A pursuit on the Servant Leadership theory by Swami Vivekananda: A conceptual Study

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Abstract

Swami Vivekananda has been a protuberant figure for his wisdom on the Vedas and the Upanishads across the globe for the last 100 years or more. He is considered as the creator of the Vedantic theories the solicitations of which are interminable. Be it any aspect of life, the experiences of Swami Vivekananda have infinite promises. The Vedantic theories summarize the applications of the perceptions of the Vedas in solving modern-day complications. The concerned research paper deals with Swami Vivekananda's teachings on 'Servant Leadership' and also parallels the same with the theory of Robert. K. Greenleaf. The various resemblances and divergences between the two theories have been determined and a model on 'Servant Leadership' from the lessons of the great Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda has been anticipated.

Keywords: Wisdom, Swami Vivekananda, Vedantic, Servant Leadership, lessons.

Introduction

"Feel, my children, feel; feel for the poor, the ignorant, the downtrodden; feel till the heart stops and the brain reels and you think you will go mad; then pour the soul out at the feet of the Lord, and then will come power, help and indomitable energy."

- *Swami Vivekananda*

The Indian sub-continent has been the epicenter of numerous viewpoints and philosophies towards the actuality of veracity from the primeval times. There have been plentiful renowned philosophers and futurists that have come out of India and enlightened the entire world. Such a dynamic figure is Swami Vivekananda. Formerly named Narendranath Dutta, Swami Vivekananda was born in 1863 on the 4th of July in Kolkata. Although he has had a stimulus on countless facets of the country in particular and the world in general, the concerned research article only focuses on his philosophies on modern-day Business Management. Firstly, it is imperative to appreciate that during the era of Swami Vivekananda there was no material lexicon as Business Management and Swamiji himself was no corporate guru. However, from his pearls of wisdom and philosophical evangelization, one could extract certain unending certainties that can be functional in any field of knowledge including Business Management. While conversing about Business Management, the first aspect of the same that comes to mind is the art of leadership. There have been various elegances of leadership described by western scholars years after the demise of Swami Vivekananda (Chendroyaperumal & Meena, 2007). However, if one revision the teachings of Swamiji he or she would treasure that the Vedantic description of leadership is quite diverse from its western complements. If one studies the Servant-Leadership theory one would find that its conferences on the wellbeing of the underlings and responsiveness of the leader towards his or her contemporaries. Here, the leader is a help to the subordinates and of the organization and not the superior (Sarvapiyananda, 2014). This concept was recognized way earlier by Swami Vivekananda through his lessons on applied Vedanta than Robert Greenleaf who devised the theory in 1970. This phenomenon is quite analogous to Adam Smith being regarded as the 'Father of modern economics' while innumerable integral aspects of economics and statecraft had already been invented by Kautilya in around 326 BCE.

||भाग्यवन्तम् परिक्षय न कारिणिम् श्रीः परित्यजति||

- *Kautilya (Arthashastra)*

The above lines have been inscribed in the 'Devanagari' text by Kautilya in his book, 'Arthashastra' and means that one should always refrain from ingoing any venture without dissecting the inherent opportunities (Modelski, 1964). There are plenty of other shlokas in the book that can be used as an indication of how conscious ancient India was regarding economics and financial planning. The study delves deeper into the views of Swami Vivekananda and his teachings on 'Servant-Leadership' and also tries to extricate Swamiji's theory of 'Servant-Leadership' from that of Robert Greenleaf's.

Research Objectives

The concerned research article aims to fulfill the following research objectives:

- To accomplish an in-depth knowledge regarding Swami Vivekananda and his theories on leadership and management.
- To enlighten readers regarding the theory of 'Servant Leadership' proposed by Robert k. Greenleaf.
- To equate the two said theories and showcase the likenesses and variances between them.
- To propose a model of 'Servant Leadership' from the lessons and records of Swami Vivekananda.
- To shed some light on the Vedantic approach to actuality.

Review of Literature

It is intolerable to discover the demeanor for the pursuit of any research without taking into consideration the available research literature on the concerned field of knowledge. An in-depth argument on the already accessible research articles on the topic under consideration is of paramount prominence.

According to Greenleaf (1998), when individuals start to care for other individuals that are when a good society is built. As human beings start caring about others they start building trust and create opportunities for others to cultivate in the long run. Servants are stanch individuals that willingly partake in the management of institutions without egotistical demands. The main objective of such servant leaders is to shape the organization and enable it to function to its fullest potential without asking for something in return. Such leaders will never indulge in dominating others within the organization. Servant leaders are scarce and hard to find but their impetus towards society, in general, creates a positive impact over the same. Administrators are short-sighted in their endeavor but leaders have a vision that assistance in the long run. Greenleaf also states that he had grown an interest in the topic during the later stage of his life and that he had never written for publications till the age of 65.

According to Russel (2001), efficient and enigmatic leadership creates value both for the organization and for society. The value thus created affects the leader's behavior towards its subordinates as well as the institution it is attached to. Organizational performance is also highly correlated to the value that the leader can create through his gestures and attitude. The concerned paper highlights three major aspects of the servant leadership theory proposed by Robert Greenleaf. It states that three outcomes are possible if a leader acts as a servant to his people within the organization and they are; trust, empowerment, and appreciation. The author further states that the value generated by servant leaders both within and outside the organization is the foremost element that segregates 'servant leadership' from any other style of leadership. The paper focuses on the value creation aspect of 'Servant Leadership.

According to Beckerlegge (2010), Vivekananda Kendra describes itself as an organization that has been highly influenced by Swami Vivekananda's ideologies on leadership and human management. The ethos of Hindu ancient scriptures and pre-historic books of India talk eloquently about how a leader should function so that the society benefits from the same. The Vedic literature suggests that an unblemished leadership theory would insist the right person be placed at the right job and at the right time. Be it a king or a modern-day Chief Executive Officer of a multinational firm. The concept of 'Lay Leadership' is something that the Vedic pieces of literature focus on and so does the Vivekananda Kendra and Ramakrishna math that operates across South Asia.

According to Dierendonck (2011), servant leadership is a new domain for research. Several aspects of the same are yet to be discovered. Both, the management and employees of an organization can get benefits from this new aspect of leadership. The concerned research paper presents a conceptual idea of 'Servant Leadership' and how its implementation can be game-changing in the modern business arena. The researcher also converses about the history of the topic and how its evolution had taken place. The researcher further states that servant leadership is all about empowering others. It deals with the progress of individuals within the organization so that the organization as a whole can advance.

According to Goswami (2014), the Indian sub-continent has been the region that has acted as a goldmine of ideas and knowledge regarding the various aspects of actuality. There can be enormous theories on personality development and strategic management based on the Hindu scriptures that were composed nearly 3000 years ago. The paper also talks regarding Swami Vivekananda's belief of human evolution being social rather than biological in nature. The researcher further highlights Swamiji's thoughts on personality development through the manifestation of perfection. The author regards Swamiji as a management guru and also highlights his teachings on the contemporary realm of things such as the need for enigmatic leadership amidst colonial India.

Research Methodology

The research article purposes to edify bibliophiles regarding the teachings of Swami Vivekananda on 'Servant Leadership' in his various lectures in India and abroad and also from his printed volumes. The study also aims to procure an in-depth familiarity with the theory of 'Servant Leadership' by Robert K. Greenleaf which was published in 1970. The paper is conceptual in nature and uses content and text analysis to institute its inferences.

Findings and Discussions

It is a matter of great bewilderment that the culture of corporate governance and business management has persisted in India across centuries in one form or the other. These cultures have existed even before Swamiji's actuality. Certain modern corporate theories like the 'Agency Theory' existed in ancient India as well but in a different arrangement. It is worth appreciating that this is a country

of mythologies that are based on an analogical explanation of reality. Therefore, there is nothing equivocal in the fact that the knowledge from these texts can be made pertinent in every field of existence if deciphered elegantly.

प्रथमेनाज्रिता विध्या व्दितीयेनार्जितं धनं।

तृतीयेनार्जितः कीर्तिः चतुर्थे किं करिष्यति॥

-   *Rig Veda*

The above lines mean that if an individual does not procure acquaintance in his or her first chunk of life and then does not make coinage and eminence in his second chunk, what will he accomplish at the expiration of his life? The article had spoken earlier about the 'Agency Theory'; an apt illustration would make things unblemished. The first mention of 'Gau Daan' or the dissemination of cow to the poor by the monarch has been made in the 'Garuda Purana'. Here, it states that the distribution of healthy cows among poor subjects is such a respectable effort that it confirms that the Sovereign sojourns in the heavens in the spirit world. Now, if one apprehends the resemblance used in the text, he or she would rejoinder that when a monarch provides a healthy cow to one of his subjects, he is confirming him a lifelong source of food in the form of milk and fuel in the form of muck (Pattanaik, 2016). In other words, the monarch engenders employment for his subjects. Now, a query may rise that what the king offers is it his possessions or the possessions of the state? Is he not acting only as an agent between the state and the subjects? Similar is the case with the modern-day 'Agency Theory' (Pattanaik, 2016). The Board of Directors is only the agent of the company that delivers dividends to the shareholders. The profit from which they offer the dividend is not theirs, but of the company's. They act as the mere agents of the firm.

Swami Vivekananda and his theories on 'Servant Leadership'

Swami Vivekananda was born in 1863 when the modern pillars of business management were not even reputable. He was not an expert in the field of business management as there was not any business management then. However, if one comprehends his works and lectures, one would ascertain that he had created a model of philosophy that can be applied in any field of knowledge be it management or statecraft. While reading and comprehending his works it is worth noting that the individual lived during the British rule in India and hints of anti-colonialism could be found in his writings. According to Swami Vivekananda, a leader is an individual that has a greater vision and who ensures that his subordinates grow along with him. He states that no individual can grow if he does not think about the growth of others (Vivekananda, 2019). He believed in 'humanism'. He had created the Vedantic philosophy that states God dwells in all creatures and that humans are unique among them. In one of his famous speeches in London, he says;

"The only God to worship is the human soul in the human body. Of course, all animals are temples too, but man is the highest, the Taj Mahal of temples. If I cannot worship in that, no other temple will be of any advantage"

-   *Swami Vivekananda, (London, 1896)*

He never believed in the power hierarchy, rather he believed in brotherhood and equality. He also stated that a great leader always needs to lead but that leadership should never turn to a monarchy (Vivekananda, 2019). He introduced a unique aspect of the Vedas that states that God dwells in the human body of every individual and if that eternal power is awakened, man can do no wrong.

Aham Brahmasmi;

Tatva masi.

-   *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, (translated)*

The above lines mean, *'I am the absolute and so are you'* (Gitapress, 2015). Swamiji believed that any country would succeed only if its leader treats its subjects like his brothers. The universal brotherhood that came into existence later from the western philosophers and managers had already been established in India by Swami Vivekananda during the last years of the 19th century. According to him, a servant leader would not only look for the growth of his or her subordinate but also guide him or her in his or her endeavor. Swamiji states that too much protection of an individual would also cause trouble. If an individual is always taken care of and is never allowed to face challenges, such an individual would fail miserably in his ventures (Vivekananda, 1905). Therefore a balance of guidance with exposure has to be maintained.

Robert. K. Greenleaf and his essay on 'Servant Leadership' in 1970

Greenleaf has had a reputation as an active name in the field of organizational development, education, and management. He has also had a successful career at AT&T and it is a matter of great significance that he came up with his theory of 'Servant Leadership' much later in this career that is to be precise after his retirement. He has also had fair contributions in the field of business research and human behavioral science. Greenleaf, in one of his later interviews, stated that the prime motivation behind his theory was the ongoing conflicts between university students and professors across the country (Greenleaf, 1998). The unrest in the academic sector of the country led to casualties in the groups, the students, and administrates of the universities. It was a violent protest from the

students. The students opined that they were not properly treated in their respective universities. The professors made money by teaching so it had to be their prime job but they indulged in personal career developing ventures and paid little heed to teach. Greenleaf stated later that he had the opinion that the demands and grievances of the students were righteous as they felt misguided and mistreated. However, the main inspiration of 'Servant Leadership' for Greenleaf was a novel by a German author named Hermann Hesse. The novel was, 'Journey to the east' (Greenleaf, 1998). The book was published in 1932 in German and 1956 in English. The plot of the story hugely motivated Greenleaf in his understanding of how a leader should act for the achievement of goals and enlargement of human self-esteem. Greenleaf states that he was greatly influenced by the character of Leo, in the story that apparently seemed like a normal servant but was not. He managed the entire pilgrimage of the league which none of the league members could comprehend. However, once Leo was missing the entire tour had to be canceled due to mismanagement and finally, it was revealed that Leo was the president of the league (Hesse, 2003).

Therefore, the following aspects of 'Servant Leadership' can be made germane in the present day. These aspects may further raise some eternal questions that prevail across the manager's fraternity. Some of them are listed below:

- **Qualities of a servant leader:** A servant leader has to have empathy. Compassion towards fellow workers is the ultimate criteria for being a servant leader. 'Servant leadership' states that a leader should always remember that he is a servant because he is the leader and a leader because he serves. Self-obsession and hunger for power have no room in servant leadership.
- **Effect of such leadership on work performance:** Servant leadership has a great effect on how work is done in any organization and how the entire work culture of the organization operates. It is quite different from other styles of leadership.
- **Effect on the overall life of an employee:** The overall life of the employees is also affected through servant leadership. The way he or she looks towards other aspects of life would change when he or she works under a servant leader. If most of the leaders in the corporate world had been servant leaders, the business world would not have faced the current epidemic of corporate stress. Every year several companies across the globe spend millions of dollars for the treatment of employee stress to regain productivity.

The timeline of the theories of Swami Vivekananda and Robert. k. Greenleaf on 'Servant Leadership'
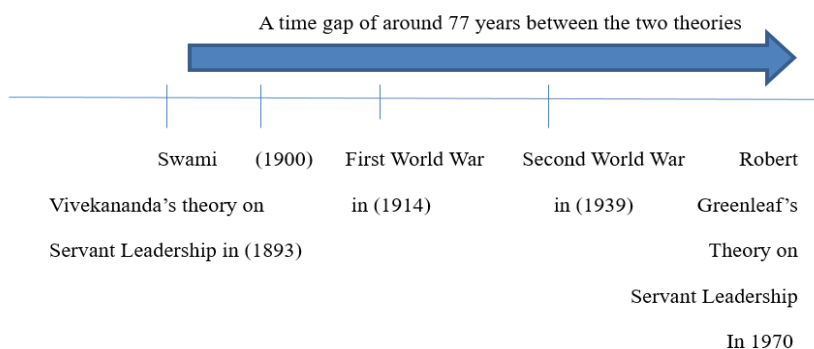

Figure 1: Timeline of the two theories and major events in-between

The contrasts between the two viewpoints

The basic points of distinction between Swami Vivekananda's theory and Robert Greenleaf's theory on 'Servant Leadership

Robert. K. Greenleaf's Theory	Swami Vivekananda's Theory
This concept was developed much later in 1970.	This concept was developed towards the end of the 19th century.
The theory is highly influenced by a novel by a German author where most of the characters were fictional (Greenleaf, 1998).	The theory has its roots in the Vedas that were composed from 1500 to 1200 BCE. The theory has also been influenced by the Upanishads that were composed around the 4th century BCE.
Robert K. Greenleaf was an expert in the field of management and had corporate expertise.	Swami Vivekananda had no relations with the corporate world. He was a revolutionary social activist and philosopher who lived at a time when the term business management was not even reputable.
Greenleaf's theory is one-dimensional and can be applied only in the field of business and corporate enterprises.	Swami Vivekananda's theory is multi-faced and can be applied in any field of life.
It is based on the western philosophy of life and the existence of reality.	It is based on the Indian scriptures and ethos from the Vedic period.
Robert Greenleaf's theory came into existence in the form of an essay in 1970.	Swami Vivekananda did not particularly use the term Servant Leadership in any of his work but one can easily extract valuable insights of the same from his writings, books, and lectures (Vivekananda, 1905).

Table 1: Points of distinction between the two concerned theories

The Vedanta model of Servant Leadership

The study tries to grasp an in-depth understanding of Swami Vivekananda's teachings on leadership and proposes a modern-day 'Servant Leadership' model. The concerned model does not gainsay the model of Robert Greenleaf but tries to fill up certain breaches to the same.
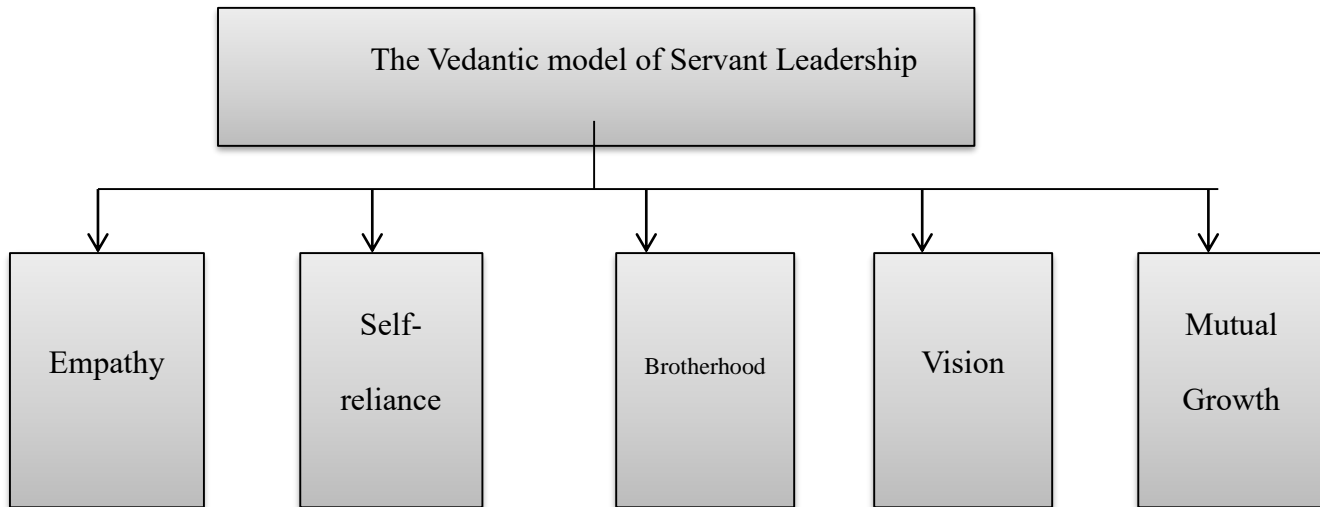

Figure 2: The Vedantic model of 'Servant Leadership'

A brief discussion on each of the elements in the model would ensure an easier understanding of the proposition.

• **Empathy:** Swamiji states in his works time and again that compassion towards people is the biggest action to ensure goal achievement. In terms of the modern business lingo, it means that a leader should understand the grievances of his or her dependents and offer service (Vivekananda, 2019).

• **Self-Reliance:** Swamiji in his book, 'Bartaman Bharat' or 'Present India', states that no individual can succeed if he is never allowed to face challenges. Facing challenges and having to cope with situations build character. Therefore, a proper balance between empathy and self-reliance has to be maintained. Self-reliance also boosts self-confidence (Vivekananda, 1905).

• **Brotherhood:** The concept of universal brotherhood has become quite reputable with the establishment of the pillars of business management. However, it is a matter of great astonishment that a man from colonial India had already established this philosophy decade ago.

• **Vision:** Swamiji says that while making a road, a manager can guide his subordinates regarding how well the road should be built to be able to reach the destination while a leader can tell whether the said road is being built towards the correct destination (Sarvapiyananda, 2014). A servant leader must possess a vision towards the objective of structural progress.

• **Mutual Growth:** No leader can grow without the growth of the people below him. This is what the pre-historic Vedas say and so does Swami Vivekananda.

Some enigmatic Servant Leaders in the recent past

There have been talks and debates regarding these theories being a mere myth only and that such quality of leadership are rare. However, there have been occasions when the world has witnessed a Servant Leader. Some of them are mentioned below:

• Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata (1839-1904)
• Ratan Tata (1937- till date)
• Nicola Tesla (1856-1943)
• Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-1945)
• Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1883-1948)

The list could go on and on. As far as servant leaders are concerned, they have been visible not only in business but also in the fields of world politics, freedom struggle and so on.

Conclusion

In the end, it can be concluded that the aspects of leadership theories and management that prevail in the ancient texts of India and that have come from the western scholars and management experts are fairly unalike. As per the Vedantic theories of swami Vivekananda, management is not the art of getting things done by the exertions of other people rather it is the art of serving people and assisting them in accomplishing their goal while confirming that the overall objective of the endeavor could be accomplished. Both the ideas focus on goal achievement but the way they preach to practice in reality is quite different. Finally, the study does not comment on the superiority of either of the two theories on 'Servant Leadership'. The study simply tries to highlight the similarities

and dissimilarities between the two. The study also acknowledges that Swami Vivekananda indeed proposed a model on 'Servant Leadership' years before Robert K Greenleaf but the latter's model was more apropos. The study also appreciates that there remains abundant scope for further research in this area.

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