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The Timeless Wisdom of Vidura Niti: Relevance in Contemporary Corporate Social Responsibility Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into Vidura Niti, a segment of the ancient Indian epic Mahabharata written by Vedavyasa. The Vidura Niti portion is attributed to the counsel of Vidura, the Advisor-Minister & Half-Brother of King Dritarastra. Vidura's timeless counsel offers profound insights into ethical governance and social responsibilities. The focus is on translating and interpreting relevant portions of Vidura Niti to explore its enduring wisdom and its applicability in shaping a responsible and sustainable business philosophy through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). By comparing the principles of social responsibility in Vidura Niti with modern CSR, the article highlights the relevance of ancient wisdom in guiding contemporary CSR practices. Despite originating over 5200 years ago, Vidura's teachings prove remarkably pertinent to current CSR concepts, emphasizing the potential of ancient philosophies to expedite the refinement of modern practices, making CSR more purposeful, ethical, and sustainable.

Keywords: CSR; Vidura Niti; Mahabharata; Artha Shastra; The Companies Act

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INTRODUCTION

CSR is being institutionalised and its process is becoming more professional and effective. The concept of CSR though new, has roots which go back to the socialization process. However the conceptualization of responsibility and more so towards society on the part of those having power can be traced back to the early forms of literature. The underlying principle of responsible behaviour in CSR can be discovered in ancient Indian philosophy and codes of conduct. One such code is the Vidura Niti, which is an integral part of the world's longest epic Mahabharata written by Sage Vedavyasa somewhere around 5250 years ago. The main goal or purpose of the study is to discover specific codes, quotes, instructions and suggestions that are attributed to Vidura, the Minister-Advisor to King Dritharastra.

Vidura Niti, a collection of teachings from the ancient Indian epic Mahabharata attributed to the wise Vidura, holds profound insights into ethical governance and societal responsibilities. While seemingly rooted in ancient wisdom, the principles outlined in Vidura Niti bear striking relevance to the modern concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). This article explores the enduring wisdom of Vidura Niti and its resonance in shaping a responsible and sustainable business philosophy.

OBJECTIVES

This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the ancient wisdom of Vidura Niti can inform and enrich modern CSR philosophy, contributing to the sustainable and ethical development of businesses.

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the teachings of Vidura Niti and identify key principles related to governance, morality, and societal duties.
2. To examine the commonalities of the principles of Vidura Niti and the core values of CSR.
3. To provide insights and recommendations for businesses seeking to integrate the principles of Vidura Niti into their CSR strategies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Research Methodology is presented before the Review of Literature because this article is predominantly a Review of Vidura Niti. Though it also covers how others have tried to relate it to social responsibility in various aspects of public welfare; this article tries to understand the relevance of social responsibility vouched by Vidura Niti being relevant to the corporate sector. Hence the methodology is provided before the review of the literature.

This study employs a multifaceted research methodology to achieve its objectives and includes a Literature Review, Content Analysis of Vidura Niti and Comparative Analysis.

a) Literature Review:

Conduct an extensive review of academic literature, historical texts, and contemporary business literature to understand the principles of Vidura Niti and CSR.

b) Content Analysis:

Analyze relevant passages from Vidura Niti to extract key principles related to governance, morality, ethical leadership, societal welfare, environmental stewardship, fair business practices, and societal responsibilities.

c) Comparing Principles of Vidura Niti and CSR:

Juxtaposing the relevant principles from Vidura Niti with established CSR frameworks and guidelines. This method is necessary as only secondary.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The focus of this part is on the ancient Indian literature dealing predominantly with social welfare and business. Many research articles have shown the commonality between ancient Indian philosophy and modern-day CSR.

In contrast to numerous management theories and concepts originating predominantly in the Western world, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) cannot be viewed as something adopted by the Indian corporate sector from the West. (Tripathi, 2019)

According to Pathak Pramod (2014), CSR is often considered a management concept originating from the West. However, he suggests that CSR practices have roots in the Indian value system, as evidenced by references in Vedic literature. The distinction lies in the Vedic texts associating social responsibility with dharma and encompassing a broader scope.

The author contends that Vedic philosophy integrates both individual and business social responsibilities, which he believes is essential because separating personal social responsibility from corporate social responsibility renders CSR less effective. According to Pathak Pramod (2014), CSR is perceived as a concept originating from Western management thinking. However, he argues that CSR practices can be found in the Indian value system, with references to Vedic literature. A key distinction lies in the Vedas linking social responsibility to dharma and presenting a broader perspective on the concept.

According to Indian philosophy, CSR represents a deliberate effort by businesses to advance along the path of dharma, which can be roughly translated as righteous duty or role. This philosophy emphasizes the concept of the four human objectives, known as 'Purusharthas': Dharma (righteous discharge of duty), Artha (righteous earning of wealth), Kama (fulfilment of desires in a rightful manner), and Moksha (liberation of the soul). CSR,

in this context, is seen as a modern-day expression of these principles, emphasizing the responsibility of individuals towards society (Pathak Pramod, 2014).

The concept of Nitishastra or Trivarga Shastra highlights three essential objectives necessary for a meaningful human life lived in righteousness. These three goals—Dharma, Artha, and Kama—are considered integral to societal progress, material development, cultural advancement, and the welfare of all individuals (Pathak Pramod, 2014). The roots of CSR can therefore be traced back to the concept of *trivarga* i.e., threefold human objectives. Further, the concept of *Daan* (charity) also pushes for practices like CSR. Famous personalities like Raja Bali in Satyuga (a time period – the first one among the four cyclic periods - in Indian philosophy) and DanveerKarna in Dwaparyuga (the third period) show us the importance attached to philanthropy in ancient Indian thought. (Pathak Pramod, 2014).

In Indian philosophy, practices akin to CSR stem from the principle of Dharma, which embodies virtue and serves as the foundation for social and moral values. The Taittiriya Upanishad emphasizes this with the directive 'Satyam Vada Dharmam Chara', urging individuals to speak the truth and act righteously. This guidance is instrumental in fostering a society where people lead principled lives, contribute to societal stability, and uphold the welfare of humanity (Ramakrishna, 1929; Mukhopadhyaya, 1960).

According to Vedic philosophy, humans are guided by four fundamental objectives throughout their lives: Dharma (Righteousness or Virtue), Artha (Wealth or Money), Kama (Desires or Urges), and Moksha (Salvation). In Indian ethics, Dharma serves as a practical compass for daily life, believed to safeguard those who uphold it. The accumulation of wealth is intended primarily to fulfil the other three objectives. The Vedas endorse the righteous creation and pursuit of wealth (Yajurveda 10-20, 5-19, 34-38), emphasizing Dharma as the rightful means to acquire prosperity (Yajurveda, 7-13). Traditional Indian philosophy also underscores Karma—the principle of cause and effect—which rationalizes events within and beyond human control. Karma rewards good deeds and penalizes mistakes, with Dharma being pivotal for self-realization, as highlighted in the Bhagavad Gita's teachings on right action leading to spiritual liberation.

Indian ethical philosophy focuses on earthly and spiritual life, grounded in virtues distinct from Western CSR paradigms (Chakraborty and Das, 2020). Dharma is central to business management, according to Sharma and Talwar (2005), who links wealth generation with ethical conduct. He underscores ethics as essential to Artha (wealth), shaping concepts like 'Shubh Labh' in business, which translates to 'Auspicious / Dharmic Profit'.

Understanding Vidura Niti:

Vidura was renowned for his wise counsel and imparted guidance on governance, morality, and societal duties. Vidura Niti emphasizes the importance of righteous conduct, justice, and the welfare of the broader community. It promotes the idea that kings should first consider the welfare of their subjects and live ethically. This in today's context is applicable

to leaders, especially political and business leaders, to prioritize the well-being of the people and act with integrity.

Translated portions of Mahabharata – Only selected verses from the portion which is termed 'Vidura Niti'

Vidura Niti: Vidura Niti, translated by KM Ganguli from Sanskrit to English and part of the Mahabharata (Chapters 33 to 40, dating back approximately to 5250 BC), provides comprehensive guidance on ethics, governance, and responsibility. These teachings remain highly relevant today, offering insights into timeless principles.

In Chapter 33, Vidura imparts wisdom through several verses. Verse 14 advises kings to refrain from coveting others' wealth, recognizing the pitfalls of such desires. Verse 15 underscores the essential connection between respecting others' rights and fostering peace and prosperity in society. Mismanagement entrusted to the undeserving, as noted in Verse 15, threatens stability and progress.

Vidura advocates honesty in Chapter 33, Verse 25, asserting that it leads to genuine happiness and prosperity. Verses 30 and 31 caution against unethical and deceitful means to achieve personal objectives, warning of the consequences such actions bring.

Chapters 33 to 40 continue to offer valuable insights. Vidura emphasizes humility and philanthropy among the wealthy in Verses 39 and 40, urging them to share their prosperity for the greater good. In Verse 42, he stresses the importance of using intelligence and knowledge for constructive purposes, highlighting their potential for both positive and negative impacts.

Verses 53 and 54 emphasize the universal importance of charity, even for those with modest means, and the need for discernment in selecting worthy recipients. Vidura's call to hold accountable those who hoard wealth in Verse 55 reinforces the ethical responsibilities of the affluent towards society.

Chapter 34, Verse 7 underscores the necessity of fairness and justice in all actions, regardless of the outcomes. Verse 8 advises thoughtful consideration of competence, the nature of the task, and its purpose before undertaking any action, discouraging impulsive decision-making.

Moving forward to Chapter 35, Verse 2, Vidura extols kindness towards all living beings as holier than mere religious observances. In Chapter 36, Verse 16, he praises individuals dedicated to the prosperity and well-being of all, highlighting their noble stature.

Verses 65 and 67 in Chapter 36 emphasize the significance of good physical health for leading a joyful life and enjoying the fruits of one's labour. Verse 69 further promotes a balanced approach combining strength and gentleness as a recipe for sustained prosperity over generations.

Chapter 37, Verse 35 underscores the importance of actions benefiting all creatures as a pathway to universal success. Verse 44 in the same chapter advises aspiring for worldly success through virtuous conduct from the outset.

In Chapter 38, Verse 16, Vidura advises against prematurely publicizing good deeds, suggesting humility and sincerity in charitable actions. Verse 24 encourages kings to distribute wealth equitably among those serving the kingdom, avoiding the temptation to hoard resources for personal gain.

Finally, Verse 27 in Chapter 38 urges kindness towards the vulnerable members of society, including the elderly and children, emphasizing compassion as a cornerstone of governance and ethical living (Ramesh Menon, 2012).

CSR in Modern Context:

In today's context, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) mirrors Vidura's teachings by urging businesses to transcend profit-making to contribute actively to society and the environment. CSR encompasses ethical business practices, environmental sustainability efforts, philanthropy, and community engagement, aligning with Vidura Niti's timeless emphasis on ethical conduct and societal welfare.

Commonality in Vidura Niti and CSR Philosophy:

Sl. No.	Chapter No & Verse No	Content Deals with / suggests:	CSR Philosophy	Broad Area of Philosophy
1	Chapter 33 Verse 14	Not to covet others' wealth	Employee Welfare, Customer Rights & Corporate Governance	Fair Business Practices
2	Chapter 33 Verse 15	Respecting the rights of others and merit	Employee Welfare, Customer Rights & Corporate Governance	Community Engagement
3	Chapter 33 Verse 25	Being Honest which leads to Happiness	Corporate Governance, Trust and Social Welfare	Societal Welfare
4	Chapter 33 Verses 31 & 32	Being on the right side of law and the consequences of deviation	Corporate Governance	Fair Business Practices
5	Chapter 33 Verses 39 & 40	Sharing wealth and resources	Social Development & Reducing Inequalities	Societal Welfare

6	Chapter 33 Verse 42	Putting knowledge to constructive use	Business Ethics and Social Welfare	Ethical Leadership
7	Chapter 33 Verses 53 & 54	Importance of sharing even while earnings are less	Continuity of SocialWorks even during lean periods	Societal Welfare
8	Chapter 33 Verse 55	Punishment for not sharing wealth i.e., hoarding	Ethics and Honest Accounting Practices	Ethical Leadership
9	Chapter 33 Verse 69	Exemplary Behaviour even in testing times	Ethical Behaviour	Ethical Leadership
10	Chapter 34 Verse 7	Adopting fair means even if it results in failure	Fair Business Practices	Ethical Leadership
11	Chapter 34 Verse 8	Selection of proper personnel for leadership positions	Meritorious HR Practices	Fair Business Practices
12	Chapter 35 Verse 2	Kindness to all life forms	SDG's covering animal, plant and all life forms	Environmental Stewardship
13	Chapter 36 Verse 16	Ensuring prosperity for all is a leader's duty	Individual Social Responsibility	Societal Welfare
14	Chapter 36 Verses 65 & 67	Importance of good physical health	PublicHealth	Community Engagement
15	Chapter 36 Verse 69	Strength and softness sustains	Sustainable Development	Environmental Stewardship
16	Chapter 37 Verse 35	Being good to all life forms	Environmental Sustainability	Environmental Stewardship
17	Chapter 37 Verse 44	Practice of Virtue for success	Ethical Behaviour	Ethical Leadership
18	Chapter 38 Verse 16	Avoid boasting and complete work silently	Avoiding Publicity Stunts	Fair Business Practices
19	Chapter 38 Verse 24	Sharing wealth with creators	Wealth Distribution, Employee Welfare	Fair Business Practices
20	Chapter 38 Verse 27	Being kind to aged, children and helpless	Care for Adults, Child Development and Destitute Protection	Community Engagement

FINDINGS

Relevance of Vidura Niti in CSR

1. Ethical Leadership:

Vidura Niti underscores the importance of ethical leadership, emphasizing principles such as truthfulness, fairness, and integrity. In the realm of CSR, ethical leadership is crucial for fostering a corporate culture that values social responsibility.

2. Societal Welfare:

Vidura's teachings stress the welfare of society, mirroring CSR's core principle of businesses contributing to community development. CSR initiatives, such as education programs, healthcare projects, and poverty alleviation efforts, align with Vidura Niti's focus on societal well-being.

3. Environmental Stewardship:

While Vidura Niti doesn't explicitly address environmental concerns, its overarching theme of responsible governance resonates with the modern CSR commitment to environmental sustainability. Vidura's wisdom encourages responsible resource use and protection of the environment for future generations.

4. Fair Business Practices:

Vidura Niti emphasizes fair and just governance, which finds echoes in CSR's call for fair business practices. CSR encourages companies to operate ethically, treat employees equitably, and engage in transparent business dealings—all principles inherent in Vidura's teachings.

5. Community Engagement:

The ancient text underscores the importance of leaders engaging with their subjects. In CSR, community engagement involves businesses actively participating in and addressing the needs of the communities where they operate, aligning with Vidura Niti's emphasis on leadership involvement.

CONCLUSION

As modern businesses and Governments struggle to balance between the complexities of societal expectations and profitability and environmental consequences, the relevance of Vidura Niti in shaping a responsible and ethical CSR philosophy becomes increasingly apparent. The teachings of Vidura Niti offer timeless principles and wise counsel. In the Corporate Social Responsibility domain, Vidura's wisdom finds a natural home, providing a philosophical foundation for ethical governance, community engagement, and environmental stewardship. These values, which are integral to CSR, underscore the enduring relevance of ancient Indian wisdom in shaping responsible and ethical business practices for the 21st century. This exploratory article serves as a call for businesses to integrate Indian Philosophy in their ethical foundations, into their corporate ethos, to

foster a sustainable and responsible future. Integrating these ancient principles with contemporary CSR practices is essential for ensuring a more holistic and sustainable business approach.

Vidura Niti, one of the timeless texts, continues to offer profound insight that resonates with contemporary discussions on ethics, governance, and societal well-being, showcasing the enduring relevance of ancient Indian wisdom in ensuring sustainability.

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