



Rethinking the History of Modern Psychology-A Book Review of ‘Psychology in Modern India: Historical, Methodological, and Future Perspectives’

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Abstract Historiography entails a social construction which is closely linked to questions of power and resistance. Scholars frequently challenge dominant histories, allowing for the emergence of newer ones. The current article is a review of these new constructions of the history of psychology in modern India, as envisioned by a group of scholars and researchers in the book ‘*Psychology in Modern India: Historical, Methodological, and Future Perspectives*’. These scholars and researchers actively debate the past, challenge dominant hierarchies, and present their vision for the future in the book under review. The book is a watershed moment in the ongoing effort to piece together the history of psychology in modern India and must be understood within the context of the editors’ chosen framework that is critical of the positivist tradition and emphasizes Indian philosophical traditions, cultural and contextual relevance. The book is divided into 28 chapters that acknowledge the accomplishments of several Indian pioneers, describe disciplinary routes in major Indian institutions, track the development of certain sub-fields of psychology in the Indian setting, and reflect on many macro and methodological issues. The current article presents a critical review of this book.

Keywords Book review · Cultural and contextual relevance · Indian philosophical traditions · Psychology in modern India · Historical · Methodological · Future perspectives

History connects us with our past, helps us comprehend the present, and gives a glimpse into the future. It thus provides us with a sense of perspective so that we can avoid mistakes that have been made in the past. A critical issue here is how far do we go back in antiquity to understand history. In the context of psychology, this becomes even more complex as much of what we now formally call psychology had its roots in philosophy, which included various other disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, physics, and cosmology. The dual nature of psychology, where at one end it aligns itself with the sciences making it seem impersonal and at the other end with humanities making it seem intimate, makes this endeavour even more difficult.

Historiography entails a social construction which is inextricably linked to questions of dominance and resistance. Dominant histories are often challenged by scholars so that newer constructions emerge. The present article is a review about these new constructions of the history of psychology in modern India as envisioned by a group of scholars and researchers who actively debate the past, challenge dominant hierarchies, and present their vision about the future in the book ‘*Psychology in Modern India: Historical, Methodological, and Future Perspectives*’.

Adding to the complexity of historiography is that in the continuity of history, we must select transformative paradigm shifts where we believe these struggles for power become apparent. This process itself is guided by our own biases and interests. Intelligence, for example, is a social construction that keeps on changing from time to time so that the meaning itself has been subjected to several debates that are closely tied to issues of dominance and power struggles. Psychometricians tried to develop ‘scientific tests’ of intelligence that they claimed were universal and objective but these were criticized for their inherent cultural bias. A response to the criticism led to the development of “culture

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free” or “culture fair tests”, but whether any intelligence tests can be free of culture or can be fair to all cultures is a question open for debate. These social constructions also have very important social implications such as the status we are accorded in society, the kinds of lives we can lead, and how some of us are also made invisible as we do not possess enough of what the society requires us to have at a given point in history (Goodey, 2016). The history of psychology thus has important implications for social policy.

There are often also disagreements about the sources of its constructions even though they may be more easily accessible as contrasted to the conceptual roots which are spread across disciplines (Goodey, 2016). Neuroscientists examine the nature of the construct ‘intelligence’ and so do several religious and spiritual texts and this presents a very complex problem for historiographers. Along the way we must also grapple with the problem of whether the different names for the construct across different historical periods refer to the same or some different constructs. Do *buddhi* and *gyan* refer to the same construct or different conceptualizations of the same construct? All these and several other issues make historiography an extremely complex and a limitless exercise.

At the centre of this entire exercise is the quest for the scientific status of psychology. The conceptions of personality in the history of psychology are only one such example which reveals these struggles. The experimentalists driven by the positivist model claimed that there was one objective truth that was universal and hence trait theories took ascendance. However, several of the constructs subsumed under personality could not be assessed by the so-called scientific methods of psychology. For example, the continuous quest for capturing Freud’s unconscious has led to limited success but it still remains a dominant force in psychology. For others in the field, the subjective and the rich internal world of the individual became dominant such that the focus on understanding phenomenological experience and self-knowledge took centre stage. Thus, these different conceptualizations show that there are different definitions of psychology and this must necessarily imply that there are the possibilities of different histories of psychology (Taylor, 2009).

Much of today’s mainstream psychology is an import of Western psychology which assumes universality of theories that are decontextualized and objective (Misra & Mohanty, 2002). Moreover, in an attempt to make psychology objective, there has been an attempt to remove the subjective aspects of human experience such as consciousness. This decontextualized view of human behaviour is now being questioned by several researchers in the field. In an influential article, Gergen (1996) critically evaluated culture’s place in psychological science elaborating on two traditional conceptions. In the first conception, culture acts as a moderator and is simply viewed in terms of differences. The second

view emphasizes psychological universals and here culture is viewed merely as an impediment to achieving this greater objective of universality. Proposing a different perspective, the researchers effectively argued for a culturally informed approach to psychological science, in which culture and its lived experience take centre stage, and indigenous psychologies are emphasised. Still others such as Cornelissen (2005) have argued that psychological knowledge from the Indian spiritual traditions, with a focus on Indian conceptions of self and consciousness, should be integrated into teaching programmes. Nandita Chaudhary et al. (2022) have also argued that due to the universality of privileging a single world view, psychology has suffered immensely. They also propose a number of strategies to establish a more inclusive psychology, including the adoption of methodologies of cultural psychology, cross-cultural dialogues, and the elimination of current binaries such as East–West and North–South.

Although several scholars have repeatedly argued for making psychology more culturally inclusive, it is the first two conceptions of culture described above that still dominate the majority of Indian colleges and universities. In Indian colleges and universities, the teaching model is predominantly Western, conforming to empiricist positivist paradigms, without regard for the cultural context (Gergen et al., 1996). However, there are signs of change (Misra and Kumar, 2011). It is now widely accepted that to solve our problems and understand the uniqueness of the Indian psyche, we must develop a psychology that embraces our culture and our worldviews. On the one hand, efforts towards indigenization of psychology are gaining momentum, while on the other hand, voices introducing Indian Psychology to colleges and universities of India too are becoming stronger. This however is not an easy task; for, e.g., despite the fact that at least a few psychology departments have sought to introduce Indian psychology rooted in native wisdom and ancient philosophical texts, anecdotal evidence suggests that students struggle to understand important concepts. This could be owing to a number of issues, including the difficulty of translating key concepts from Indian philosophical texts without proper Sanskrit expertise and without taking into account the sociocultural context of the time period in which they were written. Moreover, much of the content in Indian Psychology is related to the experiential mode focusing on the inner world (Dalal, 2010) while the teaching pedagogy in Indian colleges is borrowed from the Western model where the experiential takes a backseat. Thus, it is not just the content of the subject but how it is taught in Indian universities which needs rethinking. To teach such content in a closed classroom, in a manner that is ahistorical, in a language that many times is alien to the students, is indeed a failing proposition and requires rethinking. Furthermore, given India’s diversity, it is clear that a uniform content of

psychology across the country would not be equally relevant for all.

Given the above conditions, it comes as no surprise that psychology in India is still restricted in its scope and not applied enough to grapple with the social issues that India is facing today. Young psychologists with inadequate skills to solve real-life problems are faced with the prospect of poor employment opportunities, low paying jobs, and stagnant career growth. There is also a lack of diversity in the careers as most tend to work in the mental health setting such as counselling, clinical psychology, special education while others work as researchers. Due to these and several other factors, the past few decades have witnessed a steady outflow of Indian students to the West despite efforts by the government to put a halt to this. The increasing globalization has raised further questions about the dominant Western psychology and highlighted the importance of local cultures.

It is within the above context that the present volume titled *Psychology of Modern India: Historical, Methodological, and Future Perspectives* is reviewed. Covering vast temporal, geographical and ideological spaces, the chapters in the edited volume of *Psychology of Modern India: Historical, Methodological, and Future Perspectives* highlight traditions as well as current and future trends; continuity as well as change; similarities as well as diversities and ultimately lead to critical reflections about the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological developments in the history of psychology in modern India. Comprising 28 chapters, the book is divided into four parts. In the introductory chapter, the editors set the scene by outlining briefly the aims and scope of the volume, raising critical issues and providing the historical and conceptual-theoretical context of psychology in modern India.

Part one entitled ‘Historical perspectives’ contains eight chapters that cover the history of modern psychology in undivided India. This evolution is depicted mainly through acknowledging the contributions of pioneers in the field; traversing the different disciplinary pathways and at the same time highlighting its sociopolitical context. Three chapters of Part one cover the rich history of the first department of psychology at Calcutta University; its mentorship and intellectual traditions; as well as its current struggle to move away from the Western paradigm to include applied topics and qualitative approaches. In a later chapter, another author recognises Girindrasekhar Bose’s contributions to the institutionalisation of psychoanalysis in India, while at the same time the author laments psychoanalysis’ waning influence in recent years, critically reflecting on the path forward. The next three chapters focus on areas that are relatively unexplored in other books of a similar kind. These include Bangladesh (beginning from its inception during the British rule in the Indian subcontinent), North East India, and Uttar Pradesh. These chapters written from different vantage

points make the reader aware of the different challenges of these distinct regions. However, these chapters could have offered insights about the developments of the discipline in these regions if the authors had situated them in historical perspectives.

Part two entitled ‘Disciplinary Perspectives’ has four chapters. These chapters focus on epistemological issues that reveal to the reader the growing realization in Indian researchers the need to abandon the postcolonial mindset and replace it with more indigenous paradigms. Within this context, the authors of these chapters discuss the expansion of the scope of psychology in India especially the focus on more community-based, interpersonal interpretations of phenomena as well as the inclusion of the study of classical texts, the meaning of mind, and consciousness. In the first chapter of Part two, the authors of the chapter employ critical historiography to understand the evolution of psychological knowledge in India and emphasize social embeddedness and contextualised knowledge to understand the history of Indian psychology. Another chapter while clarifying the meaning of Indian psychology, effectively argues about its enormous implications for broadening the scope of the field. A third chapter highlights the limitations of much psychological research in India that is steeped in the Euro-American tradition, while also pointing to a few innovative research endeavours that are rooted in indigenization. The last chapter in this part elaborates on the advantages of qualitative methods, methodological pluralism, and the need for theory and research to be socially contextualized.

‘Developments in Sub-fields of Psychology’ is the title of the third part, which comprises nine chapters. In the first four chapters, different authors critically reflect about the history of sub-fields of individual differences, human development, social psychology, and organizational psychology deliberating on the consequences of adopting a Western approach, challenges of indigenization and future directions in these sub-fields. The chapter on mental health critically analyses the traditions of Yoga, Ayurveda, and folk wisdom and the ascendance of the Western system of medicine. Another chapter presents the development of clinical psychology in India and aspects related to its practice and education. Limitations of individualism and reductionism are discussed in a later chapter, where the chapter’s author proposes several alternative approaches favouring a holistic worldview and a holigrative approach. Two chapters are devoted to the developments in the sub-fields of educational and positive psychology, respectively.

There are six chapters that comprise the last part entitled “Critical appraisal and future perspectives”. This part of the volume engages with various macro-level problems that face the larger discipline of psychology. The first chapter raises several pertinent issues related to the western model, its cultural relevance and several epistemological

and methodological premises of Indian psychology. The next chapter emphasizes paradigms that integrate Eastern and Western schools; adoption of introspective and narrative approaches; incorporation of various cultures for inquiry; uniqueness of the mental realm undermined by imaging methods, and finally concludes with a self-analysis which advocates openness to new methods, practices, and questions. The third chapter in this section is a critique of the Western-inspired psychology that is considered by many as “objective, measurable, and universal science” (if this is a direct quote, we need the citation, otherwise single quotes could be used) and at the same time highlights the contributions of Indian psychology. The next chapter identifies the critical features of approaches to issues within Indian and Western knowledge systems by focusing on William James’s views of consciousness and self. In the penultimate chapter, the authors use the metaphor of the “tree of knowledge” to capture the findings from a survey that explores the perspectives of a group of active Indian psychologists. The authors visualize this tree as ever-growing, open and encompassing, bearing socially relevant fruits, and rooted deep in the cultural traditions.

In the postscript, the author of the chapter acknowledges that there could be various historical perspectives, and that the current volume merely presents one of these perspectives. The author states that this perspective is critical of the positivist tradition reflected in Euro-American psychology and instead emphasizes Indian philosophical traditions, cultural, and contextual relevance. The author also discusses strategies to bridge the methodological divide between indigenous and Indian psychology so that relevant social issues within the Indian context can be addressed.

To construct any history is always a difficult endeavour. This volume too, like all other endeavours of a similar nature, represents only one construction of history and this has been acknowledged by several authors in the volume. As the postscript correctly points out, this construction must be understood within the context of the editors’ chosen framework, which emphasises cultural and contextual relevance. When this construction of history is supported by multiple perspectives from authors who lean mainly on authoritative secondary sources such as the ICSSR surveys, several books (e.g. Dalal, 1990; Misra, 2003), but also on primary resources as well as personal reflections then the reader is provided with a construction of history which is rich, complex, and situated. The detailed references of journals and books add to the validity of this perspective on the history of psychology in modern India. The editors have also made a heterogenous sampling of researchers in an attempt to limit bias. Many of them are leading researchers who have shaped the field of psychology in India while others are young emerging psychologists who have done innovative work in the field thus providing the reader different perspectives.

How is this book different from the rest of the books of a similar kind? Firstly, the volume presents well-informed and critical perspectives about the history of psychology in modern India from a large team of authors. This multiplicity of voices however, also entails the challenge of losing some comprehensiveness, yet the editors have done an excellent job in addressing this issue. The chapters, while being written by multiple authors in different styles, are interwoven in a seamless manner so that the challenges of psychology in modern India soon become very apparent to the reader.

Secondly, various chapters have acknowledged the contributions of many Indian pioneers who were hitherto unknown; clearly documented the disciplinary paths in different Indian institutions that have not received much attention as yet by similar books, traced the developments of chosen sub-fields of psychology in the Indian context; and, reflected on various macro problems as well as methodological issues. The inclusion of some universities from South India and the contributions of some women pioneers would have made the volume more representative of this history. Also, as has been pointed out in the postscript of the volume there is hardly any emphasis on inter- and trans-disciplinary research in the volume. Furthermore, applied psychology, neurosciences, sports psychology, new therapies, and globalisation of psychology are some of the emerging fields and areas that could be incorporated in future projects. The volume would also have benefited by the histories of certain leading institutions that have made significant contributions to rural development in India, such as the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (Hyderabad) and the Institute of Rural Management (Anand).

Thirdly, as the title of the book suggests the primary focus of this book is history yet the authors have been very successful in raising many contemporary issues thereby integrating the past, present, and future. These issues are related mainly to pertinent epistemological concerns that demonstrate the current disenchantment with a Euro-American framework that ignores Indian ethos. The authors also propose several alternatives and acknowledge the current indigenization initiatives occurring in India. Although some attempts have been made in the volume to understand the impact of these frameworks on Indian policies and legislations, to a large extent these have been omitted. This could have been due to space limits imposed by such a large-scale endeavour and it is hoped that these omissions can be addressed to some degree in future projects.

Who is this book recommended for? The book is very rigorous, and well-researched. Most chapters are very easy to read but a few chapters require some advanced knowledge for critical reflections (e.g. Chapter 6 and Chapter 22). The chapters have a continuity but can also be read independently of each other. So, one can choose chapters depending

upon one's level and one's interest. It is recommended for all students, teachers, researchers, as well as practitioners in the field of psychology who will be welcomed by the rich histories of the departments as well as that of the sub-fields of psychology, contributions of pioneers, methodological innovations, practice of psychology, future trends, etc., in the history of psychology in modern India. This book is also a must-read for anyone in India who is trying to create a professional identity and develop a sense of community belongingness. Policymakers can use this book to translate the ideas and reflections of eminent Indian psychologists into policies and legislation that are sensitive to the needs of the Indian people. The book can be considered a milestone in the continuing quest for constructing the history of psychology in modern India. The book is, however, rather expensive, which may put it out of reach for some potential buyers.

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