

## Ethics and Ethical Leadership in Literature

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### Abstract

The law of the land describes and prescribes the code and role of ethics in any civilised society. Conversely the life and times of the society in turn is reflected in the literature, folklore, drama and other forms of expression. The issues of ethics and ethical leadership exist probably in every society on this planet. This paper is a humble attempt made to cull out only a few representative reflections of the past to get a feel of the society in respect of ethics, ethical practices and leadership of some of the societies to get a feel of the practices.

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### Introduction:

Ethical leadership is determined by respect for ethical beliefs and values and for the dignity and more importantly rights of others. It is thus related to concepts such as trust, honesty, consideration, charisma and fairness. It is also entwined with a concern for nurturing the environment that has to be sustained in order to be passed on to the coming generations. Ethical Leaders know what they value.

John Rawls, one of the most significant ethical philosophers of the 20th century, brings out a differentiation in the comprehensive societal ethical thoughts like religions, which cover not only behaviour but such issues like cosmic relationship of humans with the universe besides less comprehensive systems,

which cover the political, social, and/or economic spheres.

Prof Ram Nidamolu in his book 'Two Birds in a Tree Timeless Indian Wisdom for Business Leaders' legitimately feels-

*'After three decades of observing, teaching, and participating in business and business leadership, I have come to the conclusion that something tremendously important has been missing all along. It is the question of why business and business leadership exist at all.*

*In truth, the buck stops with business leaders, such as corporate leaders and corporate investors. They are the ones who have to*

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*balance the interests of governments, the public, customers, other investors, and other stakeholders in business. If business is chiefly responsible for our current mess, then it makes sense that business should be chiefly responsible for fixing it'.*

Subject of ethics has been discussed over the ages in various parts of the world and such thoughts exist in probably every country and every language.

Ethical activity is value in itself, because it enhances the quality of lives and the work we do. Business has an ethical responsibility for fairness for humanity which includes stakeholders, shareholders and the society. D. V. Gundappa says in his well-known bunch of verses of wisdom - Mankutimmana Kagga: *Whatever be the activity, the basis has to be values & ethics.* (Kagga-749)

Thomas Donaldson in his book **'Ethics and Business-New look'** observes that *"there is a growing realization all over the world that ethics is vitally important for any business and for the progress of any society. Ethics makes for an efficient economy: ethics alone, not government or laws, can protect society; ethics is good in itself; ethics and profits go together in the long-run. An ethically responsible company is one which has developed a culture of caring for people and for the environment; a culture which flows downwards from the top managers and leaders."*

**The Holy Bible:** The Holy Bible takes into consideration of man being a part of nature as well. In Deuteronomy 20:19 we see a clear warning to the warriors when they conquer a land:

*"When you besiege a city a long time, to make war against it in order to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them; for you may eat from them, and you shall not cut them down. For is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you? Isaiah 24:5*

**In Shakespeare's well known play Merchant of Venice,** Shylock presents to court such a legal conflict that poses an insane clause inserted in the contract, which demands a pound of flesh from Antonio. It is the intellectual and moral virtue of Portia which saves Antonio. This demonstrates the ethical legal

and business practices that existed during his time. But the underlying fact is that the intellectual moral virtues take an upper hand in this dispute. which is in line with the thinking of Aristotle in his famous treatise Nicomachean Ethics.

Though Indian sages emphasised on the concern for environment through many Shanti mantras, they had perceived long time ago that man keeps on polluting ecology more and more in the days to come. Bible clearly says so of future - The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, and broke the everlasting covenant in Isaiah 24:5.

**The Thirukkural:** The Thirukkural considers ethics as a means of acquiring wealth and goodwill (Kural 31 –***sirappu eenum selvamum eenum araththinou ungu aakkam evanoe uyirkku***)-*What more does a man require than virtue, which ends the cycle of births, and also confers contentment through wealth and fame.) Sage Thiruvalluvar highlighted that* there is nothing in this world except ethics which would bring both reputation and wealth together; therefore, ethical principle in business is essential. Thirukkural also highlights the importance of transparency and truthfulness in all business transactions as it will bring respectable position in business.

**Veerashaiva Scriptures: Basavanna was a 12th-century Indian philosopher, statesman and Kannada poet in Veerashaiva lineage, prescribed a simple code of ethics for everyone in the society towards Sadachara in his famous vachana:** "Steal not, kill not, speak not untruth. Be not angry, show not contempt to others, do not pride upon thy virtues. Do not speak ill of others, this is the way to internal purity, this is the way to external purity. This then this is the way to win the favour of God."

Basavanna served the King so that he could support his Jangama-Dasoha. He used the term Kayaka or work to describe the concept of "work is worship". It was the considered opinion of Basavanna that even a Jangama, who had renounced all worldly attachments, should engage himself in some useful industry or other form of work instead of being a burden on society by indulging in begging and living off the sweat of others.

**Sri Guru Granth Sahib:** Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the religious text of Sikhs, gives to us the philosophy of action, deed and consequence. It offers a perfect set of values and practical code of conduct. It stresses on the qualities of wisdom, truthfulness, justice, temperance, courage, humility, contentment, and love for humanity, which are presently the cherished ideals of ethical leadership. Vices of lust, wrath, greed, attachment and pride, which are roots of unethical leadership, are termed as the worst sins in it. It is indeed the complete and perfect teacher and the Sikhs have been ordered by the tenth Sikh Guru to seek every direction of life from Sri Guru Granth Sahib. (*Jasleen Kaur and Dharmendra Ubha*).

There is an interesting episode in Mahabharata, reflecting the ethical living during that time, when Yudhisthira is confronted by Yaksha during the end of their exile in forest. The Yaksha asks Yudhisthira 'What sort of man is noble and what sort is ignoble'? And Yudhisthira responded '**He is noble who desires the well-being of all creatures, and he is ignoble who is without mercy**'. Is that not we talk even today about ethical way of living? John Heide in his *The Tao of Leadership* points out - **Enlightened leadership is service, not selfishness. The leader grows more and lasts longer by placing the well-being of all above the well-being of self alone.** In his ethical treatises Aristotle offers a defence of the idea of eudaimonism (human flourishing or happiness) which is achieved as a result of human choice in search of excellence and the good life.

**Ethics in Greek literature:** Aristotle's 'master virtue' of phronesis, combines ethics and action so that people can 'live well' and be happy and is seen as the key to effective leadership. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* reveals that *this master virtue* is linked not only to knowledge, skill, wisdom and intelligence but also to sensory perception, intuition and aesthetics. This gives a good insight into how leaders take their decisions — and about the skills, a good leadership involves.

In the eastern hemisphere, besides India, Confucianism, a moral and ethical system aimed at human development, is a widely popular philosophy, deeply influencing many nations in east and south east China,

Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam, Korea, Japan, besides Malaysia and the Philippines. Confucianism is a main social force in China.

Thus the concepts of ethical leadership have existed in various societies and developed over a period of time. The scriptures give us the thinking and practices which were prevailing in those societies at the time they were conceptualised and written. Quran gives the attributes which are required to be possessed by the leaders - Knowledge, Power, Sound Judgement, Patience, Justice, Communication skills, Piety, Simplicity and Truth (Al-Baqarah 2:246-247)

### **Ethical leadership**

Swami Shashankananda observes - *Leadership may be Constructive or Destructive. It is determined by the virtuous or vicious object behind the activity and the quality of the leader. A virtuous Leadership is based on Principles and leads to the growth, development and welfare of the human society, but a vicious leadership is based on self-vested interest or sense-enjoyment and leads the human society to contraction, narrowness and misery.*

**Bhagavadgita** provides a composite framework to aid the understanding of the mental make up of a person or a leader. Similar to trait theory in the western context. In the Chapter 14 of Bhagavadgita Krishna details the influence of various modes of human character mainly classifying them into three and traces their genesis thus:

*सत्त्वं रजस्तम इति गुणाः प्रकृतिसम्भवाः ।  
निबद्ध्यन्ति महाबाहो देहे देहिनमव्ययम् ॥ 5 ॥*

*Material nature has in it three modes-Sattva, Rajas and Tama When the living entity comes in contact with nature, he becomes conditioned by these modes.*

Material nature or Prakriti consists of the three modes—goodness, passion and ignorance. When the living entity comes in the influence of these modes of nature, he becomes conditioned by these modes. The living entity, because he is transcendental, has really nothing to do with this material nature. Still, being a part of the cosmic consciousness, he is constantly influenced by the material nature and his actions are conditioned under the spell of the three modes of material nature.

Because living entities have different kinds of bodies, in terms of the different aspects of nature, they are induced to act differently in accordance with that mode of nature. This is the cause of the various levels of happiness and misery.

It was the belief in ancient India that Sattvic leadership behaviour is quite capable of being learned through regular practice and training. A leader can develop sattvic nature and reduce his rajasic or tamasic nature. Bhagavadgita indicates that with a greater influence of sattva in leaders' personalities, greater will be their leadership capabilities. Krishna in the verse 18 of Chapter 14 says 'oordhvam gacchanti sattvavastha' - Sattva guna leads a person to an upward movement to higher levels of actions and performance.

The Greek thinkers had a clear understanding of ethics for leaders. Because of belief Socrates had in a higher power, an afterlife, and the superiority of the soul to the body, he often makes the claim that it is far worse to be evil than to be dead. Aristotle believed that through the attachments the viewers' develop with the theme of the dramas depicting tragedy, the viewer refines his or her sense of difficult ethical issues through a vicarious experience of such thorny problems.

Plato, like many of the ancients, realized that the greatest ethical challenge for humans in leadership roles stems from the temptations of power. In Book II of the Republic, he provides a thought-provoking experiment about power and accountability.

As in Bhagavadgita, Plato believed that leadership required a person to give up his or her immediate self-interests, which in fact would not amount to altruism. He believed on the advantages of leading by example. In Book II of the Republic, Plato (1992) says that if a city of good men came into being, the citizens would fight in order not to rule... since anyone who is really a true ruler doesn't by nature seek his own advantage but would strive for his subjects. The thought is so similar to Mahabharata where Krishna advises the Pandavas that even if they did not want the kingdom, it was necessary to protect dharma and destroy adharma. Nishkama (inaction) is tantamount to irresponsibility and can lead to dushkama (evil action).

Sattva is the quality of intelligence, virtue and goodness and creates harmony, balance and stability. It is light and luminous in nature. Rajas is the quality of change, activity, and turbulence. It introduces a disequilibrium that upsets an existing balance. Rajas is motivated in its action, ever seeking a goal or an end that gives it power. While in the short term Rajas is stimulating and provides pleasure, owing to its unbalanced nature, unless it is balanced with a sattvic attitude, it quickly results in pain and suffering for the leader as well as the subjects. It is the force of passion that causes distress and conflict.

There are very few leaders who can measure up to the standards set by Mahatma Gandhi in the practice of ethical leadership. Through his example he gave the world an alternative to violent conflict resolution – a comprehensive philosophy of nonviolence or **Satyagraha**– the practice of which requires high moral standards by the practitioners. His ideal in life was *Ramayana*, a Hindu epic, where Lord Rama is depicted as the epitome of ethical leadership. Even when the action hurt him, Lord Rama did not flinch from the Truth. Without seeking an explanation or showing any hesitancy or bitterness Lord Rama renounces everything and spends the 14 years in the forest and thus becomes a role model for ethical leadership.

The way the Ramayana portrays the essential attributes of a leader, an ethical leader, is a revelation in itself. King Dasaratha talks about the qualities of Rama in Ayodhya Kaanda thus:

नाश्रेयसि रतो विद्वान्न विरुद्धकथारुचिः ।  
उत्तरोत्तरयुक्तौ च वक्ता वाचस्पति र्यथा ॥ 2-1-17

Rama was not interested in actions, which were not beneficial. He was a scholar. He had no taste in tales opposing righteousness. Like vachaspathi, his eloquent speech contained a series of strategies for action.

सत्येन लोकान् जयति दीनान् दानेन राघवः ।  
गुरुन् शुश्रूषया वीरो धनुशा युधि शात्रवान् ॥ 2-12-29  
सत्यम् दानम् तपस्त्यगो वित्रता शौचमार्जवम् ।  
विद्या च गुरुशुश्रूषा ध्रुवाण्येतानि राघवे ॥ 2-12-30  
अप्यहिंसा च भूतानाम् तमृते का गतिर्मम ॥ 2-12-33

*He has won the hearts of all beings by protecting the interests of the needy and the afflicted. Generosity, faithful service to his preceptor, valour in the field of battle, skill in archery, and have all contributed to his renown. Truth, austerity, friendship, purity, simplicity of life, knowledge of philosophy and service of his teacher are well known qualities of Shri Ramachandra.*

Shuka a Ravana's minister tells so of Rama to Ravana: **'his sense of duty never wavers nor does he ever swerve from righteousness'.**

यः च एषो अनन्तरः शूरः श्यामः पद्म निभ ईक्षणः ॥ ६-२८-१८  
 इक्ष्वाकूणाम् अतिरथो लोके विख्यात पौरुषः ।  
 यस्मिन् न चलते धर्मो यो धर्मम् न अतिवर्तते ॥ ६-२८-१९  
 यो ब्राह्मम् अन्नम् वेदामः च वेद वेदविदाम् वरः ।  
 यो भिन्द्याद् गगनम् बाणैः पर्वतामः च अपि दारयेत् ॥ ६-२८-२०  
 यस्य मृत्योर् इव क्रोधः शक्रस्य इव पराक्रमः ।  
 यस्य भार्या जन्थानात्सीता चापि हृता त्वया ॥ ६-२८-२१  
 स एष रामस् त्वाम् योद्धुम् राजन् समभिवर्तते ।

"Nearby is a warrior, dark of hue with eyes like lotuses, a chief warrior among Ikshvakus, his heroism is well-known in the world, his sense of duty never wavers, nor does he ever transgress the righteousness, he knows to use Brahma's weapon and is conversant with Veda, he is the most learned of the Vedic scholars, he shatters the firmament with his arrows, and rends even the earth, his anger is akin to that of Death, his valour equal to that of Indra the god of celestials, his consort is Seetha who was taken away by you from a place called Janasthana, he is Rama who has come to wage war on you, O king!"

**रामो विग्रहवान् धर्मः साधुः सत्य पराक्रमः ।  
 राजा सर्वस्य लोकस्य देवानाम् इव वासवः ॥ 3-37-13**

In Aranya Kanda, before abduction of Seetha, Mareecha tells Ravana - Rama's principles alone make him victorious, as he does not deviate from the path of righteousness. And by not deviating from the path of righteousness, he is truly valorous and the question of his defeat does not arise, because he will abide by his conscience.

These instances amply depict the concept of ethical leadership in scriptures et al.

In their interactions with hundreds of leaders worldwide, an Harvard Business Review (HBR) survey found Emotional Intelligence (EI) to be more important than the other attributes like technical cognitive & analytical skills. Rama stands out as a great lesson in leadership, more on the role and importance of EI as one can ever come across. He clarifies that one has to have a clear vision and a cause worth fighting for which results in victory over the evil forces. What the HBR survey and the statement of Rama in the Ramayana say are one and the same, that EI, is what makes victory possible against any opposition.

Business leaders today are considered to be fortunate to obtain good education with many of them with a Bachelor's Degree or with Master's Degree or Ph.Ds. But, what is the use of that learning if they are not ethical in their enterprise, and that learning does not lead to the blessed foundation of pure intelligence. Kural 2 says the purpose of education is to develop the discretion to distinguish between right and wrong and adequately cautioned by one's own conscience. Thirukkural clearly highlights that the leader can be a highly qualified person, but any of his unethical practices will result in irreparable damage to their business.

**Kautilya says 'As regards the chief of the corporation (the chief executive officer!), he should endear himself to the people by leading a virtuous life,** controlling his passions, and by pursuing that course of action which is liked by all those who are his followers'. (Chandrani Chattopadhyaya)

The moment a leader becomes aware of his responsibility towards others, without looking for any return but self-satisfaction, the gate of eternal power opens for him. **Bhagwadgita says,** "swalpamapyasya dharmasya trayate Mahato bhayaat" (स्वल्पमप्यस्यधर्मस्यत्रायते महतोभयात्)(Bhagavadgita, Chapter II Sloka 40). A little of this selfless service makes one free from all great fears. Fearlessness is a great virtue. It gives a tremendous and powerful source of energy and dynamism that you can galvanise the whole world (Swami Shashankananda).

In advocating compassion being most important virtue in the ethical leadership Seamus Phan (co-author of book Dot Zen) argues - To enact compassionate

leadership in a corporation, compassionate leadership must be grounded in ethics, not just compliance. He says compassion is not just for enlightened leaders like Mahatma Gandhi or HH Dalai Lama; it can be nurtured and tightly integrated into the fabric of any corporation including highly competitive and volatile technology businesses. (Leadership, Spirituality & Common Good-East and West Approaches- Henri-Claude de Bettignies and Mike J Thomson (Eds))

Ancient Chinese philosophies including Confucianism advocated a leadership, with a strong emphasis on taking the employees through personal development. The tradition believed in leaders adopting “ethical considerations above the achievement of profit”. Other factors of Chinese leadership include assuming the role of inspirational character, leading by example in terms of promoting equality, simple living and harmony with nature and others. **One of the most important principles of Confucius is the supremacy of virtue. Acting ethically in all transactions is paramount, more important than making money.**

Probably every thinker placed virtue above everything else when it came to leadership. Lao Tzu, sage in 6th century BC in China, says so in his work ‘Tao Te Ching’:

“Simplicity, patience, compassion.  
These three are your greatest treasures.  
Simple in actions and thoughts, you return to the source of being.  
Patient with both friends and enemies,  
you accord with the way things are.  
Compassionate toward yourself,  
you reconcile all beings in the world.”

John Heide in his The Tao of Leadership (Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching Adapted for a New Age) says so of the ripple effect in respect of a leader: Do you want to be a positive influence in the world? First, get your own life in order. Ground yourself in the single principle so that your behaviour is wholesome and effective. If you do that, you will earn respect and be a powerful influence. Your behaviour influences others through a ripple effect. A ripple effect works because everyone influences everyone else. Powerful people are powerful influences.

On leadership Confucius opines – ‘Let him preside over them with gravity, then they will reverence him. Let him be final and kind to all; then they will be faithful to him. **Let him advance the good and teach the incompetent; then they will eagerly seek to be virtuous’.**

Reading of Confucius reminds us that virtue, looking out for those around us and taking calculated but decisive action are all essential behaviours that we cannot ever forget or dismiss as not being relevant for an ethical leader.

## Conclusion

While, references the concepts of ethical leadership in texts all over the world are endless, in conclusion, it is relevant to recall this saying from Dr. D.V. Gundappa’s Mankutimmana Kagga (Verse 885):

*When there is discipline within the society  
The wealth of the land belongs to all  
When in the proliferation of knowledge and values  
Humanity and human ethics stand out  
Joy will pervade the whole world.*

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