

The Classic and the Modern: Mythologies of Yoga, Ayurveda, and Social Work

Brij Mohan¹

Professor and Dean Emeritus, School of Social Work, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

RECEIVED: 31-Dec-21

REVISED: 24-Feb-22

ACCEPTED: 13-Apr-22

PUBLISHED: 15-Jun-22

*Corresponding Author

Brij Mohan

E-mail: swmoha@lsu.edu

Citation: Brij Mohan (2022). The Classic and the Modern: Mythologies of Yoga, Ayurveda, and Social Work. *Horizon J. Hum. Soc. Sci. Res.* 4 (1), 9–13. <https://doi.org/10.37534/bp.jhssr.2022.v4.n1.id1133.p9>.



ABSTRACT

Vedas contain ancient spiritual-ontological world views in which saints and sages passed on as “truths” to the next generations. The rise of *Ayurveda* is relatively recent though its holistic approach to human ‘wellness’ springs from ancient resources. *Social Work* as is a modern ‘profession’ though social welfare, primordialially, has existed since times immemorial².

Keywords: Vedic-Indic Culture; Ayurveda, Social Praxis/Practice, and Mindfulness

Coronaviruses and their variants have lately ravaged the human family. The threat of extinction is surreal. Death, anxiety, fear, and loneliness have changed the way we once lived on this planet in harmony and conflicts with each other (Mohan, 2022). This exponential catastrophe has taken a toll on over 17 million lives. Seven plagues in antiquity remind us of our vulnerability despite civilization’s advancements. Let’s pause and see how our units of analyses—Veda, Ayurveda, and Social Work—evolved in South Asia both culturally and mythologically.

Modern technology, science, humanities, and social sciences owe their advancements to the Enlightenment that revolutionized the horizons of human imagination and ingenuity. It does not mean that ancient cultures and civilizations were simply blackholes of ignorance and mindlessness. There are wonders hidden in the dustbins of history which remain buried under our contemporary hubris and comprehension. Certain facets of ancient life, astronomy, medicine, architecture, and knowledge are still far beyond the modern mind.

¹ The author is Dean Emeritus, School of Social Work, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70808-5752. He is also Editor-in-Chief of *Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research and Social Development Issues* (ICSD); (swmoha@lsu.edu; Brijmohan128@gmail.com)

Let alone wonders of Sumerian (4500 BC to 1900 BC), Indus Valley (3300 BC to 1300 BC), Egyptian (3100 BC to 30 BC), Imperial Chinese (2070 BC to AD), and Mayan (1000 BC to AD 1520) civilizations, it’s perhaps beyond our capacity to rebuild another Taj Mahal which is hardly about 500 years old. There is a bunch of neo-national enthusiasts—SW’s flatliners—who blindly believe that every modern invention preexisted Rigveda. I am not one of those Indic scholars because the language of abstract philosophical and mythological conception may be true without empirical evidence.

Kurt Godel’s *logical investigation*, “expressed his conviction that a scientific proof of ‘theological worldview’ would imply not only the existence of God but also an afterlife” (Budiansky, 2021: 61). Earlier, he “stunned the world of mathematics with his incompleteness theorem, [that] he demonstrated that the field must allow for **statements that are true but unprovable**” (Budiansky, 2021: 60; *emphasis added*). I brought this rather unrelated reference in comparative introspection to make a modest

² This article is based on my Inaugural Address to the 3rd International Conference on Veda, Ayurveda, and Social Work, University of Lucknow, December 18-19, 2021.

assertion: Much of Vedas and Upanishads, and the Bhagwat Gita basically invoke these unprovable truths: *karma* and *dharma* paradigm; *deathlessness* of soul; structural inequality; afterlife; and reinforcement of the basic tenets of Buddhism and Hinduism³. It's a confluence (*sangam*) of the past and the present as well as the *classic* and *modern*.

Buddhism, as I see, was a reaction against the Hindu-Vedic orthodoxies. There is neither God nor any War that supports the status quo. This turns the Vedic truths and values upside down. Historializing this epoch, scholars believe that the Bhagavad Gita, its basic tenets and discourses, were formulated to thwart Buddhist deconstruction of Hinduism. Ancient "wisdom Matters in the modern world" (Davis, 2009).

In Aryan Journey, author Harsh Mahan Cairae, mediates the history of this Aryan trajectory validated by Rig Ved. "The Aryans who have given the Veds to us have called themselves Devs at this stage and called the other side Asurs" (2014: 31)

I. Apocalypse Now: Legitimization of Truth and War:

The Bhagwat Gita and its discourses may be interpreted as divine teachings that justify war against tyrants and oppressors. George Bush's war against Sadam Hussian? It's "the Warrior's Gita as characterized by Wendy Doniger⁴ that is used to legitimize war. Since Krishna himself delivers it to Arjuna, the warrior, it partakes of a godly song of truth. Doniger writes:

"How did Indian tradition transform the Bhagavad Gita (the "Song of God") into a bible for pacifism, when it began life, sometime between the third century BC and the third century CE, as an epic argument persuading a warrior to engage in a battle, indeed, a particularly brutal, lawless, internecine war? It has taken a true gift for magic—or, if you prefer, religion, particularly the sort of religion in the thrall of politics that has inspired Hindu nationalism from the time of the British Raj to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi today" (Doniger, 2014⁵).

Doniger's view of the Gita is two-fold: one that is deadly 'engaging' and the other philosophically 'disengaging.' She

³ This does not legitimize weaponing of religion for any exclusionary nefarious ideology. I make a clear and sharp distinction between Indigenization and Hindutva (Hinduization). I am painfully aware of a faction of social workers who justify the latter as a decolonization.

⁴ See, War and Peace in Bhagavad Gita, *The New York Review of Books*, [Sic] Wendy Doniger, December 4, 2014.

⁵ (<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/12/04/war-and-peace-bhagavad-gita/> Retrieved, 12/22/2021)

comments: "The *Gita's* theology—the god's transfiguration of the warrior's life—binds the two points of view in an uneasy tension that has persisted through the centuries" (Doniger, 2014: cited in *NYRB*, December 4, 2014).

Richard Davis's account of the Gita (2015) offers a dynamic view of life and death as experienced by most Indians since hoary antiquity. Davis's biography of this universally acclaimed philosophical and theological masterpiece is of great merit if it's read with a secular mind. *The Gita's* admirers include Hegel, Huxley, Oppenheimer, Thoreau, and Gandhi, to name only a few.

Albert Camus wrote: "It is a freak of the times. We make love by telephone, we work not on matter but on machines, and we kill and are killed by proxy. We gain in cleanliness but lose in understanding," (1986: 31), according to Camus: "The de-personalization of murder goes hand in hand with modern civilization's bureaucratic social organization.... Obedience to the national security state is valued over individual responsibility for the victims of social policy [Camus] wants to break the cycle of violence and its attendant legitimization. Camus' rejection of a "just" war is a remarkable attempt to delegitimize the unprincipled authority (Camus, 1986: 9-13).

II. The Fall and Rise of Traditional Indian Medicine aka Ayurveda

Understanding India's history is an *archeological* challenge. Though the existence of Indus Valley civilization is universally accepted, it's untrue to blame the Aryans for its destruction⁶. Cairae's conclusion seems acceptable: "The history of ancient India has to be understood (*Sic*) otherwise it gives a straight picture that the country had an urban civilization, which vanished at some time in the past and was followed by a rural culture, while around the same time a group of people came from outside, called the Aryans, who were pastoral nomads.... [who] destroyed the urban civilization and drove away its people to settle down in their place..." (Cairae, 2014: 418)⁷.

"Indian surgery remained ahead of European until the 18th century, when the surgeons of the East India Company were not ashamed to learn the art of rhinoplasty from the Indians."

⁶ Harsh M. Cairae quotes three pages from Vedas to demonstrate and "make it evident that the cow does not necessarily mean the animal that the name denotes. At many places it means prosperity in general and at many it has a philosophic and mystic symbolism (2014: 417).

⁷ *Ibid.* 2014: 410-413.

A.L. Basham (1971) *The Wonder that was India*⁸

Ayurveda represents the world's oldest holistic system of medicine developed in India 3000 years ago signifying a balanced *whole-body* harmonizing human spirit, mind, and body. It has evolved as a unified body of Unani, Homeopathy, and other indigenous elements despite a long eclipse during the British colonial rule. In modern India, graduates of Ayurvedic medical schools are treated on a par with other institutions modeled on western education and training. Indian *Hakims* and *Vaidyas* suffered the baggage of 'desi' (indigenous) practitioners as inferior compared against "doctory".

Anu Saini explores 'Physicians of colonial India' in an article published in *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*:

"During the initial years of their interaction, Western medicine, Ayurveda, and Unani shared similar conceptions about the humoral constitution of the human body and humoral imbalance as the primary cause of disease. There was mutual respect, and European doctors were willing to learn from Indian physicians, especially the treatments of tropical diseases. However, with the rise of rational thought in Europe, and the increasing importance being given to observation and scientific process over tradition and wisdom, European doctors felt that their system was superior to Indian systems and limited their interaction to finding new medicines or therapeutic measures"⁹ (2016).

There is an historical relationship between Yoga and Ayurveda. It's however unclear which one is the oldest system.

I grew up in a feudal town near Agra in a medically crowded family since Ram Pershad Sharma, my father was the only physician in Mursan. His patients were invariably poor, rural, and believers. They would knock at our house door even when his clinic was closed. He would make home visits to the villages by his *Tangas* and *Ikkas* and oftentimes he ended up paying for transport since his "patients" had no money to offer for medicines.

⁸ Quoted in the official calendar of Indian Institute of Kharagpur, 2921. At the outset of 2021, a graduate of Indian Institute of Technology, Khadakpur, gifted me with an annual calendar of his alma mater. Each month begins with a forerunner—or a group of other scientists—whose discipline is rooted in forgotten or unknown ancient Indian discovery and knowledge. Examples: January (*Saptarishi*, the Seven Sages of India who are credited with Cosmology, astronomy, Ayurveda, mathematics and geometry)... December (modern scientists: P. Chandra Roy and J. Chandra Bose to S. Ramanujam); Nehru Museum of Science and Technology), IIT, Khadakpur.

⁹ 2016 Jul-Sep; 5(3): 528–532. doi: 10.4103/2249-4863.197257 (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5290754/>). Retrieved 12/23/2021)

He practiced Ayurveda, Homeopathy, and Allopathy as needed. We lived in relative poverty since my father hardly ever had money. Being a Brahmin doctor's son, I was a privileged boy conscious of my family's status and its limitations. Since my father also served as a family physician of the Rajabadur, I would get a free ride on his elephant and occasionally his Studebaker. The duality of our experiences defined ambiguities of hope and distinction on the one hand poverty, hopelessness, and despair on the contrary.

Education seemed to be the only passport to escape the drudgery of an impoverished small town. I chose Social Work education as my calling and I remain committed to date.

III. The March of Social Work

My conception of modern Social Work related to human-structural transformation still remains neglected in the contemporary culture of ideas. I have pleaded for *Social Practice* which is a universally applicable construct.

Social Work is a relatively new wrinkle in the evolution of the professionally equipped caring-healing-problem-solving process in sectors where human vulnerabilities call for competent scientific intervention. A deliberative discussion in a conference on Vedas and Ayurveda¹⁰ is an excellent opportunity to unravel the mysteries and majesty of the past. Professional Social Work is largely shaped by Judeo-Christian values and ethics. Indigenization in the Vedic tradition may not be compatible. However, it's pragmatism rather than a capitalist culture of consumerism that may blend the modern and the classical¹⁰.

About 18 months ago, Prem, my wife curated a 30 minutes Yoga group for a small number of people in the extended family. A simple *Pranayama* exercise infused a measure of confidence and relief which reminded me of my late father who practiced daily meditation and puja before going to his clinic to treat his patients. He practiced the three systems of medicine—Ayurveda, Homeopathy, and Allopathy along with a few words of wisdom invoking the essence of *Ayurveda*.

The idea of *Health for All* is essentially a call for the universalization of healthcare as a fundamental right. As

¹⁰ This conference's main theme—'Health for All'—is my primary focus in this revised version of my Inaugural Address. The sub-theme however, gave me a vantage point to unify the subject. It gives me an opportunity to underscore the essence of both the conference and my takeaways from it.

my current studies and research on human-social development involve a deeper and analytical inquiry, I tend to realize the significance of the *Unification* of transformative knowledge (Mohan, 1999) implying a symbiosis between the *classic* and the *modern*. 'Mindfulness' owes its essence to this '*unification*.'

An entrepreneurial genius [Sic] Baba Ramdev has successfully cashed in both Ayurveda and Yoga. Medicines made in his labs and sold by the *Patanjali* franchise have made him and his products a household item. Yoga, perhaps the best-known Indian construct after M.K. Gandhi in the West, is a gift from the earliest practitioners of *Praxis* who envisioned the secular possibilities of the transcendental triumph of the human spirit over mundane matters and madness.

Human-Social Development in the 21st century partakes of special significance: Today's ubiquitous iPhones are a lot more complex. Machines have been perfected to achieve results far beyond imagination. The discovery of *dystopia* is an outcome of flawed *utopian* quests, materially and ideologically. When 'facts' and 'values' are not progressively aligned, manifestos of social change assume worrisome directions. Communism led to Gulag; capitalism became an existential slaughterhouse. Authoritarian, ethnic, and national impulses further weaponized these gospels of *enlightened* darkness.

Any discussion of *Yoga, Ayurveda, and Social Work*, without a unified framework, would amount to a fragmented 'understanding' of this age of anxiety, terror, and plagues. While 'classics' can provide resilience, patience, and wisdom in the face of a catastrophe, scientific 'problem-solving processes' of modern medicine and Social Work help understand the causes and consequences of dysfunctional behaviors and structural barriers. I am fully well aware of Social Work's potentials and strengths that can strengthen the impact of certain Yogic and Ayurvedic values and practices. My first doctoral student who earned his Ph.D. in Medical Social Work was chiefly instrumental in founding an institute of nature-pathy at Lucknow University (Mishra, P. 1972). Contemporary 'physiotherapy' is largely based on these Yogic exercises.

I seek to re-construct a framework that signifies modern Social Work as an *aesthetico-spiritual* dimension of Social Praxis which involves: Understanding; self-realization; and cognitive-behavioral transformation. The proposed framework is demonstrative of Social Work's primordial interface with the basic values and practices of Yoga and Ayurveda. It may sound blasphemous to those whose knowledge of my work is limited.

There are three main dimensions of Social Work that involve Yogic and Ayurvedic values:

- *Trauma* in a therapeutic society.
- *Coping and Adaptation* as the old mantras of direct-clinical practice; and
- *Capacity, Resilience, and Assets-Building* as the new 'wheel' of capitalist utopia (aka, free market).

Much of contemporary Social Work is built around these three central models of education, practice, and research (SW-EPR; Mohan, 1988). Newly emerging issues do include human diversity, oppression, violence, drug addiction, and climate changes that breed alienation of the marginalized people of color and economic exclusions. While Yoga, Ayurveda, and *Upnishads* can inspire you to withstand the systemic inequality and discrimination, no 'meditation' or Vedic thought can empower you to get a job in the soulless, callous free market. However difficult, practitioners of hope, as I call them, will have to humanize the system that incubates inequality and injustice. Yoga and Ayurveda teach us tolerance, acceptance, and inclusion in harmony with nature. The 1 percent rapacious elites perhaps need these values and practices more than a rickshaw puller in Aminabad who is unable to feed his family, let alone marry his sister off.

Traumatizing the present based on an unpleasant experience—repressed past injury or accident—amounts to "posthumous shock" (Will, 2021: 23-34). Modernity and technology have created a therapeutic culture (Mohan, 2018). Will Self's viewpoint explains "how everything became trauma"?

"...I shall be advancing the heretical notion that trauma as we now understand it is not a timeless phenomenon that has affected people in different cultures and at different times in the same way but is to a hitherto unacknowledged extent a function of modernity in all its shocking suddenness. Furthermore, I will argue that trauma is so widespread precisely because of the ubiquity of traumatogenic technologies in our societies: those of specularity and acceleration, which render us simultaneously unreflective and frenetic. On this analysis, the symptoms deemed evidence of PTSD are in fact only an extreme version of distinctively modern consciousness" (2021: 24)

In a violent culture where terror, school shootings, and mayhem are commonplace experiences, it's well nigh impossible to isolate 'therapy' from social structure. We find pervasive poverty and helplessness in an acquisitive-narcissistic culture. Both Yoga therapy and a

holistic view of person-in-environment can enhance and enrich Ayurvedic research and treatment.

Every day when I return to myself, I am surrounded by memories that I love and despise. They invoke fear; anguish; guilt and anger. The latter half of the Covid-19 outbreak was primarily a crisis triggered by non-vaccinated people. Community social workers and other professionals—yoga and Ayurveda practitioners—seem better equipped to mediate and resolve conflicts that make life difficult, even life-threatening, in marginalized sectors.

It's my belief that our primordial Social Contract that regulated society and governance is broken. Institutional meltdown, likewise, breeds racism, exclusions, angst, discrimination, and injustice (Mohan, 2022). This pervasive reality warrants re-discovery of a new civil culture where neither 'victims' nor 'executioners' co-exist.

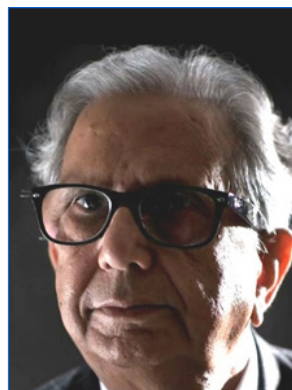
Roles, goals, and modalities of varied Social Work practices basically aim to empower marginalized people in a predatory culture. However, our aesthetico-moral dissonance tends to medicalize social issues. The need, however, is to radicalize consciousness.

"When I see beings of unpleasant character
Oppressed by strong negativity and suffering,
May I hold them, dear—for they are rare to find—
As if I have discovered a jewel of treasure."

The Dalai Lama's *Little Book of Wisdom*, 2000:

Biographical Statement of Author(s)

Brij Mohan, Dean Emeritus and Professor of Social Work, Louisiana State University, USA, is an internationally renowned Scholar with expertise in social philosophy, social welfare, public policy and international social development.



He is the author of 24 books and over 400 articles, papers, and reviews. His most recent books include: *Development, Poverty of Culture and Social Policy* (Palgrave, 2011), *Climate, Economy and Justice* (Palgrave, 2015), *The Future of Social Work* (Sage, 2018) and *Social Policy on the Cusp* (Nova, 2020).

References

- Budiansky, Stephen. 2021. 'Divine Logic,' in *Harper's*, December, 60.
- Cairae, Harsh M. 214. *An Aryan Journey*. New Delhi: Rupa.
- Doniger, Wendy. 2014. *On Hinduism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Camus, Albert. 1986. *Neither Victims Nor Executioners*. Intro. By R. Scott Kennedy & Peter Klotz-Chamberlin. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1986. Trans. By: Dwight Macdonald.
- Davis, Richard H. 2015. *The Bhagwat Gita: A Biography*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Davis, Wade. 2009. *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World.* Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press.
- Mohan, Brij. 2022. *Rediscovery of Society: A Post-Pandemic Reality*. New York: Nova Scientific Publishers.
- Mohan, Brij. 2018. *The Future of Social Work: Seven Pillars of Social Practice*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Mohan, Brij. 1999. *Unification of Social Work: Rethinking Social Transformation*. New York: Praeger
- Mohan, Brij. 1988. *The Logic of Social Welfare: Conjectures and Formulations*. New York: St. Martin's; London: Wheatsheaf.
- Self, Will. 2021. A posthumous shock: How everything became trauma. *Harper's*, December 343, 2059: 23-34.

Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith honored him with a Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*) and the National Association of Professional Social Workers in India awarded him the *Life-Time Achievement Award*.

Currently, he is working on two new books, including his memoirs.

Brij Mohan, Professor Emeritus

Dean Emeritus
Louisiana State University
LSU School of Social Work
Baton Rouge, LA 70808. USA
www.Brijmohan.org

E-mail: brijmohan128@gmail.com

