



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

MENTAL HEALTH IN ANCIENT INDIAN LITERATURE: NARRATIVES, PSYCHOLOGICAL INSIGHT, AND PATHS TO WELL-BEING

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Abstract: Mental health is not a new concern in Indian thought. Ancient Indian texts have described the mind, emotions, human behaviour, suffering, self-control, and ways of maintaining inner balance in different ways. The Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, Darshanas, and Ayurveda contain many such ideas. This article explores mental health from three perspectives. First, it looks at selected narratives from ancient Indian literature that portray fear, grief, emotional conflict, altered judgement, and compulsive behaviour. It then discusses the concept of *Manas* and its relationship with the senses, intellect, behaviour, and the Self. Finally, the article brings together the main principles described in the Bhagavad Gita, Vedas, Upanishads, Darshanas, and Ayurveda for maintaining mental balance and preventing psychological distress. These concepts are discussed as ancient Indian perspectives on the human mind and not as direct equivalents of modern psychiatric diagnoses.

Index Terms - Mental Health, Ancient Indian literature, Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Upanishads, Darshana, Ayurveda.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mental health is commonly discussed today through psychology and psychiatry, but interest in the mind and human behaviour has a much older history in India. Ancient Indian texts describe different forms of emotional and psychological experience and also discuss self-awareness, mental balance, discipline, and regulation of the mind.^{1,2,3}

These ideas appear across literary, philosophical, and medical traditions, including the Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, the Darshanas, and Ayurveda. Together, they offer different perspectives on the mind, human behaviour, and mental well-being. This article focuses on selected narratives from these traditions, the concept of *Manas*, and key principles related to maintaining mental balance and psychological well-being.

NARRATIVES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS IN ANCIENT INDIAN LITERATURE

Ancient Indian literature often presents the workings of the mind through human stories rather than through formal psychological categories. The epics and Vedic texts describe situations in which people experience grief, fear, moral conflict, attachment, altered judgement, strong desire, and difficulty controlling their actions. These narratives are important because they show how emotional experiences were observed through their effects on thought, decision-making, relationships, and behaviour. When viewed from a

contemporary psychological perspective, some of these descriptions may resemble experiences discussed in modern psychiatry. However, they are better understood as phenomenological parallels rather than diagnostic equivalents.² Their value lies in what they reveal about human responses to conflict, loss, fear, influence, and impulse, and about the ways in which mental balance may be disturbed or regained.³

1. Arjuna: Distress, Moral Conflict, and Loss of Clarity

One of the most detailed accounts of emotional conflict appears at the beginning of the Bhagavad Gita. On the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Arjuna sees teachers, relatives, elders, friends, and other people known to him standing on both sides of the war. The battle is therefore no longer only a question of victory or duty. For Arjuna, it becomes a deeply personal and moral conflict. He is required to act according to his role as a warrior, while at the same time facing the possibility of causing the death of people to whom he is emotionally attached.

Arjuna's distress is expressed both mentally and physically. He describes weakness of the limbs, dryness of the mouth, trembling, horripilation, burning of the skin, difficulty standing, and inability to hold his bow. He also speaks of confusion in his mind (Bhagavad Gita 1.28-30).⁴ The first chapter is traditionally known as Arjuna Vishada Yoga, in which Vishada conveys a state of deep sorrow, distress, and despondency. More importantly, Arjuna's experience shows how intense emotional conflict can affect judgement and the ability to act. His distress arises from the interaction of attachment, duty, values, anticipated loss, and the consequences of his decision.

The dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna that follows gradually shifts Arjuna from emotional confusion toward reflection and clearer understanding. Krishna encourages him to reconsider duty, attachment, action, the nature of the Self, and his relationship with the outcome of his actions. Modern authors have noted conceptual similarities between parts of this dialogue and psychological approaches that involve reframing, acceptance, emotional regulation, and changes in perspective.⁵ The episode is therefore important not because it provides an ancient psychiatric diagnosis, but because it presents a complex picture of how emotional distress can disturb judgement and how reflection may help restore clarity and direction.

2. Maricha: Persistent Fear after a Frightening Experience

The story of Maricha in the Ramayana provides a different picture of psychological distress. In an earlier encounter, Maricha is struck by Rama's arrow and survives. The event, however, continues to influence him long afterwards. When Ravana later asks him to take the form of a golden deer as part of the plan to abduct Sita, Maricha strongly advises him against confronting Rama.⁶

His response is shaped by the memory of the earlier encounter. Rama is no longer only an external opponent; the recollection of his previous experience itself produces fear. Maricha repeatedly recalls the danger associated with Rama and shows a strong wish to avoid facing him again. Sheth and colleagues have discussed this account in relation to trauma-related experiences, particularly persistent fear, recollection of a threatening event, and avoidance.⁷

The psychological importance of the narrative lies in the relationship between memory and continuing fear. The immediate event has passed, yet its emotional effect remains present and influences later decisions and behaviour. The story therefore suggests an early literary recognition that a frightening experience may continue to shape the mind even when the original danger is no longer present.

3. Kaikeyi and Manthara: Interpretation, Fear, and Judgement

The interaction between Kaikeyi and Manthara provides a different kind of psychological insight. Kaikeyi initially shows affection toward Rama and does not appear to oppose his coronation. Her attitude changes gradually after Manthara repeatedly suggests that Rama's rise to the throne may threaten Bharata's future and reduce Kaikeyi's own position.⁶

The important change in this episode is not in the event itself but in Kaikeyi's interpretation of the event. Rama's coronation, which was initially acceptable to her, begins to appear threatening after repeated suggestions from Manthara. This altered interpretation produces insecurity and fear, which then affect Kaikeyi's judgement and eventually her actions. She asks Dasharatha to fulfil the two boons previously granted to her, leading to Rama's exile and Bharata's proposed coronation.⁶

The episode illustrates the close relationship between thought, emotion, and behaviour. An external situation acquires emotional meaning through the way it is understood. A change in interpretation may therefore change the emotional response and, in turn, influence judgement and decision-making. The Kaikeyi-Manthara narrative is particularly useful because it shows that mental disturbance need not arise only from

an external event; it may also emerge through the way an event is repeatedly interpreted and mentally represented.

4. Rama: Grief and Separation after the Loss of Sita

Rama's response to Sita's abduction presents another important emotional experience: grief following sudden separation. After realizing that Sita is missing, Rama searches intensely for her. He calls her name and asks the trees, animals, rivers, and other elements of the forest whether they have seen her.⁶ His thoughts and attention become strongly centred on the loss, and the narrative describes sorrow, longing, helplessness, and emotional disorganization.

This episode is particularly meaningful because Rama is usually presented as a disciplined and composed figure. Yet the Ramayana does not portray such strength as freedom from emotional pain. Rama is allowed to experience grief openly. His response reflects the disruption that can follow the sudden loss of an important relationship.

The narrative also shows a gradual change in his response. Rama does not remain only in a state of helpless searching. Through information, companionship, support, alliances, and a renewed sense of purpose, he gradually moves toward organized action. The episode therefore presents grief not simply as sorrow, but as a process in which the mind may initially become overwhelmed by loss and later regain direction. In this way, the story reflects both the depth of attachment and the possibility of restoring purposeful action after emotional disruption.

5. Dyuta in the Mahabharata and Rigveda: Impulse and Loss of Behavioural Control

The theme of Dyuta, or dice play, appears prominently in both the Mahabharata and the Rigveda and provides an important account of desire, impulse, and difficulty stopping a harmful behaviour. In the Mahabharata, Yudhishtira continues to participate in the game of dice even as the consequences become increasingly severe. His wealth, kingdom, brothers, himself, and eventually Draupadi become involved in the losses.⁸ The narrative shows a striking gap between awareness of consequences and the ability to withdraw from the behaviour.

A similar psychological theme appears much earlier in the Dyuta Sukta, or Gambler's Lament, of the Rigveda (10.34). The speaker describes the effect of dice play on his family, relationships, livelihood, and social life. He recognizes the suffering caused by the behaviour, yet the attraction of the dice remains powerful.⁹ Bhide discussed these ancient accounts in relation to compulsive gambling, while George examined the Dyuta Sukta as an early description of gambling behaviour.⁸

Taken together, these narratives describe several related features: repeated engagement despite harmful consequences, difficulty withdrawing from the activity, strong attraction toward the behaviour, and damage to personal and social life. Their importance lies in the recognition of a basic psychological conflict: knowing that an action is harmful does not always mean that a person is able to stop it. The accounts therefore offer an early literary exploration of impulse, desire, self-control, and the consequences that can follow when behavioural regulation becomes difficult.

Narrative Themes and the Understanding of the Mind

Although these narratives belong to different texts and settings, they share a common concern with how the mind responds to difficult experiences. All these Taken together, these narratives present the mind as closely connected with emotion, memory, judgement, attachment, and action. They show that mental balance can be affected in different ways and that the response of the mind may shape later behaviour. This naturally leads to a broader question: how did ancient Indian traditions understand the mind itself, and how was *Manas* related to thought, emotion, judgement, and self-regulation?

Understanding Manas in Ancient Indian Thought

The narratives discussed above show how fear, grief, attachment, conflict, and impulse can influence judgement and behaviour.² To understand these experiences more closely, it is useful to consider how ancient Indian traditions understood the mind itself. The Sanskrit term *Manas* is commonly translated as "mind", although it forms part of a wider understanding that also includes the senses, *Buddhi* or discriminative intellect, and the Self.¹⁰⁻¹¹ Across different traditions, mental balance is closely linked with the ability to regulate sensory experience, thought, and action.

➤ The Chariot Metaphor of the Katha Upanishad

The *Katha Upanishad* (1.3.3-9) explains the relationship between the Self, body, intellect, mind, senses, and the external world through the metaphor of a chariot.¹⁰

Atman (The Self / Soul): The *Atman* is the rider or master of the chariot. It remains within the chariot and observes the journey. It represents the deeper Self, distinct from the changing activities of the mind and senses.

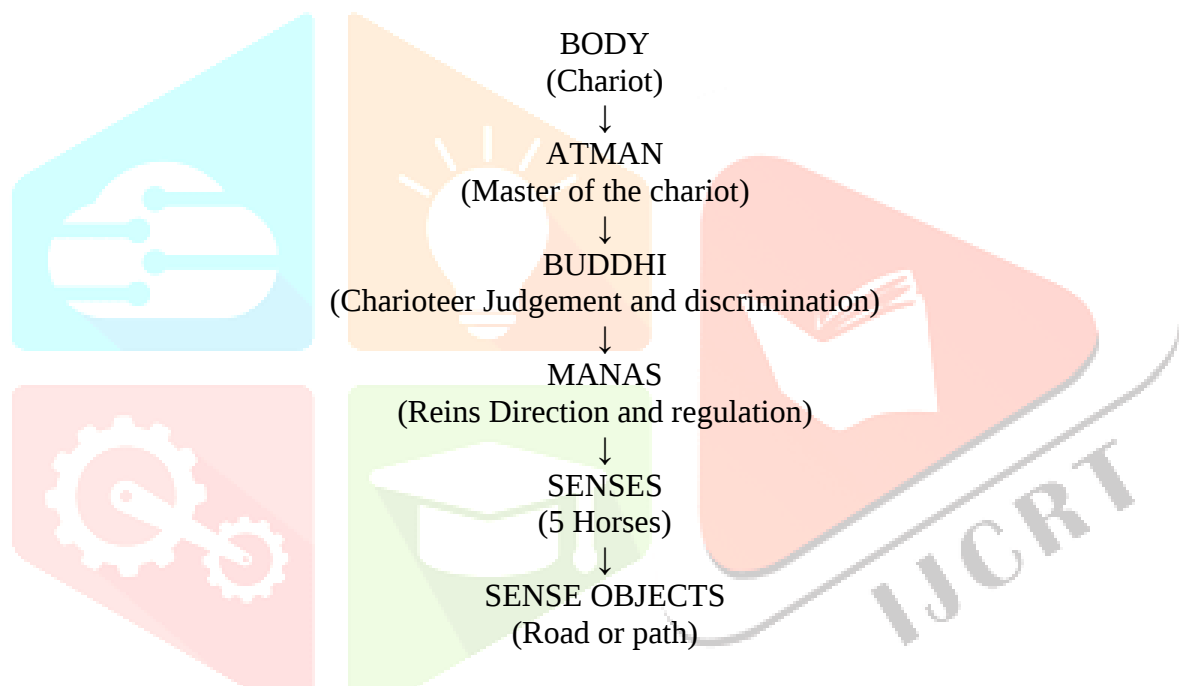
Body: The body is compared to the chariot itself. It provides the physical structure through which the individual moves and experiences the world.

Buddhi (Intellect): *Buddhi* is the charioteer or driver. It represents judgement, discrimination, and the ability to decide the direction in which the chariot should move.

Manas (Mind): *Manas* is compared to the reins held by the charioteer. It connects the intellect with the senses and helps guide and regulate their movement.

Senses: The senses are represented as the horses pulling the chariot. Like horses, they are naturally drawn toward different objects and experiences and therefore require proper guidance.

World Objects: The objects of the external world are compared to the roads or paths along which the horses travel. They are the different experiences and attractions toward which the senses may be drawn.



The metaphor shows that mental balance depends on proper coordination between these different elements. Buddhi provides direction, Manas regulates the senses, and the senses interact with the external world. When the mind and senses are poorly regulated, judgement and behaviour may lose direction. When Manas is steady and guided by clear Buddhi, actions are more likely to remain purposeful and balanced.

➤ Manomaya Kosha

The Taittiriya Upanishad describes human existence through five Koshas, or layers of experience: Annamaya Kosha (physical body), Pranamaya Kosha (vital processes), Manomaya Kosha (mind and emotions), Vijnanamaya Kosha (intellect and discrimination), and Anandamaya Kosha (bliss or deeper inner experience).¹⁰ Within this model, Manomaya Kosha represents the mental and emotional dimension and links sensory experience with higher understanding and discrimination. The model presents the person as a whole, in which the body, vital processes, mind, intellect, and deeper aspects of experience are interconnected. In the context of mental well-being, it suggests that the mind is not viewed in isolation but as part of a broader and integrated understanding of human experience.

➤ Broad Understanding of Manas in the Upanishads and Darshanas

Ancient Indian traditions viewed Manas as more than just the thinking mind. It was understood in relation to the senses, emotions, judgement, behaviour, and consciousness. The Vedas also placed mental well-being within a social context.¹² Rigveda 10.191 speaks of people thinking, communicating, and acting in harmony, suggesting that mental well-being was connected with harmonious relationships and collective living. The Upanishads further explain the need for coordination between the senses, Manas, Buddhi, and the Self. Sankhya develops this idea through Manas, Buddhi, and Ahamkara and describes mental functioning under

the influence of the three Gunas-Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. Sattva is associated with clarity and balance, Rajas with activity and restlessness, and Tamas with heaviness and inertia.²

The different Darshanas therefore do not approach mental well-being through thoughts alone. Yoga, for example, connects behaviour, body, breath, senses, attention, and meditation, showing that regulation of the mind involves the whole person. Ayurveda carries this holistic understanding into the concept of health itself. The classical Ayurvedic definition of a healthy person includes not only balanced Dosha, Agni, Dhatu, and Mala, but also a pleasant and balanced state of Atma, Indriya, and Manas. Thus, despite differences in their philosophical explanations, these traditions share a broad idea: mental well-being depends on the balanced functioning of the mind, senses, intellect, body, behaviour, and one's relationship with others.¹⁰

Principles for Prevention and Maintenance of Mental Well-Being

Ancient Indian traditions describe different ways of maintaining mental steadiness and preventing disturbance of the mind. Although some principles overlap, each tradition gives emphasis to particular concepts. The major principles relevant to mental well-being can be summarized as follows.

➤ **Bhagavad Gita**^{4,5}

- Abhyasa - regular practice to develop control over the mind.
- Vairagya - reducing excessive attachment to desires and outcomes.
- Samatva - maintaining equanimity during success, failure, pleasure, and pain.
- Nishkama Karma - performing one's duties without excessive attachment to results.
- Sthitaprajna - developing steadiness of mind despite changing emotions and circumstances.
- Moderation - maintaining balance in food, activity, sleep, and daily routine.

➤ **Vedas**¹²

- Social harmony - harmony in thought, communication, and collective living.
- Meaningful activity - engagement in productive work and responsibilities.
- Moderation and disciplined living - avoiding behaviours that disturb personal and family life.

➤ **Upanishads**¹⁰

- Dama - regulation of the senses.
- Steadiness of Manas - maintaining control over mental and sensory activity.
- Buddhi and Viveka - using discrimination and clear judgement.
- Self-awareness - observing thoughts and emotions without becoming completely identified with them.

➤ **Darshanas**^{2,11}

- Sankhya: *Viveka* and balance of *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*.
- Yoga: regulation of *Citta* through *Abhyasa*, *Vairagya*, sensory control, concentration, and meditation.
- Nyaya: correct knowledge and reasoning for clearer judgement.
- Vedanta: *Viveka*, *Shama*, *Dama*, and self-knowledge.

➤ **Ayurveda**^{1,11,13}

Ayurveda gives particular importance to prevention and maintenance of both mental and physical health.

- Satvavajaya - regulation and redirection of the mind.
- Jnana - knowledge and self-understanding.
- Vijnana - discriminative understanding.
- Dhairya - courage and mental steadiness.
- Smriti - appropriate memory and recollection.
- Samadhi - concentration and mental stability.
- Sadvritta - healthy personal and social conduct.
- Achara Rasayana - health-promoting behaviour such as truthfulness, calmness, compassion, and emotional restraint.
- Rasayana - measures aimed at promoting health, strength, and resilience.
- Medhya Rasayana - approaches traditionally associated with memory, learning, intellect, and mental clarity.
- Panchakarma - classical therapeutic procedures used within the wider Ayurvedic approach to health.
- Sattva, Rajas and Tamas - maintaining greater *Sattva* is associated with clarity and mental balance.

Together, these traditions emphasize that mental well-being can be supported through self-regulation, clear understanding, moderation, disciplined conduct, healthy routines, and greater awareness of the mind.

Discussion

The narratives examined in this article show that ancient Indian literature paid close attention to changes in emotion, judgement, behaviour, and self-control. Arjuna's moral conflict, Maricha's continuing fear, Rama's grief, Kaikeyi's change in judgement, and the accounts of Dyuta represent different ways in which mental balance may be disturbed. Although these narratives arise from different literary settings, they share an interest in how internal experiences influence decisions and behaviour. Their importance therefore lies less in their similarity to present-day diagnostic categories and more in the detailed observation of psychological experiences.

The concept of Manas provides an important link between these narratives and the later discussion of mental well-being. The chariot metaphor of the Katha Upanishad places Manas between the senses and Buddhi, suggesting that mental balance depends on both regulation of sensory impulses and clear judgement. The concept of Manomaya Kosha further places mental experience within a broader understanding of the individual. Together, these ideas suggest that the mind was not viewed as an isolated entity but as closely connected with the senses, intellect, behaviour, and the wider experience of the person.

Another important observation is the strong preventive orientation found across these traditions. The Bhagavad Gita emphasizes Abhyasa, Vairagya, Samatva, and Nishkama Karma; the Vedic texts draw attention to social harmony and ordered living; the Upanishads emphasize regulation of the senses and self-awareness; and the Darshanas highlight discrimination and mental discipline. Ayurveda develops this preventive approach further through concepts such as Satvavajaya, Jnana, Vijnana, Dhairya, Smriti, Samadhi, Sadvritta, and Achara Rasayana, together with broader health-promoting approaches such as Rasayana and Medhya Rasayana. Thus, mental well-being is presented as something that is developed continuously through the way a person thinks, behaves, lives, and relates to others.

A distinctive feature of these traditions is that mental well-being is understood in a wider context than the control of symptoms alone. Individual mental regulation is connected with judgement, ethical conduct, physical routine, relationships, social harmony, and self-understanding. Ayurveda especially places mental well-being within the wider concept of health, bringing together Manas, sensory functioning, behaviour, lifestyle, and bodily health. This broader view may help explain why preventive and health-promoting ideas occupy such an important place in ancient Indian approaches to the mind.

At the same time, these traditions are diverse and should not be treated as one uniform psychological system. The Vedas, Upanishads, epics, Darshanas, and Ayurvedic texts developed in different historical and philosophical contexts. Their concepts therefore need to be understood within their own frameworks. Modern psychological terms may help identify similarities in human experience, but direct diagnostic equivalence can oversimplify the original meaning of these narratives and concepts. A more useful approach is to consider them as culturally rooted descriptions of distress, self-regulation, resilience, and the maintenance of mental well-being.

Conclusion

Ancient Indian literature presents a broad and culturally rooted understanding of the mind and mental well-being. The narratives of Arjuna, Maricha, Rama, Kaikeyi, and Dyuta show how distress may appear through conflict, fear, grief, altered judgement, attachment, and difficulty in controlling behaviour. These accounts are valuable because they describe psychological experiences through human situations and choices rather than through formal diagnostic categories.

The concept of Manas further explains how the mind was understood in relation to the senses, Buddhi, behaviour, and the Self. The preventive principles described in the Bhagavad Gita, Vedas, Upanishads, Darshanas, and Ayurveda extend this understanding by emphasizing mental regulation, discrimination, moderation, self-awareness, disciplined conduct, and healthy living. Ayurveda, in particular, brings these ideas into a wider framework of prevention, lifestyle, behaviour, and maintenance of health. Taken together, these traditions suggest that mental well-being was viewed not simply as the absence of distress, but as the continuous cultivation of balance, clarity, self-regulation, and purposeful living.

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