Leading with Dharma: IKS – Based Approaches to Ethical Leadership and Good Governance

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Abstract

Leadership and governance are increasingly seen not only in terms of organisational effectiveness, but also from the perspectives of ethics, accountability, public welfare and responsible use of power. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) contain a wealth of concepts relating to these concerns, enshrined in the Arthashastra, Bhagavad Gita, Thirukkural, Buddhist and Jain traditions, and Gandhian thought. This article explores IKS-based approaches to leadership and governance through secondary sources and a bibliometric oriented thematic analysis of scholarly literature. The study reveals recurring themes relating to ethical conduct, self-discipline, duty, public welfare, justice, consultation, strategic thinking, accountability, non-attachment to personal gain and responsible exercise of authority. Kautilya's Arthashastra regards governance as a systematic activity involving administration, economic management, justice, security and inter-state relations (Olivelle, 2013) Bhagavad Gita emphasises duty, disciplined action and leadership through example, while the Thirukkural links good governance with qualities of rulers and ministers, justice, wise decision-making and concern for citizens. Gandhian trusteeship elaborates these ideas further in the context of social responsibility and welfare. The analysis shows that IKS does not present a single model of leadership, but a pluralistic set of principles which can be relevant to contemporary ethical leadership and governance. The article develops an IKS-based leadership and governance framework consisting of ethical self-discipline, purposeful action, public welfare, wise decision-making, accountability and social responsibility. The

study concludes that these principles can be relevant to contemporary governance institutions if interpreted with critical inclusiveness.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, ethical leadership, governance, dharma, public welfare, Indian political thought

1. Introduction

Leadership and governance are central to the functioning of societies, institutions, businesses and public organisations. The contemporary discourse on leadership emphasises not only authority and performance, but also ethics, accountability, social responsibility, stakeholder welfare and sustainable decision-making. Governance, similarly, is no longer seen only in terms of administration. It encompasses the responsible exercise of authority, institutional accountability, participation, justice and public interest. These issues have strong resonances in several strands of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS).

IKS is a broad and diverse repository of knowledge created by the intellectual, philosophical, literary, scientific and social traditions of the Indian subcontinent. It cannot be reduced to a single philosophy or a unified set of principles. The ideas relating to leadership and governance emanate from different sources including political treatises, ethical literature, philosophical writings, Tamil classics, Buddhist and Jain traditions and modern interpretations of Indian political thought. As a result, IKS presents a pluralistic approach to leadership studies, and it must be regarded as a set of ideas rather than a singular leadership theory.

Among the major sources, Kautilya's Arthashastra provides the most detailed discussion of the issues of statecraft and administration. The work contains extensive material on organisation of the state, economic activity, taxation, law and order, justice, diplomacy and security. Olivelle (2013) points out that it deals with the art of governance, promoting economic productivity and inter-state relations. The treatment of various aspects of administration shows the concerns of leadership with institutional responsibilities.

The Bhagavad Gita explores leadership from an ethical and philosophical perspective. Its emphasis on disciplined action, duty, self-control and non-attachment to rewards provides

a foundation for a view of leadership as principled action aimed at a higher purpose. The Thirukkural, on the other hand, provides an important Tamil perspective on governance, ethical conduct, ministers, decision-making, justice and administration. Recent studies have analysed the relevance of the Thirukkural to ethical leadership and contemporary management.

Gandhian thought represents a modern development of several ethical principles relating to Indian traditions. Gandhi's idea of trusteeship links economic power with social responsibility and states that resources must be interpreted in terms of their contribution to societal welfare. Chakrabarty (2014) identifies trusteeship as an important Gandhian conception of the relationship between business activity and welfare, and connects it with the later idea of corporate social responsibility.

In the light of these developments, the present article attempts to explore the leadership and governance principles that can be identified in the IKS tradition and examine their relevance to contemporary organisations and public institutions.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to explore the major principles of leadership and governance contained in selected Indian Knowledge Systems, analyse their relevance to contemporary ethical leadership and governance, and develop an integrated conceptual framework connecting the IKS principles with the requirements of contemporary organisations and public governance.

3. Methodology

The study is based entirely on secondary data. Scholarly books, research articles, academic publications and authoritative sources relating to Indian political thought, leadership and governance, Arthashastra, Bhagavad Gita, Thirukkural, Gandhian thought and other IKS traditions were analysed. A bibliometric oriented thematic approach was adopted to identify recurring concepts in the literature.

The analysis does not attempt to present bibliometric indicators such as citations, co-occurrence scores and growth rates, as a specific Scopus or Web of Science dataset was not

analysed. Instead, the bibliometric orientation is used to collate literature around recurring themes. The major themes identified include ethical leadership, self-discipline, duty, public welfare, justice, strategic decision-making, accountability, consultation, social responsibility and responsible use of power. This approach allows an interpretive synthesis without generating unsubstantiated numerical conclusions.

4. Leadership and Governance in the Indian Knowledge Tradition

A distinctive feature of Indian approaches to leadership is the connection between authority and responsibility. Leadership is not merely the ability to command others. The leader must have qualities that ensure responsible decision-making and the welfare of the people. This concern with collective responsibility is often linked to the concept of dharma in Indian political thought.

The issue of ethical responsibility, indeed, takes different forms in Indian traditions. The ruler, administrator, teacher, businessperson or community leader must realise that power brings responsibilities. This is a significant contrast to some contemporary views that regard leadership primarily in terms of power, influence or organisational position.

Antony Black's study of ancient political thought points out that Indian political thought contained both ethical and pragmatic approaches to the issue of political authority. In particular, Kautilya combined considerations of morality, political expediency and economic management in his exposition of statecraft (Black, 2016). This is an important insight, as effective governance requires not only values but also organisational competence.

5. Kautilya's Arthashastra: Leadership as Administrative Responsibility

Kautilya's Arthashastra is one of the most significant works addressing the issue of governance in the Indian intellectual tradition. It contains detailed discussions on administration, taxation, economic activity, justice, security, diplomacy and organisation of the state. Olivelle (2013) describes the text as a systematic exposition of governance, economic expansion, treasury management, law and order and dispute settlement.

The first major leadership principle that emerges from the Arthashastra is competence. Leadership requires knowledge and understanding of administration, as well as the various

functions of government. The ruler cannot effectively discharge his duties without competent officials and appropriate institutional mechanisms. The elaborate discussion of superintendents and responsibilities in Book Two highlights the concern with competent administration (Olivelle, 2013).

The second principle is strategic thinking. The Arthashastra discusses internal administration and external relations as interconnected aspects of governance. The ruler must have a strategic view of economic activity, security, alliances and threats. Contemporary leaders, similarly, operate in an environment where organisational decisions have totake into account economic, technological, social and political developments.

The third principle is institutional accountability. Governance cannot be based solely on the personal qualities of the ruler. Administrative systems, officials, procedures and mechanisms of justice are essential to translate leadership qualities into public outcomes. The discussion of justice in Book Three shows the importance of institutional mechanisms in dispute settlement and social order (Olivelle, 2013).

The Arthashastra thus presents leadership as a combination of personal qualities, administrative competence, strategic thinking and institutional responsibility.

6. Bhagavad Gita: Leadership through Duty and Self-Discipline

The Bhagavad Gita explores leadership from a philosophical perspective. The ethical and spiritual dimensions of leadership are emphasised, especially the issues of duty, action, knowledge and non-attachment. The principle of disciplined action can be seen as an important leadership insight, as leaders often have to perform their duties under conditions of uncertainty, pressure and competing interests.

An important principle is duty-oriented action. Leadership involves the commitment to one’s responsibilities rather than excessive concern for personal rewards. Such an approach can help leaders to focus on organisational goals and collective welfare rather than individual status.

A second principle is self-control. A leader who cannot regulate personal desires, emotions and reactions is unlikely to be successful. Self-discipline is a prerequisite for responsible authority.

A third principle is leadership through example. Leaders influence others not only through their instructions but also through their actions. Contemporary leadership studies emphasise the importance of role modelling, integrity and ethical conduct. The relevance of the Bhagavad Gita to modern leadership education has indeed been emphasised in recent IKS scholarship, in particular the issues of moral behaviour, self-control and purpose-driven action.

The Bhagavad Gita thus adds an inward dimension to leadership. Before trying to influence others, the leader must realise the need for self-discipline and clarity of purpose.

7. Thirukkural: Ethical Governance and Wise Administration

The Thirukkural is an important source of Tamil ethical and political thought. Its discussions on virtue, wealth and social life provide principles that are relevant to personal conduct as well as public administration. The sections on kingship, ministers, justice, decision-making and governance are particularly relevant to leadership studies.

An important principle is upright conduct. Political and organisational authority acquires meaning only when it is exercised with integrity. The personal character of the leader influences institutional credibility. Governance, therefore, requires not only competence but also ethical conduct.

A second principle is wise counsel. The Thirukkural emphasises the importance of ministers, advisers and the ability to take wise decisions. This principle is directly relevant to contemporary governance, as complex issues of decision-making require expertise, consultation and critical analysis rather than mere decrees.

A third principle is justice. Governance can be sustained only when decisions are perceived as fair and responsible by citizens and stakeholders. Modern frameworks of governance emphasise the issues of fairness and accountability.

Recent research on the Thirukkural and management identifies its relevance to ethical leadership, strategic planning, communication, people management and adaptability (Ramaiyan, 2026). Thus, the Thirukkural can be seen not only as a work of ethics but also as a source of principles for responsible administration and leadership.

8. Buddhist and Jain Contributions to Responsible Leadership

The Buddhist and Jain traditions offer additional insights into leadership through ethical restraint, compassion, non-violence and responsibility towards other living beings. These traditions add a new dimension to the issues of governance by emphasising the impact of human actions on the wider environment.

Buddhist political thought, for instance, emphasises moral conduct, compassion and reduction of suffering. Jain thought emphasises non-violence, self-discipline and restraint. While these traditions originated in particular historical and philosophical contexts, their ethical principles can be applied to contemporary discussions on responsible leadership.

The relevance of these ideas is particularly visible in modern organisations. Leaders make decisions that affect employees, customers, communities and the environment. An excessive focus on authority and performance may lead to disregard for these wider consequences. Ethical restraint and concern for others can thus be an important corrective.

9. Gandhian Leadership and Trusteeship

Gandhian thought provides a modern interpretation of Indian ethical principles relating to social, economic and political life. Gandhi's view of leadership emphasised truth, non-violence, service, simplicity and responsibility. His idea of trusteeship is particularly relevant to business leadership and governance.

Trusteeship implies that economic resources must be seen not as instruments of individual power but as means of contributing to social welfare. Wealth and productive resources owned by individuals must be interpreted in terms of their impact on society. Chakrabarty (2014) points out that Gandhian trusteeship is a conception of the contribution of business houses to welfare and connects it with the later idea of corporate social responsibility.

Trusteeship can be interpreted in contemporary organisations as a principle of responsible ownership and stewardship. Business leaders exercise control over resources but their decisions affect employees, consumers, communities and the environment. The concept thus promotes the need to consider social consequences along with financial performance.

Gandhian leadership provides an important distinction between authority and domination. Leadership is seen as service, not domination. This has relevance to contemporary approaches to participatory leadership, servant leadership, responsible management and socially accountable business practices.

10. Major IKS Principles for Contemporary Leadership and Governance

The thematic analysis of the literature shows that different strands of IKS converge around several broad principles of leadership and governance. These principles do not constitute a single ancient leadership model but represent a set of interconnected ideas that can be relevant to contemporary organisations and public institutions.

IKS principle	Leadership implication	Governance implication
Dharma and duty	Responsible exercise of authority	Decisions guided by public responsibility
Self-discipline	Emotional and ethical regulation	Reduced misuse of institutional power
Public welfare	Stakeholder-oriented leadership	Citizen-centred governance
Wise counsel	Consultation and expertise	Participatory decision-making
Justice	Fair treatment of people	Rule-based and accountable administration
Strategic thinking	Long-term decision-making	Institutional preparedness
Non-attachment to personal gain	Reduced ego-driven leadership	Public interest over private interest
Trusteeship	Responsible stewardship	Socially accountable resource management

Service	Leadership as responsibility	Responsive public institutions
Ethical example	Role modelling	Ethical organisational culture

These principles imply that IKS-based leadership is more than just political leadership; it can be conceptually applied to educational institutions, businesses, public administration, social organizations and community institutions.

11. Bibliometric-Oriented Thematic Structure

The literature surveyed for the purpose of the present study reveals a set of interrelated themes. The strongest conceptual relationships are between ethics and leadership, followed by governance and public welfare. The Kautilyan scholarship makes significant contributions to the discourse on administration, strategy, statecraft and economic governance, while the studies on the Bhagavad Gita emphasize duty, self-discipline and ethical action. The research on the Thirukkural links leadership to justice, decision-making and people management, and Gandhian scholarship takes up the discussion of social responsibility and trusteeship.

Major theme	Key IKS sources	Contemporary relevance
Ethical leadership	Bhagavad Gita, Thirukkural	Integrity and responsible leadership
Administrative competence	Arthashastra	Professional public administration
Strategic decision-making	Arthashastra, Thirukkural	Strategic management
Duty and responsibility	Bhagavad Gita	Purpose-driven leadership
Justice	Thirukkural, Arthashastra	Fair governance
Self-control	Bhagavad Gita, Jain and Buddhist thought	Ethical behaviour
Public welfare	Arthashastra, Buddhist traditions	Citizen and stakeholder welfare

Trusteeship	Gandhian thought	Responsible business governance
Consultation	Thirukkural, Arthashastra	Participatory governance
Social responsibility	Gandhian thought and ethical traditions	Sustainable and inclusive institutions

The thematic indicates that the contemporary interest in IKS-based leadership is more than the interest in cultural revival. It includes the search for ethical foundations of organisational and public decision-making. The recent scholarship explicitly explores the role of IKS in leadership, governance, accountability, public welfare and responsible use of authority.

12. IKS-Based Leadership and Governance Framework

Based on the thematic analysis, the integrated IKS-Based Leadership and Governance Framework can be suggested with six inter-related dimensions: ethical self-discipline, purposeful action, public welfare, wise decision-making, accountability and social responsibility.

Ethical self-discipline is the foundational element of leadership. Leaders have to regulate their conduct and exercise authority responsibly. The Bhagavad Gita, Buddhist traditions and Jain thought offer different perspectives on this principle.

Purposeful action focuses on the organisational and societal objectives. Leadership should not be seen only from the point of view of personal achievement. The Gita principle about disciplined action can be seen as a philosophical basis of purposeful action.

Public welfare makes the link with citizens and stakeholders. Kautilya's governance, though different from modern democracy, acknowledges the significance of effective administration, economic prosperity and social order (Olivelle, 2013).

Wise decision-making implies the knowledge, consultative process, analysis and strategic thinking. The Arthashastra and Thirukkural contain significant material for understanding the role of advisers and making informed decisions.

Accountability means the connection between authority and responsibility. Modern institutions need mechanisms for assessing and holding leaders and administration accountable.

Social responsibility links leadership with the broader community. The Gandhian trusteeship is particularly relevant for exploring the connection between owner and manager with reference to social welfare (Chakrabarty, 2014).

The conceptual representation of the framework can take the following form:

Self-Discipline → Purposeful Action → Wise Decision-Making → Responsible Authority → Public Welfare → Social Responsibility

The arrangement does not indicate sequential process of management but seeks to integrate elements of personal ethics with organisational and societal responsibility.

13. Relevance to Contemporary Organisations and Governance

The relevance of IKS-based leadership principles can be understood better by referring to contemporary organisational and governance issues. Organisations face the ethical dilemmas associated with artificial intelligence, employees' welfare, environmental responsibility, corporate accountability and equal opportunity. Public institutions are confronted by similar challenges related to transparency, service delivery, institutional credibility and responsible use of authority.

The IKS perspective is useful for highlighting the role of ethical responsibility in leadership, which complements the principles of organisational efficiency. Efficiency is difficult to negotiate in modern organisations, however, efficiency without responsibility will lead to undesirable social consequences. The Arthashastra provides the understanding of administrative and economic competence, while the Bhagavad Gita offers a stronger perspective of disciplined action and responsibility. The Thirukkural integrates the principles of ethics, governance and wise administration. The Gandhian trusteeship takes the responsibility further by linking it with economic leadership.

The principles can also be useful for leadership education. Management and public administration courses can make use of selected IKS texts and questions for triggering

discussion and critical interpretation. The issues of power and responsibility, ethical self-discipline, role of adviser in decision-making and connection between organisational and social responsibilities can be explored in the classroom.

However, the IKS approach cannot be seen as a substitute for constitutional institutions, modern management theories and evidence-based governance. Different social and political contexts shaped the ancient concepts; therefore their application in the modern environment requires critical interpretation. There are elements in the ancient Indian social and political systems, which contradict the principles of modern democracy, equality and human rights. The IKS-based approach to leadership should, therefore, recognise the difference between the principles of ethics and the particular institutional forms.

14. Critical Interpretation

The study shows that IKS offers unique resources for exploring leadership and governance, however these need to be critically interpreted. It will be misleading to look at ancient texts as the solutions to the modern administrative problems. The socio-political context, in which the Arthashastra, Thirukkural, Bhagavad Gita, Buddhist and Jain literature and Gandhian thought were produced, is significantly different from modern democratic states and organisations.

The IKS strength lies rather in the ability to recognise the principles, which can contribute to modern debates about leadership and governance. Ethical self-discipline, public responsibility, wise decision-making, justice, consultation and social responsibility remain relevant for leadership. However, the modern principles of governance require constitutional order, institutional accountability, equality, human rights, professional administration and democratic participation.

IKS-based leadership, thus, should be seen as critical integration and not historical imitation, which is important for its constructive use in leadership education and governance.

15. Conclusion

Indian Knowledge Systems offer a wide range of intellectual resources for exploring leadership and governance through the interconnected ideas of ethics, responsibility, self-

discipline, justice, public welfare and social responsibility. Kautilya's Arthashastra provides the understanding of administrative competence, economic management, strategic thinking and institutional organisation. The Bhagavad Gita contributes the principles of duty, disciplined action and leadership through personal conduct. The Thirukkural integrates the concepts of ethics, wise administration, justice and responsible leadership. Buddhist and Jain traditions elaborate further on the principles of restraint and non-violence, while the Gandhian trusteeship links economic leadership and social responsibility.

The secondary-data and bibliometric-oriented thematic analysis shows that the IKS traditions can be engaged in a meaningful dialogue with contemporary leadership and governance issues. Their potential contribution lies not in providing an alternative model of governance but in enriching the principles of leadership with ethical and social dimensions.

An IKS-based approach can be understood in terms of six broad principles: ethical self-discipline, purposeful action, wise decision-making, responsible authority, public welfare and social responsibility. In their critical interpretation and integration with modern democratic, constitutional and institutional principles, they can contribute to leadership education, organisational governance, public administration and socially responsible management.

The contemporary relevance of IKS depends on the way its principles are interpreted and applied. The IKS value lies not in looking at the past but in using historical knowledge for encouraging responsible leadership in the present. Leadership is meaningful when authority is exercised with discipline, decisions are made with wisdom, institutions remain accountable, and organisations pursue the goals of societal welfare.

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