


K. Ramakrishna Rao and Anand C. Paranjpe, *Psychology in the Indian Tradition*

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Anuradha Choudry¹ 

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Psychology in the Indian Tradition by K. Ramakrishna Rao and Anand C Paranjpe is a significant milestone in the development of Indian psychology by two veterans in the field. In many ways, it is the quintessence of their vast experience and research in different schools of psychology from Eastern and Western perspectives. K. Ramakrishna Rao is an eminent parapsychologist, philosopher, educationist, teacher, researcher and administrator. He has edited and authored several works related to consciousness studies, paranormal phenomena and Gandhian philosophy, notably *Yoga and parapsychology: Empirical research and theoretical studies* (2010) and *Consciousness studies: Cross-cultural perspectives* (2005). Anand C Paranjpe, another stalwart in the domain of psychology, is an expert in personality psychology which he studied under the tutelage of Erik Erikson. He then introduced the Indian dimension to this discourse and published an important work titled *Self and identity in modern psychology and Indian thought* (1998) amongst several other writings. He has made signal contributions to the fields of positive psychology and clinical psychology. Besides these, his keen interest in Indian philosophy led him, along with K. Ramakrishna Rao, to become the forerunners of the Indian psychology movement that was established in 2002. This work brings out key features of Indian psychology and maps it on the existing frameworks of mainstream

psychology to help the reader understand and appreciate their similarities and unique characteristics.

Today the boundaries of psychology are becoming more permeable as they are shifting beyond the dominant Euro-American viewpoints and acknowledging indigenous understandings of human nature and its functionings. Furthermore, the study of psychology is becoming more interdisciplinary in nature. Research in cognitive psychology, for instance, is being substantially influenced by the findings of neuroscientific investigations. As a result, different ranges of psychological experiences which were previously beyond the scope of the standard paradigms of ‘third person’ investigation are being explored. Following this development, there is a growing need to evolve ‘first person’ approaches that are characteristic of certain schools of psychology like Indian and Buddhist psychologies. It is in this emerging context that it is worth understanding the contributions of this book.

Contents

Indian psychology itself has been in existence within the larger discourse on psychology in India for a century. It regained momentum in 2002 when about 150 psychologists signed a manifesto in Pondicherry and undertook the task of establishing it as a legitimate field of study and research. Since then, this particular movement of psychology has attracted the interest of a growing number of psychologists in India and abroad. This book is of particular relevance to those psychologists and researchers who would like to understand the unique contributions of the Indian approaches to psychology and to explore its relationship with the

✉ Anuradha Choudry
panditanu@gmail.com;
anuradha.sanskrit@hss.iitkgp.ernet.in

¹ Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, Kharagpur 721302, India

existing theories and experiments of mainstream psychology.

The book begins with the presentation of a systematic overview of the development of Indian psychology as an emerging discipline. It clearly lays out the metatheoretical base of this approach and then presents its scope and subject matter. It discusses the prevalent methods of study in psychology, their strengths and lacunae in brief, followed by the various approaches to understanding human nature from an Indian perspective. The first chapter ends with a very helpful table for the reader as it identifies and clearly articulates the characteristic differences between Indian psychology and mainstream Western psychology. Amongst other things, it states that the focus of Western psychology is the environment and therefore its emphasis is on objective observation, while for Indian psychology, the focus is the person and consequently it emphasises on subjective experience. Furthermore, the former is value-neutral and its application is to maintain balance with the average as the norm, whereas Indian psychology is value-driven and seeks to transform the individual for the better.

The second chapter, titled ‘Cultural Climate and Conceptual Roots of Indian Psychology’, traces the history of Indian thought from the *Vedas* and identifies key concepts that uphold and sustain the Indian psyche. It discusses ideas like *ṛtam*, the acceptance of pluralism, the notions of multiple perspectives, different states of consciousness and the types of knowledge. This chapter also highlights the implications of the Indian worldview on the relationship between humans and nature resulting in a paradigm shift of focus in psychology from the study of the other to the study of the self. It then presents the doctrines of *karma*, *dharma*, the role of ubiquitous suffering, the goals of human life like the *puruṣārthas* culminating in the ideal of *mokṣa*, liberation or self-realisation. The chapter concludes by indicating certain parallels and differences with Maslow’s goal of self-actualisation.

The following two chapters revolve around the most fundamental aspects of Indian psychology, that is, the centrality of consciousness and its relation with the mind–body complex. Interestingly enough, there is no unilateral consensus on the definition of the key term ‘consciousness’ itself. Vimal (2009) refers to 40 different meanings of consciousness and concludes saying that the ‘prospects for reaching any single agreed theory-independent definition of consciousness thus appears remote’ (p. 71). The authors seek to throw some light in this regard by providing their readers with an orderly taxonomy of consciousness based on Indian and Western notions to help them get an understanding of its various existing nuances. For example, they classify it into two principle categories—(1) transcendental and (2) transactional—and point out that Western taxonomy of consciousness does not incorporate its

transcendental component, whereas in the Indian context it is essentially transpersonal in nature which is transcognitive yet amenable to direct experience.

The fifth chapter deals with a surgical analysis of the various connotations and implications of the concept of the mind and its relationship with the body in the Indian tradition. The readers will find here a treasure-trove of discussions on the intricate studies of the mind in its multiple aspects that have been decoded and meticulously documented by several schools of thought in India. It also offers a systematic comparative analysis of the different understandings of the mind by Eastern and Western traditions, highlighting the complementarity of conceptual convergences and divergences between the two approaches.

In the next chapter, the authors delve into the notions of self, person and personality as conceived in the various systems of the Indian tradition. They talk about the different levels of the self from fundamental identity to projected identity with detailed references from the various original literary sources starting from the *Upanishads*. The last two parts are special features of this book as they present certain psychometric studies of important concepts like *guṇas* and *doṣa* typologies to document the empirical work that has been carried out on otherwise philosophical concepts.

The following chapter deals with some other key notions that are included in all the branches of psychology, viz. Cognition, Emotion and Volition. These also correspond to the three principle approaches to self-knowledge in Indian thought, that is, the Path of Cognition through knowledge (*jñāna*) or the Path of Emotions through devotion (*bhakti*) or the Path of Volition through developing one’s will in actions (*karma*). The discussions brought forth here elicit the reader to engage with these topics using a very different approach which opens up the prospects of undertaking a lot of original research work in this domain. Western psychology, for example, aims at ego adjustment, whereas the goal of Indian psychology is ego deconstruction. In the case of emotions, Western psychology recognises six basic emotions, but Indian psychology takes into account eight major ones and sometimes includes the emotion related to peace as a ninth one. It also has elaborate discussions on how art and drama often serve to loosen the ego bindings. Listening to good music, for example, can act as a very effective coping mechanism for a sad person.

Another noticeable feature is that the authors are not apologetic about the underlying spiritual objective of Indian psychology despite the dominant ‘scientific’ temperament of the discipline. They categorically state that Indian culture has always sought to develop techniques for spiritual progress through living traditions of spirituality as witnessed in innovative techniques evolved by masters like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in his practice of transcendental meditation.

At this juncture, the discussion moves on seamlessly to a very relevant aspect of this psychology in the chapter titled ‘Applied Indian Psychology’. This highlights its application for mental health and psychological well-being at individual and collective levels in order to enhance human potentials and promote ways of resolving conflicts and living peacefully. It offers insights on the implications of this worldview for human development, for pedagogy, for therapy and for the explorations of extraordinary human experiences. The final section is a comparative study of Indian psychology and positive psychology. According to the authors, both approaches to psychology are value-loaded. The former is rich in its theoretical content, while the latter is predominantly practice-oriented and data-driven. Therefore, they believe that Indian psychology can provide the necessary theoretical framework for many concepts such as flow, positive emotions, spirituality, suffering and so on. Both schools of psychology share certain common objections regarding existing trends of mainstream psychology yet differ in the solutions they propose based on their specific worldviews. The goal of positive psychology is to make people happy and to help them lead meaningful lives. In Indian psychology, leading a meaningful life implies being altruistic and transcending one’s ego and not merely experiencing the pleasures that can rise from various levels of gratifications. The chapter ends by stating that Indian psychology needs to develop a strong empirical base to ground its theories and concepts. It adds that there is great scope for collaboration between Indian and Positive psychologists that could possibly lead to more fruitful and mutually reinforcing findings in the long-run.

The relevance of this book in the global context is particularly highlighted in the eighth chapter. This deals with a much researched subject in the contemporary world, namely ‘Meditation and Applied Yoga’. Today, yoga had gained global popularity primarily as ‘stretching exercises’. This book, however, presents its core principles as being methods for self-realisation and self-transcendence. It dedicates a section on defining meditation from Yogic and Buddhist perspectives and then presents the same from a neurophysiological perspective using empirical data. It also emphasises the impact of meditation on attention, its spiritual and psychic effects, cognitive, conative and emotional effects as well as its healing and therapeutic benefits by providing empirical and concrete results.

The last two chapters deal with the crux of this approach to understanding human nature, namely ‘self-realisation’ using ‘Illustrative Case Studies’. While critiques claim that the concepts of Indian psychology are too lofty and ungrounded, these chapters demonstrate their practical application by delving into the lives of spiritual stalwarts. It examines the experiences of people like ‘Tilak’, a dedicated practitioner of *karma-yoga*, of Saint Tukārāma who

experienced deep self-transformation through *bhakti* (devotion), or that of Ramaṇa Maḥarṣi who attained self-realisation through a process of self-knowledge and Gandhi, who had inspired millions through his journey of personal and social transformation with the message of non-violence. The lives of these people bear testimony to a long tradition of Indian psychologists who engaged in rigorous self-study and application of inner laws of being and acting in their daily lives. In fact, including their stories in this book serves as a reassurance to its readers that while many concepts discussed herein may seem to be very theoretical and complex to grasp, the taste of this pudding lies in its eating. By sharing these narratives, the authors seek to inspire their readers to start implementing such concepts consciously in their personal life which might someday lead them all the way to self-realisation.

Comments

The singular contribution of this work in the context of Indian psychology is the fact that the significant books available on this subject, namely *The Handbook of Indian Psychology* (2008), *Foundations of Indian Psychology, Volume 1: Theories and Concepts* (2010), *Foundations of Indian Psychology, Volume 2: Practical Applications* (2011), *Foundations and Applications of Indian Psychology* (2014) and *Perspectives on Indian Psychology* (2013) amongst a few others, are largely edited volumes based on papers that have been presented in conferences since the inception of this field in 2002. *Psychology in the Indian Tradition* is a concerted effort to weave into a comprehensive whole, the Indic worldview underlying this system of psychology. It has put together various theories that are available in Indian psychology along with their applications in a cohesive manner to enable its readers to get a complete picture of the different domains that can be studied under its umbrella.

The authors have sought to establish as many bridges as they could between concepts and practices from mainstream psychology and Indian psychology. They have tried to link the diverse approaches in both the systems explaining the functionings of the consciousness–mind–body complex of human beings and its interaction with the world around it. The project, therefore, is very ambitious in the range it seeks to cover. This can be regarded by some as its shortcoming since it cannot enter into a very detailed discussion on the various important headings, each of which can be elaborated into an independent book. Seen from another perspective, this shortcoming can also be considered as the strength of this work. The readers are introduced to most of the significant subjects that Indian psychology deals with and, at the same time, they are given

a comparative perspective of these concepts with those in modern psychology, all in one place.

Moreover, modern psychology is predominantly based on empirical experimentations and emphasises on an objective approach to understanding human nature. In comparison with this, Indian psychology is primarily a subjective approach to self-knowledge. Therefore, it tends to appear more like a philosophical discipline due to the extensive philosophico-spiritual frameworks that underlie several of its concepts. Besides this, research methods to investigate the phenomena of the human consciousness as described in Indian texts are still to be evolved and made more easily reproducible by others to help it gain acceptance in the rational world of science today. The reader could find this alternative approach to knowing themselves more challenging than methods adopted by mainstream psychology.

Certain other critiques may object to the authors' frequent use of technical Sanskrit terms. Psychologists who come from a pure background of psychology can find this aspect of the book intimidating. However, there is no easy solution to this hurdle due to the problem of 'Sanskrit non-translatables' (Malhotra, 2011) whereby they cannot be translated by a corresponding English word without reducing their original purport. The readers, therefore, are encouraged to have a brave heart and apply themselves to learning a new and rich vocabulary of Sanskrit terminologies and familiarise themselves with their meanings. In anticipation of this possible criticism, the authors have provided a comprehensive Glossary of Sanskrit and Pāli terms along with a word index at the end of the book to facilitate the reader's comprehension of the text.

Furthermore, the authors also point out in the book that unlike positive psychology which has surged ahead as an independent branch within mainstream psychology with extensive research being undertaken under its banner, and literature being generated on it, Indian psychology is still trying to make inroads in this direction. In this context, the reference section at the end is like a precious mine of books and articles that will generously equip anyone interested in

pursuing Indian psychology with sufficient material to explore and investigate this field in greater depth.

Finally, it is worth reiterating that the importance of this work lies in the fact that it offers a detailed overview of the development of Indian psychology thus far. It also makes some concrete suggestions about the direction of the research that needs to be undertaken in order to establish it as a reliable and valid alternative approach to understanding human nature. As a concluding remark, *Psychology in the Indian Tradition* is a worthy possession for any keen scholar on Indian psychology as it masterfully presents us as readers with more holistic, time-tested and systematic ways to arrive at a deeper and lasting self-realisation of who we are, what we are doing on this earth and how we can live this life in the best way possible.

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