Dilemmas of Psychology in India

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Abstract

Psychology as a scientific discipline in India traces its roots to the colonial era, with the establishment of a psychology department at Calcutta University. Since then, universities offering degrees in the discipline have increased. Psychology in India today is dominated by American concepts and literature. This is reflected in the way the discipline is often taught. While American authors and their textbooks tend to monopolise the discipline, indigenous theories also exist. The predominant focus of indigenous psychology is through ancient religious texts. Modern psychological concepts are often anachronistically attributed to the distant past. On the surface, endeavours made to indigenise and examine ancient texts might seem like a form of decolonising. However, it replaces one form of hegemony with another. The religious texts studied are neither accessible nor sacred to all communities in the country. Neither looking towards the west nor seeking insight from a selective image of the distant past, have much to say about conditions in contemporary India. As a result, psychology often transmits itself through banal, commonsensical ideas, which often fail to serve the interests of justice. In doing so, pre-existing prejudices have become normalised and justified. This paper will attempt to challenge the dominant discourse of psychology in India. Using personal experience and locating oneself within this system of knowledge production and dissemination, the author will examine how, at its most banal, the discipline transmits dangerous ideas about the human condition.

Keywords: Critical psychology, India, gendered academia

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Locating Myself Within Critical Psychology

I learnt about anti-psychiatry in the final semester of my Master's degree. It is through authors such as Foucault, Szasz, and R.D. Laing that I learnt about the critiques of the psychology I knew at the time. I learnt about structural inequality within psychiatry and psychology. It was during this time I started questioning the inequality that exists within the client-therapist binary relationship. After my Master's degree, I worked in a rehabilitation clinic. Being in a therapeutic environment helped me understand how therapeutic structures exerted control over clients' daily lives. Observing how people lost agency as they entered the system, and were often understood as a product of their symptoms, made me question my role as a counsellor. While operating under the ideal of neutrality and beneficence I encountered the gendered nature of alcoholism and addiction. While I knew abuse existed in therapeutic spaces, what I observed wasn't about individual transgressions. Something built into the system operated within us. I knew I needed the tools to articulate my discomfort with the faux neutrality within which psychology operated.

In the years that followed, I learnt more about Critical Psychology through the works of Erica Burman, Ian Parker and the members of the Discourse Unit. It was here that I expanded my knowledge of critical psychology as not just a critique of therapeutic practice, but into a larger critique of knowledge, language and social structures.

Speaking of language, as a native English speaker, my primary language of understanding critical psychology was through authors who wrote in English. These authors were not necessarily monolingual or British or even from the Commonwealth. However, I wanted to explore the work of authors whose writing is not well known, who write outside formal academic forums and have little access to elite education.

Critical Psychology, as I understand it, is similar to feminism in that it articulates discomfort. This is a discomfort felt by those who are not in power, made up of everyday microaggressions, and exclusions. Most importantly, it comes from a place of survival. Feminism is reflexive; it is constantly addressing imbalances around gender while being self-critical.

Unlike conventional psychology, critical psychology does not offer universal solutions, nor does it provide easy answers. It does the opposite, requiring self-examination and to challenge inequalities normalised within the system. While I have attempted to use translated works over the years, I am aware that English is a language of power while also simultaneous being a language of resistance in many parts of India. This is a resistance that has been growing against the hegemony of Hindi as a national language in India. Through this resistance, I have come to explore the work of southern and northeastern writers and activists.

Through this paper, I will attempt to explore psychology in India through its knowledge production, dissemination into everyday life and through my personal (gendered) experience of working in this field.

A Brief History of Psychology in India

The Department of Experimental Psychology, Calcutta University was opened in 1916, and it is the oldest in India. Professor Narendra Nath Sengupta was appointed the first chairman of the department. Sengupta was educated at Harvard University with Hugo Munsterberg, a student of Wilhelm Wundt (National Seminar, 2015). He was the Founding Member of the Indian Psychological Association and Founder Editor of the Indian Journal of Psychology. India, at that time, was still under British colonial rule. Calcutta was the capital of India until 1911 and the site of the Bengal Renaissance, which sealed the reputation of the city as an intellectual hub. Calcutta University is renowned across India as a seat of learning, and has produced numerous nationally and internationally acclaimed scholars. Not long after, in south India, the Mysore University laboratory was established in 1924 under the guidance of Dr. M.V. Gopalswami. He was trained in London under Professor Charles Spearman. The 'international flow of scientific psychological knowledge' at this time in history was more international than it would be in the decades to come (Danziger, K. (2006). This is an issue that continues to affect the way in which scientific knowledge is disseminated around the world.

Since the establishment of these psychology departments, psychology as a discipline has grown in popularity. The discipline is offered in multiple universities across the country, with both undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the discipline. In some cities colleges (in universities with a collegiate system) have been dedicated exclusively to the discipline of psychology. Psychology is an increasingly popular subject for many students, who choose to study this subject as part of their Bachelor's degree.

A new and emerging discipline around the world, psychology in India was heavily influenced by the West. Initially, psychology emerging from Europe was the reference point for the establishment of the discipline within India. However, in line with global trends, post war American psychology has become synonymous with a normative standard for psychology since the 1950s (Pickren, 2009).

Over the decades, American psychology has become the foundation of psychology in India. Currently, this branch of psychology dominates the way the discipline is taught. Adair (1999) describes American psychology as 'acultural in content and positivistic in methodology'. The effects of this attitude can be seen in the uncritical acceptance of concepts such as intelligence, distress and resilience in Indian teaching and research. American textbooks form the basis of most taught courses. Cheaper editions of these textbooks have made it possible to stock them in libraries and for students to own their own copies. Theorists whose work form the basis of these textbooks are always most always white and male, reinforcing ideas about race, gender and the production of knowledge. This is an issue I often bring up in my lectures where the entire syllabus comprises of white, male psychologists. While other disciplines such as English literature, sociology and have incorporated the work of non-western and Indian authors, psychology remains strongly entrenched in

American ideas. This has been a trend in psychology since colonial times, where sociology and anthropology were developed more indigenously than psychology.

There have also been significant changes in the way in which the education system functions in India. Education in India has become predominantly privatised at all levels. Privatisation has affected the function of education in society, which will be discussed at length in the following sections.

Invoking the past

Post World War II and Indian Independence in 1947, America rather than Britain became a primary site for education for many Indians. Many of these foreign-educated scholars returned to India bringing their new knowledge and ideas. However, these concepts, when applied in certain contexts, did not achieve the desired results. To strengthen a link with the past, and offer more appropriate local solutions, indigenous psychology was created to counteract this one-sided scholarship. Indigenous psychology was, and still is, an attempt to decentre American psychology and create knowledge that is generated and applicable locally.

In a parallel process of indigenisation from within, some Indian psychologists began to look to more ancient traditions, the Vedas, and Upanishads, which are the texts that gave rise to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, for insights into human nature. These psychologists then sought to fashion an Indian psychology that relied, in part, on these texts as a source for contemporary research and application. (Pickren, 2009:92).

Largely taught through ancient Indian texts, indigenous psychology has tried to reclaim pre-colonial practices and locate psychology within the Indian context. Theorists such as Ashis Nandy and Sudhir Kakar explore these resources and attempt to provide more nuanced and local insight into the psychology of Indian people. In their work, they explore communal violence, Indian families, relationships and morality. While some of these concepts seem universal across India, they are deeply embedded in caste privilege.

However, this resistance to accepting western ideas without critique is not a recent trend. Girendar Shekar Bose, a Bengali psychoanalyst maintained an extensive correspondence with Freud regarding the various development stages proposed by him. Through his correspondence with Freud, lasting twenty years. Bose attempted to dispute aspects of Freud's theory of the Oedipal complex. Bose is largely forgotten today, and rarely mentioned in Indian universities. Psychoanalysis, as it was practised in colonial India, was deeply influenced by Freud. Affluent Indian men, who experienced both British and Indian culture, were the main clientele of psychoanalysis in India.

> Psychoanalysis in India began in a colonial setting; Western-educated urban men had primary access to such imports. The Indian patients thus belonged to that section of society that was

closest to the foreign colonizers. This meant that they were at the same time confronted with Indian and British cultural values and behavioural norms. (Hartnack, 1990: p.922)

Hartnack's analysis looks at the impact of colonisation on this class of men and Bose's observations, which were informed by Hindu scriptures, and the upper caste joint family system to which he belonged. Superficially, this process of scripture-informed psychology might seem like an act of reclaiming the self under colonisation, it obscures the pre-colonial inequalities of caste, religion and gender that have existed in Indian society. Furthermore, the men under analysis were often from a privileged caste/ class and dabbling in nationalism. Their loss of masculinity and status and its subsequent reclamation continues to affect nationalism in India.

Turning to tradition became a means of providing psychology in India a sense of legitimacy, echoes of which can still be found in the function of indigenous psychology. The evocation of authenticity and assertions of 'Indianness' are almost always tied to upper-caste Hindu culture and practices. This claimed cultural authenticity is neither universal nor free of oppressive systems. Assertions of authenticity also have the power to erase alternate experiences. Communities that are deemed westernised or non-Indian are often excluded from the discussion of indigenous practices. A positive psychology module I taught failed to include non-Hindu perspectives in the material examining religion and positive psychology. This characteristic is shared by articles and chapters written by both Indian and western authors. By conflating Indian identity with Hinduism psychology reinforces nationalism that has been erasing the legitimacy of religious minorities through state-sponsored policies and violence.

Basu (2005) critiques the positivist approach taken to writing about the history of psychiatry in India. His critique attempts to dismantle the idea of psychology not existing before colonialism. However, as in the examples above, his defence of local practices turns to Hindu scriptures and medical texts. Similarly to Bose and other post-colonialists, assertions of pre-colonial culture often omit references to oppressive systems (caste and gender), which remain social realities.

Indigenous psychology is often seen as a way to reduce and rectify the influence of American psychology in the Indian context. While there is a case to be made against the hegemony of Euro-American psychology, there is also a danger of turning towards orientalism, as Parker points out.

US American imperialism and dominant white psychology at home go hand-in-hand with Eurocentrism, but they are also occasionally given a fillip by a good dose of orientalism. (Parker, 2007: p.125)

Indigenous psychology in the Indian context often relies on orientalist ideas of 'the east' and its mysterious spiritual knowledge. The predominant focus of indigenous psychology is ancient religious texts, with modern taxonomy applied in an often anachronistic manner. Even when modern social issues are addressed, the focus of

indigenous psychology has had little to say about the role of caste, the role it plays, and its dominance in every aspect of Indian society. Both Ashish Nandy and Sudhir Kakar ignore the role of caste in their work, whilst focusing on restoring selfhood lost under colonialism. There is a sense of nostalgia in their work, which obscures the ethnic, religious and regional differences in India.

> There is then a temptation to turn these more exotic psychologies into a romantic vision of what life used to be like or into something more authentic. We need to encourage the development of new spaces for new modes of thinking and relating, and show how every new technological development gives rise to something new in psychology. (Parker, 2007: p.212)

Parker's analysis calls for a psychology that constantly engages with the society it is observing. Instead, in indigenous psychology, modern psychological concepts are often anachronistically attributed to the distant past. On the surface, endeavours made to indigenise and look at ancient texts might seem like a means to further the aims of decolonisation. However, it replaces one hegemony with another. It certainly delves deep into visions of local culture and tradition, supplemented with texts. However, it is deeply problematic in its assumptions that it is a universal representation, and that it is universally applicable.

Reifying folk wisdom

Psychology, in its current taught form, is heavily dependent on American ideas about the world. While some of those theories have endured over time, they are often taught uncritically and without context. For example, the work of Eysenck (whose work has been recently debunked and critiqued) features heavily in all levels of teaching and student research. Similarly, it is not uncommon to see research work featuring discredited concepts such as birth order, learning styles, or neurolinguistic programming. Undergraduate research and experimental work often works with these concepts and psychometric tools.

While it would be quick to dismiss these studies as pseudo-scientific, they still serve a purpose. Alternatively, as Lamont (2010) terms it, they are 'discursively deployed' to provide an explanation of psychological expertise. Claims of finding hitherto unknown phenomena are among the ways in which the discipline stakes a claim of expertise in human behaviour. These studies, bolstered by numerical data, often provide evidence of a psychology asserting its legitimacy.

Similar problems exist in the adaptation of psychometric tools, which are often not translated or culturally contextualised. Many psychometric tests developed for an American or British audience are used without standardised or Indianised norms (Chaudhary and Sriram, 2020). Even when corrective measures are undertaken, the tools may become conceptually and culturally outdated. A case in point is the Children's Apperception Test, adapted by Uma Choudhary (1985.). This is an

adaptation of test developed by Bellak, Bellak (1991). While the test has been standardised for an Indian population (rural and urban), the material has become outdated for today's Indian children. Recently, while supervising students conducting the Children's Apperception Test on young children, students observed that the card depicting a lion smoking seemed inappropriate. Since the original test was developed, there has been a significant shift in our attitude towards smoking.

Psychology, particularly in India, is often a gateway to formalise folk wisdom or to produce contradictory evidence. This can be seen in the way mental health issues are presented in public forums. Online counselling forums offer stressed and suicidal students information that does very little to address larger issues such as parental pressure, the flaws in the educational system, or the economy.

Caste continues to divide Indian society. As an oppressive system, it leaves indelible marks on the Indian psyche. Yet is an issue that is rarely discussed in public debates. Worryingly, the effect of caste is also rarely addressed constructively in psychological literature. Delegitimising caste tensions through psychological explanations of victimhood serves to uphold the status quo, while providing explanations for caste-based discrimination that sound palatable or compatible with contemporary society.

Banality and commonsense

Through several academic seminars I find myself a part of, I have noticed a trend in solutions to complex psychological problems: many tend to be resolved through solutions that are little more than common sense. Take for example suicide amongst students in India, often brought on by academic pressure and unrealistic parental demands. Young people may face a situation where this extreme step seems like the only prospect for escape. Proffered solutions often focus on the individual, who of course must be centred. However, solutions often seem commonsensical and, stripped of broader context, depoliticised. While the act of self-harm is a personal one, it is inextricably linked to a social context with historical, economic, cultural, and other factors. Offering solutions that focus solely on individual action, ignoring larger contexts in which these issues occur, is a form of social injustice. Furthermore, this reductionist approach attempts to dismiss complex social problems by breaking them down into small parts (Tuffin, 2005). Hayes (1995) describes this process of reductionism as a means of deflecting attention from power. Psychological explanations focussing on the individual often do so at the expense of interrogating or changing policy, or the possibility of offering lasting social intervention. In this case, by reducing suicide to the individual's lack of coping skills, failing educational systems and toxic familial structures are absolved of responsibility. Psychology ends up colluding with systems of power, placing the onus of psychological distress upon the individual. This centring of solutions on individuals misleads distressed individuals seeking help, burdening them with sole responsibility for perceived personal and moral failings.

While intuition and the articulation of personal distress works in favour of feminism, the same cannot be said for folk psychology. Feminism's articulation of intuition seeks to dismantle oppression, working on addressing larger structures without locating distress solely within the individual. Psychology which is fixated on the individual at the expense of other factors ends up loosing opportunities to advocate for social change.

Harding (1995) provides a critique of science that is thought of as neutral, entrenched in 'institutional structures and languages of the sciences' but appears depoliticised. Psychology in India works with a similar objective. While superficially appearing objective in its use of scientific methods, it is a deeply bureaucratised and politicised discipline science. Banal psychology is not a mere accident, but a deeply political enterprise in which human distress and struggles against oppression are neutralised.

Between mental health policy, teaching and practice, there lie several deep gaps. As pointed out earlier, psychology courses depend heavily on American textbooks. Mental health policy is seldom taught as part of psychology coursework. This omission creates a disconnect between theory and the framework within which psychology operates. Students have often questioned the utility of modules, such as psychophysics and psychometric testing, and how they relate to counselling skills. For most students, a psychology course is synonymous with counselling and clinical practice. However, many psychology courses around the country have followed a standard syllabus, with minimal change over decades.

Dissemination of Psychology in Everyday Life.

As mentioned earlier, counselling services in India are predominantly privately run, with little or no expertise or formal licensing in psychology. Often treatments offered are based on folk wisdom, individual or group-based activities. These services provide relief to people seeking assistance. However, questions should be raised about the environment/ context in which such services are offered.

Psychological services, particularly in the forms of self-help and counselling offerings, have come to dominate urban Indian workplaces and public discourse. The advice they offer through advice that often quells any form of discontent. It is not uncommon to find small counselling clinics in cities. These spaces offer various services such as individual counselling sessions, group and family therapy. Most often these services are unregulated and the practitioners are not always qualified or certified to offer counselling services (Misra, and Rizvi, 2012)

In recent years, online counselling, podcasts and self-help videos on social media and streaming services have become popular ways of disseminating 'psychological' advice. Psychological ideas and psychological language have come to dominate the urban landscape. Several employers and educational institutions also engage the services of counselling agencies or holistic development experts to address

'psychological issues'. Concepts such as personality types/traits which were a preoccupation of 1970s and early 1980s have made their way into workplaces in the form of personality tests, which are routinely administered upon employees (Bhatia, and Sethi., 2007). Students and employees commonly commemorate World Mental Health Day or Suicide Prevention Day. This level of awareness, that mental illness exists, does not always translate into action. Suicide rates amongst the student, female and urban populations have been cause for concern: but rarely one addressed through changes in educational or workplace policies. Some mental health 'experts' blame the problem on westernisation of Indian society, amongst other unhelpful ideas. A lack of appropriately trained professionals combined with regulatory and registration requirements has exacerbated .a societal decline in mental health.

> Without a doubt, there is truly a mental health crisis in India. Lack of availability and access to trained professionals is making things worse. To cope with their mental health challenges, a large number of people visit priests, spiritual healers, mystics, and indigenous practitioners, as the field of mental health counselling is still at a very early stage. (Jain and Sandhu, 2013: p.89).

Despite the need for mental health services, the number of licensed mental health clinics and professionals remains low. A lack of funding and courses offering professional certification has had an impact on the practitioners who are available to provide services. While it would be easy to dismiss people's visits to mystics and spiritual healers, these people often are the only option for service users.

There is also a growing tendency to reconceptualise distress and broader social problems in individual psychologised terms. Social movements and crime have been labelled as mental illness or the product of unstable minds. Explanations such as these delegitimise serious social grievances or crimes with more pressing and convincing explanations than labels of insanity attached to the perpetrator. The ever-present feature of caste in Indian society, while ignored in psychological research and discussions, can be wielded against those writers wish to pathologise. In this case, it is psychologised in terms of victimhood and psychological distress, dismissing the ramifications of caste-based discrimination on communities.

Gendered Discipline

As mentioned earlier, education in India is mostly privatised. There is a strong preference across Indian society for private education over government-run colleges or universities. Since the early 1990's, there has been an exponential growth of private-run institutions, overtaking government-run institutions. However, privatisation isn't synonymous with quality. Tilak points out that many of the institutions are plagued by neoliberal policies affecting the quality of teaching and working conditions.

> Most private higher education institutions have no libraries, laboratories, or research programmes; they concentrate on saleable courses of study, prefer short-term to long-term programmes, and have under-qualified and underpaid teachers. The teaching staff required to impart meaningful teaching is also inadequate. (Tilak, 2018: p.542)

Tilak's analysis captures the many ways in which both students and staff (mostly women) are exploited across universities. While private universities and colleges hold a monopoly over the education system, a few exceptions exist. Government-run universities, in particular, are known for their academic excellence. In recent years, those institutions have had to bear the brunt of personal and institutional attacks on staff and departments. There have been several attacks by violent mobs on universities branded as anti-national or leftist. Education in India is also deeply divided along class and caste lines. Similarly, disciplines are also divided along class, caste and gender lines with some academic disciplines being seen as more useful than others for career prospects. Natural sciences, engineering, medicine, business and law are the preferred choices of parents who see these disciplines as providing stable employment after graduation.

Similar to the social sciences, psychology is considered to be a 'woman's discipline' and therefore is , often plagued by underfunding and a wage gap as a consequence. Lack of funding in most universities, especially private ones, has also had an adverse impact on the research output of female scholars (Goel, K., 2002).

Counselling and psychiatric services are also privatised. Although government-run institutions exist, private services are preferred. Psychology as a discipline remains divided along gender lines, with the field being dominated by middle-class upper-caste urban women. This division has had repercussions on the field's is perception and funding from government agencies. Psychology departments are mostly staffed by women, as the discipline is perceived to be feminine in nature. There are exceptions to this rule: senior positions, academic and administrative roles are mostly filled by men. Kagan and Lewis (1990) address this issue in the British context, their analysis including the way women's personal lives and their academic work become linked, describing assumptions as 'annoying to potentially discriminating'. Other scholars have also pointed out growing inequalities in academia with the implementation of neoliberal policies and the adoption of increasingly cost-cutting measures. Women in India have largely dominated teaching, and these inequalities have had an impact on their professional and personal lives. Psychology is no exception. As a neglected social science, research is rarely encouraged and women's emotional labour is exploited. This trend can be understood through the global trend of feminised disciplines and feminisation in education As Burman points out-

> So the feminization of education (if this epithet has any meaningful currency at all) occurs alongside other feminizations: of labour, including of management strategies. (Burman, 2006: p.356)

In the larger scheme of things, feminisation also functions in conjunction with other 'nationalist and imperialist enterprises' (Burman, 2006). These ideas can be seen in how, despite being a female-centric discipline, psychology departments are often riddled with gendered prejudices about both students and lecturers, which make their way into teaching and research. Casteism and classism also affect how 'women' are perceived and treated within the system. Some of these prejudices manifest in policing women's clothing choices on campus, with both staff and students being made to comply to narrowly defined ideas of 'Indian modesty'. Assumptions about women's personal lives are often dragged into their everyday work life. From issues of leave, maternity leave, breaks, food and dress habits, women in academic settings are policed. Students are often thought of as middle-class women pursuing a degree with the aim to work for a few years before getting married and settling down, and so less worthy of education or further promotions. Lecturers are often perceived as middle-class women who work for a second income to spend on luxuries. Similarly, single women are treated as aberrations to social norms who are not deserving of incomes or promotions. Middle-class women in India often have to face this prejudice where their incomes are seen as a means to earn as a hobby or to contribute to the household with a second smaller income.

While the discipline does attract middle-class urban women, the same arguments are not made about men who pursue academia or other academic disciplines. Women's academic pursuits and employment are routinely scrutinised with arguments discrediting their participation. Given the gendered wage gap in India and around the world, it is no surprise that the discipline is seen as a poor employment option for men (and to some extent women) who are still considered primary breadwinners in India.

Conclusion

Psychology as a discipline has grown significantly since it was first established in Calcutta University over a century ago. While the discipline has seen tremendous growth in recent decades, it faces many issues in its dissemination in academic circles and everyday life. Some of the issues the discipline faces are universal, however, some are unique to India. These have been shaped by policies and assumptions about the place of psychology in India. While there are scientifically validated tools and methodologies that are being used in the field, the assumptions underlying research remain entrenched in caste, heteropatriarchal and ableist ideas. Both positivist American and indigenous psychologies have failed to address social oppressions that have been simmering within Indian society. Psychology, particularly psychology in India needs to shift its focus from studies backed by statistics or ancient texts. Instead, psychology urgently needs a turn to social justice where it can provide tools to dismantle inequality.

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