

# Inconsistency of Indian Thinking- a Reading of the First Part of A.K. Ramanujan's "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay"

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**ABSTRACT:** A.K.Ramanujan has proved his intense scholarship through his essays on South Asian language, literature and culture which exemplify his wide range of experience and creative reflections. These essays can be grouped under four broader areas namely, General Essays on Classical Literature and Culture, Essays on Classical Literatures, Essays on *Bhakti* and Modern Poetry, and Essays on Folklore. The essay titled "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay" was written as a paper for a 'Workshop on the Hindu Person', held at the University of Chicago in 1980. This essay which consists of three parts helps us deliberate on what makes Indian thoughts different from its Western counterpart. In the first part of the essay A.K Ramanujan explores four possible interpretations of the central question of his essay "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" asking the question differently, accentuating a different word in the sentence each time — "is", "an", "Indian" and "thinking". The paper attempts to explain how Ramanujan has chronicled the inconsistencies of Indian thinking through his answers to the question "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?"

## Introduction:

Ramanujan has proved his intense scholarship through his essays on South Asian language and culture. He delivered most of these essays as lectures to audiences in the United States, Europe, and India. Some of his essays draw on research papers that he presented at numerous conferences. His essays on literature and culture exemplify a wide range of experience and creative reflections. He had published many of his essays in scholarly journals and edited books since the 1950s. He also had left behind at his death some unfinished pieces and outlines for talks or incomplete working drafts. These were brought into a final shape by the reworking and rewriting of Molly Daniels-Ramanujan with a number of Ramanujan's friends, colleagues, and associates in 1993.

His essays can be grouped under four broader areas namely General Essays on Classical Literature and Culture, Essays on Classical Literatures, Essays on *Bhakti* and Modern Poetry, and Essays on Folklore. There are thirty essays altogether, six under each on general aspects of literature, culture and Bhakti movement and twelve on folklore.

The essay titled "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay" which is one of his General Essays on Classical Literature and Culture was written as a paper for a 'Workshop on the Hindu Person', held at the University of Chicago in 1980 and was distributed in typescript among Ramanujan's students and colleagues throughout the 1980s. This cultural essay appears in social anthropologist, McKim Marriott's *India through Hindu Categories* (1990). In this essay Ramanujan explains cultural philosophies and behavioural indices thereof in terms of an Indian psychology he calls "context-sensitive" thinking. This essay which consists of three parts helps us deliberate on what makes Indian thoughts different from its Western counterpart.

In the first part of the essay A.K Ramanujan explores four possible interpretations of the central question of his essay "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" asking the question differently, accentuating a different word in the sentence each time — "is", "an", "Indian" and "thinking". He writes,

Depending on where the stress falls placed, it contains many questions—all of which are real questions—asked again and again when people talk about India. Here are a few possible versions:

*Is* there an Indian way of thinking?

Is there *an* Indian way of thinking?

Is there an *Indian* way of thinking?

Is there an Indian way of *thinking*? (34)

For each question he says the answers are various. This shows the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in the Indian Way of Thinking.

The first time Ramanujan places the emphasis on “is” and questions the very existence of such a thing as an Indian way of thinking. And he has two answers to this question. One is, there was such a thing but not anymore. And the next answer is, India never changes, so the Indian way of thinking still exists. To explain it further, there *was* an Indian way of thinking but it does not exist now. The Indian way of thinking can be located in the upper-caste, Brahmanical section of the society - in the Vedas and other religious manuscripts, or when one goes to the 'pundits'. However, even in the modern context since Indian thinking is still largely shaped as per the Vedas, it would not be completely wrong to say that there still is an Indian way of thinking that exists.

The second time he approaches the question the emphasis is on “an” meaning to ask if there is ‘one unique way of Indian thinking or many such things’. The reaction for this question is again in two ways. One is, India is a nation of diversities and there has always been the existence of Great Tradition and Little Tradition. Each community in this country has a unique world view and, therefore, there is no single unique way of thinking but there are different ways of thinking. Naturally, as a nation that celebrates diversities and highlights the differences, a single Indian way of thinking does not exist. This multiculturalism if India is being celebrated by many thinkers. Amartya Sen, Indian economist, philosopher, and public intellectual has celebrated the multiculturalism of Indian existence. According to him, it works against the ills of what he calls “solitarism” or the idea that human beings have one principal identity. Ramanujan as his other answer to the third question says that even though the Indian sub-continent is a country of diversity there exists “unity in diversity” here and so all Indian thought is the same.

In the third question the focus shifts to the word “Indian”. Ramanujan says that there is nothing inherently Indian about this way of thinking and that it’s also found in other societies that have reached a similar state of development, and the Indian way influences everything that enters the country and makes it its own. India is nothing but a product of the influences of external cultures, languages, religions and social evolutions - therefore, one might say that what we see in India is nothing unique to India. He says, “What we see in India is nothing special to India; it is nothing but pre-industrial, pre-printing press, face-to-face, agricultural, feudal. Marxists, Freudians, McLuhanites, all have their labels for the stage India is in, according to their schemes of social evolution; India is only an example” (35) However, the second answer to this question is India is capable of adapting to the changes and accommodating these external influences into its culture. Since Indian way influences everything that enters the country and makes it its own there is an ‘Indian’ way of thinking.

The fourth question puts the emphasis on “thinking”, and Ramanujan does not offer any arguments here. The question points at whether Indians think at all. “It is the West that is materialistic, rational; Indians have no philosophy, only religion, no positive sciences, not even a psychology; in India, matter is subordinated to spirit, rational thought to feeling, intuition” (35). Ramanujan is of the view that West is capable of thought. The West is projected as materialistic and rational. In India, logic is rationalized with religion and superstitions. In India, actions are projected, not the thoughts behind those actions.

Hence, the first part of this essay states how India is perceived differently at different stages by different people and from different perspectives. But the ultimate answer to the title question “Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?” is ‘Yes’. However, by starting off exploring four possible interpretations of one central question “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?” using the Stanislavskian exercise and offering

different answers to each question Ramanujan illustrates the central characteristic, “inconsistency” and the inherent hypocrisy of Indian thinking and he moves on to depict the inconsistency between tradition and modernity with an example from Ramanujan's personal experience in the second part of the essay and further interrogates the concept of inconsistency in a larger context in the third part of the essay.

### References

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