Emotions: An Indian perspective

Dharitri Ramaprasad
Richmond Fellowship College for Psychosocial Rehabilitation, ‘Chetana’, Bangalore, India

ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to understand emotions and the affect from Indian traditional point of view. In the Indian philosophical texts’ detailed descriptions of emotions are not available nor are dealt with as a separate concept. This view of emotions lays emphasis on desires as the root cause of emotional upheavals. They are seen as modification of desire and attachment. The desires are seen as arising from the contact and attachment of the ego or ahamkara with the external world and are caused by a sense of imperfection, incompleteness or non-fulfillment. Ego or ahamkara is differentiated from the true Self or atman. Emotions are viewed as springs of action and are bipolar in nature. According to Patanjali’s Yoga Shastra, suffering is due to ignorance about one’s true “self” (avidya). Hence, suffering or dukha arises from within and not from the outside world. Bhagvadgita traces all emotional experiences to the gunas, i.e., sattva, rajas, and tamas. Works of Bharathamuni have contributed to the understanding of emotional experiences. Concept of rasa or aesthetic relish is central to this approach to understanding affective experiences as dealt with in the Natyashastra of Bharathamuni. These views underline the recommended path for self-transformation. Regulating emotions, both emotional experience and emotional expression, is an integral part of the recommended “principles of living.”

Key words: Ego, ahamkara, emotion, gunas, atman

INTRODUCTION

Emotion, as an important ingredient of life, has intrigued psychologists and all those who are interested in understanding human behavior for long. Emotions play an important role in our day-to-day life. All our actions and thoughts are governed by our emotional experiences. In turn, emotions are reflected in our actions and thoughts. In addition, they play a significant role in human life by way of preparing us for action, shaping our future responses to situations and events. They also influence our social interaction a great deal. Ways in which we deal with our emotions and emotional experiences influences the quality of our social interaction too.

Emotions have been defined as feelings having both physiological and cognitive components. Various theories have been proposed in an attempt to understand them. There are theories emphasizing the physiological components and there are theories highlighting the cognitive components and there are still others, which acknowledge the role of both physiological as well as cognitive components and also there are the cognitive appraisal theories. In addition, there is the social-constructionist view-point. A wide range of emotions have been studied and described in terms of physiological responses, accompanying cognitions and associated environmental events. However, the feeling,
which is the experiential component, has often been neglected.

Feeling, termed as “affect” is the most complex component and cannot be understood by analyzing emotions into parts. This experiential aspect has been central to the Indian approach to understanding human nature. The term “affect” focuses on the subjective experiential aspects of emotions as against the physiological changes and behavior accompanying emotions. “Affect” as a feature and function of the “person” and the nature of one who experiences it, has been the focus of Indian tradition of understanding human nature.

**EMOTIONS**

In the Indian philosophical texts and scriptures detailed description of emotions are not available nor are dealt with as a separate concept. They are seen as a component of personality arising out of the contact of ego or ahankara with the external world. According to Jain,[4] this could be because “emotions remained something to be transcended in order to achieve the ultimate goal of life.” Emotions are viewed in the context of the ego (ahamkara) and the true self (atman). It is an experience that represents the relation between the ego and the outside world. In the Indian thought, emotions are seen as arising from desires. Emotions in turn are viewed as springs of action and are bi-polar in nature. There is a strong emphasis on sukha and dukha (pleasure and pain) as the two opposites. Emotions are concerned with mind or the Manomaya kosa and influence both the food sheath and the vital air sheath as evident from the physiological reactions accompanying emotions. Emotions and their affective experiences are influenced by the intellect or the Vijnanamaya kosa, the cognitive appraisal as proposed by Lazarus, as well as the Anandamaya kosa, the experiential aspect, or the bliss sheath. The nature of emotions and the associated affect needs to be examined in this context.

All emotions spring from desires and desire is caused by a sense of imperfection, incompleteness or non-fulfillment felt within oneself. The stronger the desire, the stronger would be the emotional experience. A desire when not fulfilled or thwarted gives rise to anger (Krodha), jealousy (Asuya), unhappiness (Dukha), and suffering. Desire when fulfilled leads to happiness (Sukha) and enjoyment. Indian scriptures warn that fulfillment of a desire can and most often leads to greed (Lobha). One craves for more and more of it. There is a yearning for larger possession and greater enjoyment. These when entertained, one may develop arrogance (Mada) and envy (Matsarya). There is an additional emotional experience of fear (Bhaya) of losing whatever one possesses. These emotions cloud one’s intellectual discrimination and lead one to emotional and mental disturbance. However, not all emotions are considered detrimental. Emotions are basically seen as virtue but allowing them to interfere with one’s judgment and awareness is considered a weakness.[5]

The scriptures reiterate that desires are responsible for all mental agitations and sorrows. The traditional Indian thought lays great emphasis on desires in the causation of suffering, misery and pain. Emotions are seen as modification of desire or attachment. It is suggested that if one wants to overcome the overwhelming emotional experiences like anger and sorrow, one must locate the desire underlying it and then eliminate it.[5]

According to Patanjali’s Yoga Shastra, suffering is due to ignorance about one’s true “Self” (avidya). Ignorance leads to misperception. Individuals develop a false sense of ego by identifying themselves with things/objects around them. The desires, with this ego attachment, become stronger. This ego attachment, attraction, and repulsion are termed affliction (Klesas). The misperception lies in the acceptance of external objects as the true self. This produces a false view of reality. In this sense, suffering/dukha arises from within and not from the outside world.

The Bhagavadgita traces all emotional experiences to the gunas, i.e., sattva, rajas, and tamas. Cheerfulness, joy, bliss, forgiveness and equanimity are associated with sattva. Rajas gives rise to discontent, mental agony, grief, greed, hatred, and intolerance. Fatigue, “delusion,” indolence, and non-discrimination (between the pleasant and the good) are due to tamas. Hence it is suggested that men should strive to increase the sattvic guna.

**THE RASA THEORY**

In the Indian tradition, the aesthetic theories and the science of dramatics, especially the works of Bharathmuni (5th century), have contributed to the understanding of emotional experiences. There is a strong emphasis on the experiential aspect of emotions. Concept of rasa or aesthetic relish or aesthetic mood is central to this approach to understanding affective experiences as dealt in the Natyashastra of Bharathamuni (commentary by Abhinavagupta, 11th century).[6,7] Sage Bharata conceptualized the rasa theory in the context of drama and theatre, which was later extended to all poetry and also other performing art forms. In this ancient Indian text of dramatics, all three components, i.e., physiological/behavioral, cognitive, and feelings are dealt with in detail. Bharata suggests eight aesthetic moods or rasas corresponding to eight major emotions or bhavas. These moods are sringara (love), hasya (comic), karuna (pathos), raudra (furious), vira (heroic), bhayanaka (horror), bibhasta (odious), adbhuta (marvel). The corresponding emotions are rati (erotic), hasa (mirth), soka (sorrow), krodha (anger), utsaha (energy), bhaya (fear), jugupsa (disgust), visnaya (astonishment).[8] Like all traditional
Indian approaches, distinction is made between the major or basic emotions, and the accessory ones. Major emotions are permanent emotional dispositions or sentiments or sthayibhava. These transform other emotions into themselves. These are also considered innate. Permanent emotions are considered as permanent mental traces (samskaras). These when accompanied with source (vibhava), transitory emotions (vyabhicaribhava), and expressions (anubhava) can give rise to rasa. Transitory emotions are not innate and they give rise to permanent emotions and disappear after the permanent emotions show up. It is also suggested that transitory emotions represent the day-to-day normal life where similar emotions are expressed and experienced in changing situations. Accessory emotions are transitory states, i.e., vyabhicaribhava and are subordinate to the permanent emotional dispositions. These theories have dealt with the causes of emotions and also provide cues for managing heightened affect. The yoga also differentiates between sentient pleasure and rational happiness according to which the sentient pleasure arises due to the gratification of desires and rational happiness is due to the eradication of desires. As observed by Paranjape “In the spiritual and religious domains, the analysis of aesthetic experience accounted for the uplifting quality of the experience of art. Such accounts were based on the capacity of the relishing of emotional experience for distancing of ego from the mundane concerns of life and the self-transformation, resulting from such distancing” on the part of those who participated in the art work. This is in agreement with the vedantic view that “all experiences of pleasure and pain, satisfaction and dissatisfaction are due to the involvement of ego or ahamkara”. This is also true from the spectator point of view. The feelings involved in aesthetic appreciation and experience does not directly involve the spectator. These are not directly pleasurable or threatening but the work of art or the drama touches the person within. They become enjoyable and are relished without being painful or pleasurable. Even the negative emotions become enjoyable. This is the state of non-involvement of the ego with the external event depicted. This is a state close to being a witness or a saksi. This can explain why dramas focusing on emotions like pain, sadness, fear, disgusts are also enjoyed and relished. The ability of art experience to transcend the egocentric emotional experience has been rightly acknowledged in the Indian tradition of art, music, and dramatics. According to Sinha, “in aesthetic enjoyment there is a peculiar sense of make-belief on account of which the emotion felt by the spectator is experienced as his own and yet not quite his own, and as another’s and yet not quite another.” This is the state of empathy. Work of art, like classical music and other performing arts (dance and drama) are considered to be a form of spiritual activity, a kind of “meditation” and are often used as a means of self-transformation.

Having emphasized that desires are the cause of suffering and other affective experiences, desiring is not looked down upon. The scriptures caution against becoming a slave to one’s own uncontrollable cravings and desires, which is seen as a direct path towards dukha or suffering. When these desires are not contained, they develop into negative emotions like greed, anger, fear, etc., leading to mental agitation and outbursts. Emotions and affective experiences are not always viewed as detrimental. They are beneficial if they are directed universally and do not arise from selfish motives. The emotional experience of “love” means, being in harmony with one and all. Love implies realizing one’s oneness or identity with the world. The moment it gets associated with attachment and possessiveness it becomes self-centered. This self-centeredness of emotion can lead to greed, envy, fear, on one hand and on the other hand to anger, jealousy, and sorrow, which are a state of suffering. This is the approach taken in Bharathamuni’s Natyashastra, i.e., the science of dramatics. The emotions expressed in drama and the affective experiences of the spectators are generalized and widely shared. This makes it non-threatening. They are enjoyable without being personally painful or even pleasurable. Hence, these affective experiences, whether due to negative emotions or positive emotions are enjoyed and relished. This is also relevant to understand the state of empathy. Besides the affective experiences there has been concern about its expression. Vedantic literature considers unintelligent and inappropriate expressions of emotions further leading to pain and sorrow.

**AHAMKARA, ATMAN, AND EMOTIONS**

All human beings strive for "happiness." In other words, goal of human life is “happiness.” This state of “happiness” is not the same as the emotions of “being happy.” This state of being happy is seen as transitory and is experienced due to the ego or “ahamkara” abiding in external objects and hence, it is wholly dependent on the external objects. In the Indian perspective, “happiness” or “bliss” i.e., ananda is the true nature of “self” or atman. This state of atman has been described as sat-chit-anand, i.e., the oneness of existence (sat), consciousness (chit) and bliss (anand). This state is the conquest and transcendence of pleasure and pain or the egocentric emotions. This is the state of non-involvement of ego and experience of true empathy wherein the feelings are experienced as one’s own and still not one’s own as this experience is independent of the objects of the external world. In this sense, emotion and emotional experiences provide a pathway towards personal growth or transformation.

**IMPLICATION**

Understanding emotions from this perspective can bring some insights into the process of healing emotional disturbances. Healing and change to be long lasting should address it holistically. Changing physiological responses, behavior and/or cognitions, may not bring a lasting change.
in unhealthy emotional responsiveness, until the basic wish or desire is not dealt with. The challenge for the therapist is to help the person to understand the roots of the presenting emotional experiences, their transitory nature (vyabhicaribhava), and how they disappear into permanent emotional dispositions (sthayibhava). This also implies that therapy should aim not at strengthening the ego or ahamkara but to strengthen the real self or atman. Dissolving ego or ahamkara only in the sense of false identity, identification with the external world or the non-self (anathman), referred to as abhimana, or attachment is suggested. This does not advocate losing the discriminating principle or buddhi, which is essential for maintaining the day to day dealings with the outside world and to establish and sustain a sense of personal identity.[10] This is not about being devoid of emotions but is about experiencing them without attachment and identification and be able to take charge of them. Questioning, Socratic questioning, tracing backward the source of transitory emotions and associated desires, meditation may be some of the techniques to achieve this end. Helping clients to question oneself about the why of sorrow, searching for the source within rather than outside, understanding the need for acquisition, need for possessing, and the attachment without even considering the options, alternatives, and choices need to be the focus of therapy. Facilitating insight into the free will, the freedom to choose to be either happy or unhappy can go a long way to help clients deal with their emotions and start developing a state of equanimity.

Dukkheshv anuvigna – manaah sukshesah vighatha – sprahah
Veetha – raga – bhaya – krodhah sthitha – dhir – munir uchyathe

He whose mind is not disturbed by adversity, and who in prosperity does not hanker after pleasures; who is free from attachment, fear and anger, is called a man-of-steady-wisdom (Sthita-Prajna)

CONCLUSION

Human emotions are complex experiential component of ahamkara. They are an important aspect of our life and determine what we make out of the life experiences. The Indian perspective lays emphasis on the experiential quality, i.e., the rasa, of this experience. It is argued that ahamkara or ego experiences pleasure and sadness in relation to pleasant or unpleasant circumstances due to its attachment and identification with the objects of outside world or one’s own physical body itself. Desires are the root cause of this attachment and identification resulting in experience of varied emotions/affect. Hence, the emotions are the functions (dharma) of ahamkara and not the atman, or the true self and “happiness” or “bliss” is seen as the true nature of the atman. This perspective has therapeutic implications in terms of therapeutic goals and the methodology.

REFERENCES

1. James W. The Principles of Psychology. New York: Holt 1890;2:442.
2. Schachter S, Singer JE. Cognitive, social, and physiological determinants of emotional state. Psychol Rev 1962;69:379-99.
3. Lazarus RS. Coping. In: Lazarus RS, editor. Stress and emotion: A new synthesis. Vol. 5. Springer Pub; 1999. p. 101-126.
4. Jain U. Socio-cultural construction of emotions. Psychol Dev Soc 1994;6:152-67.
5. Parthasarathy A. Vedanta Treatise. Mumbai, India: Vedanta Life Institute Publication; 2001.
6. Sinha J. Indian Psychology: Emotion and Will. Vol. 2nd. Calcutta: Sinha Publishing House; 1961.
7. Paranjpe AC. Self and Identity in Modern Psychology and Indian Thought. New York and London: Plenum Press; 1998.
8. Rangacharya A. Natyasastra (Translation of Bharath Muni’s works). Bangalore: IBH Prakashana; 1986.
9. Shastri OC. Yoga Psychology of Patanjali and Other Aspects of Indian Psychology. Calcutta: Sanskrit College; 1984.
10. Salagame KK. Ego and Ahamkara: Self and identity in modern psychology and Indian thought. In: Cornelissen RM, Mishra G, Varma S, editors. Foundations of Indian Psychology. Vol. I. India: Pub: Longman-Pearson Education; 2011.

Source of Support: Nil, Conflict of Interest: None declared