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Short communication

A Brief Introduction to Indian Psychology

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Abstract

This paper explores the emergence, development, current state and role of Indian psychology, a field rooted in the rich spiritual and philosophical traditions of the Indian subcontinent. Distinct from Western psychological paradigms that often bring individualism and detachment to the fore, Indian psychology focuses on holistic self-awareness and the interconnectedness of all beings, encapsulated in the Vedic principle of Ātmānam viddhi ('know thyself'). In its evolution, Indian psychology has made a journey from colonial influences to the development of culturally relevant frameworks addressing contemporary mental health challenges. This discipline not only offers profound insights into human behavior but also emphasizes moral and spiritual development and its current global relevance. As we are increasingly facing mental health issues and are in search of a deeper meaning in life, an Indian psychological perspective is becoming essential. By integrating traditional concepts with modern practices, Indian psychology can enhance well-being and promote resilience, making it a vital resource for individuals and communities seeking to navigate the complexities of modern life. Indian psychology has the potential to contribute significantly to global discussions on mental well-being, consciousness, and personal growth, fostering a deeper comprehension of the human psyche, which transcends geographical boundaries and takes into account the cultural dimension. Quite importantly for psychological science, the integration of Indian psychology into global discourse can be instrumental in promoting a more holistic understanding of mental health, the one that respects cultural differences while attending to universal human needs. The article describes the traditions of Indian psychology and the directions taken by Indian psychology researchers in the face of the challenges of today.

Keywords: Indian psychology, spiritual, self-awareness, mental health, cultural context

Краткое введение в индийскую психологию

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Аннотация

В статье исследуется возникновение, развитие, современное состояние и значение индийской психологии — области научного знания, уходящей корнями в богатые духовные и философские традиции Индийского субконтинента. В отличие от западных психологических парадигм, которые часто подчеркивают индивидуализм и отстраненность, в центре внимания индийской психологии находится целостное самосознание и взаимосвязь всех существ, воплощенных в ведическом принципе Атманам виддхи («познай самого себя»). Эволюция индийской психологии отражает переход от колониального влияния к разработке культурно значимых систем, направленных на решение актуальных современных проблем психического и психологического здоровья. Индийская психология не только дает глубокое представление о поведении человека, но и уделяет особое внимание нравственному и духовному развитию личности, подчеркивая его актуальность в современном глобальном контексте. Поскольку мы сталкиваемся с растущими проблемами психического и психологического здоровья и ищем более глубокий смысл в жизни, потребность в подходе, сложившемся в индийской психологической науке, становится первостепенной для научной психологии. Объединяя традиционные концепции с современными практиками, индийская психология может способствовать улучшению самочувствия и повышению жизнестойкости, что делает ее жизненно важным ресурсом для отдельных людей и сообществ, стремящихся разорваться в сложностях современной жизни. Индийская психология может внести значительный вклад в глобальные дискуссии о психическом и психологическом благополучии, самосознании и личностном росте, способствуя более глубокому пониманию человеческой психики, выходящему за рамки географических границ, с учетом разнообразия культурных контекстов. Интеграция индийской психологии в глобальный научный психологический дискурс может способствовать всеобъемлющему пониманию психического здоровья, при котором уважаются культурные различия и учитываются общечеловеческие потребности, что действительно важно для развития психологической науки. В статье описаны традиции индийской психологии и направления современных исследований индийских психологов, релевантные вызовам сегодняшнего дня.

Ключевые слова: индийская психология, духовность, самосознание, психическое здоровье, культурный контекст

1. History and origin

Indian psychology is a distinctive approach rooted in the spiritual and philosophical traditions developed by India over thousands of years. It embraces indigenous concepts, frameworks, and methods intended to promote psychological transformation rather than limiting itself to a study of the psychological characteristics of the Indian population. The term ‘Indian’ is used not to limit its scope but to honour the origin of the philosophy and knowledge systems underlying this approach (Cornelissen et al. 2011). At its core, Indian psycho-

logy offers a holistic perspective on human nature, with insights applicable across various cultures and capable of contributing to global psychology as a whole. Foundational texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita bring into focus self-realization, liberation, and the understanding of consciousness, shaping the very rudiments of Indian psychological practices.

Central to Indian psychology is the concept of Ātmānam viddhi — ‘know thyself’ — which has served as a guiding principle from Vedic times to the present. It asserts that self-knowledge is key to understanding universal truths, as the individual self

is intrinsically linked to the cosmos. Indian psychology underscores that self-realization is not limited to intellectual understanding but involves transforming one's knowledge into one's behavior and life (Rao, Paranjpe 2016). This deeper understanding fosters lasting happiness and fulfillment, aiming to cultivate authentic, ethical living. Instead of focusing merely on theoretical knowledge, Indian psychology prioritizes experiential practices and inner mastery as a means of bringing about real change in one's consciousness and way of life (Cornelissen et al. 2011).

Formal study of psychology in India began in the early 20th century with efforts to formalize it as a full-fledged academic field. In 1905 B. N. Seal established one of the first psychological laboratories, with the first psychology department at the University of Calcutta following in 1915. Pioneers like Narendra Nath Sengupta and G. Bose sought to integrate Western psychological models with Indian philosophical ideas, developing frameworks that reflected both cultural contexts. Despite this foundation, psychology in Indian universities eventually became dominated by Western paradigms, as many Indian psychologists trained in the U.S. and U.K. imported Western concepts, methods, and research topics, sidelining native insights and methods. This reliance on Western models led to psychology in India often being detached from local traditions and challenges, contributing little to national development.

In recent decades, however, there has been a growing awareness of the limitations inherent in the uncritical adoption of Western psychology in India coupled with a renewed interest in indigenous psychological frameworks. Scholars like H. S. Asthana (Asthana 1988), H. S. R. Kao and D. Sinha (Kao, Sinha 1997), J. Pandey (Pandey 2004), and G. Misra (Misra 2011) have pointed out that Indian psychology is capable of addressing contemporary psychological challenges and making meaningful contributions. G. Misra (Misra 2011), in particular, has observed signs of an emerging 'paradigm shift' as more Indian psychologists set out to explore native theories and methods, striving for a psychology that harmonizes global and local perspectives. This shift holds promise for bridging the gap between 'Indian psychology' and 'psychology in India', fostering a more culturally relevant and impactful field.

The emphasis on consciousness, self-mastery, and transformation in Indian psychology provides a unique alternative to mainstream psychological frameworks. Indian psychology views consciousness as fundamental, transcending time and space, and sees the individual as interconnected with broader

physical and metaphysical realities (Cornelissen et al. 2011). This perspective allows Indian psychology to naturally incorporate non-physical realities and parapsychological phenomena. It suggests that consciousness research and first-person methods for inner exploration could play a central role in future studies within this field. As this paradigm gains momentum, Indian psychology could potentially inspire a new wave of global interest in understanding human potential, inner transformation, and well-being.

2. Indian psychology vs. Western psychology

Indian psychology offers a unique approach which is distinct from Western psychological frameworks and has emerged from an indigenous foundation deeply embedded in Indian culture, spirituality, and values. Table 1 shows that unlike Western psychology, which primarily focuses on observable behaviors and measurable mental processes, Indian psychology stresses subjective experience, consciousness, and spirituality as pathways to self-understanding and growth. Rooted in empirical science, Western psychology often reduces human experience to cognitive and physiological factors. In contrast, Indian psychology regards the mind as a bridge to the divine, with self-realization and inner transformation as central objectives.

While sometimes equated with indigenous psychology, Indian psychology represents a unique theory-loaded framework with a defined conception of human nature built on Indian philosophical and spiritual thought. Indigenous psychology aims to develop culturally relevant concepts and methods by adjusting and adapting while designing psychological studies that align with native sociocultural contexts (Pandey 2004). However, it is often more neutral in theory and adaptable to various Western perspectives like behaviorism or cognitive psychology. Indian psychology, by contrast, stems from an integrated worldview that encompasses its own meta-theoretical base and methods for understanding and transforming human behavior. This sets it apart as a distinct psychological tradition akin to systems like psychoanalysis or behaviorism (Table 1).

The indigenous perspective in Indian psychology prioritizes interconnectedness and unity with all beings rather than the individualistic focus seen in many Western models. It encourages self-realization (atman) as part of a universal consciousness (brahman), underscoring a holistic view where physical, mental, and spiritual well-being are interdependent. This perspective advances moral and ethical development as essential to psychological

Table 1. Difference between Indian psychology and Western psychology

Aspect	Indian psychology	Western psychology
Primary focus	Focuses on the individual and their consciousness	Focuses on the individual's interaction with their environment
Key emphasis	Places a high value on subjective and personal experiences	Prioritizes observable behavior and external, measurable phenomena
Methodological approach	Uses a flexible, inclusive approach, integrating various techniques	Relies heavily on experimental methods
Approach to concept	Holistic and integrated	Focused and breakdown-oriented
View on ego	Views ego as something that needs to be surpassed during the journey to self-realization	Views ego as a necessary part of personality, with a focus on adjustment and adaptation to society
Value system	Psychology is deeply rooted in cultural and ethical values, aiming for moral and spiritual growth	Maintains a value-neutral stance, focusing on scientific objectivity without moral judgment
Role of subjectivity	Considers that subjective experiences are essential in understanding the self	Less emphasis on subjective experiences; favours objectivity
Perspectives	Both first-person (experiential) and third-person (observational) perspectives are considered essential	Primarily emphasizes the third-person (observer) perspective
Practical application	Seeks to promote inner growth, self-awareness, and transformation of the individual's consciousness	Aims to manage or correct behavior, often seeking to restore balance or 'normal' functioning
Mental health focus	Focuses on the positive development of mental well-being, often focusing on prevention and self-improvement	Focuses more on treating dysfunction, resolving issues, and 'fixing' problems

Note. Written with reference from 'Scope, substance, and methods of study' by Rao, K. R., Paranjpe, A. C. (2016). *Psychology in the Indian tradition* (pp. 1–32). Springer Publ., New Delhi. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-81-322-2440-2_1

growth, viewing the mind as both a tool and a barrier in the journey toward self-discovery.

Indian psychology also manifests a pan-human relevance, much akin to psychoanalysis, which originated in Europe but has become applicable worldwide. Although it has its roots in the Indian subcontinent, its principles are designed to deal with universal aspects of human experience. This framework provides systematic models to study human nature, with an emphasis on wisdom, inner peace, and collective harmony over material success and individual achievement. In this sense, Indian psychology extends beyond a mere indigenous approach; it holds the potential to contribute valuable insights to global psychology (Rao, Paranjpe 2016).

In the Indian context, both Indian and indigenous psychologies are complementary to each other. While Indian psychology is well-structured and theoretically grounded in ancient Indian wisdom, the strengths of indigenous psychology lie in its flexibility to focus on particular sociocultural needs and contexts without strict theoretical allegiance. Together, these two perspectives add a deeper understanding of psychological processes by integrating cultural concepts with broader human values and goals that are necessary for a compre-

hensive approach to psychological theory, research, and practice.

3. Modern Indian psychology

Since the colonial times, modern psychology in India has grown into a discipline that combines indigenous knowledge with contemporary scientific practices. It started with early influences from Western psychology during the British colonial period, centring mainly on behaviorism and psychometric approaches. However, it was not until the latter half of the 20th century that Indian psychology began to claim its identity, emphasizing the need to incorporate local cultural values and philosophical traditions.

Several scholars have conducted historical analyses of the evolution of psychology as a discipline. One notable work is D. Sinha's monograph, *Psychology in a Third World Country: An Indian Experience* (Sinha 1986), which distinguishes four different phases in the development of modern psychology in India: (I) the period before independence, (II) the period of growth and development after independence, (III) the period marked by research aimed at resolving specific problems, and (IV) the

phase focused on integrating indigenous perspectives and solutions. This book provides a thorough explanation of the trajectory of psychology in India up until the early 1980s. D. Sinha has also authored a detailed history of social psychology in India (Sinha 1998) and an important chapter on the indigenization of psychology in the Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology (Sinha 1997). He has advocated the concept of a psychology that is culturally rooted in India (Sinha 1996) and has contributed importantly to the shaping of modern psychology in the country (Sinha et al. 2015).

Scholars like A. K. Dalal (Dalal 1990; 2011) and A. K. Dalal & G. Misra (Dalal, Misra 2010) have further dissected historical trends in psychology in India, revealing that the rich Indian thought systems had little impact on the formal academic psychology established during the colonial period. This resulted in a continuous enthusiasm for building a science aligned with the positivist mode, often separating academic pursuits from the realities of societal issues. In the postcolonial context, a liberal Indian mindset persisted, albeit marginally improved. It allowed for diverse traditions — something that led to the adoption of three primary streams: 'experimental psychology, psychoanalysis, and intelligence testing', all perceived as culture-free. Post-independence, there was a growing awareness of the lack of social relevance in psychological research, prompting a reorientation toward more applied studies. This shift contributed to the crisis of identity within the discipline, triggering a move toward indigenization. In his recent assessment, A. K. Dalal (Dalal 2014) called for a paradigm shift in psychological research, noting that the emerging science of Indian origin required new frameworks.

The volume edited by K. Joshi and M. Cornelissen (Joshi, Cornelissen 2004) examines the Indian tradition of Yoga and consciousness, while G. Misra's Handbook of Psychology in India (Misra 2011) emphasizes contemporary developments that connect indigenous thought with qualitative methodologies. G. Misra (Misra 2013) further explores contributions in psychology and psychoanalysis from Indian and Western perspectives. S. K. Kiran Kumar (Kumar 2008; 2011) documents the evolution of indigenous concepts, noting a disconnection between personal philosophies and professional values among Indian psychologists. This divide has led some researchers to largely revisit concepts like Anasakyi, Ahamkar, and Santosh in the context of modern issues relating to personality, self, health, emotion, and well-being.

A significant input into the history of psychology in India has come from the Heritage Papers of Early Leading Indian Psychologists, published

by the Asiatic Society (Deb et al. 2017a; 2017b). This two-volume collection offers insights into a body of research spanning the period from 1916 to 1965, illustrating a range of concerns addressed as academic challenges. The thematic analysis puts into relief the growing importance of fields such as social psychology, personality, experimental psychology, and abnormal psychology while noting that psychoanalysis has diminished over time.

Various efforts have documented the historical trajectory of psychology at different times (Mitra, Mukhopadhyay 1958; Pandey 2004; Paranjpe 2024; Rao 1962; Sengupta 1926; Sinha 1963). These publications summarize research trends followed by Indian psychologists, revealing a consistent reliance on Euro-American psychological discourses, with a strong emphasis on attaining and defending scientific status. This pursuit has often led to an academic environment focused on aligning with mainstream psychology, reflecting a psychic unity of humankind, while theoretical constructs and methodologies predominantly derived from Western paradigms.

Research landscape

Research and education in modern India reflect the influence of institutional processes and the academic ethos, with substantial changes in content, themes, and pedagogical practices. Notable trends in Indian psychology can be traced back to Calcutta University, where positivism and empiricism from European psychology were foundational (Mitra 1937). Indian Psychology was introduced as a specialized subject, covering such research areas as psychoanalysis, emotion, and language. Despite the department's renaming in 1938, the emphasis on experimental psychology persisted, with researchers combining Western theories with indigenous knowledge (Basu 2013).

The fields of psychology evolved into specialized areas such as developmental, clinical, and social psychology, but the focus on applied research overshadowed the explorations of indigenous thought. Psychoanalysis, led by Dr. Girindrasekhar Bose, also emerged as a significant area, incorporating Indian cultural contexts into psychological theories (Bhattacharyya 2004). Over the years, research shifted towards behaviorism and clinical issues, while recent trends have included cognitive and neuropsychological studies, addressing topics like personality disorders and media psychology. This shift is illustrative of a growing acknowledgment of the limitations of previous paradigms and the need for indigenization in psychology (Bhatia 2017).

The current landscape places emphasis on the integration of indigenous concepts with modern psychological frameworks, as seen in a variety of special journal issues focusing on self-identity, spirituality, and positive psychology. Despite progress, challenges still remain, including a lack of supportive intellectual environments and an over-reliance on Western methodologies, which often neglect the cultural contexts of Indian society (Dalal 2014). As a result, addressing societal issues like poverty, mental health, and social justice is essential for the discipline's future development.

Professional bodies

The diversification of psychology in India is evidenced by the emergence of a whole range of professional bodies. These notably include the Indian Psychoanalytic Society (1922), Indian Psychological Association (1926), Indian Academy of Applied Psychology (1962), Indian Association of Clinical Psychology (1968), and many others formed over decades, including the Indian Cyber-Psychology Association (2017) and the Indian Association of Positive Psychology (2019). The National Academy of Psychology (NAOP) represents India in the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS) and takes an active part in the global psychological community.

The registration and licensing of clinical and rehabilitation psychologists are overseen by the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI). Psychology has been introduced at the higher secondary level, with undergraduate, postgraduate, and Ph.D. courses structured at the university level. The University Grants Commission (UGC) encourages model courses, yet universities retain autonomy in course development. The most recent UGC initiative in 2016 aimed to enhance the curricular framework for undergraduate psychology programs, resulting in considerable variations in course content and organization. Specialized concentrations include organizational psychology, clinical psychology, developmental psychology, and others, reflecting the expanding landscape of psychological education.

4. Concepts in Indian psychology

a. Transcendence

Transcendence in Indian psychology is the process of going beyond the ego to reach higher states of consciousness. This includes self-exploration, self-discipline, and the realization of one's connection with the universal self. Instead of confining itself to self-actualization, Indian psychology is concerned with self-transcendence, where one tries

to connect with the greater reality. This view encourages individuals to look beyond their personal accomplishments and try to achieve universal consciousness.

b. The Yogic paths to higher consciousness

The four main paths of yoga offer several ways for people to embark on their transcendental journey. Each path provides an opportunity to transcend the self and achieve greater states of consciousness while supporting various personality types. These four paths are as follows:

- *Karma Yoga* (The Path of Selfless Action): emphasizes carrying out one's duties without expecting any results, helping practitioners to let go of their ego and recognize that all individuals are interconnected.
- *Bhakti Yoga* (The Path of Devotion): promotes a deep and emotional connection to the divine, encouraging individuals to go beyond their personal desires and surrender to the higher power.
- *Raja Yoga* (The Path of Meditation and Mind Control): utilizes techniques such as meditation, concentration, and ethical disciplines to calm and discipline the mind so that individuals can move towards self-realization.
- *Jnana Yoga* (The Path of Wisdom or Knowledge): centres on self-examination and intellectual understanding so that individuals realize that the individual self (Atman) and universal consciousness (Brahman) are one.

c. The Vedic perspective on consciousness

Indian psychology offers a multi-dimensional understanding of consciousness, comprising various states and layers that are indicative of both human potential and spiritual growth.

Four-fold states of consciousness:

According to Vedic teachings, consciousness can be experienced in four main states:

- Waking (*Jagrat*): an ordinary state where we interact with the physical world.
- Dreaming (*Swapna*): a subtle level of awareness that reflects our subconscious mind.
- Deep Sleep (*Sushupti*): a state where the mind is at rest, but consciousness remains active.
- Transcendental Consciousness (*Turiya* or *Samadhi*): a state of pure awareness and feeling connected to the universal self.

Five Koshas (sheaths):

The five Koshas relate to different layers of being, which include the body, mind, and spiritual aspects of human life. Progressing through these koshas takes one from the physical, through the mental, to the spiritual: it is the discovery of the deeper dimensions of one's self. These Koshas are as follows:

- *Annamaya Kosha* (physical body): the outermost layer, representing the physical body and material existence.
- *Pranamaya Kosha* (energy body): includes life force, or prana, connecting the physical body with the mind.
- *Manomaya Kosha* (mind body): associated with thoughts, emotions, and perceptions, this sheath echoes our mental experiences.
- *Vijnanamaya Kosha* (wisdom body): represents knowledge, intuition, and awareness, helping as a guide to understanding our higher self.
- *Anandamaya Kosha* (bliss body): the innermost sheath, where an individual experiences pure joy and higher state of consciousness.

d. The Ashramas: Stages of life

In Indian tradition, the ashramas, or life stages, are inherent in a systematic approach to societal responsibility and personal development. Each phase contributes to a person's development from individual identity to societal well-being. These phases are designed to lead people to self-realization by helping them live a balanced and purposeful life.

- *Brahmacharya* (student life): a learning, discipline, and character-building period preparing the individual for future responsibilities.
- *Grihastha* (householder life): dominated by family, career, and societal contribution so that individuals are fulfilled with their worldly duties.
- *Vanaprastha* (retirement/forest dweller): encourages gradual detachment from material pursuits, promoting a shift toward spiritual awareness.
- *Sannyasa* (renunciation): the final stage where individuals let go of their worldly ties to seek enlightenment and union with the divine.

e. The Varnas: Social roles and responsibilities

The varnas, or social roles, provide an understanding of individuals' responsibilities based on their natural tendencies and skills. While often misunderstood, in earlier days varnas helped as a flexible social framework supporting individuals' strengths. It promotes harmony in society by highlighting the interdependence of responsibilities and balancing the needs of the community with the capabilities of each individual.

- *Brahmins*: scholars, teachers, and priests who focus on preserving knowledge and spirituality.
- *Kshatriyas*: warriors and leaders responsible for protection, governance, and maintaining justice.

- *Vaishyas*: merchants and tradespeople contributing to economic stability and wealth.
- *Shudras*: artisans and service providers who play a key role in society's functioning.

Indian psychology describes consciousness as something underlining all the existence. Here, the self is not limited to personal identity; it is rather understood as the expression of universal consciousness, which includes a person's identity of self with the values of ethics and resilience. By being conscious of the connection to the cosmos, one builds up a sense of purpose, strength, and morality leading to a balanced and harmonious life. It is an inborn human desire to transcend from one's present state of consciousness. This drive moves human beings toward growth, self-realization, and linking up with higher states of consciousness. Seeking transcendence is seen as a natural process that promotes individuals' resilience, insight, and understanding of their purpose within the universe.

5. Conclusion

Indian psychology, with its deep roots in spiritual and philosophical traditions, provides an alternative approach to understanding the human mind. By emphasizing self-realization, ethical living, and holistic healing, it offers a pathway to mental well-being that complements Western psychological frameworks. The growing recognition of the limitations of adopting Western paradigms uncritically underscores the need for a robust framework that resonates with local values and traditions. Indian psychology has the potential to contribute greatly to global discussions on mental well-being, consciousness, and personal growth, fostering a deeper understanding of the human psyche, which transcends geographical boundaries.

The integration of Indian psychology into global discourse can be instrumental in promoting a more inclusive understanding of mental health, the one that respects cultural differences while addressing universal human needs. As modern practitioners and scholars continue to adapt and expand these indigenous perspectives, Indian psychology may offer valuable solutions to the psychological challenges of the modern world, grounded in wisdom that transcends time and culture. This will ultimately enhance the field's ability to address pressing societal issues, from mental health challenges to the promotion of ethical living, ensuring that psychological research and practice are entrenched in the cultural contexts that shape individuals' lives.

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