

# In Search of the Cultural Coordinates in Psychology

<sup>1</sup>Roomana N. Siddiqui

*Psychology for a considerable period was dominated by the western model. A model that was steeped in the core values of the western world. As these core values were different from those prevalent in other cultures including the Asian subcontinent the lack of fit between the Asian reality and the western perspective led to a call for culture specific psychology. A psychology which was in sync with the context in which behaviour was located and being investigated. The realization that behaviour cannot be understood in isolation of the cultural context in which it was embedded enabled psychologist to explore the cultural coordinates of behaviour. The call for indigenous psychology led to the proliferation of research in culture specific issues, but the piecemeal way in which these issues were handled have not significantly contributed to the growth of the discipline. The gap between research and real-life problems needs to be abridged and the colonial hangover has to be critically evaluated. We need to evolve our own template and prototype for studying the cultural constructs. This paper attempts to identify the culture specificity of psychological research along with the domains in which Indian psychology can contribute to the global knowledge pool in furthering the understanding of behaviour.*

**Key words:** Indigenous psychology, Cultural coordinates, Asian perspective, WEIRD syndrome.

## Introduction

Psychology as a discipline slowly and steadily made inroads in the bastion of traditional subjects. If not the most sort after subject in humanities, it is one of the most popular subjects across disciplines. This can be attributed to several factors but surely one of the most important is the desire to know how the human mind works. The mental processes acquire importance because it influences our behavior. However, in its quest to be a science the mental processes did not get much precedence as the discipline was guided by the logico-positivistic model. It was much later that the cognitive aspect got incorporated. Coming of age since the behaviouristic perspective, which was a mechanistic way of explaining behavior, we do realize that reactions varies not only on account of individuals but also on account of the context in which he or she is located. It is precisely this observation that led to disenchantment with the traditional paradigm, which predominantly was a western model used for understanding behaviour in different cultures.

Since bulk of the advancement in psychology took place in Europe and America most of the early psychologist from other cultures got trained in these centres. As a result, when they returned to their cultures

their orientation of looking at issues was Euro-American. This was the case of Indian psychology too. The first university in Calcutta and the subsequent expansion of Psychology in the country suffered from this total reliance on the western model not only for methodology but also for the issues being investigated. This trend continued for long but the voice of disenchantment grew with the realisation that total import of perspective from the west was inadequate in explaining realities in their culture. The lack of fit between the western model and the social realities of different cultures led Sinha (1993) and others to raise the issue of indigenization. He rightly pointed out that since the social problems of India were different, our life perspectives were different we need to look at these problems from our own cultural lens. This led researcher to focus on local issues, but the irony was that though the topic was local the method used were western. Due to a lack of sophisticated indigenous methodology the researches were done in a piecemeal manner. This fragmented understanding of reality could not create much impact at the level of theory building or policy making. Hence, despite advancement in the area of basic field the application of these research findings confronted road blocks. Some headways were made in certain domains of clinical psychology. This was possible due to the effort of research-based evidence and also exploration of indigenous concepts that could help in mitigating psychological problems.

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India.  
Email: roomana17@gmail.com

The knowledge embedded in the ancient scriptures have helped researchers decode the mental health problem in the Indian context. Work done in the area of yoga, meditation and mindfulness needs special mention.

The desire to do culturally relevant psychology motivated psychologist in India to explore indigenous concept but we ended making the same mistake. Psychologists did incorporate local issues and national issues but we also suffered from the WEIRD syndrome. Bulk of the research was done on respondents belonging to urban and educated elite class. As India, to a large extent, is an agrarian society where a major chunk of the population resides in rural areas, they often get marginalized and their voice are not heard despite being exposed to real challenges. Be it poverty, lack of basic amenities and infrastructure, issues of sanitisation, increase in farmers suicide, issues of floods and droughts and many more pressing problems, their viewpoint find no place in the pursuit of generating theoretical understanding of social issues. Untouched by the western model of development it provides a rare opportunity for understanding the real India in terms of family structure, social connectedness, collective decision making, leadership style and the very social rubric of the country.

### **Collective orientation**

Indian society is a collectivistic society where the personal and the group are intertwined, it is difficult to assume that an individual's behavior is purely governed at an individualistic level. Most of the time the individual is an extension of the collective and this is true even at the cognitive level. This calls for a different perspective for understanding behavior as the focus in traditional psychology is the individual. Apart from the collective orientation India is also known for its rich diversity and this provides an ideal laboratory for investigating various social issues that are unique to the country and also general issues from the cultural perspective. One such issue is group dynamics. How members of different groups co-exist and also account for the conflicts between them. Given the diversity of our country not much research has been undertaken to investigate the multiple identity an individual holds and how it impacts intergroup relations. Most of the western theories have focused on intergroup relations in terms of binaries and research has mostly been on ethnocentric lines (Sherif, 1962, Tajfel, 1974, Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It was reflective of prejudices and biases often leading to perception of threat and conflict. However, if people belong to multiple groups in which some of the groups may be common then it augurs

well for intergroup civility norm and these dynamics need to be explored to get a better insight into the intergroup connections. As people belong to multiple groups simultaneously it is not feasible to eliminate the other categories that exist in an individual. At one point of time more than one category may be primed and relevant. Hence it requires a multicultural approach for understanding intergroup relations.

Another aspect of group dynamics that was understood by the western lens was intergroup conflict. Bulk of the work has explored the role of intergroup attitude and prejudice as antecedents of intergroup conflict. Tripathi, et. al. (2018) has made an interesting contribution in this area where they explored how culturally relevant contextual factors act as antecedents to reactions members make when an important norm of a group is violated by members of another group. The general understanding of conflict gives an impression that two conflicting groups always try to harm each other but this study was able to highlight the fact that intergroup relations need not always be seen in terms of prejudice. In one of the studies, it was revealed that if a group norm is violated, in this case it was a religious group, the first reaction by members of both groups is not to retaliate or that of retribution. Interestingly, for members of the group whose norm has been violated and members of the group who have violated the norm, the first reaction is that of reconciliation. In a country known for its peaceful coexistence the finding should not come as a surprise.

In the field of conflict resolution and maintaining peace India can make a significant contribution to the western world. The policy of Non-Violence propagated by Mahatma Gandhi was based on his deep understanding of the cultural nuances of the country. The effectiveness with which Gandhi used this principle to curb intergroup conflict and violence, establishes the efficacy of this principle as a conflict resolution strategy. Gandhi's approach not only was instrumental in establishing peace in India but was effectively used by other country. In the recent past also the principle of non-violence has been successfully used by various national and local level movements for peaceful negotiation. This establishes its relevance even today. Hence, we need to theoretically explore the notion of non-violence and empirically establish it as a theoretical framework for maintaining peace and harmony between groups.

### **Core cultural values**

Keeping in line with the cultural ethos we also need to further explore the role of community elders who at various flash points have mediated conflicts between group. The role of trust and respect for elders, the core

value of Indian psyche needs to be explored as factors impacting peace negotiation. What is needed is an attempt to understand the factors that enable people to be trusted as mediators in a scenario requiring conflict resolution even if they do not have any official mandate. This can be investigated in the village setup where even today elders play an important role in diffusing conflict between individuals and groups. Gandhi talked about the civic nationalism as a way to deal with the rich diversity of India. This can be explored for maintaining harmony.

The uniqueness of the Indian culture compels us to take a different trajectory. From the level of teaching to research we need to identify the cultural coordinates. In teaching psychology and conducting research we cannot totally focus on the Eastern perspective. One major difference between western approach and Indian approach is that of life orientations that govern the worldview of its people. Where the West is governed to a large extent by the external world the Indian worldview is more governed by the inner world, mainly the individual's values system and the spiritual orientation. Hence the paradigm shift needs to take into consideration the inner core of the Indian psyche. Gardner (1998) observed that the information written in Vedic literature has not been explored much and stated that "Like a lost heritage, it has to be reclaimed" (p. 122). The knowledge imbibed in the traditional literature encapsulates the cultural ethos of the region hence it will meaningfully conceptualize the Indian psyche. Since the call Sinha (1993) gave for indigenization, much work has been done in the Indian philosophy. Indian psychologists have explored the traditional knowledge base to come up with concepts that augurs well in the cultural setup. Though much work is underway but it is still at the conceptual level. No concerted effort has been made to apply these concepts in solving real life problems except in yoga and meditative techniques. Thus, we need to explore those concepts that are more meaningful in not only understanding behavior but also enable us to study relevant phenomena embedded in real cultural context.

#### **Methodological issues**

Psychology for long has adopted the behaviouristic model hence the mode of enquiry has been quantitative. This quest for quantification has given a scientific rigour to the field but it had a limiting impact on the discipline. Since the same methodology was imported in India it had a double disadvantage, on account of the method and secondly on account of relevance of issues

amenable to quantitative analysis. Historically psychology has developed in response to the burning issues and social phenomenon relevant in those eras, mainly in American and European society. So, the understanding of those issues was influenced by the historical context. Whereas the historical developments in India threw up different challenges and that required a methodology that could understand these challenges within the given historical context. More than the quantitative method we need to go for indigenous methods. The meaning making is not an individual affair in Indian context, generally there are other significant people involved. So, this extended reality needs to be captured differently. Sinha (2010) has rightly argued that the Indian mindset is very paradoxical, it is collectivistic as well as individualistic at the same time. The methodology followed by saints and religious leaders to search reality, mostly at the spiritual level, has been very individualistic. Most of them had engaged in deep meditation in a state of solitude to gain insights into human psyche. The yoga school and mindfulness strategies in vogue is a result of this orientation. If we ignore the spiritual aspect (the notion of atman and karma) it will be impossible to comprehend Indian psychological makeup, society and culture (Roland 1988, p. 289). On the other hand, since we are embedded in the immediate and extended families, we have a tendency to understand things through the collectivistic lens. For example, the notion of health and wellbeing for a mother is not about her individual health but depends on the state of well being of her family. Similarly, the understanding of social problems like poverty, malnutrition, social inequality, environmental issues, to name a few requires a sociological perspective. Hence, interdisciplinarity demands collaboration of ideas and methods with other discipline so as to get a more nuanced understanding of reality.

As cultures are different so are the issues and no single method will be able to do justice. There is an upsurge in qualitative methods being adopted by psychologist but it requires a more systematic approach. Many researchers use it in a casual manner and that defeats the purpose. We have to develop and train students in the alternative methods. Since we exist at various levels the method has to be in tune with it. The observation of Sinha (2014) on the Indian mindset very well highlights this point. "The primordial mindset served as the foundation on which subsequent ideas and influences emanating from Islamic rule, western exposure and globalization were juxtaposed and this resulted in a multilayered mindset." (Sinha, 2014).

Hence this amalgamation in the psyche requires a multi method approach which can unravel these multi layers.

### Conclusion:

Psychologists in India are concerned about the stagnation in the discipline as it was not meaningfully contributing to the solution of real problems. They are aware that in order to bridge the gap between basic research and its applications in real life settings they need to overcome the theoretical and methodological constraints. Efforts were made to relate research and application in order to make psychology relevant (Pandey, 1988; Sinha, 1993) but the momentum was quite slow (Adair, Puhan, & Vohra, 1993; Adair, Pandey, Begum, Puhan, & Vohra 1995; Gergen, Gulerce, Lock, & Misra, 1996; Sinha, 1997). The desire of Indian psychologists to establish their own identity has led to significant progress but the lack of clarity and direction makes the journey bumpy. A concerted

attempt is needed to explore the constructs and theories embedded in our social realities. Since Indian worldview nurtures interdependence and connectivity across all living beings it can transform the conventional definition of psychology from the “science of human behaviour to “human possibility and progress (Menon, 2005). What is needed is a psychology by Indians and of Indians but not necessarily for Indians. As we have benefitted by the knowledge base of the west so the west should also gain benefit from us. Developments in the field of yoga and mindfulness though indigenous is contributing to the well being of people across cultures. We need a psychology which is a positive discipline that helps in enhancing self-growth and establishing peace and social harmony (Dalal, 2014). A discipline which imbibes diversity and is responsive to the changing social reality in order to meaningfully contribute to the wellbeing of mankind.

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