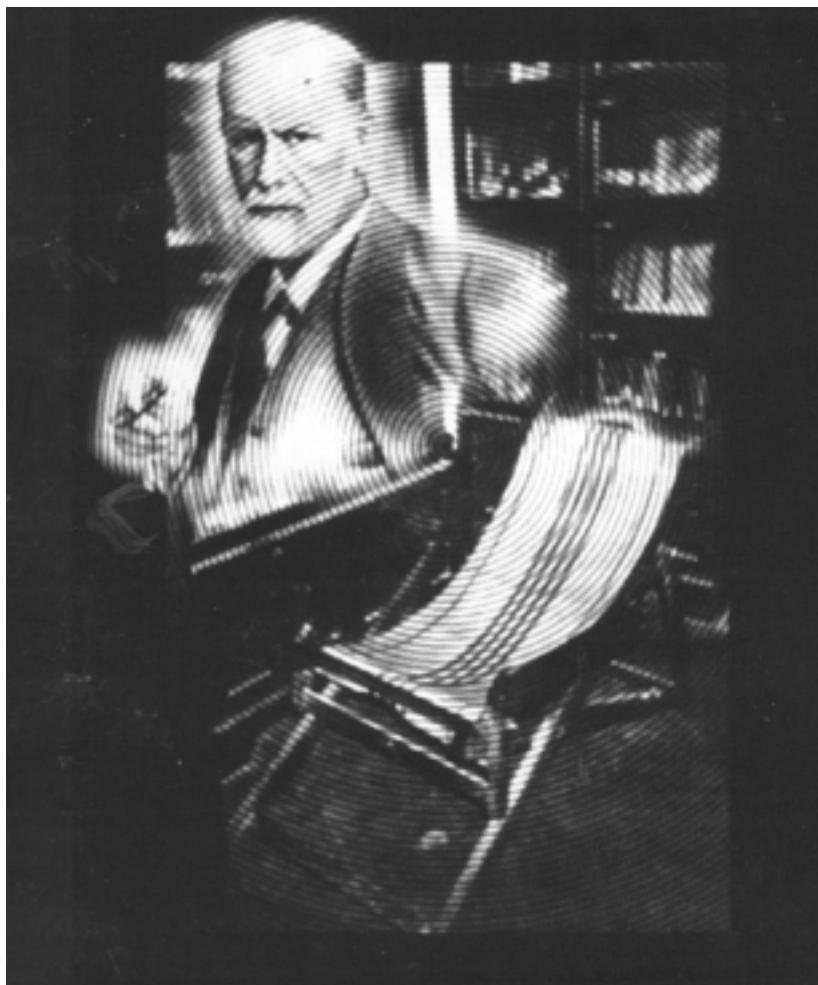


Freud on Garuda's Wings

Psychoanalysis in Colonial India

The Indian Psychoanalytical Society was founded in 1921 by Girindrasekhar Bose, a Bengali Hindu physician. Bose and the other twelve Indian founding members of the Society belonged to the urbanized Western educated Bengali elite, the Bhadrakol. These men had access to the latest intellectual trends in Europe, but could at the same time draw on a rich fund of indigenous knowledge. The members of the Indian Psychoanalytical Society concurred with Freud's technique of free association and his notion of the unconscious. Like him, they were convinced of the importance of dreams and of traumatic events. They did, however, question several of Freud's core concepts and methods. This contribution presents some of the culture-specific elements of psychoanalysis that did not travel from Vienna to India, and those that were altered or were specific to conditions of colonialism.



Taken from: Hartnack, Christiane, *Psychoanalysis in Colonial India*

Research >
South Asia

By Christiane Hartnack

Freud experienced life in two cultures: the one that he came from as a Moravian Jew, and the one into which he assimilated as an urban Viennese intellectual. Through his formulation of transculturally valid laws and universally applicable truths, Freud could, at least ideologically, overcome the feeling of belonging to a minority.

The Bhadrakol also lived under conditions of cultural hybridity. They functioned in a British colonial world during the workday, and were Bengali the rest of the time. Unlike Freud, they belonged to a majority. Bose never gave up wearing traditional Bengali clothes or following Hindu Bengali customs and proudly wrote in Bengali asserting that his British colleagues should learn Bengali if they were interested in these texts. In addition, he openly criticized Freud for running the International Psychoanalytical Movement 'like a church', and emphasized that his Bengali patients differed from Europeans.

Bose replaced Freud's emblematic couch with a deck chair. I assume that he did this because an upholstered chaise-longue would not have stood the humidity in Bengal. There is a certain irony in this choice though. By choosing a colonial piece of furniture, Bose 'went West'. By covering his couch with an oriental rug, Freud, on the other hand, 'went East'.

Shaped by the intellectual currents of the late nineteenth century, Freud – like Karl Marx and Charles Darwin – adhered to chronological-, causal-, and progress-oriented concepts. Freud emphasized the importance of individual history, and compared his psychoanalytic work with that of an archaeologist who uncovers hidden layers.

Bose, on the other hand, identified himself with an engineer who fixes circuits. His 'theory of opposite wishes' and the application of a 'see-saw-mechanism' reveal that his theoretical and practical work was based on the assumption of an essential bipolarity. However, in opposition to the subject-object dichotomies that play an important role in European cultures, his philosophical understanding was that of principal unity.

Both men realized that their philosophical views and psychoanalytic methods differed considerably, as is evident in

their correspondence, which spans the period from 1921 to 1937. In a letter dated 1 January 1933, Freud, for example, expressed his view on one of Bose's revisions: 'the theory of opposite wishes strikes me as something less dynamic than morphological.' ...". (Sinha 1966:431)

'The man Moses' facing Hindu gods and goddesses

Freud took an androcentric monotheism for granted. He was more than puzzled by the Hindu pantheon, and expressed openly how bored he was by Indian visitors, such as the author Rabindranath Tagore, the philosopher Surendranath Dasgupta, and the linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji. In a letter to Romain Rolland, written in 1930, Freud commented on this writer's enchantment with Indian culture: 'I shall now try with your guidance to penetrate into the Indian jungle from which until now an uncertain blending of Hellenic love of proportion, Jewish sobriety, and philistine timidity have kept me away.' (Hartnack 2001:138)

In his correspondence with Freud, Bose explicitly pointed to the importance of the maternal deities in his culture. Other Indian psychoanalysts even criticized classical Freudian psychoanalysis for being a product of a 'Father religion or Son religion'. This is especially ironic, since Freud had deconstructed the role of religion, and was – unlike his Indian colleagues – rather secular.

Freud derived his insights primarily from his therapies with highly educated upper middle-class Viennese women patients who lived in patriarchally structured nuclear families. These women often envied their brothers and other men for being able to make use of their education and for enjoying social freedoms. Freud's notion of penis envy thus also reflects the social situation of his women patients in early twentieth century Vienna.

Bose, on the other hand, treated mostly upper-caste westernized Bengali Hindu men. Among them he had discovered 'a wish to be female'. He wrote to Freud in 1929: 'The desire to be a female is more easily unearthed in Indian male patients than in European.' (Sinha 1966:430) In analogy to Freud's women patients in Vienna, these Bengali men were also hindered in their development – in their case by the realities of colonialism. It is likely that they envied Bengali women who were only indirectly affected by British domination. Moreover, femininity was represented by powerful goddesses and therefore associated with desirable traits.

In Bengali joint families in the early part of the twentieth century, the biological father was only one of several patriarchal figures, and the biological mother just one of several maternal authorities, resulting in multiple sources of affections and emotional bonds as well as 'hydra-like' (Kakar 1982: 420) confrontations with authorities. The direction of aggression, too, differed in European and Indian texts and folkloric traditions. As A.K. Ramanujan (1983, p.252) pointed out, in Indian literature the aggressor is often the father and not the son, as in the classical Oedipus tale, because the father is jealous of his wife's devotion to her son.

It is therefore not surprising that Bose rejected Freud's view of the transcultural universality of the Oedipus complex. In 1929, he sent him thirteen of his psychoanalytical articles, noting: 'I would draw your particular attention to my paper on the Oedipus wish where I have ventured to differ from you in some respects.' Bose claimed, for example, that its resolution is achieved by fighting and overcoming the father's authority, and not by a submission to it: 'I do not agree with Freud when he says that the Oedipus wishes ultimately to succumb to the authority of the super-ego. Quite the reverse is the case. The super-ego must be conquered ...The Oedipus [conflict] is resolved not by the threat of castration, but by the ability to castrate.' (Hartnack 2001:148)

The politics of psychoanalysis: imperial versus colonial conditions

Until 1947, India was a British colony. This implied that the Indian Psychoanalytical Society had not only Indian,

but also British members. For example, Lieutenant Owen Berkeley-Hill, a psychiatrist in the British army, used psychoanalysis to help British patients in the European Mental Hospital in Ranchi to adjust – or re-adjust – to life in a colony. In his cultural-theoretical writings, he also drew on psychoanalysis to legitimize British colonial rule. In an essay published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* in 1921, he attributed to Hindus an anal-erotic personality structure, and ascribed highly positive characteristics to his English countrymen. Berkeley-Hill concluded that Hindus do not have a psychological disposition for leadership and thus need to be ruled. In addition to being obsessive-compulsive, they were also infantile, since 'their general level of thought partakes of the variety usually peculiar to children.' (Hartnack 2001: 52)

Another officer in the Indian army, Claud Dangar Daly, also left no doubt about his value judgements on Hindus. In an essay published in *Imago* in 1927, he asserts that the character traits of the Hindus 'are in many respects the same as we are accustomed to observe among European obsessive neurotics). Furthermore, in an article published in 1930 in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Daly wrote that 'the Hindu people would have to make an effort to overcome their infantile and feminine tendencies ... The role of the British Government should be that of wise parents'. (Hartnack 2001: 67)

Perhaps as a result of such writings by fellow members of the Indian Psychoanalytical Society, Bose was critical of psychoanalytic generalizations. In his essay 'On the Reliability of Psychoanalytic Findings', for example, he cautioned against psychoanalysts who 'do not hesitate to dogmatise on their findings and regard them as "settled facts" even when the analysis has been of a very cursory nature.' (Hartnack 2001:149)

Bose and other Indian psychoanalysts had personal contact with members of the Indian independence movement, and several of their writings contain an explicitly anti-colonial stance. Bose's view of the resolution of the Oedipus complex indirectly indicates this, and his definition of mental disease specifically exempted martyrs and patriots: 'The sense of morality and duty often leads us to self-destructive actions, e.g. the feeling of the patriot or martyr.'

Freud's envisaged 'conquest' in India remained confined to his imagination. The psychoanalytical 'Internationale' of which he had dreamed was not realized, and the 'Freudian Orient', namely the wholesale reception of psychoanalysis in India, was not what Freud had thought it was. Not even in their public statements did the Indian members of the Indian Psychoanalytical Society turn out to be loyal to Freud.

Freud intuitively sensed all this. On the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, the Indian Psychoanalytical Society had sent him a statuette of Vishnu. When the sandalwood stand and the ivory of his 'trophy of conquest', as he had called it in his letter of thanks to Bose, developed cracks, he made an entry in his diary: 'Can the god, being used to Calcutta, not stand the climate in Vienna?' (*The Diary of Sigmund Freud* 1992: 115) Perhaps Freud, in the privacy of his diary, expressed a premonition that, like the statuette of Vishnu, psychoanalysis would not travel easily. ◀

References

- Hartnack, Christiane, *Psychoanalysis in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press (2001).
- Kakar, Sudhir, 'Fathers and Sons: An Indian Experience' in: Cath, Stanley H., Alan R. Gurwitt, and John Munder Ross (eds.), *Father and Child: Developmental and Clinical Perspectives*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company (1982), pp.417-23.
- *The Diary of Sigmund Freud, 1929-1939. A Record of the Final Decade* (translated, annotated, with an introduction by Michael Molnar), London: The Freud Museum (1992).
- Ramanujan, A.K., 'The Indian Oedipus' in: Edmunds, Lowell, and Alan Dundas (eds.), *Oedipus: A Folklore Casebook*, New York: Garland (1983), pp.234-66.
- Sinha, Tarun Chandra (1966) 'Development of Psychoanalysis in India', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (1966), pp.427-39.

Dr Christiane Hartnack is Deputy Head of the Department of Cultural Studies at the Donau Universität Krems (Austria). She was also Lecturer in Psychology at the Freie Universität Berlin, and has taught at the Universities of Iowa and Vienna and at Wellesley College. christiane.hartnack@donau-uni.ac.at