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Psychology in Pre-Modern India

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Without Abstract

Indian cultural and intellectual tradition is a living tradition; it has continued in an unbroken form from hoary antiquity to the present. Psychological phenomena were an integral part of systematic inquiry and investigation in numerous schools of thought in this tradition.¹ The vitality of this tradition was reduced during British rule from 1857 till independence in 1947 as its world view and sciences were denigrated in an Anglicized educational system. During the British rule, Western psychology was introduced in the Indian subcontinent, where it took roots and continues to flourish. Traditional approaches, which were pushed to the back seat for long, are currently getting attention and being introduced to the world. Since the cultural context in which these approaches developed is distinct from the European background of modern psychology, it is necessary to first explain certain substantive and stylistically distinctive features of Indian approaches to psychology.

The Historical and Cultural Context of Traditional Indian Psychological Thought

Foundations of psychological thinking in India were laid in the ancient texts called the *Vedas*, the first of which was composed about two millennia BCE. But more specific concepts can be traced

to a set of texts called the *Upaniṣads*, which are dated around 1500–600 BCE. Yearning for spiritual uplift was a dominant feature of the Upaniṣadic sages. This yearning has continued to dominate the thought and practices of not only the “orthodox” schools that accepted the authority of the *Vedas*, but also the many schools of Buddhism, Jainism that rejected it. Although the two main branches of Buddhism, namely, Theravāda and Mahāyāna, originated in India, their influence in the Indian subcontinent nearly ended around the eighth century CE. Thereafter, the Buddhist traditions flourished outside India. Psychology in Buddhism is a vast field in itself; it deserves separate treatment of its own. Here reference to Buddhist concepts will be restricted to their dialectical relationship with few of the “orthodox” schools of thought. In the fourteenth century compendium called the *Sarvadarśana-saṃgraha*, Sāyaṇa Mādhava (14thc./1978) outlined over a dozen schools of thought, including orthodox as well as unorthodox. Within the limited scope of this essay, distinguished contributions of only the Advaita Vedānta, Sāṃkhya-Yoga, and Nyāya will be emphasized.

A major concern for several such schools of thought was spiritual uplift by means of self-knowledge. However, for millennia, the Indian culture advocated and encouraged the pursuit of four major goals of human life: fulfilling one’s social obligations and doing one’s duty (*dharma*), acquiring wealth and power (*artha*), fulfilling natural desires including sex (*kāma*), and radical liberation from the fetters of living (*mokṣa*). Although some of the most distinctive Indian contributions to psychology arose from the spiritual quest for liberation, psychology flourished in other areas as well. Systematic study of experience and behavior in worldly pursuits is evident in highly regarded works such as Vātsyāyana’s (n.d./2002) *Kāma Sūtra*,² a treatise on sexology, and Kauṭilya’s *Arthaśāstra* (n.d./1992), which deals with state craft and group conflict, and Bharata Muni’s *Nāṭya-śāstra* (n.d./1996), a comprehensive work on dramatics, which deals with the expression and transformation of emotions. As well, the indigenous system of medicine called *Āyurveda* deals with certain issues in health psychology.

There is a wide range of psychological topics on which sophisticated theories developed in India. Important among these are consciousness, self, person, cognition, action, emotion, the experience of art, language, nature of suffering and pathology, positive mental health, and varied technologies for self-transformation and self-realization. The material available is vast; discussion of theories of specific topics such as consciousness or cognition warrant volumes. Given the international scope and audience of this encyclopedia, emphasis will be on those aspects of theories that are distinctive or complementary to their more commonly known Western counterparts.

Some Distinctive Features of Conceptualization and Analysis

Since the historical development of Indian thought proceeded on distinctive lines, it is necessary to explain some of its unique stylistic features. Insofar as the ancient texts were preserved in an

oral tradition where entire texts were meticulously memorized and passed on to the next generation, it was important to condense ideas in aphorisms to minimize the burden of memorization. In an attempt to make the most succinct statement of a given system of ideas, a specific genre of texts called the *Sūtra*, which literally means aphorism, evolved around a couple of centuries before and after the beginning of the Common Era. The *Vedānta Sūtra* of Bādarāyaṇa, Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*, and Gautama's *Nyāya Sūtra* are examples of well-known texts of this genre.

Further development of systems of thought in India proceeded through a series of glosses (*vīvaraṇa*) and commentaries (*bhāṣya*, *vyākhyā*) on important texts, and commentaries on commentaries (*tīkā*). Over the centuries, many of the commentators explained and elaborated ideas of the original texts of the originators of their specific school of thought. In this process, they often critiqued ideas of rival schools in a way that would first state the position of a rival school (called *pūrva pakṣa*), which they refuted (*khaṇḍana*) by giving contrary arguments and evidence. Thus, the authors often stated their own thesis (*siddhānta*) by proving that the antithesis was false. There are several instances in history where eminent scholars toured the land challenging proponents of rival schools in open debates (*śāstrārtha*). It is important to note the development of systems of Indian thought through dialogues and debates, for it is through the development of theses and antitheses that rich and elaborate theories developed.

The system of logic that guided the development of theories was distinct from Aristotelian logic, which guided Western thought for over a millennium. Contrary to Aristotle's law of the excluded middle, which denies the rationality of a position between extreme affirmation and extreme negation, the Buddhist philosopher Nāgarjuna (second century CE) adopted a position midway between opposite extremes. The difference between these two approaches to logic is complex and the matter is controversial; and we need not examine this issue. But we may simply note that the distinctive and profound contributions to logic made by Buddhist, Nyāya, and the more recently (twelfth to thirteenth century CE) by Navya Nyāya traditions are widely recognized. The development of the Nyāya system is particularly important in providing guidelines for a disciplined inquiry. This system is sometimes known as *Ānvīkṣikī*, or science of inquiry. Nyāya is known for developing rules on how argumentation should proceed, and hence known as the science of reasoning (*tarka vidyā*). Since it also developed rules for debate, it is sometimes referred to as the science of debate (*vāda vidyā*). This is clearly an important aspect of the Indian tradition; it laid an essential framework for the development of sciences in the sense of systematic inquiry in various fields. The point is that psychological thought developed in India within the context of rigorous logic demanded by these traditions.

Ontological Bases and Epistemological Guidelines for Psychological Theorizing

Over the centuries, varied schools of thought evolved, and the fundamental issue of what

constitutes the world was a central issue for most of them. A wide range of ontological doctrines developed as part of their inquiry. The Advaita school, for instance, held that there is a single principle of reality that is essentially indescribable, but can be generally characterized in terms of Being (*sat*), Consciousness (*cit*), and Bliss (*ānanda*). In contrast, the Sāṃkhya system proposed two principles of reality, one characterized by pure consciousness (*Puruṣa*) and the other by materiality (*Prakṛti*). On the opposite end of the spectrum, the Loakāyata school of Cārvāka insisted that matter is the only constituent of reality. The nature of psychological phenomena as conceived within such radically different views of reality was bound to be different. However, despite such highly divergent ontological doctrines, mind was more commonly conceived as fundamentally material in nature. Interestingly, mind and matter were not viewed in dichotomous terms as in the Cartesian scheme, and “mind–body problem” typical of Western thought did not arise in Indian thought. As will be explained later in this essay, a most distinctive feature of Indian perspectives was the concept of pure consciousness that transcended the processes and contents of the mind. Pure consciousness is thought of as having an ontic status beyond mind and matter.

Complex epistemologies developed as scholars criticized rival theses through logical argumentation (*tarka*) and adumbrated their own theses by citing specific evidence in their support (*pramāṇa*). The discussion of criteria for the validation of knowledge claims (*pramāṇa carcā*) is a very significant aspect of the development of theories in Indian thought. An important part of this discussion is the concept of valid cognition (*pramā*) as a proposition that remains unfalsified (*abādhitā*) in face of contradictory arguments and evidence. By and large, empirical statements are considered as having only provisional truth value; they remain open to revision. In the Indian tradition, testing knowledge claims through serious attempts at their falsification has been an integral part of testing theories centuries before Popper popularized the concept of falsification in modern philosophy of science.

Psychological theories are integral part of systems of Indian thought called the *darśanas*. The word *darśana* means a vision, and Sāyaṇa Mādhava’s compendium of the principal schools of thought are alternative perspectives on life. Although it is common to consider the *darśanas* of Indian thought are systems of philosophy, whether they present philosophy in the Western sense, or constitute a unique Indian form of thinking called *Ānvīkṣikī*, is a matter of controversy. Whatever be the nuances in ways of thinking in Indian and Western styles, the *darśanas* nevertheless offer broad perspectives on a wide range of issues such as the nature of self, person, cognition, volition, and so on, which are important issues of modern psychology. Even as there are differences in Indian and Western *styles* of dealing with philosophical issues, there are distinct styles of psychological theorizing. Thus, while in contemporary psychology what matters most is empirical verification of theories, what matters most in the context of the Indian tradition is the application of a theory at experiential and behavioral level as part of a lived reality. As we shall see, Indian theory building commonly proceeds from whole to part, abstract to concrete, and not the other way around. Aside from such “stylistic” differences, there are differences in the assumptive framework adopted in theory building.

Key Concepts of the Assumptive Framework

Foundations for systematic thinking were laid in Indian thought in the *R̥g Veda*. There are two basic concepts from the earliest Vedic period that provided firm foundations for later developments. The first, called *ṛtam*, implies fixed and repeatable pattern of events, and the truth inherent in that pattern. The second called *satyam* implies absolute truth. The recognition of fixed and recurring patterns of events implies that the universe is a cosmos, not a chaos. Such a basic and axiomatic assumption implies the lawful relationship among events, and it is a necessary precondition for all systematic inquiry. A clear instance of lawfulness of behavioral events is the notion of *karma*, or action and its lawful consequences. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (4.4.5)³ declares that “According as one acts, so does he become.... The doer of good becomes good, the doer of evil becomes evil.” This is basically consistent with the Biblical notion “as you sow, so you reap.” Although the emphasis here is on the morally lawful consequences of action, in the course of history this basic idea led to a comprehensive view of lawfulness of events in physical, mental as well as moral spheres. The basic idea here is not fundamentally different from the notion of universal laws in science,⁴ except that the Law of karma extends far beyond the physical domain and beyond the scope of “value free science.” The domain of truth uncontaminated by values was not unknown to the Upaniṣads, however. In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (2.14), for instance, the young inquirer Naciketas insists on knowing that which is beyond good and bad, beyond right and wrong. As is widely recognized, with the lone exception of the school of the materialist Cārvāka and his followers, all schools of Indian thought, of Upaniṣadic as well as Buddhist and Jain persuasion, accept the Law of karma. This is particularly relevant for psychology insofar it deals with behavior and its consequences.

In later *pramāṇa*-based epistemologies, the concept of *ṛtam* mentioned above has a connotation of truth insofar as the truthfulness of a statement can be affirmed through the observation of a repeatable pattern of events. There is in the *Vedas* the notion of a higher order truth (*satyam*), meaning absolute truth that remains unfalsified at all times (*trikāla-abādhyam*). This does not imply apodictic statements that are open to rational proof and immune to empirical considerations as Kant suggested. Rather, *satyam* implies Truth inherent “in reality” or “in its own existence,” and as such is open to direct experience in a trans-cognitive state of consciousness. This idea of a higher order truth is particularly significant for psychology insofar as it is based on a distinctive view of states of consciousness and their noetic significance. It involves a significant contribution of psychology in the Indian tradition, and will be discussed at some length in the remainder of this essay.

Consciousness

The idea of consciousness in the Indian tradition is traced back to the *R̥g Veda*. In it there is a hymn called the *Nāsadīya Sūkta* wherein a sage speculates on what may have happened at the time of the origin of the universe. He first suggests that perhaps it all began with some single

undifferentiated entity devoid of basic distinctions such as existence vs. non-existence, death vs. immortality, day vs. night; open air vs. the void beyond, and so on. That something, he speculates, somehow became *aware* of its lonely existence, and a desire (*kāma*) arose in it for becoming many. This primordial desire was the “seed of the mind” (*manso retah*), it suggests, from which the universe evolved. From the point of view of psychology, it is important to note that in this world view, such things as awareness, desire, and mind are taken for granted as *primordial* – and not in need of explanation as products of something else such as matter or evolution of life.

In the *Māṇḍūkya* Upaniṣad, we find an explicit account of four states of consciousness: wakeful, dream, deep sleep, and a fourth one simply called the Fourth State (*turīyā avasthā*). These states are distinguished in terms of being outer directed, inner directed, or directed in neither way. Although both deep sleep and the Fourth State are somewhat similar in not being directed in either outer or inner manner, the Fourth is much different from sleep; it has many extraordinary features. It is described as trans-cognitive, ungraspable, unspeakable, peaceful, and benign. Most of all, it is said to be the basis of experience of the Self, the unchanging basis of self-sameness underlying the continually changing images of the self. This extraordinary state of consciousness has been held in very high esteem throughout the Indian tradition, and many alternative paths have been suggested for the attainment of self-realization through the experience of such a state of consciousness. We will take up two of the most prominent trends in this direction. The first one is in the Advaita tradition, and the second in Sāṅkhya-Yoga.

In the Advaita tradition, the *Māṇḍūkya* Upaniṣad is followed by Gauḍapāda’s commentary on it in the eighth century CE. Gauḍapāda’s student Govinda passed on his interpretation to his famous disciple Śaṅkara (commonly called Śaṅkarācārya). Śaṅkara (788–822) proposed a strictly monistic ontology that takes pure consciousness experienced in the Fourth State as the single ubiquitous principle of reality (called *Brahman*). His approach is called Advaita, meaning non-dual, since it is based on the noetic value of the Fourth State in which the subject–object duality is transcended. It is also called the Vedānta system since it is founded on the Upaniṣads, which were composed toward the end (*anta* in Sanskrit) of the Vedic era. A competing system called the Sāṅkhya finds its initial expression in some of the later Upaniṣads. Based on this lead, Īśvarakṛṣṇa wrote a treatise called the *Sāṅkhya-kārikā* around the second century CE. This system proposes an elaborate conceptual framework with two ontological principles: *Puruṣa*, which involves pure consciousness, as apart from Prakṛti, the principle of materiality. It declares the radical removal of suffering as its goal. This goal is attained, it claims, when a person realizes that the true Self is pure consciousness, and not the body or any other objective manifestations with which the self is commonly, but mistakenly, identified. The Yoga of Patañjali provides clear guidelines for the attainment of self-realization as explained and promised in Sāṅkhya.

Yoga: The Psychology of Higher States of Consciousness

Yoga is a generic term that connotes a theory as well as a wide range of techniques aimed at the removal of suffering and the attainment of bliss and spiritual development. Bodily postures and breathing exercises with which the currently popular image of Yoga is identified are only a small part of a branch of Yoga called the *Hatha* Yoga. The origin of some of the Yogic practices is probably pre-Vedic. An iconic representation of a person in the lotus position found in the ruins of the ancient Indus civilization (about 2500–1900 BCE) is often cited as evidence of the antiquity of Yoga. The use of Yogic practices in spiritual development was well established in Buddha's times, i.e., in the sixth century BCE. Patañjali, who composed the famous Yoga aphorisms (see Woods 1914/[1972](#)) around the second century BCE, did not invent the system; he explained the already established methods within a conceptual framework of the Sāṃkhya philosophy. Patañjali's Yoga is concerned with controlling one's stream of consciousness (*citta nadī*) so as to help discover the true Self in the state of pure consciousness. As such, the subject matter of Patañjali's Yoga is clearly psychological, and the tradition avers that it is the most predominant system of psychology that originated in India.

Patañjali's lists of eight means, or steps, leading to its goal are widely known. They include (i) a set of restraints, (ii) a set of observances, (iii) postures, (iv) breathing exercises, (v) withdrawing of senses from their objects, (vi) concentration, (vii) contemplation, and (viii) a set of higher states of consciousness called the *Samādhi*. Patañjali mentions stability and comfort as the only two criteria for an adequate posture to help stabilizing the mind without being distracted by pain or discomfort. Important from a theoretical point of view are psychological concepts developed in Patañjali's tradition and detailed descriptions of experiences encountered in the progress of practitioners proffered by his followers. Historically important in this context is the work of a series of scholars who wrote glosses and expository commentaries on Patañjali's aphorisms, namely: Vyāsa (second century CE), Vācaspati Miśra (ninth century), Bhojarāja (eleventh century), and Vijñāna Bhikṣu (sixteenth century), among others.

The Concept of Mind and the Technology of Restraining the Mind

Patañjali's Yoga aphorisms and the works of many of his commentators are a virtual treasure trove for Indian concepts of mind and higher states of consciousness. The core of Patañjali's system is the concept of the *processes* of mind (*citta vṛtti*) such as thinking, imagining, recollecting, doubting, determining, desiring, and so on. Patañjali's commentator Vyāsa uses the term mind-river (*citta nadī*), which recognizes the flowing character of mental processes as does James's expression the *stream* of consciousness. The idea of *flow* implies the recognition of continuity in mental states from past through present to future. Patañjali's system suggests that every mental event leaves behind its trace (*saṃskāra*). These traces are thought to be like seeds which get stored in the mind (*citta*). They sprout under appropriate conditions giving rise to experiences and behaviors similar to the original experiences and behaviors that left the trace behind. The *saṃskāras* are thought to remain dormant for indefinite periods of time.

Remembering is cited as an example of sprouting of a seed sown previously within the same life cycle. And when an individual is prompted to feel or do something without an apparent connection to events since birth, it is attributed to *vāsanā*, a concept similar to drive in modern psychology. *Vāsanās*, like drives, are thought to originate from events prior to the beginning of the present life cycle, implying the concept of rebirth and continuity of life across life cycles. *Samskāra* is an important concept in Indian psychological theories in that it is used to connote various cultural devices – such as teaching and rituals – that are designed to shape individual's behavior in a culturally desired direction.

The idea of the *flow* of thoughts in the stream of consciousness has a special significance in Indian psychology. Patañjali's Yoga aims at the attenuation and eventual arresting of the flow of thoughts by deliberate and systematic design. This is accomplished by two principal means: relentless practice (*abhyāsa*), and the cultivation of dispassionateness (*vairāgya*). Postures and breathing exercises are minor aids to ensure that discomforts do not distract the practitioner. A Yogi is supposed to first slow down the flow of thoughts, and then hold attention steadily onto a single thought. Then attention is withdrawn inward from the objects of thought, and taken successively into the inner domains of the mind. Attention is said to pass through meanings and mental images on which the meanings rest, and further inward till it rests firmly at the center of awareness. In this process, an adept is said to experience a graded series of higher states of consciousness called the *Samādhi*.

Attaining Higher States of Consciousness

Samādhi is an important concept suggestive of a series of successively higher states of consciousness. Patañjali describes two major types of *Samādhi* that arise in succession. In the initial set of states called the *Samprajñāta* *Samādhi*, the contents of consciousness are retained in experience. When one attains mastery on this state, one obtains the *Asamprajñāta* state, which is devoid of all content. During the course of this progression, the connotative and denotative meanings are dispelled from the mind. Insofar as meanings are added onto the input provided by the senses, what remains in experience are only the sensory images on which the meanings foisted. When even the sensory content is also shed, what remains is only the center of awareness. Finally, attention is made to rest firmly on the center of awareness, thereby providing a direct experience of pure consciousness which reveals the unchanging inner Self.

The central thesis of Yoga is that, while in common wakeful state the sense of self remains identified with the ongoing thought, the true Self is experienced when the mind is emptied of all content. To put it in Sāṃkhya terminology, when attention is completely withdrawn from objects in the material world as well as from objects of thought, the true Self (*Puruṣa*) is experienced in its nascent form as pure, or content-less, consciousness. The experience of *Samādhi* states does not persist for long periods of time, and a yogi regains normal wakeful state. However, with repeated experience of *Samādhi* states, a complete personal transformation takes place. One no longer feels identified with the passing thought, feeling, or activity, and stops being tossed from

elation to depression with successes and failures of mundane life. The person's experience becomes firmly anchored in an unchanging and blissful Self, thereby experiencing a non-diminishing inner calm and peace.

Yoga is not the only system offering a theory of mind; other systems also offer their own theories of mind, and distinctive ways of dealing with the mind. In the Advaita system, for instance, the word *manas*, rather than *citta*, is used to designate the mind's activities. However, the Advaita proposes a distinct technique for dealing with the mind which does not emphasize slowing down the flow of thoughts as in Patañjali's Yoga. Instead, in the Advaita, the mind (*manas*) is defined in terms of the twin processes of cognitive integration (*saṃkalpa*) and cognitive differentiation (*vikalpa*). The Advaitic technique of meditation accordingly focuses on the use of these two mental processes. Thus, it encourages a practitioner to first generate all possible alternative propositions in relation to a belief (*vikalpa*) such as varied self-definitions, and then choose the correct one among them (*saṃkalpa*) according to a specific criterion, namely, the true self is that which remains unchanged (*nitya-anitya viveka*). In other words, the logical principle of agreement (*anvaya*) and difference (*vyatireka*) is employed to put all self-definitions into two separate categories: those that are open to change vs. those that indicate permanence. The search for the true self thus follows a strict process of reasoning (*tarka*), and as such, this approach to self-knowledge is called the path of knowledge (*jñāna mārga*). The journey on this path ends when one discovers that pure consciousness is the only thing that remains unchanged, and hence reveals one's true identity (see Dharmarāja [1972](#)).

A most important feature of the typical Indian view of mind is that the process of thinking is not equated with consciousness. While the ongoing mental processes are recognized as having a conscious character, they are viewed only as part of a broader spectrum of consciousness that includes pure consciousness. This stands in sharp contrast with the Western tradition where the Cartesian equation of consciousness with cogito is taken for granted. Also, unlike Brentano and his followers who insist that consciousness is always intentional, or directed to some object or other, in Indian thought the occasional occurrence of non-intentional states is taken for granted. In the West, there is tendency to consider non-intentional states as either impossible, or as "mystical" and unworthy of attention. But what proof does Yoga offer in support of its claims? According to Vyāsa, the chief commentator of Patañjali's aphorisms (#3.6), Yogic claims can be verified by *doing* Yoga. This is no different from the scientists' approach: their claims can be verified by anyone by replicating the experiment as specified.

Self and Identity

In the history of Indian thought, the self has been conceived of in terms of various aspects of selfhood. That selfhood often manifests itself in terms of the sense of "me" and "mine" with the attendant feelings of pride, and egotism (*garva*) is expressed by the concept of *ahamkāra*. The connotation of this term is similar to that of ego in modern psychology insofar as both indicate the sphere of self-love and its boundaries. That the individual's sense of belonging and

attachment is usually spread over different spheres is expressed in Advaita by the concept of person (*jīva*) as multilayered entity represented by five concentric “sheaths” or layers like those in an onion. The outermost layers are (i) the bodily self (“made of food”: *annamaya kośa*), followed in sequence by (ii) physiological functions driven by the life force (*prāṇamaya*), and by (iii) mental (*manomaya*), and (iv) higher cognitive (*vijñānamaya*) layers, with (v) blissfulness (*ānandamaya*) as the innermost core. To put it in contemporary terminology, what it means is that the sense of self manifests in the identification of the “I” with the body, with the functions and conditions of the body such as yawning in tiredness or feeling fresh and energetic, with one’s auditory, visual and other sensations, with ongoing thoughts, and with innermost feelings such as bliss.

A parallel conception of the manifestation of the self in one’s thoughts, feelings, and actions is expressed in the Advaitic idea of the person as a knower (*jñātā*), enjoyer/sufferer (*bhoktā*), and agent (*kartā*). Paranjpe (1998a) has shown how such conceptualization has selective parallels in modern perspectives in psychology such as those of William James, G.H. Mead, Cooley, and others. But the most distinctive concept of self in Indian thought is that of *Ātman*, which, to put it simply, implies a *transcendental self* at the center of awareness. The *social* nature of the self is implied in the portrayal of important characters of the epics *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* as players of multiple roles within the immediate family, as members of an extended kin group, and as players of political, military, and other roles in kingdoms spread across the subcontinent and beyond.

Aside from the concepts mentioned above, the concept of *Ātman* is an important concept regarding the nature of self as conceived of in Indian thought. It is somewhat similar to William James’s (1890/1983) concept of the Pure Self, by which he means “the inner principle of personal unity” (p. 324). But unlike James who concludes that the ultimate inner principle of selfhood is just the passing Thought of a given moment and nothing beyond, the *Ātman* implies pure consciousness experienced when the mind is emptied of all Thoughts. The *Ātman* is one of the central concepts of the principal Upaniṣads, and the active search for the essence of selfhood is arguably the core of Upaniṣadic psychology. The central thesis is that the core and essence of selfhood is “pure” consciousness experienced in higher states such as the *Samādhi* explained before. The intricate relationship between self and pure consciousness centers around the question of what, if anything, accounts for the unity and sameness of self amid the many, varied, and continually changing images of the self one experiences throughout the life cycle. That the self is simultaneously one and many, same and yet changing is a paradox. It is a conundrum with which some of the greatest minds of the world have struggled. It has been called the “problem of identity.” The Advaita position adumbrated in a medieval text called the *Dr̥g-dr̥śya Viveka* (n.d./1931) is that the principle of unity and self-sameness is the self-as-subject as opposed to self-as-object. In other words, the *Ātman* is that which experiences, and not anything that is experienced whether in the form of sensation, thoughts, dreams, or feelings.

The thesis that self-as-subject is the foundation for, and the essence of, selfhood is one of the central features of the Indian tradition. As noted earlier, according to the *Ṛg Veda*, consciousness is the *primordial* principle of the universe; it is from the *awareness* of the original One of its lonely existence that the entire course of evolution started. And according to the Upaniṣads and

its Advaitic followers, whatever exists (*sat*) is but a manifestation of Consciousness (*cit*), the fundamental principle of reality. Human beings, as part of this pervasive principle, have Consciousness at their very core. Besides, this principle is blissful (*ānandamaya*) by its very nature. Advaita, along with Sāṃkhya and varieties of Yoga, have devised spiritual practices that promise to help discover the Bliss at the center of awareness. Indeed, the Divine is often defined in terms of Existence (*sat*), Consciousness (*cit*), and Bliss (*ānanda*).

Although this is one of the dominant views of the nature of self in Indian thought, there is great diversity of opinion on this. Indeed, in the history of Indian thought, there has been an unending debate over it. On one side of the debate is the strong affirmation of the *Ātman* as the principle of the unity and sameness of a transcendental Self in the Upaniṣads, followed by a long tradition of Advaitic thinkers. On the opposite side is an equally strong denial of the Self by numerous scholars of the Buddhist tradition. The Buddha was well aware of the Upaniṣadic claim that there was an unchanging basis underlying the changing images of the self and that it was blissful in nature. According to Dasgupta (1922/[1975](#)), “We could suppose that early Buddhism tacitly presupposed some such idea. It was probably thought that if there was the self (*attā*), it must be bliss” (p. 109). However, as Dasgupta points out, Buddha’s conclusion was the converse of this idea: “that which is changing is sorrow, and whatever is sorrow is not self” (p. 110). The doctrine of no-self (*anattā*) is one of the central theses of Buddhism. It involves a complex thesis expressed in various ways in writings ascribed to the Buddha, and also in the writings of scholars of many schools of Buddhism. There is vast amount of literature on just this topic in Buddhism. It is neither possible nor necessary here to summarize what does the denial of self in Buddhism means, and how the doctrine stands in relation to the Advaitic affirmation of the self.

Putting the concept of self in a comparative context, we may note that the debate in the Indian tradition between the denial and affirmation of the self has a Western parallel. Thus, David Hume’s famous denial of the self has Skinner ([1974](#)) as a follower of sorts in modern psychology, while on the opposite side, Erikson’s ([1968](#)) view of the ego identity echoes Kantian affirmation of a transcendental ego. The comparisons among such apparent similarities and parallels are tricky. For upon closer examination, one finds that what is denied or affirmed, and on what grounds and to what consequence, is different in each case. A detailed discussion of the similarities, apparent or essential, can be found in Paranjpe ([1998b](#)).

Person and Personality Typology

The concept of self must be grounded in that of personhood; it cannot exist in a vacuum. In the Upaniṣadic tradition, the human individual is usually referred as *jīva*, which literally means a living being. All living beings are viewed as conscious, whether at a lower or higher level. In the Advaita tradition, the individual or *jīva* is conceptualized as a knower (*jñātā*), an experiencer of feelings (*bhoktā*), and an agent (*kartā*). In other words, a person has three fundamental capacities: of cognition, affect, and volition. This view clearly parallels the idea of person in John Locke and his followers.⁵

That persons have distinctive and stable characteristics is well recognized. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (5.14), for instance, it is suggested that the individual's own character (*svabhāva*) generally prevails, although it is not considered to be fixed and unalterable. The *Gītā* (as the *Bhagavad-Gītā* is commonly referred to) suggests three types of personality following the conceptual framework of the Sāṃkhya system. In it, everything in the material world (*Prakṛti*), including persons, manifests each of three basic “strands” or components: light or enlightenment (*sattva*), energy (*rajas*), and inertia (*tamas*). Although each of the three components is present in everybody and everything, individuals differ in terms of the relative dominance of the three. There are extensive descriptions in the *Gītā* of persons in whom one of the three strands or qualities is dominant. In Buddhism, the concept of person is designated by the term *puggala*. An old Buddhist text called the *Puggala-Paññatti* describes various personality types based on their eligibility for spiritual development (Law [1922](#)). The Indian medical system called the Āyurveda suggests three types of personality based on the relative dominance of three humors (*kapha*, *pitta*, and *vāta*) that are said to constitute the human body. Each type is described in detail in terms of the features of the body as well as behavioral characteristics, and this typology is used in diagnostics. These typologies are amenable to empirical research, and tests have been developed in this context (Murthy and Salagame [2007](#); Wolf [1998](#)).

Personality Development and the Ideal Human Condition

A persistent theme of the Indian culture is that, on the whole, suffering exceeds pleasures and happiness. In the epic Mahabharata, the story of Yayāti, a mythical king, conveys that his appetite for pleasures could not be satisfied despite all his wealth and power, and despite borrowing his son's youth in his old age. The point of the parable is that desires are not sated by indulgence; expectations keep growing like fire fed by fuel. Buddha's message was not much different. Despite such rather pessimistic view of the human condition in some important classical sources, the thrust of the culture as a whole is far from kill-joy. In fact, the four goals in life that the Hindu tradition prescribes include not only spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*) and doing one's duty (*dharma*), but also pursuit of wealth and power (*artha*) and the pursuit of sensual pleasures (*kāma*). India is a land in which Lakṣmī, the Goddess of wealth, is unabashedly worshipped, and its culture produced a superb text of sexology called the *Kāma Sūtra*. Moreover, despite the oft-repeated message that the pursuit of pleasures often leads to a negative balance, the assumption has been that it is possible to overcome all common sources of suffering, and attain a state of undiminishing inner peace and bliss. The desired end point is a transcendent state, a stasis, not perpetual progress. Unlike the concept of perpetual progress implied in the currently popular idea of ever-growing gross national product, the ideal of individual and social life in the Indian tradition is that of a sustained stability. To put it in different words, the ideal of human life is not self-actualization, meaning an expression of unlimited inner potentials manifest through an ever-increasing level of accomplishments – as is implied in Western thinkers from Aristotle to Abraham Maslow. But rather the ideal is self-realization through the inner

experience of an unchanging basis for selfhood.

This basic theoretical principle is complemented through a variety of techniques, ways of life, or methods of spiritual development that form the core of applied psychology of the Indian tradition. The conceptualization of person as knower, enjoyer/sufferer, and agent has been used to develop distinct methods for spiritual development. These are based on sophisticated theories of cognition, emotion, and volition, and are, respectively, called as the Path of Knowledge (*Jñāna Yoga*), of Devotion (*Bhakti Yoga*), and Action (*Karma Yoga*). Each of these deserves a brief account.

Cognition and the Path of Knowledge

To properly understand the traditional Indian view of cognition, it is necessary to view it in the context of the distinctive world view in which it is embedded. In his introductory section (called the *Adhyāsa Bhāṣya*) of his famous commentary on the Vedānta aphorisms, Śaṅkara (n.d./[1977](#)) conceptualizes all living beings (*jīva*) as individualized centers of awareness reflecting the universal and infinite consciousness of the ultimate reality called Brahman (Rao [2002](#)). In its individualized form, consciousness suffers from the inevitable limitations (*upādhi*) of the capacities of the sense organs and cognitive apparatuses typical of the species to which the individual belongs. Within each species of organisms, each individual may have deficiencies of its own, which characterize the conscious experience of that particular individual.

According to the Nyāya and Vedānta systems, humans are born, like animals, with a capacity for perception devoid of concepts and words (*nirvikalpa pratyakṣa*), but develop the capacity for the use of concepts and words (*savikalpa pratyakṣa*) during the course of development (Datta [1932/1972](#)). Given the intrinsic limitations of the sense organs and cognitive capacities, humans cannot obtain complete knowledge of most objects, let alone of an entire class of objects. As Śaṅkara explains in *Adhyāsa Bhāṣya*, all new knowledge is “veiled” (*āvaraṇa*) by existing knowledge; the new incoming information is “filtered” and is received only partially rather than fully. Reciprocally, what is known from previous experience is often “projected” (*vikṣepa*) onto what is newly encountered. To compensate for the deficiencies in cognition, and to fill in the gaps in the information available, humans make use of imagination (*kalpanā*). Thus, most human perception is *savikalpa pratyakṣa*, i.e., it involves at least some element of imagination. This added element involves, among other things, concepts and names given to classes of objects; thus, human cognition is mostly “constructed” or fabricated.

Based on this view of human cognition, Śaṅkara draws far-reaching implications for all human knowledge. What we know about the world (*jagat*) starts with intrinsic and inevitable limitations of our cognitive apparatus, and although we keep on adding new knowledge with experience and reasoning, what is incomplete at start continues to be incomplete despite continual improvements. He forcefully suggests that all empirical and rational knowledge based on transactions with the world (*vyavahāra*) is forever revisable and forever imperfect. This view of

knowledge, it may be recognized, is basically compatible with the contemporary notion that scientific knowledge is forever revisable. Similarities between Śaṅkara's and Piaget's views of cognition and knowledge are particularly striking (see Paranjpe [1998a](#)). Śaṅkara uses the Upaniṣadic term “*avidyā*” to designate the entire domain of rational-empirical knowledge. Following the *Īśa* Upaniṣad (9–12), Śaṅkara mentions a different kind of knowledge, called the *vidyā*, which is transcendental (*parā*), and is unconstrained by the contingencies of empirical knowledge. Knowledge at this higher level reveals absolute Truth (*satyam*), while rational-empirical knowledge reveals empirical generalizations that reflect a repeatable pattern (*ṛtam*) – which is true as long as it remains uncontradicted by a new set of observations or a fresh insight. Such an idea of two levels of knowledge is a matter of epistemology that many psychologists today would happily leave for philosophers to deal with. Nevertheless, the concept of transcendental knowledge should be of interest to psychologists insofar as the method developed for its attainment involves a psychological technology. The technology relevant here is the same as the Advaitic method for self-realization.

Inspired by the teachings of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* Upaniṣad (2.4.5), the Advaitists advocate the following strategy to help discover the true Self hidden behind the changing images of the ego: (1) Study of the principles of Advaita (*śravaṇa*), (2) relentless critical examination of all self-definitions to see if they are open to change or not (*manana, nitya-anitya viveka*), (3) deep contemplation (*nididhyāsana*) of what is thus learned. In the course of critical examination, self-definitions based on identification with things, personal relations, or even values that often appear nonnegotiable change sometimes due to changed circumstances, sometimes by choice. It is gradually recognized that all objective self-definitions are open to change; it is only the awareness that underlies all understanding that remains unchanged. When this understanding sinks in deeply, an extraordinary state of consciousness called *Nirvikalpa Samādhi* is experienced. This is the same as the Fourth State in which the subject–object duality is transcended, and higher knowledge (*parā vidyā*) is attained.

This higher knowledge cannot be expressed in words, but the process of arriving at it can be expressed in cognitive terminology. One way of describing the process is to suggest that, at the beginning of inquiry, the self is accounted for in the form of an autobiography, and an attempt is made to see who its author is. If one compares what one thought of oneself at the age of say 15 and then at 20 or 50 and so on, it becomes clear that the author of the first description is not quite the same as the author of the later accounts; she or he has kept on changing. It is gradually recognized that autobiographical narrative is cognitively and socially constructed, and further that the surface structure of the knower is a set of cognitive structures and processes that are undergoing continual change. What accounts for true identity, i.e., self-sameness, is only the passive witness of the drama of life presented to an indescribable “I” at the center of awareness. In this process, the ego, or one's view of the self and his/her world is “deconstructed” in a far more rigorous and radical manner than what is suggested in the postmodern idea of deconstruction.

What happens to the person who successfully deconstructs her or his ego? The *Śvetāśvara* Upaniṣad (4.8) describes the situation in a metaphor in which there are two birds perched on top of a tree: one of which is eating and enjoying a fruit while the other one is simply watching. The

first one is the ego; it is involved with the world and cyclically enjoys or suffers with gains and losses as life unfolds. Self is the other bird dispassionately witnessing the ups and downs without being affected by them. The trick is to cultivate a dispassionate stance of an uninvolved witness of the drama of life. By doing so, one can experience inner peace and calm in an uninterrupted manner. This method of attaining trans-cognitive knowledge requires capacity for critical thinking and relentless effort in self-examination. It is not found easy by many people, although there are many examples throughout history of sages who have successfully followed the Advaitic strategy and attained self-realization. One way of understanding self-realization thus attained is to view the ego as a region marked by a boundary, a boundary between the self and the surrounding world, between self and the “other.” Repeated self-examination brings home the point that self concept is acquired in the process of socialization, and is continually modified under the influence of various factors. The boundaries between the Me and the not-Me are continually redrawn through interpersonal interaction, gains and losses, and individual will. In other words, ego boundaries are continually constructed and reconstructed. More specifically, they are open to deliberate modification – or “deconstruction.” Constant questioning of the place of Me and not-Me in the course of relentless self-examination, the ego boundaries lose their force, and get ultimately dissolved.

Great saints, who attained self-realization, have described their experience in poetic expressions. For instance, in a famous poem, the fifteenth-century saint-poet Kabir says that being in the world is like a pot in an ocean; there is water inside and water on the outside. Similarly, the modern Bengali saint Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886) describes self-realization metaphorically; he says that the ego dissolves like a doll made of salt immersed in water. In other words, the Me and not-Me distinction simply goes away. Correspondingly, the behavior of such self-realized individuals shows a complete transformation of personality. Saint Kabir, for instance, was completely above the Hindu–Muslim divide, which was strong in his days, and taught to view individuals as human beings first, and then in terms of Hindu, Muslim, or other such categories. Ramakrishna is known to have practiced spirituality as taught by Vedāntic, Sufi, and several other traditions, and pointed out the commonalities in their teaching. The limitless compassion of such saints is a clear manifestation of their shedding of ego boundaries. Paranjpe (2008) has examined the biography of a modern sage and saint called Sri Ramaṇa Maharshi (1879–1950) to illustrate how the quest for and attainment of self-realization can manifest in a particular individual.

Emotion and the Path of Devotion

While the path to self-realization mentioned above focuses on the use of one’s cognitive capacities to deconstruct the ego, a different way proposed since ancient times emphasizes the transformation of emotions. The key to this approach is to totally surrender one’s ego in a strong emotional relationship with the Divine. The tradition of devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa is traced back some four millennia to the Tamil poetry of Āḷvār saints. A basic outline of this perspective is found in a medieval treatise called the *Bhāgavatam*, which mainly describes the life of Kṛṣṇa as

he grew up among poor cowherds in a small village. The hero is shown in endearing relationships with his adoptive parents, playmates, and in particular in amorous relationships with several young milkmaids. The thrust of the story is to show how normal relationships involve innumerable shades of love which have great potential for self-transformation. It is shown how intimate relationships in paired social roles such as parent and child, mutual friends, and especially lovers, offer opportunities to transform the ego by immersing it in a mutual bond of self-giving. When the emotions are exceptionally strong, as in love between man and woman – whether in licit or illicit relations – the ego of the lover can completely merge with that of the counterpart. When love is directed to a divine being, as Kṛṣṇa, the result of total surrender of the devotee's ego is the experience of limitless and unending love. Indeed, the *Bhāgavatam* suggests that even hatred for the divine can ultimately lead to the same result as intense and unconditional love. The devotional approach to God-realization is explained in a well-known work called the *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra*.⁶ As we shall see, this view of religious devotion was developed in the sixteenth century on the basis of a theory of emotion that had its origin in an effort to understand the transformation of emotion in witnessing dramatic productions.

Understanding the Nature of Emotions and Their Transformation

In the history of Indian thought, a systematic analysis of emotions was provided by Bharata Muni, in a treatise called the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (n.d./1992), meaning the science of drama, composed within two centuries before or after Christ. While writing mainly as a guide for authors, directors, and actors of plays, Bharata deals extensively and in depth with human emotions. He identifies eight basic emotions, which he considers as relatively lasting and common to humans as well as other animals. He also describes 32 relatively transitory emotions along with their facial and physical expressions. A more important theoretical contribution of his work is the concept of *rasa*, which is roughly translated as aesthetic relish or mood. This theory was extended greatly by a great Kashmiri philosopher called Abhinavagupta (ca. 990–1020). There is a long tradition of scholars, which continues till this day, that follows the lead of Bharata and Abhinavagupta in the fields of aesthetics, poetics, dramatics, literary criticism, and various aspects of dance and other art forms.

Scholars in the tradition of Bharata Muni raised a simple but important question: Whose are the emotions that are experienced while witnessing a play? It was reasoned that they do not *exclusively* belong to either the playwright, or the actor (both of whom may not have experienced the pangs of separation which the play portrays), or the character (who could be imaginary), or by the audience (by a honeymooning couple witnessing separation, for instance). The conclusion is that the emotions experienced in a playhouse are *shared* in common. The concept designed to express this idea is the generalization (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*) of emotions. Another important observation in this context is the fact that the basic emotions such as sorrow, fear, and disgust are *transformed* in the process of their dramatic or other artistic presentation so as to lose their

“sting,” or negative character. They are converted into aesthetic moods (*rasa*) of respectively pathos (*karuṇa*), horror (*bhayānaka*), and the odious (*bībhatsa*), which are “enjoyable” by the aesthetes in the audience. The theory is developed further to explain why and how the vicarious experience of the spectators loses the negative character of the basic emotions as experienced in real life. It is suggested that the spectator leaves home, so to speak, her or his daily concerns and ego-involvements with situations that lead to such negative emotions, and the ego-distancing in the process allows for “relishing” of previously experienced “sting” (Dhayagude [1981](#)).

Over the centuries, the development of the *rasa*-thesis (*rasa-siddhānta*) has gone through a series of heated controversies, revisions, modifications, and continued enrichment, and the process continues till this day. A few distinctive features of this theoretical position may be noted in the non-Indian context. *First*, the concept of the generalization of emotion implies that emotions do not belong only to the brain or bodily tissues of individuals; they are socially shared trans-individual phenomena. The underlying ontology is clearly far from the physicalism implied in many contemporary approaches. *Second*, the *rasa* perspective is closer to recent views of social emotions compared to the psychophysiological theories. *Third*, given its attempt to explain transformation of emotion with reference to the ego, it becomes open to use as basis for practical applications. In conformity with the long-standing trend, the practical application was found in the spiritual context.

In the sixteenth century, two scholars of the Guḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition named Rūpa and Jīva Gosvāmī used the theory of *rasa* to help understand and advance religious devotion. Taking the lead from the *Taittirīya* Upaniṣad, which says that the Brahman is the essence (*rasa*) of reality, they use the *rasa* theory in Bharata’s tradition to help explain self-transformation through religious devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa described in the *Bhāgavatam* as indicated above. Rūpa Gosvāmī (n.d./[1981](#)) and Jīva Gosvāmī (n.d./[1986](#)) suggested that the artistic portrayal of emotions have the potential for experiencing shared emotion by *temporarily* overcoming ego boundaries. When a devotee takes for herself or himself the role of a lover, sister/brother, child, servant, student, or whatever vis-à-vis the divine, and plays that role intensely, the devotee can merge with the Lord, who is the Supreme Self (*Parama-Ātman*). It is important to note here that the concept of divine as defined in the tradition of devotion (*bhakti*) is that God is celestial love, a supreme *rasa* that fills the universe. He is an immanent principle that is said to sometimes manifest in human form. He is not a transcendent creator who controls the universe and punishes humans who disobey Him. The stories of divine beings, such as that of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavatam*, can serve as aids in total self-transformation through religious devotion. The Gosvāmīs were careful to specify, however, that while the joy in the experience of art was somewhat similar to the greatest Bliss of Brahman, it is not the same (Paranjpe [2009](#)).

Volition and the Path of Action

As noted, the typical Indian term for action is *karman*, and the Law of karma is accepted by almost all schools of Indian thought, except for the materialist school of Cārvāka. The concept of

free will is implicit in the notions of *karman*. This is succinctly expressed by Śāṅkara (n.d./1977) in his *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* (1.1.2), where he defines *karman* as action which one can choose to do, not to do, or to do in different ways. According to the Law of karma, *all* actions have their natural consequences sooner or later, whether during the life time of the agent or sometime during later incarnations of the individual. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* (1963) (18.14) suggests five distinct factors that determine the nature of the consequences of every action: (i) the context in which it is done (*athiṣṭhāna*), (ii) the agent (*kartā*), (iii) the instruments available for performing the action (*karmaṃ ca prthagvidham*), (iv) the specific movements involved (*vividhāḥ prthak ceṣṭāḥ*) and finally, (v) the working of divine providence (*daivam*). The *Gītā* (18.15) adds that persons often do not realize the degree to which all these factors jointly determine the outcome, and egotistically tend to take all credit for success to themselves. It goes further to observe that what makes the action “binding” on the individual agent is the ego-involvement and passionate craving for the results of her/his actions. As long as the craving for desired results persists, the individual faces the inevitable consequences of his actions, then new actions and their consequences follow, and the individual gets inextricably bound with the perpetual cycle of actions and their consequences.

On the basis of such theoretical formulation, the *Gītā* proposes a practical strategy for the emancipation of the ego from the perpetual *karmic* cycle. Although it may not always be possible to perform actions without any intended goal, one can get rid of the craving and insistence for the intended fruits. One should rather learn to derive pleasure in doing the right actions, and leave it to nature to produce their lawful consequences. With the cultivation of increasingly dispassionate attitudes, the ego can be gradually freed from the clutches of the *karmic* cycle. To put it into contemporary terminology, whereas ordinarily behavior is conditioned and controlled through environmental factors, Karma Yoga offers a way for emancipating oneself from environmental control through a self-administered process of systematic “deconditioning.”

Person as a Social Being

On the first blush, it might appear that a typical Indian theory of personality, such as the Upaniṣadic and Advaitic view of person as *jīva*, is lacking in adequate attention to the social aspect of human beings. However, the opposite is true. An important aspect of the pervasive and persistent Indian world view, which is accepted by virtually all schools, is the concept of *dharma*, a concept that implies that the social aspect of human beings is an integral part of the very nature of reality. *Dharma* is one of those terms that are hard to properly translate into English. Its usual translation as religion is highly misleading, for the term religion has an inescapable connotation by the nature of Abrahamic religions, as a perspective on the sacred that is defined by one God promulgated by one Prophet, and explained in one Book. This connotation is not applicable to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and a myriad of sects of Indian origin, although these are commonly designated by the term religion. We need not here discuss the complex issue of what makes for the difference in the so-called “religions” of Western and Indian origins. To help understand the typical Indian perspective on the social nature of human

beings, it is necessary to understand the concept of *dharma*.

Traditionally, *dharma* is defined in different ways: as duty, charity, something that “holds” the society together, as natural property of an individual or of a thing, and most importantly, as a society’s ethos. There is a natural pairing of the term *dharma* with that of *karma*. A historical overview of these concepts is ably presented by P.V. Kane (1968) in a set of volumes titled the *History of Dharma-śāstra*, i.e., history of the “science” (*śāstra*) of *dharma*. While the concept of *karma*, as explained before, suggests lawfulness of all events in nature, *dharma* correspondingly indicates orderliness of life in society. What accounts for social order is a community’s ethos, or a set of guidelines for behavior that are consensually supported. A society “holds itself,” so to speak, to the extent that people follow rules designed for the welfare of society with a sense of duty – and that is what *dharma* is all about. In a spirit similar to Aristotle’s notion of man as a political animal, the common Indian view of human beings is that they are social animals. Insofar as this is widely presumed, it is part of tacit knowledge and as such in no need of explicit statement.

In the Indian tradition, social ethos is conceived of in two distinct sets of rules: one general and meant for all, and the other specific to a category of people in a certain role or a stage of life. The *Taittirīya* Upanisad (1.5) lists a set of prescriptions common to all (called the *sāmānya dharma*): that one must speak the truth, do one’s duty, never miss opportunities for learning, have respect for parents, offer hospitality to guests, and so on. It is recognized, however, that the right behavior for individuals in society requires guidelines appropriate to one’s station in society. It is taken for granted that behavior must be understood in its *context*, defined by space (*deśa*), time (*kāla*), and capacity and eligibility of the person (*pātra*) as appropriate to the context. Persons who play reciprocal roles such as teacher-student, parent-child, young-old, master-servant have differing obligations and duties toward each other, and hence their conduct must be judged by standards appropriate to their specific role. This idea of variability in the rules of conduct is encapsulated in the expression “*varṇāśrama dharma*,” which means duties and obligations appropriate to the different divisions of the society such as priest, warrior, trader, and worker (*varṇa*) and according to one’s stage in the life cycle (*āśrama*): that of the student, householder, a retiree, or a renunciate. Such rules are, again, considered not fixed for eternity, but as revisable from one era to the next. The ethical code was not viewed as fixed like the Ten Commandments as God-given and fixed, but rather as a matter of conventions that keep changing with time as societies continue to evolve. Each era is supposed to have its own ethos, which would be codified by scholars on the basis of how the wise men of the times behaved. It is widely understood in recent times that the traditional division of the society hierarchically ordered with the priestly Brahmin caste at the top is a thing of the past; the current ethos is reflected in the constitution of the Indian republic. Unlike the old “*varṇāśrama dharma*,” which implied social inequality, the ethos of the present – the *yuga-dharma* of modern times – insists on egalitarian equality.

Traditionally, the two great epics of India, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, provide in-depth portrayal of social life, the former emphasizing the social roles within family and royal contexts, while the latter offers an understanding of a society in turmoil and transition against the backdrop of a major war with rival cousins as main combatants. While these works may not be

seen to offer formal *theories* of social psychology, they do offer deep insights into the nature of human social life. A formal theory of social conflict is offered by Kautilya (n.d./[1992](#)) in his classic treatise on statecraft called the *Arthaśāstra*. The relevance of this work for contemporary theorizing about social conflict is recognized by LeVine and Campbell ([1972](#)) in their book on ethnocentrism.

Theories of Language and Meaning

Language was an important topic of scholarship in the Indian tradition. It was initially part of the exegesis of the ancient Vedas. The study of grammar became an important part of any attempt in the study of a text, scriptural or otherwise. Pāṇini, who wrote a comprehensive grammar of Sanskrit, is now recognized as a great grammarian, and the influence of his work on modern linguistics is widely acknowledged. An important perspective on language is offered by the *sphoṭa* theory, which tries to explain how meaning “bursts forth” in the process of linguistic expression. Philosophical and psycholinguistic implications of this ancient theory have been recognized in recent scholarship (Coward [1980](#); Coward and Kunjunni Raja [1990](#)).

Overview and Styles of Theorizing

Notwithstanding the great diversity within and between Indian and Western psychological theories, certain dominant features stand out as distinctive of each tradition. The prominent features of theories of the Indian tradition may be identified in terms of the ontological presumptions, epistemological choices, overarching goals, and matching approaches to practice.

In terms of the ontological theses that provide the primary foundation for theories, the Indian tradition has generally favored the presumption of the primordial and irreducible nature of consciousness, while this is not the case in the West. India did not witness anything like the “mind–body problem,” which has remained unresolved, and material monism, which is strong in contemporary psychology, is accepted in an insignificant minority in the Indian tradition.

A most distinctive feature of epistemological foundations of psychological theories in India has been the acceptance of the noetic value of the higher states of consciousness. While followers of the Upaniṣadic tradition have insisted that the highest state of consciousness is blissful and holistic (*pūrṇa*), Buddhists have equally strongly insisted that the highest state is characterized by emptiness (*śūnya*). And regardless of their irreconcilable differences on such important issues, both camps have equally valorized the higher states. The higher states of consciousness are considered the basis for both, the highest form of knowledge as well as the culmination of highest happiness. Consistent with the value of higher states of consciousness, contemplative practices of Yoga in one form or another is integral part of praxis among followers of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and so on. The dominance of such spiritual goal does not mean the

neglect of mundane goals as is illustrated by theories in the areas of social conflict, language, and sex. At any rate, the overall thrust of application of psychology in most schools of Indian thought is self-control, and not on controlling someone else or something in the environment.

The most dominant form of theory building is holistic and “top-down” in approach. Thus, in the Advaita, Sāṃkhya-Yoga, as well as Buddhism, one starts with a global view of reality, of the individual human being as a whole, and one aims for the attainment of ultimate happiness. This approach stands in sharp contrast with the “bottom-up” approach typified by behaviorist psychology where one starts with a molecular unit such as stimulus-response, and strives to develop an understanding of increasingly complex forms of behavior. This observation, based on a long-range historical account of the development of psychological theories, is interestingly consistent with the observation by Nisbett et al. (2001) that cognitive styles of individuals from Eastern cultures tested in the laboratory tend to be holistic rather than analytic. Hajime Nakamura (1964) has made similar observations about dominant aspects of Eastern philosophies, which goes on to indicate the deep influence of culture on philosophical and psychological thinking.

Notes

1. A brief sketch of the major currents of psychological thought through this early period of history is provided by S.K.R. Rao (1962). References to psychological topics discussed in classical literature were compiled by Jadunath Sinha (1934/1958). Overviews of the classical literature are available in works on the history of Indian philosophy by Dasgupta (1922/1975) and Radhakrishnan (1927/1931), and in a series of encyclopedic volumes on important works in Indian philosophy under the editorship of Karl Potter. Bibliographic details of the first nine volumes published in this series since 1970 and a brief account of the ongoing series may be found on the World Wide Web at http://www.infinityfoundation.com/encyc_philosophy.htm.
 2. The precise dates of these works are not known. The approximate period in which these texts were composed are: *Artha-śāstra* (fourth to third century BCE), *Kāma Sūtra* (first to sixth century CE), and *Nāṭya-śāstra* (first century BCE to third century CE).
 3. For English translations of the principal Upaniṣads, see Radhakrishnan (1953/1994). Unless otherwise stated, translations of quotations from these texts are from this source.
 4. For theoretical significance of the Law of karma see Potter (1980).
 5. For a detailed discussion of Indian and Western views of personhood, see Paranjpe (1998a).
 6. As is true of many old Indian texts, the date of the *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra* is not known. English translations of this work are widely available. See, for example, Tyāgīśānanda 1972.
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