

## Mental Wellbeing in Ancient India

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**Introduction - Introduction:** It is said that in India, study of psychology started since 1857, in Calcutta University. This statement is not completely true as it was the study of western form of psychology. India has always a clear vision on mental activities as *Chitta Vratti*.

Indian thought is not only rich in describing the metaphysical but also in psychological aspects. Numerous valuable insights about this topic are found as early as from the Vedic times to *Bhatikal sants*. Each school of philosophy, medicine, aesthetics etc., developed its own theory of mind. Mind which is addressed as *Man or Manas* in Indian Wisdom. The term "mind" is not a suitable representative of man's insight. The term 'mind' is limited to cognition, whereas 'manas' captures cognition, emotion, and behaviour i.e. entire insight.

Study of this "*man or manas*" is known as Manovigyan or Manovijnana (*Sanskrit: मनोविज्ञानम्*). This is the science of mental states and processes of human. Some aspects of this manas or insight are studied in the modern branch of Psychology and Psychiatry.

Understanding the manas or mind, thought, actions of the sense organs and consciousness have remained as exclusive subjects and beyond the reach of common understanding. Understanding the various mental processes and managing mental health has remained a major challenge to modern scientists and doctors till this day. It is the time to reflect on the various siddhanta's and methods used by ancient seers who made unfathomable advancements in the study of consciousness and mental processes.

The source of man's insights are twofold - exploring the wonders of the world outward and the states of the mind inward. In the Vedas, the boundless diversity of nature engages attention. In the Upanishads we return inwards to explore the depths of inner world. The interest of the seers has always been in understanding and in controlling the mental processes encountered in the inward journey. The Bhartiya way of philosophic analysis started with the reflection on the inner self of man with the ultimate goal, of all mental training, being the attainment of *Moksha*.

We find that the psychological and physiological

disciplines developed in the *Upanishads*, the *Yoga* sutras, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and in the schools of Buddhism and Jainism. Practicing scholars were astonished alike at the psychosomatic views held by the great medical authorities of India, namely, Charaka and Sushruta. It has been one of the wonders in intellectual history that though there was no independent branch of study like Psychology in ancient India, the ancient thinkers had independently developed highly systematic views regarding mind and its operations, particularly with reference to mental health and well-being.

**Mental health in Ayurveda:** Ayurveda, the ancient Indian science of medicine is directed towards positive health. It aims at studying man in his social, religious, seasonal, climatic and regional environment. It is known as *Ashtanga Ayurveda* because of its eight disciplines. *Bhoot vidya*, one of them, refers to the study of psychological & emotional disorders. After studying Ayurveda in general & *Bhoot vidya* in particular, one observes that there is more emphasis on maintenance and preservation of normal physical & mental health than on the treatment of any disease or illness. Moreover, the role of life style, life goals, personality, and dietary, cultural & social habits in health is highlighted. Medications have been assigned a secondary role. We have now understood the limitations of modern medicine. Most of the illnesses except acute infections require long term treatment e.g. Diabetes, Hypertension, Cardiac disorders, Rheumatic disorders etc. It is only recently that physicians trained in modern medicine have studied the role of personality, life style, dietary & social habits in genesis & perpetuation of these disorders. One may say that ancient Indian medicine begins where modern medicine ends - when acute phase of an illness is over and efforts must be directed to maintain normal health & well being.

Patanjali has defined health as "Optimal utilization of one's physical, intellectual and emotional faculties to maintain harmony with self without undue preoccupation with the environment." This definition is easily the best among all other definitions. It takes into account capabilities of an individual and emphasizes harmony with self. It stresses to avoid undue & excessive comparison with others which is a major source of unhappiness.

Sushruta has not defined health but has elaborated certain parameters of health. They are

1. Samdosha - equilibrium of body humours,
2. Samagni - uniform healthy digestion, 3) Samadhatu - normal body tissues,
4. Malakriya - normal process of excretion and
5. Prasannatmanendriyamana - coordination of functions of body organs, mind & soul to maintain happiness.

Kapil Muni has discussed in detail the constituents of human being consisting of twenty-five elements.

1. Panchmahabhutas - the five great elements - Prithvi (Earth), Jala (Water), Vayu (Air), Akasha (Sky), and Tejas (Sun)
2. Sense Organs - Eyes, Ears, Nose, Tongue, Skin
3. Motor organs- hands, Feet, Speech, Excretory function, Reproductive function.
4. Tanmatra or perceptual processes - Vision, Hearing, Odour, Taste and Touch.
5. Directive elements - Cognitive apparatus - helps to process and appreciate experiences received through sensory organs & tanmatra. Intelligence, 'I' concept, An element which is source of all, and An element which directs, creates, maintains & organizes.

Patanjali has observed that there is a constant rhythmic interaction & harmony between all the element of mind i.e. Cognitive apparatus, psychological self, Physical self and social self. The shat ripus (six foes) - Kama (lust), Krodha (anger), Lobha (greed), Mada (Pride or aggression), Moha (desire), and Matsar (jealousy) or the primary instincts increase the vulnerability of an individual. These can be compared to the Id in Freudian terms.

India's approach to psychological support has deep cultural and spiritual foundations. The earliest forms of guidance were not structured as formal counselling as we know today, but they were embedded in the very fabric of social and spiritual life. Ancient scriptures, religious texts, and philosophical teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism laid the groundwork for what would later become a more formalised system of counselling. In the Vedic period, sages and wise men (rishis) played a role akin to modern-day counsellors. These figures, who were highly revered in Indian society, often provided counsel on a wide array of issues, including moral dilemmas, personal challenges, and even mental well-being. The advice they imparted was grounded in deep knowledge, spirituality, and a holistic understanding of human nature. One of the oldest examples of this guidance system is found in the ancient Indian texts, the Upanishads, Ramayan and the Bhagavad Gita, which provide philosophical insights into human suffering, personal growth, and self-realisation—key aspects that modern counselling seeks to address as well. The concept of "counselling" in these ancient times was deeply intertwined with ideas of self-awareness, emotional regulation, and spiritual growth. The aim was not merely to address psychological issues in isolation, but to offer advice

that helped individuals connect with their higher purpose and align with the natural order of life. This deep philosophical underpinning is continued in present time also.

In the Indian social structure, elders have long held the role of guides, providing emotional, moral, and practical counsel to the younger generation. This informal, yet integral, tradition has played a key part in sustaining mental health within communities. Counselling in traditional Indian society was often delivered by family elders, religious leaders, and community heads. These figures would offer advice on a range of issues, from marital challenges to career decisions. However, this advice was not always framed in psychological terms, but rather in ethical, spiritual, and community-focused contexts. Elders relied on their life experience and knowledge to offer solutions, often based on shared wisdom passed down through generations.

In rural areas, especially, the importance of elders as mental health guides remains significant. For many people, the first form of support comes from a trusted elder figure who offers practical advice, emotional solace, and reassurance. This communal, familial approach to counselling continues to influence the way modern therapy is practiced in India.

Even today, Indian therapists often strive to incorporate respect for the elderly and family dynamics into their counselling approaches, acknowledging the role that these figures still play in the lives of individuals seeking support. Religion and spirituality continue to have a profound impact on the counselling practices in India. While modern counselling techniques have become more secular, spiritual guidance remains a significant element for many individuals seeking help. The integration of religious or spiritual elements in counselling is not just a unique feature of India, but is deeply embedded in the cultural psyche.

In the Indian context, religious beliefs provide a framework for understanding life's challenges, offering a sense of purpose and a direction for those in emotional turmoil. The Bhagavad Gita, for example, presents Lord Krishna's advice to Arjuna on how to navigate conflict, suffering, and confusion—offering psychological insight that resonates with modern therapeutic approaches. Similarly, Buddhism's teachings on mindfulness and meditation have found their way into therapeutic practices in India, with mindfulness-based therapies becoming a popular form of treatment. In a multicultural society like India, various religious philosophies—whether Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity—inform the practice of counselling.

Many counsellors draw from these teachings to provide a more holistic, culturally relevant approach that takes into account the spiritual beliefs of the client. Therefore, in many Indian counselling settings, the blending of religious guidance and psychological support is not only accepted but encouraged, especially when the client's personal belief system is an important part of their worldview.

Thus, mental well-being had been cared in ancient India through a comprehensive approach.

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