

Reconceptualising Leadership through the Indian Knowledge System: Dharma-Based Leadership as an Indigenous Model

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is an ecological form of epistemological tradition that incorporates into one system of evaluation ethics, action, self-regulation and social responsibility as the conditions of a prosperous life on an individual and social level. Although IKS has been studied extensively in philosophy, education, sustainability, and governance, its use in the theory of leadership is still disjointed and under-theorised. In this research, the conceptualisation of Dharma-Based Leadership is developed as a native leadership construct within IKS that is based on Dharma, Karma Yoga, Seva, Svadharma, Lokasangraha, and Trusteeship as some of its principles. The present study provides a conceptual model of Dharma-Based Leadership as a normative and values-oriented model of leadership in opposition to Western instrumental leadership through a systematic review of classical Indian literature and modern academic research on the topic of IKS, ethics, and leadership. The review shows the combination of inner self-discipline with outer social responsibility in Dharma-Based Leadership, which provides a culturally fitting system of ethical governance, stakeholder orientation and sustainable leadership. Theoretically placing Dharma-Based Leadership within IKS, the present study will advance the body of indigenous management and form a basis for future empirical work in the field of leadership, governance, and sustainability, especially in the context of new economies like India.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System (IKS), Dharma-Based Leadership, Karma Yoga, Svadharma, Lokasangraha.

Introduction

Western study traditions based on epistemological paradigms (individual agency, performance optimisation, and instrumental rationality) have historically dominated the field of leadership scholarship. Even though the methods have improved management science, there has been more concern with their universal applicability, especially when the culture and ethical issues are involved in the management of culturally diverse and ethically complex situations (Tsui, 2007; House et al., 2004). This has resulted in the increasing academic interest in indigenous knowledge systems as alternative sources of leadership insight that bring ethics, social responsibility, and sustainability into the leadership practice.

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is one of the most ancient knowledge systems of the world, which is a comprehensive system of civilisational knowledge, covering the fields of philosophy, governance, education, ethics, sustainability, and social organisation. It is based on the texts including the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Arthashastra, Ramayana, and Mahabharata, which are grounded on the principles of Dharma (moral order), Karma (action and consequence), Rta (cosmic

balance), Ahimsa (non-harm), Satya (truth) and Lokasangraha (collective welfare). In contrast to the fractured contemporary knowledge systems, IKS is a holistic and integrative knowledge regime, in which knowledge, action, and ethics cannot be separated (Ranganathan, 2020; Nath, 2024). More recent policy measures, including the recent National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the official institutionalisation of IKS into Indian higher education, have revived academic interest in transferring this body of knowledge to new areas, one of which is leadership and management.

The concept of leadership in this epistemology does not have the meaning of authority and control but that of moral responsibility (kartavya) to people, institutions, society, and nature. It is based on this understanding that Dharma-Based Leadership is an indigenous approach of leadership based on the ethical and philosophical grounding of IKS. Dharma-Based Leadership can be understood as a leadership based on dharma where leaders execute their role-based obligations in an ethical manner and with self-discipline, service-oriented, and committed to the welfare of the collective, but are independent of egos or short-term benefits. Instead of letting the outcome be the main focus, Dharma-Based Leadership observes the right of action, the moral authority of power, and the sustainability of a decision.

Some of the major IKS principles that are used in Dharma-Based Leadership include Svadharma (ethical duty acting in role), Karma Yoga (selfless action), Seva (service), Lokasangraha (wellbeing of stakeholders), Satya-Ahimsa (truth and non-harm), Samatva (equanimity), and Trusteeship (stewardship of resources). All these principles combine the inner self-regulation and the outer governance, resulting in a leadership approach that is performance-ethical, service-authoritative, and growth-responsible. Although elements of Dharma-Based Leadership are reminiscent of modern theories like the idea of ethical leadership, servant leadership, and sustainable leadership, its philosophical foundation in IKS is conceptually differentiated and culturally entrenched, instead of a cultural adaptation of Western theories.

Although IKS is increasingly becoming a prominent field of knowledge in education, policy education, and sustainability research, the concept of leadership has not been adequately theorised in this line of knowledge. The available literature is more likely to focus on Dharma, ethics and sustainability separately, without creating a coherent model of leadership based on IKS. The present study theorises Dharma-Based Leadership as a fundamental element of the Indian Knowledge System, providing a systematic theoretical statement of its dimensions, mechanisms, and results. The present study also contributes towards the indigenous leadership theory, answers the demands of culturally based management research, and offers a normative basis of ethical and sustainable leadership in modern organisations.

Literature Review

• **Indian Knowledge System (IKS): Philosophical and Applied Foundations**

IKS has been said to be a comprehensive and integrative knowledge system that unites material, ethical, and spiritual aspects of human existence (Ranganathan, 2020; Nath, 2024). In contradiction to the compartmentalised contemporary knowledge system, IKS foster the interrelationship between the individual, society, and nature based on the principles of Rta (cosmic order), Dharma (righteous conduct), and Ahimsa (non-harm). IKS offers viable models in managing modern problems like environmental degradation, environmental crises, global warming, and social fragmentation (Nath, 2024).

Recent research has widened the definition of IKS to non-philosophical fields, such as education (Thapliyal, 2023), sustainability (Sharma&Mishra, 2021), governance (Mehrotra, 2025), and public policy (Mandavkar, 2023). Leadership is not always developed as a theoretical construct, but it is usually implicit in these discussions. This generates a possibility of extrapolating IKS to leadership theory in a systematised conceptualisation.

• **Dharma as the Moral Nucleus of Leadership**

Dharma is also a key concept in Indian thinking as it defines moral duty, social responsibility, and righteous behaviour (Chakrabarti, 2018). The concept of Dharma in the context of leadership refers to role-based ethical responsibility (Svadharma) instead of adherence to general rules. The research on Dharma and governance demonstrates that leadership in Indian cultures is based on ethical behaviour and social service rather than authority and power (Mehrotra, 2025).

However, recent studies on leadership have started to connect Dharma with the ethical decisions and sustainability results (Sharma & Mishra, 2021; Biswas, 2022), but they are dispersed across other fields. A lack of a cohesive leadership structure that is based on Dharma is an important theoretical void.

- **Karma Yoga and Ethical Leadership, which is Action-oriented**

Karma Yoga is a teaching in the Bhagavad Gita, which focuses on doing without the desire for a result (Nishkama Karma). It has also become more relevant to leadership scholars as a means of making ethical choices, being resilient, and having a long-term orientation. Other studies interconnect Karma Yoga with less unethical behaviour and better quality of governance, where Simpson (2021) suggested the Gita-inspired leadership model emphasising self-regulation and duty-oriented action, while other studies link Karma Yoga to reduced unethical behaviour and improved governance quality (Kumar & Rao, 2022). In IKS, Karma Yoga converts the outcome-obsession idea of leadership to a process of righteousness, providing a philosophy of responsible leadership in unstable and complicated situations.

- **Seva, Servant Leadership and Social Responsibility**

Leadership is service to others and not domination, since the principle of Seva (selfless service) applies. Servant leadership is widely researched in the Western literature (Greenleaf, 1977), but Indian literature demonstrates that Seva is not new and merely builds this principle by making service a part and parcel of the moral obligation and the common good (Ranganathan, 2020). Research in Indian companies has shown that service-based leadership promotes trust, staff comfort, and social legitimacy (Sinha, 2022). Dharma-Based Leadership incorporates Seva as a principle of leadership, which identifies leadership with social sustainability and stakeholder governance.

- **Lokasangraha and Stakeholder Orientation**

The social dimension of leadership in IKS is the concept of Lokasangraha, which refers to being an agent of the societal good. It predicts the contemporary stakeholder theory by placing the leaders as the keepers of collective welfare instead of profit maximisers (Sharma & Mishra, 2021). The recent ESG literature puts more stress on stakeholder value, but it does not have a moral-philosophical basis. Dharma-Based Leadership bridges this gap by basing stakeholder orientation on IKS ethics and not strategic compliance.

- **Trusteeship, Sustainability and Ethical Governance**

The Gandhian trusteeship that is based on the ethics of IKS considers that leaders are custodians of resources entrusted to them by society. Empirical research demonstrates that leadership that is stewardship-oriented increases long-term organisational performance and sustainability (Mehrotra, 2025). This would put Dharma-Based Leadership at the same level as modern sustainability and ESG conversations and keep the indigenous philosophical foundation.

Components of Dharma-Based Leadership within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS)

In the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), leadership is viewed as a moral-social obligation based on Dharma but not as a management practice. The list of elements below consists of the basic dimensions of Dharma-Based Leadership, based on the Indian philosophical traditions and modern IKS research. These elements together combine inner self-discipline with external social responsibility, which makes Dharma-Based Leadership a comprehensive indigenous leadership model.

- **Svadharmā (Role-Based Ethical Responsibility)**

Svadharmā is the ethical responsibility that is based on the position, ability and role. IKS is always primarily focused on the fact that ethical conduct is functional and relative, and not abstract and universal (Chakrabarti, 2018; Nath, 2024). The Indian tradition of leadership is therefore measured through the loyal performance of the role-based responsibility and not by the results.

In the Dharma-Based Leadership, Svadharmā means that there is a unique ethical responsibility associated with every head role. Leaders have a role to play based on the expectations of institutions and society. Ethical failure has been defined as taking the wrong path instead of breaking a rule. This is particularly applicable in the context of India, where leadership is incorporated in the social, familial, and institutional functions. Svadharmā, therefore, makes Dharma-Based Leadership have a context-sensitive logic of governance, unlike the universalised logical models of leadership.

- **Karma yoga (Action without Attachment)**

Karma Yoga, which is the focus of the Bhagavad Gita, focuses on effortful action that is not linked to personal gain. The modern IKS literature views Karma Yoga as a principle of ethical resilience and long-term orientation, especially applicable to the situation in the environment of a complex decision (Simpson, 2021; Nath, 2024).

Karma Yoga acts as the business engine of leadership in Dharma-Based Leadership, as leaders are more concerned with the ethical process and not with personal gain. Duty (kartavya) and integrity give direction to decision-making, and leaders are responsible and free of ego and obsession with results. This puts leadership in the place of maximising performance to process righteousness, and this makes Dharma-Based Leadership consistent with responsible governance and sustainable leadership.

- **Lokasangraha (Leadership to the common good)**

Lokasangraha is doing well for the society and its unity. According to IKS scholars, this is the social purpose of everything, and leadership is associated with harmony in society and ecological balance (Sharma & Mishra, 2021; Nath, 2024).

In Dharma-Based Leadership, organisations are perceived as social institutions. Leadership choices are rated based on the impact on society and the environment, while profit is not considered as an end but as a means. Dharma-Based Leadership is consistent with stakeholder theory and ESG models, although Lokasangraha has a moral justification that sets it apart from instrumental models of sustainability.

- **Seva (Service-Oriented Leadership)**

Seva means that we serve others without returning favour. Unlike servant leadership in the West, Seva in IKS is a leadership duty based on dharma and not a leadership style (Ranganathan, 2020). Dharma-Based Leadership integrates Seva by placing leaders as guardians and not as dictators, giving a priority to employee dignity and the welfare of the community, and integrating compassion in governance. The empirical research in the Indian context links the service-oriented leadership with trust, inclusion, and legitimacy (Sinha, 2022). Seva, therefore, is the basis of Dharma-Based Leadership.

- **Satya and Ahimsa (Ethical Boundaries of Leadership)**

The ethical limit in which leadership power should be exercised is Satya (truthfulness) and Ahimsa (non-harm). The literature on IKS points out these principles as being crucial in sustainable governance and social trust (Nath, 2024; Mehrotra, 2025). In Dharma-Based Leadership, Satya will guarantee transparency, honesty, and ethical reporting, while Ahimsa focus on non-harm of psychology, social, and the environment. Moral conduct is an important factor of Satya and Ahimsa reshaping Dharma-Based Leadership. These values strengthen the Dharma-Based Leadership governance and integrity aspect, which is not an aspect of compliance but an aspect of ethical leadership.

- **Samatva (Equanimity and Emotional Balance)**

Samatva is the state of emotional level of success and failure. IKS sees self-regulation as a critical tool to wise action, especially when one is in authority. Nath (2024) and Simpson (2021) point out that emotional discipline makes it possible to be ethically consistent and avoid making decisions on the spur of the moment.

In Dharma-Based Leadership, leaders develop stability within themselves, which helps to control their emotions for effective decisions. Samatva gives the psychological underpinning of Dharma-Based Leadership, the inner leadership and the outer responsibility.

- **Trusteeship (Tyaga and Stewardship of Resources)**

Trusteeship, which is based on IKS ethics and Gandhian philosophy, also considers leaders as custodians of wealth, power, and resources that are in trust of the society. According to the recent sustainability and governance research, the stewardship-focused leadership is associated with better long-term performance and ESG performance (Mehrotra, 2025).

In Dharma-Based Leadership, trusteeship implies abandoning self and self-indulgence (tyaga). This principle grounds Dharma-Based Leadership in the intergenerational sustainability and moral capitalism.

- **Sattva (Guna Theory and Inner Leadership Quality)**

IKS acknowledges leadership as an internal discipline that is regulated by the system of guna - sattva, rajas, and tamas. Dharma-Based Leadership encourages sattvic leadership, that is, being clear, wise, restrained, and compassionate (Simpson, 2021).

In Dharma-Based Leadership, Sattva enables moral transparency in decision-making, balanced ambition, and less corruption and exploitation. This dimension allows linking Dharma-Based Leadership to the studies on mindfulness and ethical leadership, but is still very close to the Indian philosophical psychology.

Implications of the Study

- **Theoretical Implications**

This research contributes to leadership and management theory in several ways.

First, it promotes theorising of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) by placing Dharma-Based Leadership in the position of indigenous leadership constructs as opposed to a philosophical abstraction. Whereas ethics, sustainability, and education have been given emphasis in past research about IKS, leadership is a concept that has been under-theorised. This analysis adapts IKS into the theory of organisational leadership by incorporating Svadharma, Karma Yoga, Seva, Lokasangraha, and other concepts in an integrated theory.

Second, the framework criticises the superiority of Western instrumental models of leadership with a normative, duty-based, and stakeholder-focused alternative. Dharma-Based Leadership contributes to the growing research in the field of indigenous management, demonstrating how leadership can be theorised within the framework of civilisational epistemology instead of adapting Western theories to cultural contexts.

Third, Dharma-Based Leadership enhances ethical, servant, and sustainable leadership literatures with a philosophical base of such constructs. Rather than seeing ethics and sustainability as management instruments, Dharma-Based Leadership entrenches them in dharma and moral responsibility and, therefore, further enriches their theory.

Lastly, the present study presents opportunities in multi-level research of leadership connecting inner self-regulation (samatva, sattva) with organisational regulation and overall societal performance, an area where leadership theory is largely deficient.

- **Practical Implications**

The suggested Dharma-Based Leadership framework provides practical knowledge to organisational leaders and managers that can be utilised in the context of India and other emerging economies.

To corporate leaders, Dharma-Based Leadership offers a values-based decision-making framework that assists in overcoming ethical dilemmas, sustainability trade-offs, and conflicts of interest. Karma Yoga, Svadharma and other principles make leaders pay attention to the integrity of the processes and the role they have, minimising short-termism and opportunistic behaviour.

To human resource management, it can be incorporated in the leadership development, performance appraisal and succession planning. Self-regulation (samatva), service orientation (seva), and stewardship (trusteeship) are some of the main competencies of leadership that can be included in the training programs.

In the case of governance and boards, Dharma-Based Leadership reinforces the ethical control and the long-term orientation. Board-level decision-making is guided by trusteeship and lokasangraha towards the value creation to stakeholders, environmental responsibility and intergenerational equity.

- **Policy Implications**

The research has significant policy implications for the people, education, and institutional leadership. The Dharma-Based Leadership framework is similar to NEP 2020 and national IKS projects, which provide a systematic approach to incorporating IKS into management education, civil service training, and leadership programs in the public sector. Dharma-Based Leadership presents a normative

model of leadership to governance reforms, ethical or moral policymaking, and sustainability initiatives to policymakers.

Svadharna and Lokasangraha (Dharma-Based Leadership) principles can be used in public administration to boost accountability, transparency, and citizen-centric governance, which would solve the problem of trust deficit in institutions. To regulatory bodies, Dharma-Based Leadership is offering a way to base ESG compliance and sustainability reporting on an ethical basis rather than checkbox frameworks and move instead to a morally-grounded governance.

- **Societal Implications**

On the societal level, Dharma-Based Leadership provides a model of leadership that fosters trust, harmony and sustainable development. Through instilling leadership into dharma, Dharma-Based Leadership assists in combating leadership crisis due to corruption, exploitation, and lack of moral engagement.

Non-harm (Ahimsa), service (Seva), and collective welfare (Lokasangraha) are promoted, which would inclusively grow, protecting the environment and social cohesion, thus Dharma-Based Leadership is especially applicable in the development of economies that are facing ethical and sustainability issues. The restoration of the connection between leadership and civilisational values also results in cultural continuity and intellectual self-reliance by Dharma-Based Leadership, which highlights the applicability of IKS in solving modern global issues.

Conclusion

The present study conceptualised Dharma-Based Leadership as a part of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), which provides an indigenous and values-based alternative to mainstream Western leadership paradigms. Through the combination of information in classical Indian literature on philosophy and recent studies on the Indian Kingdom, the present study has shown that leadership in the Indian tradition is essentially a moral and social duty based on dharma, not a positional or instrumental role. The discussion has established Dharma-Based Leadership as a logical leadership framework that incorporates ethical behaviours, duty-driven behaviour, self-control, and social interests in a single leadership concept at both organisational and societal levels.

The present study has defined and provided a detailed explanation of some of the fundamental elements of Dharma-Based Leadership, i.e., Svadharna, Karma Yoga, Seva, Lokasangraha, Satya-Ahimsa, Samatva, Trusteeship, and Sattva and has shown how these interventions can be applied to intersect IKS philosophy with practical leadership conduct. The combination of these dimensions helps leaders to find the balance between the inner self-discipline and the external governance, between the performance and ethics, between the authority and service, and growth and sustainability. The suggested conceptual framework shows that IKS is the backbone epistemology, Dharma-Based Leadership is the implementation mechanism of leadership, and ethical control, ESG performance and societal well-being are the outcomes.

Hypothesising that Dharma-Based Leadership is a formal aspect of IKS, the present study adds to the body of indigenous management, overcomes the cultural drawbacks of mainstream leadership theories, and suits the present-day expectations of ethical and sustainable leadership. The framework offers a normative ground to the leadership practice in Indian organisations and can be relevant in other contexts that want value-based and sustainability-oriented leadership models. In addition to that, the research also establishes a basis upon which empirical research, such as the development of scales, testing hypotheses and conducting longitudinal analysis of the effect of Dharma-Based Leadership on the outcomes of organisations and society, can be conducted in the future.

The rediscovery of IKS-based leadership principles and their implementation is timely and even necessary in an era when ethical failures, environmental crises, and decreased institutional trust are the norm. As well as providing the culturally based leadership model, Dharma-Based Leadership is a civilisational input into the leadership discourse worldwide, reestablishing the applicability of ancient wisdom in terms of modern organisational and societal issues.

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