



# Reclaiming Indian Psychology: Some Reflections

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**Abstract** This short essay shares reflections on Sinha's seminal paper published in 1965 from a historical perspective. It is organised in three sections. The first section delineates the changing world and Indian context from 1965 to 2022, with a discussion on colonisation, post-colonial psychology in India and the current movement towards decolonisation. Section two discusses some theoretical and meta-theoretical points on Indian psychology (IP), a few raised by Sinha. The final section concludes with the way forward for both IP as well as psychology in India.

**Keywords** Indian psychology · Consciousness · Research methods · Epistemology

## Changing World and Indian Context: 1960s to Now

Sinha's context of psychology in India, the current world context, and the Indian context of psychology are vastly different. It is astonishing as one reflects on this change in living memory of the post-colonial world that globalised rapidly from the 80's onwards. We note that colonisation and globalisation may have overlaps and yet also present distinctive features, especially for a country such as India.

Academically, there is greater acceptance of culture as the organiser and co-creator of psyche. The defining role of culture in cognition, affect, as well as behavioural processes is increasingly being accepted by the Euro-American

psychologists. A small but influential group of psychologists across all cultures work to reclaim and re-examine the indigenous systems of knowledge across the ex-colonised and increasingly globalised worlds. Three key movements of thought are concomitant to this turn of events: The linguistic turn in psychology which leads to accepting the centrality of culture, the advances in neurosciences aided by advances in technologies and finally an increasing, albeit a grudging acceptance that the psychology that arose in Western Europe and later in North America was a particular psychology of those times and context, not representative of the universal ways of being, becoming, relating and doing. The linguistic turn, starting with the work of Wittgenstein and later works by cross-cultural and cultural psychologists opened the space for culture as a co-creator of psyche (Choi et al., 1999; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Advances in neurosciences gave way to a proposal that brain is 'an organ of culture' (see Ambady & Bharucha, 2009; Rule et al., 2011). The idea that brain function is influenced by culture has led to a strong proposal of cultural neuroscience.

This brings us to one of the important undercurrents in Sinha's paper. How have psychologists attempted to bridge the different world-views, metaphors and the more detailed frameworks/pathways; macro- and micro-theories, especially, in India? Sinha called for 'integrating' Indian psychological thought with 'modern' psychology. The process of integration can happen in three ways. First, is a possibility when the meta-theoretical assumptions of the positivistic, empirical psychology form the super structure and the indigenous knowledge systems are retrofitted or at best accessorised to the main system. The 100-year, body of research on Yoga is an example of that. Researchers proposed contextual, reductive hypotheses and tested them; they found that Yoga works according to their limited measurable parameters. A similar enterprise seems to be ongoing

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in case of Buddhist meditation practices. Is Sinha calling for such an enterprise? Colonised societies in the early years of their political independence grappled with this model, in their attempts to adapt to the paradoxical realities of the large repositories of traditional knowledge systems in these societies and the massive demands of post-colonial ‘futures’ of their nations. The second model is initiated by the Euro-American psychologies, which looks at comparisons between different cultures and grants possibly an equal stature to different psychologies. This model, however, continues with the methods of the positivistic, empiricist assumptions and therefore, perpetuates an imposed ethic, albeit in a sophisticated sense. The final and perhaps the relevant model for the Indian psychologies would be to fundamentally re-assess the analytical categories of a Euro-American tradition that inform the philosophy and meta-theoretical superstructure of psychological science. In the last ten years, this last model has been the frontier of psychological science in a home run for Indian psychological thought. Due to the advances in neurosciences, computer and medical technologies, and importantly globalisation, experimental psychology itself has reached the footsteps of consciousness, where the scholars and scientists now debate the ‘minimal’ self (Metzinger, 2000), or what Albahari (2011) calls as ‘ownerless’ consciousness, as well as study the embodied, enactive, enminded consciousness!! Ownerless consciousness indicates awareness, which does not ‘own’ the experience as me or mine. Several Scholars in philosophy have been discussing this aspect of consciousness; is the ‘mineness’ of experience connected to selfhood, for example (see, Gallagher, 2014; Haim & Ramprasad, 2018; Sideritis et al., 2011).

This brings us to the radical possibilities of decolonisation. Early scholars, including Sinha, but also importantly Misra, Paranjpe, and Rao (see, Misra & Gergen, 1993a, 1993b; Misra & Gergen, 1993a, 1993b; Gergen et al., 1996; Dalal & Misra, 2010; Chaudhary et al., 2022; Paranjpe, 2005; Rao & Paranjpe, 2016) have continued to write on the impact of colonisation on indigenous knowledge systems including IP, but this movement did not find the momentum in the Indian context, due to multiple factors which Chaudhary et al. (2022) discuss. With the advances in neuroscience, the medical and computer technology and the ‘linguistic turn’, we, the colonised can now find strength to call for a decolonised psychological science, which by default must mean the indigenous psychologies of various meta-theoretical assumptions. These raise fundamental questions in the domain of methods as the experimental method has continued to be the mainstream as ‘science’, not recognising its indigeneity in the European and North American context itself, when it comes to methods. For example, the *Handbook of Attention* (Fawcett et al., 2015, pp. 325–349), chapter on attention and action, self-critiques the limitations of the experimental method in understanding attention, eye

movements and action. We need to extrapolate this to the Indian context of Yogasana and the phenomenal nature of moment by moment shifts in attention/gain of function, to recognise how reductive our current understanding of Yoga is. Another example, say, Indian dance system with its nuanced systems of mudra, nritta and abhinaya, as mirrored and performed is studied by psychologists, and we become aware that the positivistic experimental method is a particular kind of method among the many methods of science, which not only reduces knowledge but also gives an illusion that one indeed ‘knows’.

Can we apply the experimental method on Yogasana of attention and action or the dancer performing Marga? Certainly, we can—what will it reveal and how will it help? If we get to know that which the tradition claimed, then, how does one question the meta-assumption of the mainstream science, till we continue to perpetuate false knowledge—similar to the toxic value of coconut oil, questions on cholesterol and the cultural interpretation of feeding with your hands as ‘force-feeding’ a child!

We know then, the values of science—of scepticism and proof as different from values of Yoga—for experiential truth as proof and sharing of that truth for well-being for all. Both are necessary and true. The philosophies of psychology emanating from yoga and from current science arise from different worldviews. The body-mind-consciousness is central in IP—but, is for the benefit of all and not its commercialization/commodification.

### Decolonisation and Globalisation in Social Sciences Academia

The debate to decolonise is alive in almost all humanities and social sciences, across the world. The scholarship has till now primarily focussed on race and is a discussion point in South America and Europe, but it recognises the devastating impact of colonisation across the world—in Africa, South America, North America, and Australia. Several works have triggered these debates, such as the decolonising of the research methods itself, by a Māori social scientist, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Smith, 2021), which plainly documents that social science research methods were by themselves methodologies of systematic loot and appropriation of both symbolic and material indigenous resources. One of the outcomes of colonisation has been the effacement of the indigenous knowledge and wisdom traditions, and/or the dilution and fragmentation of the knowledge systems into the Euro-American analytical and disciplinary categories. The fragmentation of the knowledge systems is so profound that native Indians, speaking in Indian languages, will find this alienating. Societies have faced a clean rupture in the flow of their indigenous

traditions. Several issues that have further effaced the Indian knowledge traditions, post-independence are conformity with the existing university structures, the desperation to secure tenured academic positions, the sheer inability to create and nurture institutions that can think creatively, without self-censoring (see also Dalal & Misra, 2010).

Psychologists such as Moghaddam have discussed intensively why ‘third world psychologies’ are mimicking psychologies through a process of double reification and proposed that the solution lies in ‘Omni culturalism’ (see, Moghaddam, ; Moghaddam & Lee, 2006). So, now we have three concepts – the ‘indigenous psychology’ of the colonised world, who were turned ‘third world’ based on economic power. In parallel, the globalisation movement gathers speed and there is now a sudden acceleration of multi-cultural and multi-directional exchange. This brings the necessity to cohere all the divergent strands and therefore, the terms ‘Omni-culturalism’ and a globally relevant psychology. A globally, relevant psychology may be reached; its pathway must necessarily be navigated through intensive reflection and reclaiming of the indigeneity rather than papering it over. In India, this quest to reclaim indigeneity has frequently been understood simplistically. Psychologists look at this quest as a camp/lobby like project, dishonouring or casually examining the case for what it represents for a millennia-old history. As a serious enquiry, a mature analysis needs to expect that decolonisation as a process, will go through several churns and debates and still not be dismissed as ‘camps’ or ‘lobbies’. The initial versions of the articulation of this honouring of indigeneity of IP might struggle to find that exact note, given that there is a transition ongoing. The argument in India that decolonisation would be a ‘right leaning’ project is immature; an evidence of the poor historical understanding of the history of Indian psychological thought as well as a mindless importation of the European categories. The critique of a perceived internal homogeneity or the fear that homogeneity will be ‘imposed’ by IP equally shows a poor understanding of the rich intellectual traditions of India. Some examples of this heterogeneity have been pointed out by Paranjpe and Rao (2016).

It is increasingly noted that knowledge construction in psychology follows the practices of psychology of WEIRD-Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Developed countries (Henrich et al., 2010a, 2010b; Jones, 2010; Nielsen et al., 2017). Note that, in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the colonies that became newly independent, inherited the category of ‘modern’ in general and modern psychology, in specific from their colonisers. Indigenous psychological thought was deemed by the colonisers as irrelevant and anti-modern or on the other hand esoteric and ‘other-worldly’. So, we have Yoga and contemplation taken internationally, and yet not taught in IP curricula.

This circle is turning now, after 70 years. The idea of ‘modernity’ or ‘progress’ has been problematised as a European modernity, with its own legacy concerns and the notion of a linear ‘progress’. Other cultures may have arrived at ‘modernity’ earlier or differently. Cultural psychology and its scholarship has increasingly gained notice *away* from the earlier models of cross-cultural psychology (Berry et al., 1997; Kitayama & Cohen, 2010; Shweder & Sullivan, 1993; Valsiner, 2014), where Valsiner (2014) in particular discusses culture as a semiotic framework. The core of IP, in its conceptual as well as practice architecture as well as continuing living practices, reaches out to all—through its objectives of the removal of suffering for all humanity. IP therefore is a globally relevant psychology, not a cultural psychology alone. It is possible that there are other indigenous psychologies, which are also trans-cultural in their objectives, but one can only propose what one knows and lives—the IP (see also Paranjpe, 2006).

Decolonising psychology is an imperative, especially in the teaching–learning contexts. It might be said that there was indeed no Indian civilisation and there were multiple migrations, exchanges, etc. Notwithstanding these churns in history, there were and are particular continuities that allow for this term—Indian civilizational ethos found in languages, symbolic meaning making frameworks, world-views, values and lived practices, these cannot be denied or wished away. Generations of people, historically and in contemporary times, from both academic and non-academic contexts, have appreciated and practised the Indian civilizational understanding and frameworks of well-being such as Buddhism and its different schools, Vedanta and its different perspectives, bhakti and yoga/samkhya. While there is a legitimate criticism that yoga has been reduced to physical exercises and tucked within the broader rubric of ‘mindfulness’ and that IP has been distorted or appropriated in academic ecosystem; at the same time, seeker communities, even if very small in numbers have lived and attempted to follow IP and its civilizational ethos, while not born in the geography of India. Several examples of such teachers and their communities abound—Swami Sivananda Radha, Students of Sri Mahesh Yogi, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Yogananda, and Swami Rama. Several academic scholars of Yoga for example were students of Yoga masters (see Goleman & Davidson, 2017).

Sinha’s paper makes several substantive points relevant today for discussion. The advances in neurosciences, computer, and medical technologies (from 1965 to 2022) have brought psychology to the footsteps of consciousness. Along with a ‘consciousness boom’ (as seen in the discussion by Zahavi, 2011) in research, we have an innovative neurophenomenology as a research method (Dreyfus, 2011; Varela, 1996), the discovery of the mirror neurons in the late 90’s, and the studies on self-awareness among the animal

kingdom—consciousness as a subject of study today, is not antiscientific or a speculative philosophical question. Cognitive scientists are now proposing to examine non-representational reflexivity and non-dual awareness in understanding consciousness (see, Josipovic, 2019). Empirically, anomalies of consciousness, altered states of consciousness, meditative flow states and brain functions are studied neuro-phenomenologically. True, that the studies are largely limited to understanding consciousness mapped to neural function, but we have moved. Sinha does not discuss consciousness but discusses metaphysics and epistemology. Indian epistemology was studied as a prerequisite to making claims about ontology and metaphysics. Indeed, the word *pratyaksha*—generally translated as empirically real, was distinguished from a mere sense-based empiricism and reality beyond the momentary and limited sensory awareness. The contemporary research is able to discuss these points with the lived practices of the monks themselves. Of course, the current interest in machine cognition and consciousness also drives these questions, but they do point to an unmistakable overhaul of the philosophy of psychology.

Consciousness has been important in its meta-theoretical assumptions—metaphysics, ontology, epistemological concerns and ethics/axiology. Of these, the primacy of epistemology or ‘*Pramana*’ is the key to unlock IP; indicated by Sinha and by several scholars thereafter esp., of the Yogācāra schools (Lusthaus, 2004). It is the episteme that unlocks all claims of reality and its categories. In this process, several contradictions in the contemporary philosophy of psychology get exposed and will continue to be discussed, such that, it is the psychological science itself, which will turn full circle.

As mentioned, Indic civilization has an un-broken history of possibly several psychologies, where several key concerns continue to reverberate. IP proposes many ideas of consciousness and contrary to the current mainstream physicalist ideas, which mix up mind and consciousness, differentiates between theories of mind and theories of consciousness. The centrality of consciousness, an internal and external world, which is coherent and is sustained by the coherence (Dharma) and the possibility of an ‘engaged emancipation’ where suffering ends for all, not just for the human self (Sambodhi/Jivanmukti) are the background notes of IP. This is a common concern for all Indic psychologies. Beyond this basic consonance, the Buddhists, the Jinas, the Vedantins, the dvaitins and the Yoga-samkhya and others can and do disagree. At the fundamental level, IP is the enquiry on consciousness, its embodied enmindedness that reveals as the different bodies and minds in this world along with the practices to recognise and free oneself from suffering. In recent times, several have weighed in on these questions (e.g. Chaddha, 2015; Ganeri, 2012; Hayes & Timalina, 2017; Ramprasad, 2001; Timalina, 2011, 2012).

In such a scenario, the earlier binary debates between East vs. West, quantitative vs. qualitative, and nature vs nurture need to give way to a more reflective understanding of what psychology is, where it was mistaken to be, and what psychology is not. What psychology could be—that question is unequivocally worth examining through the living lens of IP. The meta-theoretical assumptions, theoretical formulations and applied practices of IP can radically revise the academic discipline and practice of mainstream psychology, including a radical overhaul of the teaching learning practice, with its focus on experiential learning, making psyche less commodified and commercial, more embedded in the environment, less narcissistic and less locked in the body, neurotransmitters and eye tracking labs.

In summary, not seen anywhere in the research literature is the architecture of IP—initiating from the centrality of consciousness and the placement of concepts in an architectural frame that then lead to downstream macro- and micro-theories. Therefore, a set of macro and micro-theories of each aspect of psyche—cognition, affect, action, needs to be the agenda for Indian psychologists themselves that gives them and the students a big picture view or the lay of the land. Currently, psychologists in India largely limit themselves to test the null or the alternate hypothesis but do not engage with the lay of the land and whether the land is a desert, mountainous region or a fertile plain. The agenda for research, even in IP, is driven by alienation, such as fashionable trends or commercial interests. For example, even as cognitive psychology is in trend, very few psychologists in India have worked with Indian music or painting or the creative process that involves imagery, including auditory imagery. Another key unaddressed aspect of IP has been the lack of interest in Bhakti tradition. Bhakti and hatha yoga traditions that consolidated in India from ninth century onwards reflect a radical transformation in IP as an Indian social psychology. Bhakti movement therefore led to a complex yet Indian modernity, with focus on social reform. In general, Buddhism is presented as an alternative to the problems of caste in the hierarchical Hindu social systems. Undoubtedly, the great Buddha was indeed, the first of the Indian modernists, preaching in Pali; the project of modernity to address the issues of caste in Indian society are better addressed by Bhakti movement for two reasons: one it democratised knowing and being in a shared social sense, removing the last barrier between monks/nuns as well as the laity (which persisted in the Buddhist context) and second, Bhakti is more embodied and enactive; infused with day to day lived experiences—with day to day rituals, music, dance and satsang—which bring shared joy and not just insight. While, there is a scholarly interest in ‘no mind’ or Samadhi, as a radical theory in Indian psychology, the point that IP of bhakti makes is that freedom from suffering makes sense only when one is living. Can there be freedom while living?

What is the value of freedom otherwise? This has not been examined by psychologists in India.

Sinha mentions that Indian psychological concepts need to be tested; but would that be in labs? In this age of portable EEG's and wearables, psychologists in India need to radically reconceptualise research itself, even when they are not studying concepts such as Dharma!—even within the experimental context. Neuroscience will lead to the frontiers of the body, but we will then need to do more! In the last 150 years of the exchange between East and West, seekers are found across the world; the key political point, without generating adversarial binaries between East and West, is dual. Firstly, we need to acknowledge the brutal loss to the Indic civilization and its ontological, epistemological and axiological frameworks. Secondly, we need a sustained movement, an open enquiry on IP—on macro- and micro-theories, world-views which are invisible and present and every day embodied practices of immersion and well-being.

If we gaze towards future, the most important purpose for IP is the key challenge that physicalism throws at humanity. At the core of the physicalist argument is the nature of self/consciousness as physical and whether humanity can be shaped and controlled by humans themselves or by others and/or non-human forces. IP presents an alternate world-view beyond the impurified ideas of 'God', non-human machines, and an emergent consciousness from complex systems; IP views material as *imbued with and the manifestation of* consciousness and can be located as a naturalistic framework, without the Abrahamic baggage of divinity and spirituality. In a fascinating flip of irony, all is recognised and lived as spiritual in a non-Abrahamic sense. The continued application of IP towards well-being emphatically states that the human and indeed the whole universe is ever free; the only welcome bondages that the self 'accepts' are the bonds of ahimsa (love) and dharma (coherence). This is possibly the reason why IP presents a strong counter to the physicalist argument. To this end psychologists, not only from India, but across the world need to be galvanised into instituting and practising an Indian consciousness-based psychology.

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