Volume 13 Issue 22
Originally issued as G8



Global Journal of human social science
Linguistics & Education
Volume 13 Issue 8 Version1.0 Year 2013
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X&Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Emotional Intelligence in the Indian Context

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GJHSS-G Classification : *FOR Code: 810105p*



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Emotional Intelligence in the Indian Context

Gayathri, N[α] & Dr. Meenakshi, K[σ]

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I. Introduction

Emotional intelligence (EI), perhaps one of the most popular and the most researched psychological constructs of the 21st century (Ashkanasy, 2003; Bar-On 2006), emphasizes on the role of emotions in an individual's success or failure in workplace and in life. Popularized by Goleman (1995), the concept of EI has inspired applied research in every field be it management, academics, life sciences or psychology. Though there are many definitions and constructs which classify the skills pertaining to emotional intelligence, three models have been recognized as widely used and accepted ones (Sharma et. al. (2009) –

- Mayer and Salovey's 'Ability Model'
- Goleman's 'Competency model' and
- Bar-On's 'Trait model'.

One of the definitions of EI is, it is "… the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth" (Mayer and Salovey, 1997).

Mayer and Salovey's four branch model of EI focuses on emotional perception, emotional assimilation, understanding and management (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). The skills are assessed by the 'Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scale' (MEIS). To date, this is the only model that takes on a purely cognitive approach. In contrast, Reuven Bar-On (2002) agrees on the qualities of emotional self awareness, self-actualization, interpersonal relationship, reality testing, stress tolerance, optimism, happiness, etc. as those that decide the emotional intelligence of a person. Goleman (1998) on the other hand points out to emotional self awareness, self control, empathy, problem solving, conflict management, leadership, etc. as the characteristics of an emotionally intelligent person. The mixed ability model proposed by Reuven Bar-On emphasizes on how the personality traits influence a person's general well being and Goleman's model focuses on workplace success (Stys & Brown, 2004). Goleman's model is measured by the Emotional Competency Inventory (ECI) (Boyatzis et. al., 2000) and Bar-On's model is assessed with the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i) (1997). As a fresh concept with only twenty years of history, the theoretical models have not concentrated much on the cross-cultural aspect of emotions (Sharma et. al., 2009). Culture plays a significant role in deciding a person's response to any given situation and it has been recognized that basic psychological processes depend on socio-cultural practices and meanings (Triandis, 2000). Broadly speaking, culture can be distinguished under two branches – the collectivist and the individualist (Srivastava, et. al., 2008). In a collectivist culture, individuals see themselves as interdependent with their groups (family, friends, society, tribe, country, etc.), whereas in an individualist culture, people are independent and give more importance to personal goals and personal needs. The Asian countries generally fall under the collectivist culture, and North America, Australia, and New Zealand, to name a few, are categorized under the individualist culture. Explicit expression of strong feelings like anger, love, frustration etc. are considered as uncouth and are restrained in public in collectivistic cultures, but the same is considered essential in individualistic cultures. The way people perceive and exhibit emotions varies according to their cultural background. What applies to one culture will be an anomaly to the other. Thus, it becomes imperative to study the concept of EI from the perspective of different cultures of the world and see whether it can be applied universally. This paper in particular approaches the concept of emotional intelligence from the Indian perspective of emotions.

Emotional Intelligence is a concept that is not new to the Indian reader. Though there is hardly any serious research on EI from the Indian perspective (Sharma, 2012), anyone who has read through the ancient Indian literature will be aware that EI is embedded in every text. The Indian philosophic tradition stresses on the powerful nature of emotions, which have to be harnessed for a harmonious life. References to the

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description and functions of the human mind can be found in the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, and the texts of Ayurveda. Patanjali, who is considered to be the 'Father of Indian Psychology', had done a systematic, thorough research on the mysteries of human mind, thousands of years ahead of the western study (Tattwamayananda, 1994). Though the Indian philosophy has a religious strain which focuses or guides an individual in turning his mind on the Supreme Being, a careful study will reveal the fact that it is perfectly attuned to the down- to-earth needs of the present world as well (Engardio and McGregor, 2006).Hinduism is more a way of life than a religion and combines in it the fundamental principles of social, political and economic life.

Education in ancient India molded the students to envisage a world beyond any physical boundaries. It promoted unity and social responsibility encouraging them to respect everyone as equals, without any distinction. As the Rig Veda says,

"Samāni va akutih samānā hridayāni vah samānam astu vo mano yathā vah susahāsati".

("One be the aim of all your activities. Alike be your desires and intentions. May a sense of unity be your guide")

The education helped the students have an incisive and a comprehensive view of life. Including death as a part of life enabled the individual to distinguish clearly between the material and the moral, the permanent and the impermanent. Knowing that this material world is impermanent prepared the mind for higher planes of thought. The Indian philosophy believes in 'Karma' which holds a person accountable for all his actions. The nature of his actions decides whether he attains eternal bliss or is reborn in this material world to face another cycle of life. To escape the struggles of this impermanent materialistic world becomes the aim of life for which self realization is crucial. A selfrealized individual understood life's struggles as trivial compared to the inner struggle for control over one's mind and thoughts. Thus, an individual's mind was prepared to encounter the challenges of achieving inner peace and tranquility. The Vedas and the Upanishads focus on this need for emotional stability which helps an individual tide over the many battles of life (internal and external). The recent theory of emotional intelligence also stresses on the need for emotional regulation for success in life. This paper compares the modern theory of emotional intelligence as proposed by Salovey and Mayer, with the idea of emotional stability as expressed in the Bhagavad-Gita (a part of the great Indian epic 'Mahabharata'), a text which has influenced people across cultures (Algeo, 2000). It mainly focuses on the second chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita, as it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all the eighteen chapters. Though there are significant similarities between the 'ability model' of EI and the idea of emotional stability as advocated by the Bhagavad-Gita, one can see that the Bhagavad-Gita takes a more comprehensive view.

II. The Bhagavad-Gita

The Bhagavad-Gita (the Divine song), considered to be the fifth Veda is Lord Krishna's moral guidance to Arjuna on the battle field. It is considered to be the essence of the four Vedas (Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva) (Robinson, 2005; Easwaran, 1985). The Vedas are Hindu religious texts which include hymns, incantations, religious rituals and sacrificial rites (Goodall, 1996). The Bhagavad-Gita gives the core message of the Vedas in a pragmatic way, thus being a more practical document than the Vedas (Jeste and Vahia, 2008).

"…Horror and doubt distract

His troubled thoughts, and from the bottom stir

The hell within him; for within him Hell

He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell

One step, no more than from Himself, can fly

By change of place…."

(Paradise Lost, Book IV, Lines 18-23)

As Satan flies out of hell to avenge himself, one wonders how he could fly away from hell. When God had banished him away from heaven, how could he come back? But does Satan escape Hell? Milton explains Satan's curse beautifully – "The Hell within him; for within him Hell…" The real hell is within him, in his mind, his thoughts. Where can he fly away from himself? Unless the change, the repentance comes from within, there is no escape. As Milton subtly points out to the power of mind over body, Krishna in Bhagavad-Gita is open about his thoughts on the same. The background of Bhagavad-Gita is the Kurukshetra war where the first cousins stand against each other when Arjuna, the warrior non-pareil loses his nerve and refuses to fight. His mind is a cauldron of emotions gripped with the moral dilemma of to do or not to do. Even as Arjuna struggles to accept the fact that he has to fight his own kith and kin, his guru and his childhood friends, Krishna admonishes his lack of mental strength and points out to the supremacy of people who have absolute control over their mind, are focused on their duty and are unperturbed by neither pain nor pleasure.

y*am hi na vyathayanthyethe purusham purusharshabha*

samadhukha sukham dheeram somruthathvaya kalpathe (In Sanskrit)

That calm man who is the same in pain and pleasure, whom these cannot disturb, alone is able, O great amongst men, to attain to immortality.(Swami Swarupananda, 1996).

(Bhagavad-Gita, Ch. II, Sloka 15)

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Following this is an active, spontaneous conversation between Krishna and Arjuna, which throws light on the supremacy of knowledge, bhakthi (devotion) and selfless action. Krishna simplifies the philosophy of life as it can be understood and practised by even laymen who do not have any formal education.

III. Emotional Intelligence and The Bhagavad-Gita

The Mahabharata is the epic saga of conflict between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. It is a text which can be understood and interpreted at different levels. On the superficial level, it is the clash for power. But, on a higher plane, it is the war between 'Dharma' and 'Adharma' – the right and the wrong. The opening verse of Bhagavad-Gita begins as 'Dharmakshetre Kurukshetre' – Dharmakshetre' – where 'Dharma' was established and 'Kurukshetre' – where the 'Kurus' fought. 'Kshetra' meaning 'field' can be understood in two levels – the physical topographical place where the war takes place, and also the 'mind' of every human being. The war at Kurukshetra is can be taken as symbolic of the struggle which every individual faces in varying degrees at various stages of his life.

The Pandavas having been stripped of their wealth and kingdom through guile and deceit are left with no option but to fight their own brothers and grandsire. The Pandava army rests its hopes on the valour of worthy Arjuna, whose military skills have no match. The war is about to begin and Arjuna asks Krishna (his divine charioteer) to take the chariot to a place from where he can see all those assembled against him in war. As he sees his gurus Drona and Kripa, his beloved grandsire Bhishma and his brothers the Kauravas, he falters and is gripped with misery. He refuses to fight saying he does not see any gain or happiness in the kingdom he gains by killing his own brothers. The Kurukshetra war is thus synonymous with the complex circumstances a person faces in his/her life. The fear, anxiety, misgiving, and desperation of the person is symbolized in Arjuna's predicament. As Arjuna battles with his emotional turmoil, the reader gets an insight into an emotionally disturbed person's struggle for clarity of thought and action. Krishna's guidance to Arjuna gives a practical solution to emerge out of this struggle unscathed.

One can see striking similarities between Krishna's emotionally stable person (Sthithapragnya) and Mayer and Salovey's emotionally intelligent person. Mayer and Salovey's 'ability model' (2004) identifies four stages through which a person becomes emotionally intelligent –

- Emotional Perception
- Emotional Assimilation
- Emotional Understanding and
- Emotional Management

The first step – emotional perception – is an ability to be self-aware of emotions and to express them accurately. When a person is aware of the emotions he is experiencing, he moves on to the next level – emotional assimilation, which is to distinguish between the different emotions he is undergoing and also identify those emotions that affect his thought process. This ability leads him to – emotional understanding – an ability to understand complex emotions and also to recognize the transition from one emotion to another. By then he becomes adept in dealing with his emotions and thus is able to manage his emotions by connecting to or disconnecting from any emotion at any given situation. This gives him complete control over his impulses and is thus able to think, analyze and behave rationally in any situation. The first two stages are when a person identifies and becomes aware of his own and others' emotions and the awareness leading to a better judgment of the situation he is in and its consequences. Though the Bhagavad-Gita does not speak of this fundamental requirement of emotional intelligence, it stresses on the effectiveness of being able to control and manage emotions, (i.e.) the third and fourth stages. The reason being Arjuna has already satisfied the preconditions as he is aware of his emotional turmoil and clearly spells out his predicament to Krishna. He perfectly understands his misgivings and seeks Krishna's help to overcome them. The slokas (verses) four to eight of the second chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita bring out the anguish of Arjuna in his own words.

karpanyadosopahatasvabhavah prcchami tvam dharmasammudhacetah

yacchreyah syanniscitam bruhi tanme sisyate ham sadhi mam tvam prapannam
(In Sanskrit)

With my nature overpowered by weak commiseration, with a mind in confusion about duty, I supplicate Thee. Say decidedly what is good for me. I am Thy disciple. Instruct me who have taken refuge in Thee.
(Swami Swarupananda, 1996)

na hi prapasyami
mamapanudyadyacchokamucchosanamindriyanam
avapya bhumavasapatnamrddham rajyam suranamapi cadhipatyam

(In Sanskrit)

I do not see anything to remove this sorrow which blasts my senses, even were I to obtain unrivalled and flourishing dominion over the earth, and mastery over the gods.

(Swami Swarupananda, 1996)

(Bhagavad-Gita, Ch. II. Slokas 7, 8)

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We clearly see that Arjuna has what we can call the qualifying qualities of an emotionally intelligent person – emotional perception and assimilation. The precise words chosen by him effectively convey his state of mind. He says that his nature is overpowered by 'weak commiseration'. He commiserates with himself for being in a place where he has to fight his own dear ones. He feels pity for his cousins who have brought their entire clan to this sorrowful state. But he also realizes that this commiseration is a weak one, one that weakens and confuses him against doing or even deciding on what his duty is, and thus supplicates to Krishna to guide him, advice him on the right course of action. It is in response to this does Krishna discuss in length the need for emotional management. It is interesting to note at this juncture that Krishna does not merely stress on effective emotional management but first spells out the reasons that lead to emotional disturbances and then moves on to the ways of dealing with them. Krishna offers a systematic analysis of the problem at hand and a solution as well. Thus Krishna's advice becomes more practical. The course of action that he advises Arjuna is one that can be followed by anyone at any place. The guidance is universal in nature and holds meaning even to present day life.

Tracing the root cause of all emotional turmoil, Krishna identifies desire and anger as the two vices that lead an individual to his downfall.

dhyayato visayanpumsah sangastesupajayate
sangatsanjayate kamah kamatkrodho'bhijayate
(In Sanskrit)

Thinking of objects, attachment to them is formed in a man. From attachment longing, and from longing anger grows.

krodhadbhavati sammohah sammohatsmrtivibhtamah

smrtibhramsadbuddhinaso buddhinasatpranasyati

(in Sanskrit)

From anger comes delusion, and from delusion loss of memory. From loss of memory comes the ruin of discrimination, and from the ruin of discrimination, he perishes.

(Swami Swarupananda, 1996).

(Bhagavad-Gita, Ch. II, Slokas 62, 63)

It is the strong desire for and attachment to the worldly objects that drives an individual to his downfall. Desire when not satisfied leads to anger, which in turn leads to delusion. This further destroys the ability to discriminate which leads to complete ruin. Examples of those who fell to disgrace because of their desire, abound – Macbeth, Dr.Faustus, Satan, Icarus, to name a few. Macbeth, a brave warrior charts his own doom as he is swayed by the desire of becoming the King. He has no compunctions in murdering the unsuspecting King who visits his castle. Though he does ascend the throne it is one wrought with guilt and misgivings, that at the end Macbeth is actually happy to die in the battlefield. He feels so relieved from the life of guilt. Dr.Faustus' blunder is no less as he is willingly sells his soul to the devil for gaining name and fame. The terrible consequence of his act is not realized by him until the end. When the realization dawns, it is too late. Satan falls down to eternal doom as he is overcome by the desire to become God. Icarus' fall (literal and metaphorical) is because of his desire to reach greater heights than he is actually capable of. The Indian literature equally focuses on the great heroes who fell to disgrace because of their attachment and desire which lead to ruinous anger. To take an example from the great epic 'Ramayana', Ravana the demon king was a great scholar and a great devotee of Lord Shiva. He was well versed in Vedas and also a great astrologer. His expertise in statecraft was recognized even by his opponents. Lord Rama instructs his brother Lakshmana to learn the art of statecraft from the dying emperor after the war. How could such an erudite, scholarly, wise emperor fail to defeat a motley army of monkeys? It was his lust and desire for Sita, Rama's wife that lead him to his ruin. His desire blinded his wisdom. He lost his power of discrimination. He failed to realize that abducting another man's wife against her wishes was a great sin which would eventually destroy him and his kingdom. His power of reasoning vanishes as he is gripped with desire and lust. Thus, it becomes evident that desire leads a man to his ruin however great he might be. The lessons that can be taken from the life of these heroes stress on the need for overcoming desire, lust and anger. The Bhagavad-Gita thus moves a step forward of the theory of EI and outlines what leads to a loss of discrimination, and cautions the individual.

The Bhagavad-Gita refers to the emotionally intelligent person as a 'Sthithapragnya' (the emotionally stable person). As Arjuna asks Krishna who a sthithapragnya is, Krishna describes the nature and qualities of a sthithapragnya in detail.

sthitaprajnasya ka bhasa samadhisthaya kesava

sthitadhih kim prabhaseta kimasita vrajeta kim

(In Sanskrit)

What, O Kesava, is the description of a man of steady wisdom, merged in Samadhi? How (on the other hand) does the man of steady wisdom speak, how sit, how walk?

(Swami Swarupananda, 1996).

(Bhagavad-Gita, Ch. II, Sloka 54)

Krishna answers him in twenty one slokas (55 – 72) discussing in detail the qualities of an emotionally stable person.

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duhkhesvanudvignamanah sukhese vigatasprhah

vitaragabhayakrodhah sthithadhirmunirucyate

(In Sanskrit)

He whose mind is not shaken by adversity, who does not hanker after happiness, who has become free from affection, fear, and wrath, is indeed the Muni of steady wisdom.

yah sarvatranabhisnehastattatprapya subhasubham

nabhinandati na dvesti tasya prajna pratisthita

(In Sanskrit)

He who is everywhere unattached, not pleased at receiving good, nor vexed at evil, his wisdom is fixed.

yada samharate cayam kurmo'nganiva sarvasah

indriyanindriyarthebhyastasya prajna pratiathita

(In Sanskrit)

When also, like the tortoise drawing its limbs, he can completely withdraw the senses from their objects, then his wisdom becomes steady.

(Swami Swarupananda, 1996).

(Bhagavad-Gita, Ch. II, Slokas 56,57& 58.)

A sthithapragnya according to Krishna is one who remains unperturbed in the face of calamity, and takes good or evil with equanimity. He is neither happy when something good happens, nor is he affected when things go against him. This does not mean that he lacks sensitivity. He has the ability to keep his emotions in check and the skill of withdrawing his feelings away from the object of pleasure or pain. Even as a tortoise withdraws its head and legs inside the protective cover of its shell whenever it faces danger, so does an emotionally stable person withdraw all his emotions and feelings within himself and remains unperturbed. He has the power to emotionally attach or detach from any situation, at his will. This is not far from what Mayer and Salovey list as the skills pertaining to the fourth branch of their 'ability model' (Salovey, Mayer & Caruso, 2002).

- Ability to be open to feelings, both pleasant and unpleasant
- Ability to monitor and reflect on emotions
- Ability to engage, prolong, or detach from an emotional state
- Ability to manage emotions in oneself, and the
- Ability to manage emotions in others

The difference between Krishna and the proponents of the theory of EI is that Krishna takes a more comprehensive view of the problem. He studies the cause, discusses the effect and also offers the means of encountering the problem successfully. Having identified the cause of all emotional distress, he identifies the qualities of an emotionally stable person and completes the circle by advocating the medicine for the ailment.

One of the greatest hurdles of EI is whether it can be successfully imparted, and if so what would be the best method. Though there are innumerable training centers and courses which promise to enhance the emotional intelligence of an individual, the question that looms large is, are they really effective, and if so, are they universally applicable irrespective of time place and culture. On the other hand, Krishna's answer to the problem is universal and is applicable to any individual of any place or culture. It is simple and practical.

To achieve emotional stability, Krishna shows the path of 'Nishkama Karma' – action with detachment to the outcome or result of the action. As it was seen earlier, emotional instability stems from attachment to and a longing for the desired object. So Krishna's advice is to detach oneself from the fruits of one's action.

karmanyevadhikaraste ma phalesu kadacana

ma karmaphalaheturbhuma te sango'stvakarmani

(In Sanskrit)

Thy right is to work only; but never to the fruits thereof. Be thou not the producer of the fruits of (thy) actions; neither let thy attachment be towards inaction.

yogasthah kuru karmani sangam tyaktva dhananjaya

siddhyasiddhyoh samo bhutva samatvam yoga ucyate

(In Sanskrit)

Being steadfast in Yoga, o Dhananjaya, perform actions, abandoning attachment, remaining unconcerned as regards success and failure. This evenness of mind (in regard to success and failure) is known as Yoga.

durena hyavaram karma buddhiyagaddhananjaya

buddhau saramanviccha krpanah phalahetavah

(In Sanskrit)

Work (with desire) is verily far inferior to that performed with the mind undisturbed by thoughts of results. O Dhananjaya, seek refuge in this evenness of mind. Wretched are they who act for results.

buddhiyukto jahatiha ubhe sukrtaduskrte

tasmadyogaya yujyasva yogah karmasu kausalam

(In Sanskrit)

Endued with this evenness of mind, one frees oneself in this life, alike from vice and virtue. Devote thyself, therefore, to this Yoga. Yoga is the dexterity of work.

karmajam buddhiyukta hi phalam tyaktva manisinah

janmabandhavinirmuktah padam gacchantyanamayam

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(In Sanskrit)

The wise, possessed of this evenness of mind, abandoning the fruits of their actions, freed for ever from the fetters of birth, go to that state which is beyond all evil.

(Swami Swarupananda, 1996)

(Bhagavad-Gita, Ch. II, Slokas 47-51)

Krishna points out that action without desire, action that does not bind the doer with the outcome is the right kind of action. When an individual acts for the sake of action, because it is the right thing to do, and does not fear the result, then his mind remains unfettered. Taking the example of Arjuna himself, Arjuna was worried about fighting his cousins because he was worried about the outcome. He was upset because he found no gain or happiness in winning the war. He did not want to fight because there was no positive result for him at the end of the war. Winning he loses, losing he gains nothing. If on the other hand, Arjuna does not think or worry about what is to happen after the war, but proceeds with the fight because it is his duty as a kshatriya to fight when called upon, then there is no confusion or emotional turmoil. He does what has been expected of him, not what is convenient or productive. This 'Nishkama Karma' has a dual effect. It frees the doer from the emotional imbroglio of worrying about the outcome and also frees him from the responsibility of the outcome as well. It is a liberating feeling which annihilates any negative thoughts or emotions. When the mind is free from negative emotions, it calms down and a calm, tranquil mind is the fountain head of all things positive. It is with a stamp of authority that Krishna declares,

prasade sarvaduhkhanam hanirasyopajayate

prasannacetaso hyasu buddhih paryavatisthate

(In Sanskrit)

In tranquility, all sorrow is destroyed. For the intellect in him, who is tranquil minded is soon established in firmness.

(Swami swarupananda, 1996).

(Bhagavad-Gita, Ch.II, Sloka 65).

This is the desired end towards which the proponents of emotional intelligence are working.

IV. Conclusion

Bhagavad-Gita is a text which has influenced many thinkers from east and west alike. The lessons that can be taken from this divine exposition on the philosophy of life are boundless. Recent research has linked many concepts of management to the Bhagavad-Gita. As one commentator of the Bhagavad-Gita points out, it is a text which speaks of many things at different levels (Das, Sita pati). It is a 'complete' text – Purnam – as one says in Sanskrit. To quote the same pundit, "We can continue to discuss and inquire about Bhagavadgita unlimitedly, and never find the end of its ability to produce the most profound realizations about life, the universe, and the purpose and the person behind them." This paper is but a drop in the ocean trying to find similarity of thought between the theory of EI and the Bhagavad-Gita. he prospects are innumerable which will help researchers perfect the theory of emotional intelligence.

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