

## INDIGENIZING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD GOVERNANCE IN THIRUKURAL FRAMEWORK

Madhusudanan.S\*

Dr. R.Nalini\*\*

### Abstract

This article indigenizes the characteristics of good governance with special reference to Thirukural. Thirukural a sacred Tamil literary classical text is taken to link with the characteristics of Good Governance outlined by UNDP. The couplets of Thirukural are linked, intertwined and superimposed with the definitions and explanations of the Good Governance characteristics given by UNESCO. This paper also argues for home-made social work and also calls for indigenization of social work theory and methods to local contexts.

**Key Words:** *social work, cultural competency, equity, indigenous knowledge, indigenization*

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\* Ph.D. Research Scholar (UGC-JRF), Department of Social Work, Pondicherry University, R.V Nagar, Kalapet, Puducherry 605014, India. Mob: +91 94421 32324

\*\* Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Pondicherry University, R.V Nagar, Kalapet, Puducherry 605014, India. Mob: +91 9489145171

## Introduction

The Global definition of social work approved by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) General Meeting and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) General Assembly in July 2014 (retrieved from <http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/> last accessed on November 24, 2014) defines “Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and *indigenous knowledge*, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” [my italics]. The commentary notes of the definition stated that the indigenous knowledge has been devalued, discounted and hegemonised by Western theories and knowledge. The acquisition of culturally specific knowledge, values and skills leads to an understanding of other perspectives and cultures which can then be used by the social worker to understand the client’s ‘cultural frame of reference’ (Clark 2000, as cited in Gray *et al.*, 2008). Nimmagadda & Cowger (as cited in Gray *et al.*, 2008) use the term indigenization to ‘reflect the process whereby a Western social work framework/or Western practice methodology is transplanted to another environment and applied in a different context by making modifications’. Resnick (1976) refers indigenization as the ‘process of relating social work function and education to the cultural, economic, political and social realities of a particular country’. Further indigenization involves understanding and articulating local indigenous resources, relationships, and problem-solving networks; and the underlying ideas, rationale, philosophies or values (Osei-Hwedie 1996, as cited in Gray *et al.*, 2008).

This article indigenizes the characteristics of good governance with special reference to Thirukural and for that purpose, the explanatory notes for good governance characteristics given by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (1997) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2005) are used by the author. Zvelebil, a noted scholar has said ‘Thirukural is a contribution of the Tamil creative genius Thiruvalluvar to the world cultural treasure and should be familiar to the whole world and admired and loved by all in the same way as the poems of Homer, the dramas of Shakespeare, the pictures of Rembrandt, the

cathedrals of France and the sculptures of Greece' (<http://www.classicaltamil.org/thirukural2005/Quotes%20on%20Kural.htm> last accessed on December 11, 2014). This article will facilitate the social workers to build their skills and cultural competency besides appreciating the cultural sensitivity in understanding the values engrained in the regional treasure trove of Thirukural.

### **Good Governance**

The term, 'good governance' was first mentioned in the World Bank's (1989) report: *Sub-Sahara Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth- a Long-Term Perspective Study* (Elahi, 2009). The World Bank defines governance thus 'governance consists of the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. This includes the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced; the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies; and the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them' (Kaufmann et al, 2008). Good governance, for the World Bank, is synonymous with sound development management (World Bank, 1992).

According to UNDP (1997) the result of good governance gives priority to poor, advances the cause of women, sustains the environment, and creates needed opportunities for employment and other livelihoods, whereas for International Monetary Fund (cited in Pradhan & Sanyal, 2011) good governance is in the form of rule of law, improving the efficiency and accountability of public sector and tackling corruption is the key for economic efficiency and growth. Former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan said 'Good governance is ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law; strengthening democracy; promoting transparency and capacity in public administration' (Weiss, 2000). It is a well-known fact that good governance is crucial for a nation's holistic development.

### **Characteristics of Good Governance**

UNDP (1997) outlines participation, consensus orientation, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, equity, rule of law and strategic vision as the major characteristics of good governance.

### **Characteristics of Good Governance in Thirukural**

The aforesaid characteristics are extensively addressed by Thiruvalluvar 2000 years ago. Being a great visionary he has spoken extensively on good governance under the section

Porutpal (of wealth) in Thirukural. While outlining what are good governance and its aspects, he has also delineated how a ruler should be and how he should treat his subjects.

The chapter fifty five, *the right sceptre* elucidates the facets of impartial rule. Couplet 390 extols the temperament of a king, 'He is the beacon of kings who has these four things, beneficence, benevolence, rectitude and care for his people'. On administration, Valluvar asserts, 'he who possesses these six things, an army, people, wealth, ministers, friends and a fortress, is a lion among kings' (Couplet 381). He questions that what fault could be found with that king, if a king eliminates his defects in the first place and later sees others' defects (couplet 436). Eliminating the defects in oneself (administrator) is the first stepping stone towards good governance.

Valluvar strikes a balance in affirming the adverse effects of bad governance in the chapter fifty six *the cruel sceptre*. He counsels that the country of the king who does not daily examine into the wrongs done and distribute justice, will daily fall to ruin (couplet 553). Though he devotes only one chapter to bad governance he makes it clear what a single drop of venom does to a pot of sweetened milk.

### 1. Participation

Participation by both men and women is a key cornerstone of good governance. Participation could be either direct or through legitimate intermediate institutions or representatives. It is important to point out that representative democracy does not necessarily mean that the concerns of the most vulnerable in society would be taken into consideration in decision making. Participation needs to be informed and organized. This means freedom of association and expression on the one hand and an organized civil society on the other hand (UNESCO, 2005). Valluvar in chapter fifty two *selection and employment* says that the proper course of action for a man who has undertaken a project is to obtain the opinion of the man who knows the project's intricacies (couplet 677) and he further adds that after having scrutinized and made sure that this person will do this job by these means, entrust that job and leave him to do it (couplet 517). In chapter forty seven *acting after due consideration* he says for him who acts after consultation with select associates and with due deliberations there is no unattainable objective (couplet 462). These couplets explain the characteristics of participation.

### 2. Consensus orientation

Good governance requires mediation of the different interests in society to reach a broad consensus in society on what is in the best interest of the whole community and how this can be achieved. It also requires a broad and long-term perspective on what is needed for sustainable human development and how to achieve the goals of such development. This can only result from an understanding of the historical, cultural and social contexts of a given society or community (UNESCO, 2005).

Valluvar says that there is nothing too difficult to be attained by those who, reflect before they act and thoroughly consider the matter with chosen friends (couplet 462). Analogizing the lofty chariots to ships, he says chariots with mighty wheels will not run on the ocean as the ships that traverse ocean, and ships will neither move on the earth (couplet 496). He also urges to consider well and then venture to do a thing; it is folly to say; 'we shall think about it after we have ventured on it'. In the couplet 637 Valluvar emphasizes on consensus 'even when a person knows the best text-book technique, let him act only after acquainting himself with the current worldly practice'. These couplets explain the importance of coming to a consensus before an action and the importance of place of activity.

### 3. Accountability

UNDP (1997) said that decision-makers in government, the private sector and civil society organisations are accountable to the public, as well as to institutional stakeholders. Valluvar says the king (in the present context it could be council of ministers) who dispenses justice to his people and affords them protection will be considered as God to his people (couplet 388). He also adds that a king should never admire himself and never favour a project unproductive of welfare to the people (couplet 439). This exemplifies the quality of accountability.

### 4. Transparency

According to UNESCO (2005) transparency means that decisions taken and their enforcement are done in a manner that follows rules and regulations. It also means that information is freely available and directly accessible to those who will be affected by such decisions and their enforcement. It also means that enough information is provided and that it is provided in easily understandable forms and media. Valluvar has subtly dealt with the concept of transparency in the chapter forty four *avoiding faults*; if a king is unblemished he would not incline to unjustifiable path and sway from justice. He adjudges that if a king is easily accessible

for his subjects and not a person of harsh words the world will speak highly of that king's dominion (couplet 386). A king who is blemished will not be transparent to his subjects.

### 5. Responsiveness

Good governance requires that institutions and processes try to serve all stakeholders within a reasonable timeframe (UNESCO, 2005). Valluvar warns 'he will perish who does what is not fit to do; and he also will perish who does not do what is fit to do' (couplet 466). Moreover he counsels to delay those deeds which may be delayed and delay not those which ought not to be delayed (couplet 672). These couplets explain how the king should be astute in carrying out the deeds to serve all his stakeholders.

### 6. Effectiveness and efficiency

Good governance means that processes and institutions produce results that meet the needs of society while making the best use of resources at their disposal (UNESCO, 2005). Thirukural talks about the effectiveness and efficiency in the chapters sixty '*energy*' and sixty one '*freedom from sloth*'. Valluvar affirms that laziness, procrastination, lack of vigilance, dozing form the raft coveted by those destined to perish (couplet 605). He also urges to eradicate laziness in oneself to become efficient.

### 7. Equity

A society's wellbeing depends on ensuring that all its members feel that they have a stake in it and do not feel excluded from the mainstream of society (UNESCO, 2005). Valluvar says a king should be able to acquire wealth, lay it up, guard the wealth, and to distribute it (couplet 385). This could be attributed to the government acquiring wealth through variety of means like exports, imports, laying income tax, and services and guarding the wealth, distributing to people through welfare schemes. He also says 'chief of all the virtues is sharing of food with others, and the preservation of the manifold life of other creatures' (couplet 322).

### 8. Rule of Law

UNESCO (2005) affirmed that good governance requires fair legal frameworks that are enforced impartially. It also requires full protection of human rights, particularly those of minorities. Impartial enforcement of laws requires an independent judiciary and an impartial and incorruptible police force. Valluvar urges that in the examination of the crimes and showing no favour to any one, acting impartially towards all, and inflicting punishments as may be wisely

resolved on, constitute righteousness (couplet 541). Further he says rain and plentiful crops will ever dwell together in the country of the king who rules his sceptre with justice (couplet 545).

### 9. Strategic vision

Leaders and the public have a broad and long-term perspective on good governance and human development, along with a sense of what is needed for such development (UNDP, 1997). The uniqueness of strategic vision is addressed in the chapters forty eight, forty nine, sixty seven and eight seven. Valluvar says let one weigh well the strength of the deed, his own strength, the strength of his enemy, and the strength of the allies, and then let him act (couplet 471). He also points out that to have a strategic vision one should always respect the realities of the world that though acquainted with the theoretical methods of performing an act understand the ways of the world and act accordingly (couplet 637).

### Conclusion

Culture is central to good social work practice and culturally appropriate practice calls for a critical and dialogical approach (Gray *et al.*, 2008). This paper comes closer to the 'home-made social work' as proposed by Crawford (1994) to some extent (as cited in Nimmagadda & Martell, 2008). Home-made social work views things from the client's social world. There are four essential ingredients to home-made social work: cultural authenticity, use of local knowledge, creativity and connectedness (Nimmagadda & Martell, 2008). The long awaited National Council of Professional Social Work in India Bill (1993) Chapter IV 'Functions of the Council' Section 10.10 advocates the *promotion of the production of indigenous literature in all the official languages of the country*. This paper linking the good governance characteristics with indigenous language 'Tamil' calls for indigenization of social work theory and methods to local contexts.

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