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Psychology in India: A Critical Perspective on its Growing Popularity in Universities

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The search for oneself in these neoliberal times, a job market for psychologists, and the emergence of an “Indian psychology” explain the current popularity of this academic discipline in India. What psychologists should work for is a “psychology for India” rather than an “Indian psychology”.

In 2015, Deepika Padukone spoke about her depression, treatment, and therapy to the media. Shortly after, Shah Rukh Khan appeared as a gentle psychotherapist in *Dear Zindagi* (2016). The film, directed by Gauri Shinde, depicted the process of therapy with considerable accuracy. Khan’s client, the protagonist of the film, was played by another young star, Alia Bhatt. Shinde’s pride in her work, the presence of stars in a film on a stigmatised subject, and the continuing popularity of the film seemed like a breath of fresh air to psychologists in India.

This opening up about mental illness and the possibility of therapy is only one facet of the increasing space psychology has in popular discourse. Apart from films and web series that are available online, the turn to psychology is evident in numerous websites, blogs, and newspaper columns that provide advice on parenting, managing relationships, and work-related matters, among others. It should therefore not be surprising that there is an increase in the number of students who enrol for courses in psychology. [Several newspaper reports point](#) to a doubling of applications for psychology courses.

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The number of institutions offering courses in psychology has increased. In Delhi, for example, a student can enrol as a psychology major in 18 colleges of the University of Delhi. Psychology is also offered at Ambedkar University Delhi, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University (GGSIU), and Jamia Milia University, all in Delhi. The availability of psychology courses in several private universities in the vicinity of Delhi – Ashoka, Jindal, BML Munjal, Galgotias, and Amity – also suggest that paying fees for a degree in psychology makes economic sense. The pattern seems to be true in most metropolitan centres in the country – Christ University in Bengaluru, Krea University in Sri City, and many others run popular courses in psychology.

A straightforward correlation would suggest that it is the psychological discourse in the social imagination that has led to the popularity of psychology. It might also seem that the heightened interest in the discipline is coterminous with India’s turn to globalisation and neoliberalism. I would like to suggest that while the pervasive presence of “psydiscourse” (Rose 1996) in a global digitised world is a significant aspect of the popularity of psychology, a nuanced understanding requires an analysis of both the very nature of the discipline and the changing Indian context.

Discipline of psychology

Psychology has been described as an empirical discipline that employs objective measures to establish a science of human behaviour and mind. From its inception in the mid-19th century, psychology developed in several distinct though overlapping directions.

Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920), often deemed to be the father of psychology, was committed to an academic understanding of the laws of inner experience and brought psychology into a laboratory setting in a university. William James (1842–1910), influenced in part by evolutionary theory, struggled between the natural science and human science facets of psychology. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) turned to the clinic to evolve a frame for rethinking human distress, writing about human sexuality, the unconscious, and the ‘talking cure’. James and Freud described humans as beings with a biology and a biography and seemed to be interested in establishing a new narrative, of what might be called the self or the human subject. They also wanted to communicate with a larger audience and popularise the discipline.

With such disparate beginnings, psychology has been looking for a core for well over a century. It has been emphatic about establishing general laws of human behaviour although there has always been some space for the uniqueness of individuals. On the whole, “psychology is in a messy and unproductive pre-pragmatic state” (Märtsin 2020), united more by a search for methodology to approach questions of the human condition than by a substantive core. The messiness implies that a student of psychology studies a range of thoughts from neurobiology and statistics to psychoanalysis and phenomenology. Psychology is perhaps the only discipline that bridges the natural sciences and the human sciences in one programme.

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It is precisely the highly variable character of the discipline of psychology that paradoxically contributes to its current popularity. The study of psychology can provide an illusion of expertise, which is applicable to all domains of being human – from negotiating questions of love and grief to the neuropsychology of memory, or from how childhood shapes adult traits to workplace productivity and mental health challenges. Rose, writing of psydiscourses, points out that these disciplines “have brought into existence a variety of new ways in which human beings have come to understand themselves and do things to themselves” (1996). In psychoanalytic parlance, I might say that the very absence of a core with a proliferation of voices provides a projective surface for multiple, and possibly split identifications.

The first department of psychology in India was established in the University of Calcutta as early as 1916. There was a steady growth of interest in psychology. While the numbers were small, programmes in psychology across Indian universities attracted bright minds, characterised by what Kakar (2008) describes as the individuation associated with psychological modernity. The introduction of psychology to the plus-two curriculum, sometime in the 1980s, may have also contributed to the enhanced interest.

I propose that there are at least three sensibilities that have attracted students to psychology. These may intersect in various ways, and it is entirely possible for those engaged with the discipline to shift from one to the other. I also argue that each of these has taken on a new significance in an India committed to neoliberalism.

Wish for self-exploration

On one end of the spectrum of those who wish to study psychology are those who see a space for self-exploration and insight into the complexities of experience, both their own and of others. People often study psychology because they are grappling with family issues, a perceived lack of empathy from others, or experiences with violence or mental distress. Psychology is also likely to become more popular in a phase of historical transformation. The questions of 'who am I?' and 'where do I go from here?' find an exploratory space in psychology.

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Psychological frameworks that highlight the role of experience in shaping anxiety or depression offer a sense of legitimacy and bring order to what may have previously felt chaotic. When fostered in an enriching, context-sensitive, and emotionally receptive setting, many students of psychology become reflective academics and practitioners, often working to alleviate distress (Vahali 2019). Interestingly, the idea of the self that is a subject of exploration is also being reformulated, both within the discipline and outside it. Access to the global media has made it possible to imagine the self in new ways, distant from those maintained by familial ideologies. A discipline that makes the self an aspect of enquiry is fascinating.

The employable self

At the same time, a part of the attractiveness of psychology comes from the fact that it seems to be linked to the job market. Most psychology programmes today emphasise contact with the world of organisations, providing internship opportunities, and tools for measuring and managing psychological data. Students are equipped with the soft skills of empathic listening and communicating with others, and the hard skills of research methods, measurement, and statistical analysis.

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Psychology provides a sense of expertise. The methodological focus of the discipline has meant that most programmes teach students how to formulate a question and find an answer using empirical tools and statistical methods. With these diverse skill sets, it is possible to seek further training to work as counsellors, clinical psychologists, and social workers in programmes for children and in organisational contexts. Becoming therapists require several years of training, and though opportunities within India are expanding they are still limited.

In this context, I am reminded of a moment from the 1990s when I noted with some dismay a trend during the admission process at Lady Shri Ram College for Women in New Delhi. Our cut-offs for psychology admission were as high as those for economics and commerce. It also seemed interesting that the same students had often applied to both programmes. While some of this may have been because of a desire to gain a seat in a prestigious institution, there was also the desire to learn skills that would give them access to the world of work. Looking back, I was partly concerned that psychology was losing its appeal to brilliant, yet alienated, students – the very people who looked at the world from the perspective of outsiders.

While the interpretive forms of psychology promote self-exploration and reflexivity, mainstream psychology with its emphasis on prediction and control provides a sense of certainty and mastery. There can be a heady sense of power when you find that a simple test can assess hidden attributes such as emotional instability or intelligence in both you and others. Inner secrets can be revealed, measured, and if necessary, transformed.

Indeed, some if not much of the popularity of psychology in India could come from the goodness of fit between a market-driven economy and the ability of the discipline to generate a marketing character first described by Erich Fromm (1900–1980) (Funk 2023). The marketing character personifies an ambitious striving for success, honed by the creation of an adaptable self, driven by self-presentation. This fits well with the ideology of jobs linked to marketing and sales. Many students transition from an undergraduate degree in psychology to a master’s programme in management or specialise in the field of organisational behaviour.

The success of expensive psychology programmes in private universities might well be linked to the belief that an education in psychology will enable the development of both a self that can be marketed to fit a position and one that possesses the requisite skills to create others with similar characteristics.

The 'Indian' self

By the 1970s, psychologists began to write about crises in the discipline, searching for frames that were less interested in universals. Social constructionism, discursive approaches, and cultural psychologies emerged along with more political formulations such as feminist psychology. Dalal (2011) writes that early developments in psychological thought in India were marred by a wholesale imitation of “psychology from the West.” The turn to culture in psychology led to the emergence of an 'Indian' psychology, which was described as “an approach that is based on ideas and practices that developed over thousands of years in the Indian subcontinent” (Cornelissen et al. 2011).

Clearly, the definition of psychology here shifts in a problematic manner from that of a modern discipline to a civilisational perspective. A quick survey of the [recent curriculum in psychology](#) will reveal a substantial shift in this direction: there is the addition of a foundation course called 'Introduction to Indian Psychological Thought' and an elective on 'Psychology of Health and Yoga'.

Cornelissen et al. argue that three elements of Indian civilisation create possibilities for the development of a more relevant psychology. These include a well-worked out meta theoretical framework, a variety of psychological practices, and a repertoire of theories (2011). The foregrounding of the spirit and knowledge of an inner self and the possibility of individuation seem to be quintessentially psychological (Kakar 2008), while practices such as yoga and meditation provide ways of cultivating the self. Although problematic in the positing of an essential Indian psychology, the increasing success of programmes in psychology may lie in the experience that access to an education in psychology does not necessarily entail a rupturing of selves cultivated through more familiar cultural routes.

The self in neoliberal times

In a globalised, neoliberal India, each of these three sensibilities may take on a new form. Psychology not only explains psychological experiences but also actively shapes them by promoting new ideals such as intelligence, autonomy, maturity, self-control, expressiveness, and adaptability.

Adams et al. (2019) point to the intersections between mainstream psychological science and the project of neoliberalism. These are reflected in (a) the ideology of a self that is free from social constraints; (b) an “entrepreneurial” self that is a project of ongoing development; (c) well-being defined as personal fulfilment; and (d) success defined as “affect regulation.” In an increasingly precarious work environment where the acquisition of new selves (dress, accent, and the presentation of the body) for acceptable performance is possible, a “flexible, skilled, mobile, and fast self is more important than any stable self, and continuity and coherence are now achieved not through an ‘I’ but through the market” (Teo 2018: 586).

The ideology of measurement, prediction, and control fits in well with a neoliberal environment. A wide range of experts exist to provide often paid for services to help foster a self that fits. Teo calls this the “neoliberal form of subjectivity” (NLFS), a process that allows for an identification with the neoliberal project, a “suturing in” (2018: 583, 586) that simultaneously creates a sense of agency.

The “Indian” traditions in psychology, including yoga and meditation, are also likely to cohere well in the neoliberal space where multiple techniques of self-modification are employed to alleviate distress that might well be from societal conditions themselves.

In India, psychological measures derived from the global North have been utilised for selecting, promoting, and enhancing the experience of well-being in work settings for several decades. However, these have proliferated in neoliberal times (Bhatia and Priya 2018).

The emphasis on ‘individual enterprise’ has also extended to the domain of mental health. In keeping with the rest of the world, it has become commonplace to diagnose mental illness when there may be social suffering (Kleinman 2012), and to treat trauma resulting from social processes as an individual pathology (Bhatia and Priya 2018: 662). ‘Indian’ traditions in psychology, including yoga and meditation, are also likely to cohere well in the neoliberal space where multiple techniques of self-modification are employed to alleviate distress that might well be from societal conditions themselves.

My somewhat sceptical reflections on the popularity of a discipline I have identified with and taught for four decades may seem paradoxical. However, my wariness is accompanied by a hope that we may be able to work towards interpretive, critical psychologies that enable an empathic, self-reflexive stance towards the vexed question of subjectivity in an often divisive and unequal world. Psychologists in India and the Global South have been involved in envisaging alternatives to mainstream psychology. Perhaps the current popularity of the discipline can provide the motivation to work towards what is a “psychology for India” rather than an “Indian psychology.”

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