

Psychology in India and the predicament of scientific Indian psychology: empirical report and analysis

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ABSTRACT

The nexus between culture and mental health is an undeniable experience in every society. This nexus is more pronounced as a predicament in India. It is because the Western psychological theories accepted and taught in India neither help to understand nor explain the behaviour of people. This problem has been pinpointed by prominent psychologists long back. As a result, they proposed Indian psychology as a solution. This proposed Indian psychology seeks the ancient philosophical and religious writings for every modern-day problem. Many psychologists in India accept this inadequate approach scrupulously. Psychology aspirants too reiterate this view indiscriminately. This incongruous situation of Indian psychology is identical to Western psychology in the pre-Wundt era that circled around Christian theology and Greek philosophy with little scientific orientation. The ancient philosophies and religious dogmas were meaningful when society and social living were entirely different. However, they do not reflect the social living today to offer scientific solutions to modern-day problems. Therefore, the prevailing model of Indian psychology that lingers around ancient knowledgebase is very much questionable. This qualitative study explores this dilemma of Indian psychology's slant with unscientific, spiritual, sectarian knowledgebase and raises a clarion call for scientific Indian psychology.

Keywords: *Indian psychology, Hindu spiritual psychology, Scientific Indian psychology, Indian philosophy as psychology, Indigenous Indian psychology.*

Human behaviour is exhibited and executed in the cultural context of people. This influx of culture is ingrained in the psyche to define health, sickness, and its cure. Also, actions or beliefs that are considered normal in one culture may be labelled as abnormal in another culture. Therefore, the definition and classification of mental disorders change as the social norms change (Ramsden, 2013). Historically, the causes and cures of mental illness are viewed primarily from a religio-magical model and in some cases, from a spiritual model. These models attribute mental illness to possession by devils, human and divine curses, the interference of spirits, witchcraft, or sorcery, and even sin and crime. 18th-century scientific developments and rational thinking in Europe paved the way for identifying biological causes of mental illness. Despite this global scientific progression, the

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Received: January 08, 2021; Revision Received: February 18, 2021; Accepted: March 03, 2021

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scenario is far from scientific in many cultures (Butcher, Mineka, & Hooley, 2013). The cultures in Africa believe that mental illness is caused by supernatural forces (Igberase & Okogbenin, 2017). Religions in India that believe in reincarnation and the karma philosophy (Buddhism, Jainism, and some forms of Hinduism) attribute the cause of mental illness to sins committed in past lives or births (Dasgupta, 1975; Shweder, 1991). Some Vietnamese cultures perceive mental illness as caused by spirit possession, black magic, and astrological misalignments (Nguyen, 2003). In the Philippines, the Cordillera indigenous people attribute illnesses to influence of spirits, mainly malevolent spirits (Janetius, 2015). Exorcism (chasing an evil spirit) is one of the popular practices in Europe under the patronage of Christianity (Freze, 2016; Young, 2016; Carlin, 2018). In India, even today, almost all religions invariably associate mental disorders with religion.

Since biological and psychological activities were identified as the leading cause of mental illness, psychiatry and clinical psychology came to spotlight. After the Second World War, when positive mental health received prominence, counselling psychology emerged as a formidable force. Such (counselling) practices were traditionally used in every community by indigenous healers (Gielen, Fish, & Draguns, 2004; Moodley, Gielen, & Wu, 2013; Janetius & Mini, 2015b). In the last fifty to sixty years, besides the fields of psychiatry and clinical psychology, many other subfields surfaced employing evidence-based therapy models.

Western theories Vs culture-specific approach

Nearly 77% of the world's population live in Asia and Africa, and they rely primarily on Euro-American concepts to explain their behaviours. This reveals two things: one, lack of culture-specific theories; two, many Euro-American scholars prefer their ideas and concepts to be accepted universally irrespective of cultural variations. In this situation, it is a constant struggle for culture-specific psychology to evolve as a decisive force. The different specialities in cultural studies (cultural psychology, cross-cultural psychology, indigenous psychology) though overlap in their pursuits, contribute to the knowledgebase with confusion and conflicts because of a lack of unity among psychologists or inconsistency in their approaches. Absolutism, Universalism, and Relativism are the popular approaches taken by psychologists in applying theories.

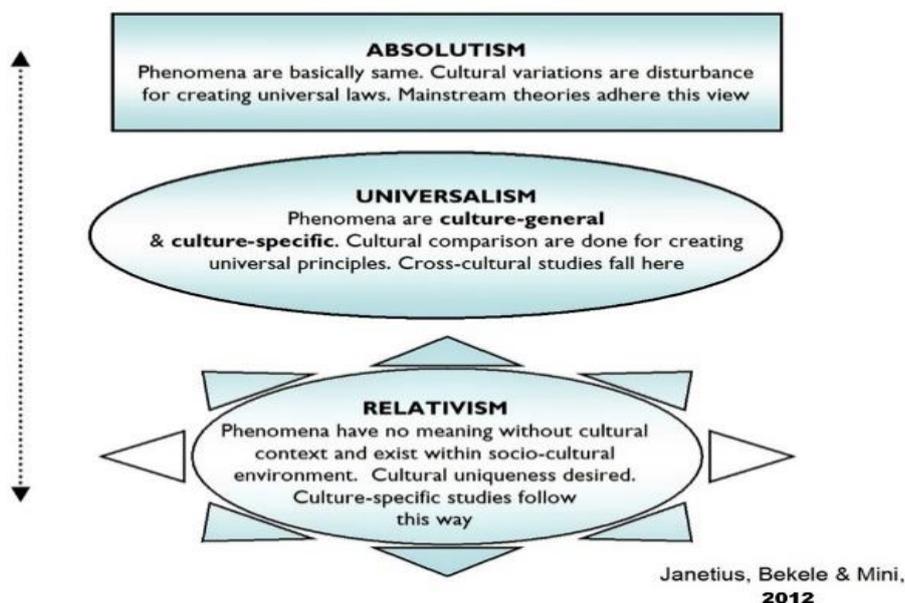


Fig. 1: Orientation in studying culture

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Absolutism asserts that phenomena are the same and views various variations as a hindrance for creating universal laws. As Adamopoulos and Lonner (1994) point out, “true human nature will emerge when external, nuisance variables, such as cultural norms and expectations, ideologies, and so on, are sufficiently removed”. Universalism views phenomena as both culture-general and culture-specific. Many cross-cultural psychologists adhere to this approach with a little acceptance of cultural variance. Lastly, human behaviour is determined by socio-cultural and historical factors, according to relativism. Phenomena exist within a socio-cultural environment, and it has no meaning in the absence of cultural context (Gergen, 1982). Cultural relativism leads to culture-specific approaches. However, due to emphasis on absolutism and universalism, relativism is ignored in Asia and Africa. The popular diagnostic manuals DSM-5 and ICD-11 although highlight the importance of culture, there still exists an inevitable tension between the local cultures and universal classification.

Indian Psychology

Indian society is at a crossroads today. There are moves from many quarters to rewrite the history to safeguard the lost pride of India. Though this move silently started long back, due to political security in the recent years, it has taken a gigantic stride. The colonisers developed a damaging impression of India as a land of savages. Due to this erroneous idea, besides looting the wealth, the colonisers started to think that they must educate the people. These repeated thinking and acting of colonisers led to the intense inferior feeling in the Indian psyche, both among intellectuals and ordinary citizens. Due to this psychological condition, a nationalistic concept started to spread in every sphere with political backing. The notion of polarisation that a person who is not a Hindu is an anti-national slowly began to spread. National security, territorial integrity, one nation-one culture concepts are originating from this backdrop. The initiatives taken for developing Indian psychology are not free from this nationalistic ideology, and it needs to be understood from this historical background of the Indian psyche.

Indian culture-specific approach to psychology started as early as the first half of the 20th century. It originated as ‘Indian psychology’ by Jadunath Sinha (1892-1978), a philosophy graduate and a lecturer with a blatant philosophical dependence (Sinha, 1956, 1986). The philosophical slanting of Sinha is evident from his plagiarism accusation against Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan who allegedly stole the first two parts of Sinha’s thesis titled “Indian Psychology of Perception” and published as Indian philosophy (Aich, 2016; Venkatesh, 2018). From this unfortunate scrambling in the 1920s, Indian psychology never became an independent scientific pursuit; instead, it is begging at the doors of philosophy for its entire quest. A good number of prominent psychologists, as well as psychology aspirants in India, honestly believe that Indian psychology is exploring its past glories of the ancient philosophical and Hindu religious writings (Rao, 1962; Safaya, 1975; Sinha, 1986; Kuppaswamy, 1993; Paranjpe, 1998; Rao, Paranjpe & Dalal, 2008; Dalal, 2010; Sinha, Mishra and Dalal, 2015; Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). Thus, the pursuit for culture-specific scientific Indian psychology missed its objectives down through the centuries. Similar attempts for sectarian Islamic psychology have been made in India and abroad (Vahab, 1996; Haque, 2004; Siddiqui & Malek, 1996). Integrating Sufism and psychology is also done as creating Islamic psychology (Avery, 2004; Spiegelman, 1991; Mitha, 2019). Buddhist psychology is also popular among some circles (De Silva, 1991; Anacker, 1984). Christian psychology or Biblical psychology based on Biblical theology and Christian

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writings are prevalent in some countries (Dansby, 2019; Roberts & Talbot, 1997; Chambers, 1995).

In the recent past, a proposal was presented by the participants of a National Conference on Yoga and Indian Approaches to Psychology as ‘Pondicherry Manifesto of Indian Psychology’ (Cornelissen, 2002). “Indian psychology is a distinct psychological tradition that is rooted in Indian ethos and thought, including the variety of psychological practices that exist in the country” - defines the manifesto (Cornelissen, 2002). This initiative sounds more like spiritual, religious psychology than scientific Indian psychology per se, old wine in new wineskins.

The problem with many scholars who exert their efforts in defining Indian psychology is that they magnify some selected ancient mystical, mythological and puranic cosmological thoughts and religio-philosophical systems as glorified scientific psychological knowledge and evade from providing practical and pragmatic principles guiding to comprehensive concepts as per the emerging worldview in the changing society. Therefore, Indian psychology remains a primordial, intuitive, unscientific thought pattern of bundled subjective assumptions and metaphysical assertions of a particular religion, eluding concrete empirical investigation. To overcome this erroneous approach Indian psychology should focus more on developing local theories without any hindrance from religion and ancient abstract philosophy.

Objective

The objective of this study is to: 1). To highlight the nature of psychology in India; 2). To analyse its appropriateness and accomplishment of psychology in India in solving the modern-day behavioural issues.

METHODOLOGY

This is a two-part qualitative research that describes the phenomenon of Indian psychology. The first part of the study (in the year 2011) identified the difficulties of doing therapeutic counselling (Janetius, 2011). Besides using that data, 63 subjects participated in the current study (42 psychology PG and UG students and 21 psychologists). The authors conducted guided interviews among psychologists and focus group discussion among students. Using accepted qualitative protocols content analysis was done to arrive at meaningful categories and themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study results identify three main categories. 1) *The narrow concept of mental illness*, 2) *The understanding of Indian psychology*, and 3) *The hurdles for scientific Indian psychology*. The discussion part explains the three above groupings in smaller themes.

1) *The narrow concept of mental illness:* One of the main themes that evolved from the interview and focus group discussion is the simplified concept of mental illnesses in India. The simplified understanding arises due to the lesser knowledge of the different subfields of psychology. Clinical psychology and psychiatry have occupied a centre stage, and other vital subfields of psychology are not fully recognised or accepted. Many students of counselling psychology feel a kind of identity crises while mingling with psychiatrists and clinical psychologists. Counselling as a therapeutic approach towards mental health is not understood fully by psychiatrists, clients, and the Indian government. For simple issues like

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sleeping problems, depression, anger management, etc., the solution is visiting a psychiatrist and popping pills. The following diagram depicts the different subfields of psychologists.

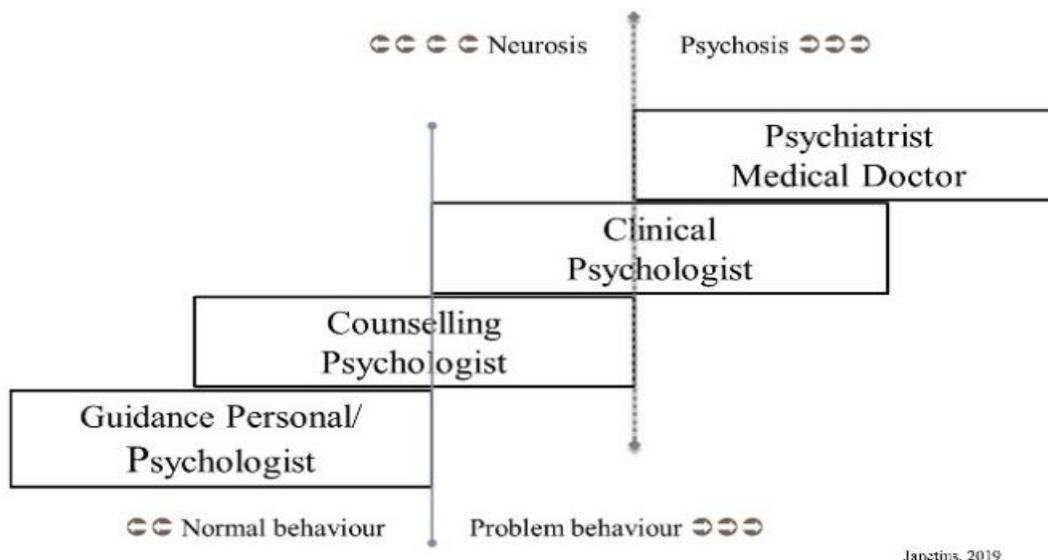


Fig. 2: Depicting different fields of psychology related to mental health

The recent Mental Health Act of India-2017 highlights the dignity of mentally ill people, but it focuses on the medical model and highlights clinical psychology and psychiatry. It reflects a poor understanding of mental health in India. The prevention of mental illnesses and promotion of wellbeing that is mostly done by counsellors and other professionals are rarely accepted. The over-reliance on Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) as a licensing authority for all mental health concerns neglects various psychology professionals such as counselling psychologists, child psychologists, vocational and organizational psychologists, life coaches etc. Indian psychology and the focus on mental health needs to be freed from the clinical model. It is not only those who have disorders that need mental health assistance but also every person with daily life challenges. Therefore, depression, stress and anxiety, developmental needs, adjustment issues, life goal setting, career confusion, vocational guidance and so on are different mental health problems which are ignored and neglected in India.

Industrial psychology is yet another poorly understood area in India. The overemphasis on Business management and the study of HR in Masters in Business Management (MBA) has caused the disappearance of industrial psychology and its importance. Also, the MBA students with HR specialty lack in basic knowledge of human behaviour and personality dynamics.

2) Indian psychology today: In its current form (though often claimed as a scientific study), Indian psychology remains in a dubious scientific realm. Though many senior psychologists talk about indigenous psychology and claim that they have made a breakthrough in preparing Indian psychology, the proposed solution, is an antiquated blend of philosophy, theology, cosmology, and mythology of ancient Indian living. It could be called Indian spiritual psychology that is pleasing to the traditional Hindus rather than scientific psychology for every Indian to embrace.

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This situation and the pursuit of Indian psychology in the ancient Indian (Hindu) traditions are like Western psychology in the pre-Wundt era. Western psychology had its origin from the ancient Greek philosophy of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. In the medieval period, it was nourished by various European philosophers and the Christian theology of Aquinas. By establishing the world's first experimental psychology laboratory at Leipzig, Wilhelm Wundt gave a scientific outlook to psychology in 1879 and, liberated it from the clutches of metaphysical assumptions and abstract philosophical speculations. The Russians too had their share through the experiments of Ivan Pavlov. These initiatives produced some serious, systematic, and fundamental changes in the scope, outlook and the nature of psychology which elevated the human behavioural study on par with other empirical sciences. Unfortunately, this has not taken place in the Indian subcontinent yet.

The compilation of writing on psychology in India, an initiative by Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) reveals that Indian traditional philosophical thinking or selected quotes from the Hindu holy books are referred as Indian Psychology (Kumar, 2006). The philosophical concepts of Vedanta, Samkhya, Yoga are explored and researched over and over to have a psychological theory, to counter Western psychology, thinking that they give psychological solution to modern-day problems. Sometimes the philosophy of Buddhism and Jainism are also added in the pursuit. Of course, religious texts provide solace to the people of that religion and people who adhere to that faith, just as any other spiritual psychology but one cannot claim that as scientific Indian psychology. Due to its undue dependence on ancient religio-philosophical doctrines, it can be very well called Indian Spiritual Psychology, not Scientific Indian psychology. It is the right time to think about whether India needs spiritual psychology or scientific psychology.

3) Hurdles for scientific Indian psychology: The study identifies three hurdles. 1) The indigenous Indian psychology initiatives are based on ancient values of one religion and do not reflect the cultural, philosophical situation of present Indian society, 2) lack of initiatives to induce critical thinking among students, 3) the polarising religiopolitical pressure groups perpetuating unscientific and mythological assertions.

India is a pluralistic society filled with cultural variations. It has many religions, ethnic groups and has an extraordinarily complex cultural identity. Indian culture is not a sole product of Hindu religion maligned by Islamic or Western Christian cultural influences, as understood by some sectarian authors (Goel, 1996; Malhotra, 2011). What is lived now is the fusion that occurred at regular intervals due to many impactful historical phenomena, mainly religiopolitical. The great Indian psyche today probably carries the remnants of the following elements- The ancient Indus Valley Civilisation in the North and Keeladi-Vaigai Valley Civilisation in the South, remnants of Aryan invasion, components of Agnostic revolt against the ritualistic Hinduism in the form of Jainism and Buddhism, fragments of atheistic and agnostic Indian traditional philosophical groups; the caste-based religious dogmas, the settlement of Jewish merchants, the early Christian communities (as early as the 1st century in the Malabar and Konkan coast) and their unique lifestyle, Shaivite-Vaishnavite doctrinal differences, Arian and Dravidian racial, cultural differences, Mughal rule and the syncretism of Islamic culture, the Zoroastrian Parsee community and the cultural integration, colonial powers of Europe and Britain and the Christian mission, the unique cultures of North-East to add few more - all tell the tale of the present Indian complex worldview. Thus, today India stands as a pluralistic society with a union of multicultural elements, racial and religious and linguistic intermingling (Nandrajog, 2020). The periodical cultural fusion or cultural

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evolution (call it syncretism, acculturation, accumulation) has not eliminated one or other earlier cultural elements rather they have been added to or replaced the previous ones over time (Janetius, 2017).

Added to this cultural amalgamation, the global culture that is seen in mass media, social networks, and multinational establishments have created a complex worldview in India. Therefore, the modern Indian mind is miles away from Puranas, Vedas and Vedanta, Samkhya and many more philosophies and religious thinking of ancient India. The sensual-materialistic life has reached the remotest rural communities, and the younger generation runs berserk falsifying and dethroning the past values (Janetius, 2017). By unearthing ancient religious and philosophies for applicable psychology, many scholars ignore the cultural fusion in India. The fusion has become a unique part of the Indian psyche today. Therefore, Indian psychology, as it is understood today, alienates itself from the daily life struggles of people, become powerless to provide pragmatic solutions.

Another reason identified by the respondents for the stunted growth of scientific psychology in India is the inadequacy of the current educational system in implanting critical thinking amongst students. Obedience towards parents/teachers (Mata, Pita, Guru, Deivam concept) reflected in the collectivistic nature inhibits and even forbids questioning attitude among pupils to some extent. Added to that, negligence from the part of policymakers caused the continuance of the outdated educational system post-independence. Despite the meagre periodical changes by the state and central governments, the educational system is plagued by a dearth of critical reasoning, rational inquisitiveness, and scientific scepticism.

Indian education is excessively examination centric rather than outcome-based or skills-based approaches (Janetius & Mini, 2015a). One of the main issues related to the quality of education is academic freedom. The external interferences from government bodies and other religiopolitical pressure groups are strong enough to the extent of withdrawing textbooks to suit specific ideology, and intolerance in accepting views of renowned authors is a common occurrence (Tierney & Sabharwal, 2016; Joseph, 2017). Besides curriculum, selection and appointment of top-level posts in the academic institutions are stained by favouritism and nepotism; creamy institutions are headed by and controlled by bureaucrats (Gusaiwal, 2020). All these negatives of Indian education are reflected in the low score in the global academic ranking (Redden, 2020). The National Education Policy 2020 released recently by the Indian government to update the education scenario, though sounds optimistic, needs time to see its implementation and outcome (Kalyani, 2020).

Critical thinking, creativity, and a healthy dose of scepticism among academia can liberate Indian psychology from its abstract and unscientific form. For example, on close examination of the four ashramas of the ancient and medieval India, which is regarded as one of the best practices of ancient India with all-time value, reflects a patriarchal society with submissive women, not a present India amid globalisation. Such a system is outdated, invalid and inaccurate in explaining the life situation of present educated Indian working women and families. Encouraging such a practice today would give the impression that India is a deeply sexist and misogynistic society. To develop critical thinking among students, removing cultural remnants of Mughals, Islam, Christian or Europe from school textbooks and highlighting ancient religious concepts is not a solution; it only paves the way for polarisation.

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The scientific pursuit of yesteryears is slowly vanishing in recent times in India. The erroneous assertion that ancient Indians were adept at IVF, stem cell technology, plastic surgery, aircraft manufacturing during Ramayana, weapons of mass destruction during the period of Vedas, imagined medicinal elements in cow and its urine etc., are commonly heard from scientific forums and people holding positions of power and influence (Thapar, 2014; Lakshmi, 2015; Vyas, 2017; Ramesh, 2018; Khaira, 2019; Sharma, 2019). Psychology as a science is a unifying factor which falls under the influence of caste-based, religion-based, occasionally region and language centric pressure groups. Even a committee that was formed by the Ministry of Culture to study the origin and evolution of Indian culture dating back to around 12,000 years has its controversy (Nayar, 2020). Therefore, the glorification of religio-philosophical thinking continues without scientific-inquisitive orientation. Indian minds need a paradigm shift towards a scientific approach.

Some recommendations

1. Indian psychology should be freed from the clutches of philosophy, mythology, religion, and spiritual contexts and be founded on a scientific framework to understand the Indian psyche in its culturally relevant context.
2. Indian psychologists should free themselves from the undue preoccupation with the past glories of cognitive fallacies. Instead of defending that all the answers are available in the culturally outdated unscientific work of yore, develop scientific theories for modern living.
3. India needs psychology to understand the behaviour of its different people from diverse cultures. Thus, theories explaining psychosocial and cognitive developments that would help in assessment need to evolve based on scientific research.
4. A central Scientific Indian psychology association/organisation which is free from religious and political affiliations and influence must be created. Such a central body should regulate licensing for Indian psychologists of all subfields and disciplines, replacing Rehabilitation Council of India.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the status of psychology in India and the understanding of Indian Psychology in its present form amongst psychologists and psychology aspirants. Indian psychology in the current framework is not capable of describing, explaining, predicting, and modifying the human behaviour and mental process of Indian minds scientifically in the current cultural context. Most of the leading Indian psychologists are obsessed with Indian philosophical concepts and Hindu religious writings. Therefore, what they propose is nothing more than Indian spiritual psychology, or Hindu psychology. It does not apply to all the people living in India due to its sectarian nature. Lack of critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, scientific scepticism, and academic freedom in the educational system become hindrances for scientific Indian Psychology. In addition to that, the Indian mental health scenario is marred by inadequate understanding of mental health with an overemphasis on clinical psychology and psychiatry that neglects many other meaningful subfields of psychology. India lacks a central governing body for licensing all the subfields of psychology, a unified governing body for authorizing and approving the subfields of psychology is expected by many psychologists in the study. Thus, the present study critically analyses the various aspects that linger around psychology in India so that a globally accepted Indian psychology could evolve in the future.

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Acknowledgement

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Janetius S.T. & Nath A.R. (2021). Psychology in India and the predicament of scientific Indian psychology: empirical report and analysis. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 9(1), 329-339. DIP:18.01.037/20210901, DOI:10.25215/0901.037