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Indian Psychology's Coming of Age

2007 National Seminar on Indian Psychology

When academic psychology was introduced in India (in 1905), the supposed superiority of the western conception of knowledge led to an uncritical acceptance of western concepts and methodologies. The rich Indian traditions concerned with consciousness or the self, which were perceived by the British rulers as emanating from the primitive notions of a backward people, were left out of the curriculum. It stayed that way until 2001, when the Indian Council of Philosophical Research (ICPR) sponsored the first seminar devoted entirely to the development of new approaches to psychology based on traditional Indian psychology and yoga.¹ Since then there has been a dramatic increase in interest in this subject. There have been conferences and seminars devoted to various aspects of Indian psychology in all corners of the country. A rapidly expanding group of psychologists are studying psychological theories and methods based on the intellectual and spiritual traditions of India. Recommendations for curricula, teaching and research methods are being framed and slowly but increasingly implemented.

The latest milestone for this growing movement has been a *National Seminar on Indian Psychology*² that was jointly organized by the ICPR and the Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana (SVYASA). It took place from 26th to 28th December

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[1] URL: <http://ipi.org.in/texts/ip2/ip2-contents.html>.

[2] URL: <http://ipi.org.in/events/nsip-2007info.html>.

2007 in the vicinity of Bangalore, on SVYASA's beautiful hill-station campus. Over 120 papers were presented in seven plenary and five times five concurrent sessions. Eight sessions occupied the intersection of Indian philosophy and yoga with health and healing, five were dedicated to issues of a primarily philosophical, epistemological, or methodological nature, five to yoga and spiritual practice *per se*, to their interface with society or, more specifically, to their relation to positive psychology or their application to management. Four sessions dealt with spiritual traditions (e.g., Buddhism, Patanjali), three with education, and two addressed questions of cultural and historical interest. The fact that any number of alternative groupings would have been equally viable given the intricacies of the subjects and their complex mutual relations, must have been a major headache for the organizers.

The welcome address was given by H.R. Nagendra, Vice Chancellor of SVYASA, and this was followed by the keynote address by Ramakrishna K. Rao, Chairman of the ICPR. In the next plenary session (a panel chaired by Janak Pandey, Head of Psychology, Allahabad University), Professors Rao, Sudhir Kakar, Uday Pareek, V. George Mathew, and Lilavathi Krishnan reflected on the *why* of Indian psychology. While mainstream academic psychology relies primarily on a physicalist view of reality, the vast majority of Indian thinkers took consciousness, rather than matter, as the basis of reality. If the materialist viewpoint is carried to its extreme, consciousness becomes a causally ineffective epiphenomenon. If one looks from the opposite extreme — the standpoint of the *mayavada* school of Indian thought — the material world becomes an illusion. Both extremes, however useful they may be or have been for their respective purposes, are severely impoverishing. The more ancient *vedanta* of the Upanishads steered clear of both extremes, so that across the spectrum of Indian philosophy we find ultimate reality (*brahman*) described in terms that are spiritual yet utterly life and world affirming: *brahman* is (i) the existence or substance (*sat*) that constitutes the world, (ii) a consciousness (*chit*) that contains the world, and (iii) an infinite bliss (*ananda*) that expresses and experiences itself in the world.

Before we can hope to reap the potentially enormous benefits of this grand vision of reality, we are in for some metaphysical house-cleaning. The world is effectively what we *think* it is, and we know little, if anything, about how this is determined by what it *really* is. Besides, if the expression 'what it *really* is' means, as it usually does, 'what it is by itself, out of relation to consciousness or a self', then from the Indian perspective it lacks a referent. This theme was

developed by Neeta Arora in her paper on critical constructivism and by Shanti Auluck, who reminded us of Polanyi's (1969) observation that while theology was the greatest single source of fallacies in the days when any idea could be silenced by showing that it was contrary to religion, at a time when any thought can be discredited by branding it as unscientific the greatest single source of error is science.

Science perpetuates both its successes and its failures through education. Three papers on alternative approaches in teacher and elementary education were presented, two by Srila Basu and one by Baren K. Raul, both belonging to Mirambika, an innovative school in New Delhi providing a training ground for educators from all over India. Divya Parasher for her part reported on the novel methods of teaching adopted at the Indian Psychology Institute, Pondicherry. Pointing to the increasing disenchantment with existing practices the world over, Bharati Baveja remonstrated that innovative frameworks for education have little impact. Interpreting experience according to fixed notions derived from abstract theories or specialized discourse is a recipe for mystification and cynicism. Teaching needs to be conceptualized as an ongoing process of contemplation, an evolutionary process of self-development, capitalizing on the learner's innate ability to think and reflect.³

A revealing instance of both the underdetermination of theory by data and the 'overdetermination' of it by dogma is provided by the fundamental theoretical framework of contemporary physics. If one tries to make sense of quantum theory within a materialist framework

[3] Researchers at Johns Hopkins, M.I.T., and other well-regarded universities inside and outside the United States have documented that 'students who receive honor grades in college-level physics courses are frequently unable to solve basic problems and questions encountered in a form slightly different from that on which they have been formally instructed and tested ... Indeed, in dozens of studies of this sort, young adults trained in science continue to exhibit the very same misconceptions and misunderstandings that one encounters in primary school children' (Gardner, 1991, pp. 3-4). A regularly updated bibliography (Duit, 2007) that at the time of this writing has about 7,700 entries documenting change in students' conceptions, makes it clear that 'little or no change happens when students experience even the best of standard science instruction' (Dykstra, 2005). What most science students learn is that they are on the lower rung of a system in which they are dependent on a higher rung for declarations of the truth. Orthodoxy holds that once the teacher has presented the established canon by approved methods, she has done her job. Whether or not a student 'gets' it is out of her hands. As a result, science instruction fails society by promoting elitism and rendering most of its members intellectually stunted or handicapped. Alternative approaches to teaching science, which have been demonstrated to yield significant progress in understanding, are resisted or ignored (Dykstra, 2005). The reason this is so, one surmises, is that in substituting a constructivist epistemology for the realist conception of the knowledge constituting the canon, these alternative approaches deflate the status of the institution of science by controverting if not an explicit claim of access to ontological truth then certainly the carefully cultivated perception of such access.

of thought, one will ‘go down the drain’, as Feynman has warned.⁴ If instead one interprets it within the Vedantic framework outlined above, it makes perfect sense, or so U. Mohrhoff (your reporter) maintained. One of the differences between a materialistic world view and a spiritual one is that the former assigns ultimate reality to a multitude (e.g., particles or spacetime points) and models reality ‘from the bottom up’, whereas the latter assigns ultimate reality to a unitary principle and models reality ‘from the top down’. Multiplicity results when *brahman*, entering into self-relations, presents itself to itself in a multitude of aspects, each containing as well as contained in the whole. Seen in this light, quantum theory’s radically holistic features are unsurprising.

As Matthijs Cornelissen stressed in one of the Seminar’s most significant lectures, virtually all major research projects on yoga till date are carried out within the limits of existing science. By distilling from the Indian tradition only those theories and techniques that science can assess by its own methods, they treat the psychological knowledge-base that the Indian tradition has created as a dead historical collection, without worrying how the ancient Indian sages actually arrived at their knowledge and techniques. The research methods used by the Indian tradition were sophisticated but essentially subjective. To arrive at a serious integration of the Indian knowledge systems with modern scientific methods requires the acceptance of methods that are thoroughly subjective yet intellectually rigorous.

Many a guardian of science will reject the idea of intellectually rigorous subjective research as a contradiction in terms. The prevalent perception is that whereas objective research is amenable to public validation, inasmuch as its data reside in a shared physical universe, subjective research is not, its data being only privately accessible. To this, Cornelissen offered several insightful responses. For one, the alleged privacy of consciousnesses does not come into the picture. What matters is that someone’s results are reproducible by similar methods of inquiry, and in the subjective domain this is as possible as in the objective. For another, it isn’t the case that one consciousness is strictly inaccessible to another. There is, for instance, a wealth of anecdotal data about people becoming aware, without any kind of physical contact, of what their loved ones go through, especially at times of crises, and in the Indian tradition the ability to know what goes on in someone else’s mind is widely held as a sensitivity that can

[4] Feynman didn’t have to mention the framework part — this goes without saying as long as the name of the game of science is virtually synonymous with saving the materialistic appearances.

be developed. It is in fact thought, again on the basis of much anecdotal evidence, that a competent spiritual guide can know better what happens in a disciple's consciousness than the disciple herself.⁵

Cornelissen compared the introspective methods developed in the West and used in mainstream psychology (to the extent that such methods are used) to developing astronomy by asking people to look at the sky and then collating their reports. Astronomy has more sophisticated tools at its disposal, and so has yoga-based psychological research.

The first and indispensable condition to be fulfilled by the researcher wishing to employ the powerful tools of yoga is disentanglement of the self, *atman*, from the activities of mind, *manas*. The ensuing stillness allows subtleties of perception that are not possible to the mind engrossed in the relentless flow of its thoughts. The objectivity — in the sense of detachment, impartiality, clearheadedness — of the resulting witness consciousness (*sakshi*) far surpasses the objectivity that can be achieved by *manas*, entangled as it is with preconceptions, predilections, beliefs and opinions, likes and dislikes. For instance, if one succeeds in adopting the witness perspective, one immediately realises that our ordinary sense of agency is a mistake; few if any of our thoughts and behaviours are under our direct conscious control. Libet's (1999) findings do not surprise those who are capable of observing their minds from this perspective.

This conference has highlighted the enormous potential that traditional Indian psychology holds for psychology at large, at least in the long term. (It will take some time for a significant number of psychologists to become yogis!) Even greater perhaps are the potential benefits of a world view that puts at the very heart of reality an infinite bliss that, in objective terms, is the quintessence of quality and value. In a materialistically conceived world, where ultimate reality belongs to some ultimate multitude (traditionally known as 'dust'), quality and value are strangers; the most 'uplifting' perspective on offer is a naturalistic humanism or a 'spiritual naturalism' (see, for instance, naturalism.org). Now *that* is a contradiction in terms. But perhaps the most radical change Indian psychology has the potential to bring about is the deposition of physics as the most direct access to reality. In a spiritually conceived world, where the force at work in the world is a conscious force, that distinction goes to psychology. Psychologists, say 'bye' to physics envy.

[5] I would add a third response: whereas the assertion that subjective data reside in a shareable subjective universe — a cosmic consciousness — can be and has been established by advanced yogic methods, the assertion that objective data reside in a shared physical universe is unprovable by the established scientific methods.

References

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