Understanding Man-management and managerial skills as in the Tamil Classic “Tirukkuṟaḷ”

Dr V. Chandrasekar

Abstract

In this article, we are interested to look into the suggestions made by an ancient saint-poet of Tamil Nadu, namely, Tiruvaḷḷuvar (whose work, Tirukkuṟaḷ, is considered to be a universal canon - ulaga podumaṟai). This attempt is made in line with the exhortation made by Bhagawad Gita, the holy text of the Hindus, Guru Granth Sahib, the holy text of Sikhism; alongside the pronouncements of Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and that the core competence should guide any development. The wealth of spirituality with its emphasis on human values is the core competence of India. Hence I have tried to see if anything can be suggested from an ancient text, namely, Tirukkuṟaḷ. It is to be noted that this attempt is a thematic appraisal of some of the couplets from that work (out of the 1330 couplets) as Tiruvaḷḷuvar has suggested these to the common man and to the ruler with respect to identifying the right act, planning, coordination, execution and management. The most important aspect of management is man-management and that is taken us so as to result in better utilisation of the resources on hand (be it the economic backing or the skills of the person involved). In this attempt, we try to look into the suggestions given by the Tirukkuṟaḷ on managerial aspects of planning, coordination and execution with an eye on human values for the betterment of the organisation and also those who contribute to the organisation.

Keywords: Tiruvaḷḷuvar, Tamil Nadu, human values, purification of emotions,

1 Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda College (Autonomous), Mylapore, Chennai – 600 004.
Introduction

The paper begins with the words of Swami Vivekananda that everything external should be conducted through internal spirituality for enduring effectiveness. This can be extended to the field of management also today. The Bhagavad Gita, Guru Granth Sahib, Rabindranath Tagore also have spoken on similar lines. In other words, any development should be commensurate with its core competence. Now, what is the core competence of India? The wealth of spirituality with its boundless values is the core competence of India. The values include frugality, sincerity, humility, etc., - called human values - and these depend on three core values, namely intuitive wisdom, the inwardness of mind and purification of emotions – diagrammatically represented thus by S.K. Chakraborty –

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\begin{align*}
\text{India’s core competence} & \\
\text{ANTARRSRDRSTI} & \quad \text{(Intuitive wisdom)} \\
\text{ANTARMUKHITA} & \quad \text{(Inwardness of mind)} \\
\text{ANTARŚUDDHI} & \quad \text{(Purification of emotions)}
\end{align*}
\]

The 80’s and ’90s of the previous century awakened, to a certain extent, to the need to indigenize the outlook in management. Similarly, Gandhi, Tagore, Vivekananda, Aurobindo and several others epitomised this outlook in their thoughts. One such towering personality in ancient Tamil literature and culture is Thiruvalḷuvar.

Suggestions from Tirukkuṟaḷ:

Thiruvalḷuvar is a celebrated Tamil poet who wrote the Thirukkuṟaḷ. This Tamil work of wise sayings is on ethics and it is very much practical. It teaches that man should not leave the family or become a sannyasin in order to lead a divine life of purity and sanctity. For instance,
Kural 280 suggests that “there is no need of a shaven crown, nor of tangled hair, if a man abstain from those deed which the wise have condemned”

Mazhitthalam nittalam vendu ulakam
Pazhitthathu oziththu viitin

This work is universal in approach and hence called ulaga podhu marai (the world’s common scripture). An important feature of this book is that it does not advocate any specific religion then prevalent in India – Hinduism, Jainism or Buddhism. On the other hand, it expounds various aspects of life. Thirukkural is a collection of 1330 Tamil couplets organized into 133 chapters under 3 sections. Each chapter consists of 10 Kural and has a specific subject ranging from “ploughing a piece of land” to “ruling a country”. The three sections are:

- arathuppal – on law/virtue (dharma) – deals with good ethical behavior with conscience and honour
- porupal – on wealth/politics (artha) – deals with the right manner of conducting worldly affairs
- kama – on desire/love (kama) – dealing with love between man and woman.

Though a very old text, Thirukkural, nevertheless offers new insights pertaining to the times. True to this tendency, one can recognize various gems of wisdom from this text addressing the present-day management requirements. Management can be understood as the art of getting the desired work from its people or as synchronizing the contribution of one and all working in a concern with similar objectives. If that be the case, what are the essential skills needed? Some have identified it as planning, worker’s participation or involvement, the administration that involves controlling, coordinating etc. A point to be remembered here is that the great saint-poet Thiruvaalvar has dealt with these in his own way. A thematic presentation of these views will definitely showcase the contribution of Thirukkural.

**Thirukkuṟaḷ on Planning**

eninthuṇiga karumam; thuinthapin
enнуvam enpathu izhukku

Consider, and then undertake a matter; after having undertaken it, to say “We will consider,” is folly.

Here, Thiruvaalvar speaks of the need for administering care in the selection of a job and also the need for the proper execution of the same without hesitation. This is a very important aspect of planning that has been well pointed out by Thiruvaalvar not only here but also in Kural 470 –

elātha eninic seyalvēntum thammōtu
kollātha kollāthu ulagu
Let a man reflect, and do things which bring no reproach; the world will not approve, with him, of things which do not become of his position to adopt.

Kurāḷ 468 suggests

அறிவிட்டத் குற்றங்கள் நேர்கையான மனைக்கு
Arrin varunthā varuṇtham palarninru
சொன்னதைமை விளக்க தந்து
Pōrūnum poththap patum

The work, which is not done by suitable methods, will fail though many stand to uphold it.

Tiruvaḷḷuvar gives one more suggestion in regard to this and that pertains to identifying the criteria for determining the right act by us.

உரு இரண்டு பெய்யாமாக பெய்யாமாக உட்கோவும்
Enru enru iranguva seyyaṅka seyyānel
மாத்தற்றால் யான்கண் படின்
Maṭṭu Anna seyyāmai Nanṟu - 655

Do not indulge in a world which will cause you to repent later. However, he quickly adds that we should not repeat that mistake if we had committed it already.

These couplets suggest that Thiruvaḷḷuvar (i) not only speaks of selection and execution (ii) but also the way in which the work has been selected and executed. Thus he does not stay contented with suggesting what is to be selected and what is to be executed but also highlights the need for a proper method to be used both in the selection and in execution. This is where man-management comes into focus.

Another significant contribution of the Tirukkurāḷ that could be read alongside the preceding couplets is the one that highlights the result of the possession of wealth in the hands of the benevolent.

மாத்தற்றால் பெல் பெல் மாத்தற்றால் பெல்
Marunthākith thappā māṭṭharṟal selva
ணுவெங்கினை மாத்தற்றால் பெல்
Perunthagai yānkaṇpatin - 217

This couplet means that wealth in the hands of the benevolent (good-hearted) soul is compared to the herbal tree that helps to heal one and all. Similarly, the administration (including planning, execution and coordination with workers) should be in the hands of the right person. But, who is the right person? How to identify the right person? Are there any criteria for identifying the right person? A deeper analysis of the Tirukkurāḷ gives answers to these questions by its suggestion for instilling some human values in human beings. Kurāḷ 501 is an eyeopener in this regard and it is brought out in the next section.
Tirukkural on Worker’s participation/involvement of workers

There will be many departments in an organization. So, the organization will require the right person for the right job and the right manner of executing the job. In this situation, the management cannot stay quiet after selecting the right man for the right job; the management will also have to hone the skills of the people through proper training. When once all these are done, it should not revert to stage 1 to see if the selection has been done correctly. Thus, Thiruvalluvar insists on a proper method of selecting the correct man for the correct job and at the same time, with an eye on the outcome for the organisation10. The reason for this is well brought out in the couplet 507 quoted a few pages from here. It is true that all people are capable of doing all works in this world but it is essential for the management to identify the unique talents innate in every individual. What is the benefit here and who benefits here? It is both the management and the individual who benefit from this. That is, it brings out the individual’s unique talent, on the one hand, and the execution of the work (from the management’s point of view) highlights the utmost perfection that has gone into it. A manager should remember that he should not repose faith in an individual just because he knows the other or that the other is his relative or friend. Instead, he should explore and ascertain to himself if the person can do the job in the right way befitting his potential and also act in line with the goals of the institution. He says in Kural 509 –

Thērākka yāraiyum thērāthu thērthapin
Thēlukka thēr̄ap porul*

Let (a king) choose no one without previous consideration; after he has made his choice, let him unhesitatingly select for each such duties as are appropriate.

Next are the major management techniques, that is, the proper utilization of the worker potential after the identification of the right man for the right job. Thus this requirement can be divided into two: (i) identification of the potential and (ii) utilization of the available potential. The manager and his subordinates are two inseparable units of management. How the manager selects and executes jobs with his people is very significant. It assumes more meaning as it involves the need for instilling some human values too. Saint poet Thiruvalluvar gives some clues (of course for a King) that can be adopted here:

Aram porul* inpam uyiraccam nānkin
Thirantherinthu thērap paṭum — 501

Let (a minister) be chosen, after he has been tried by means of these four things, viz., his virtue, (love of) money, (love of) sexual pleasure, and fear of (losing) life.

Kural 502 says –

Kutippiranthu kurāththi nēngi vaṭuppariyum
nānutāiyān kattṭe theṭivu
(The king's) choice should (fall) on him, who is of good family, who is free from faults, and who has the modesty which fears the wounds (of sin).

While these two couplets speak of selection, there are others that speak of the method of execution of jobs after entrusting it with the subordinate. Today, every organization has training programmes both for the fresher and for those who are serving (like orientation programmes and refresher programmes). These programmes help the management in identifying the attitude of its employee and allocate work accordingly. These help the subordinate to identify his weak points for rectification. The onus is on the management for allocating the jobs and getting it done in the best possible way. Thiruvalluvar has said –

இதனை என்று முடிக்கும் என்றாய்த்து
Ithanai ithanān ivanmuṭikkuṁ enrānthu
இதனை அவன்கேளி விளங்கும்
Ithanai avankaṇṭai viḻāl – 517

Having considered what work a man is fit for, let (the king) employ him in that work. (the management has to allocate work based on the talent and attitude of the employee).

Thus the management should monitor the job done for the sake of maintaining the integrity of the organization and the welfare of its employee. It should rather refrain from interfering in the methodology of the work. In the same way, the work should not be entrusted based on favour. The management should strictly look for the (unique) skill of the person as also the method by which he executes the work in line with the requirement of the job and the organization. There should be no consideration beyond this apart from looking into the values of the person engaged in the work. Today’s management looks not merely at the skills of the person but also gives importance to the values attached in the execution of work. There is no one who is perfect in this world. On closer analysis, it can be found that there are faults with everyone. What should be done in that situation. Thiruvalluvar comes to the rescue once again.

தன் கூட்டத் குக்கரம் நடி ஆவர்கள்
kuṇam nāṭik kūgramum nāṭi avarrūḷ
மிகை நடி மிக்க கோளம்
Mikai nāṭi mikka koḷal - 504

Let (a king) consider (a man's) good qualities, as well as his faults, and then judge (of his character) by that which prevails.

One important point has been addressed by the poet in the couplet quoted above and that relates to the presence of good and bad in man today. The King (according to the text) or the management (in today’s context) should consider the overall nature of man, weigh the good and the bad and then take a decision based on that. Another important exhortation of the Tirukkuṟaḷ that is more relevant in today’s context is Kūṟaḷ 507 which lays down an important guideline in the selection process. It says that the selection process should be transparent and free of nepotism. The couplet is:
In other words, the saint-poet suggests that one should not be selected just because he is familiar. This kind of selection might result in danger if that person is not good at the job. Hence, care should be taken to select only those who are capable of the job and not otherwise. These facts have been reiterated here as it leads to the next aspect of management, namely, administration.

Tirukkural on administration

The well-being of an organization, no doubt, depends on the identification of the person as well as the execution of the work by that person. It also depends on good governance. This again relies on sharing of duties and responsibilities (or delegation of power, in modern terminology) and controlling and coordinating. It is not necessary (as has been pointed out earlier) for the management to interfere and control every action of its worker. On the other hand, it should not hesitate to keep track of the work done to see how effectively the worker has performed. Hence all corporate institutions now have appraisal meetings which help them to put their work in proper perspective. This can be called control and coordination. Kural 520 states –

Nāṭorum nāṭuka mannan vinaişeyvān
Kōṭāmai kōṭā thulaku – 520

Let a king daily examine the conduct of his servants; if they do not act crookedly, the world will not act crookedly.

It suggests that the management should constantly monitor the worker and his actions. While talking of control, the Kural also talks of sharing the responsibility as in Kural 527 –

Kākkai karavā karainthuṇṇum ākkamum
Annanī rārkkaï ula

The crows do not conceal (their prey), but will call out for others (to share with them) while they eat it; wealth will be with those who show a similar disposition (towards their relatives).

This kurāl should be read along with the one that speaks of the action down by a benevolent person, namely, kurāl 217 cited earlier.

Thus, Thiruvalluvar simultaneously shows the importance of control and also reveals the need for sharing. Notwithstanding these, Thiruvalluvar has also highlighted when one should be restrained and when one should act. Kural 490 states –
At the time when one should use self-control, let him restrain himself like a heron; and, let him like it, strike, when there is a favourable opportunity.

That is, wait like a crane before embarking on a job. Nevertheless, having decided to take the plunge, wait for the opportune moment, says Thiruvalluvar (new arrivals during festival occasions, the new variety of stationery, shoe, uniform material etc at the time of school reopening, embarking on a new launch or up-gradation etc can be cited here as examples). In addition to this, one must also ensure that he works unhesitatingly towards the goal in the face of suffering too.

Though it should cause increasing sorrow (at the outset), do with firmness the act that yields bliss (in the end)

Having realized that an act will finally result in the good of the organization and the individuals working for it, intermediate sufferings should not deter it. Thus, Thiruvalluvar speaks of steadfastness here and therefore most of the concepts gaining supremacy in today’s management techniques are found in his famous work (though in an unhthematic manner). In conclusion, it must be remembered that whatever Thiruvalluvar has said for a king is applicable in today’s context, to management and managerial skills. This should highlight the importance of the contribution made by Thiruvalluvar in the field of management.

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2. Tirukkuṟaḷ with English Translation by Yogi Shuddhananda Bharati is taken from http://pm.tamil.net/pub/pm0017/pm0017.pdf on 30-08-2010 at 7.55 pm
Notes and References

i If you want to bear fruits, you have to reach for the roots, said the Guru Granth Sahib; swadharne nidhanam shreya, parodharma bhayavaha (it is desirable to follow one’s own law of being even it if may bring death, for another’s law of being is surely perilous), says the Bhagawad Gita. Rabindranath Tagore ‘We in the east have had to arrive at our own solution of the problem of life’; and warned that ‘artificial uniformity leads to lifelessness’. Japan, China, Korea, Thailand, Malaysia can be cited here as examples.

ii S K Chakraborty, The Management and Ethics Omnibus, p. xiii

iii The couplets and translations have been referred from G U Pope’s translation of the Tirukkural and Kaviyogi Shuddhananda Bharati

iv This view should be looked at only in respect of division of labour based on one’s skill and not misunderstood in any other way

v a spark of communism in his own way, we can say

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