

Thirukkural and Management

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Abstract

The Thirukkural, which is also called the “Tamil Vedas”, “Threefold Division” (Muppāl), Book of Ethics, Book of Life, Philosophical Text and Universal Scripture, has fascinated the intellectual and moral imagination of individuals globally. It is easy to see why it has been translated into so many different languages such as G. U. Pope (English), the French scholar M. Ariel (French), the Italian missionary, Constanzo Giuseppe Beschi (Latin) and so many others have translated its wisdom into their own language. Management today has become an important area of study and professional practice, as well as a critical need in the organization. A lot of the effectiveness of any institution is dependent on the managerial competence of the leadership. Co-ordination is one of the various aspects of personality and is a key area in management, ensuring that actions are co-ordinated and efficient in the work of groups. In fact, management is a universal phenomenon which is applicable to all economic systems and all organised human activity. Remarkably, many of the elements of management that have been put into words today by Western contemporary thinkers have been totally described and conveyed over two thousand years ago in the Thirukkural, by Thiruvalluvar. This article thus aims at the investigation of the management concepts that are held within this old classical piece and their analysis, with the view of showing that this piece still has relevance to management practices at present and organizational theory.

Keywords: Thirukkural, Management, Organization Skill, Economic.

Introduction

Thirukkural is classified as a part of Eighteen Minor Works, Pathinenkeezhkanakku in the traditional Tamil literary division of Sangam and post-Sangam Tamil literature. The text is arranged in 133 chapters, 443 of which are in Aram (Virtue), 363 in Porul (Wealth) and 324 in Inbam (Love) for a total of 1330 couplets (Thiruvalluvar, 2017). Even though this work is short, it serves as a complete moral text which provides lasting lessons in the right way to live, respect society’s obligations and act.

This universalism of the work is long recognized in the Tamil intellectual world. The national poet Subramania Bharathi immortalized Thiruvalluvar’s universal importance in his iconic lines “Valluvar gave himself to the world, and thus Tamil Nadu attained divine fame” (Bharati Patalkal, English Translation, Part 5, Poems 101–150, edited by Sekkizhar-Adi-p-Podi T. N. Ramachandran). The significance of the Thirukkural is also demonstrated through its partial and full translation into various international languages all over the world (Pope, 2017). Thiruvalluvar’s ideas, which were written more than 2000 years ago, remain relevant and universal in today’s intellectual and social theories as well (Appaththurai, 2020).

Thirukkural has a lot to say about various aspects of governance, leadership and administration which is definitely relevant in the modern world. Modern management is seen as a process of continuous and dynamic activities where human, material and institutional resources are organized and turned into an efficient system of collective functioning. In modern times, scholars have devised several models to define management. Captain Bennett Singh lists four important management roles: Information Gathering, Planning, Implementation, Monitoring. Vikram also highlights the role of planning, organizing, controlling and coordinating as key functional activities of administration. Luther Gulick, the noted management theorist, expanded the concept of administration in terms of “POSDCORB” (Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing, Coordinating, Reporting, and Budgeting) (1937).

Interestingly, many of these rules of management and administration had already been foreseen in the Thirukkural, which is one of the oldest management manuals in the world, written centuries before the advent of modern management. The Thirukkural presents a complex public and organizational management approach in the discussions with regard to leadership, governance and decision making, resource management, ethical administration and strategic action which is very relevant to contemporary administration thoughts (Koontz & O’Donell, 1972; Nagasamy, 2021).

Research Methodology

This study takes a textual analysis approach to uncovering the managerial insights contained in the Thirukkural. Primary sources are the original text and classical commentaries by scholars like Parimelazhagar, Mu. Varadarasanar and Solomon Pappaiah. Relevant research books, journal articles and secondary literature of those related to Thirukkural and management studies are also referred to support and contextualise the analysis.

It is important to remember planning as a basic principle of management. Remember planning as a fundamental principle of management.

The planning process is a necessary first step before taking action; it is the base of good administration. It is one of the main duties of the Management, to think and to see into it. Planning is closely related to innovation and creativity (Koontz & O’Donnell, 1972) and before starting any task a manager must develop a clear and structured approach. The process starts in all levels of management with the establishment of clear objectives and the identification of the best ways of meeting them. The goal in any administration is to get the greatest return on the least expenditure at the earliest possible date. So, there are some critical questions that need to be considered before any activity: Can success be obtained? What challenges can you see? How can they be overcome? The factors mentioned above explain the importance of planning in the process of decision making. An important aspect of Thirukkural is the need for planning, as set out in various couplets:

தொடங்கற்க எவ்வினையும் எள்ளற்க முற்றும்

இனங் கண்டபின்னல் அது. (குறள் 491)

Do not do anything without careful consideration; Have no contempt for anything.

Until the end of its nature is sought, it is not known what it is.”

முடிவும் இடையூறும் முற்றியாங்கு எய்தும்

படுபயனும் பார்த்துச் செயல். (குறள் 676)

Take heed of the end, the means, the loss and the gain;

Then take action, it is the commandment of the wise men.”

The verses show clearly, that to manage well, one must analyse thoroughly before doing anything. Before execution, a competent manager needs to consider all the possible outcomes, constraints, and benefits thoroughly. Thiruvalluvar also warns against hasty decision making:

எண்ணித் துணிக கருமம் துணிந்தபின்
எண்ணுவம் என்பது இழுக்கு. (குறள் 467)
Think before you act; once you have started”
To think again leads only to failure.”

This makes it clear that the planning process must go before the doing, rather than after it. Efficient action requires deliberation, and failure if anything else does. After taking an action, a retreat or a hesitation can lead to loss of credibility and effectiveness.

Hence, in the Thirukkural planning is enunciated as a fundamental rule of the management, which still holds true in the modern management theory and practice, and the need for foresight, analysis and decision and action which is the most essential requirement of management.

Organizing as a Core Function of Management

Organizing means dividing work into tasks, determining who will have authority and setting up a clear line of authority in an institution. It makes sure that human resources, financial sustainability, security, expert guidance, and harmony among relationships are well coordinated for the organization to achieve its objectives (Gulick, 1937). A system that is well organized combines these elements to operate effectively and productively. This is emphasized by the following couplet from the Thirukkural, written by Thiruvalluvar:

படைகுடி கூழ்வுமைச்சு நட்புஅரண் ஆறும்
உடையான் அரசருள் ஏறு (குறள் 381)

This Kural, though a king's experience, can be very applicable to today's organizational context. It highlights the fact that the core characteristics of a competent ruler, or modern-day leader, are resource, people, advisors, alliances, and security systems.

In the modern organizational context, it can be likened to that of a managing director or chief executive, whose job is to coordinate different functions and organize them into departments or teams. To be effective, the duties must be clearly assigned, authority must be delegated, and the relationships among the various levels of management must be well defined. Besides, a proper organization structure gives the conditions required for the employees to work efficiently which are clear responsibilities and coordinated between departments. Such an arrangement would not only boost productivity but also help to successfully implement plans. It is thus clear that organizing is an essential managerial activity, and that the ideas of structured coordination and integration of resources go back to a time before the dawn of modern management theories, as illustrated in the Thirukkural.

Staffing: Selection and Placement of Employees

People are the essence of any organization and the success of the organization greatly depends on the competence and integrity of its employees (Dessler, 2017). Therefore, the selection of skillful and capable persons to a degree, and the assignment of responsibilities in a proper manner according to their skill is important for effective management. Thirukkural, a work by Thiruvalluvar, offers great insight on this aspect of management:

நன்மையும் தீமையும் நாடி நலம்புரிந்த
தன்மையான் ஆளப் படும் (குறள் 511)
“One who understands what is good and evil and does good.
Is fit to be entrusted with responsibility.”

This couplet brings a point across that the employees should be selected according to their moral values and determination to do good deeds. Reliability is not enough, ethics is an equally vital requirement of organizational positions.

Thiruvalluvar also stresses on the significance of task assignment:

“This person could do this in this way” (Kural 517)

The concept that when tasks are based on individual skill, efficiency and organizational success results. The key to a proficient manager, then, is pairing an individual to the correct job.

In addition he warns against bad judgment in recruitment and trust:

தேரான் தெளிவுந் தெளிந்தான்கண் ஐயறுவுந்

தீரா விடும்பை தரும் (குறள் 510)

“To trust without examination, and to doubt after trust—

Both (are) a plague and a trouble.”

In this sense, the Thirukkural offers a full picture of staffing: it focuses on the ethical screening of candidates, their appropriate placement and the development of trust in delegating duties, all basic principles of human resource management today. This is a reminder that careful consideration should be given before selection. Only after assessment and selection of the individual, the organization should be absolutely sure of them and entrust them with the tasks.

Leadership: Qualities of an Effective Leader

According to management experts, leadership is not just a job, it is a collection of traits that makes a person a leader. A managing director is responsible for ensuring that the activities of employees are supervised and also set an example for them. Leadership is built on trustworthiness, approachability, effective communication and the ability to motivate others (Northouse, 2019). A good leader sets an example, instills confidence and commitment in team members. Thiruvalluvar's Thirukkural prescribes these basic leadership traits in a few illuminating couplets:

அஞ்சாமை ஈகை அறிவுஊக்கம் இந்நான்கும்

எஞ்சாமை வேந்தற்கு இயல்பு (குறள் 382)

Courage, charity, wisdom, and enthusiasm—”

These are the four virtues which are always and everywhere the best qualities of a ruler.”

தூங்காமை கல்வி துணிவுடைமை இம்மூன்றும்

நீங்கா நிலன்ஆள் பவர்க்கு (குறள் 383)

Wakefulness, learning, and boldness, —”

The three never abandon a true leader.”

காட்சிக்கு எளியன் கடுஞ்சொல்லன் அல்லனேல்

மீக்கூறும் மன்னன் நிலம் (குறள் 386)

If a ruler is approachable and is not severe on his tongue,

In his kingdom they will grow prosperous.”

These couplets highlight the need for a leader to be courageous, generous, wise, enthusiastic, diligent and never-ending in learning. Another important factor is that they are approachable and friendly in their communication, establishing good business relationships and creating trust. The Thirukkural, therefore, offers a complete view of leadership which is similar to the principles of modern management and emphasizes that good leadership involves both moral rectitude and good sense.

Coordinating: Unity and Harmonious Function

Coordination is one of the important managerial functions necessary to bring all the members of an organisation into action for the achievement of its goal. One of the responsibilities of a managing director is to ensure that everyone in his team feels aligned with each other and is directed by him in such a way that no conflict and no division happens as it can weaken the team. If it can be understood what employees require, and what their needs are in relation to the organization,

functioning and continued growth can be achieved. Thiruvalluvar's Thirukkural speaks about the value of the companionship of a capable and wise person (Kural 462), suggesting that collaboration with a knowledgeable and skilled associate is important. Positive relationships between a leader and competent staff supports understanding and coordination of work within the organisation. Thiruvalluvar further explains:

பொதுநோக்கான் வேந்தன் வரிசையா நோக்கின்

அதுநோக்கி வாழ்வார் பலர் (குறள் 528)

“If a ruler can make a judgment with discernment and not uniformity,
Under his rule many will thrive.

The moral of this couplet is that employees should not be treated alike but according to their skills and merits. Identifying and rewarding talent helps motivate and retain people while failing to appreciate and reward the talent can result in discontent and employee attrition. Sinthanai kavnagar Kavithasan has said: “If a manager, instead of treating all employees in the office at the same level, pays attention to each according to their abilities, the office will function very efficiently. On the contrary, if everyone is treated equally, those who have exceptional ability to perform will leave the manager.” (Kavidasan. (2026).) Therefore, the managing director needed to coordinate various functions, keep the various departments in harmony and ensure that each individual member functions at his best to achieve the success of the organisation. “United we stand, divided we fall” is the mantra that Subramania Bharathi has stressed upon.

Reporting: Communication and Accountability

Reporting is another important management function as it allows accurate and timely information to be disseminated within the organization. Assistants and subordinates are an important part of the chain in ensuring that facts, events and developments are conveyed to the managing director which enable a decision to be made. In the following couplet Thiruvalluvar emphasizes this responsibility:

தெரிதலும் தேர்ந்து செயலும் ஒருதலையாச்

சொல்லலும் வல்லது அமைச்சு (குறள் 634)

“To investigate, to act with discernment and to communicate clearly and decisively-These are the duties of a minister.”

This lesson reminds us that it is essential to be well understood, precise and directive in our communication. In the modern organizational setting, it means that the reports must be accurate, well studied and well-presented. Similarly, a managing director should make sure that the operation and activities of the organization are communicated clearly to the higher-ups. Therefore, reporting, as described in the Thirukkural is a function based on truth, clarity and responsibility, which are still essential in modern management.

Budgeting

Financial management is one of the most important components of management in the field of management. The organization should have a way to generate revenue, to collect enough money to pay for the bills and to spend it properly using a planned approach. In other words, a managing director must ensure that spending is in line with income and that all financial moves are in the direction of company growth (Brigham & Ehrhardt, 2016). Thiruvalluvar speaks this principle quite clearly:

இயற்றலும் ஈட்டலும் காத்தலும் காத்த

வகுத்தலும் வல்லது அரசு. (குறள்.385)

“To earn, to save, to protect, and to allocate wisely —

These four make a true government.” (Kural 385)

அளவறிந்து வாழாதான் வாழ்க்கை உளபோல

இல்லாகித் தோன்றக் கெடும்.

(குறள்.479)

Let him who lives without measure,

He appears to be alive, but will soon die.” (Kural 479)

A balanced financial planning and good budgeting is the only way to make progress and to prosper whether it is a country, a family or a company.

வாரி பெருக்கி வளம்படுத்து உற்றவை

ஆராய்வான் செய்க வினை.

(Kural 512)

In other words, Thiruvalluvar is saying that if someone can find more income sources, more resources and clear away obstacles, then that person is a capable leader, which are efficient managing director attributes. Not only individuals, but also organizations are subject to this principle. Honesty, non-injury, restraint from anger and non-covetousness must be the basis of the culture of an institution and the way employees behave. Such virtues are related to the contemporary management principles of transparency, integrity and employee welfare. Thirukkural is very emphatic that leadership based on values is key to long-term success.

Time Management and Leadership

The present day is a day of science. Hence the success of an organization relies on its workers' value and management of time more or less efficiently. A managing director has to have the foresight to act fast when the appropriate time presents itself to ensure the organization's growth. Thiruvalluvar conveys this thought through the metaphor of “the stork strikes when the time is right” and in Kural 482 — “Act in time.” He conveys the message that when right action is taken at the appropriate time, the richness of the organization is maintained and continues.

Conclusion

The Thirukkural (Book of Wealth), especially its chapters on Government, Ministry, Fortification, Wealth Acquisition, Decision-Making, Execution, and Diplomacy, are quite similar in content with the basic tenets of management. In the same way, the Arathuppaal (Book of Virtue) and Inbathuppaal (Book of Love) have other themes like Wisdom, Enthusiasm, Perseverance etc which give very deep knowledge about modern managerial ethics and managerial qualities.

For example Thiruvalluvar says:

சிதைவிடத்து ஒல்கார் உரவோர் புதைஅம்பின்

பட்டுப்பாடு ஊன்றும் களிறு

(குறள் 597)

Though shot in all directions with arrows the elephant does not back down from battle. The meaning of this couplet is that an elephant can withstand arrows thrown at them, but a strong leader must have resilience and bravery in the face of challenges. Thus, Thiruvalluvar stresses that it is the duty of great leadership to have firm determination even in difficult times. This insight is very applicable today in the corporate world, where executives allocate a significant amount of resources to maintain and grow their businesses. Thiruvalluvar's Thirukkural contains a collection of principles which are fundamental to organizational success and which have been developed by many management scholars today. The Thirukkural is not just an ethical text or a literary work, it is a universal guide on how to manage things and provide universal time tested wisdom to those who are pursuing some of the most modern branches of study like Business Administration (B.B.M.) and Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.). The study hence concludes that Thirukkural is not just a product of the intellectual legacy of the Tamil people but contributes greatly and can be seen to be a contribution of lasting value to management thought across the world.

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