Introducing Indian Psychology: the Basics

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Every scientific discipline has its specific protocols, procedures, and methodologies that are considered essential in order to arrive at valid knowledge. These approaches are based on well-established presumptions about reality and about knowledge that, within each field, are rarely made explicit and even more rarely questioned. It is hard to challenge these fundamental premises because so much of the discipline is built on them. Almost everything the discipline has achieved is contingent on their inviolability. And yet, if we want to consider introducing traditional Indian psychology within modern academic psychology we must examine the presumptions underlying both systems with great care. If we fail to appreciate the enormous differences between the two systems and the intricate manner in which they are related to each other, we are likely to miss out on the very essence of what Indian psychology could contribute to the world and especially to psychology as an academic science.

It is true that both academic psychology and Indian psychology are extremely complex fields of human activity. They cover long periods of time and consist of many disparate substreams and widely differing schools of thought. Within Western psychology, for example, the differences between psychoanalysis, cognitive behaviourism, and the various humanist schools seem to outweigh by far their commonalities. Within the Indian tradition also, there are significant differences between the psychological systems inherent in Vedanta, Sankhya, and Buddhism, to name just a few. So it is clear that one must be wary of undue generalizations. But still, there are some definite and highly significant differences between the centres of gravity of both systems. It is even possible, and this is perhaps more interesting, to discover an overriding historical development that encompasses both systems and that could give a hint as to where the future may be leading us.

The foundations of academic and Indian psychology
For a good part of the twentieth century, academic psychology was fully under the sway of behaviourism, and it based itself on an exclusively materialist worldview: consciousness, and all that depends on it, was virtually banned from psychological inquiry. The most extreme forms of behaviourism have luckily been discarded and at present consciousness is a respected and high profile subject of scientific discourse. Thoughts, beliefs, and feelings are again a legitimate focus for psychological research. But the behaviourist influence is not gone. Academic psychology is still commonly defined as the science of behaviour and, if not in theory, at least in practice, it still regards human beings primarily as separate, physical entities, living in a physical world. Social influences, for example, are acknowledged, but it is taken for granted that such influences are transmitted by physical gestures and expressions. If use is made of self-reports, there is a tendency to take the reports, not the experience, as the raw data. Individual experiences are distrusted and one relies instead on standardized reports of groups of individuals that need to differ “significantly” from those of other groups. In
short, traditional academic psychology relies primarily on a physicalist view of reality. For many of those working in the field, all this may seem too obvious to be worth mentioning, but actually, it is not that obvious at all. The original assignment of psychology, its svadharma one could say, is to be the science of the soul, the science of our inner being, the science of consciousness. To develop such an inner science is certainly not easy, but to coolly redefine psychology as the science of behaviour is a kind of coup d’etat for which there is no good excuse. As I hope to show, Indian psychology has followed a more fruitful path by concentrating its efforts on the development of solid and extremely well worked-out procedures to improve the quality and reliability of subjective knowledge. It has been helped in this endeavour by the fact that it could build on a for this purpose much more suitable basic philosophy.

During the long history of the Indian civilization there have been, no doubt, materialist or agnostic schools, but the vast majority of Indian thinkers takes consciousness, rather than matter as the basis of reality. Across the spectrum of the various schools, the nature of the ultimate reality is described as Sachchidananda, an indissoluble unity of absolute existence, consciousness, and joy. It is out of this absolute consciousness, existence, and joy that the physical world comes into manifestation as just one type of world among many others. Sri Aurobindo describes this as a process of exclusive concentration, comparable to that of a man fully engrossed in his work: he forgets the surrounding; he forgets who he is; for all outer appearances, he becomes the work in which he is involved. Through a similar process, the Absolute One condenses itself into the multitude of lesser forms of consciousness that we know, for example, as the mentality of humankind or the apparent nescience of matter. [1] A central aspect of the Indian system is thus that it recognises as consciousness not only the human mind, which is the only form of consciousness that traditional science recognises, but an extensive hierarchy of different types of consciousness ranging right from the super-consciousness of Brahman to the apparent unconsciousness of matter. In this vast scheme, the ordinary human mind is seen as not more than an intermediary term.

It is possible to build logically coherent philosophies on both physical and spiritual premises and the most exclusive forms of these two opposite viewpoints show an interesting symmetry. If the material viewpoint is carried to its extreme, consciousness is seen as not more than a causally ineffective epiphenomenon of material processes. If one looks at the world from exactly the opposite side, from the standpoint of the exclusively spiritual mayavadin schools of Indian thought, the physical manifestation appears as an illusion imposed on the pure consciousness of the Absolute.

But the symmetry is not complete. There is a considerable, qualitative difference between those theories that start from matter and those that start from consciousness. The materialist and reductionist schemes have, no doubt, proven to be powerful within their range, but they tend to have an impoverishing effect when used beyond it. As Sri Aurobindo says, the significance of the lotus, is not found in the mud, but in its heavenly archetype above.[2] Materialistic explanations tend to trivialise, distort or even completely miss out on inner values, beauty, love, freedom, -- in other words on all those more subtle aspects of reality that for most people make up the real meaning and value of life. The more integral spiritual frameworks, on the other hand, uplift and enrich whatever they touch, because they see behind the surface phenomenon, the higher reality on which it is based. If one looks from a physicalist standpoint at a sculpture, let’s say one of those marvellous, Chola-period statues one finds in Gangakondacholapuram, it is just a piece of granite sculpted by means of purely physical processes into the likeness of an idealized male or female figure. It is a valid description, no doubt, but only to a point. If there had been only physical forces at play, the granite would have remained an indescribable rock on a hillside. It was the vision of the sculptor, who saw Shiva hidden inside the rock, which made the artist chip off all that
didn’t belong to him. There is something in us that vibrates to the same hidden reality that the sculptor saw, and it is this “secret ingredient” which makes us recognise the Chola sculptures as the outstanding pieces of art they are.

Materialist reductionism is a puritan view; it clears out superstition, but in the end it sterilizes and leaves one in a bare, severely diminished remnant of reality. The exclusively spiritual views of the mayavadin schools have a similar impoverishing effect through their denial of the physical reality. But there is a third option. The most ancient Vedanta, as espoused in the Vedas, or more recently by Sri Aurobindo, is a vast and comprehensive scheme that encompasses both materialism and spirituality. It doesn’t deny the reality or value of matter, nor any of the discoveries of physics, it has no difficulty with the experiences on which the theistic religions are based, nor with the white purity of the most impersonal forms of Buddhism. It encompasses them all in what is easily the widest framework devised by humankind so far. The entire scientific enterprise fits in fact into just one small niche of the Vedic worldview. What is science after all? It is a highly perfected physical mind observing physical nature. But in the Vedic scheme, the physical mind is just one of many different levels from which the observing consciousness can look out at the world, and physical nature is just one of the many different levels on which Nature can manifest. On all these myriad levels of involvement and emancipation, it is the one single Consciousness-Existence that splits itself, for the sake of the play, into Self, purusha, and Nature, prakriti. According to this view, in matter conscious existence is fully engrossed in its own movements. On the human level it is kind of half awake, so that we can play with “ideas in our mind” and make mental models of physical reality that make enough sense to work. But, and here we touch on the very heart of the human problem, at this intermediate level, our budding individuation and pseudo freedom are achieved at the cost of a deep alienation: we are uprooted from the subconscious unity of physical nature without realising as yet the conscious unity of the higher ranges of consciousness above us. It is only in these higher ranges that conscious unity begins to be recovered, till at the peaks our individual conscious-existence can merge with what has been called, the consciousness the Divine has of itself.

The basic philosophical system underlying Indian thought is thus a much wider and more comprehensive worldview than the scientific one. While it is perfectly possible to study Western science and its findings from within the framework of Indian thought, one cannot study Indian psychology from within the standard scientific framework without loosing out on its very essence.

**Indian psychology and questions of method**

How is all this high philosophy relevant to down-to-earth psychology? There are two reasons to be concerned about basic issues of philosophy; the first relates to method, the second to content. Regarding method one may observe that ontology and epistemology are closely related. It is one’s basic ontology that determines the final touchstone in one’s epistemology and vice versa. In other words, what we take for the ultimate reality is inextricably linked to what we accept as proof. The common assumption that scientific proof rests in sensorial perception and that validity and reliability are determined by physical referents and instruments implies that we are dealing with physical objects. These criteria are thus fine for physics, but not for psychology, because they reduce human beings to physical bodies, and presume without ground that consciousness, if such a thing can be conceded, is dependent on the physical functioning of the brain. History shows that if one begins by presuming that only physical things can be reliably known, one will tend to focus exclusively on physical factors and after some time one runs the risk of thinking that the physical aspect of reality is all there actually is. This is at least what has happened in Europe.
Copernicus launched his explanatory system as not more than a simplification of astrological\textsuperscript{[3]} calculations. Two centuries later, La Place's famous remark to Napoleon that he did not need God to explain the movements of the planets, is still an honest statement of his mathematical model. But when Daniel C. Dennett claims that, "we are just a bunch of neurons" what had started as a clean, methodological simplification, has ended as a drastic ontological reduction, which would have greatly surprised those who started the scientific revolution in Europe.

As we have seen, the Indian tradition presumes that consciousness is the primary reality, and that we are first and foremost a conscious Self, one with Brahman. If we accept this, then the ultimate proof in psychology must rest in subjective experience itself, and external, physical measurements can no longer be used as a yardstick. After all, in this philosophical framework the material manifestation is just one way in which our mind sees the in itself ineffable (anantaguna) reality. This means that we have to look for an entirely different solution to the problem of reliability. The Indian tradition has approached the problem by focussing on the quality, purity, and concentration of the antahkarana, the inner instrument of knowledge used by the person who has the experience. Just as Western science has developed techniques to make objective measurement more reliable, the Indian tradition has developed a plethora of methods to enhance the quality and reliability of inner observation. The specific form these methods have taken shows a baffling variety, but their essence is quite straightforward and methodologically sound. To put it very simply, it rests on a particular combination of concentration and detachment, leading to an attentive, one would almost say, "objective"\textsuperscript{[4]}, inner silence. I’m convinced that, when we pursue this line of enquiry in the right spirit, we will find this approach at least as powerful, effective, and reliable for the study of inner, psychological processes, as the standard scientific methods have been for the study of physics, chemistry, and biology.

There are other, equally crucial aspects in which the introduction of the Indian ontology would require a profound change in the epistemology and methodology of psychology. They have to do with the nature of knowledge and the way knowledge is acquired. This is a complex issue, and all I can do here is to mention a few of the main issues. A first point is that the modern scientific concept of knowledge is not the same as the ancient Indian idea of knowledge. Scientific knowledge is something external, it is something you have; Vedic knowledge is transformative, it changes who you are. Speaking of the role of knowledge in Yoga, Sri Aurobindo writes:

\textquote{The knowledge we have to arrive at is not truth of the intellect; it is not right belief, right opinions, right information about oneself and things, -- that is only the surface mind’s idea of knowledge. To arrive at some mental conception about God and ourselves and the world is an object good for the intellect but not large enough for the Spirit; it will not make us the conscious sons of Infinity. Ancient Indian thought meant by knowledge a consciousness which possesses the highest Truth in a direct perception and in self-experience; to become, to be the Highest that we know is the sign that we really have the knowledge.}\textsuperscript{[5]}

This is an example of what Sri Aurobindo calls, "knowledge by identity". In our surface consciousness, we know by this type of knowledge only ourselves. It is not mediated through our sense organs, but it comes into existence directly, simply by being ourselves. In our ordinary consciousness, we know in this direct manner only the bare fact of our own existence, all other detail we construct by the more indirect means of our sensorial mind, intelligence, memory etc. But according to the Indian tradition, and anyone who cares to take the trouble can verify this for himself, we can deepen this inner type of knowledge till we know ourselves as our eternal soul, our higher Self which is one with the Self of the world. If we explore this further, we find that this direct
knowledge by identity need not remain limited to our own individual being; it can be extended to other selves and even to things, which we then can know as if from inside. We then realise that ordinary sensorial knowledge is only one amongst many other types of knowledge, and that it is not always the most reliable. Knowledge by identity plays a role in all forms of knowledge, but it shows itself most clearly in intuition and revelation. This is no doubt a difficult field to explore systematically, but it is clear that if we could make such types of knowledge more commonly operational, it would be a fascinating development. Sri Aurobindo predicts that in the long run, discoveries in this direction will dwarf those of the physical sciences.

A second point is, that scientific knowledge is entirely explicit. It is exhaustive, in the sense that there is nothing more to it than what is explicitly given on the surface. Vedic knowledge, on the other hand, often deals with realities that resist exhaustive description; it just points at an ineffable reality that can be experienced, even realised in one’s own being, but that cannot be exhaustively described. In the older Indian texts one can often see how a Rishi uses an image or only a name, to evoke in the listener the direct experience of the underlying reality. An interesting example is the end of the Kena Upanishad where just the mentioning of the Eternal as the protector of a blade of grass against the assaults by Agni and Vayu is enough to silence the questioning mind and make Indra realise the futility of his ego, and the omnipotence of Brahman, the all-pervading divine consciousness.

A third point is the use of the mind. In modern times, science constructs knowledge with the help of mental reasoning out of basic data provided by the senses. The later Indian systems of thought do basically the same, with as only difference that they allow a wider range of inputs, like the text of a scripture, the word of the Guru, suprasensual experience, etc. But the Vedas and the Upanishads have not been composed like that. The Rishis are clear that they do not construct their knowledge but receive it directly through revelation, inspiration, intuition, and intuitive discrimination (dristhi, sruti, smriti, and ketu). According to Sri Aurobindo it is quite possible to recover these methods of direct knowledge, and then use the reasoning mind, not to arrive at knowledge, as we do now, but only to express a knowledge that has already been attained by these more direct, and in the end more reliable means. He sees this as the way of the future. After a long period in which mind developed and intuition got increasingly lost, we may now have reached a stage where we can take up again the more direct method of intuition to arrive at knowledge and use the newly developed rational mind only for its expression.

We have already seen that it is not possible to make a meaningful study of Indian psychology from within the boundaries of academic psychology as it is presently understood. Its present theoretical framework is too small and cannot deal with the very essence of what Indian psychology is about. But even from the few short observations on the epistemology of Indian psychology that we have made so far, it may be clear that studying Indian psychology on its own terms will not be easy. It will require a profound and far-reaching change from present practice in almost every respect: in methods of teaching, in methods of research, in the definition of results. But the most interesting of these changes is certainly that it requires psychologists to be yogis. In itself this is nothing new, music teachers need to be musicians, physicists need to be mathematicians. But it will involve a difficult -- but for those who try highly rewarding - - period of transition.

**Reintroducing infinity into psychology**

The enrichment the Indian ontology offers is not limited to a richer epistemology. It equally affects the contents of every aspect of psychology. The most central is, of course,
what it has to say about the nature of our essential being. Starting from a materialist viewpoint we can in principle not get any further than our ego, which is no more than a temporary construct required to establish our individuality and coordinate our actions. Starting from a consciousness perspective one also encounters the ego, and one can see it perhaps even more clearly, but one can also discern that there is something else hiding behind and above it. In experience we can rise above our ego and identify with the Atman, our real Self, immutable, eternal, standing above. We can also go deep within, and find behind the heart our antaratman, our chaitya purusha, what Sri Aurobindo calls our psychic being. It is this inmost soul that, as a representative of the Self above, is the true centre of our psychological being. It is this that is supposed to incarnate in the human body to collect from life to life experience and gradually build an increasingly deep, spiritualised personality around itself. The deepest, most valuable experiences people have of love, faith, gratitude, awe, beauty, all relate to this psychic centre. In a materialist framework, experiences related to these inner parts of ourselves can only be regarded as freak phenomena that resist explanation. But, when seen in the cadre of the gradual development of a soul-personality, the gradual transformation of all the parts of our being under the influence of our inmost self, they fall beautifully in place and get their due value.

Indian psychology introduces likewise in every aspect of psychology an element of infinity. Emotions and feelings for example get a whole new depth and beauty when seen as different expressions and distortions of an underlying Ananda. Motivation completely changes its character if one realises that the aim of existence is not just promulgating one’s genes or having a good time for the longest period possible, but the finding of one’s soul and the bringing of one’s entire being and all one’s actions under its influence. Even pain and difficulties can then be recognised and accepted as uncomfortable, but effective steps in this long-term project. In developmental psychology, the enormous differences between children right from birth and the different ways they go through the stages of development acquire a whole new depth and meaning when seen against the backdrop of a vast, ongoing, individual and collective evolution of consciousness.

The element of infinity that Indian psychology introduces in psychology brings with it a greater beauty, a deeper meaning, a deeper connectedness. Things difficult to research and badly missing in modern times, but very much needed to keep our individual and collective life together.

The big picture
The introduction of Indian psychology into the psychology curriculum is not an isolated event. It has its political overtones. Rather than shy away from these, I would like to make an attempt to place them in a broad historical perspective. At the present time, we see two broad cultural streams converging towards a new synthesis, which potentially could go far beyond what either of them has developed in the past. In West-Asia and Europe the confluence of Judaic, Greek, Roman and Arabic influences has led over the last two thousand years to the development of the two great monotheistic religions, with their strenuous attempts to arrive not only at a single truth, but also at a single and exclusive form to express that truth. It spawned civilizations with a strong element of uniformity, maintained by a powerful, centralized religion, grounded more in doctrinal faith than in direct personal experience. Partly in response to this -- during what, interestingly, is called the European Enlightenment -- the human urge for independent, individual enquiry separated itself from religion, and we see the birth of a science that is progressive, rational, and decentralized. But, as the result of a kind of power-sharing arrangement in its early days, Western science focuses almost exclusively on the material, objective aspect of reality. The approach of science and its
technical and economical applications proves to be extremely effective in dealing with physical nature, and as science gradually takes over more and more aspects of public life, Western society becomes increasingly rational, democratic, and materialist.

In India we see in the remote past the deep and vast spirituality of the Vedas and early Upanishads. In this early period, mental reasoning in the modern sense does not seem to play a significant role and knowledge is based on a well-trained intuitive insight, confirmed in experience. Where individual experiences differ, they are not pitted against each other as in later times, but acknowledged as complementary aspects of one continuous reality. But with the coming up of the rational and divisive mind, more and more value is given to logical analysis and the linguistic exegesis of established texts. As a result we see conflicting schools of thought built on experiences that themselves are complementary rather than exclusive: Buddhism, the six Darshanas, Shankara, -- each school asserts its separate viewpoints and refutes those of the others. Simultaneously the social fabric splits up into myriads of separate strands, casts, clans, sects, philosophical schools, that each stick tenaciously to their separate forms and ideologies. But still, in the midst of all this, both Indian religion and science stay close to experiential spirituality. The scientific spirit of enquiry links itself not to an external technology focused on the manipulation of the outer physical manifestation, but to yoga, an inner technology focused on changing one's internal, psychological reality. As a result the society stays rooted in spirituality and in a sometimes manifest, sometimes more tenuous awareness of the Oneness that underlies the variety on the surface. Indian philosophy and the multitude of decentralized religions remain subservient to direct personal experience. An irreverent folk tradition honours the wise illiterate woman above the learned pandit. This trend finds its culmination in Ramakrishna, who, lacking any kind of formal education and almost totally ignorant of Sanskrit, is still widely acclaimed as the greatest sage of the 19th century. The towering quality of his realisation marks according to Sri Aurobindo the transition from a period dominated by the rational, divisive and externalising mind, to a new period, once more grounded in direct, intuitive experience. In this new period the now highly developed mind will only be a passive instrument to express the inherently harmonious Truth found deep within ourselves.

In the synthesis of these two broad streams of civilisation, India has her own unique contribution to make. The core of this contribution must be her deep spiritual knowledge, and more specifically, her ability to let this spirituality penetrate all aspects of life. Among the sciences it must thus be specifically in psychology that India has to make her greatest contribution, and here we mean obviously not behaviourist psychology, but psychology in its original sense, psychology as the science of the soul, the science of consciousness. For no other culture has such a treasure house of practical psychological and spiritual knowledge as its heritage.

India is still in the process of recovering from 800 years of foreign rule, and one can see the introduction of Indian psychology in the framework of this national resurgence, but if one does so exclusively, one misses out on the larger historical events that are taking place at the moment. There can be no doubt that the West is still dominant politically, economically and intellectually, but underneath, there is a strong counter stream of cultural and spiritual influence from India to the West. Eugene Taylor, who wrote an excellent book on the history of spirituality in the USA, argues on the basis of existing trends that Indian psychology is bound to have an increasing influence on the world culture, especially as a new epistemology.

**Conclusion**

It would be a great tragedy if in India Indian Psychology would be introduced as something that is only of interest to India, or worse, as something that belongs to the
past. Indian psychology definitely belongs to the future and is of utmost relevance for the whole of humanity. It is needed, not as a minor, ethnic addition in the already overfull marketplace of trivial information, but as a vital link between spirituality and science. There is all reason to believe that it will fulfill this role and that in due time it will become the central discipline that will help humanity to know itself, to know one another, and to know the Divine. Knowledge of the Self and of the Divine is not something that belongs exclusively to religion, or that should be left to the new age counterculture. It is the most valuable element of human experience and the reality in which we live. If psychology is, as I think it is, the science of consciousness, then it should not shirk this assignment but take it up with all its rigor and enthusiasm. The Indian tradition has provided all the methodological tools that are required.

I don’t think we should at this stage give too much attention to the detailed arguments with which the different philosophical schools have fought each other in the past. Neither do we need to focus on the rituals and outer forms of the various paths of Yoga. All these things have their value and I do hope they will be researched at some time by some people, but this is not what the world needs and expects from Indian psychology. What it needs is the psychological essence, the direct experience, the inner gestures, the subtle processes, the attitudes, the psychological tools that can widen our consciousness, that can make us more deep, truthful, free, happy, harmonious with ourselves and others, and above all, more intimate with the Divine. The core of Indian psychology is its spiritual understanding, the rigorous methods that it has developed to make self-observation reliable, powerful, and capable of covering the entire range of consciousness open to our being. Its real value will show itself when this spiritual knowledge is used not only for individual liberation, as it has done in the past, but also for a comprehensive, collective transformation of life, which is the promise of the future. This is the long-term project, for which we are now preparing the first steps.


[3] "Astrological" is not a slip of the pen. It seems that in his time, astronomical calculations were mainly used by the Church to decide on astrologically favourable dates for public functions.

[4] "objective" has many meanings, here I mean "unbiased".


[6] At present, economically, politically, and even intellectually, India does not occupy the place she deserves amongst the nations of the world. This is often attributed to her religion, to Hinduism. But that is a sad distortion of history. It can perhaps be acceded that an excessive stress on otherworldly ideals amongst India’s elite, may have contributed something to India’s fall. But one should not forget that the Chinese, Arabs, Turks, French, Portuguese, and British didn’t come to India because of her poverty. India was known for her legendary riches. Each one of the ancient travellers to India agrees that India was the richest and most beautiful country on earth, not only spiritually, but also in the wealth of her nature, in the wealth of her people, in the
quality of her government, in her science, philosophy and religion. All the way from Sri Lanka to Kashmir, India was described as the land of Eden. It has been calculated that India up to the eighteenth century produced 18% of the world economy. When the British left this was reduced to 2%. Obviously, this has nothing to do with a faulty or backward religion, which existed millennia before the British came. It is the direct result of political, economic, and intellectual suppression.