Are we ravaged by egoism?

Egoism emerges when an act disregarding others is propelled by the deeper belief that others have no value at all. In short, a very worrying aspect of contemporary India is a rampaging egoism engulfing us all. Let me immediately allay the fears of those who suspect that the target of my attack is self-interest. It is not. Indeed, it is extremely important that self-interest be distinguished from egoism. So, it is the galloping growth of egoism that alarms me, not the legitimate pursuit of self-interest.

Self-interest is the awakened attention of one’s self towards its own desires or good. This awakened attention to one’s own good may lead one to desire it when it is absent, to actively pursue it in order to attain it, and to have positive feelings when it is achieved. There is clearly nothing wrong in this. Indeed, we want people to recognise their interests and pursue them with care and concentration. We reprimand a diabetic who does not maintain a diet that is healthy, and therefore inappropriate to want it. And to switch in step to a home-cooked, balanced diet. But what if my self-interest, rich or poor, conflicts with the interests of others? Isn’t egoism just this: the pursuit of self-interest; to recognise, for instance, that it is unhealthy to consume fast food and therefore inappropriate to want it? And to switch instead to a home-cooked, balanced diet. But what if my self-interest, rich or poor, conflicts with the interests of others? Isn’t egoism just this: the pursuit of self-interest at the expense of others? Is this the problem of rampaging egoism – that all of us are currently pursuing our own interests disregarding the interests of others? Not quite. Why?

Egoism Egoism is a pathological by-product of modern reason, a rationally evaluated perspective for which the only entity in the world that matters is one’s own self. All other persons are entirely worthless, without any value. And it comes in two forms. If the self coincides with one person, we obtain individual egoism. If it extends and encompasses several persons, then we have communitarian egoism. Such egoism may focus on the family, the caste, or a linguistic, religious or national community. For communitarian egoism, only my community has value; other communities are entirely worthless. This should immediately clarify that a person pursuing self-interest even when disregarding others is not necessarily an egoist. An egoist’s disregard for the interests of others is different from the non-egoist’s. The difference is this: egoism emerges only when an act disregarding others is propelled by the deeper belief that others have no value at all. The self-interest of two persons who recognise each other’s value may conflict but such conflicts can be resolved or reconciled because deep down they share a moral framework. But the egoist is numb to others; he altogether lacks a moral dimension.

In fact, the pursuit of self-interest can even serve justice. Let me offer some examples to illustrate my point. An apple is placed before Alok and Neel. Alok already possesses six apples and wants the seventh. Neel has none. Both Alok, who is clearly greedy, and the needy Neel want the apple. But Neel, disregarding the current interests of Alok takes it. Though Neel has successfully pursued his self-interest at Alok’s expense, he is not an egoist. Take another example. Ram and Ravi are travelling in a compartment of a fast-moving train. Neither can leave the compartment. Ravi lights a cigarette. Ram suffers from asthma and so requests Ravi to stop smoking but to no avail. Ram snatches the cigarette from Ravi and throws it out of the window. The window has acted protecting his interest, disregarding the interest of Ravi, but he is not an egoist. These are not fanciful examples of philosophers. The poor who suffered in, say, the Odisha cyclone and lost food reserves of local baniyas because of the complete breakdown of the public distribution system can hardly be called egoists.

So, what is worrying about our current socio-cultural malaise is this: there are lots of people amidst us acting against others to not only realise their self-interest but to brutally convey that others are altogether worthless. What else is conveyed by the callous indifference to children dying out of neglect in hospitals, by an 80-year-old swami being kicked and abused, by the collective savagery of the rape of little girls, and lynching of innocents by feral mobs?