

Chapter 2

Modern Psychology in India: Reminiscences and Reflections



H. S. Asthana

Abstract Lest we feel tempted to regard the development of psychology in India as a recent phenomenon, it is important to look at the contributions of early workers in the field. A generation stands on the shoulders of its predecessor. Against this brief backdrop, this survey examines the contributions of early Indian psychologists. They were drawn chiefly from philosophy and education. However, it may be interesting to see how scholars from almost all parts of the country, who moved places contributing in varying measures, promoted the growth of the discipline. There was no narrow specialization as obtains today; they worked and researched in various fields of psychology at different times. The discipline followed generally the course it took in the West emphasizes on “behavior” did provide objective subject matter but by banishing consciousness and mental life the Anglo-American psychology has become impoverished. Recent efforts to retrieve the study of consciousness and indigenization hold potential for non-positivistic mode of understanding.

Keywords Behavior · Consciousness · Indian · Indigenization · Philosophy · Psychology

Editorial Note: This article was originally published with the same title in *Psychological Studies*, 2008(53). 1–6. It is reproduced here with the permission from National Academy of Psychology (NAOP) India.

Written at the suggestion of the Editor of the Journal. Author was asked to write because the author spent five years with the founder of modern psychology in India N. N. Sen Gupta, Ph.D. (Harvard) prior to the demise of the founder in June 1944, and the author started his study of psychology early (1937), one of his instructors teaching in Lockean (tabula rasa) tradition when the country was under British rule, the other a missionary trained under EL. Thorndike (connectionism).

This brief survey is in the nature of going down the memory lane, covers only the non-living pioneers, with most of whom the author had met and those associated with generally institutions of higher learning.

H. S. Asthana (✉)

Department of Psychology, Doctor Hari Singh Gaur University, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India

The beginning of modern psychology is traced officially to 1879¹ with the founding of the experimental psychology laboratory² by Wilhelm Wundt at Leipzig.³ In Asia, Japan 'was the first country to start the psychology program.'⁴ In the unpartitioned India, the University of Calcutta began the teaching of psychology in 1916 when Sir Asuotosh Mukerji appointed N. N. Sen Gupta a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy then chaired by Sir S. Radhakrishnan and rose to professorship and chairman of the Department of Psychology. Sen Gupta had returned the previous year from Harvard University with a doctorate. He was charged with developing psychology teaching program and a laboratory. In 1921, Haridas Bhattacharya, Professor of Philosophy, University of Dacca (Dhaka in Bangladesh), in the undivided India borrowed S. K. Bose from Calcutta (now Kolkata) to set up a psychology laboratory in his department. It was, however, only in 1965 that the university established an independent department of psychology.⁵ The University of Mysore has the distinction of being the second university in the country to have instituted psychology program in 1925. In 1930, Lahore (now in Pakistan) got a psychology department with M. Aslam (author of *Religious Experiences of Muhammad*) and I. Latif (interested in psychoanalysis and literature). With the partition of the country, S. M. Moghni, then working at Aligarh Muslim University in the Philosophy Department, moved over to Pakistan. Later, he established Psychology Department at Rajshahi University⁶ (then East Pakistan) in 1955, but with the creation of Bangladesh, he returned to Pakistan. It was after Calcutta and Mysore that several universities and colleges began offering teaching and research facilities in India.⁷

As mentioned earlier, modern (Western) psychology took roots initially at Calcutta University in Bengal. N. N. Sen Gupta who had taken his doctorate from Harvard

¹ A note by S. C. Mitra, the only Indian to earn D.Phil. from Leipzig puts a different date. He attended the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the laboratory on Nov. 21, 1925 at Leipzig. Accordingly, the date would be 1875 (*Psychological Research Journal* (1991), 15(1.2)).

² Even in nature of sciences the experimental method was introduced in the postHellenic period. While delivering his address on the occasion of the inauguration of the newly built independent laboratory of experimental psychology at Lucknow University in 1951 Gardner Murphy said "it was in the late afternoon of Greek civilization at Syracuse and at Alexandria, that the experimental method could be discovered. Unknown to them the disciples of Patanjali experimented upon the physiology and psychology of the states of trance, relaxation and ecstasy Both in the east and the west, conditions become less favourable until after more than a thousand years social stability and the development of travel between West and East assisted in the revival of mathematics, of experimental physics, of alchemy, of astronomy and of medicine. By the time of Galileo the coalescence of mathematical and empirical thinking was complete ... (The Meaning of Experimental Psychology, Manasi (1954), 1(1), 7-14 (Mimeo.)

³ The contention that G. D. Fechner was the founder of experimental psychology (*Elemente der Psychophysik* (1860) has been recognized by Edwin Boring (*A history of Experimental Psychology. 'Preface' to 1st Edition in Second Edition, (1957) page ix, para 3. New York: Appleton Century. Boring once told the author at Harvard in 1965 that he regarded Fechner as the greatest psychologist and that he was busy translating the Elemente into English.*

⁴ *Psychology Research Journal* (1991), 15 (1,2), p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 31-37.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Deb, M. *Heritage papers of early Indian psychologists*. 2. vols. Asiatic Society, Kolkata (in press).

on anti-intellectualism in philosophy had the opportunity of studying under Hugo Munsterberg (invited by William James to chair psychology, while he himself moved over to philosophy) and taking training with Yearkes and Holt in psychology. He visited Cornell Psychology Laboratory before returning. Though exposed to the structuralist *Zeitgeist*, Munsterberg's influence made him more catholic in outlook. In social psychology, he challenged the concept of "group mind," and in general psychology, he was against the reduction of mind to brain. Investigating the influence of groups on work with C. P. N. Singh, he anticipated some aspects of the "*Hawthorne Studies*."⁸ Along with Radhakamal Mukherji, he published one of the first few books on social psychology in 1929. He also wrote on "race psychology." He founded Indian Psychological Association and its official organ *Indian Journal of Psychology* and managed to have a Section of Psychology and Educational Science instituted in the Indian Science Congress Association. He moved over to Lucknow University in 1929. Girindrasekhar Bose is a physician succeeded him to the Chair of the Department of Psychology. Bose was the founder of the psychoanalytic movement in India, the Indian Psychoanalytical Society, and its official publication *Samiksha*. He made important contributions to the concepts of "wish," repression "and the unconscious." He worked in experimental psychology devising apparatuses and wrote on "Yoga Psychology." S. C. Mitra, the only Indian trained at Leipzig, worked in many areas particularly on a theory of "emotion."⁹ Some of the other senior psychologists who worked in various fields were: M. N. Bannerji, K. C. Mukherji, S. K. Bose, A. Dutta. D. Ganguly (social and industrial), R. Haider (literature and psychoanalysis), and G. Pal (psychophysics).

In Bihar H. P. Maiti worked on memory using experimental method. Jamuna Prasad worked in social psychology. But psychological measurement and testing involved many like S. M. Mohsin, Zain-ul-Abdeen, and B. B. Chatterji, and Mohsin in his later years moved over to social psychology. Patna University also established an Institute of Psychological Services.

In Karnataka, Mysore, as noted earlier, was the second university in the country to establish a department of psychology with M. V. Gopaldaswamy as its head. He had returned after training with Charles Spearman in U.K. and set up both experimental and applied psychology programs. He worked on galvanic skin response in the former and on aptitude testing in the latter. His successor B. Kuppaswamy worked on Indian psychology and found a close correspondence between the concepts of "*antarmukhi*" and "*vahirmukhi*" in Jungian concepts of introversion and extroversion. In later years, he got involved in social psychology and in election studies. N. S. N. Shastry did much to disseminate educational psychological research and along with K. G. N. Menon published *Journal of Education and Psychology*. B. Krishnan succeeding Kuppaswamy at Mysore devoted himself specially to classical Indian psychology and sought to develop scales based upon Samkhya "triguna" theory.

G. D. Boaz developed the Department of Psychology at the University of Madras (now Chennai). He founded the Madras Psychological Society and started editing

⁸ *Introduction to Social Psychology*, London: Heath (1929). II.

⁹ *Psychology Research Journal* (1998), 22 (1,2).

along with his colleagues three journals in general, experimental and applied areas, being himself in all the areas.¹⁰ At Annamalai University, Adinarayanan was one of the early workers in the area of social psychology, specially attitudes.

In the neighboring Union Territory of Pondicherry, Indra Sen, earlier at Delhi, was deeply involved in Indian psychology. He was devoted to the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and worked tirelessly on the philosopher-sage's notion of "integral Yoga."

In Orissa, the study of psychology began at Ravenshaw College, Cuttack, before the establishment of a full-fledged department of psychology at the new university at Bhubaneswar. Adjoining state of Andhra Pradesh had two major centers of psychological studies. Osmania University at Hyderabad was the only university which published psychology literature in Urdu. Later, it organized teaching in most of the conventional areas, emphasizing experimental and organizational psychology, both the fields championed by E. G. Parmeshwaran.

Andhra University at Waltair, while offering conventional courses, specialized in researches on paranormal phenomena, on sleep, dream, and classical Indian psychology, principally psychology of Yoga and the nature of consciousness. The *Journal of Indian Psychology* was also founded in 1981.

In Maharashtra, H. P. Mehta and K. H. Camat took to educational psychology, while Ishwar Dayal entered industry. When the University of Bombay instituted the Department of Applied Psychology, there being a Department of Experimental Psychology at Pune, Nirodh Mukherji¹¹ joined as its chairman. Trained in U.K., he took to experimental psychology in particular. In many instances, he was his own subject as, for instance, his experiments on the psychological effects of hallucinogenic drugs, like Heinric Kluver's study of Peyot. He also worked on the psychology of laughter. On his faculty was a physician T. R. Kulkarni who was trained at Calcutta and had studied Sanskrit in the classical tradition. He spent some time at the Lonavala Yoga Center and researched on the psychological aspects of Pranayama and the psychology of *Vedanta*.

At the Kerala University at Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram), E. I. George developed the department of psychology organizing teaching in various areas, himself interested in general and social psychological problems.

K. G. Rama Rao joined the College of Education and Psychology at Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh where S. N. Ray spent some time before he returned to Calcutta Department. As an educational psychologist, Rao introduced psychological testing and guidance in the curriculum of education and started a course in applied psychology oriented mainly to education. His successor Rao continued the tradition himself devoting to child development and creativity studies. While Bilaspur had undergraduate elective of psychology, a full-fledged postgraduate course in

¹⁰ Boaz had a great sense of humour and repartee. Once when Vice-Chancellor Mudaliar visited him, he formed Boaz tending to roses in his garden appreciating the roses, Mudaliar remarked: "Professor, you have an excellent hobby;" To which Boaz replied: "This is my profession, teaching is just a hobby"!

¹¹ He was an excellent flute player.

psychology and research activity began with the institution of a Department of Psychology at the newly established University at Raipur where S. N. Upadhyaya initiated studies in experimental psychology like those on perceptual defense.

Up north, there was a department of education in Kashmir University at Srinagar where Zargar and M. L. Lidhoo were involved in educational psychological researches.

Panjab University started a Department of Psychology, and S. K. Mitra joined as Professor only to move over to Calcutta and Delhi and was succeeded by S. Jalota who too moved out a little later. P. S. Hundal chaired the Department of Psychology when G. N. D. University came up at Amritsar. He was interested in psychology of creativity, personality, and social behavior and founded a journal on *Personality and Social Behavior*.

Psychology was oriented to education in Gujrat at some other places. T. N. K. Menon and L.J. Bhatt were mainly involved; they founded the *Journal of Education and Psychology*. Gujrat University at Ahmedabad had a department of psychology then chaired by P. H. Prabhu who took to social psychology in Indian context and published a volume entitled *Hindu Social Organization*.

In 1929, N. N. Sen Gupta had moved over to the University of Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh from Calcutta joining as Professor of Philosophy. A year later, he introduced psychology in the philosophy curricula. He had brought the tradition of experimental psychology from Calcutta, and by mid-1930s, he started training Maurice Hakim (who later moved over to St. John's College, Agra), Rajnarain (who stayed at Lucknow till his retirement) in experimental psychology, and the present author¹² (who moved to Sagar two decades later). At Lucknow, he published on "heredity and mental traits" and on "mental growth and decline."¹³ On his sudden demise in 1944, Kali Prasad took charge of the department. He published on the Psychology of Meaning, he had earlier published in *Mind*, industrialization and social change, attitudes and international images, and international behavior.¹⁴ S. K. Saksena trained in London and having published on *The Nature of Consciousness in Indian Thought*

¹² Sen Gupta's method of training his students was to pose a problem and let the student struggle, helping him improvise. He subscribed to Willem Stern's dictum: "Methods do not exist for their own sake, they grow out of the exigencies of the situation and the possibility of material" (*Personalities*). Unlike the current methodological imperialism, he believed in the primacy of the problem. As an illustration, Sen Gupta read and translated Wertheimer's papers on apparent motion to the author and demanded the phenomenon to be demonstrated by improvising (no apparatus had been made in India at the time). Assigning the problem of testing an aspect of Ribot's theory of ideomotor action to the author, he expected a few hundred work-curves to be recorded on an improvised ergograph and sand-motor! (Owing to WW II, apparatuses were not imported, nor were they manufactured in the country).

¹³ Sen Gupta was an accomplished student of Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and of Pali language which gave him access to original literature on Buddhism. As a psychologist, he believed that "*Sadhana*" could be experimentally studied. Prior to his death had written his magnum opus: *Mechanism of Ecstasy*, unfortunately, the manuscript got lost in the confusion following his fatal stroke.

¹⁴ As a successor to Sen Gupta's chair, Kali Prasad instituted a psychology-oriented course for teachers (B.Ed. Sc.), developed a library of psychological tests, got an independent laboratory of Experimental Psychology building, equipping it with apparatuses, set up an animal laboratory,

joined for a brief spell and handing over to Rajnarain who worked in the areas of social psychology, championed for political psychology and on psychological theory. Others to follow were R. M. Loomba (general psychology), Sri Chandra (social), Vimla Agarwal (social and political), and Prabha Gupta (psychology of peace). Elsewhere P. S. Naidu propagated hormic psychology.¹⁵ B. L. Atreya published on psychology in Yoga Vashistha. He was assisted by S. Jalota (psychological measurement) and M. M. Sinha (experimental and comparative/animal). At Meerut, S. D. Singh trained in U.K. and at Harlow's laboratory set up animal laboratory performing stereotaxic experiments on rats, and undertook and trained students and publishing on social behavior of rhesus monkeys by studies at Ayodhya and in Dehradun forests, where he died of food poisoning. At the University of Allahabad, Durganand Sinha trained at Patna and at Cambridge founded the Psychology Department, got an independent building for it, developed a rich library, established a center for Study of National Development and Social Change, initiated cross-cultural studies, championed indigenization, and joined efforts to put the psychology of developing countries on the international scene.

Though Delhi University started the Department of Psychology a little later, the Ministry of Defense, Government of India, had made psychological screening of officers in the three branches of the services as a part of the Second World War effort, under charge of the psychiatrist in the Services Selection Boards. (Colonel) Sohan Lal, trained in U.K., a psychometrician, was the first Indian to take charge of the psychological testing program. Later M. Adiseshiah, trained at the Cambridge University Psychology Laboratory, took over and initiated work on vigilance function as related to defense requirements, besides looking after the selection program. Elsewhere in Delhi at the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), S. K. Mitra, a psychologist trained at Chicago and as the director, organized and supervised educational psychological research and counselling and guidance programs. He was assisted by N. N. Sen trained in Lucknow and in U.K. who set up an experimental laboratory to undertake psycho-physiological studies of cognitive and motor functions and organized courses on behavior modification.

It will be noted that, as observed in the beginning, almost all parts of the country had workers who engaged in the promotion of teaching and research in psychology. We have, however, limited ourselves primarily to universities; there were other psychologists, institutes, and agencies which were involved in the application of psychology.

Reminiscing, the author admits wearing power lenses magnifying some events while attenuating others, and when reflecting, he would naturally be betraying his own idiosyncrasies.

established a psychology clinic (a testing and counseling center) and as Hony. Librarian of the University; enriched the psychology collection by subscribing to most APA journals.

¹⁵ Controversy over teleology and mechanism was fuelled with William McDougall's work on instincts. Hormic psychology was in the air and was included by E. C. Tolman in his "purposive behaviourism."

Psychology in India inherited the Lockean tradition of the colonial masters, and this entered via courses in education till the introduction of the Titchenerian model when the University of Calcutta started teaching of psychology in 1916. Early workers were mainly drawn from education and philosophy. This tribe is gradually vanishing as the later generations are getting groomed into Anglo-American psychology which is predominantly positivistic and utilitarian. Access to literature is mostly via English language and whatever is filtered and made available from other language publications.

The growth of the discipline has followed generally the course it took in the West—the same paradigms (“schools”), their methods, and problems of study.¹⁶ Much research, therefore, has been replicated.¹⁷ Slowly, this scenario has been changing as problems of national concerns that had to be addressed. With the partition of the country into India and Pakistan, social scientists, including psychologists, engaged in studies of social tensions then obtaining in the country (riots, migration of population from one country to the other). Likewise, after World War II, a bid to industrialize and modernize focused interest on the problems of social change. Presently, problems relating to globalization, market economy, emerging knowledge society, rejection of pluralism, and looming threat of uni-culture stare in the face and seek examination.

Research funding is scarce. Unlike the developed countries where business, industries, corporations, and government departments are major sources of funding research, state financial support is drying up because the sources of the state are yet to come up and state does not require the institutions to generate their own funds by floating professionally oriented teaching programs. Basic and fundamental research is at discount therefore. Applied psychology (e.g., mental health, counseling, human relations in business and industry, etc.) is attractive for utilitarian and pecuniary reasons. Psychology of “mentality” caters to behavior manipulation in the best sense of the term, whereas the psychology of “mind” has few takers.¹⁸ One wonders how healthy this trend may be for the growth of the discipline.

Emphasis on “behavior” originally born of the need to be “objective” and “scientific” owing to the prevailing Zeitgeist (its philosophy of science) made John Watson change the very subject matter of psychology¹⁹ from the study of “mental life”²⁰ to the study of “behavior,” placing “mind,” as if, on the back burner and later grudgingly

¹⁶ From structuralism, functionalism behaviourism (neo-behaviorism and neo-neo behaviorism), hormic, Gestalt, field-theoretical, Verstehen psychologies, cross-cultural, cognitive science and more fascination, with mental health (Including well-being and, happiness).

¹⁷ ICSSR Survey.

¹⁸ Around 1970s psychology fractured into psychology of “mind” and psychology of “mentality.” The former concerned with mental life the latter with application of psychology in various fields, or basic and applied.

¹⁹ J. B. Watson’s Classics: *Psychology from the Standpoint of Behaviourist and Behaviorism*.

²⁰ Basic mental makeup and the process operating. It may be noted that even after the debut of behaviorism B. S. Woodworth published his book entitled. “*Psychology: Study of mental life*,” London: Methuen in 1999.

admitting it in the form of “verbal report.”²¹ This has kept successive generations of psychologists busy and happy for having to deal with something tangible rather than try dealing with something elusive and ephemeral like “mind.” It seems that by banishing consciousness and mental life the Anglo-American psychology has impoverished itself.

The emergence of cognitive psychology/science as a equal to the information processing paradigm could not exclude mental events (e.g., attending, images, memory, thinking, etc.) from consideration though it did so in terms of the positivistic approach.²² In this context, it is reassuring to note that some psychologists in the country are trying to retrieve the study of consciousness once again as a legitimate subject of psychological study.²³ It is here, in our opinion, that something unique and original could be discovered about mental phenomena in the true sense of indigenization.²⁴ For, it does not seem necessary to restrict oneself to the current positivistic thinking after the challenge posed by Karl Popper, T. Kuhn, and Feyerabend. Consciousness and mental life could be explored in alternative ways.²⁵

²¹ E. C. Tolman called the subsuming of introspective data as “verbal report” under the rubric of “behavior,” a semantic summersault!

²² Consider, for example, in this context M. Posner: *Chronometric study of mind*. A positivistic approach where “time” and “errors” are “treated as indices of mental and discrimination reaction times” (R. S. Woodworth: *Experimental Psychology*).

²³ Refer to various issues of *Journal of Indian Psychology*.

²⁴ Unfortunately, the term “indigenization” has been variously conceived ranging “import substitution.” through psychology by Indian psychologists and data on Indians to romantic revivalism of classical philosophical psychology as available in Sanskrit and Pali literature. So after indigenous concepts have been forced into English (Based upon Greco-Latin terminology) “equivalents” to make them comprehensible to the English-speaking reader. But this robs the original terms of richness and connotation when divorced from their context for all terms are embedded in a culture.

²⁵ Popper, K. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959) New York: Basic Books; Kuhn, T. *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1960), Feyerabend, P. *Against Method* (1975). London: NLB Press, Van Leenwan, M. S. *The Person in Psychology* (1985) England, Inter-University Press.