

Chapter 2

Cultural Climate and Conceptual Roots of Indian Psychology

Indian psychology is situated in the cultural and social context of the Indian tradition even as Western psychology has developed over centuries under the influence of the European culture and society followed by the American. Search for knowledge, whether in psychology or other disciplines, is unavoidably a social enterprise. No person is an island; we all learn at home, and in schools, and neighborhoods; and the ideas we assimilate in the process provide the foundation on which we build our understanding of the world. Sociologists of knowledge (Mannheim 1929/1936; Berger and Luckmann 1966) have pointed out how the search for knowledge is largely a matter of social construction; even “facts” reported by scientists are deeply shaped by the interaction among scientists, their assistants and technicians, and so on (Latour and Woolgar 1986). Indian and Western psychologies had grown over centuries in distinct cultures that were continents apart and had minimal contact with each other. As such, they developed in different directions as guided by different cultural themes and social institutions. In this chapter, we attempt to identify distinctive aspects of the long history of Indian culture that shaped psychological knowledge in specific and significantly different ways from the development of modern psychology and sketch the conceptual foundations of Indian psychology.

2.1 The Beginning

At first blush, myths and stories, especially very old ones, would appear to be irrelevant to the “science” of psychology. As is well known, modern psychology accepts the Darwinian view of the development of species, but the opposition to evolutionism by the ancient Biblical account of creation continues till this day. Psychology is not immune to the debate over this issue. Although the mainstream of modern psychology would tend to ignore the voices asking for the teaching of theory of “Intelligent Design” in schools, it is true that spiritual issues are assigned to pastoral counseling done in churches, while university trained counselors and therapists would be strictly restricted to “secular” issues. There are more subtle

ways in which the opposition between science and the Church has shaped contemporary psychology; the mind–body dualism as defined by Descartes in the seventeenth century under the shadow of Galileo’s inquisition is a case in point. As we shall see, the myth of creation of the universe in India was radically different from that in the Genesis chapter of the Bible, with very different implications and consequences on the development of psychology in India.

In the *Rg Veda*, which is the earliest extant text in the history of India, there are several hymns about the creation of the universe. In one such hymn called the Nāsadiya Sūkta (*Rg Veda*, 10.129), the sage wonders about what it might have been like at the time of the very beginning of it all. Here is an excerpt from its English translation.

There was neither nonexistence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection, was there water, bottomlessly deep?

There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond ...

Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind ...

Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?

Whence this creation has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know. (Translated by Doniger 1981, pp. 25–26)

The agnostic tone of this myth of creation sets the tone for future discussions of the intractable issue of who, if anybody or anything, created the universe and with what purpose. It forestalls a dogmatic belief in this matter even among those who would later take the Vedas as providing unquestionable claims. Note how gods are put into place; there is no creator God to be blamed for all the evil in the universe He created. Given the continuing controversy in the West over evolutionism versus “Intelligent Design,” this ancient perspective from India stands in sharp contrast. The relevance of this hymn to psychology should be clear if we note that it recognizes some form of desire (*kāmaḥ*) to emerge and become the “seed of the mind” (*manaso retaḥ*) as a primeval entity in the course of the evolution of the universe. Insofar as having a desire implies being conscious in the first place, consciousness is viewed as having emerged prior to the emergence of matter. This priority of consciousness has further implied its *primacy* in subsequent conceptual frameworks. Note now that the common but infrequently spoken view in modern times is that life first somehow arose in a puddle of chemicals, and that consciousness arose much later in the course of evolution of homo sapiens simply as a means to improved adaptation to the (material) environment. This view makes consciousness a mere product, and a mere appendage, to “reality” constituting nothing but matter in motion. In sharp contrast, in the Indian tradition, consciousness is viewed in the course of evolution not only as primordial, but also is given primacy in the most dominant perspectives in psychology.

As to which came first, consciousness or matter, is an intractable enigma like the question, which came first, chicken or the egg? A typical Indian perspective on this issue is illustrated by a little story which may be cited here. A little boy meets Śiva, the god who is said to oversee the dissolution of the world. The child asks him: Who is your father? He answers: Viṣṇu, the sustainer of the world. And who is your grandfather? The answer: Brahmā, the creator. And who is your great grandfather? Myself, says Śiva. The point of this paradoxical answer is the assumption that there is a cyclical process of creation, sustenance, and destruction of things in the universe; the question of which comes first is redundant. No god has primacy; the trinity of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, the three are different faces of the same underlying reality. Although commonly presented in human forms, they are simply symbolic representations of the basic processes of creation, sustenance, and dissolution of things and creatures in the universe. This implies the cyclical nature of time in the Indian tradition (Deshpande 1979), which stands in sharp contrast with the common Western idea of the “Time’s Arrow” (Blum 1951) which implies that time can pass only one way: from past to future.¹ This view of time has further spawned the notion of “perpetual progress” implying that accomplishments and wealth in the life of individuals, as well as the increase in the Gross Domestic Product of nations, must keep on rising forever—which is a questionable idea.

The Indian notion of the cyclical nature of time provides a radically different perspective on such issues, not only of nature, but also of human nature and human ideals. As to human ideals, it is common in the Indian tradition to question the value of perpetual progress or ever-improving accomplishments, and to seek the intrinsic value of the unchanging bedrock of human existence in pure consciousness. This is an issue we shall return to at the end of this chapter.

Another point to note about the Nāśadiya Sūkta is that it suggests that there was something there at the beginning of the universe that lies beyond the fundamental dualities of existence versus inexistence, death versus immortality, and so on. Here there is more than a hint at the assumption of something, the One from which the multiplicity in the universe arose. This idea of the many arising from the One is repeatedly mentioned in the Upaniṣads, philosophical treatises inspired by the Vedas. Interestingly, the Nāśadiya Sūkta views the *desire* to multiply and to procreate as a primordial tendency traced back to the very beginning of the universe. Implicit in this idea is a seed of thinking about organic evolution.

Although no clear theory of evolution is presented in classical Indian texts, it is generally believed that human beings are an integral part of the wide spectrum of life on earth in a way that is consistent with the perspective on life encountered in

¹In more recent times, the views about the nature of time are changing and getting highly complex in light of developments in Einstein’s theory of relativity as well as quantum mechanics. These new developments do not appear to have started influencing psychological thinking as yet. So the discussion here is limited to the differing views of time in Indian and Western thought in the history of psychology.

modern biology. In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.10.2), we are told that all creatures, whether insects or animals, all have come from a single Being. According to a common expression in Sanskrit, there is a continuity of life in nature extending from the lowly blade of grass to Brahmā, the creator God (*ā brahma-stamba-paryanta*). This view of continuity of forms of life is consistent with the concept of Brahman as the immanent principle characterized by being, consciousness, and bliss (*sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda*); consciousness is viewed as being present in varying degrees in plants, insects as well as monkeys and other animals. In early twentieth century, the Indian scientist Jagdish Chandra Bose tried to show signs of consciousness in plants, and more recently the idea of consciousness in subatomic particles is being suggested in studies of quantum physics (Stapp 1993). The view of consciousness as a pervasive and fundamental principle of reality clearly provides a unique place for psychology among the plethora of sciences.

2.2 *Ṛtam*: Truth and Order

In the Vedas there is the concept called “*ṛtam*,” which has twin connotations: *First*, it means truth, and *second*, it is suggestive of an inexorable order of events in the universe. There is an important implication of this double meaning. It is that truth is discovered by finding a constant and repeatable pattern of events. This reminds us of a crucial concept that is foundational for science, namely searching for truth through the discovery of universal laws of nature. This being said, it does not follow that India witnessed the same enthusiasm for the discovery of the laws of nature that was seen in Europe since the dawn of modern science when Francis Bacon (1561–1626) introduced the idea of collecting facts and making generalizations. What fascinated the Indian imagination more is a stricter definition of truth than universal laws of nature.

Another Vedic concept, called the *sat*, illustrates the focus on the search for truth in a different sense that is uncommon in contemporary English usage and hence needs some explanation. This is not simply an abstract and abstruse philosophical issue; as we shall soon see, the issue has at its basis claims to the significance of an extraordinary state of consciousness—which is a problem for psychology. Like so many other terms, the term *sat*, like *satyam* which is often used as its synonym, have several different connotations (see Zalkikar 1978, pp. 943–946). Although both terms have some common positive connotations such as good or authentic, the term *satyam* connotes *validity* of a proposition, proven to be correct through critical examination of epistemic criteria, such as observation, reasoning, or simply the testimony of a trustworthy person. By contrast, the term *sat* has been used in a more stringent sense, as for instance to indicate existence as opposed to inexistence (*asat*) in the very title of the hymn Nāsadiya Sūkta mentioned above. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (8.3.5) explains *satyam* as a compound of *sat+ti+yam* where *sat* means that which is immortal, or unchanging; *ti* means that which is mortal or open to change; and *yam* is a bridge that holds them together. In other words, *sat* implies an

absolute truth that can never be falsified, while *satyam* implies what is found to be true so far, but, like truths of science, remains open for revision in light of fresh observations and argument. Staying within this tradition, in the Advaita system the term *sat* is used to designate truth that is immortal in the sense that it remains unfalsified forever, sustaining its validity in the past, present, and the future (*trikāla-abādhita-satyam*). According to the Advaita viewpoint, *sat* stands for existence, a feature of Brahman, the single eternal and ubiquitous principle underlying all that exists. This distinction between *sat* and *satyam* is important for psychology in the Indian tradition since it is in the *experience* of a higher state of consciousness that *sat* is said to be discovered, not in the wakeful state in which most search for knowledge commonly occurs.

To help clarify the psychological significance of this idea of an unfalsifiable truth, it may be noted that, according to the Advaita tradition, *sat* as a higher order truth (which may be thought of as *absolute* Truth indicated by using capital T as distinguished from *contingent* truths represented by truth with a lower case t) by finding out what remains as an unchanging foundation for the “I” as knower. This foundation is pure consciousness underlying the parade of changing images of the self that we witness through the passage of life. In a similar way, Patañjali’s Yoga suggests bringing the continuous flow of thoughts to a standstill to help attain the same experience. It should be clear that dealing with self-images or the flow of thoughts is a psychological issue, a matter of doing, not simply of some philosophical speculation.

2.3 Pluralism and the Notion of Multiple Perspectives

There is in the *R̥g Veda* (1.164.46) a brief sentence which may be translated in English to mean that “truth is one, but the wise speak of it in different ways” (*ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*). This simple idea has profound implications that manifest in different ways throughout the Indian cultural tradition. For instance, the wise men of the Upaniṣadic, Buddhist, or Jain traditions, who struggled to find answers to too many crucial issues concerning the human condition, are thought to have come up with different perspectives on some common underlying truths. Such a belief leads to an atmosphere where the differences among them are thought of as negotiable through debates among the wise men, rather than conflicts to be solved by killing each other. It results in tolerance and mutual respect of different religions, which is reflected in the fact that for over two millennia, Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains have most commonly constructed caves and temples next to each other rather than destroying down the creations of others. As is well known, Christian, Zoroastrian, and Jewish communities that fled persecutions in the lands of their origin have settled on the west coast of India and have lived in peace adding to the multifaith society of India starting as early as the first century CE when Thomas, one of Jesus’s Apostles, traveled to Kerala and started a Church there.

The same spirit of mutual respect among different schools of thought is manifest in *Sarva-darśana-saṃgraha*, a compendium of the diverse schools of thought composed by Sāyaṇa-Mādhava in the fourteenth century CE. It includes a score of orthodox as well as “heretical” perspectives, without excluding even the least popular views of the materialist followers of Cārvāka school, thus displaying the inclusive rather than exclusivist spirit of the tradition. In Jainism, we find an approach to knowledge called *anekāntavāda*, which provides a rationale showing how a variety of perspectives emerge when founded on differing assumptions about issues that remain unresolved. The result of all such streams of thought is the pluralist approach accommodating varied perspectives on life, living side-by-side with minimum of overt and deadly conflict among them. This is not to suggest that intolerance among believers in various faiths has not existed in India, for it has; but to identify sources of the tradition that may have helped mitigate the poison of intolerance, and the possible contribution to such mitigation through the understanding and application of some basic psychological principles.

From the point of view of psychology, the underlying principle involves a perspective on the nature of cognitive processes, which says that it is usually possible to construct different meanings or implications following from the same data given in observation. In modern psychology, Kelly (1955) enunciated this idea as a form of “constructive alternativism,” meaning that we can view the same data in alternative ways. Indeed, the ability to do so underlies the creation of different theories based on identical sets of data, and to evaluate their relative merits by construing and testing diverse hypotheses. Without such ability, no progress in science is possible. As we shall see in a later chapter in this book, psychologists of the Indian tradition have come up with constructivist theories of cognition, and their applications in improving self-understanding.

2.4 States of Consciousness and Types of Knowledge

The *Māṇḍūkya*, which is one of the later Upaniṣads, as mentioned, deals with states of consciousness, their nature, and their deep implications for the knowledge of the self and of the world at large. It identifies four states of consciousness: wakeful, dream, deep sleep, and a fourth one simply called the Fourth State (*caturtham, turīyā avasthā*). The wakeful state, it says, is characterized by being oriented outward; it perceives objects of the external world and indulges in them. In dreaming attention is directed inward, and one experiences images in the inner world, while in deep sleep attention is not turned either inward or outward, and one experiences a form of bliss. The Fourth State, however, is quite different. In it attention is turned neither inward, nor outward, and not even both ways; it is neither cognitive nor noncognitive. It is essentially unspeakable, unthinkable, and ungraspable; it is in this state that the true Self is directly experienced. This experience itself is the *ātman* (*sa ātmā*).

As can be easily seen, it is the account of the indescribable Fourth State that marks a unique and distinctive contribution of Indian psychology. The *Māṇḍūkya* provides the core insight that was followed up by many scholars and sages for centuries, particularly by Gauḍapāda sometime between 300 and 500 CE, and by Śaṅkara in the ninth century. Śaṅkara (788–820), a most influential thinker of the Indian tradition, in fact considers the *Māṇḍūkya* as representing the essence of his AdvaitaVedānta system. The insight of this Upaniṣad that the *self* is directly experienced in the Fourth State is crucial for Indian psychology since self-realization has been viewed as the highest goal in life assuring the total annihilation of suffering and the attainment of the highest good (*niḥśreyasa*) in life. As we shall see later in this chapter, the views of what constitutes the highest good vary from school to school in Indian thought. However, most schools have developed techniques for attaining the ideal state they conceive of, and aspire to, and in the process they have developed alternative forms of applied psychology. The AdvaitaVedānta, for instance, has come up with an elaborate method for attaining self-realization through the experience of the Fourth State by engaging in critical self-examination, while Patañjali's Yoga has developed a step-by-step process leading to a similar goal through concentrative meditation. Here we may note that self-knowledge which, according to the *Māṇḍūkya*, is revealed in the Fourth State, is qualitatively different from knowledge attained in wakeful or dream states. Some other Upaniṣads make a clear distinction between two different kinds of knowledge, called *vidyā* and *avidyā*, as mentioned earlier. Since such a distinction is practically absent in Western thought, and since it is crucial in the Indian context, this needs some explanation.

According to the *Śvetāśvata Upaniṣad* (5.1), *vidyā* is knowledge about the imperishable (*akṣara*), meaning the unchanging *Ātman/Brahman*, while *avidyā* is knowledge about the perishable (*kṣara*), i.e., the world of objects that is subject to change. It may be noted that in the Sāṃkhya system, *akṣara* suggests *puruṣa* or the *self* as revealed in pure consciousness, while *kṣara* designates *prakṛti*, the principle of materiality manifest in the world of objects. Insofar as the prefix “a” suggests lack of something, *avidyā* means lack of *vidyā*. And since the word *vidyā* is often used to mean knowledge, *avidyā* is sometimes translated to mean ignorance. This causes confusion because *avidyā* does *not* mean ignorance; it is a technical term that means only the absence of *vidyā* as a transcognitive experience of the Self, but implies all sorts of knowledge about objects perceived through the senses and comprehended with the use of reason. A good way of understanding the two types of knowledge involved here is to explain the distinction between *svārūpa jñāna* on the one hand and *vṛtti jñāna* on the other. Here *sva* means the Self, and *svārūpa jñāna* is what is discovered in the state of Self-realization, while the term *vṛtti jñāna* means an act of cognition, whether in the form of observation or reasoning. In other words, *vṛtti jñāna* implies all forms of rational-empirical knowledge. What this means is that the term *avidyā* covers the entire domain of scientific knowledge, not ignorance. Indeed, that is the way the term is used in the discourse of Indian thought.

The views of knowledge just mentioned are important for the development of psychology in India because, as we shall see, Śaṅkara builds a comprehensive model of psychological functioning with a focus on cognition, presenting a

distinctive perspective on the nature, strengths, and also limitations on human acquisition of knowledge. Śaṅkara's followers have further developed this model to include detailed accounts of meditative techniques leading to self-realization. These developments will be discussed in due course in this book.

2.5 Relationship Between Humans and Nature

It is difficult to find a term in Sanskrit or some Indian languages that conveys the same sense as the contemporary view of nature, although the terms *prakṛti*, *sarga*, and *nisarga* come fairly close to it. Nevertheless, what matters most is how attitudes toward nature that are reflected in Indian culture have shaped psychological thought in India in ways different from those in the West. That events in nature unfold in ways that are strictly determined by cause–effect relationships is widely assumed in the Indian tradition as in the West, but there are interesting differences in views of causality that are important in the context of psychology.

When Descartes conceptually divided reality between the domains of mind and matter, the question of how the abstract, nonspatial and weightless events in the mind, such as intentions, could ever make a concrete and heavy body move in space, became a major problem. Modern psychology is stuck with this conundrum, pitting mentalist, and physicalist camps forever against each other. With the advent of behaviorism, the concepts of consciousness as well as mind were banished from psychology; and with rapid advances in the understanding of how the brain works, the idea that mind is nothing but the functioning of the brain has taken hold. Regardless of the popularity of such physicalist views, the debates over the mind–body problem continue with even greater intensity than before. It is neither necessary nor possible to enter into a discussion of the mind–body problem here.

At the first blush, the cultural differences between attitudes toward nature may not be viewed as having anything to do with psychology. However, as we shall see, such differences, deeply rooted in the very fabric of culture over centuries, have shaped psychological thought in different directions. To help understand how so, we need to take a close look at the historical development of attitudes toward nature in Western and Indian cultures.

There is difference between Indian and Western attitudes about the relations of humans toward nature. As we saw earlier, the common Upaniṣadic view of human beings was that they are integral part of the world of plants and animals, and that consciousness as an immanent principle of reality is imbedded in all forms of life from the simplest to the most complex. In the West, although Aristotle saw continuity between plants, animals, and humans, the Bible gave a special place to man as God made him in His own image. Working within the Biblical tradition Francis Bacon, the father of modern science, assigned a special place to humans in relation to nature. It was implicit in his perspective that God had endowed humans with power to reason that He had not given to any animal species. For Bacon, this power was to be used to “read the book of nature,” and to discover the universal laws of nature.

Following in the footsteps of Bacon, Newton believed that his task was to define the laws that God had given nature to follow. But for Bacon, knowledge of the laws of nature was to be pursued for a particular purpose: to control the forces of nature for the benefit of mankind. (Note that Bacon had denied a place for purpose in nature, not in human nature.) This implies the attitude of *dominating* nature, and for Bacon this was a mandate that God Himself had given to human kind. Having created man in His own image, God is supposed to have assured men to “let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over every living that moveth upon the earth (*Genesis*, 1.25).

Interestingly, despite the continuing conflict between science and religion in the West, the two have inadvertently collaborated in promoting not only the mastery over, but also the exploitation of nature. The mastering of nature’s forces through science and technology has led to enormous benefits for humans by controlling diseases and producing food and goods in unimaginably large quantities. This is too well known to need proof. With the advent of behaviorism, the Baconian view of using the knowledge of the laws of nature was extended to psychology. Now the science of psychology could use knowledge of the universal laws of learning to exert control over animals including humans, even as knowledge of Newtonian laws were used to tame forces of nature. Skinner (1983), clearly inspired by Bacon, developed the technology of behavior modification based on the laws of learning. But in psychology, as in the natural sciences, application of scientific knowledge is a double-edged weapon. Knowledge of physics and biology has been used effectively for damming rivers and increasing food production, while at the same time it has also been used for the development of weapons of mass destruction, whether atomic, chemical, or biological. The ability to master the nature has led to ecological disasters and to the depletion of natural resources at an astounding rate. Likewise, the use of behavioral technology, too, has shown to be both beneficial as well as destructive in different situations: beneficial clinical practice as well as education on the one side, and in a diabolical form in “brain washing” of prisoners of the Korean War (Lifton 1961).

Turning now to the typical Indian attitudes to nature, we can see a significantly different situation. There are several passages in Upaniṣads like the one quoted from the *Chāndogya* earlier in this chapter that portray humans as being integral parts of nature. It is not only that the cow is considered sacred, there are several folk festivals that illustrate respect for the role animals play in human life, such as refraining from eating foods produced with the help of animals once a year, and so on. For millennia villages in India had adopted a way of life where everything useful produced from nature was fully recycled back into nature. It is true that in India too rivers were dammed indicating some ways of harnessing forces of nature, but when compared to modern Europe, domination of nature was not a specialty of the Indian culture. It is fair to say that by and large the attitude to nature displayed in the history of Indian culture is one of “man-in-nature” as opposed to “man-over-nature” (Paranjpe 2011a). Cultures are, of course, open to change; the tendency to live in symbiosis with nature manifest in the village life style has changed with increasing industrialization in India. Gandhi’s attempt to revitalize the self-sufficiency of villages has not been

successful, and rapid urbanization is resulting in major changes in Indian society and culture. Indiscriminate mining and deforestation in various parts of India now reflect the same exploitative attitude toward nature as in many other parts of the world.

The inadvertent complicity of science in the exploitation of nature is consistent with the gaze of science that looks at the world “out there” rather than focusing on the inner world. It is interesting that behaviorist psychology is likewise focused outward. Thus, Skinner (1974, p. 13), following the lead of Meyer (1922), called their kind of psychology as the “psychology of the other-one.” In sharp contrast with this, the focus of Indian Psychology is on the self, rather than the other, and one is encouraged to look inside rather than objects and events—animals, behavior—from the outside. Thus, the most crucial aspect of Patañjali’s Yoga is looking inwards (*pratyāhāra*) and to control one’s own stream of thoughts so as to discover the blissful nature of the *self*, self as a subject (*puruṣa*). Although the self continues to be a topic of study in modern psychology, the emphasis is usually on the observable aspects of one’s own as of others’ behavior, with little if any effort in reaching into the self at the center of awareness.

2.6 The Concept and the Doctrine of Karma

To understand how behavior is most commonly conceptualized in Indian psychology, it is necessary to clarify the use of the concept of *karman*, and the principles that are thought to govern behavior. The Sanskrit word *karman*, or simply *karma*, mainly means action, but it also conveys a set of related connotations such as physical motion or activity, work, performance, especially performance of religious acts or rites, and so on. *Karma* is traditionally characterized in terms of human activity at three levels: physical, verbal, and mental. In this sense, it covers the region of what modern psychology refers to as overt and covert as well as verbal behavior. But unlike the contemporary usage of the word behavior, especially in a behaviorist sense where it generally excludes deliberate or willed action, the conventional Indian usage of *karma* clearly implies free will. Thus, for instance, Śaṅkara defines *karma* as action that one may choose to perform, not to perform, or to perform in a different way.² He gives a common sense example where a person may choose to walk to go to a place, or ride a horse, or choose not to go at all. He clarifies that such freedom exists in actions that are enjoined by the Vedas (*vaidika karma*) and thus have moral implications (such as speak the truth, for instance), as well as common daily activities without moral implications (*laukika karma*, e.g., choosing to cook, cook with rice or barley, or not to cook at all). Surely the concept of *karma* presumes what is conventionally called “free will,” which is particularly

²Śaṅkara says in his commentary on Bādarāyaṇa’s *Brahma Sūtra*:

Kartum akartum anyathā vā kartum śakyam laukikam vaidikam ca karma. (Ninth century/1980, 1.1.2.2)

crucial in choosing between good or bad behavior, for without such freedom the idea of moral responsibility becomes meaningless. Note, for instance, that a man may be expected to help a lady in danger only when his hands are free to do so, but not when his hands are tied by burglars. In the Indian tradition, the usage of the term *karma* rarely implies action devoid of moral implications, as is often the case in modern psychology.

Since the time of the ancient Upaniṣads, it was assumed that good actions lead to good consequences, and bad actions lead to bad consequences. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* says, for instance, that “the doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action” (4.4.5). This idea has sometimes been called the *Doctrine of Karma*. The word “doctrine” is used here to imply its dictionary meaning as a principle in a branch of knowledge that is traditionally accepted as valid and authoritative. In essence this principle is consistent with the words of the New Testament saying that “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (*Galatians* 6.7). The basic idea here implies “retributive justice,” meaning that it involves dispensing appropriate punishments for all immoral actions. In Christianity it is believed that such justice is done on the Day of Judgment when God calls every dead person from the grave by name and holds him/her accountable for all good and bad actions, assigning them to heaven or hell as appropriate for eternity. In the Indian tradition, however, there is no concept of a particular day of judgment. There is rather a belief in a cosmic system where good or bad consequences of all actions naturally follow, even as causal consequences are *assumed* in natural science to inevitably follow all events according to the principle of causality. Moreover, Indian thinkers have over the ages constructed a systematic set of concepts to help understand how the system of behaviors and their consequences work, and it would be useful to provide an outline of the same.

An important concept in this context is *saṃskāra*, which suggests that each activity or action—i.e., *karma*—leaves behind a *trace*. Each trace is metaphorically thought of as a seed, which sprouts under appropriate conditions and leads to a “fruit” (*phala*), even as a coconut can under the right conditions produce a coconut tree. In terms of human experience, the idea of action bearing its “fruit” can be put somewhat differently: A student’s hard work at study bears the fruit of a brilliant success and a coveted prize, and this rewarding experience prompts her to study harder for the next examination. Thus rewarded by good consequences, a person is prompted to repeat the rewarding behavior. This should explain why the Upaniṣad quoted above says that one becomes virtuous by virtuous action. Such conceptualization is similar to the behaviorist idea of “reinforcement,” which suggests that behaviors that are followed by pleasant experiences tend to strengthen the propensity of that behavioral response, and the same behaviors tend to be repeated.

The traditional interpretation of *karma* in the Mīmāṃsā system is closer to a retributive justice model similar to the Christian view whereby good behaviors are thought to be rewarded by pleasures in heaven (*svarga*), and bad actions are punished by horrors in hell (*naraka*). But unlike the notions of eternal hell or eternal life in heaven typical of Christianity and Islam, a soul’s sojourn in heaven and/or hell is believed to be temporary, commensurate to the amounts of accumulated

merit (*punya*) or demerit (*pāpa*). Rewards in heaven and punishments in hell may not exhaust all that is due for past actions, and seeds sown by past actions often take indefinite period of time before finding appropriate conditions to bear fruit. If all this were correct, then it would be logically necessary for individuals to be reborn. For even if all good and bad deeds were to be adequately rewarded and punished in heaven and hell, it would not be fair to end the soul's life once and for all, since this would mean unfairly depriving the individual of further opportunities for higher levels of spiritual progress and final liberation (*mokṣa*). The implications of the temporary nature of rewards in heaven, and the rationale for attaining a state of perpetual happiness, are clarified in the famous dialogue between the young Naciketas and Yama, the God of Death, in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. Naciketas refused to take the offer of all the pleasures hard to attain in the world of mortals—noble maidens, chariots, and musical instruments and all—in return for a coveted 3rd boon given to him by Yama, and asked instead for what lies beyond birth and death (*Kaṭha*, 1.1.26–29). We shall return to this issue of going beyond the cycle of birth and death later on in this chapter.

One of the assumptions implied in the theory of *karma* may be called the “just world hypothesis,” which suggests that the world is a place where justice will be *ultimately* done, no matter how long it takes for adequate rewards and punishments to be meted out.³ There are a few other underlying assumptions that would help clarify and deepen the idea of a cosmic system of perfect justice implied in the doctrine of *karma*. Two such assumptions are that, *first*, without exception, *all* actions must necessarily result in appropriate consequences, good or bad (*kṛta vipraṇāśa*), and *second*, there is no undeserved reward or punishment (*akṛta abhyāgama*). Although we often find instances where saints suffer while villains get away with murder, there is a promise (or hope) that such apparent miscarriages of justice will be rectified, sooner or later. This idea is expressed in a popular saying in Hindi, which asserts that in God's world there is delay (*der*), but no darkness (*andher*)—or lack of justice.

The idea that nobody would suffer for someone else's action has an important implication of special relevance to psychology. Putatively, all *saṃskāras* remain strictly with the individual herself without spilling onto others or dissipating away. In other words, individual is the unit, an ultimate “profit center” as it were of gain or loss, merit and demerit. This implies an “individualistic” position on the concept of person that is common in the Indian culture. This position is parallel to a kind of individualism implicitly adopted in modern psychology, whereby the human individual—a person or personality—is taken as a unit of understanding, constituting an independent field of study with a universe of discourse of its own. Such a position underwrites psychology's search for meaningful connections among an individual's behaviors across time and space. It provides the fundamental rationale whereby a psychologist expects meaningful connections between a person's

³There is a considerable amount of research in modern psychology about people's belief in a just world. See Montada and Lerner (1998), Dalbert (2001).

childhood experiences and behavior in later life. The same rationale provides a basis to expect significant correlations between a person's behavior across situations, thereby making behavior in principle predictable. While in modern psychology, the time span is limited to a single life cycle (usually the one that is currently in progress and is in principle observable, or a portion thereof that is described in a case study or biography), in Indian thought the time span indefinitely extends across life cycles. The idea of rebirth provides the hope that it will be possible to attain self-knowledge no matter how many life cycles it takes to finally escape from the apparently unending cycle of action and its consequences.

The idea of repeated birth and death (*punarjanma* and *punarmṛtyu*) is an integral part of the traditional world view shared by almost all schools of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain thought with the exception of the materialist followers of Cārvāka. What happens to each soul after death is, however, a matter of differences of opinion. When seen from the vantage point of the secular and scientific worldview that prevails today, the idea of rebirth would appear fanciful, and even if one is willing to take it seriously, one would like to ask for some kind of proof, empirical or rational. There are in fact cases of a person “reborn” reported in the newspapers now and then, for instance where a child starts to speak in a foreign language and narrates episodes from her “past life.” Many such cases have been subject to systematic investigation and critical analysis. Stevenson (1974, 1987) at the University of Virginia collected and analyzed a large number of ostensible cases of reincarnation. While these cases suggest the possibility of reincarnation, they do not prove with any degree of certainty that reincarnation is real (Rao 2011b). Accounts of exceptional talents of the musical genius such as Mozart, or the mathematician Ramanujam, for instance, are cited as evidence for something that must have been learned in prior life. The inborn fear of death common to all animals is thought of as the result of the memory of the ending of the previous life cycle, and is considered as a rational proof for the idea of rebirth.⁴

According to Dasgupta (1922/1992), the well-known historian of Indian philosophy, “there has seldom been before or after Buddha any serious attempt to prove or disprove the doctrine of rebirth” (Vol. 1, p. 87). Potter (1964) has suggested that the Law of Karma is a fundamental principle that is taken for granted without discussion even as the principle of causality is taken for granted in the study of natural sciences. Even as events happening apparently without cause tend to be ignored in science as mere exceptions to the rule, or anomalies (Kuhn 1970), in the context of the Law of Karma, miscarriages of justice in our lifetime are considered temporary, subject to eventual correction in times to come. Looking at the Indian and Western tradition across centuries, one can see a major difference in perspectives: while in the West there is a sharp line dividing the domains of “is”

⁴This idea is suggested in Vyāsa's commentary on Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra* (2.9). Vyāsa clarifies that evidence for the universal fear of death in all living beings cannot be obtained through direct experience or observation (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), or testimony of scriptures (*āgama*). This is an indication that evidence for idea of rebirth is considered open to discussion—although detailed discussion of the same is rare.

versus “ought,” fact versus values, in the Indian tradition there is no sharp dichotomy of this kind. In modern science, there is a strong tendency to insist on value-free search for truth free from ideological encroachments on scientific research. In the Indian tradition, too, there has been a clear conception of the domain of truth beyond the good and the bad. This is expressed clearly, for instance, in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (1.2.14), where the young lad Naciketas insists on Yama that he be told of what lies beyond good and bad, beyond right and wrong.

In recent years, there has been a strong reaction against the belief in the Doctrine of Karma since historically it had been the basis on which the birth of individuals in “lower” caste families suffering from various socially imposed handicaps, including untouchability. We shall return to this issue in the next section of this chapter since the issue is inextricably connected with that of *dharma*.

2.7 The Concept of Dharma and Its Role

Dharma is one of the core concepts of the Indian tradition. *Dharma* is an important part of Indian culture and society. Monier-Williams’s *Sanskrit–English Dictionary* lists the followings meanings of the term *dharma*: prescribed conduct, duty, right, justice, virtue, morality, religion, religious merit, and good work according to a right or rule, among others. In contemporary Indian languages, *dharma* often means charity as well. As can be easily seen from this list of meanings, moral considerations and duties are central to the concept of *dharma*. Although the modern usage of the word *dharma* includes ways of worshipping, these are not crucial aspects of the classical concept of *dharma*. Given the emphasis in Indian culture on ethics and the performance of one’s duty, it should be easy to understand why *dharma* is one of the four major goals that all persons are expected to pursue in life along with the acquisition of wealth and power (*artha*), fulfillment of desires (*kāma*), and liberation (*mokṣa*). We shall return to a more detailed discussion of the prescription of these goals later on in this chapter. Here it will be useful to focus on the implications of the most important meaning of *dharma* as ethos, or ethical guidelines widely upheld in a society. It should be clear that social life would result in chaos in any society if a majority of people does not follow its ethos or consensually supported system of rules. As a set of rules of conduct, the concept of *dharma* is inextricably connected with that of *karma*, or willed action. To put it in terms popularized by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, *ought* implies *can*, for there is no point in asking someone should do something when it is physically impossible for her to do so.

In Jaimini’s *Mīmāṃsā* aphorisms (1.1.2) *dharma* is defined as (Vedic) injunctions or commands to act in a specific manner. A command suggests how people *ought* to act; they imply prescriptions, rather than descriptions. Although the term *dharma* is most often used in a prescriptive sense, sometimes it is also used in combination with other terms to suggest the description of natural tendencies. For instance, *guṇa dharma* means natural property of anything, such as curative or

poisonous property of an herb, and *svabhāva dharma* implies trait-like behavioral tendencies of persons such as aggressive or talkative without necessarily implying whether it is good or bad to behave this way. In Jaimini's Mīmāṃsā system the discussion of *dharma* was focused primarily on the correct delineation of rules for sacrificial rituals (*yajña*) described in the Brāhmaṇa texts, rather than ethical principles. In the Upaniṣads, however, the term *dharma* is often used to designate practice of virtues, rather than specific rules for conducting sacrificial rituals mainly for the purpose of attaining a place in heaven. Thus, the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (1.11) suggests: "Speak the truth. Practice virtue (*dharma*)... Let there be no neglect of study and teaching. Let there be no neglect of the duties to the gods and the fathers ..." Here the focus is clearly on how one ought to behave in society here on earth.

According to Kaṇāda's *Vaiśeṣika-Sūtra*, the goal of *dharma* is twofold: to promote, the attainment of prosperity (*abhyudaya*) as well as the attainment of highest good (*niḥśreyasa*). It is implied that the pursuit of wealth is fine as long as it is done without violating ethical principles. In the same spirit, the *Bhagavad Gītā* (7.11) says that the Lord is reflected in the fulfillment of desires when it is not against moral guidelines. As the common saying goes, honesty is the best policy; it helps improve profits in the long term. The Upaniṣadic rules of conduct, such as speak the truth, respect your teachers and parents, and the like mentioned above are considered applicable to every one regardless of age, gender, and position in society. As such, they are called *common* rules (*sāmānya dharma*). However, when it comes to daily life, the rules of conduct need to be specific to one's station in life. Thus, while a teacher or a priest can afford to follow the rule against killing without any problem, a soldier or policeman responsible for protecting the society from alien invaders and criminals cannot avoid killing as part of their duty. So, a code of conduct that would provide rules appropriate to various categories of people is needed. This was the idea behind the development of *varṇāśrama dharma*, or a code of conduct appropriate to major occupational categories and stages in life. Here *varṇa* implies the four major occupational categories, namely the priests (*brāhmaṇa*), warriors (*kṣatriya*), traders (*vaiśya*), and laborers (*śūdra*), and the *āśrama* refers to roles appropriate to age grades, namely that of student (*brahmacarya*) in youth, the householder (*grhastha*) in adult life, the transitional stage of preretirement (*vānaprastha*), and lastly that of renunciation in old age (*saṅnyāsa*). We should quickly add here that the *varṇa* and *jāti* have currently become highly controversial issues, and we shall return to examine the contentious issues later on in this section. The purpose of the discussion of these concepts here is not to advocate them, but rather to help understand the aspects of psychology that are affected by the social structure of the Indian society shaped by its historical and current context.

In the history of the Indian tradition, a number of texts generically called *Smṛtis* arose to fulfill the need for developing a code of conduct applicable to each of the *varṇa* and *āśrama* categories. The specific rules in the code were normally based on the general ethical principles, such as speak the truth, which were enunciated by the Upaniṣads. Whereas the Upaniṣads were considered to be of supra-human origin (*apauruṣeya*), the *Smṛtis* were undoubtedly composed by human beings: scholars

from different regions at different times. Important among such persons are Manu, Yājñavalkya, Āpastamba, Bodhāyana, and so on.

These scholars devised specific rules in light of the general ethical principles stated in the Upaniṣads. In situations where Upaniṣadic guidelines were either not available or found inadequate, the scholars turned to the then-established practices of the region, considering the behavior of unselfish and learned persons as guide to right behavior. The *Smṛti* texts systematized and codified sets of rules of conduct to guide in a wide variety of civil matters such as property, succession, and professional conduct, as well as criminal matters such as theft and murder. For centuries, various *Smṛti* texts were used by the kings as guidelines for the operation of judicial systems in their kingdoms. When the British established their rule over the Indian subcontinent, they developed a criminal code based on Roman and British traditions, but allowed the Indian judicial system to follow the guidelines of the *Smṛtis* in civil matters such as succession, adoption, marriage and divorce, and so on. Muslims and Christians as well as tribal communities were also allowed to follow their respective traditions in such civil matters. Now into the second decade of the twenty-first century, whether or not India should have a common code in all civil matters is a highly controversial political issue.

Although the *varṇa* categories as described in the *Smṛtis* were supposed to exist in real life in ancient times, social practices were transformed over the centuries giving rise to a number of communities called *jātis* (or castes in English) that were loosely grouped into the four *varṇa* categories. The reason to say “loosely” is that often there is no consensus on which *jāti* belongs to which *varṇa*; while members of many castes considered themselves as belonging to a higher *varṇa*, those in the upper castes often denied them such status. The *jātis* were commonly associated with specific trades in the village economy such as priesthood, fishing, smithy, carpentry, pottery, and so on. *Jātis* were endogamous communities, i.e., groups where members married within the community. Most of these groups were closely, but not exclusively, associated with particular occupations or trades. Members of such communities developed all kinds of support systems, and usually regulated their internal affairs through committees of elders called *jāti pañcāyats*. Outside of legal matters within the jurisdiction of the kings and legal authorities appointed them, the authority of caste councils was respected. These councils ruled in various matters pertaining to alleged breach of conventional rules of conduct within specific caste communities, such as disputes over payments among members of the trading communities, or practicing a trade that members of a caste are not supposed to practice, marital and family disputes, and so on.

The caste councils were headed by respectable elders of the community. They generally followed conventions or devised new rules when needed. The councils exerted considerable influence on members of their communities by imposing fines, and by excommunicating errant members in case of more serious violations of caste conventions. This system of making and implementing rules of conduct is significantly different from that of ancient Greece, where laws were enacted by people in legislative assemblies of small democratic states, and also unlike ancient Rome where administrators laid out the rules. In some ways, the Indian system resembles

the British system where the British Common Law, or traditional practices of Britain, provides basic guidelines in legal matters. It is after gaining independence from the British colonial rule that a parliamentary system of legislation through elected officials at the local, state, and national levels became central to life in India. Although the caste councils and their influence is rapidly withering away, a few of them are still functioning, with occasional bad publicity as in the case of *khap-panchayats* in Haryana and other regions of northern India with their dictates on who can or cannot marry whom and so on.

Throughout history, the Indian society was pluralistic; there was no insistence on a single code applicable for all; cultural and regional differences were commonly recognized and respected. Different *Smṛti* texts were followed in different regions during the same era, and new *Smṛtis* were formulated when historical change made old rules obsolete. Diversity in codes of conduct in different religious, ethnic, caste, and tribal communities was taken for granted. Does this mean that there were no common rules applicable to everyone on the basis of universal ethical principles? Not so. Indeed, standards equally applicable to all were well recognized. As noted earlier, these were designated as *sāmānya dharma*. The common ethical principles of the *Smṛtis* were similar to the basic Upaniṣadic injunctions such as speak the truth, practice virtue, respect teachers and elders, and so on. Manu (n.d./1971, 6.10) lists ten such principles of *sāmānya dharma*: contentment, forgiveness, disciplining one's mind, nonstealing, inner and outer cleanliness, controlling lust and greed, cultivating curiosity and lust for knowledge, seeking self-knowledge and insight, truthfulness, and controlling anger. The saints often summarized the essence of *dharma* in simplest guidelines and explained them in vernacular to common folk. The seventeenth century Marathi saint poet Tukārāma, for instance, explained (in poem #1027) that helping others constitutes meritorious behavior (*punya*), while maliciousness constitutes the opposite (*pāpa*) (see Tukārāma, seventeenth century/1973).

Varṇāśrama dharma specifies different rules for the Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras. This system has become very problematic in modern times, and for good reasons. This is because the different duties for the priests, warriors, traders, and laborers became associated with differential privileges favoring the upper categories over the lower ones. For instance, while the Brāhmaṇas and Kṣatriyas were traditionally given privileges to learn the Vedas and have rituals such as weddings administered according to Vedic formulae, such privileges were denied to the Śūdras. Worse, the *Smṛtis* not only prevented the Śūdras from learning the Vedas, but also prescribed harsh penalties to Śūdras who would so much as to inadvertently over hear the chanting of the Vedic mantras. At the village level, customs were developed whereby the Brāhmaṇas were allowed to bathe in the river at the upstream portion where the waters may be cleanest, followed by the Kṣatriyas and Vaiśyas, while the Śūdras had to go furthest downstream where the water was least clean. Moreover, the system of such differential treatment of *varṇas* and *jātis* deteriorated further when a fifth *varṇa* was added at the lowest rung, and this section was assigned occupations such as scavenging, forced to live outside the village, and was subject to the heinous practice of untouchability.

There is no historical explanation of the origin of untouchability, nor is there any basis for its justification. It is not clear if membership in a caste or a *varṇa* always and strictly depended on birth, but it has come to be so in the case of *jātis* for centuries. Many forms of systemic discrimination historically arose along a hierarchical ranking of castes, and membership by birth put serious limits to mobility up the ladder of status hierarchy. Worst of all, persons born in “lower” castes were supposed to accept the indignities imposed by birth in a caste group as the consequence on their own bad karma in the past life and not as an injustice imposed by a bad social organization. This was the worst application of the Doctrine of Karma. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who was born in a caste, considered “untouchable” and personally experienced the heinous treatment, and by dint of his hard work became an unquestionable leader, expressed his reaction thus:

To the Untouchables Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors. The sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas, Smritis and Shastras, the iron law of caste, the heartless law of karma, and the senseless law of status by birth are to Untouchables veritable instruments of torture which Hinduism has forged against the Untouchables.⁵ (Ambedkar 1945/1991, p. 296)

It is due to the systemic inequities supported by Manu in the *Manu Smṛti* that “Manuism” (*manuvāda*) has become a common slur in India today. Worse still, caste-based inequities not only perpetuated despite the efforts of several Hindu reformers for centuries, but they also infected communities of Indian Muslims and Christians who did not officially believe in the caste system. Notwithstanding all such negative aspects of *varṇāśrama dharma*, it is suggested sometime that the caste groups historically provided a variety of benefits and protection to their members, and thereby provided a strong albeit problematic socioeconomic structure for the Indian society for centuries. With the introduction of a democratic system, castes became voting blocs trying to protect common interests and privileges, giving rise to a divided society based on caste politics.

A saving grace in the middle of all this is the fundamental notion that *dharma* was not meant to provide an *eternal* and unchangeable set of rules carved in stone. *Dharma* has been called everlasting (*sanātana*) simply because, as a *living* tradition, it adapts to the historically changing environment. This is particularly true about the aspect of *dharma* that Manu had focused on, namely differential privileges based on *varṇa*. Manu was very clear about the fact that the essence of *dharma* is the actual social practice, and that social practices demand continual redefinition in changing historical circumstances. Indeed, it is recognized in the Indian culture from ancient times that each new historical era (*yuga*) deserves a new ethos (*yuga dharma*) appropriate for its unique conditions. It is also believed that a new scholar emerges at the dawn of a new era to help put together a new code of conduct. The process of change has been called *dharma-cakra-pravatana*, or turning of the wheel of *dharma*, and is symbolically represented in the wheel carved into the capstone of a pillar erected by Emperor Aśoka in the third century B.C.E. Indeed, rather than remaining

⁵The words quoted here are from Dr. Ambedkar’s work called “What Congress and Gandhi have done to the untouchables?”, which was first published in 1945.

a proper name of a particular person, “Manu” has become a generic term designating a scholar who prepares a code of conduct at the beginning of a new age, and tradition avers that there have been as many *Manus* as distinct historical *eras* (*yugas*).

Against this background, the Constitution of India adopted in 1950 represents a new code for the latest—postcolonial—era of the history of the Indian subcontinent. The most significant change heralding this new age is the abolition of untouchability by law. It is a sweet irony that the chief architect of the change was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who like his countless ancestors had suffered from the indignities of untouchability. Given that the legitimate anger of Dr. Ambedkar and his followers was sometimes expressed in the form of burning copies of the *Manu Smṛti*, it is even more ironic that he has been sometimes called the latest Manu, as the word Manu has become a generic term meaning a law giver. At any rate, since independence, a variety of special privileges have been offered to the under-privileged castes to offset the losses suffered by them over the centuries. Hopefully, the various forms of “reverse discrimination” will ensure success to the grand experiment in social engineering aimed at bringing about a thoroughly equalitarian society in India.

2.8 Implications of Dharma and Karma for Psychology

Both *dharma* and *karma* are foundational concepts of the traditional Indian worldview. They permeate the conceptual systems of almost all schools of Indian thought. Traditional psychological thinking is an integral part of these systems, and as such they are deeply influenced by notions of *dharma* and *karma*. It should be clear that *dharma* is particularly relevant for the study of society and social psychology in India. The role of castes, a product of *varṇāśrama dharma*, is too prominent a part of society and politics in India to be ignored by social psychologists today. While this issue has been a core topic for anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists, it is arguable whether social psychologists in India have given it the attention it deserves. On the other hand, *dharma* as the basic source of the evolving ethos of the Indian society for millennia, its impact on the day-to-day behavior of countless citizens of India is less visible than caste politics, prayers in temples and homes, various religious festivals and other overt manifestations.

It is possible that the thrust of the mainstream of contemporary psychology for universal laws fashioned after Newtonian laws has led to ignoring the impact of culture and religion in shaping human behavior. The natural laws such as those of physics and chemistry do govern behavior; the electrical currents and magnetic fields in the brain continue to function exactly as dictated by the laws of electro-magnetism. However, such laws are not adequate enough to account for human behavior to the fullest extent as logical positivists and some behaviorists have often suggested. The search for timeless and universal laws seems to result in ignoring the fact that history and local customs have considerable influence on behavior. As Albert Einstein once pithily quipped, the laws of gravity cannot explain why people fall in love! It is not because of some natural laws that a great majority of drivers in

some countries drive on the right side of the road and on the left in other countries, but because human behavior is rule-governed as well as governed by laws of nature—without violating the latter. As formally argued by Harré and Secord (1982), it is necessary to consider rule-governed behavior in addition to natural laws to fully account for human behavior. Although humans are free to break human-made social regulations, unlike natural laws that they cannot break, the society is together and does not fall apart because a majority follows the regulations. To the extent that *dharma* continues to provide guidelines for behavior, it must remain a suitable topic of psychological studies.

A few words may be added here to explain the relevance of the historical account of the social structure of the Indian society in a book on psychology. Modern psychology, in its enthusiasm to model itself after the natural sciences, especially physics, viewed its task to formulate the eternal and universal laws that determine behavior. As well, a sharp line was drawn between the natural sciences that depended on experimentation and replication on the one hand, and the humanities that depended on the interpretation of historical trends or the meanings of texts. History, it was thought, did not matter for the “science” of psychology. Without going into the recent developments in the philosophy of science that point out the relevance of interpretation not only for the human sciences but also for the natural sciences (Kuhn 1977; Taylor 1980), it may be noted simply that it makes no sense to ignore the role of history of *dharma* and the caste system for psychology in India. While the history of slavery in the West can help understand the intergroup relations between Caucasians and Afro-Americans in USA, generalizations from studies of the American situation may not be equally applicable to inter-caste relations in India.

Given the insidious effect of the *jāti*-based social organization, nobody in the right mind would in these days and age think of going back to *varṇāśrama*; social reformers who tried that have been duly ignored. The only relevance of it today is to recognize the relevance of ethical guidelines having to be different for those who play radically different roles in society. Imagine soldiers behaving like priests, and vice versa and think of the consequences. It is sometimes suggested that the degeneration of *dharma* during the period of the *Mahābhārata* was the result of Droṇa, a Brahmin, had taken to arms like a Kṣatriya, while Vidura, born in a Kṣatriya clan had given up arms and taken to learning like a Brahmin. It is interesting to note in this context that in the *Mahābhārata* (*Śānti Parva*, 109.11) the term *dharma* is discussed in its etymological sense tracing to its root verb *dhṛ*, which means to hold, sustain, or preserve. Thus, it suggests, *dharma* is that which holds a society together. There is a common expression in Sanskrit, which says that when *dharma* is protected, it protects the society. What this means is that social cohesion is ensured when people follow the ethos of the society and play their roles according to rules of the game. If this is correct, then it makes sense for psychologists to study the conditions that facilitate or hinder rule-following behavior, rather than ignoring moral behavior in the name of value-free science. Indian psychology is admittedly and unabashedly value-driven, even though, as noted before, the sphere of truth beyond good and bad, *dharma* and *adharma*, was well recognized in the ancient *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*.

A blind following of the Western models tends to lead psychologists to refrain from anything related to religion, and the idea of the relevance of *dharma* for Indian psychology would be good enough to cause suspicion for some, if not outright rejection. The above discussion of *dharma* should make it clear that *dharma* is not based on any belief system, or the putative authenticity of a historical founder claimed to be a messenger of God. Nor did it lead to the establishment of an institutional structure to safeguard a belief system by banishing or otherwise punishing scientists or thinkers who propose ideas opposed to some foundational beliefs. The misperception of *dharma* as a “religion” courts the danger of being perceived as inimical to science and free inquiry, which it cannot be.

The concepts of *karma* and *dharma* are inextricably intertwined since the practice of *dharma*, which means following ethical guidelines, is not possible unless *karma*, meaning choosing to behave in accordance with those guidelines, is also possible. *Dharma*, as a matter of right action in all walks of life, is equally connected with the other major goals of life envisioned in the Indian way of life, namely, the pursuit of wealth (*artha*), pleasure (*kāma*), and final liberation (*mokṣa*). The connection between *karma* and *mokṣa* is critical as well as intricate. This is because *mokṣa* is commonly thought of liberating oneself from the perpetual chain of *karma* and its consequences. As we shall see, the concepts of *karma* and the *kārmic cycle* have been applied to help make sense of human suffering, and to develop ways to overcome such suffering once and for all. Amelioration of suffering is clearly an issue relevant for clinical psychology, and as such the issue warrants some discussion here.

2.9 Ubiquitous Suffering: The Existential Anguish

That humans strive to minimize suffering and maximize happiness is a truism, and psychology is not an exception to the same striving. To that end, different systems of psychology have developed an understanding about the nature and causes of both suffering and happiness. In some systems of psychology such views are explicit, in others implicit, and these are often embedded in the cultural context of the psychologists who develop theories and applications. For instance, in *Civilization and its discontents* Freud (1930/1961) viewed anxiety as the problem most commonly affecting the entire civilization, and traced its origin in the repression of pleasure seeking impulses under the influence of religious doctrines and practices. In contrast, the behaviorists often implied that maladaptation to the environment was the common cause of difficulties in life and devised techniques of behavior modification to help individuals in getting over such difficulties. Human suffering is a matter of considerable discussion in the history of Indian thought.

A systematic analysis of the nature of suffering is found in the Sāṃkhya system. In his commentary on the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* (stanza #1) Vācaspati Mīśra (n.d./1985, pp. 12–17) first makes a distinction between suffering arising from external and

internal sources. The external sources are said to be of three kinds: (i) suffering arising from physical causes (*ādhibhautikam*) such as falling objects or menacing animals, which can be dispelled by physical means, such as moving away from a falling rock or by counter attack on a charging animal; (ii) suffering arising from mysterious agents (*ādhidaivikam*) such as ghosts or evil spirits, which may be dispelled by wearing amulets or chanting mantras; and (iii) suffering arising from within oneself (*adhyātmikam*). The third kind of suffering is further subdivided into two types: (a) suffering resulting from the body (*śārīra*) such as pain arising from the imbalance of bodily humors, which can be treated by medication, and (b) suffering arising from mental causes (*mānasa*), which implies mental tension (*santāpa*), and other emotional problems which demand what we now call psychotherapy. In Sāṃkhya-Yoga and the Advaita traditions, the main remedy suggested for overcoming suffering arising from mental causes is to dispel *avidyā* and remove misconstrued notions of the self.

Reflecting on the Sāṃkhya approach just described we may note, *first*, that there is an attempt here to develop a systematic approach to understanding the nature and types of suffering, and *second*, there is a focus on psychological causes of suffering to be addressed by psychological means. Indeed, in the literature on Yoga as well as the Advaita, there are explicit statements where their enterprise is viewed as being similar or analogical to that of medicine. Suffering is thought of as the disease, and methods of meditation and other practices are thought of as a form of therapy.⁶ The domain of psychological intervention is clearly delineated from that of the physical domain and the field of medicine, which in its traditional form was the system of Āyurveda. That the physical aspect of yoga, involving mainly postures and breathing exercises, are means to enhance health and fitness is widely recognized. That the physical aspect is primarily a preparation for the crucial part of controlling the mind is often lost sight of. Patañjali's yoga is in fact a form of psychotherapy. It is not an accident that various forms of meditation, Yogic or Buddhist, are slowly becoming part of the clinicians' tool kit in various places around the world; it indicates that psychologists have gradually started to recognize the psychotherapeutic value of such techniques.

Many of the systems of psychology and psychotherapy that developed within the Indian tradition share a fairly common view of the nature of suffering and its

⁶In his commentary on the *Yoga Sūtra* (2.16), Vyāsa uses a medical analogy suggesting that the painful passage through life is the disease, the collusion of *puruṣa* with *prakṛti* is the cause of the disease, and wise discrimination between the two is the remedy. For an English translation of Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras and the commentaries of Vyāsa and Vācaspati Miśra, see Prasada (1912).

Similarly, in the first stanza of the 19th chapter of the verse section of his *Upadeśasāhasrī*, Śaṅkara (ninth century/1973) uses the following words alluding to a medical metaphor:

trṣṇā jvara nāśakāraṇaṁ cikitsitaṁ jñāna vairagya bheṣajam

Here desire is compared with fever, and knowledge and the cultivation of dispassionateness are thought of as a medicine. For an English translation of *Upadeśasāhasrī*, see Potter (1981, pp. 217–254).

underlying causes. In the long and rich history of Indian culture, there is a persistent theme that considers the insatiable nature of desires as the primary cause of human suffering. A story of a king from the first chapter of epic Mahābhārata illustrates the point. King Yayāti lost his youth due to a curse, and became despondent for being unable to enjoy sex and other pleasures of life anymore. So he asked his sons to lend him their youth so that he could continue enjoying sensual pleasures. While the first four sons refused, the fifth and youngest son agreed. With borrowed youth, Yayāti enjoyed sensual pleasures in the company of his two wives and a heavenly damsel “for a 1000 years.” But in the end he still remained unsatisfied. The central idea of the story of Yayāti is beautifully expressed in words attributed to him in a single short stanza of *Ādiparva* (75.50), a section of the epic Mahābhārata. It may be paraphrased in English as follows: “Human desires can never be completely sated by means of objects of pleasure; instead they get stronger like fire flared by fuel.”⁷ The same idea is repeated in the same words in the *Manu Smṛti* (2.94), an influential code of Hindu ethics (see Manu, n.d./1971, p. 47). While this instance may be viewed as an old Hindu “myth,” the well-known episode in the life history of Siddhartha Gautama, the prince of a kingdom in Nepal, echoes a similar theme. All the pleasures he was able to enjoy as a young and married prince could not make him happy; the sight of a sick man, an old man, and a dead man convinced him that worldly pleasures are transitory; on balance suffering exceeds pleasures. As is well known, Siddhartha went on to find ways to solve this problem, and spent the rest of his life learning and teaching how to eradicate suffering.

There is a popular saying in Sanskrit which suggests that one who owns ten houses yearns for a hundred, and the owner of a hundred wants to own a thousand and so on. In current times, we find that a winner of eight Olympic gold medals sets a record exceeding all previous athletes, but wants to set up a still higher record. The Forbes’ list of billionaires around the world keeps getting longer, but one rarely hears about any of them not wanting more. A multibillionaire like Howard Hughes, who could command all kind of pleasures he would desire ends up with fears of death from infecting microbes and becomes miserable in his old age. Should all this seem to express an unwarranted form of pessimism, or a “sour grapes” attitude, then we may turn to modern psychology where similar ideas can be found. As James (1890/1983, p. 296) suggested through an equation:

$$\text{Self-esteem} = \text{Success} \div \text{Pretensions.}$$

What this means, in other words, is that how good or happy one feels depends not only on the degree of our success or accomplishments, but also on the degree to which they fulfill our expectations. While there always are limits on how much we can achieve in life, there are no limits on how much we can *expect* to achieve. In

⁷The words of the oft quoted stanza are:

na jātu kāmāḥ kāmānāmupabhogena śāmyati, haviṣā kṛṣṇavartmeva bhūya evābhivardhate.
(Mahābhārata, Ādiparva, 75.50).

more recent times, the concept of *relative deprivation* (Runciman 1966) suggests the same idea: one feels deprived and unhappy insofar as one's expectations remain unfulfilled. Not having something that the Jones's next door have is enough to make a neighbor feel miserable, and the grass always looks greener on the other side of the fence as the saying goes!

Some important and distinctive aspects of the Indian perspectives on suffering presented above may be noted here: *First*, there is a holistic view of enjoyment and suffering in life; it is the balance of one or the other through the entire life cycle that is a matter of concern more than particular sources of suffering, or forms of pathology. *Second*, the search for answers is directed inward more than outward; the focus is on the nature of the one who enjoys or suffers rather than on external afflictions or stressors. *Third*, there is an attempt to reach to the root of the problem and try for a radical removal of suffering. The main idea is that a proper understanding of *the one who suffers* or enjoys would strike at the root of the problem; cutting off a tree at the trunk would make it unnecessary to take down the branches one by one. Whether or not such an attempt is successful is a relevant question to ask, but this requires a detailed understanding of the various means that have been developed, tried, and tested in the lives of many persons across the generations. Such an examination, however worthwhile, is beyond the scope of this book. It would be useful to first see what the views of suffering and its amelioration are as well as those of the highest possible happiness and how it could be attained. These issues are examined elsewhere in this book.

It should be clear that the focus of Indian psychology has been on self-knowledge; it is existential issues such as "who am I" or "why am I here?" that are seen as fundamental issues deserving our attention. This requires looking inward to the core of one's selfhood. Such is not the central issue in modern psychology, although it is surely not ignored in the history of Western thought. Indeed, modern psychology began with interest in the nature of selfhood as William James's long and insightful chapter in his *Principles* (1890/1983) indicates. However, most of the development of studies of the self in modern psychology have focused on what James called the self-as-object, aspects of selfhood that require "looking out" rather than turn inward as most Indian approach to self-knowledge require. The clear contrast between traditional Indian and modern Western psychologies may be attributed to the fact that major developments in the former happened primarily in the context of a spiritual quest, while in the latter case the psychologists' close alliance with the profession of medicine with a focus on various forms of pathology. But the contrast implies more of complementarity than of conflict in their contributions to psychology on the global scale.

2.10 The Human Quest

While systematic attempts to understand the nature and causes of suffering is one side of the quest, the other side involves the setting up goals worth pursuing in life, including the attainment of the highest possible level of happiness. The latter

pursuit, like the former, may be viewed in the broad historical context of culture to help identify the major themes of culture and their influence on the pursuit of psychological knowledge. Coan (1977) has shown how various systems of psychology around the globe have been influenced by views of psychological well-being such as mental health, normality, maturity, self-actualization, and human fulfillment. After surveying varied models reflected in the classical literature on this issue from around the world, Coan suggests that the ideals pursued belong to four types of personalities, namely a hero, artist, sage, or saint. To put it in other words, the more common ideals involve the successful pursuit of wealth and power like a hero, creativity in the field of art like Michelangelo, stellar contribution to knowledge like Plato or Einstein, or simple life and compassionate behavior like the many saints of the world. With this interesting analysis in mind, we may examine the ideals that have guided the pursuit of psychology in the Indian tradition.

As noted earlier, *mokṣa* is one of the four major goals that all persons are expected to pursue in life along with the performance of one's duties (*dharma*), the acquisition of wealth and power (*artha*), and fulfillment of desires (*kāma*). These goals are called *puruṣārthas*, and they are intricately intertwined with the common pattern of passage in life construed in terms of four stages of the life cycle (called *āśramas*). During the *first* stage called *brhamacarya* spanning childhood and early youth during which one learns the rudiments of culture including the society's ethos (*dharma*). The moral principles imbibed from early childhood are to be translated into action throughout life. The *second* stage called *gṛhastha* involves married life during early and middle adulthood in which one is to devote fully to earn wealth (*artha*) and fulfill one's natural desires including sexuality (*kāma*). During the *third* stage of *vānaprasta*, which is a period of preretirement, one is expected to gradually withdraw from active life in society. And in the *fourth* and final stage of life called *saṁnyāsa* a person is supposed to retire from family and work-a-day world, and be devoted full time to the pursuit of liberation (*mokṣa*).

It should be clear that this is an ideal pattern of life to help accommodate the pursuit of the major goals prescribed for everybody. It is more of a prescription of what life should be like, rather than a description of what commonly happens. Exceptions were made for the precocious individuals such as Śaṅkara who crave more for their spiritual uplift than pleasures of life, and were allowed to skip the pursuit of wealth and the fulfillment of desires and enter the stage of *saṁnyāsa* whenever they are ready for it. Aside from such exceptional cases, the pursuit of wealth and sexual and other pleasures are allowed for all. It should be clear that this model does not imply a kill-joy perspective on life. Asceticism is not recommended (nor possible or desired) for everybody. This is contrary to the misperception that Indian culture promotes turning away from seeking wealth and getting socially involved. It may be noted that the worship of Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth, is an integral and popular aspect of Hinduism. In Indian culture, like in most others, the ideals are not fully followed, and in modern times the pursuit of *artha* and *kāma* has dominated, with the pursuit of *dharma* and *mokṣa* taking a back seat. This is particularly true with increasing globalization with accompanying proliferation of a consumerist culture around the world.

The promotion of the four major goals of life has led the Indian intelligentsia in the past to produce major works devoted to their pursuit. Thus, Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* (see Kauṭilya 1992) and Vātsyāyana's *Kāma Sūtra* (1992) are classical works devoted, respectively, to the study of political economy and sexology. Jaimini begins his Mīmāṃsā aphorisms declaring "let us now begin to explore the nature of *dharma*" (*athāto dharma jijnāṣā*), devoting the rest of his treatise to specify the rules of conduct expressed in the injunctions of the Vedas. There is long and rich tradition of works devoted to the study of *dharma* (Kane 1930–1977). As to the pursuit of *mokṣa*, there is a still richer and more diverse approaches described in numerous works belonging to several spiritual paths. This is the predominant topic of the Upaniṣads, and they inspired many approaches to reach the same goal. One of the most prominent among such approaches is described in Bādarāyaṇa's *Brahma Sūtra*. It involves a critical examination of the Upaniṣadic texts in an attempt to find out what *Brahman*, the ultimate reality. Given that Brahman is thought to be identical with the Ātman, this work is essentially a treatise on the nature of the Self. Following the lead of the Upaniṣads and their interpretation by Bādarāyaṇa, the system of Vedānta develops in detail the methodology for the attainment of *mokṣa* by way of self-realization. Interestingly, Gautam Buddha, who strongly rejected the major tenets of the Upaniṣads, nevertheless proposed the pursuit of *nirvāṇa*, a goal that strangely seems to take an adept to results that look highly similar to those pursuing *mokṣa*.

Mokṣa is one of the most prominent terms in the history of Indian thought and culture; it indicates a very popular conception of an ideal that many people aspire for. *Mokṣa* and its linguistic variation *mukti* are part of a set of terms including *apavarga*, *niḥśreyasa*, *kaivalya*, and *nirvāṇa*, all of which designate variations of views concerning the highest possible state to strive for. Ensnared in various schools of thought and their many subdivisions, the terms convey nuances arising from the doctrinal differences among the schools, and indicate the outcome of varied practices for self-transformation. These practices have been developed in multiple chains of dedicated teachers and students over the millennia. Various techniques developed by the different schools of thought are an integral and important part of the applied aspect of Indian psychology. Here it would be useful to clarify certain important commonalities as well as differences in the views of the ideal human condition conveyed by these terms.

It is best to note first of all that underlying all the variations in the views of the ideal human condition is the distinction between what is pleasurable (*preyas*) as distinguished from what is essentially good (*śreyas*). This distinction is clearly made in the dialogue between the young Naciketas and Yama, the god of death, in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (1.2.1–3) where Yama appreciates that the boy was able to make this crucial distinction in asking for something more worthwhile than a 1000 years of luxurious life of a ruler on earth. In this context, the term *niḥśreyasa* indicates the highest possible good, and this connotation is implied in the rest of the terms in this class. Of the many different schools of Indian thought, the materialist followers of Cārvāka school seem to ignore the issue of what is "good," and stick to the search for carnal pleasures. Their view is comparable to what is called

hedonism, which holds that pleasure is the ultimate good. A similar idea is expressed in Freud's writings where he says "... sexual love... has given us our most intense experience of an overwhelming sensation of pleasure and has thus furnished us with a pattern of our search for happiness" (Freud 1930/1961, p. 82). In such views, we find an echo of the tradition of Cārvāka which continues till this date. Cārvāka school founded by Bṛhaspati, is said to have advocated that we should make the most of life on earth by seeking pleasures, for there is no life after death. In sharp contrast to this view, most other schools of Indian thought, including those aligned with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism believe in the idea of rebirth.

The idea of *mokṣa* is inextricable from the Doctrine of Karma, since the basic meaning of this term is liberation, and it implies getting oneself free from the perpetual cycle of action and its consequences. There are many assumptions embedded in this doctrine that explain why we are all thought to have been trapped in an unending cycle, and why is that cycle so fearful as to lead many great minds across centuries search for an escape from it. To put this in perspective, let us note that the perpetuation of the *kārmic* cycle is no different from the idea embedded in the world view of science where every cause necessarily and always leads to an appropriate consequence, and that the causal chain is thought to be perpetual. But there is a basic difference in views of causality as interpreted in science and in the Doctrine of Karma. According to the Doctrine of Karma, intentions that guide behaviors are presumed to have causal consequence, whereas in the world view of science the causal efficacy of intentions is denied. It is common in most Indian perspectives to view that desires, especially pleasure-seeking desires, prompt behaviors in pursuit of the objects of pleasure, which is similar to what is presumed in psychoanalysis and even in early behaviorism where desires were implied in the concept of drives. The main difference between such modern perspectives in psychology and Indian perspectives which uphold the Doctrine of Karma is the idea that desires never get fully satisfied and that their pursuit results in a balance of suffering over happiness. Given this commonality of assumptions, the differences in perspectives on *mokṣa* and related concepts among the many schools of Indian thought are based on a set of factors: their differing views of reality (metaphysical doctrines), the difference in relative emphasis on cognition, emotion, and volition. Such differences are reflected in the three main paths to liberation among the Hindus, namely *jñāna*-, *bhakti*-, and *karma mārgas*, or pathways to *mokṣa*. The different techniques they have developed, and the lives shaped by their successful practice are illustrated in three exemplary life histories in Chap. 9 of this volume.

A closer look at the broad range of schools of thought and their spiritual practices would indicate that in fact there is an exception to the otherwise commonality of the yearning for *mokṣa*. It is common among the followers of the *bhakti mārga*, or the path of devotion, where the devotees would rather be reborn than seek escape from the *kārmic* chain and rebirth. This is because, *first*, their metaphysical doctrine denies strict monism—as in the case of Rāmānuja and Madhva—*presuming* a fundamental and inexorable difference between the devotee and the deity, and *second*, because many prominent devotees or saints find their immersion in Celestial Love (*preman*) so engaging that they would rather be reborn and keep

enjoying that ecstasy. (We will revisit this issue in Chap. 9 when we examine the life of Tukārāma, one of the greatest devotees of all times.)

The followers of Sāṃkhya and Yoga also reject monism and are committed to the dualism of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. The term *kaivalya*, which is used in common by the followers of both Sāṃkhya and Yoga schools literally means the state of complete *isolation* of *puruṣa*, the real and unchanging *self*, from its entanglement with the continually changing body and varied selves or social roles. Since the entire domain of *prakṛti*, which means the phenomenal world of ordinary experience, is thought to be continually changing, complete isolation from it implies getting exempted from the perpetual chain of karma and its consequences, and thus from the possibility of being reborn. According to the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* (see Īśvarakṛṣṇa 1940, stanza #44), the main means for turning away from the phenomenal world is knowledge (in the sense of *vidyā*, mentioned above), which is attained in the highest state of *samādhi*.

In the Advaita system, *vidyā* is gained through a specific kind of meditation, mainly involving the wise discrimination between what is changing and what is permanent, and hence its approach is called the path of knowledge (*jñāna mārga*). While staying within the conceptual framework of the Sāṃkhya system, Patañjali's yoga has devised a different and more elaborate strategy to help attain the same goal of *kaivalya*. The core of the strategy involves withdrawing one's attention first into the mind and further inward through the layers of meanings that becloud the contentless pure consciousness, the *puruṣa*. Thus, when attention is withdrawn totally into the centre of awareness, and is made to persistently *stay* (*avasthānam*) there, a yogin becomes an uninvolved witness unaffected by the emotional ups and downs in the course of daily life. That implies escape from suffering implied in the concept of *kaivalya*.

The above account of yogic meditation as a withdrawal of attention should clarify why *kaivalya* is often considered synonymous with *apavarga*, since the term *apavarga* is derived from the root verb *vṛi* which means to turn, and the prefix *apa* meaning away from. In other words, it means turning off from, or side-stepping, the perpetual chain of action and its consequences. The technique developed in Patañjali's yoga involves much more than withdrawing attention from the outer world; it includes mainly the cultivation of dispassionate attitude to life (*vairāgya*) and repeated and tireless effort (*abhyāsa*). In addition, it includes the disciplining conduct by following ethical guidelines, cultivating concentration of mind and so on.

All such practices are considered useful by most schools of Vedānta, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and so on, regardless of their differences in their views of what exactly constitutes the highest state. For instance, the basic Sāṃkhya-Yoga texts by Īśvarakṛṣṇa and Patañjali, respectively, say little if anything of the positive or blissful nature of the state of *kaivalya*. Although many Advaita-Vedāntists often use the word *kaivalya* as a synonym of *mokṣa*, their account of the experience commonly emphasizes the extremely positive nature of highest level of experience one can attain by escaping the perpetuating chain of karma and its consequences. Indeed, the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (2.8) estimates the Bliss of Brahman/Ātman to be

100 quintillion times higher than what a young, well-endowed human being can enjoy. Whether or not such an account is simply an exaggeration or a hyperbole, it clearly emphasizes the positive character of the ideal condition thought to be humanly attainable.

There are serious differences in the opinions of various schools of thought as to whether the highest possible state involves unimaginable bliss, or if it simply means the cessation of suffering. In the Mīmāṃsā system, for instance, *apavarga* is defined as the total absence of suffering (*ātyantikī duḥkhanivṛttiḥ*), and in fact in the Nyāya Sūtra (4.1.63) it is compared with the absence of misery in deep sleep (see Gotama 1913, p. 124). According to Jainism, however, the state of *mokṣa* involves not only an emancipation from the chain of karma and its consequences and a complete relief from suffering, but also the attainment of infinite knowledge (*ananta-jñāna*) and infinite perception (*anantadarśana*) (Dasgupta 1922/1975, Vol. 1, p. 207).

The term *nirvāṇa*, which is most commonly used in Buddhism, is sometimes used by Hindu thinkers also as a synonym for *mokṣa*. The term literally means blowing out, as in the case of extinguishing a flame. In Buddha's view, nothing remains the same in human life, and despite the momentary nature of events that follow one another, there is supposed to be continuity in life in the same way that a flame has a continuing existence. What feeds the flame of life is human desire; and the idea of the insatiable nature of desires is implied therein. Once the desires are tamed, the chase after pleasures must end even as a flame extinguishes after the depletion of oil in the lamp. Taming desires is not an easy enterprise, and devising effective ways to do so is the challenge that Buddha and many of his followers have taken up—and an account of the same is an important chapter of applied psychology in the Buddhist tradition. There is a great variety of techniques developed within the Buddhist tradition, and all of those are supported by matching theoretical frameworks. *Nirvāṇa* is a common term, but the accounts are too varied and complex to explain as the vast literature on the topic shows. Part of the difficulty in describing the state of *nirvāṇa* is that it is essentially indescribable. Buddha often kept silence when asked questions to which there were no simple answers; he chose instead to stick to practical problems that ordinary men and women could understand and deal with. The literature on the topic indicates that there were significant differences in the accounts of the state of *nirvāṇa*; it has been suggested that some schools portrayed the state as simply the absence of suffering, while others, especially those coming from the Mādhyamika tradition presented it as a positive quality of experience.

Before ending this section on the ideals such as *mokṣa* and *nirvāṇa* that guided the development of psychology in India more specifically of the applied side, it would be useful to make some observations in the context of modern psychology. It should be clear that a significant aspect of the historical development of modern psychology was its close association with medical practice. Freud, in particular, was most influential in the development of psychoanalysis as a method of treatment for hysteria, anxiety, and other such disorders, and indeed he and his followers

significantly influenced the development and teaching of modern psychiatry. From then on, till today modern psychology in its clinical applications is focused more on specific forms of pathology and their treatment. The continuing editions of the widely used Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) illustrate the point. By comparison, in the mainstream of modern psychology, there is less attention paid to the improvement of the condition of “normal” individuals taking them to higher levels of fulfillment. In recognition of this putative deficiency, a branch of psychology called “positive” psychology has started to develop in more recent years (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Lopez and Snyder 2011). The increasing popularity of techniques of meditation, particularly *Vipaśyanā*, among clinical psychologists in the US, indicates that Indian contributions to this field are already making inroads in the field of positive psychology. This issue is discussed at some length in Chap. 7 of this volume.

The fact that the ideal condition is described in highly varied ways—ranging from ordinary and humdrum deep sleep to be a zillion times better than the best of lifelong sensual pleasures—creates a problem. Such disparity in its accounts cannot be ascribed simply to the transcognitive and, therefore, consider them essentially indescribable extraordinary states of consciousness. It is possible that despite the use of common words such as *kaivalya* or *nirvāṇa* used by followers of different schools, the actual experience of the state and the pathways that help to attain it may be significantly different. Of course, nobody can have direct access to anyone else’s experience, whether it pertains to extraordinary states such as *samādhi*, or ordinary experiences such as the taste of salt or pain of a pin prick. Nevertheless, if such different experiences are compared by the same person who has them, her testimony would provide some credence to the comparative value of the varied experiences. An important consideration here is that, since the variously described experiences are said to be attainable as the result of practices that are clearly laid out, their attainment is in principle attainable by a serious inquirer ready to perform all the prescribed practices. Indeed, that was the strategy adopted by Sri Ramkrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886), who personally followed the arduous practices of Advaita Vedānta, Sufism, and some other systems under the tutelage of masters in the respective fields. Needless to say, such a strategy is not within reach for a vast majority of people including the most serious and capable aspirants.

As an alternative to such first-person approach to the assessment of validity and relative value of the highest state described by various spiritual paths, we may consider an assessment of their value by examining the conduct of persons who have putatively reached the highest state. Unlike their private experiences, the behavior of such persons is publicly observable. Indeed, highly acclaimed persons from various spiritual paths tend to become widely known, often attract followers, become objects of biographies, and commonly become targets of critical assessment. We shall describe some such persons in Chap. 9 in this book. Presently, we may examine some traditional accounts of the characteristics of self-realized persons described in classical sources.

2.11 Self-realization

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is a widely available text that describes (in Chap. 2, stanzas 54–72) how a person who has settled in the highest stage of *samādhi* (*samādhistha*) “walks and talks.” The main characteristic of such a person is described as “being firmly founded in wisdom” (*śhītāprajñā*). Second, such a person must have given up all worldly desires, and found a profound source of satisfaction in the depth of her own inner self. Such a person remains unruffled in the midst of situation that would normally cause despair or elation in ordinary persons. Being desireless would make a person fearless and also indifferent to alluring prospects. It is so because one who is not expecting to defeat a revenge-seeking enemy need not be afraid of a possible strike, and one would not care less about windfall profits in a bull market if one is happy with simple living without lots of luxurious possessions. Such a person need not make friends in high places or ingratiate with them, nor need to hate anybody. The key to attaining such a state of equanimity, it is suggested, is to withdraw attention inward, rather than focus on objects of pleasure and make emotional investment in them. For, if one becomes seriously interested in objects of pleasure, one can become obsessed with the idea of possessing them; and an obsessed mind loses a sense of proportion, can get frustrated, and frustration leads to anger opening the door for ruin. By contrast, a person who keeps her pleasure seeking senses under firm reign can afford to take normal ups and downs in life in her stride and maintain peace and calm. Such a person does not feel excessive pride and completely rids herself of a narrow sense of ego and egotism. Overcoming the boundaries of a narrow ego implies the dawning of selflessness and manifesting limitlessly compassionate behavior (altruism). The *Bhagavad Gītā* (in Chap. 12, stanzas 13–19) gives a very similar description of the behavior of saints who may have become totally immersed themselves in celestial love of the divine, suggesting that there are various ways that may lead to such an ideal state of living.

Here one may ask, is this simply an imaginary account of a possible case, or is it manifest in the real life of any persons? The answer lies in the life histories of saints in various traditions around the world. At the dawn of modern psychology one of its founders, William James, recognized the importance of saintliness, and noted the following characteristics of saintliness recognized in the Western tradition:

A feeling of being in wider life than that of this world’s selfish little interests... An immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the conflicting selfhood melt down... [T]he saint finds positive pleasure in sacrifice and asceticism... The sense of enlargement of life may be so uplifting that personal motives and ambitions, commonly omnipotent, become too insignificant for notice... Fears and anxieties go, and blissful equanimity takes their place. (James 1901–1902/1958, pp. 216–217)

The parallel between the *śhītāprajñā* described in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and James’s account of saintliness should be clear. Such a state is not restricted to a culture or a tradition; it seems to result from so many different ways to spiritual uplift resulting in overcoming of narrow ego and manifesting compassionate

behavior. In explaining the nature of *nirvāṇa*, the well-known Buddhist scholar La Vallée Poussin (1917), for instance, says that to attain *nirvāṇa* “is to become a Saint, an Arhat, free from sorrow, hope, and fear” (p. 139). To realize the truth of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self would mean losing one’s ego, but despite all the doctrinal differences between Buddhism and the Advaita, the latter’s goal of merging *ātman* in the *paramātmān* would *also* mean losing one’s ego. In either case, the result of the long march to the highest goal appears to be the manifestation of saintliness in behavior.

After describing the manifestations of the behavior in the lives of several saints, James (1901–1902/1958) goes on to write a separate chapter focused on critically judging the *value* of saintliness. While recognizing that some great saints attract followers who go on to start institutions with corporate ambitions resulting in “hypocrisy, tyranny and meanness” (p. 262), James proceeds to conclude that “the saintly group of qualities is indispensable to the world’s welfare” (p. 290). Such indulgence in a discussion of values has all but disappeared from modern psychology as the enthusiasm grew over the years to build a value-free science of psychology. As the twenty-first century starts unfolding, however, there is perceptible thaw in icy cold response of psychologists to value-loaded topics such as saintliness contaminated by their association with religion. An indication of this is that a well-known psychologist like Paul Ekman is engaged in a serious discussion with Dalai Lama, responding to the latter’s appeal for finding ways to overcome the obstacles to enhancing compassion (Ekman 2008).

Concluding this chapter, it would be useful to briefly consider the ideal of self-actualization which is reflected in modern psychology primarily through the work of Maslow (1970). The concept of self-actualization, has a long history in Western thought; it goes back to Aristotle. In Nichomachean Ethics, he defines the good as the activities in which the life functions specific to human beings are most fully realized. Happiness is attained when one uses her abilities to their fullest potential. He gives the example of a harpist who would be happiest if he excels at the art of playing the harp (Aristotle 1985, p. 17). In presenting his views of self-actualization, Maslow (1971, p. 133) clearly follows in the tradition of Aristotle giving explicit reference to Aristotle. Maslow’s examples of self-actualized persons involves highly accomplished persons including a couple of American heroes (Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson), a great scientist (Einstein), some great thinkers (Spinoza, William James, Aldous Huxley), and a couple of highly respected women (Eleanor Roosevelt, Jane Adams), and a saintly artist-cum-doctor (Albert Schweitzer). Looked at from Coan’s (1977) typology of hero, artist, sage, and saint, Maslow’s view of self-actualized persons presents a mixed bag. This is understandable since there is no reason for either cultures, or ideals they cherish, to fit into single little categories. However, as an overall estimate of ideals more commonly presented in traditional Indian and modern Western psychologies, some general observations may be made.

It appears that by and large modern Western psychology has highly valued the actualization of potentials through a process of growth indicating continual change for something better in one form of human endeavor or other. Note that aside from

Maslow's views just presented, Carl Rogers speaks of the "fully functioning person" as an ideal. The word "becoming" in the title of his book *On Becoming a Person* (Rogers 1961) indicates an emphasis on the process of continual change for better. Human life is viewed as a process of continuing *evolution*. "Evolving self" is the title of at least two books (Kegan 1982; Csikszentmihalyi 1993). Kegan uses the metaphor of the spiral to indicate how a new round of change builds on top of a previous round and the spiral continues. Erikson (1982), who presents a most elaborate model of human development spanning from cradle to the grave, emphasizes the continual and unending change explicitly saying that the sense of self is forever revisable. Further, Csikszentmihalyi (1991) emphasizes that when a person's activities remain in an uninterrupted flow, then the experience becomes naturally enjoyable. In contemporary Western psychology, the emphasis is clearly on becoming (rather than one's Being), which implies that one always tries to become different from what one currently is. The reason to point out the overall focus on change is to point out a contrast with Indian psychology where we encounter a persistent emphasis on being; there is a serious attempt to find out what there is within oneself that was there in the past, which there is at present, and will remain so forever in the future. The concepts of *samādhi*, *kaivalya*, or *nirvāṇa*, all are suggestive of an attainment of a stable state or *stasis*, a final position of rest from which one need not move, expecting some kind of change for better.

Psychology in the Indian Tradition

Rao, K.R.; Paranjpe, A.C.

2016, XVII, 387 p. 3 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-81-322-2439-6