kinds of papers presented at two recent national conferences on Indian Psychology held at Pondicherry, one during 2002 and the other during 2004, one gets an idea that there has been a growing interest, concern and efforts in this direction by Indian Psychologists.

It is a well-known fact that Psychology has grown because of the contributions of significant personalities who have not necessarily belonged to psychology *per se*. If Indian Psychology has to develop further, it has to beseech the cooperation and collaboration of other disciplines and scholars’ belonging to other disciplines in India, as the nature and concerns of Indian Psychology is such.

It is attempted to understand how different area concerns have attempted to amalgamate and enrich Indian Psychology in the 21st century by using a tentative index of considering the kinds of papers that were presented during the two significant national conferences on Indian Psychology held at Pondicherry during 2002 and 2004. This attempt is being done for want of any other reliable source of information on this.

Table showing different concerns presented, and discussed in two national Conferences on Indian Psychology.

Sl. No.	Area concerns	National Conference 2002	National Conference 2004	Total
1	Psychology	39 (43)	48 (40)	87 (41)
2	Yoga	29 (32)	14 (12)	43 (23)
3	Philosophy	07 (08)	21 (17)	28 (13)
4	Education	01 (01)	15 (12)	16 (8)
5	Sociology	03 (03)	03 (2.5)	06 (3)
6	Veda and Vedanta	01 (01)	04 (3.3)	05 (2)
7	Meditation	03 (03)	03 (2.5)	06 (3)
8	Health and Medicine	02 (02)	00 (00)	02 (0.9)
9	Ayurveda	01 (01)	01 (0.8)	02 (0.9)
10	Music	01 (01)	00 (00)	01 (0.5)
11	Dance	01 (01)	00 (00)	01 (0.5)
12	Epic	03 (03)	03 (2.5)	06 (3)
13	Folk	00 (00)	01 (0.8)	01 (0.5)
14	Management	00 (00)	02 (1.6)	02 (1)
15	Religion	00 (00)	01 (0.8)	01 (0.5)
16	Gerontology	00 (00)	02 (1.6)	02 (1)
17	Spirituality	00 (00)	02 (1.6)	02 (1)
	TOTAL	91 (43.12)	120 (56.87)	211 (100)

Note: Figures in the parentheses indicate the percentages.

An analysis of the above table suggests that in terms of number of issues that psychologists want to be covered under Indian psychology is also growing. If one looks at the concerns expressed, around 41% of papers alone directly relate to psychology, and other areas cover the rest. The major share of concerns comes from Yoga, Philosophy and Education. Among other concerns, Sociology, Veda and Vedanta, Meditation, Issues of Epic share the next round of importance. It is equally interesting to see that, though at a small level, other issues have figured prominently including, Health and Medicine, Ayurveda, Music, Dance, Folk, Management, Religion, Gerontology, and Spirituality. The last four concerns have added only during 2004. This suggests that psychologists are constantly contemplating on seeing issues of relevance to Indian Psychology from different sources.

Perhaps one may like to infer that Indian Psychology is growing in terms of its vastness, as it is flexible enough to be receptive to concerns expressed by people who may not be labeled as “Psychologists” *per se*. This needs to continue in the interest of Indian Psychology.

If one looks at the papers / abstracts of all these concerns presented, one can also get a picture that most of the issues raised and discussed are not empirical in nature. Perhaps, as said above, as Indian Psychology is growing, it needs to see the validity of its intrinsic concerns in empirical reality. One needs to be cautious here that, not all concerns are fit to be empirically established. Many may be experiential in nature too. Therefore, there is a need to discern what needs to be empirically established. But the fact remains that there is a need to empirically test many of the concepts that are used in Indian Psychology context.

Indian Psychology has also been growing in different directions, branching out. One such branch is Personality. In fact a good number of concepts related to Personality are also empirically studied by researchers. There is still a scope for doing a lot in this direction. It is interesting to see how the concept of Personality is handled and understood in Indian Psychology context.

The Personality Debate:

Personality has always captured the major attention of psychologists in the past. This tradition has influenced Indian Psychology too. Different concerns and views held by different people on personality can be seen as follows. According to Auluck, (2002) “Despite vast amounts of knowledge about the external world, one is still faced with a big question about oneself, to whom this world presents itself as a mystery. The universe and its experiencer, the man, both are fantastic phenomena of nature..... Man is both the knower and the Creator of knowledge. It is this profound complexity of “I” which inspired the galaxy of thinkers in India whom we call “*Rishis*”, to delve deep into the great question “who am I?” It was the central enquiry in Indian Psychology enshrined in *Upanishads*, which are universally acknowledged for their profound metaphysical insights. This question is undoubtedly the most fundamental and profound one and is expected to be at the heart of psychology, particularly the field of Personality”...“Personality, ego and self are interchangeably used in the mainstream psychology.” (pg. 374).

Auluck, (2002, pg. 375) is of the opinion that “most of the western theories of Personality have been formulated by the psychologists who were faced with the challenge of understanding and treating people with mental disorders. Rich insights have developed in this process. However, despite extensive research and theorization, we have made little progress in understanding the human personality. We are still at the stage of tentative description and explanation and therefore, far from the ultimate goals of scientific psychology, i.e., control and prediction. Why is it so? Why is the field of personality psychology so stagnant? Are we going in the right direction in our search for understanding personality formulations? Are we even asking the appropriate questions and following appropriate framework? We can hear several psychologists questioning the basic framework within which psychology is searching for answers.”

According to Magnussan and Toarstad, (1993) “we psychologists must avoid the mistake we made previously, when in striving to attain the status of a truly scientific

discipline, we adopted the research paradigm of Physics with its Newtonian view of nature. It is imperative that we develop research strategies and methods appropriate to the phenomena that are our concern". While, Carlson (1984) has aptly described the field of personality psychology as showing "chilling absence of larger theoretical aims and synthesizing concerns". "Mainstream psychology in general and personology in particular has been criticized for its lack of concern with larger framework, outmoded view of science, narrowly focussed disparate studies and sterile inappropriate methodology which reveals little about the real genuine data." (Auluck, 2002, pg. 377, 378).

In the view of Sloan (1997) "mainstream approaches have systematically reduced our capacity to understand personality. Psychologists need to know how to think about personality in order to understand it"..... "In his view, instead of seeing personality as simply a system of enduring dispositions, we need to look at it as a "problem" with its rigidities, impaired self-awareness, impulsive or automotive behaviors that increase one's sufferings. The goal of Personality Psychology has to be emancipatory rather than mere interpretative understanding and control. The former requires understanding one's situations, clarifying one's needs and goals, and empowering oneself to deal with one's own life more effectively and meaningfully." (Auluck, 2002, pg. 378).

This new definition for the personology, feels Auluck (2002, pg. 379), "approximates, in some measure, the approaches of Indian Psychology which have elaborate and profound knowledge systems that explain not only vicissitudes of mental life, but also help guide us in dealing with the problems of life. Unlike western psychology the emphasis here is not on studying others but studying one's own self. Indian psychological thoughts offer answers and workable solutions to the questions that the earnest seekers have always asked about themselves and their mental life. It holds promise for important breakthrough in understanding mind, self, consciousness and its place in the entire scheme of nature. The *Bhagavad Gita* is universally acknowledged as a great text in human psychology. It addresses psychological and spiritual concerns of man, which are intimately connected with each other."

"The question of self and identity were at the heart of *Vedantic* Psychology or rather the entire Indian Psychology which is shrouded in the religio-philosophical traditions of our country. It was not purely a theoretical question; the query often started from seeing the transient nature of everything in life. In fact it is assumed that till one begins to experience and see the limitations of all our pursuits, one is not prepared enough to grasp the vision of the *Vedanta*." (Auluck, 2002, pg. 383).

Krishna, (2002, pg. 292, 293), has stated that from ancient to present times there are adherents to typology. Modern psychologists generally trace typological thinking to Greeks. Philosophers like Plato, literary men like Theophrastus; physicians like Hippocrates and Galen are reported to have categorized human beings into certain types.... In the recent past the notable topologists are Janet, Jung, Kretschmer, Spranger, Sheldon and Eysenck. Further, he also reminds about the efforts of the ancient Indians in

the area of typology saying, “one notices the contributions from seers and philosophers, eminent scholars, medical men, sexologists and the exponents of dramaturgy.” (pg. 294).

“*Swethaswathara Upanishad* refers for the first time to the three fundamental qualities of matter, namely *Sathwa*, *Rajas*, and *Thamas*. (Deussen, 1908)..... These three qualities of matter depending upon their relative strength influence the Homo-sapiens and bring about the personality differences. An elaboration of this theory is found in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a much later work than *Swethaswathara Upanishad*.” (Krishna, 2002, pg. 295).

“This classical “*Guna*” theory has been used either in its original form or with suitable modification by the later scholars. Varaha Mihira, an eminent scholar, using the *Guna* theory, presents a seven fold classification of persons. They are *Satwic*, *Rajasic*, *Thamasic*, *Satwic-Rajasic*, *Satwic-Thamasic*, *Rajasic-Thamasic* and *Satwic-Rajasic-Thamasic*. He recognizes mixed types beside extreme types”..... In addition to the above classification, based on *Guna* theory Varaha Mihira presents two other types of typologies..... One is of morphological type and the other is based on physical and other conditions. The former consists of five types and the latter ten types.... Varaha Mihira also presented a five-fold classification of dwarfs with respect to their physical and psychological characteristics. They are known as *vamana*, *jaghanya*, *kubja*, *mandalika* and *sami*. (Krishna, 2002).

“Ayurveda, the science of Indian medicine gave rise to humoral doctrine much earlier than the Greeks, with the postulation of *Vata* (wind), *Pitta* (bile), and *Kapha* (phlegm). Charaka (Gulabkum Verba 1949) gives a description of these humors.... Each of these gives rise to a type of temperament referred to as *Prakriti*. Seven types of *prakriti* are recognized based on the dominance of one or more than one of the three humors. They are *vata*, *pitta*, *kapha*, *vata-pitta*, *vata-kapha*, *pitta-kapha* and *sannivatha prakritis*.(pg. 299).... Besides the above, *Ayurveda* recognizes 16 types of personality based on the classical *Guna* theory. Caraka and Susruta *Samhitas* give a description of these types. Seven types are based on *Satwa*, six on *Rajas* and three on *Thamas*.” (pg. 300).... “It is clear in the writings of Ayurveda that more mixed groups are found than the extreme groups. A deeper reading and understanding of the circumstances that led the authors to propound their typologies and the light the typologies throw on the delineation of the characteristics of the individuals coming under the type may go a long way in the appreciation of the solution of human problems. As one of the approaches to the understanding of Personality, typology is coming rather handy. Though there are many critics of typology in modern times, yet, there are psychologists who still adhere to typological thinking.” (Krishna, 2002).

While commenting on Indian Psychology, Dash and Rout, (2002), hold the views as follows: “Every scientific discipline has its specific protocols, procedures, and methodologies that are considered essential in order to arrive at valid knowledge. These approaches are based on well-established presumptions about reality, and about knowledge that, within each field, are rarely made explicit and even more rarely questioned. It is hard to challenge these fundamental premises because so much that the

discipline has achieved is contingent on their inviolability. And yet, if we want to consider introducing traditional Indian psychology within modern academic psychology we must examine the presumptions underlying both systems with great care. If we fail to appreciate the enormous differences between the two systems and the intricate manner in which they are related to each other, we are likely to miss out on the very essence of what Indian psychology could contribute to the world and especially to psychology as an academic science.” Further, on Indian thought they hold the view that “The basic philosophical system underlying Indian thought is thus a much wider and more comprehensive worldview than the scientific one. While it is perfectly possible to study Western science and its findings from within the framework of Indian thought, one cannot study Indian Psychology from within the standard scientific framework without losing out on its very essence.”

Discussing on the pre-requisites for teaching Indian Psychology, Dash & Rout (2002) are of the opinion that, “even from the few short observations on the epistemology of Indian psychology that we have made so far, it may be clear that studying Indian psychology on its own terms will not be easy. It will require a profound and far-reaching change from present practice in almost every respect: in methods of teaching, in methods of research, in the definition of results. But the most interesting of these changes is certainly that it requires psychologists to be *yogis*. In itself, this is nothing new; music teachers need to be musicians, and physicists need to be mathematicians. But it, (becoming *yogis*), will involve a difficult –but for those who try highly rewarding—period of transition.”... They also feel that “the element of infinity that Indian Psychology introduces in psychology brings with it a greater beauty, a deeper meaning, a deeper connectedness. Things difficult to research and badly missing in modern times, but very needed to keep our individual and collective life together.”

Expressing succinctly the importance that Indian Psychology is capable of achieving in the world today, Dash and Rout (2002) are of the opinion that “It would be a great tragedy if in India Indian Psychology would be introduced as something that is only of interest to India, or worse, as something that belongs to the past. Indian psychology definitely belongs to the future and is of utmost relevance for the whole of humanity. It is needed, not as a minor, ethnic addition in the already full marketplace of trivial information, but as a vital link between spirituality and science. There is all reason to believe that it will fulfil this role and that in due course it will become the central discipline that will help humanity to know itself, to know one another, and to know the Divine. Knowledge of the self and of the Divine is not something that belongs exclusively to religion, or that should be left to the new age counterculture. It is the most valuable element of human experience and the reality in which we live.” Thus, there are plenty of challenges for psychologists to understand, empirically verify and benefit from our vast indigenous literature.

The above opinions are sufficient motivators for psychologists to work toward enriching the Indian Psychological base. There is a great potentiality in indigenous literature, which needs to be studied and utilized under Indian Psychology.

Conclusion:

The present century has witnessed interest in enriching the base of Indian Psychology. The vast indigenous literature available needs to be pooled, studied and empirically tested to understand from the psychological perspectives. It is here there are more challenges for psychologists interested in the indigenous literature. It requires psychologists to take the support of specialists in other fields also and on a collaborative way verify the knowledge and their amenability to psychological understanding. This activity is by no means a small one and in this process both Indian Psychology and allied discipline get a boost as each discipline will have something to give and take. Therefore, attempting to enrich Indian Psychology has to be undertaken by all well-meaning psychologists. One can hope that these challenges are going to be accepted by psychologists to take this discipline forward.

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