Spirituality and the Role of Ego: Insights for Management

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Abstract

Spirituality has been explained in numerous ways since ages. In this paper the ego has been related to 'I Consciousness' and in this context the role of ego in spirituality has been discussed. It is strongly emphasized that it is the ego process which is the biggest barrier to spirituality and the spiritual state is basically the state where one gets rid of ego and achieves an orderly state of mind thereby showing morality naturally and not in the forced manner. Ego in the human consciousness can do lot of damage and there has been lot of historical evidences where this ego process has led to unwanted results in the long term to the organizations and individuals. This paper aims at explaining the spirituality from the ego perspective and then connecting it with the management for better understanding of role of ego in the human behaviour and decision making. It needs to be mentioned that this paper is influenced by the thoughts of Prof. P.Krishna expressed during the conference on 'Spirituality and Ethics in Management' held at School of Management Sciences, Varanasi in October, 2010.

Introduction

Ego is the principle of differentiation of oneself from others; ego rests on the feeling of otherness (what in the spiritual philosophy is technically called 'dvaitabhava' or 'bheda-bhava'). I cut myself off from the rest of the world (taking the persons of the world to be 'other' to me and not my own), and naturally therefore I think only for myself and not for others, I want that 'my' will be done and 'my' interests be served and everything be for 'me'– this 'me –ship (in which 'other' are discarded) is the ego. This means that ego takes place when I do not consider the so-called others as 'me' or 'my own' and cut myself off from them and confine myself to my own individuality. It should also be clear that ego is the correlate of selfishness. In the ego-state I wish only the good of myself and not the good of others, I impose myself on others and even exploit others for my own end. Selfishness and ego are like the two sides of one and the same coin (Mishra and Singh, 2009).

If this is the meaning and nature of ego, it is not difficult to understand that ego is the foundation and the root cause of all evil, of all immorality. This 'I Consciousness' which creates 'dvaitabhava' or 'bheda-bhava' or in English the 'feeling of separateness from others' often leads individuals and organizations to pursue self-interests at the cost of others and make them deviate from the path of morality.

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Survey of Literature

In the literature of management, business ethics, philosophy, and psychology the concept and the role of the ego has been discussed.

Ego defense mechanisms (or factors) were defined for the first time by Freud (1937) as unconscious resources used by the ego to reduce the conflict between the id and the superego. The self is the true subject of the whole psyche and prefigures the ego (Jung, 1969, 1971). The Jungian conceptualization of self partly derives from the Hindu perspective of 'the divine Self within' (Crowley, 1998) and consists in 'the experienceable and the inexperienceable (or the not yet experienced)' (Jung, 1971)

According to Bowie (1991) "egoism in theory and in practice is destructive of business itself". Ego also affects the consumer's pro-social behaviour (Basil and Weber, 2006; Rollinson, 2002; Hemingway and Maclagan, 2004; Moon, 2001). In particular, people do not wish to be viewed negatively by others (Archer et al., 1981) and so the corporate social responsibility (CSR) support is for ego enhancement purposes (Ramasamy et al., 2010). According to Ramasamy et al. (2010), "In Singapore religiosity in fact promotes egotistic reasons for supporting CSR". Egocentrism can generate dualisms (me/them, corporation/labor, etc.) and this self-aggrandizing dualistic belief system can lead to a diminished ability to love or care about others spiritually or in any other sense (Crittenden, 2000). Ketola (2006) has shown that an organization uses ego-defense mechanisms to protect the integrity of its personality, even at the expense of sacrificing the morality of its actions. It is more important for organizations to feel that they are moral persons than to face the immorality of their actions (Ketola, 2006, p. 149).

Satya means seeking the truth within ourselves (Niranjanananda, 2002). According to Corner (2009) a person who is practicing satya may realize that his resentment toward a colleague who got promoted could very well be due to his own ego-based desire for recognition, respect, and increased security through greater income. If a person can acknowledge this and filter out this ego only then he is practicing satya. Further she says that yoga practitioner is empowered to know his or her authentic self and can begin to change behavior away from ego driven actions toward behavior more consistent with intrinsic, positive tendencies. As a result, the practitioner and close work colleagues suffer less from the harm that ego driven behavior typically creates.

Cavanagh and Badsuch (2002) believe that spiritualities based on supremacy, intolerance, and narrow world view does not help in developing good moral habits. Probably they are hinting that when ego gets attached to spirituality then it ceases to be spirituality and it is not good for individuals and organizations. They further say that spirituality helps in increasing creativity, cooperation, motivation, personal satisfaction, productivity, overcoming stress

and turnover, and decreasing the costs in organizations.

Envy and resentment which are the expressions of ego state are vices for business and they poison the business firm (Solomon, 1993).

Misreporting of firm's performance has become a common phenomenon. Studies (for e.g. Hayward et al., 2004) have found out that when CEOs and others believe that they alone are responsible for the firm's high performance (and are rewarded financially or psychologically based on that belief), there is a strong tendency to exaggerate firm's performance to bolster the CEO's ever increasing ego.

Pride (abhimana) is also ego in the secondary sense. This too rests on the feeling of otherness. Regarding this Carver et al. (2010) says that hubristic pride is associated with extrinsic values of social dominance and public recognition, while authentic pride is tied to intrinsic rewards of goal engagement and adaptive achievement. Based on the findings reported in the study of McGregor and Marigold (2003), it appears that individuals who are more prone to experience hubristic pride are typically characterized by low-implicit and high-explicit self-views that induce frequent fluctuations in their levels of self-esteem. Therefore, when confronted with a threat to their ego, these persons tend to respond defensively by engaging in self-enhancing behavior to compensate for this unbalanced style of emotional regulation. Conversely, people who do not display such dissociations between implicit and explicit self-representations enjoy greater self-esteem stability, do not behave defensively in face of adverse life events, and are less likely to involve in compensatory self-enhancement activities (Tracy et al., 2009).

In Indian ancient literature (Ramayana, Mahabharata, etc.) we find that many people who were very powerful got destroyed because of the ego they were carrying. Notable ones are the downfall of all-powerful Ravana, Duryodhana, and Kansa. In recent times downfall of Enron, Arthur Anderson, WorldCom, and people like Ramalingam Raju could also be attributed to the ego where powerful organizations and individuals developed the ego that they can get away with any immoral act because of the power they have achieved.

Alongwith the ego, in the literature lot of insights have been provided linking spirituality with management, business, and leadership (Fry, 2003; Pava, 2007; Giacalone and Jurkiewic, 2003; Mitroff and Denton, 1999; Marques et al, 2005) and the role of spirituality.

Management Crisis

Corporate scams, recent global economic crisis, disturbed financial markets, and ethical failures of successful organizations and individuals are some of the events that have shaken the confidence of a common man. Management models which worked for decades are now

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failing. Modern management is facing the challenge of sustainability.

The visible problem is that true Globalization based on unity is still eluding the world where a sense of connectedness, trust, inter-dependence, and healthy exchange and sharing of ideas, resources, and knowledge can take place amongst the citizens of the world. Effort to bring Globalization on economics driven by developed nations has unfortunately further driven the world into 'haves' and 'have nots' instead of 'everything for everyone' bringing further disparity in the world society. Leadership world over is struggling to provide a global vision and direction but self-interests and myopic thinking act as the biggest barriers. Organizations be it International Organizations like WTO, World Bank, Trading Blocs, Multi National Business Organizations, and many other public and private organizations have still not been able to develop true global agendas for benefit of the world society. It is strongly realized now by the world that leadership, organizations, and various professional disciplines should have to come out of their self-interests and bring about the change in the world based on connectedness, love, trust, and harmony so that peace and prosperity across the world can be achieved. The ego process which very often comes in the way and creeps in the decision making process of organizations, leaders, and individuals is the major stumbling block.

There is a silver lining. Recently, the interest in spirituality has grown among scholars, practitioners, and professionals and has become a subject of serious discussion. A theme emerging the world over is that of spirituality in practice could lead to better decision making for the long term benefits.

Ego and spirituality have a close connection and it is necessary to understand the role of ego in spirituality. For effective management the understanding of ego process which stops us in reaching to the orderly state of mind is critical and this understanding could help in creating more sustainability in decision making and respectfully integrating the ideas from spirituality to the existing management framework.

Spirituality and Ego

While defining spirituality, we have to understand that there are two aspects of spirituality – a negative aspect and a positive aspect, and the two aspects are complementary to each other. Negatively, spirituality means melting or effacing the ego, and positively it means realizing one's unity with others (or in other words, having universal love). Spirituality may mean different things to different people. Some say it is an occult phenomenon, religion, telepath, mind reading, psychic experience and so on. For the real basis of spirituality is freedom from ego process in our consciousness. There is a beautiful book by Swami Vivekananda entitled "What Religion Is" where he explains in his own masterly way how the essence of every

religion is to come upon the liberation from the ego, freedom from the selfishness and self-centeredness which is otherwise present in the human consciousness; so that one's motives in working, in living, in relating do not remain selfish or self centered. This is what is meant by liberation. Without this liberation it is not possible to come upon virtue.

Every religion has promulgated ethics such as love, compassion, trust, non-violence, non-stealing and so on. People have tried hard to practice that ethics. But the result shows that human beings have not been successful in practicing virtue. Indeed virtue is a state of mind, state of being but it is not contained in action. This was first pointed out by Socrates in the West and by Buddha in the East. Socrates said there is only one virtue and that is order of consciousness. By order in consciousness one means non-violence, peace, harmony, love, happiness, joy which are all orderly state of consciousness and by disorder in consciousness one means hatred, conflict, sorrow, fear, all the negative emotions that human consciousness is searching to. So unless we eliminate from our consciousness the disorderly states of consciousness we don't really come upon the order. We may temporarily come upon love, happiness, joy and other experiences but it is shattered by negative emotions that follow and therefore it is not really a state of virtue rather it is just a momentary glimpse into that state.

The real purpose of religion is to end the disorder in consciousness which is what we mean the freedom or liberation from ego and that is spirituality. It is the essence of all religion. The forms differ. Muslim prays in a different way without a statue in front of him, Hindu prays in front of various statues. These are simply different forms of religion but they all talk about love, confession, about kindness, about non-violence and unless that is there in or consciousness it will not manifest in our relationship, even though we may divide to do so.

 Multi-National Corporations may think of following a stakeholder approach whereby the interest of the customers, society, and environment will be taken care of and profitability will only be the by-product of their actions. They may propagate this message through speeches and reports. Whatever they say or write or do charity but it won't work. It won't work because it is not something they can really do. MNC's cannot decide that they won't be greedy and they won't be exploiting the customers, employees, and environment and do the same also. The reason is that there is a deep rooted causation within their consciousness for profits and power. Unless that causation is eliminated the real results won't come. This causation would always create a conflict between what they think they should be and what they actually are, what they actually are and what they actually feel. So, that is why virtue cannot really be practiced although MNC's can claim to be virtuous. Any business organization will really be virtuous when the deep rooted causation for profits and power will be replaced by stakeholder approach. It needs lot of efforts and sacrifice. Are these organizations ready for that? The day any organization achieve that deep consciousness for stakeholders moral decision making will become a natural phenomenon for that

organization and there won't be any difference between thoughts, speeches, and behaviour. That wisdom or coming to that wisdom is spirituality.

Buddha pointed out long ago three laws, and we must deeply understand what they mean and I think they are relevant for management. First of all, he said, sorrow exists, just as Newton said motion exists but if it happens there is a cause of it. It is just an observed fact. Buddha said sorrow exists. We can all see that there is lot of sorrow in the form of psychological suffering, in the form of conflict, in the form of action etc. Secondly, Buddha said that it has a cause. Ignorance is the cause of sorrow and that is the second law. Ignorance here does not mean the lack of knowledge but means illusion. Illusion is something that we take to be true when it is not true but we are assuming it to be true is illusion. Or we are giving some tremendous importance to something in life that is not so important is illusion. And illusion is ignorance what Buddha said from it arises sorrow, conflict, and all negative emotions. This is the source of all disorders in our consciousness and that is why they are in our relationships in society. The third is that the cause can be eliminated. Why? The reason is that illusion can be eliminated. We can't change an organic fact which is not the creation of our own thought. We can't change a biological fact but psychological assumptions which are false assumptions can change when we discover for ourselves that they are false. And, therefore true spirituality is born of the purpose of understanding of what is true and what is false.

When we perceive what is true and what is false the false ends. Here is an example. We have a big division between Hindus and Muslims in India and that is the cause of so many violent acts. The fact is that Hindus feel very different from the Muslims and they feel that because their ideas about religion, about God are different from that of Muslims. Hindus pray in a different manner. Actual fact is that Hindus don't know what God is. Muslim also doesn't know what God is. A Hindu is repeating what his ancestors have told him and what is written in books. He is identifying with this truth and he feels this is right. A Muslim does exactly the same. But if they only had the understanding and the humility to say that this is what my ancestors have told me but I myself do not know if this is true and Muslim said the same, they would be friends and there will be no hatred between them. They would say that well my ancestors told me something differently from yours but I also don't know if this is true. So if both the people say like this then they will have an inquiring mind and though their opinions may differ, they both are ready to go beyond that opinion and to discover the truth for themselves. So this division is born of illusion because we are accepting something which you don't know to be true.

Of course, illusions can be different for different people because these are just imaginary things and imagination can be very different. But the fact cannot be different, for truth is not different for different human beings. Truth comes into being when a conscious perceives

"what is a fact without any distortion." We have a distortion process going on when we are egotistic. The ego is this identification with my body, my family, my religion, my country. This identification creates a division. This is mine that is not mine, those people and our people are the reflections of ego. As soon as we have produced the division there is disaffection and there is groupism around one particular view. I share with all the Hindus and Muslims share with all the Muslims and so on and out of this groupism comes out all the disenchantment, antagonism, and so on. So we remain brotherly with that small set of people we call mine. We work for their welfare and we really don't love others and the rest of the humanity. So the ego process narrows us down. It creates boundaries within which I say I love. Pakistan was in India earlier. So their people were our people. They were also Indians and they were suppose to feel for all of them and then Britishers draw the boundary and those people are no longer our people and that is why I hate them. So it's all doing of mind. That is not a fact in nature and is born out of illusion. And when we are attached to our own particular illusion and we are doing propaganda for our illusion it is not religion.

Spirituality is the quest for truth, for wisdom and not for attachment to a particular belief or a particular point of view. Otherwise it becomes important because we are identifying with it, we get possessed with it and that is why we give importance to it and that's how we become egotistic. So from this ego process in us comes all the disorders in human consciousness. People may ask that what this ego has to do with management. Well that same ego is the source of problem in the management. You have set up a factory and you have different managers for different works. They feel rivalry with each other. They want to supersede others, they want to outscore others, and they feel jealous of each other and that is the ego process in us. And that means that they are fighting with each other and they are not able to cooperate with each other and work. So lot of wastage of time, energy and resource goes into this internal friction and the output goes down. So not only this ego process is creating disorder in our own consciousness it is also creating disorder in society because society is nothing but the relationship between human beings. And it is also creating problems within the family. Because it is the same central factor that comes in the way of working as a cooperative group. A cooperative group is formed when there is one central interest. Even gangsters work in some cooperative group so long as they want to rob the bank and share the profits. But if one gangster of the group wants to leave the group they will kill him. That cooperation is not based on love and friendship. That is based on common self interest. So when we are motivated by a common self interest that is not virtue and that is not real cooperation. Our critic may be our true friend because he may be pointing out something true and we may be going on our own song, our own illusion in mind. Therefore our critic may be our best friend, if we are really interested in truth. But if we are only interested in victory then we are only looking for a support and that is what our ego turns us into.

There are two quests for truth. One is the scientific quest where we promote inquiry because

that helps us in understanding how the nature functions like how the tree grows, how the river flows, why we get sunrise and sunset and so on. The second quest is the religious quest for truth where we try to find the causation of hatred, jealousy, and violence in ourselves and when we discern what is true and what is false the false drops away, the disorder ends and there we discover the order in consciousness.

We have given forms to religion and lost the substance in it. Deep wisdom that it was supposed to invoke gets diluted. After all Jesus did not follow Hindu or Islam and was able to come to that consciousness. The Buddha did get that without Hinduism. He broke away from Hinduism, casteism, and ritualism that was going in Hinduism and brought a new light. So this transformation of the consciousness from disorderly one to the orderly consciousness is the basis of spirituality. It is based on inquiry because so long as we follow a view there is no wisdom. A mind that is full of illusion has no wisdom. So unless we have that intelligence what is true and what is false all our actions are prone to lead us to that disorder. That is what we find repeatedly in society. It is unfortunate that this inquiry we have promoted in science when it comes to education, not in the field of sociology and other fields. In philosophy there is a little bit of that inquiry but that only remains at the intellectual field but that does not come to our life. A professor of Buddhist philosophy is not Buddha. So what is the difference we must ask for ourselves to come to that Buddha consciousness. If we cannot come to that Buddha consciousness or Jesus consciousness then what is the use to say that we are a follower of Buddha or Jesus. What we will follow will be a superficial routine but that is not the essence of Buddha or Jesus. So unless we come over to that consciousness of Buddha or Jesus and that is not different from human consciousness we are not spiritual.

Ego turns our mind into a sort of lawyer who is always defending us and works for the profit and security of us and the mind and the lawyer is not interested in truth. The lawyer is only interested in defending his client and winning the case and when our mind becomes like that it become incapable of perceiving what is true and what is false because we will defend the false when we love the false. It is our particular illusion that blocks the true inquiries and ultimately it blocks also the true spirituality.

When the ego goes out one is able to understand the truth and universal love flows. Morality becomes natural in love, as one would not exploit the beloved person and, on the contrary, would do well to him/her. Selfishness which is the opposite of love is the ground and the cause of all immorality. Since in love selfishness is absent, there remains no cause for being immoral.

In summary it could be said that (i) egolessness and (ii) love or the feeling of unity-are the two negative and positive meanings of spirituality and in this state person is able to come

upon the truth as false automatically goes away. Moreover, it is the essence of all religion and organizations to come to that state of egolessness where feeling of universal unity is developed.

Role of Ego

Let us see the role of ego and consequences thereafter (Krishna, 2010):

Love	+	Ego	→	Attachment, Possessiveness
Wish	+	Ego	→	Desire, Addiction
Power	+	Ego	→	Domination, Exploitation
Sexuality	+	Ego	→	Lust, Pornography, Rape
Friendship	+	Ego	→	Support, Dependence
Humility	+	Ego	→	Inferiority, Servility
Talent	+	Ego	→	Pride, Vanity, Superiority
Excellence	+	Ego	→	Competition, Rivalry
Groups	+	Ego	→	Division
Thought	+	Ego	→	Worry, Fear, Anxiety
Pleasure	+	Ego	→	Habit, Addiction, Boredom
Need	+	Ego	→	Greed, Covetousness

If we look at the words such as love, wish, power, need, talent, excellence, humility, thought, friendship we find that they all look positive words and are related naturally to human beings. But the moment we use the words like attachment, possessiveness, desire, addiction, domination, exploitation, lust, rivalry, worry, fear, etc. negativity emerges. This shift from positive to negative is simply because of ego. When ego gets attached to natural feelings or behaviours it immediately takes a negative form. Clearly there is no problem with love, wish, power, etc. These are all natural things but it is the ego process in us that turns them into something evil.

Management and the Role of Ego

Some of the issues that are discussed in Management relates to organizational failures, exploitation of employees, misuse of power, organizational rivalry and conflict, narrow vision, leadership failures, environmental degradation, abuse of hierarchy, departmental conflicts, and so on. If we closely look we find that it is the self-interest that is the root cause. Individuals are failing to come out of the myopic individual or organizational goals. Greed for power, greed for money, greed for name and fame, desire for luxuries, possessiveness for materialistic things, exploitation of helpless people, dominating others, addiction to sensory things, superiority complex, pomp and show in superficial success, etc. are the factors that

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are hindrance to the effective management practices which are inclusive in nature instead of exclusively for self-interest.

The role of ego in management and business practices is implicit in the first stage out of five mentioned by Collins (2009) "How the Mighty Fall". Collins explains that when a 'Hubris is Born of Success' in business organizations then this is the first stage towards the failure. Dating back to ancient Greece, the concept of hubris is defined as excessive pride (Talent + ego) that brings down a hero. Many organizations which were great organizations at one point of time failed because they developed so much ego that it blinded them and stopped them in visualizing the bigger picture. He cites the example of Motorola, Zenith, Circuit City, Bank of America, Ames etc.

Collins (2009) writes:

"Mototorola's arrogance gave competitors an opening, and Motorola fell from being #1 cellphone maker in the world, at one point garnering nearly 50 percent market share, to having 17 percent share by 1999."

He further writes:

"A core business that meets a fundamental human need-and one at which you've become best in the world-rarely becomes obsolete. In this analysis of decline, only one company, Zenith, fell largely because it stayed focused on its core business too long and failed to confront its impending demise."

Case of Zenith could be correlated with ego consciousness entering into the pleasure or comfort of core business.

Bank of America nearly collapsed in 1980's simply because of inflated beliefs of Samuel Armacost, the CEO in his decision making neglecting some valuable suggestions from others. The ego worked there creating feeling of superiority in the CEO.

There are numerous other instances where there have been managerial failures with ego being at the centre.

It is worth mentioning that the second stage of decline of big organizations described by Collins is 'Undisciplined Pursuit of More'. This could be related to the greed (need + ego). Stein (2003) has argued that the near collapse of Long Term Capital Management (LTCM) in 1998 was caused not by a lack of information or poor decision processes, but by its own narcissism. LTCM's partners displayed denial of reality in believing that they possessed knowledge and capabilities far beyond those of any other hedge-fund managers. The case of

LTCM could be related to humility and when ego got attached it became the case of inferiority and servility.

In decision making we should realize that ego affects our capabilities and capacities. It narrows us down. It develops negative thoughts, negative emotions, and negative behaviour in us. Acquisition of material wealth (Artha) and satisfaction of desires (Kama) become unhealthy only when we do the same selfishly and egoistically. That is why in Indian ancient literature it is said that one who appropriates all money for oneself without giving others their due share, is virtually a thief ("… yo bhunkte stena eva sah …") or "... such a person is a thief and deserves punishment …" (" … sasteno dandamarhati") or, "…those who cook only for themselves, eat sin…" (bhunjate te tvaghnan papa ye pacantyatma karmat").

Today many business organizations are involved in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The real intentions differ from organization to organization. Unless and until the ego process does not go away in such activities the real excellence won't be achieved and such activities would be restricted to superficial levels. In the Indian tradition the concept of 'Dana' (Charity) too is there, but it finds its place in the religious sphere and not in the spiritual field. 'Dana' is considered as 'Pun,ya' (moral merit) and not as spiritual act. 'Dana' in love or with the feeling of service to God, alone is spiritual act, which is more desirable. 'Dana' literally means 'giving'. Giving in love is the real Dana. There is a famous saying of Sai Baba, namely, " Love gives and forgives, selfishness gets and forgets". Love means giving, selfishness means only getting. So, spirituality means giving (not in charity but in love).

Effacing of ego could help individuals and organizations to cultivate proper attitude towards Nature and the world, the material life itself can be made spiritual and the so-called dichotomy between the material and the spiritual be abolished. Only ego is the barrier.

This ego is an obstruction on the flow of real potential and capabilities that are hidden in organizations and individuals. The more the ego melts, the greater will be the flow of capabilities and consequently the greater will be the success.

Conclusion

All the concepts mentioned in scriptures and concept of universal brotherhood has not been able to be converted into reality because of the ego process that goes in us. Therefore we need spirituality. We are deluded with all the illusions of mind and are making ourselves slaves of this illusionary identification unless we are trained into this to inquire and step out of it, beyond that it will be difficult for us to attain the real human consciousness or the orderly state of mind which could lead to moral behaviour. We should avoid being a propagandist on one point of view. In that case we are not in that quest for truth. So it has a

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bearing on management and our decision making abilities.

We can never realize the true potential of the organizations and individuals and achieve ethics in management if we don't have that wisdom or spirituality which we can get by getting out of the ego process which exists in all of us.

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