

Case Study

## Ancient Indian Scriptures and Modern Psychology: A Case Study on Patanjali's Yoga Sutra

Varun Yadav<sup>1\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to highlight parallels between an ancient Indian scripture, Yoga Sutras, and major concepts of modern psychology. As modern-day science developed and examined teachings of ancient cultures and knowledge traditions, explanations of the complex phenomenon across disciplines were discovered. From natural sciences to social sciences, discoveries in these texts have proved that ancient wisdom remains relevant and crucial in the pursuit of knowledge. Similarly, human psychology has also been examined in Yoga Sutras, believed to have been written in the 2nd century BCE. Yoga Sutras is not merely a commentary, but a complete guide to psychological well-being. A fragment of Yoga Sutras, Vinyasa Yoga, has been adopted as a lifestyle of millions across the world today. However, systematic study of these scriptures requires the educational institutions to recognize them as foundational works. Therefore, this paper also proposes recognition of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras as the first psychological treatise.

**Keywords:** Ancient Indian Scriptures, Modern Psychology, Patanjali's Yoga Sutra

Patanjali is believed to have contributed to Yoga Sutras, the earliest textbook on Yoga, in the 2nd century BCE. Patanjali, an ancient Indian sage also known as *Gonardiya* or *Gonikaputra* is considered to be not the only author of the Sutras. Therefore, Yoga Sutras may even go further back to 4000 years. But until the timeline is confirmed, we are left with practical and method-oriented psychological material which is still much older than William James's (1890) "The Principles of Psychology".

The western empiricist attitude has almost obsessed with differentiating sources of knowledge - physical/metaphysical. The Indian knowledge tradition, however, encourages an integrative approach to the acquisition of knowledge. In other words, it seems more reasonable to believe that the human psyche is a culmination of both the physical and metaphysical components of existence.

Due to the discontentment with the 'hyper-empirical' medical model of psychiatry, the discipline of Psychology emerged. The earliest psychologists believed that an individual cannot be viewed as a mere "problem". Instead, there are biological, genetic, environmental,

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Lucknow, India

\*Corresponding Author

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social, economic, and philosophical dimensions of his personality that must be taken into consideration. Only then the psychological problem can be accurately identified.

In a 2019 study at the University of Liverpool, Allsopp, et al. found that psychiatric diagnoses represent 'a disingenuous categorical system'. Professor John Read, one of the researchers, said, "Perhaps it is time we stopped pretending that medical-sounding labels contribute anything to our understanding of the complex causes of human distress or of what kind of help we need when distressed."

The Yoga Sutras, on the other hand, not only view humans in their completeness but also goes beyond. This ancient scripture, which must now be formally reinstated in academia as the first psychological treatise, provides a rather deep explanation of the psychological condition of human life. It also lays down the methodology of treating the mind and highlights the importance of freedom from, what we may call, psychopathologies.

The second aphorism of the Samadhi Pada states, "*Yogash chitta vritti nirodhah*", or, "Yoga is restraining the mental material (*chitta*) from taking various forms (*vrittis*) (Vivekananda, 2021, p.2). This aphorism explains the process of perception. That is, there is first the instrument (eg. eyes), then the organ (eg. visual cortex), and then the mind (eg. information processing). Furthermore, with our determinative faculty (*Buddhi*) we react. To avoid confusion, we may separate the autonomous or the involuntary reactions. The voluntary actions are constituted by waves of thoughts (*vrittis*). Therefore, *chittavritti* means psychological disturbances. The major highlight of this particular aphorism, according to Vivekananda, is that what we witness as reality is nothing but a reaction of the mind to the suggestion of the external world. Thus, our *vrittis* become our perceived reality.

The ninth aphorism states that "*Shabda gyaana anupati*". It means that "Verbal delusions follow from words having no corresponding reality (Vivekananda, 2021, p.10). In simpler terms, when a speech is uttered, we barely wait to consider its meaning. Instead, we quickly jump to a conclusion. A parallel can be drawn between this aphorism and cognitive biases as explained by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman in the early 1970s. Specifically, we can associate this tendency with availability heuristics and confirmation bias. Such disorganized speech is also characteristic of Disorganized Schizophrenia (Hebephrenia) where an individual commits finds it difficult to maintain a coherent chain of thought.

The eleventh aphorism states that "*Anubhoota vishay asanpramoshah smritih*". It means that "Memory is when the (*vrittis* of) perceived subjects do not slip away (and through impressions, come back to consciousness)" (Vivekananda, 2021, p.11). This aphorism has pointed out the disadvantage of memory. In cognitive terms, memory serves as an important function that facilitates learning and exercising consistent behavior. However, Vivekananda views memory as *vritti*. Furthermore, he explains that dreams also occur due to disturbance caused by memories. A fairly new hypothesis in cognitive neuroscience tries to credit the association between sleep and dreams with memory consolidation (Diekelmann & Born, 2010, pp. 114-126).

The twelfth aphorism states, "*Abhyasa vairagy abhyas tan nirodhah*". This means that "Their (*vrittis*) control is by practice and non-attachment" (Vivekananda, 2021, p.11). Here, Vivekananda points out habit formation and the concept of '*samskaras*' or impressions. Frequently repeated action is a habit. The concept of personality also resonates with this aphorism as our character is the total of these habits. This aphorism implies that irrational

thoughts must be controlled before they take shape of a habit, or worst, psychopathology. The principal objective, in fact, of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is to replace undesirable behavior with desirable behavior. John Kabat-Zinn (1979) developed a program called, "Mindfulness-based stress reduction" (MBSR)". This program was later integrated with cognitive therapy by Segal, Williams, and Teasdale (2000).

The fifteenth aphorism states, "*Drisht anushravika vishaya vitrishnnasy samgya vairagyam*" (Vivekananda, 2021, p.13). "That effort (continuously restraining *vrittis*), which comes to those who have given up their thirst after objects either seen or heard and which wills to control the objects, is non-attachment". It is renunciation, according to Vivekananda, that is the most desirable mental strength against the unending psychological urges. A non-attached attitude would prevent us from acting at our whim and causing disorder, rendering destabilization of our psychological condition. Based on the Big Five personality theory, Kotov, et al., (2010) amongst other researchers, suggested that extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness appear to increase with age whereas neuroticism and openness decrease after mid-life. These changes are associated with increased stability in relationships, success at work, better health, reduced risk of criminality and mental health problems, and even, mortality. This pattern of the positive average change in personality is called the "maturity principle of adult personality development" (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005).

Combined with the Yoga Sutra as the theory, Patanjali proposed the Eight-limbed process called Ashtanga Yoga, the practicum. Out of 196 Yoga Sutras, this article has drawn parallels between only five aphorisms and concepts of modern psychology. This age-old text contains an immense value for the discipline of modern psychology. But it would be essential to recognize the Yoga Sutras as the first psychological work, especially by Indian psychologists.

Since its conception, Indian psychology has struggled for its unique identity and a sense of utility. The knowledge traditions of every civilization serve its people best, for the challenges faced by the civilization are unique. For the same reason, the traditional wisdom left behind by the ancestors must be preserved and utilized for the betterment of the indigenous societies. Moreover, given that Indian traditions are universal and inhibit none to benefit from their richness, could be incorporated into modern science with due credit.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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