

# **THE INDIAN JUNGLE**

Psychoanalysis and  
Non-Western Civilizations

*Sudhir Kakar*



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*I shall now try with your guidance to penetrate into the Indian jungle from which until now an uncertain blending of Hellenic love of proportion, Jewish sobriety, and Philistine timidity have kept me away. I really ought to have tackled it earlier, for the plants of this soil shouldn't be alien to me; I have dug to certain depths for their roots. But it isn't easy to pass beyond the limits of one's nature.*

—Sigmund Freud to Romain Rolland, January 19, 1930.  
*Letters, pp. 292–293*

*For my granddaughter Elsie, a writer in the making*

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## About the author

**Sudhir Kakar** is an Indian psychoanalyst and writer. He has been a lecturer and visiting professor at Harvard University, visiting professor at the universities of Chicago, McGill, Melbourne, Hawaii, and Vienna, fellow at the Institutes of Advanced Study, Princeton, Berlin, and Cologne, and is on the board of the Freud Archives.

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Kakar is the author of fourteen books of non-fiction and six novels. His books have been translated into twenty languages around the world. Learn more at his website: [www.sudhirkakar.com](http://www.sudhirkakar.com).



# Introduction

**W**hat psychoanalysis is possible in a traditional non-Western society like India with its characteristic family system, religious beliefs, and cultural values? Is the mental life of non-Western patients radically different from that of their Western counterparts? Over the years, in my own talks to diverse audiences in India, Europe, and the United States, these two questions have invariably constituted the core of animated discussion.

We have to ask them, because most of our knowledge on how human beings feel, think, act is derived from a small subset of the human population. Since 2010, following psychologist Joseph Heinrich and colleagues, we have called this subset the WEIRD, now famously Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. This small group of statistical outliers are both the producers and subjects of the contemporary psychological knowledge that we have then blithely proceeded to generalize to the rest of humankind.

The WEIRD, for instance, have a distinctive morality. The chasm that divides WEIRD morality from others is observed in a 2012 experiment by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt who studied morality in twelve groups of different social classes in different countries. During his interviews, Haidt would tell the interviewee stories, and he then asks

if there is something wrong in how someone acts in the story and, if so, why. One of the stories goes: A man goes to the supermarket once a week and buys a chicken. But before cooking the chicken, he has sexual intercourse with it. Then he cooks it and eats it.

Only one group out of the twelve showed a majority (73 percent) who tolerated the chicken story, finding it acceptable. These were students from the University of Pennsylvania, a liberal, Ivy League college in the United States and certainly the most WEIRD among the twelve selected groups. Their rationale for their tolerance: “It’s his chicken, it’s dead, nobody is getting hurt and it’s being done in private” (Haidt, 2012, loc. 184).

Like other large groups, such as the major non-Western civilizations, the WEIRDs have a distinctive cultural imagination that attended the birth of psychoanalysis and continues to pervade its theories and models.<sup>1</sup> Seeded into a network of minds, we absorb our cultural imagination and its worldview from early on in life—not via the logic of the head, but via the emotional stirrings of the heart and body in which this imagination is encoded. Our cultural imagination shapes what Roy Schaefer (1970) called “vision of reality” that is not a set of philosophical doctrines, relevant only for religious and intellectual elites, but beliefs bordering on convictions, many of them unconscious, that are reflected in the lives, songs, and stories of a vast number of people who share a common culture. It is the culture’s vision of reality that interprets central human experiences and answers perennial questions on what is good and what is evil, what is real and what is unreal, what is the essential nature of men and women and the world they live in, and what is a person’s connection to nature, to other human beings, and to the cosmos. A civilization’s vision of reality plays a significant role even in how it organizes knowledge, how it shapes the processes of attention, perception, reasoning, and inference making. For instance, research into cognitive processes since the 1960s (Segall et al., 1966) shows that perception is strongly influenced by cultural differences

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<sup>1</sup> For better readability, I will henceforth use the term “Western” for WEIRD. Although the cultures of psychoanalysis in South America, France, Italy, England, United States, and so on have distinct and important differences, they all share a strong family resemblance that distinguishes them clearly from the cultural imaginations of Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and other non-Western civilizations.

(Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005). Commenting on cultural variations in perception in the Müller-Lyer illusion where lines of equal length give impressions of different length, an illusion created by the orientation of the arrow caps placed at their ends, Alfred Margulies (2014) observes:

our cultural environment in its everyday structures, practices and aesthetics shapes the way our brains process visual information. And, if this is true for neurobiological non-conscious visual processing, it seems almost certain it would be true for psychoanalytically relevant unconscious processes and the impact of culture. (p. 5)

Indeed, if the ego is a skin ego, dependent upon the physical body to find its mental representation, then does the early life of skin—shaped, after all, by culture—impact how ego gets constructed in different cultural contexts (Kakar & Narayanan, 2023)? We might wonder whether ego formation is different in India where urban-area breastfeeding we are told (UNICEF, 2018) continues for over a year for children of both genders, at a rate of 79 percent, compared to the United States where extended breastfeeding rates are around 6.2 percent. From breastfeeding, the Indian child proceeds not to spoon-feeding but to hand-feeding, less frequently to strollers than to being carried on the mother's side or back in skin contact, and extended co-sleeping with parents or elder relatives. In this atmosphere of early life, conveyed by visible skin contact over a long period, it would be reasonable to expect that the account of mental life in infancy would not exactly hew to the reigning psychoanalytic models derived from Western experience.

The mental representations of culture, our cultural imagination, has been a relatively unexplored territory in psychoanalytic discourse. Disseminated through myths and legends, proverbs and metaphors, iconic artworks, the stories a society's members tell each other, enacted in rituals, conveyed through tales told to children, given a modern veneer in films, the cultural imagination is equally glimpsed in admonitions of parents, in the future vistas they hold out to their children, indeed even in the way their children are touched and fed and carried about.

For more than a century, the cultural imagination of psychoanalysis has been assumed and largely continues to be assumed as being Western. Fundamental ideas about human relationships, family, marriage, and gender that are essentially cultural in origin often remain unexamined as

if they are shared by analyst and patient alike. Though these fundamental ideas belong to WEIRD culture, they pervade the analytic space as if they were universally valid. Thus ideas that are historically and culturally only true of and limited to modern Western—specifically European and North American middle class—experience are incorporated unquestioned into psychoanalytic theory.

With the rise of relativism in the human sciences and politically with the advent of decolonization in the second half of the twentieth century, human sciences took a sceptic turn, to which psychoanalysis has not been immune. Intellectually, the relativistic position owes much of its impetus to Foucault's powerful argument on the rootedness of all thought in history and culture—and in the framework of power relations. Adherents of this perspective are not a priori willing to accept why psychoanalysis, a product of early twentieth-century European bourgeois family and social structure, should be an exception to the general rule on the incapacity of thought to transcend its roots. In the intellectual climate of our times, then, the cultural and historical transcendence of psychoanalytic theories can no longer be taken for granted.

For a long time—up to a few decades ago—psychoanalysis was reluctant to accord culture a defining role in the construction of individual subjectivity. In the various phases of its encounter with anthropology, which could conceivably have tempered its Western-cultural orientation, psychoanalysis has taken a privileged, asymmetric position in its relationship with anthropology: there has been psychoanalytical anthropology but not an anthropological psychoanalysis. Analysts have continued to regard ethnographic facts and the methods used to uncover them as belonging to the “surface” of human behavior and hence superficial; they are not considered “deep” enough to merit the respectful attention given to the reports of practicing analysts. The few anthropologists among analysts—especially the pioneers of the psychoanalytic anthropology such as Géza Róheim (1950) and George Devereux—reinforced the privileged position of psychoanalysis by applying psychoanalytic concepts to cultures, almost as if the former were a fixed set of tools, rather than a means of making analysts more culturally sensitive and reflective. According to Devereux (1978), for instance, any doubts about a universal, a-cultural conception of

psychoanalysis were to be rigorously combated. For him, analysis was a science independent of all cultural thought models and any efforts to “reculturalize” it were to be strongly resisted; a psychoanalysis with cultural connotations would no longer be a science but merely one of the myths of the occidental world. All that Devereux was willing to grant was the presence of an ethnic unconscious built from a specific constellation of defense mechanisms that a given culture brings to bear on human experience, and through which the necessary renunciation of universal wishes and fantasies can be achieved.

Despite these obstacles, the rise of the multicultural movement in many Western societies has resulted in more and more calls from analysts of varying persuasions in many different countries (Bergeret, 1993; Davidson, 1988; Rendon, 1993; Yampsey, 1989) to re-examine the issue of culture in psychoanalysis and not shy away from any “reculturalization” if found necessary. Indeed, the intersection of psychoanalysis, culture, and society has been called the new frontier in psychoanalytic theorizing (Ainslie, 2018). Salman Akhtar (2008, 2009), for instance, has been a pioneer in bringing contributions from Muslim and East Asian societies, otherwise at the “periphery” of psychoanalytic discourse, to the attention of the Western “metropolis.” Yet, given the dominant social concerns of Western societies, it is the cultures of race and class, rather than those of a society or even a civilization, that continue to draw most psychoanalytic attention (e.g., Altman, 1995, 2000; Dalal, 2002, 2006; Layton, 2006).

My argument against psychoanalysis as a universal enterprise where “one size fits all” rather than as a global one that reflects cultural nuances does not mean that I subscribe to an extreme culturally relativist position. Cultural conditions cannot by themselves account for intrapsychic constellations or even the behavior of individuals in a given culture. Nor do I share the postmodernist belief that there is no essential human nature at all. I would resist the notion of the person as a *tabula rasa* without “innate” desires, wishes, and fantasies although recognizing that one may differ about the basis of this innateness being biology, universal conditions of human infancy, or a combination of the two. A person is greatly modifiable but not infinitely so, with a mental life that is the end product of a complex interaction between the person’s culture, family milieu, and his or her own needs and desire-based fantasies.

In another, more dynamic formulation to which I would subscribe, the individual self is a system of reverberating representational worlds—representations of his culture, primary family relationships, and bodily life—each enriching, constraining, and shaping the others as they jointly evolve through the life cycle (J. M. Ross, 1994). None of these constituting inner worlds (imagination of body, family, and culture) are “primary” or “deeper”; all of them flow into the same river we call the psyche. There is thus no need for a hierarchical ordering of aspects of the psyche or to attempt an “archaeological” layering of the different inner worlds, although at different times the self may well be primarily experienced in one or the other representational mode.

To put this in Freudian language, the reality of the reality principle which the ego endeavors to substitute for the pleasure principle of the id is essentially cultural. The cultural reality I engage with in this book of essays, a sequel to an earlier collection (Kakar, 1997) is primarily Hindu-Indian, even as I am aware that an individual Indian’s cultural imagination is modified by the specific cultures of their family, caste, class, or ethnic group. Yet even in the modern Hindu-Indian, who forms the bulk of the clientele for psychoanalytic therapy in the metropolises of Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Kolkata, one finds that the Indian civilizational heritage has not disappeared from their psyche. Just as we talk about an intergenerational transmission of trauma, we need to be aware of a preconscious and unconscious intergenerational transmission of culture. The modern Indian of the future, too, will continue to have an ancient heart.

The Indian journey of psychoanalysis begins with Girindrasekhar Bose, the founder and the longtime president of the Indian Psychoanalytical Society who linked Indian philosophical thought with psychoanalysis even as he produced original work on the cultural moments in his patients’ mental life in essays for the newly founded journal of the Indian Psychoanalytical Society (Bose, 1948, 1949, 1950). As early as 1929, Bose, perhaps the first analyst to raise the issue of cultural relativity of some of psychoanalytic propositions, wrote to Freud: “Indian patients do not exhibit castration symptoms to such a marked degree as my European cases,” and “The desire to be female is more easily unearthed in Indian male patients than in

European”, and “The Oedipus mother is very often a combined parental image” (Sinha, 1966).

Freud was politely dismissive of this challenge from Calcutta to the psychoanalytic claim of universality of its theories and models, especially the Oedipus complex, and the discussion did not go further.<sup>2</sup> Privately, he showed some irritation with Bose and the first generation of Indian analysts. For instance, he is reported to have remarked to his patient, the poet Hilda Doolittle (1956), “On the whole, I think my Indian students have reacted in the least satisfactory way to my teaching” (p. 68). And later, in the context of the Japanese Association, the only other non-Western society in the IPA at the time, H.D. writes (Friedman, 1981): “He [Freud] and I agreed that the Jap may be something where the Hindoo was all muddles with unconscious and with psychoanalysis in general” (p. 320). And when analyzing the writer Mulraj Anand, who went to see Freud for a few sessions in Vienna as a young man, Freud burst out mid-session: “You Indians, with your eternal mother-complex!” (Kakar, 1995).

As I have observed earlier (Kakar, 1997), like sexist discourse, which either looks down at women as whores or elevates them to goddesses, colonial psychoanalytical discourse also dismissed non-Western people

either as irrational, less-differentiated primitives or elevated them to a class of noble savages, close to unconscious rhythms of life and nature and possessors of an intuitive wisdom. Whereas Freud can be said to exemplify the former tendency, Jung is clearly the representative of the latter; both were part of their colonial times and were influenced by the European hegemonic ideology. (p. 31)

Freud’s world (as also Jung’s) was still that of a colonial Europe, which regarded itself as the center of the world, culturally, intellectually, and politically. It was a world untouched by the globalization and decolonization of our times, and it is unfair to expect that Freud should be an

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<sup>2</sup> Three years later, Freud showed similar disinterest in “the father of Japanese psychoanalysis” Heisaku Kosawa’s theory of the Ajase complex in Japan which he contrasted with the Oedipus complex (Okinogi, 2009).

exception who transcends the rule of rootedness of thought in culture and history.

The colonial mindset was particularly crass in the writings of British analysts claiming a close familiarity with Hindu-Indian culture and society. C. D. Daly, an officer in the British Indian army who was one of the twelve founding members of the Indian Psychoanalytical Society in 1922, published a paper in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, where he wrote that “the Hindu people would have to make an effort to overcome their infantile and feminine tendencies ... The role of the British Government should be that of wise parents” (Hartnack, 2001, p. 67).

Owen Berkeley Hill (1921), a psychiatrist in the Indian Medical Corps and the other British founder-member of the Indian Society, attributed to Hindus an anal-erotic character, asserting that Hindus do not have a psychological disposition for leadership and thus need to be ruled. In addition to being obsessive–compulsive, they were also infantile, since “their general level of thought partakes of the variety usually peculiar to children” (Hartnack, 2001, p. 52).

The colonial mindset of pathologizing a non-Western people in even its most reputed professional journals by analysts without a claim to a serious engagement with and understanding of Indian civilization lingered on far into the 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

Well into the 1940s, work of Indian analysts around Bose, not easily available to Western colleagues, shows a persisting concern with the illumination of Indian cultural phenomena as well the “Indian” aspects of their patients’ mental life (Kakar, 1997). After Bose’s death in 1953, cultural critique receded from psychoanalytical awareness, even among Indian analysts (Kakar, 1997). In the last three decades,

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, Nathaniel Ross, the coeditor of the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, observes (1975): “I am afraid that the Hindu striving toward Nirvana may well be related to the terrible failures and cruelties of this culture (as the appalling prevalence of abysmal poverty, the infantile death rate, the infamous caste system, with its ugly notion of ‘the untouchables,’ the dismal failure to control overpopulation) and the dangers of escapism implicit in a too unworldly approach to life” (p. 90).

Or, in almost a caricature of psychoanalytic “scientific” writing, we read:

“Most especially, there is a pull to oral fixation ... Rigid proscriptions around eating and killing animals suggest reaction formation. Oral eroticism is seen in cultural emphasis on generosity, especially around food, institutionalized dependency, totalism etc.” (Silvan, 1981, p. 97).



though, perhaps as part of the cultural and political critique of psychoanalysis as it relates to non-Western societies such as India, Bose's person and work have been experiencing a renaissance (Dhar, 2018; Hartnack, 2001; Hiltenbeitel, 2018; Kakar, 1997; Nandy, 1995).

Almost a quarter of a century after the passing away of Bose, there was renewed interest from practicing psychoanalysts in the cultural specificities of psychoanalysis in India as well as its implications for psychoanalytic assumptions and models (Kakar, 1978, 1987b, 1989, 1997; Roland, 1980). To judge from the many papers published by Indian analysts and psychoanalytical therapists in edited books in the last two decades (Akhtar, 2005; Kumar et al., 2018; Vaidyanathan & Kripal, 1999) this interest is burgeoning as the lingering mental colonization is cast off.

In conclusion, I wish to say that as the globalization of ideas picks up pace, psychoanalysis cannot afford to lose the lens through which Indian cultural imagination, as also the imaginations of other major civilizations, have viewed the fundamental questions of human existence, the human mind, and the quest for psychic truth. These cultural imaginations are an invaluable resource for the move away from a universal to a global psychoanalysis that remains aware of but is not limited by its origins in the modern West. I believe that in future, the more important contributions to psychoanalysis, that could rejuvenate its current theoretical/conceptual state, will come from Asia whose ancient and still surviving psycho-philosophical schools have much to contribute. Insights from clinical work embedded in the cultural imaginations of Asian civilizations could spur psychoanalysis to rethink its theories of the human psyche. I hope that this slim volume is a small step in the start of that journey.