

Comparative view of the eastern and western perspectives on the concept of Ahamkara/Ego

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ABSTRACT

In the Indian tradition, the experience of personal identity or the self-sense is termed as 'aham', which is translated to 'I'. It is debatable that whether this interchangeable use of Sanskrit and English translation of Ahamkara/Ego respectively convey the same meaning. The present research focused on drawing a theoretical analysis of the concept of 'Ahamkara' from two dominant perspectives: Eastern and Western. At one end, western equivalent term 'Ego' is equated with eastern concept of 'Ahamkara' but gross differences can be observed in the two contexts. To explore the underline differences in the meaning of Ahamkara and Ego, a broader review of literature was carried out. It was extracted from the analysis that these concepts differ on under-mentioned dimensions: Nature of reality, Dimensions of self, Boundaries of self and non-self and Methodological approach to study the self. Salagame et al. (2005) concluded that the concept of Ahamkara has specific significance and value in the Indian context which emerges as a meta-construct that can embrace many of the modern psychological concepts related to self and identity. The differences between the two perspectives reveal the significance of context bound knowledge and its broad implications.

Keywords: *Ahamkara, Ego, sense of self, Western, Eastern.*

The fundamental question 'Who am I?' is the center of inquiry for mankind. Different disciplines have tried to find appropriate answer to this question at varying level of analysis. For example: Biology studies it at cellular level, Psychology studies it at mental and cognitive level, Philosophy explores the existential aspects, sociology attempts to answer it at group level, anthropology tries to find an answer from archaeological perspective and similarly religious texts expands the horizon to include transcendental level. 'I' of English Language translates to 'Aham' in Sanskrit. *Aham* is a generic term. In Indian context, there are various terms originated from *Aham* such as *Ahamkara*, *Ahambhava*, *Aham-padartha*, *Aham brahmasmi* etc (Salagame et al, 2005). These concepts can be classified in three different categories i.e., Psychological, Empirical and Transcendental. The concept of Ahamkara lies in the Psychological level.

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At a psychological level, Ahamkara is considered the function of mind which includes an individual's everyday thoughts and feelings about oneself. It is understood as the mechanism of 'I-maker' or the ability of mind to take on identities by relating to things as 'Me' or 'Mine'. It is the sense of "I-am-ness" the individual ego, which feels itself to be a distinct, separate entity. Safaya (1976) noted that in Indian texts there are different terms referring to the concept of mind. For example: According to Vedanta, Anthakarana (Mind) has four distinct aspects namely, Buddhi, Manas, Citta and Ahamkar. Similarly, Mind is called Chitta in Yoga Philosophy. The word chitta is derived from the root chit, which means 'to know'. Chitta is used in the Yoga system to mean the entire knowing mechanism. Chitta has three chief aspects with distinct functions to perform namely Manas, Ahamkara and Buddhi. At this backdrop, Ahamkara is understood as a function of the mind which enables an individual to take on identities through interaction with the world around.

Ahamkara is loosely translated to 'Ego' in English language (Salagame & Raj 1999). The term 'Ego' was popularized from Freudian theory of Personality, which emphasized the three structures of mind i.e., Id-Ego-Superego, in which ego plays executive role in balancing Id and superego. Ego, in psychoanalytic theory, is that portion of the human personality which is experienced as the "self" or "I" and is in contact with the external world through perception. It is said to be the part that remembers, evaluates, plans, and in other ways is responsive to and acts in the surrounding physical and social world. This concept later became the center of Ego movement. The present study aimed to understand the differences between the concept of Ahamkara and Ego. The Freudian 'ego' represents the western approach to understand the self and behavior whereas the eastern concept of Ahamkara represents the sense of self.

Concept of Ahamkara

In layman language, Ahamkara is commonly referred as False ego, Pride or Arrogance. But the spiritual understanding of Ahamkara lies beyond such terms. For example, 'Ego' refers to an individual's sense of self-esteem. 'Pride' refers to an individual's feeling of deep pleasure or satisfaction from one's own achievements. 'Arrogance' on the other hand refers to an individual's exaggerated sense of self importance.

In the Indian traditions, the nature and function of *ahamkara* can be found in the *slokas* of *Viveka Chudamani* of Shankaracharya. It states that *Anthakarana (Mind)* dwells in the body as *aham* with *abhimana* in the reflected brightness of *atman* and this is to be understood as *ahamkara*. Due to *abhimana* (identification) *ahamkara* becomes *karta* (doer) and *bhokta* (enjoyer). It is made clear that *ahamkara* experiences happiness and sadness in relation to favourable and unfavourable circumstances and therefore *sukha* (happiness) and *dukha* (sorrow) are its *dharma* and not of *atman* which is *sadananda* (forever bliss).

Modern researchers have understood the nature of Ahamkara in different aspects. Rama et al. (1976) observe that the I-ness inherent in *ahamkara* provides a sense of separateness from the rest of the world, a feeling of distinction and uniqueness. Safaya (1976) notes *ahamkara* is the "Individuating principle, responsible for limitations, separation and variety in the universe. It designates the state of active consciousness of ego".

Based on such definitions Raj (1993) conducted a theoretical analysis of the concept of Ahamkara and identified its four aspects. They are Identification, Individuality, Separation and Agency. Here Identification represents feeling 'I and mine', in terms of one's bio-psycho-social associations and attachments. It highlights an individual's relationship with

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things, people, places and events around them. Individuality refers to the feeling of uniqueness. Separation represents the feeling of 'I and not-I'. It differentiates the self from others. All these four aspects together compose Ahamkara. Agency represents feeling of Doer-ship or 'I am the Doer'. It includes sense of control and personal efficacy.

Concept of Ego

"The term 'ego' is often used in a highly ambiguous way, even among analysts. It is broadly defined in three ways: 'ego,' in analysis, is not synonymous with 'personality' or with 'individual'; it does not coincide with the 'subject' as opposed to the 'object' of experience; and it is by no means only the 'awareness' or the 'feeling' of one' as own self. In analysis, the ego is a concept of quite a different order. It is a substructure of personality and is defined by its functions.

The formation of self within the subjective executive function of the ego (Kernberg, 1980) was promoted in Freud's ego concept. According to Freud, Ego comprises the executive functions of personality by serving as the integrator of the outer and inner worlds as well as of the id and the superego. The ego represents what may be called reason and common senses, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions" (Freud, 1923). He continued that "the ego develops from perceiving instincts to controlling them, obeying instincts to inhibiting them" The ego gives continuity and consistency to behaviour by providing a personal point of reference which relates the events of the past (retained in memory) with actions of the present and of the future (represented in anticipation and imagination). Ego development is considered the result of many activities including the meeting of basic needs, interpersonal relationships, learning, effective problem solving and coping with challenges (Freud, 1923).

In 1936, Anna Freud published perhaps her most influential book: *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (A. Freud, 1936/1966). Later, Erikson focused his attention on the issue of ego identity, which he defined as the person's awareness of him- or herself, and of his or her impact on other people. Erikson proposed that an individual must progress through a series of stages in order to achieve a fully developed personality. At each stage, the person must meet and resolve a particular crisis. In so doing, the individual develops particular ego qualities. In *Insight and Responsibility* (1964), he argued that each of these strengths was associated with a corresponding virtue or ego strength. Thus, each of the eight positive ego qualities has its negative counterpart.

METHODOLOGY

This theoretical research reviewed researches on Ahamkara and ego from various Books and journals available online. Comprehensive understanding of the concept of Ahamkara in the light of eastern and western body of knowledge was developed. Based on the review of literature, it was found that Ahamkara is the most elaborated Indian concept which is studied at theoretical as well as empirical level by researchers. In the field of Ahamkara Indian researchers like Kiran Kumar (1993), Gaur (1994), Murthy (1995), Rekha (1995), Raj (1999), Parimala (2001) have extensively contributed. In regard with the Concept of Ego the major researcher are Kernberg (1982), Freud (1986), Kohut (1977), Erikson (1968) and others.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to understand the differences between the eastern concept of Ahamkara and its English translation Ego. Based on the review of literature, it was found

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that the eastern concept of 'Ahamkara' and western concept of 'Ego' have various differences. Salagame et al (2005) has extensively worked in this direction. Based on the analysis it can be said that the Ahamkara and Ego can be differentiated on major dimensions like; Nature of Reality, Dimensions of Self, Boundaries of self, and Methodological approach to study the self.

Table 1: Differences between Western and Eastern perspective on Ahamkara/ Ego.

S.No.	Dimensions	Western Approach 'Ego'	Eastern Approach 'Ahamkara'
1.	Nature of Reality	Experiences at awakened state only	Experiences at awakened, sleep, and even paranormal states-transcendental level.
2.	Dimensions of self	Bio-Psycho-Social Identity	Bio-Psycho-Social-Psychical (Soul/Spiritual) identity
3.	Boundaries of self	Objective self-sense (empirical level or Psychological level)	Transcendental Self (beyond subject-object distinction)
4.	Methodological approach to study the self	Etic Approach (Observable, measurable, quantitative)	Emic Approach (Subjective, qualitative, experiential)

The differences can be understood with regard with the following dimensions. Firstly, the nature of reality, on one hand the western concept of Ego is considered to incorporate the human experience that takes place only in the awakened state. The experiences of paranormal, dream state, transcend are not considered real. Whereas on the other hand, the eastern concept of Ahamkara incorporates the human experiences of all kind including awakened state, dream state, paranormal and mystical, unlike most modern psychologists. They also discussed dreams, illusions, hallucinations and delusions (Sinha, 1985).

Secondly, Dimensions of Self, on one hand in the western concept of Ego, the self is understood at bio-psycho- social level. Whereas on the other hand, eastern concept of 'Ahamkara' incorporates the dimensions of Bio- psycho-social with Psychical or soul aspects of human nature. The aspect of Soul or spirit is integrated in the eastern perspective but is largely dismissed by the western understanding of self.

Thirdly, Boundaries of self, on one hand the modern psychology affirms a narrow range of human experiences as self. It comprises of all the worldly association of the body, either psychological or empirical in nature, which can be seen or observed and thus are objective in nature. In this limited understanding the self is classified as subject or object of the experience. Whereas on the other hand, the eastern knowledge claims that only the ground awareness i.e., Atman is considered self and all the other aspects of self like the jiva (soul) or dehi (owner of the body) or Purusha (plural of jiva) are viewed a part of non-self. The basic difference between Atman and jiva, dehi, Prursa is that in Indian tradition jiva, dehi or purusha is viewed as the Individual or person or self or subject but atman is beyond the distinction of subject-object because transcendence implies no experience or experienced. The human experiences are associated with jiva or dehi, because atman is experience-less. It contemplates the identification with jiva and dehi as wrong or due to lack of transcendental self-knowledge (ajnana). This idea promotes the subjective nature of self which is experiential in nature.

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Lastly, the methodology or the approach followed to study the self-differs in western and eastern perspectives. While modern psychology has limited understanding and discussion of self and identity to empirical level only, the eastern body of knowledge takes both the empirical as well as the transcend level into consideration. It is important to note that Aham (Ontological) is a generic term and it can be understood at three levels i.e., Empirical, Transcendental and Psychological level. Ahamkara is classified under psychological level and thus can be studied through empirical methods. Eastern tradition places the emphasis on one's internal world, the whole person, and perfecting the person, namely, one's authenticity and one's integrity. Indian knowledge system chooses the methods of listening (śravaṇa) and reflection (manana) as the ways of attaining knowledge of distinction between the non-self and the Self. It observes an experiential and emic approach to study of self. In contrast, cultivating the mind to understand and master the world (i.e., mind model) in the Western tradition places the emphasis on the external world, the mind and critical thinking, knowledge of the world, and the products and things in the universe represented by the sciences. It observes the etic approach or more quantified approach to study of self (Chin, 2013).

Overall, based on this analysis it can be asserted that there does exist differences in the eastern and western body of knowledge in regard with what is the nature of reality, what is self and non-self, how to study the self and the aspects of self. These differences evince the gap between the eastern and western body of knowledge.

Psychology is a social science that primarily studies human beings. The nature of human mind changes with the context and thus the concepts developed in different regions of the world needs to be given proper acknowledgement so that they can be utilized for the best. The complete debate of west-east needs to be conducted at two levels, first at national level, by acknowledging the importance of the spiritual texts in educational systems; and secondly at global level so as to provide acknowledgement to eastern concepts like Ahamkara, which are deep and detailed. In regard with acknowledging the Indian philosophy at national level, Zohar in 1997 introduced the term spiritual intelligence (SI) as 'It is the intelligence that makes us whole, that gives us our integrity. It is the soul's intelligence, the intelligence of the deep self. It is the intelligence with which we ask fundamental questions and with which we reframe our answers' (Zahar and Marshall 1999) Recently Emmons (2000) argued that "Spiritual intelligence can be viewed as a form of intelligence because it predicts functioning and adaptation and offers capabilities that enable people to solve problems and attain goals". According to Griffiths (2017), Spiritual intelligence results in a deeper sense of meaning and purpose. Content related to 'Bhagavad Gita' is already included in National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)'s Class XII Sanskrit text book, namely, Shashwati, Part-II (Chapter IV: Karma Gauravam) since 2007-08. This is a positive step towards value-oriented education but it is less explored due to language restrictions. Much more open access and facilities needs to be developed in regard with 'Spiritual Intelligence' amongst the youth.

In regard with the acknowledgement at global level, the concept of Indigenization that insists upon culturally specific knowledge and practices, which may or may not be universal or even cross- indigenious, becomes the center of interest. Indigenous studies highlight two important points; a) the ill practice of making the western concepts and models as dominant, mainstream or universal in nature; and b) relevance of culturally appropriate research, education and practice. In similar concerns foreign researchers have also raised their voices such as in 2008, Arnett published a paper titled "The Neglected 95%: Why American

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Psychology Needs to Become Less American” that found a profound bias in the publication practices and editorial staffs of journals published by the American Psychological Association (APA). Later, Henrich et al. (2010) published an article titled ‘The Weirdest people in the world’ wherein “W.E.I.R.D.” referred to (Researches conducted with participants from Western European Industrialized Rich Democratic countries). They found that majority of studies published in world’s top journals that claim about human science and behavior are dominated by the W.E.I.R.D. sample. These papers also throw light on biasness of the scientific communities towards the western concepts. They question the reliability, validity and generalization of findings of such research at global level. The present study not only focuses on the differences between the two perspectives on the concept of self and identity at surface level but also reveals the significance of context-based knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Western and Eastern philosophy are quite vast. They follow different paradigms in regard with ontology, epistemological, and methodology. Western philosophy is governed by strict laws of empiricism, objectivity, logic and systemization, the likes of which bar the influences of religious or traditional values in such reasoning. Conversely, Eastern philosophy exudes these spiritual values as the framework of their philosophical edifices. Indigenization in longer run, contributes in making a more just world through reconciliation between both eastern and western perspectives. Indian philosophy is rich and deep as it covers dynamic aspects of human life and beyond. Such body of knowledge can be highly advantageous for not only Indian or eastern but also western world. Rao and Paranjpe (2016) wrote that "We should consider the Western and Indian approaches not as either or but mutually complementary and reinforcing models." In conclusion, it is essential to realize the worth of Indian philosophy at both national and global level.

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Conflict of Interest

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