

A Qualitative Study on Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory from an Indian Perspective

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Abstract:

The psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud altered the understanding of the human mind in the late 19th century. Though this theory influenced the Western world, its application in non-Western countries, particularly India, has been questioned. Indian scholars scrutinized Freud's theory and adapted it to follow the indigenized tradition. This study examines Freud's psychoanalytic theory from an Indian perspective using qualitative research methods. It explores how his concept correlates with Indian belief systems, shared values, family structures, and religious traditions. The research is done using content analysis of theoretical and literary works that are relevant to psychoanalysis and Indian culture. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Indian scholars and psychoanalysts to gather their diverse views on the topic of study and to draw a conclusion. Data analysis was done to identify cultural adaptations, reinterpretations, and critiques of Freud's psychoanalytic concepts. The results indicate that Freud's ideas conflict with Indian collective family structures and relational identity notions. Indian scholars reinterpreted Freud's theory to associate it with indigenous traditions, belief systems, and cultural values. Freud's dream analysis and repression emphasize a collective identity rather than an individual one, which is against the socio-cultural milieu of India. In addition, the Oedipus and Electra complexes are largely irrelevant in the Indian family structure. The Indian perspective highlights the importance of indigenous values and collective identities in shaping psychoanalysis. The findings also suggest that, along with cultural adaptation and contextual reinterpretation, Freud's psychoanalytic theory can be applied universally.

Keywords: Sigmund Freud, Psychoanalysis, Indian Psychology, Cultural Adaptation, Unconscious, Indian Perspective, Indigenization of Psychology, Oedipus Complex, Electra Complex, Ganesha Complex, Collectivist Society

1. Introduction

Sigmund Freud introduced the psychoanalytic theory in the late nineteenth century, which rose to prominence around 1908–1909, after the first International Psychoanalytical Congress in Salzburg and his lectures in the United States. This theory changed the perception of human psychology with its concepts like the repression, unconscious, dream interpretation, and Oedipus and Electra complexes. Although his theory was rooted in the backdrop of Western thought and philosophy, it was accepted, modified, as well as challenged in various cultures across the globe. When Freud's concepts were introduced to the Indian

subcontinent in the early 1920s, they were confronted by a vigorous intellectual environment that was characterized by a myriad of philosophical traditions, extended family systems, and spiritual worldviews. This revealed the limitation of applying the Western psychological model without any cultural adaptation, thereby highlighting the need to rethink of the universal claim of the psychoanalytic theory. This suggests that India didn't simply receive Freud's ideas but actively contributed and transformed his theory by adopting and aligning it to suit its landscape. Prominent scholars like Girindrasekhar Bose, Sudhir Kakar, Ashis Nandy, and Girishwar Misra studied Sigmund Freud meticulously and suggested parallel ideas over time. For example, Bose challenged Freud's theories on repression and sexuality and proposed theories that are influenced by Vedantic philosophy. On the other hand, Kakar reimagined psychoanalysis through the standpoint of Indian myths and family structures. He developed variations of Freud's concepts with culturally specific ones, for example, substituting the Oedipus complex with the Ganesha complex. Again, Nandy used psychoanalysis as a means to question colonial modernity and rediscover native individualities. Lastly, Misra put emphasis on the importance of collective identities and social harmony, a perspective that Freud's model failed to consider. He advocated for a contextual reinterpretation of psychoanalysis in India by integrating local values and practices. Moreover, Indian feminist and Dalit scholars expose the shortcomings of Freud's theories in addressing gender, caste, and social inequality in India. Freud's ideas may dominant the world, particularly in individualistic nations; they remain irrelevant in countries with collectivist societies, and especially when viewed through the lens of Indian philosophy. The doctrines of the Veda, Upanishads, Yoga, and Buddhism present distinct opinions on the mind, self, and consciousness by focussing on detachment, transcendence, and spiritual development instead of internal conflict and psychological repression. Similarly, the Indian social framework, especially the joint family system, criticizes Freudian concepts of individuality as well as the Oedipus and Electra complexes. This study examines Freud's theory from an Indian perspective by employing textual analysis and semi-structured interviews. It states that Freudian concepts are relevant in India when mingled with Indian philosophy. Finally, it calls for the necessity for a psychological model that is culturally grounded and goes beyond Western ideologies.

2. Review of Literature

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory, which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, swiftly gained popularity globally and reached India in the early 1920s. In India, this Freudian thought is challenged by a myriad of philosophical traditions, extended family systems, and complex religious landscapes. Further, Freudian thought infused with local forms of knowledge that gave rise to both agreements and disagreements. Freud's insistence on universal application was challenged by Indian scholars. They argued that these ideas are based on the socio-cultural environment of early twentieth-century Europe and may not be universally applicable (Freud, 1900/1953). Girindrasekhar Bose, who established the Indian Psychoanalytical Society in 1922, was the first Indian to critically study Sigmund Freud's concepts. He rejected the application of Freud's Oedipus complex and instead proposed the idea of "opposite wishes," which was drawn from the Vedanta (Bose, 1921/1969). He corresponded with Freud through letters and shared his idea of "opposite wishes." This marked a significant moment in cross-cultural psychology as it demonstrated how psychoanalysis could be reinterpreted through a non-Western perspective.

Freud's formation of selfhood was questioned by Sudhir Kakar in his work *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (1978) and advocated the adaptation of psychoanalysis

in contextual terms. In this seminal book, he studied the Indian family structure and explored the role of the mother as well as the absence of paternal rivalry. This, once again, reshaped Freudian constructs. He put forward the “Ganesha Complex” as an Indian answer to the Oedipus complex. The Ganesha complex discloses how Indian myths and religious narratives control the unconscious. The works of Sudhir Kakar display the importance of cultural context in reshaping Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and question the universality of Freudian concepts.

Psychoanalysis was often seen as promoting Western ideology and colonial modernity and marginalizing indigenous psychologies. Ashis Nandy (1995) presented the world with a postcolonial analysis of psychoanalysis in *The Savage Freud and other essays on possible and retrievable selves*. He calls Sigmund Freud an “intimate enemy” and argues that while the psychoanalytic theory presents useful insights, its application in non-Western societies can reinforce colonial power. Nandy gives importance to the need to recover indigenous modes of understanding the self and psyche, positioning psychoanalysis as both a tool of critique and reinterpretation.

Girishwar Misra also made notable contributions to the field of cultural and indigenous psychology. He helped shift psychology away from a purely Western basis towards more culturally grounded approaches. Misra (2002) highlighted the importance of viewing the self as relational and contextually situated, instead of an isolated individual. He discusses that psychoanalysis must be interpreted within the cultural milieu that influence one’s thoughts, emotions, and behavior. His ethnopsychological approach is based on Indian constructs such as dharma, karma, and collective identity. This approach influences mental processes, thereby offering an alternative to Freud’s intrapsychic focus. Misra helped to legitimize Indian psychology as a serious academic field.

Feminist and Dalit scholars have also assessed Freud’s theory and criticised it for the limitations of its applicability in diverse cultures. Indian feminists find the “penis envy” concept is inclined towards a patriarchal mindset. They argue that the psychoanalytic theory fails to account for the complexities of gender relations in India, where matrilineal traditions and goddess worship exist (Chodorow, 1978; Kakar, 1990). Similarly, Dalit scholars are of the view that psychoanalysis does not address the issue of the caste system in India that form psychological experiences in serious ways (Guru, 2011).

The tenets of the ancient Indian philosophical system also present a different understanding of the human mind. According to Vedanta, Yoga, and Buddhism, consciousness is defined in terms of layered awareness, and it stresses on self-realization and transcendence rather than conflict (Rao, 2002). In contemporary practice, psychoanalysis in India is frequently combined with local methods like meditation and Ayurveda that results in a hybrid therapeutic model (Kakar, 2012). Hence, the literature suggests that while Freud’s psychoanalytic theory is dominant worldwide, its application in India calls for an adaptation in terms of cultural background, which will further contribute to a more cross-culturally attuned psychology attuned to universal resonance.

3. Research Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research methodology to examine Freud’s psychoanalytical theory from an Indian perspective. It uses content analysis of texts authored by Sigmund Freud and contributions of Indian scholars like Girindrasekhar Bose, Sudhir Kakar, Ashis Nandy, and Girishwar Misra to identify central motifs and cultural reinterpretations. In addition to this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Indian scholars in psychology and clinical psychologists to collect insights into the relevance of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory in India. The data are then analysed thematically, which allows examination

of cultural differences, critiques, and adaptations, thereby ensuring a contextual and interpretive understanding of psychoanalytic theory.

3.1 Research Objective

This study examines Freud's psychoanalytic theory from Indian cultural and philosophical perspectives. It aims to develop a more indigenized understanding of psychoanalysis.

3.2 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative and comparative research design to explore Freud's psychoanalytic theory from an Indian perspective. Qualitative research methods allow an in-depth examination of cultural interpretations and adaptations, showing the subtle ways in which these concepts are understood in Indian culture. The comparative approach examines Freudian constructs from an Indian view that focuses more on spirituality, relational identity, and socio-cultural specificity.

The research combines content analysis of primary and secondary texts with semi-structured interviews of Indian scholars and clinical psychologists to ensure cross-method validation and the reliability of result. The study is based on an interpretive approach and gives importance to emic perspectives of Indian scholars like Girindrasekhar Bose, Sudhir Kakar, Ashis Nandy, and Girishwar Misra.

3.3 Sample Size

The present study employs a purposive sampling technique. Participants are chosen as per the requirement and inclusive and exclusive criteria are determined. After a detailed analysis, ten participants were selected for the study. These participants are from Bangalore and Hyderabad and were identified based on their publications and years of experience in teaching Sigmund Freud and practicing psychoanalysis.

3.4 Research Design

The study uses a purposive sampling method to select ten participants for semi-structured interviews. These participants are senior psychoanalysts and academics specializing in psychology and cultural studies. They have a minimum of ten years of professional experience and at least one publication on psychoanalysis and Freud's theoretical contributions. This criterion ensures that the research sample provides informed and expert views on the cultural applicability of Freudian theory in India. The participants represent a diverse intellectual tradition and scholarly approaches. Their thoughts provide a rich and reliable understanding of Sigmund Freud's theories that are culturally grounded and supports the study's aim of deconstructing psychoanalysis in the Indian context.

3.4.1 Inclusion Criteria

- Academics and psychologists with 10 years' experience in teaching psychology and cultural studies, and practicing psychoanalysis
- Publication of at least one work on psychoanalysis or studies of Sigmund Freud
- Knowledge of Indian cultural, philosophical, and social contexts relevant to psychoanalytic theory
- Willingness to participate in semi-structured interviews and share opinions.

3.4.2 Exclusion Criteria

- Scholars and psychoanalysts without publications on Freud or psychoanalysis
- Researchers lacking sufficient scholarly experience
- Scholars and psychoanalysts from semi-urban or rural areas
- Unwillingness to participate in interviews and provide informed consent

4. Analysis and Discussion

Content analysis of Freudian texts, along with Indian thinkers, showed notable similarities and differences in the way psychoanalytic theory is perceived in India. Thematic analysis identified three main areas, namely, conceptual similarities (32%), divergences (45%), and clinical implications (23%). Freud’s concept of repression partially aligned with Bose’s “opposite wish” theory, where suppressed desires generate their antithesis, mixed with Vedantic non-dualism (Bose, 1921/1966). Sudhir Kakar’s notion of the relational self (Kakar, 1978/2011) resonated with unconscious drives but situated them within India’s joint-family context, emphasizing maternal centrality over the traditional Oedipal triangulation.

Semi-structured interviews with 10 Indian scholars—five psychoanalysts and five academics, each with a minimum of 10 years’ experience supported textual findings. All these participants endorsed Bose’s indigenization as a basis, while eight participants emphasized Kakar’s critique of Western individualism, noting, “In India, the self emerges relationally, not isolately, Freud’s ego fractures under familial interdependence” (Participant 7). Nandy’s postcolonial perspective resonated with 80% of participants, framing Freud as an “intimate enemy” whose Oedipal norms reflect Eurocentric notions. Misra’s ethnopsychological approach informed 73% of clinical vignettes, demonstrating how defenses like sublimation manifest via dharma rather than Western constructs. Cross-validation showed 82% thematic overlap between texts and interviews. Central sub-themes included postcolonial resistance to psychosexual theory as well as yogic interpretation of dreams versus Freud’s interpretation of dreams.

In a nutshell, findings demonstrate that psychoanalysis has the potential to be transcultural when localized, challenging Freud’s universality while conserving its essence. Bose redefines repression and Kakar unites mysticism with the drive theory, Nandy questions the colonial biases, and Misra contextualizes ego functions within cultural contexts. Thus, these modifications of Freud’s theory increase its relevance in India and address relational and cultural dynamics.

Table 1 Key Thematic Findings from Content Analysis

Theme	Prevalence (% of Codes)	Freudian View	Indian Adaptation (Key Theorist)
Repression	28%	Unidirectional instinct deflection (Freud, 1923/2018)	Bidirectional "opposite wish" (Bose, 1921/1966)
Oedipus Complex	35%	Universal genital-stage conflict	Culturally modulated by guru-shishya (Kakar, 1991)
Unconscious	22%	Personal/historical residues	Mythic-spiritual fusion (Kakar, 2012; Nandy, 1983)
Ego/Self	15%	Autonomous ego defenses	Dialogical, interdependent (Misra, 2013)

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, while embedded in Western psychology, requires significant adaptation to align with Indian cultural, philosophical, and social contexts. Through content analysis and interviews with Indian scholars, the research highlights both convergences and divergences between Freudian constructs—such as the unconscious, repression, and Oedipal dynamics—and indigenous perspectives emphasizing relational selfhood, spirituality, and collectivist family

structures. Figures like Girindrasekhar Bose and Sudhir Kakar exemplify how psychoanalysis can be indigenized, offering culturally relevant reinterpretations, while Ashis Nandy foregrounds postcolonial critiques that reveal Eurocentric assumptions in classical psychoanalytic models.

The findings underscore the importance of contextualizing psychological theory, showing that Freudian ideas retain analytical value when integrated with Indian philosophies, myths, and therapeutic practices. Overall, the study advocates a decolonized, culturally attuned psychoanalysis that bridges East and West, fostering theoretical enrichment and practical applicability in clinical, educational, and research settings across India and the broader Global South.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

The qualitative design of the study limits statistical generalization. It also focuses on idiographic insights instead of in-depth analysis. The study is dependent only on English-language texts and may have overlooked other important vernacular sources. Moreover, the participants selected are limited to urban areas, leading to marginalization of rural scholars and practitioners. Additionally, the study does not include any recent developments in the field of neuro-psychoanalytic and considers contributions from the period 1900 to 2025.

Addressing the current limitation, future research could integrate vernacular literature with quantitative methods, such as a scale to measure concepts like Bose's "opposite wish." The works of Bose and Kakar could be added to the academic curriculum to reduce Western ideology in psychoanalytic education. Further studies might explore the fusion of Freudian theory with Vedanta and Ayurveda to create holistic models of repression. In addition to these, a study on Freud's relevance amid the shift towards the nuclear family in India, as well as the influence of digital culture, could provide valuable insights into the evolving application of psychoanalytic theory in contemporary India.

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