

Values in Leadership in the Tamil Tradition of *Tirukkural* Vs. Present-day Leadership Theories

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[**Abstract**] It is useful to keep in mind the present-day discussion on leadership theories from the Western traditions before looking at an ancient Indian text from a leadership perspective. The purpose is not to seek parallels, but to juxtapose them. In this way the reader will evocatively perceive the underlying value system found in the Indian text discussed here. Obviously, historical contexts and present day worldviews are different. But wisdom embedded in ancient Indian tradition has perennial values that transcends time and space; is applicable to every period of history and has cross-cultural appeal. The research shall briefly sum up what “leadership” means in today’s management sectors. The theme of the paper is ‘Values in Leadership.’ This presentation will be based on this ancient Tamil text *Tirukkural*, which discusses administration and management by a ruler in his country.

[**Keywords**] Leadership; Tamil tradition; *Tirukkural*; administration; management; Indian ruler

Introduction

Western traditions concept of Leadership has a history of development (Bernard M. Bass). In the early days, prophets, priests, chiefs, and kings were models of leadership. The Greek concepts of leadership were illustrated by the heroes in Homer’s epic *Iliad*. The qualities admired by the Greeks are justice and judgment (Agamemnon), wisdom and council (Hector), shrewdness and cunning (Odysseus), valor and activism (Achilles). Philosophers like Plato looked for an ideal leader to rule the State with order and reason. Aristotle was concerned with virtue among the leaders. Machiavelli believed that leaders needed steadiness, firmness and concern for the maintenance of authority, power and order in government. He is widely quoted as a guide to effective leadership.

The importance of leadership is expressed in the writings of great leaders like Napoleon and other historical personalities. Hence leadership has historically been a subject of inquiry, though definitions of leadership vary as much as do the people defining it (1). In general, leadership is defined as a process by which one individual influences others towards the attainment of organizational goals. Leadership is gradually distinguished from management. Management involves planning, organizing, staffing, directing and controlling and the manager is someone who performs these functions. Leadership, on the other hand, deals with influence. A leader’s ability to influence others depends on various factors other than his formal position of authority. Some focus on the traits of effective leaders, for example, the theory that leaders are born, not made. Traits include physical (such as height), mental (such as intelligence) and social (such as personality attributes). This is one of the approaches in the historical development of leadership research.

Some others shift from focusing on leadership traits to focusing on leadership behaviors. They argue that the behaviors exhibited by leaders are more important than their physical, mental, or emotional traits. One study concludes that employee orientation and general close supervision yields better results. This concept combines concern for production with concern for people. Here, team management is considered to be the best leadership approach.

There is also a situational approach which suggests that a favorable situation determines the effectiveness, task-oriented and person-oriented leadership behavior. The situation is most favorable when followers respect and trust the leader, the task is highly structured, and the leader has control over rewards and punishments (Fiedler's research).

While these theories; trait, behavioral, and situational approaches have all contributed to the understanding of leadership, none of them provides a complete and satisfactory explanation for recognizing and developing effectiveness in a leader. Other models suggest the whole notion of leadership is an evolutionary process, as things are constantly changing. Beginning in the 1970s, leadership theories focus on the effectiveness of the leader's charisma. This topic of leadership continues to be one of the most researched and published topics in the social sciences. To date, there is still no final authority on the subject, as the issue is very complex. To be sure, efficiency seems to be the key criterion.

The Text of *Tirukkural*

This presentation on the values in leadership is based on the wisdom literature from the Tamil tradition in South India (2). There is a standard set of "eighteen texts" on wisdom tradition, among them, *Tirukkural* is the most popular text (3). These texts date back to the period between the 2nd and the 8th Century. This ethical tradition displayed and formulated in the wisdom literature is unfortunately over-looked by the present-day leaders, firstly because, they are not even aware of their own tradition. Secondly, the ethical texts do not offer any attractive suggestions to those who are involved or interested in the process of quick acquisition of wealth. After all, wisdom itself cannot be obtained by academic degrees in management, but rather, by practicing a patient and meaningful way of living. Even to appreciate this wisdom literature one needs a certain level of maturity, which comes gradually as life experiences unfold themselves. But it is the task of the elders in every generation to transmit these values in an intelligible and easily accessible manner to the younger generation. 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 (in spite of all the signs that we might see to the contrary).

Kural refers to the specific kind of verse-form which has two lines with seven feet. *TiruKural* means 'sacred text in Kural verse-form.' This work is attributed to the poet, Tiruvalluvar. The scholars vary in fixing the date of the text from 3rd Century B.C to 5th Century AD. The text itself is divided into three parts – *Aram* (Fundamental Principles of Life), *Porul* (Management) and *Inbam* (Love in a Family) with 133 chapters, each chapter has ten verses, totaling in 1330 couplets. The historical perspective shows that various religious traditions - Saivas, Vaisnavas, Jains, Buddhists, even Christians - claim this work as theirs.

G.U. Pope went so far even to claim that Tiruvalluvar was influenced by St. Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ, who came to India in 52 AD and eventually later came to Mylapore, Chennai. Kamil Zvelebil argues that Kural belongs to the Jaina reform movement, but it was Karl Graul who first suggested that (4).

Values and Management Skills

The three sections of the ancient Tamil text *Tirukkural*, are entitled *Aram*, *Porul*, and *Inbam*, which have various translations depending on the author. For example, S.M. Diaz translates them as “Virtues, Wealth and Love;” T.R. Kallapiran as “Fundamental Principles of Life, Management and Love;” Karl Graul, a German Lutheran scholar, equates them with Luther’s three hierarchical structures, namely, “Church, State, Family;” and Kamil Zvelebil, a Tamil scholar from Czech Republic, translates them as “Cosmic and Moral Order, Political Skill and Social Life, and Pleasure.”

Seven Factors Necessary for a Ruler

The focus of this presentation is on the second section of the work, which deals with state administration. In fact, the management of public life is said to consist of seven factors dealt with in subsections: King’s art of governance (Chs.39-63), Art of administration by minister (Chs.64-74), Defense structure (Ch.75), Economic resources (Ch.76), Army structure (Chs.77-78), Allies (Friendship) (Chs.79-95), and Family (Chs.96-108).

The Art of Governance by the King

There are 24 chapters in the section on the art of governance by the king. It starts by defining the six attributes of a good king. A good king must have trained armies, responsible citizens, economic resources, capable ministry, supportive allies, and sustainable fortresses (v.381). The next verse 382 talks about the qualities of a good ruler, namely: courage, generosity, knowledge, perseverance in abundance (382), alertness, learning, bravery (383), easy access to people and gentleness in words (386), ability to render justice according to the laws of the land (388), and acceptance of well-meant criticism with patience and forbearance (389). Finally, as essential qualities of a good ruler, he must also have the four attributes of generosity, graciousness, justice, and concern for citizens’ welfare (390).

Here, the core value that receives significant attention is justice. This value is elaborated upon in detail: in the context of dealing with criminals, as the ultimate basis for all religious and righteous living, and in the capacity for the ruler to be accessible to people and consult men of wisdom in dealing with difficult matters. What gives victory to the ruler is not the spear, which is the symbol of his military might, that he carries as a powerful monarch, but rather the scepter that he carries as the symbol of justice (546).

Administration by the Minister of the king

The next section deals with the art of administration by the minister in charge. In 11 chapters, the minister’s functions are described. A good minister is a statesman who has mastered good projects for execution, means of performance, timing and place of action (631). The minister needs five traits, namely: courage, lineage, study of statecraft, loving care of the people, and driving energy (632). His method of procedure is further classified in the way he strengthens

the kingdom by dividing the foes, strengthening the existing alliances, and buying back old friends (633). Then the defense structure is described in ten couplets. A fortress must have a moat of clear water with an esplanade of land with all-round line of sight, backed by hills and woods of shady trees. Its walls must be high, broad and strong, not easily attacked by the enemy. After describing the essential features of a fortress, the concluding word says all excellences of the fort come to nothing if the commander is not a man of ability in action. Then comes the discussion of the economic resources, including acquisition of wealth. What is important here for our theme is the set of values that are articulated as having great importance for when we are trying to create wealth, which is indispensable for any surviving nation. The way of the world is such, (752) that the poor are despised and rich are praised. But then wealth is also praised as an unfailing lamp that dispels darkness. But it is said that earning wealth must be faultless. The end and means must be without taint of evil (754). Wealth must be collected from people with compassion and love (755). Compassion, which is the child of love, can be tended by the caretaker for prosperous wealth (756).

What is a Prosperous Nation?

A prosperous nation must have productive land, competent labor, organizers, and undiminished wealth (731). A prosperous nation should not have warring sects and destructive internal strife nor should it have murderous offences that disturb the King's peace (735). Thus, the five ornaments of a nation are unfailing health, wealth, rich harvests, popular pleasures, and security (738).

Management Styles

The desired management styles that must be practiced are also explicitly pointed out. In chapter 68, in ten couplets this is summed up. It is worth quoting this chapter in full:

- ü A decision is taken after due deliberation, but once it is decided, delay in implementation and dilatoriness in execution are positively wrong (671).
- ü Things which may be done at leisure could be implemented slowly; but things requiring prompt action should not be put off even for a moment (672).
- ü Whenever the way is clear, to act immediately is right where this is not so, it is better to deliberate and arrive at the best method for implementation (673).
- ü Unfinished work and un-reconciled enmity are like smoldering sparks in embers, which can rise up to overwhelm the perfunctory man (674).
- ü Resources, means, action-plan, time, and place are the five factors which need to be considered and cleared, before embarking on action (675).
- ü Before commencing any action, it is wise to consider in depth the objective, obstacles, and benefits or reactions upon completion (676).
- ü In order to decide how best a particular job may be done, it is wise to tap the expertise of a person who knows it inside out (677).
- ü It is a good policy to plan one successful project to lead to another, just as we use one elephant to capture another (678).
- ü Even more urgent than rewarding friends is the need for making friends with your enemies (679).
- ü The weak should free themselves from continuous alarms by entering into alliance

with the strong (680).

Today's management experts might find value in these standards: discerning ability in the process of decision-making, consulting the experts on this field, acting promptly once the decision is taken, etc.

Fostering Friendship

There is a section titled 'Friendship, which indicates it should be integrated into any administrative structure. It is given for a ruler who may have to deal with destructive forces both within his country and outside. In fact, this chapter deals with this question by taking the human factor into realistic consideration as to how one should select friends, master the enemy characteristics, and assess enemy strength; these are points which are born out of wisdom from the ancients. They know that evil forces cannot be eradicated completely, but one has to deal with them in a competent way, given a particular situation or context. What is said about the King or a ruler in a nation is applicable to any company or management where several people are working together. Hence the chapter on friendship finds a rightful place as part of the management technique in all sectors.

Friendship here refers not only to mutual admiration, but also to readiness for harsh and ethical advice when needed. In a genuine friendship there must be freedom for correction. It is significant to note how ways of dealing with enemies and assessing enemies' strength are suggested (861). If a ruler has the tact and good relations to convert enemies into allies, his sagacity will be praised by the whole world (874). The ruler has to be careful about the enemy within, which is perhaps the most dangerous. It is also said that it is prudence not to offend the mighty rulers, holy men, and learned scholars (891). In this context of allies or making friends, some advice is given about dealing with one's own wife, or other women of questionable repute, and abstaining from drink and gambling. These are all factors which could harm a good relationship. Ultimately, good relations are essential for a ruler or an administrator. This section ends with a chapter on medicine; here the medical advice consists of consuming food in moderation, certain basic discipline regarding food and knowing one's limitations and aptitudes. After all, health is wealth and a healthy body indicates a healthy mind.

Today, cleverness and intellectual ability are discussed less than emotional intelligence. Success depends on one's ability to perceive things and to forestall oppositions or crises that are inevitable in any human organization. Hence a chapter on wisdom or what it is to act wisely finds a proper place here. In chapter 43 several hints are given about men of wisdom. It is said that the wise men who can read the signs and foresee developments will not be shocked by emerging distressful situations (429). Men of wisdom are prepared for what is coming (427). The wise ones know how the world moves and move accordingly; for, it is a part of wisdom to conform to the ways of the world (426). To discern the truth, whatever source it emanates from, is the true quality of wisdom. Wisdom is after all the ultimate and impregnable defense for protection against destruction. It is also the fortress of inner strength against enemy onslaughts (421). It is the hallmark of wisdom to concentrate on the wise and the good instead of letting the mind wander aimlessly everywhere (422).

Elements Related to Administration in Public Life

The last 13 chapters of the section on “public life” (*porutpal*) are called *olipiyal*, i.e., miscellaneous items, and initially they do not seem to deal directly with politics or come under the purview of management. But when one analyzes more closely the verses in this section, one discovers a deeper meaning of interconnectedness. That is, “rectitude and sensitiveness to shame come by nature only to people who are born of good families” (V.V.S. Iyer’s translation). Certain things are perceived spontaneously by people of noble birth – an intellectual power of discernment. Such traits cannot be taught easily if the inner disposition is not receptive or open to it. People endowed with such traits of character will not deviate from standards of conduct, even if they fall on evil days. “The nature of the soil is known by the seedling that grows in it, a man’s ancestry is known by his speech” (959). “An instinctive aversion to evil is the secret of a happy and virtuous life” and this is an intuited, rather than a reasoned, conclusion (960).

Who is the Wise Administrator?

Finally, the question is: who is the wise administrator? This idea is developed in the chapters that follow, which address honor, greatness, pursuit of perfection, courteousness, sharing what one has, modesty, etc. People with such traits are called “*sanror*.” This word specifically refers to a virtuous gentleman who is characterized by (a) compassion for all lives, (b) sensitiveness to shameful conduct, (c) social co-operation, extended to kith and kin and neighbors, (d) accommodating grace towards other people and their faults, particularly known persons, and (e) constant upholding of truth. In a world of management or public administration, to desire to have such people is not an unreasonable demand. In fact, Tirukkural takes pains to define what is meant by wisdom and it is worth quoting the ten couplets dealing with this aspect of managerial wisdom in chapter 43 entitled “Wisdom.”

421. Wisdom is the ultimate & impregnable *defense* for protection against destruction; It is also the fortress of inner strength against enemy onslaughts.
422. It is the *hallmark* of wisdom to *concentrate* on the wise and the good, instead of letting the mind wander aimlessly everywhere.
423. To *discern* the truth, from whatever source it emanates, is the true quality of wisdom.
424. The wise express even profound thoughts in simple terms, but would grasp the subtleties of all that others say.
425. The wise man loves the world with certain constancy, unlike the kind of bloom that opens and closes frequently.
426. It is a part of wisdom to conform to the ways of the world (The wise ones know how the world moves and move accordingly).
427. Men of wisdom know and are prepared for what is coming; the ignorant do not know what is ahead of them.
428. The truly wise will fear what is to be feared; only the ignorant will be fool-hardy.
429. Wise men who can read the signs and foresee developments, will not be shocked by emerging distressful situations.
430. The wise have all blessings, even if not possessed with worldly goods, but the ignorant rich have nothing.

Conclusions

According to the worldview of the *Tirukkural* (of the Tamil wisdom literature), the image of this world is different from that of the Hindu, which has the individual striving after *moksha*, which refers to liberation from this world. In the Kural, the ideal, peaceful life defined by love and virtue in this world is lovingly presented in all details. Above all, the happiness of family life is shown as the highest ideal. This idea stands in opposition to the traditional priestly value system in which penance and meditation serve as the most desirable works. One needs not wonder, therefore, in the study of the Kural, what the reformation attitude hinted at indirectly through this new professional ethics, as it offers here a link for the new secular development in South India.

The ideal householder is presented further as a happy father whose children are his greatest treasure (vv.65-66). Love determines his life (Ch.8). Guests are always welcome (Ch.9). He is polite and kind in his speech (Ch.10). He is grateful for every act of friendship (Ch.11). He practices justice in his dealings (Ch.12). He is master of himself (Ch.13). He is conscientious in his dealings (Ch.14 and 22). He is pure and patient (Ch.16). He never slanders or uses mean gossip against others (Ch.19). He does not speak useless words (Ch.20). He avoids evil (Ch.21). He is generous (Ch.23). Finally, he is respected by all and known everywhere (Ch.24).

In the Kural, a completely different attitude to the world is expressed than in the Bhagavadgita. Kural 140 says: "Those who cannot live harmoniously in the world are ignorant men, even if they are men of learning." Leading a right life in this world is more important than learned wisdom about the next life (Ch.14). In this connection the Kural sounds to be somewhat critical of the Brahmins. If a Brahmin forgets the Vedas, he can get it by reading again, says Kural 134, but if he neglects right conduct, he loses even his birthright.

Not only is right knowledge, but the corresponding right action in the world is highly valued by the Kural. "What is the advantage of great and exact knowledge," it says, "if a man behaves meaninglessly with his neighbors through greed" (175). One contrasts the demand of the Gita that the knower should get detached from his action in order to become free from the world (Bhagavadgita IV, 10). In the Gita, a free, disinterested action is demanded that one in no way holds on to the fruit of the work, since by that he will be bound again. The goal is to become free from action (*akarman*). But in the Kural it is not completely about inner freedom from possession, wife and children; for, having as if one does not have and doing as if one does not do contradict the values of the Kural. The Kural demands pure and interiorized worldly actions, but opposes worldly indifference or a mystically detached inner worldly action. This action differentiates itself also from the Christian action: 'in the world, but not of the world.' It is not surprising, from this perspective, that certain criticism of religion and gods is interpreted in the Kural. The Kural 1073 says, 'The unprincipled people are like the gods, because they can act as they please.' Using a similar perspective of interpretation, it can be said that begging is a negative act: "If the Creator intended that some people should beg in order to eke out their livelihood, may He too wander about in such a world and perish" (1062). The political ethics which reflects itself in the foundation of the State (Ch.74-95) and the behavior of the minister of the State (Ch.64-73) differentiate themselves from the classical

Hindu scripture on political governance, the Arthasastra of Kautilya. According to this scripture, not rightful action (*dharma*), but only *danda*, the use of force, violence and punishment, is the recommended foundation of political power. This applies even if the use of *danda* is recommended not in the form of sheer violence (*bala*), but in the hidden, subtle form of cleverness or the power of secret dealings. In contrast to this, the Kural demands from the ruler a righteous fulfillment of duty in a manner that is comparable to the clouds, which rain without expecting anything in return. Kural thus expresses that *dharma*, (honesty, uprightness) and *artha* (worldly business), should not be separated from one another, as in Arthasastra (5).

References and Notes

- (1) Business Reference: Encyclopedia of Management: Int-Loc. Leadership Theories and Studies forum.
- (2) There is also a well-known text of the Sanskrit tradition on the state administration, Kautilya, *The Arthasastra*, (c. 150 AD) but its orientation is different from *Tirukkural*, which will be referred to later. (Penguin Classics translated by L. N. Rangarajan 1987).
- (3) Cf. Kamil V. Zvelebil, (1974). *Tamil Literature*, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, pp.117-127.
- (4) The Christian missionaries valued Tirukkural very much because of its ethical values. The Danish Missionary, August Friedrich Caemmerer, had for the first time translated it into German in 1800. In 1865 Karl Graul translated again the Tirukkural into German. C. J. Beschi did it into Latin. G.U.Pope translated it in 1889 into English. This is to show the fascination this text had on the European missionaries.
- (5) Hans-Joachim Klimkeit: *Anti-religiöse Bewegungen im modernen Südindien*. Ludwig Roehrscheid Verlag, Bonn 1971, pp. 128-133.