

# *Sahya*: The Concept in Indian Philosophical Psychology and Its Contemporary Relevance

by  
*L. Sam S. Manickam*

## Introduction

Indian thought is a treasure rich with psychological concepts, which have not yet been fully explored by psychologists. Unearthing the tremendous potential of Indian thought in relation to psychology is one of the great challenges for psychologists in the twenty-first century. Since the inception of psychology as a science in India in 1905 (Sinha, D, 1986), a considerable amount of scientific research has been undertaken in the country. Reviewing the history of psychological research related to Indian concepts reveals that hardly any attention has been given to Indian thought by Indian psychological researchers (Manickam, 2000). However, recently there has been an increased interest in this area, and contributions in the form of theoretical as well as experimental studies have been initiated and are getting published (for example Nathawat & Kumar, 1999; Veeraraghavan, 2001; Manickam, 2003a).

## Increase in Focus on Indian Thought from the West

Interestingly, there are several attempts by psychologists as well as other scholars from all over the world to initiate research on Indian concepts without diluting or altering the original concepts (Cornelissen, 2001). Early interest in Indian thought included that of Jung and some scholars abroad kept the interest alive by focusing their attention on the psychological concepts in Indian thought. Kilby (1968) and Walsh (1988) made valuable observations regarding the potential of philosophical psychology in India for the development of a comprehensive psychological science. Probably the words of Vivekananda (1989b) were prophetic when he said,

If a foreigner takes up our literature to study, at first it is disgusting to him; there is not the same stir, perhaps, the same amount of go that rouses him instantly. However, if you delve into this area you develop a passion for the concepts and ... as you go on studying them they fascinate you; you cannot

move; you are bound; and whoever has dared to touch our literature has felt the bondage, and is there bound for ever. Like the gentle dew that falls unseen and unheard, and yet brings into blossom the fairest of roses, has been the contribution of India to the thought of the world. — p. 274

That psychological concepts in Indian thought have not got their due attention from the psychology fraternity may be due to several factors. Most of the ancient texts were written in Sanskrit, which poses a great problem in comprehending the concepts in English. The efforts made by some psychologists to interpret the psychological concepts in Indian thought through the framework of Western psychology lead either to misperception of the concepts or to neglect of the most important ones. For example, the concept of *vijñāna* is considered as *intelligence* by Radhakrishnan (1983, p. 165), *knowledge* by Sri Aurobindo (1988, p. 268) and *consciousness* by Śaṅkarāchārya (The Eight Upanishads, 1989, p. 334). Research is further complicated by inconsistencies in the use of the terms. Similarly, the ancient concepts in psychology were identified with Eastern religions, and therefore kept outside the realm of scientific enquiry (Walsh, 1988).

The perception of the Indian concepts and the attitudes towards the concepts by the psychologists in the country also may have hindered the process (Manickam, 2003b). Often, psychological concepts of Western origin are proclaimed as concepts of Indian origin. Thus psychotherapy (Balodhi, 1990), behaviour modification (Sharma, 1986), self-actualisation (Sharma, 1986) are claimed as concepts of Indian origin and, as a result, the uniqueness of the concepts in Indian thought are either misperceived or not perceived. Likewise, concepts which have their origin in Indian thought are described as or equated with well-known or popular concepts of Western psychological science. Yoga, for example, is equated with relaxation (Nathawat et al., 1999), behaviour therapy (Balodhi and Mishra, 1984) and de-conditioning therapy (Vahia, 1973). Due to the predominance of scientific psychology and an inability to find Indian concepts which are related to the local context or the global situation, psychologists in India continue to do research on concepts of Western origin only and replicate foreign research in India with minor variations (Sinha, D., 1986).

There are numerous concepts of psychological importance in Indian thought. One of these concepts, *Sahya*, is dealt with in this paper. The concept of *sahya* is used sparingly in modern psychological literature in India but is used extensively in ancient Indian literature. *Sahya* as a quality has found its place in the life and philosophy of Vivekananda and Gandhi and appears to have great significance for the contemporary global scenario.

### *Sahya*: Origin and Definition

The term *sahya* originated from its root *Sah* in Sanskrit (Monier-Williams, 1984,

p. 1192). *Sahya* literally means to prevail, to be victorious, to overcome, to vanquish, to conquer, to gain, to tolerate and to allow. *Sahya* cannot be equated to the English word tolerance since this means the “capacity to endure pain or hardship, a sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices different from or conflicting with one’s own” (Webster, 1987 p.1241). It is quite possible that Gandhi and Vivekananda used the word tolerance for want of an appropriate term for *sahya* in English.

The word *sahya* is used in the *R̥g Veda* and the *Atharva Veda*. Depending on the context, *sahya* denotes the meaning to bear, endure, suffer, and put up with. A person possessing the quality of *sahya* bears with a stimulus, not out of weakness to react, but for the cause of the ultimate “Truth”, by not giving up in times of turmoil or adverse stressful factors. *Sahya* is not passive-resistance, in which a person bears negative cognitive inputs with unpleasant emotions. In *sahya* the bearing of negative cognitive inputs is meant to “win over” the stimulus or stimuli, in the pursuit of holding on to Truth, in order to achieve oneness with Brahman, the ultimate Truth. In the psychological realm, *sahya* is defined as a quality, which makes one endure and at the same time strive to overcome the adversaries in one’s pursuit of attaining oneness with Brahman or Truth.

*Sahya* belongs to the *sattvic* quality or dimension, which could lead to conflict with *rajasic* and *tamasic* dimensions. However, with one’s *svadharma* as the force behind *sahya*, one could manifest the quality of *sahya* constructively. *Svadharma* is a “driving force” and the person fulfils his *dharma* by developing and practising his natural “endowment and properties” (Sarma, cited in Heuber, 1987, p. 63). Therefore, he describes *svadharma* “as a tree performing its duty of producing flower and fruit” –with perfect ease and spontaneity. On the other hand, Devanandan (Heuber, 1987) perceives *svadharma* in action in the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the dialogue between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa or while they are relating to each other. With the driving force of *svadharma*, the quality of *sahya* can be manifested and in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa encourages Arjuna to acquire the quality of *sahya*.

But *sahya* cannot be viewed as the opposite of *amarsa* (resentment). Śaṅkarāchārya defines *amarṣa* as intolerance due to the thwarting of one’s efforts in attaining objects, which are desired (Sinha, J., 1986, p. 113) and *krodha* (anger) closely follows *amarṣa*. At the same time, *sahya* is not *akrodha* (non-anger) because *akrodha* means suppression of anger aroused in a person who is “chastised or injured” by other persons (Sinha, J., 1986, p. 113).

### *Sahya* as an Essential Quality in Self-Growth

Two decades ago I discussed the concept of *sahya* with psychotherapy experts in India. But at that point of time, I was told that the concept of *sahya* does not have much relevance as a separate quality of the therapist. It was mentioned that *sahya*

would form part of an unconditional positive regard or acceptance which Carl Rogers (1961) postulates as core conditions or essential qualities of the therapist-client relationship, which can effect change. However, in one of the studies conducted by Norcross (1990) on therapists who were undergoing therapy for themselves, the subjects responded that while undergoing therapy they primarily learned the importance of interpersonal relationship in the dynamics of psychology, mainly: warmth, empathy, and the personal relationship. But seven percent of the therapists opined that they expect the therapists to be having “more patience and tolerance” (Norcross, 1990). This finding indicates the relevance of the concept of *sahya* in the growth of the self in the therapeutic situation.

In my twenty-two years of experience of psychotherapy with clients having divergent problems, I have found that *sahya* as a therapist quality has great significance. In addition to therapist warmth, acceptance, unconditional positive regard and empathy, *sahya* is one of the essential and highly relevant qualities in establishing and maintaining a growth-promoting relationship. To illustrate, one of the therapeutic situations where *sahya* attains prominence is in establishing a therapeutic relationship with persons who have the problem of addiction. In the initial interviews, some clients who are addicted to substances tend to distort factual information, a deception which can easily be perceived by the therapist. Subsequent interviews with the spouse or a significant relative would confirm the gross distortion of the factual information provided by the index client. It is likely that such clients consciously or unconsciously distort the information as a “checking out mechanism” to assess the level of *sahya* of the therapist. Realising that the distortion in the information provided by such clients may have to be borne with and at the same time not being provoked by these clients will help the clients experience the *sahya* of the therapist. At this stage, the appropriate response which manifests *sahya* can be provided only if the therapist possesses the quality of *sahya*. Neglect of *sahya* can either lead to premature termination of the session or to a strained therapeutic relationship.

#### *Sahya* as Manifested in Gandhi’s Style of Relating

Information on Gandhi’s (1927) style of relating to clients who consulted him for legal, personal and societal problems is extensive and requires in-depth analysis. To cite an example, Gandhi stated,

During my professional work it was also my habit never to conceal my ignorance from my clients or my colleagues. Wherever I felt myself at sea, I would advise my client to consult some other counsel, or if he preferred to stick to me, I would ask him to let me seek the assistance of senior counsel. This frankness earned me the unbounded affection and trust of my clients. — p. 306

In this statement of Gandhi several therapist qualities which a successful therapist or counsellor should possess are inherent. It appears that Gandhi was aware of the helpful qualities, which are likely to effect change in another person. Though he had not acknowledged the concepts as therapist – or counsellor-related qualities or variables, his experiential observation supports that these qualities did help Gandhi to build up and maintain the helper-helped or professional-client relationship. Gandhi (1927) proclaimed how this growth-promoting relationship had helped him later in his life and stated that, "...this affection and trust served me in good stead in my public work" (p. 306).

The application of the concept of *sahya* as a "healing" or helping quality is evident in Gandhi's style in relating both to individual clients and to the social movement. Gandhi describes how one of his clients transformed and through his intervention adopted a new style of behaviour and living. Though this client consulted Gandhi for a legal issue which put the client's life at stake, through the helping relationship, the client could perceive his faulty behaviour and take appropriate action to effect change in his maladaptive behaviour. This client of Gandhi, who was involved in large-scale smuggling, was worried about his own behaviour and sought Gandhi's help. Analysis of the verbatim record of their interaction makes it clear that the quality of *sahya* was manifest in Gandhi (1927) in the helper role:

I calmed him and said: "To save or not to save you is in His hands. As to me you know my way. I can but try to save you by means of confession"

The good Parsi felt deeply mortified.

"But is not my confession before you enough?" he asked.

"You have wronged not me but Government. How will the confession made before me avail you?" I replied gently. — p. 307

The outcome of the interaction was that the client paid a penalty equal to twice the amount that he had confessed to having smuggled and the case against the client was compromised. But the modified behaviour of the client was instrumental in changing the behaviour of many others that approached him. The client of Gandhi wrote down the facts of the whole case and got the paper framed and hung it up in his office to serve as a perpetual reminder to his heirs and fellow merchants. Gandhi strictly adhered to his values and principles even though his client's behaviour was against his own values and principles. It is likely that Gandhi's *sahya* towards his client may also have led to the transformation of his client.

### *Sahya* in Community Living

A thorough study of the concept of *Satyāgraha* and the process that gave birth to the term could also help us to clearly comprehend the quality of *sahya* in action. Gandhi (1927) stated,

The principle called *Satyāgraha* came into being before that name was invented. Indeed when it was born, I myself could not say what it was. — p. 266

It appears that Gandhi had mulled much about the concept in his “inner cognitive laboratory” before he pronounced it to the world outside. Gandhi tried to find the appropriate term in English and, in his discussions with others, the term “passive resistance” came up. But he found that the term

... “passive resistance” was too narrowly construed, that it was supposed to be a weapon of the weak, that it could be characterised by hatred, and that it could finally manifest itself as violence. — p. 266

Therefore, Gandhi denounced all the available terms and coined a new term to designate and explain the real nature of the movement. It was Maganlal Gandhi who coined the word *Sadagraha* (*Sat*: truth, and *Agraha*: firmness, p. 266) and to make it more phonetically attractive and make the meaning more clear, Gandhi changed the word to *Satyāgraha* (p. 266). In order to pursue *Satyāgraha*, as Gandhi advocated, *sahya* is an essential quality. Gandhi evidenced the quality of *sahya* in relating to his clients in a one-to-one situation and in his interaction with different and divergent groups during his pursuit as a leader in attaining freedom for the country as well as in his struggle to attain communal harmony.

Vivekananda (1989b) too described *sahya* in action in the daily life of the people of India. Though toleration is preached in other nations, Vivekananda felt that in India,

...it is here and here alone that toleration and sympathy have become practical; it is theoretical in every other country; it is here and here alone, that the Hindu builds mosques for the Mohammedans and churches for the Christians.

— p. 274

### *Sahya* and Global Peace

Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1979), expounding the biology of peace and war, opined that one of the biological and guiding principles is survival value. But it remains open whether this survival value can be limited to a definite culture, racial group or nation, or that it has to be for the whole community. Biologically, human beings are still one species, irrespective of all cultural, geographical, racial and ethnic differences and consequently, the preservation of humanity must be the aim. Therefore in a pluralist society, intolerance of “outsiders” is by no means adaptive in achieving global peace. The quality of *sahya* assumes greater importance in this context. Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1979) wrote, “Our biological inhibitions against aggression, aided by this insight, should enable us effectively to control our reaction to outsiders”(p.195). In the



conflict between the two biological norms of intolerance and empathy, the quality of *sahya* helps one to resolve this conflict. Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1979) further noted,

A humanity that unites humanity must not be absolutely uniform, but must be united with tolerance, so that new ideas may be tried out and have a chance of proving themselves. Otherwise the evolution of man could come to a standstill. — p. 196

In the psychological realm, Walsh and Franczp (1989) analysed the psychological causes of war from a Buddhist psychological perspective and concluded that the problem of “three desires” namely “addiction, aversion and delusion” is the primary one. Addiction to material comforts makes people resort to lifestyles requiring heavy energy and material inputs. This leads to high dependence on foreign supplies and ends up in war to defend the vested interests. Similarly, addiction to beliefs and ideologies can also lead a whole culture to move to kill and die for the beliefs. Walsh and Franczp (1989) suggested that “... recognising this insanity is a necessary first step for its cure and the alleviation of the life threatening global symptoms...” (p. 166, 167). In order to achieve this state, *sahya* as a group quality assumes much importance.

The quality of *sahya* is not exclusively individualistic and manifests not only in one-to-one interactions, but can pervade one-to-group, and group-to-group interactions. This is quite evident in the following statement of Vivekananda. Vivekananda (1989b) observed here that tolerance (*sahya*)

...had entered into the blood of the nation, till it began to tingle with every drop of blood that flowed in its veins, till it became one with the life, part and parcel of the material of which it was composed; and thus the land was transmuted into the most wonderful land of toleration, giving the right to welcome the various religions as well as all sects into the old mother country. — p. 113

Vivekananda also elaborated how and to which level the quality of *sahya* could be manifested in a group. It is a quality which is inherent in every Indian and, at the right occasion, the quality of *sahya* permeates even those with whom the nation interacts. The first remarks of Vivekananda (1989a), during his “response to welcome”, at the World’s Parliament of Religions, Chicago, on 11 September 1893 reveals it:

I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted, and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth. I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites who came to Southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. — p. 3

In the current global scenario, where hostility and aggression between castes, races, religions and nations prevail, and at times have led to aggressive actions, conflicts and war, the role of *sahya* as a group quality assumes prime importance.

Vivekananda felt that group *sahya* is possible and called the nations of the world to follow the Indian spirit of *sahya*. He continued,

Your labours have now proved beyond the possibility of doubt that the contradiction of the world's numerous creeds are all reconciled in the universal light of the *Vedānta*, and that all the people of the world have need to understand and practically realise the great truth that "Unity in variety" is nature's plan in the evolution of the universe, and that only by harmony and brotherhood among religions and by mutual toleration and help can the mission and destiny of humanity be accomplished.

— Vivekananda, 1989b, p. 202

Gandhi (1927) shared a similar view, which had its foundation on the principle of *ahimsā*. He stated,

When two nations are fighting, the duty of a votary of *ahimsa* is to stop the war. He who is not equal to that duty, he who has no power of resisting war, he who is not qualified to resist war, may take part in war, and yet wholeheartedly try to free himself, his nation and the world from war.

— p. 292

This statement of Gandhi explains the concept of *sahya*, where one indulges in an activity which is not in tune with one's own thinking and where one is yet trying to achieve the ultimate objective of finding the Truth—becoming one with Brahman.

It is beyond doubt that the observations made are related to the concept of *sahya* and have great relevance in the present national and international relations, especially in maintaining peace and avoidance of war.

### *Sahya*—Guidelines for Future Research and Action

The quality of *sahya* as growth promoting and peace promoting for self, community, groups, and nations is evident from the diverse situations and contexts described above. However, *sahya* as a psychological concept has not been experimentally studied, though various experiential anecdotes are available to validate the quality. There is a need for further experimental and experiential research to be undertaken to establish how and to what extent the quality of *sahya* in the therapist or helper is growth promoting. The different dimensions—*sahya* as an individual quality as well as a group quality—require extensive investigation. How far *sahya* can be experimentally studied in laboratory conditions as well as in social situations could be taken up for future research by psychologists. If experimental evidences suggest a positive



association between *sahya* and outcome in therapy, training those in the helper role in *sahya* may be initiated based on personality theories which have their foundation in Indian philosophical psychology (Manickam, 2003a). Correlates of *sahya* have to be explored which may include, dietary habits, *dhyana* (meditation), faith orientation, regular observance of religious practices and practice of yogic *asana* (exercise). The measure of the *sahya* possessed by an individual and its relation to spiritual transformation, of becoming or integrating with the Brahman is also another area that can be subjected to qualitative analysis in a longitudinal manner.

It might also be interesting to investigate whether *sahya* is culture-specific or universal. Knowledge about ethnic and geographical influence on *sahya* may help conflict resolution managers to execute their job more effectively. The inherent group quality of *sahya*, emphasised by Vivekananda, appears to be dormant at times and the causes for this have to be explored. If the group quality of *sahya* is one which could be imparted through training or by adopting a life style based on Indian concepts, it is the role of the present day psychologists to do action research on those lines.

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