ETHICS FROM THE THIRUKKURAL AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR CONTEMPORARY BUSINESS LEADERSHIP IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Dimension of business ethics from ancient Indian times and its contemporary relevance for business leadership. In the Indian context, during the past one decade we have witnessed an increase in number of literatures on applying ancient wisdoms especially from the Bhagavad-Gita, Ramayana and the Arthashastra in the business leadership context. However very few works are found on business ethics from the Thirukkural and its relevance for contemporary business leadership. The Thirukkural is a well-known treatise on ethics which was authored by Thiruvallavar in the second century. It is considered to be the first work which covers ethics in Indian literature. The Authors Employed Hermeneutics, a qualitative methodology which is the interpretation of ancient or classical literatures. The findings reveal that Thirukkural advocates a consciousness and a spirit-centered approach to the subject of business ethics based on eternal values and moral principles that should govern the conduct of business leaders. The prospect of highlighting the Thirukkural in other areas like leadership can be considered for the near future. This paper likely to provide insights into Indian business ethics and western manager and employee, enabling them to work more effectively with Indian leaders and business partners either in India or abroad. It also has some implications for leaders for leaders in Indian context and employees who have to deal with ethical dilemmas in making their daily business decision. This paper is also expected to reinforce Thirukkural Ethics to Indian business leaders and make them more aware of the code of conduct in business. This paper start with the understanding of the concept ethics and business ethics, which is branch of ethics. The Final part of this paper explores the business ethics from the Thirukkural and its relevance for Contemporary Leadership.

Key words:- Indian ethics, Business ethics, leadership, Ancient wisdom, Thirukkural.

I. INTRODUCTION

Business ethics have become one of the major topics for discussion around the world due to many of the business scandals that took place not only in the Indian context but also throughout the world. In academic literatures, research papers on various dimensions of business ethics have been written by several scholars. There are perhaps hundreds of research papers written on business ethics in the Indian context, and there is also an increasing number of literature on the Indian philosophy and organisational management. The Thirukkural and its relevance for contemporary business leadership in the Indian context. This paper outlines some of the ethical guidelines that should be manifested in an Indian (Tamilian) business leader like being trustful and honest with high level of integrity. This paper is like to provide insights into Indian business ethics for Western managers and employees, enabling them to work more effectively with Indian leaders and business partners either in India or abroad.
It also has some implications for leaders in the Indian context and employees who have to deal with ethical dilemmas (dharma sankatam) in making their daily business decision. This paper is also expected to reinforce Thirukkural ethics to Indian business leaders and make them more aware of the code of conduct in business. This paper starts with the understanding of the concept ethics and business ethics, which is a branch of ethics. These are followed by some of the contemporary issues in business ethics.

**Ethics**

Ethics are considered as an age-old discipline and one of the four branches of philosophy, along with logic, metaphysics and epistemology. The word ‘ethics’ is derived from the Greek word ethos, which means good and bad, right and wrong and should and should not related concept. Ethics are defined as the code of moral principles that sets standards of good or bad and right or wrong behaviour. It is a moral principle or set of moral values held by an individual. Morals are principles of behaviour in accordance with standards of right and wrong. It attempts to provide a systematic and logical reason or justification for what is right and virtuous and what is wrong and bad. Ethics also deal with values and principles relating to human conduct with respect to the rightness or wrongness of certain actions. Values are moral principles or accepted standards of a person or a group, while principles are a standard or rule of personal conduct. The ethics can be understood as a social standard which involve a conflict between the needs of the part and the needs of the whole. Ethical behaviour is what is accepted as good and right as opposed to ‘bad’ or wrong in the context of the governing moral code. In the approach towards ethics, there are mainly four approaches, namely, utilitarian approach, individualism approach, moral rights approach and justice approach.

The utilitarian approach holds that moral behaviour produces the greatest good for the greatest number. Under this approach, a leader is expected to consider the effect of each possible decision on all parties and select the best that optimises the satisfaction of great number of people. The individualism approach contends that acts are moral when they promote the individual’s best long-term interest. Individuals calculate the best long-term advantage to themselves as a measure of decision goodness. In theory, with everyone pursuing self direction, the greater good is ultimately achieved as people learn to accommodate each other in their long-term interest. The third approach, the moral right asserts that human beings have fundamental rights and liberties that cannot be taken by an individual decision. Thus, ethically correct decision is one that best maintains the rights of those people affected by it. Finally, the justice approach holds that moral decisions must be based on standards of equity, fairness and impartiality. This approach further explores three types of justice, namely, distributive justice, procedural justice and compensatory justice. The distributive justice requires that different treatment of people not based on arbitrary characteristics; the procedural justice requires that rules to be administered fairly; while the compensatory justice argues that individuals should be compensated for any cost of their injuries by the responsible party and individuals should not be held responsible for the matter over which they have no control.

**Business Ethics**

Globalisation and the growth of world economy, business organizations are becoming more dominant with less of governmental control; therefore, a greater need for ethical practices arises. The leaders in organisations are facing the problem of ethics, on the choice between good or bad, and do’s or don’ts in making the work. A business leader is just one whose
behaviour is considered to reflect all those ethical qualities. The principle objective of ethics has always been to produce morally upright individual leaders with good and acceptable behaviour. In business organisation and also in the political context, ethics involve the application of moral principles of the conduct in governance or good governance. The principles of ethics should be an integral part of the organisation for good governance and societal welfare. Business organisations are also increasingly concerned with ethical conduct of the duties and responsibilities, their relationship with the shareholders of the company and stakeholders’ groups with the ultimate aim to provide value to shareholders and stakeholders.

**Business Ethics are A Set of Moral Principles**

Business ethics are a part of general ethics. Ethical business values are part of the bigger topic of business values in general. Business ethics as a field of study examine the ethical principles and moral or ethical problems that arise in a business environment. Business ethics are a set of moral principles for arriving at a decision within the values of the organisation. It covers to all aspects of business conduct and management functions, such as accounting, finance, purchasing, operation, marketing and human resources which are relevant to the conduct of business organisations as a whole.

**Implement Business Ethics Programmes**

Business ethics are becoming increasingly necessary because, if unchecked due to lack of awareness, business can go unethical as there are plenty of evidences today on unethical business practices. Therefore, increasing number of organisations are trying to design and implement business ethics programmes to address the legal, ethical, social responsibility and environmental issues they face. Samson and Daft argue that by addressing these issues in a systematic way, organisations can improve their own business performances, expand opportunities for growth, and contribute to the development of social capital in their countries and realise specific business benefits, such as

- Enhanced reputations and goodwill
- Reduced risks and costs
- Protection from their own employees and agents
- Stronger competitive positions
- Expanded access to capital, credit and foreign investment
- Increased profits
- Sustained long-term growth
- International respect for enterprises and emerging markets.

**Contemporary Issues in Business Ethics**

The ethical business practices are crucial to overall society’s well-being and good ethical behaviour of the leaders must be encouraged and given emphasis by organisations. Poor ethical behaviour can lead to business losses and embarrassing scandals. In the contemporary business environment, the business Ethics from the Thirukkural 457 leaders throughout the world are faced daily with ethical issues at work, and sometimes they do not know how to deal with them. Some of the issues being faced by them include bribery, nepotism, stealing, lying, fraud and deceit, conflict of interest, quality control issues, discrimination, falsification of information, abuse of public funds and environmental pollution. In several Asian countries, chronic disregard for transparency, ethics and democratic principles has been cited as the cause for organisational failures.

In the American context, some results of public opinion studies indicate that 58% of American adults rate the ethical standards of business executives as only ‘fair’ or ‘poor’, 90% believe white-collar crime is ‘very common’ or ‘somewhat common’ and 76% say the lack of ethics in businesspeople contributes to plummeting societal moral standards. One of the
major assertions is that the American public does not view businesspeople as unethical or immoral, but instead, as being a moral due to the fact that ethical considerations are often seen as inappropriate in business situations. “Business is not structured to handle questions of values and ethics, and its managers have usually not been trained in business schools to do so”.

**Business Ethics**

Bribery and other forms of illegal or corrupt conduct increase costs for organisations not only because of the payments involved but also because it requires management time and effort to work with officials, maintain secret accounting books and address threats of extortion and blackmail. To reduce such obstacles, business leaders and government officials should work together to establish regulatory practices that reduce administrative discretion and promote transparency and efficiency. As a consequence, business ethics as a field of study are also increasing the relevance for business schools. In academic, over the years, we have witnessed several business schools offering courses in ‘Business Ethics’ and some of the schools classify the course as compulsory for every business student. The main purpose of business ethics course is to promote ethics through education, inculcation and nurturing of values such as honesty, fairness, integrity and self-regulation among business students. Other purposes may include, among others, to promote honesty and transparency in business, to create awareness on unethical practices in the marketplace and also to create an understanding on general accepted business norms, ethical percepts, human values and social expectations of society.

**Business Ethics Awareness**

Business ethics course helps leaders to improve their business performance, make profits and contribute to the economic progress of their communities by meeting the reasonable expectations of their stakeholders. It also aims to achieve specific expected course outcomes, such as increasing awareness of ethics issues, improving decision-making and reducing misconduct. Responsible management recognises that an effective business ethics courses are likely to touch every decision and activity of an organisation, it will guide patterns of thought, choice and action that subtly shapes the organisational culture of the enterprise. The business ethics courses should also be based on the core beliefs of the organisation and should reflect an approach or orientation that will resonate with employees and other stakeholders.

**Ethical Business Conduct in Organisation**

- Aligned with an organisation’s core beliefs
- fit well with organisation systems, policies and practices
- addresses leadership priorities as well as employee expectations for ethics
- are used by employees at all levels to guide decision-making and action
- become a central part of an organisation’s culture overtime.

**Indian Culture and Business Ethics**

Indian organisations have not been able to do well internationally. Among the reasons cited are the failure of Indian management to develop the indigenous business management style, which revolves around Indian cultural roots and upbringing. Indian grows up in a system, where family ties and sense of belongingness get top priority and with this type of background, he or she may not be able to adjust or fit into the job environment, practicing American philosophies of individualistic, direct, low power distance and contractual style of management. The same principles also apply to the Education in Business Ethics as although ethical principles are universal, they are culture-bound.
Management System (Includes Ethics) to be Effective

A management system (includes ethics) to be effective, it has to be rooted in the cultural soil of the country, where it is practised. Many communities and countries in Asia have created their own system of management and ethical principles. The success of Japanese, Chinese, Taiwanese and Korean system of management is largely attributed to Confucianism culture and ethics. The ancient Indian classics such as the Valmiki Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Upanishads5 and also the Puranas6 offers several lessons on ethics, which are useful in contemporary business leadership, although many of these literatures were written in Sanskrit more than 50 centuries ago. From the Bhagavad-Gita, for example, we learn that lust or desire of the leaders as the root cause of unethical practices. Sri Krishna said that it is the lust or desire of the leaders, latter transformed into wrath, which compels them to commit such unethical practices.

Golden Age of Tamil Civilisation

In the Indian context, besides Sanskrit, the Tamil language is also considered by many scholars to be one of the oldest languages, which has a rich literary tradition spanning more than 3,000 years, perhaps even earlier. Most of the ancient Tamil literature belongs to the Sangam7 period, considered by many as the golden age of Tamil civilisation. Many of these had been lost and the available literature currently is just a fraction of the material produced. One of the available literature and the greatest contributions of Tamils to the world is the Thirukkural; a book on ethics authored by Thiruvallavar in the second century BC, but not much is known about the author of Tolkappiam.

Thirukkural is the most popular and the most quoted by many Tamils. Even today Tamil philosophers, sociologists, economists, political leaders, song writers, poets, teachers and others often quote verses from the Thirukkural. The popular Tamil poet Kannadasan13 also quoted Ethics from the Thirukkural 461 extensively verses of Thirukkural in many of his works. Although the teachings of Thirukkural encompass all the aspects of life, limited literature is found on its principles of business ethics and application in business leadership.

Thirukkural in the Organisational Context of Leadership

Although several Tamil scholars have written on various dimensions of Thirukkural in Tamil language, the studies on Thirukkural in the organisational context of leadership in English language is indeed limited. Among the authors who have done studies on the Thirukkural’s application in business leadership are on human resource management from the perspectives of Thirukkural, on management philosophy from the Thirukkural, on leadership values from Thirukkural, on management role modelling from Thirukkural.

The business ethics are yet to be explored by scholars, the objective of this paper is to highlight the principles of business ethics from the Thirukkural and presents its relevance for contemporary business leadership. As the focus of this paper is on Thirukkural and Thiruvalluvar’s wisdom on business ethics.

The Great Thirukkural

The great Vedic literature like the Valmiki Ramayana and the Vyasa Mahabharata, Thirukkural is also an epic. The word Thirukkural is a combination of two Tamil words ‘thiru’ and ‘kural’. Thiru means auspicious and ‘kural’ means short poem consisting of two lines, a couplet. Thirukkural
consists of 1,330 couplets (kural) and divided into three parts. The first part deals with the ethical code of conduct (aram) and the second part deals with political governance, wealth and other topics of social and material interest (porul). The third part deals with romance and love (inbam). The author Thiruvalluvar was a Tamil saint and he was also a weaver and believed to have lived in Mylapore, a part of Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu. Thirukkural expounds various aspects of life also known as tamilmarai.

**King’s Court, The Pandyan King**

It is said that at the time of its first presentation to the King’s court, the Pandyan King wanted to check its greatness. In the presence of all poets and the public, he put it to test by placing the palm leaves on which the Thirukkural was written along with those of other contemporary works on a golden lotus and allowed it to float in the temple tank at the famous temple of Madurai Meenakshi Temple in Tamil Nadu. The sanctified golden lotus that would recognise only masterpieces is said to have rejected all other works and retained only the Thirukkural.

Thirukkural has also been widely translated in many of the world languages apart from Indian languages. One of the reasons for its wide translation in different languages of the world is the undeniable fact that the ethics and the values it carries are applicable to all religions, all countries and all times.

**Ethics, Morality and Humanness**

“In its essence, Thirukkural is a treatise par excellence on the art of living. Tiruvalluvar, the author, diagnoses the intricacies of human nature with such penetrating insight, perfect mastery and consummate skill absorbing the most subtle concepts of love and modern psychology, that one is left wondering at his sweep and depth. His prescriptions, leavened by godliness, ethics, morality and humanness are sagacious and practical to the core.

They cut across castes, creeds, climes and ages and have freshness which makes one fuel as if they are meant for the present times.”

“World and Life Negation are found in the thought of Jesus in so far as he did not assume that the Kingdom of God would be realized in this natural world. He expected that this natural world would very speedily come to an end and be superseded by a super-natural world in which all that is imperfect and evil would be overcome by the power of God”. On the contrary, Valluvar believed that in this very natural world, the liberated man can find his heaven and said that perfect bliss could be attained by an individual in this natural world itself and it is unnecessary to wait indefinitely for the transformation of the world in order to transform oneself. Thus he took life and world affirmation to a loftier plane than Christ did.” – Dr Albert Schweitzer, Nobel Laureate.

**Three Most Important Features Of The Thirukkural Unique**

- It is secular in nature
- It is universal and applicable to people living everywhere
- It is everlasting and its messages transcend time.

This secular, universal and immortal nature of Thirukkural, combined with its conciseness and literary charm, has been the pride of Tamil people for the past many centuries. Therefore, it is imperative for the Indians (Tamils) to dive into the ocean of Thirukkural to learn the principles of ethics for business leadership.

**Business Ethics From The Thirukkural**

Ancient literature is always a source of wisdom. It inspires those who are open to it all the time and it is never exhausted by any one generation of interpreters, no one has said the last word on it. Thirukkural is an example of one such ancient literature (Amaladass, 2007). The Thirukkural...
is pregnant with lessons in several fields related to wealth, economics, politics, duty, pleasure, etc., besides ethics. For some Indians it may look strange that an ancient literature like the Thirukkural can say some things about business ethics in the modern context of leadership. The contribution made by Thiruvalluvar on ethical principles and its relevance today.

**Indian Business Leaders To Be Aware Of Code Of Business**

The strength or maturity of a tradition depends on the continuity of such wisdom pointers at all times. Sometimes the ancient values of a particular culture may not appear to influence the current thinking of people, yet simultaneously they never are completely eroded. Therefore, it is imperative that the principles of ethics from ancient text like the Thirukkural need to be reinforced to the Indian business leaders to be aware of code of business and to deal effectively with ethical dilemmas (dharma sankatam) in making their daily business decision. This might look like a sermon but the lessons are likely to have a deep impact on business leadership and on those in the leadership position.

**Ethics Is The Road To Wealth And Goodwill**

The Thirukkural considers ethics as a road to wealth and goodwill (Kural 31 – Thiruvalluvar highlighted Cirappu eenum celvamum eenum arattinunku cakkam evanouyirkku). There is nothing in this world except ethics which would bring both reputation and wealth together; therefore, ethical principle in business is essential. The Bible, for example, also says that the righteous shall ‘flourish’ and be ‘filled’ – “They shall bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing” (The Bible: Psalm 92:12–15). The implication is not merely earthly but heavenly fulfillment as well. In business, the leaders must work hard and make it successful by not diverting their effort and concentration.

**Transparency and Truthfulness**

The Thirukkural also highlights the importance of transparency and truthfulness in all business transactions as it will bring respectable position in business. The business leaders are required not to do anything in your business which is of health hazard, environmental hazard, highly toxic, causing pollution. The problem or affecting the nature and harmony or likely to cause temporary or permanent problems to others.

**Ethical Leadership**

Business leaders today are considered to be fortunate to obtain good education with many usefulness leaders with at least a Bachelors Degree or with Masters Degree or PhDs, but what is the use of that learning if they are not ethical in their undertaking, and that learning does not lead to the blessed feet of pure intelligence (Kural 2 – karratana laa payanekol; valarivan narral tolaar rennin). The purpose of education is to develop the intellect to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong and cautioned by one’s own conscience. A leader needs to be well behaved and set good examples for their followers. The Thirukkural clearly highlighted that the leader can be a highly qualified person. But any of leader’s unethical practices will result in irreparable damage to their business. Therefore, they must do the right things first and continue to do the right things only. The leader’s glamour and show off in business will not serve any purpose, unless they gain the faith and confidence in the market as the reliable business. As a leader of reliable and reputed business, they must be always truthful, honest and follow ethics in all their business transaction. Even for millions of dollars of profits, they should not attempt in doing anything unethical and illegal in their business, as this will destroy the hard-built reputation of their business. It is known that customers will throng to the business with your established high reputation, product and service
reliability in the market. Therefore, leading with sound principles of ethics is essential for every leader. These leaders will be seen to ‘walk the talk’ and also ‘talk the walk’. Poet Kannadasan in Aandavan Kattalai had written that a leader who walks his talk and talks his walk will attain the happiness. People will work ‘with’ leaders with ethical principles and not ‘for’ them. The leaders will be considered to be honest, trustworthy and have a very high level of integrity, and will deliver their promises to their people or subordinates.

Principles of Ethics

On principles of ethics, in Thirukkural, Thiruvalluvar guides not only the business leaders but also all humanity to live an ethical life and virtues. In the organisational context today, what was said by Thiruvalluvar for a king applies to business leaders in organisations. An organisational leader who is virtuous and acts according to the principles of ethics will not only bring good name and reputation but will also enrich one’s wealth. Therefore, good business ethical practices provide leaders, employees with the guidance and information they need for effective, efficient and responsible choices and actions. The goodness of a leader’s behaviour itself is the root cause of all other goodness. This is clearly asserted by Thiruvalluvar as the only goodness of the leader is that of their goodness; all other goodness is not to be included among any goodness.

Sri Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita also asserts the following to Arjuna: whatever action the leader performs, common men follow; and whatever standards the leader sets by exemplary acts, all worlds pursue. The ethical conduct should originate from the heart, otherwise it cannot be considered ethical. Similar to the other Vedic literature, Thirukkural recommends intrinsic or inside out perspectives to ethical conduct. The propensity to behave ethically must come from heart and not by force or by any rules or regulations. Thirukkural says a blemishless mind is the basis of all virtue; everything else is just an empty show (Kural 34 – Manathukkan maacilan aadhal anaitharan aakula neera pira). The word ‘Maacil’ in Kural 34 refers to the impurity of the mind, which has to be eschewed if one is to progress in virtue. Jesus Christ also highlighted this concept of purity of heart, when he said that a man who entertained in his mind lustful thoughts with reference to another woman.

II. Conclusion

The Thirukkural do not conflict with Vedanta and are of no difference to the teachings from the Bible, the Koran, the philosophy of Buddha, Confucius and other philosophical schools of thought. The Thirukkural is a treatise on ethical business leadership. Thirukkural advocates a consciousness and a spirit-centred approach to the subject of business ethics based on eternal values and moral principles that should govern the conduct of business leaders. This paper is significant for both academicians and practitioners in Indian management, as it is to provide insights into Indian (Tamil) business ethics from an ancient time and its modern relevance. The authors hope that this paper will reinforce Thirukkural ethics to Indian (Tamil) business leaders and make them more aware of the code of conduct on business.

Indian (Tamil) business leader will be able to incorporate and apply the principles of ethics taught by Thiruvalluvar in their daily business practice. It is the hope of the authors that this paper will provide the groundwork for many future Thirukkural studies on business ethics and leadership in the Indian context.

III. Reference


