Indian Theory of Leadership from Thirukkural

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Abstract

Efficiency of an organization, be it a company at a micro level or a country at a macro level, is primarily determined by the efficiency of the resources such as raw materials, machines, buildings, policies, capital, etc. The efficiency of these resources depend on the efficiency of another factor namely Human Resource. However the efficiency of all resources including human resource is determined by the quality of the leadership. Various scholars have studied leadership over time and thus various theories of leadership exist today. India had produced brilliant leaders in her history that the mankind would find it difficult even to believe that such people walked on this earth. A few examples are namely Lord Buddha, Mahavir, Gurunanak, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, etc. To rediscover the Indian contribution to management wisdom, leadership in particular, this paper attempts to highlight an Indian theory of leadership based on Thirukkural, an acclaimed original Indian work on management that is more than 2000 years old. This study finds that Thirukkural not only presents a theory of leadership but also suggests that, perhaps there are some born leaders but leaders can also be made! Besides, this theory is also consistent with traits theory of leadership, behavioral theory of leadership, social cognitive resource theory of leadership and ethical theory of leadership of the modern times as well!

1 Leadership and Organizational Efficiency

Efficiency of an organization, be it a company at a micro level or a country at a macro level, is primarily determined by the efficiency of the resources such as raw materials, machines, buildings, policies, capital, etc. The efficiency of these resources depend on the efficiency of another factor namely Human Resource. However the efficiency of all resources including human resource is determined by the quality of the leadership. Various scholars have studied leadership over time and thus various theories of leadership exist today. Panchatantra, another Indian Classical work on management that is more than 5000 years old, endorses this view thus: “... the nature of the servant also depends on the master’s quality ....” (Ryder, p-31) and that

“In case of horse or book or sword
Of women, man or lute or word,
The use or uselessness depends
The coordinating role of leadership is emphasized in Panchatantra as below:

“Save the chieftain of the clan,
  Whatsoe’er the pain;
  Lose him, and the clan is lost;
  Hubless spokes are vain.”  (Ibid. p-108)

This paper attempts to highlight an Indian theory of leadership based on Thirukkural.

2 Modern Theories of Leadership

“Leadership is the ability to influence a group towards the achievement of goal” (Robbins, p-332). Various studies have researched the bases and process of leadership. Traits theory of leadership holds that ‘it is the personal qualities and characteristics that differentiate leaders from non-leaders” (Ibid. p-333). The traits that make for leadership are “ambitions and energy, the desire to lead, honesty and integrity, self-confidence, intelligence, high self-monitoring and the relevant knowledge (Ibid.) The basic assumption of traits theory is that leaders are born rather than made. “Most of the dozens of traits that emerged in various leadership reviews could be subsumed under one of the Big Five and that this approach results in consistent and strong support for traits as predictors of leadership (Ibid. p-333). The Big Five model of personality lists five traits namely extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness to experience as the leadership personality. Behavioral theory of leadership from Ohio State studies focuses on the behaviour of the leader in terms of two independent dimensions namely initiating structure (the extent to which a leader is likely to define and structure his or her role and those of subordinates in the search for goal attainment) and consideration (the extent to which a person is likely to have job relationships that are characterized by mutual trust, respect for employees’ ideas, well-being, status and satisfaction” (Ibid. p-336). The University of Michigan studies focused on two dimensions namely employee orientation and production orientation of the leader. Blake and Mouton’s model focused on the leaders concern for people and concern for production. Scandinavian studies added ‘development orientation’ to the initiating structure and consideration of the Ohio State studies. Fiedler’s contingency theory of leadership states that the effective group performance depends on the proper match between the leader’s style and the degree to which the situation gives control to the leader. Situation refers to leader-member relation, task structure and position power and that the situation required a particular type of leadership style namely relationship oriented style or task oriented style. To Fiedler and Joe Garcia’s Cognition resource theory, the stress unfavorably affects a situation and that intelligence and experience can lessen the influence of stress on the leader (Ibid. pp-339-341). To Hersay and Blanchard’s situation theory, the effective behaviour depends on the follower ability and motivation and they listed four follower situations namely: unable and unwilling, unable and willing, able and unwilling and able and willing (Ibid. pp-342-343). In Leader-Member Exchange theory the leader differentiates among followers as ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’. As per Path-Goal theory it is leader’s job to assist followers in attaining their goals and to provide the necessary direction and support to ensure that their goals are compatible with the overall objectives of the group or organization. Leader Participation Model provides a
set of rules to determine the form and amount of participation in decision-making in different situation. There have been modern theoretical processes of leadership. **Charismatic leadership theory** states that charismatic leaders are those who by the force of their personal abilities are capable of having profound and extraordinary effect on followers (Luthan, p-560). Charismatic leaders are characterized by self-confidence and confidence in the subordinates, ideological vision, and the use of personal example,” (Ibid.); “Vision and articulation, personal risk, environmental sensitivity, sensitivity to followers needs, unconventional behaviour (Robbins, p-363). **Transformational leaders** shift the values, beliefs and needs of their followers through charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration (Luthan, p-561-562). Social cognitive approach treats that “leaders are causal determinants and that influence subordinates independent of followers’ behaviour or the situation (Ibid, p-563). “The leader and the subordinates have a negotiable, reciprocal, interactive relationship and are consciously aware of how they can modify (influence) each others’ behaviour through cognitions and the contingent environment” (Ibid, p-564). The **substitutes for leadership theory** tries to point out that some things are beyond leaders’ control; leaders do not have mystical powers over people. The situation plays a role” (Ibid, p-565). “There may be certain ‘substitutes’ for leadership that make leaders behavior unnecessary and redundant, and ‘neutralizers’ that prevent the leaders from behaving in a certain way or that counteract the behaviour” (Ibid, p-564). However the substitutes idea does not negate the leadership; but it may put a more realistic boundary on what leadership is capable of achieving from substitutes” (Ibid, p-565). The neutralizers are” subordinate characteristics (experience, ability and training); task characteristics (structured and routine work; feedback within the task, intrinsically satisfying task), organization characteristics (cohesive work groups, low position power of leader, formalization, inflexibility, leader physically isolated from subordinates (Ibid, p-565). **Authentic leadership** is “a process that draws from both positive psychological capabilities and a highly developed organizational contact, which results in both greater self-awareness and self regulated positive behaviour on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive development. The authentic leader is confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, transparent, moral /ethical, future oriented, and gives priority to developing associates to be leaders” (Ibid, p-566). **Self-leadership** refers to “a set of processes through which individuals control their own behaviour. And effective leaders (or what advocates like to call super leaders) help their followers to lead themselves. They do this by developing leadership capacity in others and nurturing followers so they no longer need to depend on formal leaders for direction and motivation” (Robbins, p-372). This is done through model self-leadership, encouraging followers to create self-set goals, encourage the use of self-rewards to strengthen and increase desirable behavior, create positive thought patters, create a climate of self-leadership and encourage self-criticism” (Ibid, p-372). **Ethical leadership** refers to the leadership wedded with ethical behavior (i.e. the means used by the leader to achieve the goals and the moral contents of the goals). Unethical leaders are more likely to use their charisma to enhance power over followers, directed towards elf-serving ends” (Ibid, p-373). **On-line leadership** refers to guiding, inspiring and motivating dispersed followers through emails. Table-1 presents the essence of the modern theories of leadership.
Table-1: Modern Theories of Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S No.</th>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Traits Theory</td>
<td>Leadership is a set of traits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Behavioral Theory</td>
<td>Leadership is behavioral orientation of a person. (People orientation or task or production orientation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Contingency Theory</td>
<td>Leader-Member relationship, task structure and position power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Situational Theory</td>
<td>Ability and Motivation of the followers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Leader-Member Exchange Theory</td>
<td>Leader creating ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Path-Goal Theory</td>
<td>Direction and support to achieve goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Leader Participation Theory</td>
<td>A set of rules for form and amount of participation in decision making for different situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Charismatic Leadership Theory</td>
<td>Personal abilities of the leader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Transformational Leadership Theory</td>
<td>Leader’s ability to boost values, beliefs, and needs of the followers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Social Cognitive Resource Theory</td>
<td>Leader is one of the causes of followers’ behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Substitutes for Leader Theory</td>
<td>A set of substitute factors to control the behavior of followers and the leader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Authentic Leadership Theory</td>
<td>Leader developing following to be leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Self-Leadership Theory</td>
<td>Developing the followers to lead themselves through model-self leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Ethical Leadership Theory</td>
<td>Leader’s use of ethical means to achieve the goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>On-Line Leadership Theory</td>
<td>Leader guides, inspires, and motivates ‘physically dispersed’ followers through emails.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Theory of Leadership from Thirukkkural

Thirukkkural deals with the leadership theory in its chapter-39 entitled ‘leadership excellence.’ Thirukkkural’s leadership theory represents a composite model of Traits theory, Behavioral theory, Social Cognitive Resource theory, and Ethical theory of leadership. The ideas of Thirukkkural are presented first followed by the couplet for brevity.

1 The Big Four Qualities of a Leader

According to Thirukkkural the ‘big’ four qualities of a leader are namely: never failing daring courage, magnanimity, intelligence and enthusiasm as given below:

Anjaamai eegai arivu vookkam innaangum
Enjaamai vaendark kiyalbu. (Kural-382).
2 Qualities of a Governor

Four qualities, as per Thirukkural, namely promptness in action (non-delaying), education, decisiveness and bravery shall never leave the leaders governing the Earth, as below:

Thoongaamai kalvi thunivudaimai immoonrum
Neengaaa nilan allbvarku. (kural-383)

3 Governance is Ethical Behavior

To Thirukkural governance is just ethical behavior, devoid of all unethical ones, in high esteem. This implies that unethical behavior by the leaders s not governance but some thing else altogether.

Aran ilukkaadhu allavai neekki maran ilukka
Maanam udaiyadhyu arasu. (Kural-384)

This couplet emphasizes the behavioral aspect of the leader and the ethical aspects of the behavior as well.

4 Simple and Easily Accessible Leader is Celebrated

Thirukkural states that the whole world will celebrate the leader if only he is simple looking and easily accessible and devoid of harshness in all his words, thus:

Kaatchiku elian kadunjchollan alanael
Meekkoorum mannal nilam. (Kural-386)

This couplet focuses on the behavioral aspects of the leader.

5 Communicative Leader Will Command the World

Thirukkural suggests that those who are capable of magnanimously rewarding by pleasant-talks (nice-talks) shall see the whole world at his words, thus:

Insolaal eethalikka vallarkuth thunsolaal
Thaan kandanaithiv vulagu. (Kural-387)

This couplet emphasizes the importance of communication skills of the leaders in governance besides his behavioral aspects.

6 Leader’s Protective and Just Behavior is Godly

Thirukkural states that those who protect (the people) by doing duty (or justice) will be esteemed as people’s God, as below:
Muraicheydu kaapaatrum mannavan makkatku
Erai endru vaikkap padum.  (Kural-388)

Where Thirukkural defines ‘doing duty or justice’ as ‘governing mercilessly (disciplining) through knowledge through trial impartially whoever-it-is, thus:

Whorndhu kannodadhu iraipurindhu yaarmaattum
Therindhu cheyva ahudhey murai.  (Kural-541).

7  Great Leaders’ Trait it Tolerance

To Thirukkural, the whole world will dwell under the governance-umbrella of that leader who has the trait of tolerating the bitter words (i.e. criticism, etc), thus:

Sevikaippa cholporukkum pannbudai vaendhan
Kavigaikkeel thangum vulagu.  (Kural-389).

8  Four Factors of Brilliance of Leadership

Thirukkural defines the factors (or causes) of brilliance of leadership. Brilliance of leadership is simply possessing these four namely the trait of rewarding, giving grants, good governance and care for the welfare of the people, thus:

Kodaiali sengoal kudiombal innaangu
Udaiyaanaam vaendharku oli.  (Kural-390).

This couplet also emphasizes that the brilliance or effectiveness of a leaders is not due to the leadership alone but due to four causes said above and that leadership is only one of the causes of the effectiveness of leadership. This idea is consistent with the social cognitive resource theory of leadership.

4  Indian wisdom on Leadership

Thirukkural represents a part of the Indian wisdom on Management. This study finds that Thirukkural has shed brilliant light on the theory of leadership. Thirukkural presents a Theory of Leadership that seems to integrate the traits theory, behavioral theory, ethical leadership theory and the social cognitive resource theory of leadership. The leadership traits identified by the Thirukkural are: never failing daring courage, magnanimity, intelligence, enthusiasm (Kural-382), promptness, education, decisiveness and bravery (Kural-383), pride of ethical behaviour (Kural-384), magnanimity, nice-talk (Kural-387), justness, impartiality, mercilessness (in disciplining) (Kural-388), tolerance (Kural-389); Thirukkural also identified the following behaviour of leaders: ethical behaviour, avoiding unethical behaviour (concern for the people) (Kural-386), rewarding, nice-talk (people oriented) (Kural-387), protecting the followers (Kural-388), rewarding, giving grants, good governance, care for the welfare of the people (concern for the people and orientation towards the people) (Kural-390). Thirukkural is fully consistent and agreeable to the Ethical Theory of Leadership. Thirukkural even goes to the extent of defining leadership behaviour as ethical behaviour only. Thirukkural has also recognized that the leader is
only one of the causes for the effectiveness of the leadership and that there are four factors namely rewarding, giving grants, good governance (management) and care for the welfare of the people. Thus Thirukkural advocates the social cognitive theory of leadership as well.

5 Leaders are also made! - India

The main assumption of the Traits theory of leadership is that the leaders are born rather than made. Since Thirukkural also focuses on the traits of the leaders does it also mean that it also advocates the belief that ‘leaders are born and not made’? Though Thirukkural’s theory emphasizes the leadership traits, it does not seem to agree that leaders are born and not made. It seems to suggest that leaders can also be made because of the following reasons: (1) Thirukkural does not explicitly states anywhere that leadership is an inborn quality, (2) it does not explicitly state that leadership can not be made; (3) instead it does seem to suggest that leaders can be made since many of the traits can be developed in an individual and hence they could become leaders. For instance, magnanimity, intelligence, enthusiasm, promptness, nice-talk, justness, impartiality, mercilessness (in disciplining), and tolerance of bitter words are all under the control of an individual. Hence these leadership traits are under the control of an individual. Perhaps though daring courage and bravery seems to be in-born traits, they could also be developed in an individual with experience and support. Therefore one can become leader by developing and fostering these leadership traits. Thus though Thirukkural focuses on the leadership traits it differs from the traits theory of leadership and suggests that leadership can also be made! Typical Indian examples would be Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi.

From the above discussion it may become quite clear and interesting to note that the Indian contribution to the leadership theory, based on Thirukkural, is very relevant, practicable and consistent with the important theories of leaders even today though it is more than 2000 years old!

Reference:


