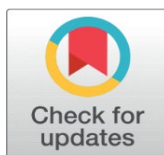


HEALING THROUGH WORDS: PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE AND MENTAL WELL-BEING IN INDIAN CLASSICAL LITERATURE

Pooja Khanna ¹✉, Neerja Deswal ¹✉

¹ Professor, Department of English, Aditi Mahavidyalaya (University of Delhi), Delhi-110039, India



Corresponding Author

Pooja Khanna,
poojakhanna1973@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.5749](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.5749)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore psychological aspects of Indian classical literature. To this end, it avails an interdisciplinary lens linking ancient wisdom with modern mental health discourse. Relying on texts like the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Vedas, the paper demonstrates how concepts like karma yoga, dhyana, vairagya, and bhakti provide frameworks for emotional resilience, self-regulation, and existential insight. The study emphasizes the pedagogical and therapeutic relevance of these texts in modern education, psychology, and cultural studies. Through a comparative analysis with Western psychological models, this paper adopts a pluralistic, decolonized approach to well-being, which corroborates Indian literature as a reservoir of holistic healing and self-knowledge.

Keywords: Indian Classical Literature, Mental Well-Being, Psychological Resilience, Mindfulness, Emotional Healing

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian classical literature forms part of the subcontinent's civilizational consciousness, brimming with psychological and therapeutic wisdom. Centuries before modern psychology emerged, ancient texts like the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Vedas offered insights into the human psyche. They addressed existential anguish, moral dilemmas, emotional suffering, inner experiences, and so on. Far more than entertainment or moralism, these texts function as psychological manuals, providing a pathway through crises of identity, anxiety, and alienation.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna's moral dilemma on the battlefield becomes an existential inquiry, diving into his inner world to draw a discourse informed by self-awareness, detachment, action, and transcendence. In the Ramayana and Mahabharata, narratives play out matters of resilience, moral clarity, and self-regulation, embodied by archetypal characters like Sita, Rama, Draupadi, and Yudhishtira. Further, the Vedas and Upanishads provide perhaps the earliest frameworks for achieving mental balance through the cultivation of sattva, practice of dhyana, and understanding of atman.

This paper aims to establish a dialogue between such ancient literature and modern psychology. It seeks to understand how the former anticipated and aligned with the latter (particularly cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness-based approaches, and existential psychology). It argues for integrating these texts into modern mental health discourse and pedagogical paradigms. With mental well-being becoming a global, shared concern, India's literary and philosophical traditions can offer pathways to psychological healing that are culturally rooted yet universally applicable.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Indian classical literature integrates inner discipline with public duty; self-awareness is not to be considered a retreat from the world but rather a preparation to engage with it. This makes such texts pertinent windows into understanding the ins and outs of moral psychology and of emotional decision-making. Ranganathan (2022) argues that the ethical concerns germane to the Gita and Mahabharata texts mirror the frameworks of moral cognition and situational psychology.

The foundation of this study rests on the intersection of Indian classical literature and contemporary psychological theories: how do ancient texts prefigure, mirror, and enhance modern understanding of resilience and well-being? A central concern is the premise that Indian epics and scriptures (Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the Vedas) offer not only spiritual/moral guidance, but also timeless psychological models for navigating human suffering and cultivating inner equilibrium.

The Bhagavad Gita, part of the Mahabharata epic, serves as a key text within the epic: Krishna responds to Arjuna's existential crisis on the battlefield not with dogma but with a lucid psychological response, marked by acceptance, purposeful action (karma yoga), self-transcendence, and emotional regulation. Mishra (2024) notes this dialogue parallels contemporary approaches such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) & acceptance-based models. Through clarity, meaning-making, and detachment, Krishna's counsel reconstructs Arjuna's worldview; these functions would later be identified as therapeutic pivots by Beckian cognitive therapy and Viktor Frankl's logotherapy.

Keshavan et al. (2024) approach karma yoga itself as psychotherapeutic intervention. In this model, maintaining detachment from the outcomes of actions helps reduce performance anxiety and existential burden. This concept finds echoes in mindfulness-based therapy and third-wave cognitive therapies. Further, Kiran Kumar (2010) emphasizes that Vedic literature anticipates a holistic psychology rooted in the *gunas* (*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*), a tripartite structure that aligns with emotional personality-typologies and mood regulation theories.

The Ramayana and Mahabharata develop psychological narratives through character-driven explorations, illustrating moral endurance, grief, and trauma. Figures like Sita, who maintains dignity as she endures exile & rejection, or Yudhishtira, whose post-war depression resembles survivor's guilt, reflect what Deekshitulu (2024) deems literary archetypes of resilience. Rather than avoiding pain, these characters convey emotional strength, processed through *dharma* (moral clarity), restraint, and introspection. This resembles Carl Jung's archetypal psychology, in which mythic figures embody aspects of the human experience.

Beyond literary characters, these texts also bear philosophical concepts relevant to humanistic psychology: *ātman* (self), *vairāgya* (detachment), and *dhyāna* (meditative introspection). Dalal (2021) notes that these texts encourage a self-actualizing model of mental health long before Maslow formalized it. Similarly, Khosla et al. (2020) have dealt with how Hindu religious texts can guide clinicians in culturally competent practice (especially in South Asian contexts, where Western psychological models may require adaptation).

Furthermore, the role of storytelling in these texts is central: the narratives are not passive, but dialogical and reflective. Indeed, Krishna's discourse functions as a dialogic intervention. Vasishtha's narratives in the *Yoga Vasistha* unfold as therapeutic storytelling, guiding Rama through existential despair; Panchal (2020) calls this "narrative therapy in pre-modern form." These texts prefigure psychotherapy's therapeutic alliance, wherein the client's worldview is reconstructed through structured dialogue and philosophical inquiry.

The applicability of these frameworks is not limited to only traditional/religious contexts. Jayashree and Sai Baba (2020) encourage their integration into modern pedagogical practices, and Murthy (2010) similarly advocates their revaluation within psychiatric discourse. An argument is made in favor of a pluralistic therapeutic model respectful of cultural contexts while tapping into indigenous knowledge systems.

Altogether, these sources reframe Indian classical literature in sophisticated psychological terms, brimming with conceptual, narrative, and experiential insights that can enhance modern mental health frameworks. This theoretical lens affirms the relevance of ancient literary traditions to contemporary psychological discourses. They offer methodical pathways geared towards healing, mindfulness, and emotional transformation.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study's theoretical & interpretive methodology is grounded in textual analysis of selected Indian classical texts, viz. the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the Vedas. These texts were chosen because of their crucial stature in the Indian philosophical tradition, as well as their insights into themes such as suffering, duty, emotional regulation, and inner peace – concepts deeply relevant to modern psychological constructs. The analysis uses a qualitative hermeneutic approach, focusing on a close reading of key narrative moments, character arcs, and philosophical discourses. The aim is not to historicize these texts but to extract universal psychological insights from their literary and spiritual frameworks.

This inquiry is interdisciplinary, and draws from literary criticism, Indian philosophy, and contemporary psychology (particularly cognitive-behavioral theory, mindfulness-based interventions, and existential therapy). This comparative lens enables a dialogue between ancient literature and modern therapeutic paradigms, emphasizing the contribution of these texts to contemporary conversations surrounding mental well-being and emotional resilience.

Instead of empirically measuring psychological outcomes, this study interprets the function of literary narratives and philosophical principles as symbolic interventions— models of healing, identity formation, and ethical navigation relevant in today's world.

4. DIALOGUES ACROSS TIME: COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

A parallel can be drawn between the concept of Atman (the higher self or inner essence) and Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualization. Both lay emphasis on the inward journey to realize one's highest potential. While the Gita considers this in terms of one's dharma and transcending the ego, Maslow articulates it through personal growth and fulfillment. Nevertheless, the similarities suggest common ground in terms of understanding human fulfillment across civilizations.

Despite the gap of centuries and cultures between them, Indian classical literature and modern psychology often arrive at similar conclusions regarding the human mind and emotional well-being. Through a comparative view, it can be appreciated how a number of psychological practices today mirror the wisdom that imbues these ancient texts.

For example, the Bhagavad Gita's articulation of Karma Yoga directs individuals to perform their duties sincerely, without attachment to results. This bears similarity to modern cognitive therapy, wherein individuals are counseled to prioritize effort over outcome, effectively reframing their thinking and mitigating stress. Similarly, the praxis of Bhakti, or devotion, offers emotional grounding through love, surrender, and connection to a higher presence. This is consistent with the key ideas of attachment theory, where emotional bonds—whether spiritual or human—are deemed to be stabilizing forces in one's inner life. Dhyana (or meditative absorption) is a pertinent concern in Indian texts such as the Vedas and Upanishads. It finds common ground with contemporary mindfulness-based practice. Both share goals, such as staying in the present, reducing anxiety, and cultivating inner calm.

Finally, the epic characters of Indian literature (Rama, Sita, Arjuna, Draupadi) provide more than just a model of moral heroism; they represent archetypes embodying courage, patience, doubt, and strength. These roles align with Jungian archetypes in psychology, where recurring character types reflect universal human experience.

These comparisons bring out a deep dialogue between Indian classical literature and modern thought. In terms of narratives, concepts, and characters, these texts continue to speak to contemporary emotional realities, proof of the timeless value of these texts when it comes to understanding the human journey.

5. LITERARY WISDOM AS LIVING PSYCHOLOGY

National Education Policy 2020 as well as the UGC's curriculum reforms have prioritized the ancient Indian knowledge framework. It intends to revive India's traditional intellectual, literary, and spiritual heritage and integrate it

into modern academic disciplines. Indian classical texts (such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, and Bhagavad Gita) need to be recognized as more than religious instructions; they are structured bodies of knowledge equipped with scientific, philosophical, and psychological insights.

This paper is in line with IKS's vision: it interprets classical Indian literature not only in terms of its literary stature but also as a vital compendium of psychological and emotional wisdom. Concepts such as dharma, karma yoga, vairagya (detachment), and dhyana (meditative focus) are consequential to our understanding of cognitive balance, ethical reasoning, and mental well-being. Scholars such as Ranganathan (2022) and Kapil Kapoor have long argued that such traditions, rooted in experience, reflection, consciousness, constitute an indigenous psychology.

Bringing these texts into dialogue with modern psychological frameworks, this paper serves as a contribution to the decolonization of psychological education and scholarship. It underlines the mobilization of India's narrative and philosophical traditions to address modern challenges such as anxiety, alienation, and identity crisis. Such work also aligns with current IKS-funded academic programs that promote interdisciplinary inquiry; thus, a bridge is provided between shastras and sciences, textual wisdom, and therapeutic praxis.

Ultimately, positioning Indian classical literature within the IKS framework serves to bring out its value as 'living knowledge.' Within this actionable context, it can guide individuals toward emotional equilibrium, social harmony and holistic well-being.

6. WHY IT MATTERS TODAY: LITERARY WISDOM IN MODERN MENTAL HEALTH

This approach also aligns with India's educational reforms, which continue to prioritize the integration of ancient Indian wisdom into mainstream curricula. To this end, many universities have commenced programs on the Gita or Upanishads, including and extending beyond the literary scope to embrace their psychological relevance. In therapeutic contexts, traditional narrative-based interventions are being trialed in youth counseling models, especially in rural mental health programs.

The modern age is marked by rising anxiety, depression, and emotional burnout. There is a need for holistic and culturally relevant approaches to mental well-being. While modern psychology offers valuable tools, there is a growing recognition of the limits of one-size-fits-all models (especially in non-Western societies). In India, factors such as stigma, lack of access, and cultural disconnection often prevent people from seeking or benefiting from conventional therapies.

Indigenous knowledge is crucial for a more inclusive, accessible, and localized understanding of healing. Ancient Indian literature (such as the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Vedas, and Mahabharata) harbours vast emotional insights, resilience-building, and reflective guidance. Their timeless lessons are deeply relevant to the emotional needs of modern individuals.

Dalal (2021), Khosla (2020), and Jayashree (2020), among others, have made a case for integrating these texts into educational and therapeutic contexts. They are not meant to altogether replace modern science but rather to enrich it with cultural relevance and deeper meaning. Through stories of courage and duty, as well as meditative reflections on the self, these texts offer tools to understand emotions, find clarity in chaos, and cultivate inner strength.

The reclamation and revival of this literary heritage are not a matter of nostalgia. Rather, it must be understood in response to pressing contemporary needs of the society. This encourages us to rethink well-being not just as a clinical goal but as a deeply human, lived experience. This experience is one that the literature has long helped to understand.

7. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Going further, this paper also touches on the need to decolonize literary and psychological studies. Much of modern psychology persists within Euro-American contexts. By recovering insights from Indian texts, this study challenges the global asymmetry in knowledge systems by offering culturally situated models. In other words, it is an invitation to expand the framework of literary studies from the aesthetic to its therapeutic, moral, and spiritual essence.

The present study, grounded in a close literary-psychological analysis, offers a theoretical lens for reinterpreting Indian classical literature as a repository of psychological strategies and models of mental well-being. This reading is not anachronistic but rather an act of reclamation that recentres the relevance of ancient wisdom in the face of contemporary mental health crises.

By examining canonical texts (such as the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Vedas), this paper demonstrated their value not only as cultural artifacts but also as psycho-spiritual blueprints. Indeed, they prefigure many aspects of modern therapeutic practice: meaning-making, acceptance, moral clarity, mindfulness, emotional regulation, and narrative re-authoring. For example, Krishna's guidance to Arjuna can be interpreted as a dialogic intervention that brings together cognitive reframing and existential acceptance.

Such insights carry important implications for contemporary education, mental health, and cultural studies. There is a growing appreciation for the need to culturally ground models of psychological well-being, particularly in postcolonial and Global South contexts. Indian classical literature provides indigenous mental frameworks that are culturally resonant and psychologically profound. At the societal level, this study reaffirms the virtue of pluralistic, cross-cultural approaches to mental health. Western models of therapy are valuable, but their domination of global mental health narratives must be complemented by wisdom rooted in the Gita's karma yoga, the Vedas' contemplations, and the epics' moral narratives. This is the way to create a more inclusive psychological discourse.

In conclusion, this theoretical investigation invites educators, clinicians, and literary scholars to reengage with Indian classical literature not as a frozen tradition but as a living praxis. These texts provide a path toward self-knowledge, resilience, and inner peace—principles at the heart of literary imaginaries and psychological healing.

8. CONCLUSION

Not only does Indian classical literature exemplifies India's rich heritage and offers enduring psychological insights. Through the archetypal voices of Krishna, Rama, Sita, and Arjuna, these works deal with timeless human concerns: grief, moral conundrums, and the quest for inner peace. This study demonstrated how an interdisciplinary lens can make the emotional and psychological models of resilience, meaning-making, and inquiry present in works such as the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, and Vedas accessible.

Bridging Indian thought with modern psychological frameworks allows us to uncover dialogues relevant to our times. The parallels between dhyana and mindfulness, karma yoga and cognitive restructuring, and bhakti and emotional bonding demonstrate the correlation between literature and healing. These texts offer not only philosophy but also lived strategies that are accessible, relatable, and deeply human. These are critical for navigating conflicts in life.

As contemporary society grapples with numerous mental health crises, the search for inclusive approaches to emotional well-being makes it vital to revisit Indigenous literary traditions. They remind us that healing is not confined to clinics and laboratories but also unfolds through language, narratives, and contemplation. Literature, in its finest form, is not simply something we read; it is something that reads us, replenishes us, and guides us toward a more balanced self.

This paper is a call to recognize Indian classical literature as more than just ancient wisdom; it is living therapy. This realization can make a meaningful contribution to modern conversations regarding well-being, education, and human conditions.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Dalal, A. K. (2021). Mental health and healing in India: A retrospect. In *Psychology in modern India: Historical, methodological and future perspectives* (pp. 307–322). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-4705-5_18
- Deekshitulu, P. V. B. (2024). Effects of Indian epics in psychotherapy. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/383531342_Effects_of_Indian_Epics_in_Psychotherapy
- Jayashree, V., & Sai Baba, M. (2020). Ancient Indian knowledge system for the holistic

- development of school students for their physical, mental and spiritual well-being (NIAS Conference Report No. 11). National Institute of Advanced Studies.
<http://eprints.nias.res.in/1974/1/2020-CR-11-VJayasree.pdf>
- Keshavan, M. S., Hegde, S., & Bhargav, H. (2024). Doing good well (Karma Yoga, the path of selfless action): Psychotherapeutic lessons from the East. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 86, 103813.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2023.103813>
- Khosla, M., Moodley, R., & Killick, E. (2020). Hinduism and healing in mental health. In *Routledge international handbook of race, culture and mental health* (pp. 293–308). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315276168-26>
- Kiran Kumar, S. K. (2010). Indian indigenous concepts and perspectives: Developments and future possibilities. In *Psychology in India: Theoretical and methodological developments* (Vol. 1). Indian Psychology Institute.
<https://ipi.org.in/texts/kirankumar/kk-indian-indigenous-concepts.pdf>
- Mishra, R. (2024). The Bhagavad Gita: A manual philosophical therapy technique based on ancient knowledge. *Expressions India Journal*.
<https://expressionsindia.org/images/journals/chapters/2024/apr24/7.pdf>
- Murthy, R. S. (2010). Hinduism and mental health. In P. J. Verhagen et al. (Eds.), *Religion and psychiatry: Beyond boundaries* (pp. 363–380). Wiley-Blackwell.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9780470682203>
- Naik, S., & Paranjape, V. (2023). Pursuit of happiness: The path of philosophy and counselling. Joshi-Bedekar College Conference Proceedings.
<https://www.joshibedekar.org/conference/Pursuit%20of%20Happiness%20The%20Path%20of%20Philosophy%20and%20Counselling.pdf>
- Panchal, K. (2020). An interoperative phenomenological analysis of Hindu psychologists and the impact of Hinduism on their clinical work (Doctoral dissertation). National Louis University.
<https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/diss/457/>