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***Social Psychology Scenario In India, Importance of
Common Sense Understanding of Social
Phenomenon in India and Envisaging Social
Representations Theory in the Coming Times in
India***

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Purpose

The purpose is to touch upon the following:

1. The background of social psychology scenario in India
2. Problems in the way of practicing social psychology in India
3. Element of common sense in the social representations theory
4. Envisaging social representations theory getting established in coming times in India
5. Issues for common sense understanding of social phenomenon in India

1. The Background of Social Psychology in India

The concepts and principles of traditional social psychology of India were inherent in its scriptures that not only mirrored the Indian society but also prohibited models of social behaviour till the beginning of the 20th century.

Britishers supported sociological and anthropological studies and by the turn of this century these disciplines were established in the Indian academics (Dhanagare, 1985). On the other hand, social psychological research was largely ignored and did not receive the advantage of its sister disciplines.

It happened to be so, that what constituted social psychology in West, was renamed as the modern social psychology in India.

Reference: Dalal and Misra (2002). Social psychology in India: Evolution and emerging trends. In A.K. Dalal & Girishwar Misra (Eds.), *New Directions in Indian Psychology* (Vol.1: Social Psychology), New Delhi: Sage.

Social Psychology in Pre-independence India: Replicating the West

- Inspired by the work done in west, Indian psychologists tried hard to establish the identity of psychology as a ‘scientific discipline’ widening the distance between sociology and psychology even further.
- Bose (1938) in his review of work done during this time, lamented that it was mostly replication of what was being done in the West. Nevertheless, he was hopeful that, “in due time much fruitful work may be done in folk and social psychology” (p.345).
- Social psychology in pre independence time was less popular than general and clinical psychology (Ganguli, 1971).
- Barring a few experimental studies, social psychological studies were mostly logical analyses of various social phenomena.

Social Psychology in Post Independence India

Prime Minister of independent India, Nehru, envisioned adoption of Western science and technology as the best bet for rapid economic growth of India.

This encouraged wholesale import of Western science from which psychology did not remain unaffected.

Social psychologists from the psychology background worked primarily in the American tradition with emphasis on **methodological sophistication**.

It was also the time, when large number of Indian scholars went abroad for higher studies, and distinguished western scholars came to India under programs like Commonwealth and Fulbright.

For example, Gardner Murphy visited India under UNESCO plan and many Indian psychologists worked with him to understand social-psychological consequences of communal hatred (*In the Minds of Men*, Murphy 1954).

Some Topics of Interest During the Later Years of Post Independent India (1950s-1960s)

- **Social Psychology** grew in popularity during the post independence years of India (Ganguli, 1971, Rath, 1972), but later years saw rise in experimental work.
- **Prejudice, stereotypes and social attitudes** were studied using **survey** and **attitude measures**. **Knowledge, attitude and practice (KAP)** studies became very popular by 1960s (D. Sinha, 1998).
- **Attitude change** became a major topic of interest as western experience suggested close link between attitude change and desired social change for development.
- **Racial, communal and caste attitudes** became subjects of interest (Adinarayan, 1953, 1958; Anant, 1970; Rath & Sircar, 1960).
- **Group psychology** began to focus on 'group processes' after initially establishing causal relationship between the group and individual performance.
- A number of Indian psychologists were attracted by Mc Clelland's (1961) early sixties theory of **need for Achievement (n-Ach)** and even collaborated with him.

Social Psychology in the Later Years of Post Independence (till 1980s)

- Other areas of interest were **intergroup relations** (Singh, 1981), **relative deprivation** (Misra, 1982), **ingratiation** (Pandey, 1986) and **leadership** (J.B.P. Sinha, 1980).
- **Influence of social groups on individual behaviour** was investigated and effort was also made to establish **causal linkages between macro-level variables** (demographic, social and cultural) and **micro-level variables** (i.e., attitudes, feeling of deprivation).
- Studies on **ethnic identities** and **rise of the depressed classes** indicated some shift in the interest areas of social psychologists.
- However, the **“approach and methodology remained consistent with individual social psychology of the American variety”** (Dalal and Misra, 2002, p.16).

Crisis of Identity of Indian Social Psychology

Progress in **social psychological research in India**, did not show any **distinct mark of change** in terms of **context**, **method** or **ideological commitment** (Dalal and Misra, 2002). The major tendencies remained:

- (i) Understanding aspects of Indian reality through **western concepts** and **measures** (i.e., studies of prejudice, stereotypes, values, etc).
- (ii) **Crude replication** of the western studies headed to examine **consistency of conceptual linkages** or **testing predictions in different cultural settings**.

The **pattern** was to substantiate the work of a western researcher by one's own research (Dalal & Misra, 2002, p.17).

However, with the **political Independence of India**, the intellectual plane scholars tried to break away from the “apron string of the West” (D. Sinha, 1994b).

J.B.P. Sinha questioned the n-Ach theory's usefulness in India's socio-cultural and economic context (J.B.P. Sinha, 1968; J.B.P. Sinha & Pandey, 1970).

Similarly, in the area of **achievement motivation**, interest was shown in understanding the **meaning** of the concept in Indian culture (Agarwal & Misra, 1987).

Beginning of Disillusionment

By the end of 1970s, disillusionment started growing with the applicability of western theories.

There was increasing evidence that **social psychological theories** developed in the west, do not provide solution to the complex problems of social change and development in India, or for that matter, the **socio-cultural problems of the country** (Dalal & Misra, 2002; Misra & Kumar, 2011).

Reviewers (Ganguly, 1971, Krishnan, 1961; Parmeshwaran, 1978; Shastri, 1932) reiterated that the **academic training** was western oriented and lacked necessary concern to address the **Indian context** and **concepts of Indian origin**.

Indigenous Psychology

- D. Sinha (1993, 1994b, 1997) observed, that the goal of indigenization is the development of ‘appropriate psychology’ and not ‘parochial psychology.’ He gave call for ‘indigenous psychology’ with its own paradigm.
- Indigenization was the ‘process of making the discipline appropriate/suited to the socio-cultural soil of the country’ (D. Sinha, 1977, 1986, 1993). Others (Nandy, 1974; J.B.P. Sinha, 1973; Mukherjee, 1980 and Pareek, 1981) urged that scientific understanding of Indian social reality would benefit from **indigenous psychological knowledge**.
- The vast treasure of ‘**traditional psychological knowledge**’ accumulated over centuries was the source for the indigenous psychological knowledge.
- Kim (1990) defined Indigenous psychology as psychological knowledge that is: **(a) native, (b) not transported from another region, (c) is designed for its people and (d) is about understanding how the local context affects, shapes and guides psychological description, explanation and application (Kim, 1990).**

Making the Discipline Appropriate for the Socio-Cultural Context

- It was argued, **relevance of the discipline and the profession** could not be separated from the **commitment to social reality, social values, socio-cultural development and needs and problems of the country** (Pareek, 1981, p. 805).
- However, it was disturbing to see that researches originating from a genuine need (intellectual or social), from the Indian soil were limited.
- At about the same time, cross-cultural psychology pointed out the ‘mono-cultural’ nature of modern psychology and seriously challenged its claims to ‘universality.’
- Both these factors gave a thrust to the trend towards ‘indigenization.’

2. Problems in the Way of Practicing Social Psychology In India

- In general, an till date, social psychology in India remains basically concerned with **describing reality** with the **western conceptual categories** and **little concern for the cultural roots**.
- **Academic spheres, college and university teachers are not well informed about the recent voices in social psychology** and are preoccupied with text books of Euro-American origin.
- Indian psychologists have **not** made effort to **write a text book on social psychology from an Indian perspective** with an **Indian conceptual frame**.
- The **emerging trends** in social psychology have **not yet** secured a place in the **curricula** of mainstream social psychology taught in **Indian universities**.
- Only a small minority of scholars are struggling to revive and reconstruct indigenous Indian concepts. Some have tried to do this at the conceptual level while others, at an empirical level.

Lack of Update on the Rethinking Away from the Empiricist-Positivist Position

The Indian social psychology community has to be introduced to the **rethinking away from the empiricist-positivist position** and be informed that:

- Positivism is grounded in the assumption that it is possible to obtain **undisputable sense data**, and researchers can **impartially** and **decisively** capture an **external** and **independently existing reality** with **reasonable degree of certainty**.
- Under the **positivist scheme** the **knower** (subject), who is separate from the **known** (object), sets up a supposedly theory-neutral observational language (whereas, observations are theory loaded).
- Indian social psychology community has to be encouraged to give a thought to the **“shaky ground of a clear subject-object dichotomy”** seriously doubted by the post-modernists (Anand Prakash, 2011, p.229).

The Post Modernist Position: Research is a Socially Configured Process

- According to the **post modernist position** individual principles emanate from **social processes** and therefore, the **focus of analysis** ought to be the **communicative acts**, (i.e., language and social interaction) where **meaning takes shape in the 'discourse' rather than by 'labeling' of objective reality.**
- In this sense, *'knowledge' is an ongoing process of 'social construction'* rather than discovering *universally applicable absolute laws and principles.*
- **Post-modern approaches** look towards **methodologies** that allow discerning how the **definition of truth and reality** are **continually constructed, negotiated, and revised** (talk, discursive act, and texts, provide the 'data').
- **Research**, is seen as a **socially informed process** and it is argued that *reality does not exist independent of the knower and the process of knowing.*
- **Qualitative Research Methods (QRMs)** are chosen as they subscribe to a **subjective ontology** and a **constructionist, interpretive epistemology.**

Move Towards the Emerging Trends in India

Recent years have shown relative **sensitivity towards the cultural context**, and also towards the **limitation with the concepts** and the **manner in which they behave** in different cultural contexts.

There has been concern for making psychology **socially relevant** and worthy of finding solutions to problems from an Indian perspective by utilizing the untapped symbolic and behavioural cultural resources.

The **postmodernist thinking** has drawn some Indian social psychologists towards the **social representation framework** which proposes no inherent basic conflict between common sense, everyday understanding and scientific understanding.

Such a framework tries to understand **social phenomenon emerging from the language and practices of real people in real interactional/transactional contexts**.

In general, the social psychology community in India may not be fully educated about the SRs framework, nevertheless, there is huge scope for this approach in India.

3. Element of Common Sense in Social Representations Theory

Social representations theory is the **theory of common sense, every day knowledge and discourse**. Everyday thinking is down-to-earth/pragmatic and only secondarily oriented towards semantic truth.

Accordingly, the theory's framework is designed to capture the **shared common sense and every day understanding** used by people to orient themselves to their world.

Social representations may be understood under 'distributive' and 'collective' view points. The **distributive** view (Harre ,1984) refers to the '**product**' part of commonsense submitting to:

- i. **structured mental substance** (comprising of *cognitive, evaluative, affective* and *symbolic contents*) about a socially relevant phenomenon
- ii. that take the form of *images, mental connections , symbols* and *metaphors*
- iii. are **consciously shared** with the group members and
- iv. become part of the **individuals' everyday knowledge system**

Such **products** of commonsense are based on '**shared traditions**' and are enriched by many '**experiments**' and '**observations**' (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983).

The Socio-Genesis of Social Representations

Notably, the **'product'** part of common sense cannot be conceived apart from the *socio-genetic conditions of its formation*. That is, the **'product'** and **'process'** features of social representations are inseparable.

For example, on the one hand, social representation is conceived, as the *communication process* taking place in *socio-genetic conditions* (i.e., social groups), and on the other, as the **'product'** (i.e., part of individuals' everyday knowledge system) **of this process**.

In other words, the **'product'** part of common sense is collectively shared in a group/community/society or culture (Wagner, 1994, p. 199) used and talked while people 'explain familiar problems' or 'predict outcomes.'

The 'Process' Part of Common Sense

The **collective view** of social representations refers to the '**public process**' of *creation, elaboration, diffusion and change of shared knowledge* or *common sense* in everyday discourse of social groups (e.g., Doise, 1990; Ibanez, 1988; Jodelet, 1989a, Moscovici, 1984, 1988; Wagner, 1994).

Simply said, social representation is defined as the *elaborating of social object by the community* (Moscovici, 1963: p.13).

So, the common denominator of different kinds of social representations is that they are *socially elaborated* and *collectively shared*.

Common Sense For Making the Unfamiliar, Familiar

- SRs research usually starts with questions around ‘locally embedded meanings and functions’ of a phenomenon, aiming to understand how ‘common sense’ thinking is put into practice in daily life experiences.
- Moscovici (1984) makes a distinction between the ‘consensual world’ of common sense and the ‘reified world’ of the research scientist.
- Farr (1993) observes, “Once a scientific theory enters the public arena it acquires a life of its own. It is elaborated and developed in lay as well as in scientific circles. In the former it becomes a social representation; in latter it remains a theory” (p.194).
- Scientists avoid associating them selves with the popular form of knowledge of their field of expertise, fearing confusion resulting from such practices.
- Lay persons, are not trained specialists and “continue to believe in archaic notions or fail to distinguish between science and pseudo-science” (Farr, 1993, p. 192). Apparently, in lay circles, old knowledge continues to be “recycled” (Jodelet, 1991).
- However, in the ‘consensual world’ of common sense, “unfamiliar becomes familiar” through the cognitive processes of ‘anchoring’ and ‘objectification’.

Lay Explanation

- People want to make sense of their world and explain their society's problems (Hewstone, 1989). Uncovering the 'lay epistemology' (origin, nature, and limits) of societal problems is crucial for understanding our social world.
- Using SRs framework to investigate the lay explanations of the economic recession in Ireland, O' Connor (2012) refers to the *risk society* thesis of Ulrich Beck (1992).
- Accordingly, the typical problems of **risk society** features: (a) **being a global event**, (b) whose **processes are invisible**, (c) requires **specialised knowledge** for understanding its origin and development and (d) it is **difficult to pinpoint as to whose activities** (individual or group) **the problem could be attributed**.
- Apparently, these features make the crises **resistant to simple causal explanation**.
- When an issue evades **direct experience and perception**, it has to be conceptualised at an **abstract level** but now the need is to reach its **lay version** by **intercepting and analyzing the information circulating in society** concerning the object, and **sampling people's perceptions** of that object (Farr, 1993, p. 191).
- Lay explanations originate in the mass media of communication rather than specialized ways of research community, their understanding is possible through mediation of people/institutions, experts, media outlets and conversational partners. SRs approach helps reach the **lay explanation** by focussing on the constitutive role of social context and discourse.

4. Envisaging Social Representations Theory in the Coming Times in India

Social psychology in India is not yet fully awakened to the spirit of “de-individualizing” and “re-socializing” of social psychology nor have challenged the popular ‘individualistic approach to human thought.’

Only a small number of Indian social psychologists have taken the shift from *knowledge as an individual property to knowledge grounded in the inter-subjective world of a community* (Jovchelovitch, 2007).

Similarly, there is a general unawareness about the framework which offers an *integration of the social and cultural dimensions by emphasizing common sense and understandings of socially contextualized knowledge.*

Nevertheless, it is quite possible that Indian social psychology will appreciate the premise of postmodernism and the spirit of de-individualizing of social psychology in the coming years.

Envisaging Social Representations Theory in the Coming Times in India

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Leading Indian social psychologists Dalal and Misra (2002) hope that:

- Indian social psychology will attend more to the “*institutional level dynamics and the way they operate at individual level rather than vice-versa*” (p. 17).
- It is hoped that **behaviour and action of individuals** will occupy **greater space** in social psychological deliberations *as parts of the collectivity*.
- Furthermore, it is wished and expected that the focus is on *interdependence of individual and society*, rather than on *dichotomy of these two aspects* of social life (Dalal and Misra, 2002, p. 19-20).

India Could be a Promising Site for Common Sense Understanding of Social Phenomenon: 'Demonetisation' a Case in Point

- The findings of the earlier mentioned study of O' Connor (2012) impressed that while strictly economic explanations were avoided; people drew upon a wide range of ideas about society, politics, morality, public spheres and personhood.
- In India, a recent effort to promote demonetisation, and thereafter, digitalisation for establishing a cashless system, is a phenomenon that may not have simple causal explanation. The unannounced event was meant to bring about change in the financial conduct of Indians and enlighten them about its long term benefits.
- However, being 'unfamiliar' for many, and not being part of the common people's financial practice, it created 'confusion' for a big segment of the Indian population.
- Apparently, the concepts even prompted a kind of 'crisis' as not all the major financial institutions could plug the loop holes in the process of exchange of new and old currencies or foresee the practical difficulties in implementing a smooth change over.
- This was an occasion which invited '**constructing commonsense understanding**' of the matter for **establishing solid points of reference** through which these could conceptually adjust to the situation, and people could understand *where to locate them* amongst the representations whose meanings have already been negotiated.

Social Representations Approach and Methods to Find Place in Institutions of Higher Education and Research

- Huge scope waits for including social representations approach and method at the Doctoral and Masters level teaching and research at the Indian universities.
- Barring a few, researches at these levels are still a repetitive carry over of the western empiricist tradition and do not represent the 'voices' and 'shared feelings' of the social creators of their contexts.
- Further, as bulk of the university faculty remains naïve as teachers, guides and researchers, immense possibility lies for introducing the SRs approach in the agenda for resource building of the faculty and incorporating the theory into the syllabus of universities and research institutes.

5. Common Sense Understanding of Social Phenomenon in India

- India is no exception to the case where groups/communities/or cultures, engage themselves in **constructing** events and ideas (relevant and related to their **socio-cultural context**) in their **everyday activities**.
- The social world of India comprises of numerous **local and national issues of interest** whose commonsense understanding and **locally embedded meanings and functions** have implications.
- Hence, it would be enlightening to know how issues of significant relevance are **socially constructed** in everyday discourses of Indians while they engaged themselves in deriving sense out of them, and tried to made them functional.
- In sum, it makes sense to have an update on how the **situational, institutional and socio-cultural phenomenon** are represented in **everyday thinking and lay explanations** of Indians as ‘social actors’ and ‘citizens.’

The Complex Social Context of India and Scope for the Social Representations Approach

- India presents a **complex context, with its diversity and coexisting opposites** (i.e., modernity lives with conservatism, spirituality with stark materialism, technological sophistication with total technical ignorance, illiteracy with knowledge power and poverty with extreme forms of affluence).
- In this unique context, popular social representations are in a **constant flux**, create confusion and do not seem to offer guideline for social etiquette or for '**bringing order**' in people's social world.
- Such volatile representations have to be understood in their existing contexts at the levels of:
 - (a) Shared beliefs, images, metaphors and symbols they represent now, and (b) the socially constituted 'lay explanations' given to them (grounded in their diverse cultural and historical backgrounds) at present.
- So, there is scope for studying the **meaning making role of social actors** behind the emerging social and cultural phenomenon of contemporary importance

Touching Upon Current Concerns and Social Categories

Some **marked concerns** of Indian social reality contain ‘**dialogical oppositions and inconsistencies**’ (Moscovici, 1961/2008; Jovchelovitch, 2007; Markova, 2007) in their meanings.

Hence, it seems important to look into the **debate, disagreement, and conflict** that under goes during the **process of their formation**.

Representation of **Indian women** (including rape and violence inflicted on them), the **intolerant Indian generation, the strayed youth, and the present face of social relationships**, manifest **oppositions in everyday thinking and language**.

Some popular **social categories** (i.e., *neta/political leaders, Dalits, rich and poor*) and **concepts**, (**nationalist and anti-national, communal and secular**), that have an overarching influence on Indian politics, development and national integration, need to be studied for their **meanings and representations**.

Could we say that the **methodology** of social representations is an option for going about the everyday understanding and construction of these categories having serious implications for the lives of Indians?

Understanding Macro-Level Issues

Corruption in public and political life, **communal and caste violence**, **criminality and individualism on the streets**, **social justice**, **freedom of speech and cohesive development**, etc., are larger public sphere **notions of relevance** that are being debated and discussed.

Some other macro-level **socially relevant issues** are, **good governance** in Indian democracy, (also grass root administration) plus **social evils** like **dowry**, **child marriages**, **witch hunting** and **human trafficking**, in modern India.

It makes sense to ask **'how these disturbing matters are cognitively processed in the daily life activities of Indians, allowed to survive, and explained by the social citizens of the country?'**

Similarly, one would like to ask, how Indians **'makes sense'** out of a generally, **non-functional, un-dependable system**, its practices, and deal or manage it?

Issues of Interest

- **Rural India** is an intricate picture of caste, land ownership, and locally existing centres of power. India's development is directly related to the development of its huge rural segment which also is the huge vote bank of Indian democracy.
- There is hardly any attempt to understand the **needs and aspirations of rural Indians** or to understand **how they are socially represented** in the common sense understanding of fellow Indians, agents of development and the politicians.
- Further, India, is a strong case of **plural culture**, and also that of '**unity in diversity**.' However, this is exactly what is at stake due to the changing loyalties and selective attachments of the cultural and sub-cultural groups, irresponsible politics, and slim concern for **national integrity**.
- Today '**national integration**' or '**unity in diversity**' are unclear representations.
- Apparently, there is growing need to understand these notions in their pertinent cultural and sub cultural contexts, and ask, 'how' and 'why' these representations are being transformed and constructed in **particular ways** in mass media and public conversations?

More Issues of Interest

- The thoroughly diverse culture of India, is a case in point for countless rituals, festivals, celebrations, customs, folk traditions, and religious practices that are nevertheless, being **steadily amended** and may act as ‘culture dilutors.’
- Hence, one is curious to understand the modifications within the changing social and economic context of Indians who participate, amend and have their own interpretations for the phenomenon.
- At a different level, representations of **spirituality** and **religion** today, **cherished** and **operational values of Indians** and **parenting in 21st century urban India**, are **phenomenon in transition** but have significant effect and implications for the lives of common Indians.
- Similarly, there is dearth of researches on the common sense understanding of **emotional vices** like, *kama, krodh, moh, eersha, trishna*, etc. or virtues like *nishtha, vishwas, seva, tyag, ahimsa*, and *santosh*, etc., that often script the social and personal lives and behaviour of Indians.
- Such subjects cannot be studied in the tradition of scientific inquiry. And perhaps, here is the scope for deriving “**potential insight into wider social and cultural phenomenon**” (Pirttila-Backman et al., 2017, p.31) by giving recourse to the **processes** of social representation.

The Identity Issues

- **Regional identity** of some Indian states, and their people, are often embodied in myths and narratives besides their geographical, political, cultural and historical backgrounds. Such subjects can be appropriately studied by the SR approach.
- Kishore (2004) analyzed **women's identity** through a range of 36 Hindi movies made between 1969-2000.
- The movies involved aspects of women's life revolving around **family, children, work, religion, oppression, exploitation, desires and anxieties, signs of protest, conflicts and contradiction, and aspects of personal autonomy**, etc., and how these issues are posed in a critical ways.
- In-depth analysis of nine films out of the 36, using narrative analysis, open and unstructured observation of the films revealed the **differential patterns of socialization and discrimination** that work through **'sanctioned cultural processes'** limiting the possibilities of women's lives and their personalities within very restricted spheres.

Reference: Anand Prakash (2011). Qualitative Methods in Psychology: An Overview. In G. Misra (Ed.), *Psychology in India (Theoretical and Methodological Developments)*. Pearson.



Thanks for Your Attention

Psychology for India (2015). Sage.

[Durganand Sinha](#), [Girishwar Misra](#), [Ajit K. Dalal](#) SAGE Publications India, 08-Oct-2015 (pp. 260)

Durganand Sinha was a visionary who gave psychology in India new directions and identity through his seminal writings and efforts. This is the first book featuring Durganand Sinha's seminal contributions to psychology. It includes his key articles in the areas of indigenous psychology; self, family and social values; and human and socio-economic development. His life-long endeavour was to develop a psychology for India, and his publications opened up new areas of research. His book *Psychology in a Third World Country: The Indian Experience* (1986), a SAGE publication, played an important role in shaping contemporary psychological research in India. This volume will inspire researchers in various disciplines of social sciences to pursue research for psycho-socio-economic development of India.