*Advances in Consumer Research*
https://acr-journal.com/
Volume-3 | Issue-10 |Sep: 2026
*Original Researcher Article*

# Rethinking Financial Ethics through Indian Knowledge Systems: Developing an Indigenous Framework for Responsible Corporate Decision-Making

**Dr. Ritvik Dubey[1]*, Dr. Karishma Agarwal[2]**
[1]Principal, School of Management Studies, Swami Rama Himalayan University, Jolly Grant, Dehradun Uttarakhand, India
[2]Assistant Professor, TMCLLS, Faculty of Law, TeerthankerMahaveer University, Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh, India.
***Corresponding Author**
Dr. Ritvik Dubey
Email: ritvikdubey@srhu.edu.in

**ABSTRACT**
Contemporary corporate finance is anchored in shareholder-wealth maximisation and in ethical vocabularies drawn mainly from Anglo-American moral philosophy. Repeated governance failures and growing consumer scepticism towards corporate claims of responsibility suggest that these foundations are insufficient, particularly in non-Western contexts where institutions, values and consumer expectations are shaped by different intellectual traditions. This article examines whether Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) can supply an indigenous and operational basis for financial ethics. Using an interpretive qualitative design, it undertakes a hermeneutic content analysis of five textual and thought streams: Kautilya's Arthashastra, the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, Tiruvalluvar's Thirukkural, and the modern Indian economic thought of Gandhi and J. C. Kumarappa. These are triangulated with Indian regulatory instruments and illustrative corporate cases. Thematic analysis yields six interlinked principles: dharma (role-based duty), artha with limits (legitimate wealth), ahimsa (non-harm), loka-sangraha (welfare of the world), aparigraha and trusteeship (non-possessive stewardship), and viveka-satya (discernment and truthfulness). The article integrates them into the DHARMA Framework, a six-stage decision protocol for responsible corporate financial decisions, and proposes testable propositions linking its use to consumer trust, perceived corporate authenticity and long-term value. The study contributes to the decolonial and pluralist turn in business ethics, offers practitioners a culturally resonant decision aid, and sets out a research agenda for consumer research.
**Keywords**: Financial ethics; Indian Knowledge Systems; Corporate decision-making; Dharma; Arthashastra; Bhagavad Gita; Responsible business; Consumer trust; Indigenous framework; Stakeholder welfare

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Financial decisions are moral decisions. Choices about pricing, capital allocation, disclosure, executive remuneration, supplier terms and dividend policy determine who bears risk, who receives reward and who is left out. Yet the dominant theoretical account of the firm still treats these choices primarily as problems of value maximisation for owners (Friedman, 1970). Ethical considerations enter, if at all, as constraints, as reputational insurance, or as instruments of the "business case". Ghoshal (2005) argued that such amoral theories do not merely describe managerial behaviour but shape it, and that they have contributed to the erosion of good management practice.

The consequences are visible to consumers. Surveys of ethical consumption repeatedly show a gap between what firms promise and what consumers believe (Carrington et al., 2010; Luchs et al., 2010). Consumers, who are also depositors, investors, borrowers and policyholders, increasingly judge firms on the integrity of their financial conduct as well as on product quality. In India this judgement is sharpened by memories of high-profile governance failures, such as the 2009 Satyam accounting fraud, and by a regulatory environment that has moved quickly towards mandated responsibility through the Companies Act, 2013, which introduced statutory corporate social responsibility (CSR) spending, and through the Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) requirements of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Government of India, 2013; SEBI, 2021).

Most business-ethics scholarship that informs such regulation, however, derives from deontology, utilitarianism, contractarianism and Western virtue ethics (Rawls, 1971; MacIntyre, 1981; Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994). These traditions are valuable, but they are one set of resources among many. Scholars in decolonial and Southern-theory traditions have argued that management knowledge exported from the global North often fits poorly with the contexts it is applied to, and that indigenous intellectual traditions deserve serious engagement as sources of theory rather than as cultural decoration (Connell, 2007; Santos, 2014; Mignolo, 2011; Chakrabarty, 2000).

India possesses an unusually deep and continuous body of such resources. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) encompass philosophical, ethical, economic and administrative thought spanning the Vedic and

Upanishadic corpus, the epics, the Arthashastra, Tamil ethical literature, Buddhist and Jain ethics, and the modern reinterpretations of Gandhi and others. India's National Education Policy 2020 has itself placed IKS on the academic agenda. Within management, a body of work has begun to draw on these sources (Chakraborty, 1991; Chakraborty & Chakraborty, 2008; Muniapan & Dass, 2008; Muniapan & Shaikh, 2007). Much of this literature, however, is either exhortatory, quoting verses to support generic claims about "values", or focused on leadership and spirituality at the individual level. Relatively little work translates IKS into a structured decision framework for financial choices at the corporate level, and still less connects such a framework to consumer-facing outcomes. This article addresses that gap. It asks three research questions:

**RQ1.** What ethical principles relevant to financial and economic decision-making can be identified in major Indian Knowledge Systems sources?

**RQ2.** How do these principles relate to, and differ from, prevailing Western frameworks of corporate responsibility?

**RQ3.** How can these principles be integrated into an operational framework for responsible corporate financial decision-making, and what consumer-research questions does it generate?

The contribution is threefold. First, the article synthesises dispersed IKS sources into six analytically distinct principles rather than a loose list of values. Second, it proposes the DHARMA Framework, a decision protocol that managers, boards and ethics committees can use. Third, it derives propositions that link the framework to constructs familiar in consumer research, namely trust, perceived authenticity, and ethical consumption behaviour. The article is conceptual and interpretive; it does not claim to test the framework empirically, and it is explicit about this limit in Section 3 and Section 6.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Mainstream approaches to corporate and financial ethics

The literature on corporate responsibility has developed along several lines. Friedman's (1970) shareholder view holds that the manager's responsibility is to owners within the rules of law and ethical custom. Freeman's (1984) stakeholder approach widened the circle of those whose interests managers must consider. Carroll's (1991) pyramid arranged economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities, and Schwartz and Carroll (2003) later reframed them as overlapping economic, legal and ethical domains. Elkington's (1997) triple bottom line extended reporting to social and environmental performance, and Porter and Kramer (2011) proposed "shared value" as a way of aligning competitive advantage with social benefit. Garriga and Melé (2004) mapped the field into instrumental, political, integrative and ethical theories, noting that most prevailing approaches remain instrumental.

At the level of individual decisions, Rest's (1986) four-component model (moral sensitivity, judgement, motivation and character) and Jones's (1991) issue-contingent model explain how managers recognise and act on ethical issues, while Hunt and Vitell (1986) offer a general theory of marketing ethics combining deontological and teleological evaluations. Virtue approaches (Solomon, 1992; Arjoon, 2000) emphasise character and excellence. Humanistic management scholarship argues for a paradigm shift towards dignity and well-being (Pirson & Lawrence, 2010).

Three limitations motivate the present inquiry. First, the instrumental drift: ethical language is often absorbed into a return calculation. Second, the problem of operationalisation: virtue and humanistic approaches are rich but give managers limited procedural guidance for a specific capital-budgeting or disclosure decision. Third, the problem of cultural fit: frameworks developed in individualist, rights-centred traditions may not capture relational, duty-centred and cosmological conceptions of responsibility that are common elsewhere.

### 2.2 Indian Knowledge Systems as a source of economic and ethical thought

IKS do not treat economics and ethics as separate domains. The classical scheme of the four human aims (purusharthas) places artha (material prosperity), kama (legitimate desire) and dharma (right conduct) within a larger orientation towards moksha (liberation or fulfilment). Wealth is affirmed as a legitimate and necessary human aim, but it is embedded within, and disciplined by, dharma. This differs in structure from a view in which markets are ethically neutral spaces and ethics a separate overlay.

Sen (1987) observed that the "engineering" and "ethics" approaches to economics have been artificially separated, and that economics has been impoverished by distance from ethics; his later work on justice stresses plural principles and comparative reasoning over transcendental blueprints (Sen, 2009). This resonates with the contextual, duty-sensitive reasoning typical of IKS.

The Arthashastra, attributed to Kautilya, is a treatise on statecraft, economic administration and public finance. Olivelle (2013) and Rangarajan (1992) provide authoritative translations, and Kangle (1972) remains the standard critical edition. Although often read as a text of realpolitik, it also contains a systematic ethic of administration, including prescriptions on honest revenue collection, protection of consumers from adulteration and false weights, regulation of traders' profits, and the ruler's obligation to promote the welfare of the people (Muniapan & Shaikh, 2007). The Bhagavad Gita (Easwaran, 2007; Radhakrishnan, 1948) offers the doctrine of svadharma (one's own duty), nishkama karma (action without attachment to fruits) and loka-sangraha (maintaining the welfare of the world). The principal Upanishads (Olivelle, 1998) contribute the injunction, in the Isha Upanishad, to enjoy through renunciation and not to covet others' wealth, a foundation for non-possessive stewardship. The Thirukkural (Sundaram, 1990) devotes extensive couplets to wealth, honest earning, and the duties of rulers and householders. In the twentieth century, Gandhi's doctrine of trusteeship and J. C. Kumarappa's (1945) Economy of Permanence reinterpreted these ideas for industrial society, evaluating economic activity by its permanence, non-violence and service to the community.

### 2.3 Gap and conceptual positioning

Prior IKS-management work establishes that such connections exist (Chakraborty, 1991; Chakraborty & Chakraborty, 2008; Muniapan & Dass, 2008). What is less developed is (a) a disciplined derivation of distinct, non-overlapping principles from multiple sources, (b) a decision procedure suitable for financial choices, and (c) an explicit link to consumer-research constructs. The article positions IKS neither as a replacement for Western frameworks nor as a nostalgic tradition to be applied uncritically, but as a complementary, pluralist resource consistent with calls for epistemic diversity in management theory (Santos, 2014; Connell, 2007).

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research design

The study adopts an interpretive, qualitative and conceptual design appropriate to theory-building from textual traditions. Because the object of study is a body of normative texts rather than a population of respondents, the design is hermeneutic: it seeks to understand meanings within their intellectual context and then to translate them carefully into the vocabulary of contemporary corporate finance. No human participants were recruited and no primary survey data were collected; ethical approval was therefore not required. The framework presented here is a theoretical proposal and should be read as hypothesis-generating rather than hypothesis-confirming.

### 3.2 Corpus and sampling

Purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) was used to select sources that (i) are widely recognised within IKS, (ii) contain explicit material on wealth, governance, conduct of trade, or the responsibilities of those who hold economic power, and (iii) are available in reputable scholarly translations. Five source clusters were included:

**Kautilya's Arthashastra** (Kangle, 1972; Rangarajan, 1992; Olivelle, 2013): sections on economic administration, trade regulation, taxation and the ruler's duties.

**The Bhagavad Gita** (Easwaran, 2007; Radhakrishnan, 1948): chapters on duty, action and equanimity.

**The principal Upanishads** (Olivelle, 1998), especially the Isha Upanishad.

**The Thirukkural** (Sundaram, 1990): the books on wealth and polity.

**Modern Indian economic thought**: Gandhi's trusteeship idea and Kumarappa's (1945) Economy of Permanence.

To anchor the analysis in practice, three further data sets were used as triangulating material: the Companies Act, 2013 (Government of India, 2013); the SEBI (2021) BRSR requirements and the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (2019) National Guidelines on Responsible Business Conduct; and published accounts of illustrative corporate cases, namely the Tata group's trusteeship-oriented history (Lala, 2004) and the Satyam governance failure of 2009 as a counter-case. The cases were used illustratively, to test whether principles help interpret real decisions, and not as evidence for generalisation.

### 3.3 Analytical procedure

Analysis followed an adapted version of the six-phase thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006), combined with directed qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018; Mayring, 2014):

**Phase 1, familiarisation:** repeated reading of the selected passages and their scholarly commentaries.

**Phase 2, initial coding:** passages bearing on wealth, profit, trade, truthfulness, harm, duty, power, consumption and stewardship were coded inductively (Saldaña, 2021), producing approximately forty first-cycle codes.

**Phase 3, theme construction:** codes were clustered by conceptual similarity and by their relevance to a financial decision (who is affected, what is permitted, how it should be disclosed, and how outcomes should be shared).

**Phase 4, review:** themes were checked against the full corpus for coherence and against one another for distinctness, and overlapping themes were merged.

**Phase 5, definition:** each retained theme was defined and translated into a corporate-finance construct.

**Phase 6, integration:** themes were ordered into a decision sequence, and the sequence was applied retrospectively to the illustrative cases.

### 3.4 Rigour and reflexivity

Trustworthiness was pursued through source triangulation (multiple texts and traditions), use of established translations and critical editions, explicit audit of coding decisions, and a conscious effort to avoid cherry-picking verses. The analyst's positionality is acknowledged: reading classical texts through a contemporary management lens risks anachronism, and Sanskrit and Tamil concepts lose nuance in translation. The principles reported are therefore interpretive translations, offered for scholarly scrutiny, and not claims about what the authors of the texts would have prescribed for modern corporations. Ideas that are contested within the tradition, including the hierarchical social ordering found in some classical sources, are not carried into the framework; only principles that are consistent with contemporary norms of equal dignity are retained.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Principles identified (RQ1)

The analysis produced six principles, each of which has textual grounding in more than one source cluster and each of which bears directly on a financial decision. They are summarised in Table 1 and discussed below.

**Table 1. Principles derived from Indian Knowledge Systems and their financial-decision translation**

| Principle | Principal IKS grounding | Translation to corporate financial decision-making |
|---|---|---|
| Dharma (role-based duty) | Bhagavad Gita (svadharma); Arthashastra (duties of the ruler and officials); Thirukkural (duty of householder and ruler) | Directors, CFOs and managers carry role-specific duties of care, honesty and fairness that cannot be waived by profit targets |
| Artha with limits (legitimate wealth) | Arthashastra; Thirukkural (wealth earned by right means); purushartha scheme | Profit is affirmed as legitimate and necessary, but only when earned by fair means and in proportion to value created |
| Ahimsa (non-harm) | Upanishadic and Gandhian ethics; Kumarappa's economy of permanence | Screening of pricing, product, credit and investment decisions for foreseeable harm to consumers, workers, communities and the environment |
| Loka-sangraha (welfare of the world) | Bhagavad Gita; Arthashastra (welfare as the basis of the ruler's own welfare) | Explicit inclusion of broad stakeholder and societal welfare in the objective function of the firm |
| Aparigraha and trusteeship | Isha Upanishad; Gandhi; Kumarappa | Executives and owners hold corporate resources as stewards: restraint in remuneration, surplus sharing, intergenerational responsibility |
| Viveka and satya (discernment and truthfulness) | Bhagavad Gita; Arthashastra (audit, anti-fraud and honest weights and measures); Thirukkural | Truthful disclosure, reflective deliberation before decisions, and detachment from short-term outcomes such as quarterly targets (nishkama karma) |

**Dharma as role-based duty.** In the Gita, the central ethical question is not "what maximises outcomes?" but "what is my duty in this role, and how may I perform it without distortion by attachment?" (Easwaran, 2007; Radhakrishnan, 1948). Translated to finance, this reframes the fiduciary role. A director's or finance officer's duty is not only to owners but to the integrity of the enterprise and those it affects. The Arthashastra is consistent: officials who handle revenue are expected to be honest, and it describes in detail the embezzlements to be guarded against (Olivelle, 2013; Rangarajan, 1992). Dharma therefore supplies something that value-maximisation lacks, a non-negotiable floor of role-based obligation.

**Artha with limits.** A common misreading holds that Indian thought is ascetic and hostile to wealth. The textual evidence points the other way. The Arthashastra treats prosperity as the foundation of the state, and the Thirukkural praises wealth while insisting it be earned by right means (Sundaram, 1990). What IKS adds is the qualifier: wealth is a legitimate aim within dharma. This is directly relevant to consumer-facing finance. The Arthashastra contains provisions against adulteration, false weights and exploitative pricing by merchants, suggesting an early concern with consumer protection (Muniapan & Shaikh, 2007). A modern analogue would be scrutiny of hidden charges, mis-selling of financial products and exploitative lending practices.

**Ahimsa.** Usually translated as non-violence, ahimsa in an economic setting means avoiding harm in all forms, including structural harm. Kumarappa (1945) distinguished an "economy of permanence", in which activity is judged by its sustainability and non-violence, from an "economy of transitory" or predatory character. As a decision test it asks: whom might this financial decision injure, directly or indirectly, and can that injury be avoided or remedied? It extends the stakeholder question from "who is affected?" (Freeman, 1984) to "who may be harmed, and who has no voice?"

**Loka-sangraha.** The Gita's idea of holding the world together is not a philanthropic add-on; it is a standard against which even detached action is judged. The Arthashastra's well-known sentiment that the ruler's happiness lies in the happiness of subjects expresses the same logic in administrative form. Where shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2011) seeks win-win overlaps, loka-sangraha holds that societal welfare is part of the purpose of the firm itself, whether or not an overlap with profit is demonstrable.

**Aparigraha and trusteeship.** The opening verse of the Isha Upanishad counsels enjoyment through renunciation and non-coveting (Olivelle, 1998). Gandhi's trusteeship drew on this to argue that owners of wealth hold it in trust for society. In the corporate context the principle bears on executive pay, dividend and retained-earnings policy, treatment of employees in downturns, and environmental liabilities passed to future generations. It is the principle most at odds with pure shareholder primacy, and also the one most likely to be tested for feasibility.

**Viveka and satya.** Discernment (viveka) and truthfulness (satya) govern the quality of deliberation and disclosure. Nishkama karma, acting without grasping for the fruits of action, has a clear financial reading: decisions should not be bent by pressure to manage short-term earnings or meet analyst expectations. The Satyam episode of 2009, in which the company's promoter confessed to inflating accounts over several years, is a stark illustration of a failure of satya under the pull of outcome-attachment. In contrast, Lala's (2004) history of the Tata group describes a tradition in which the founders and trusts framed wealth as held for the community, an example of trusteeship consistent with this principle in practice, although the account is a published narrative and should be read with caution as a company history.

### 4.2 Comparison with Western frameworks (RQ2)

The derived principles overlap with Western approaches but differ in structure and emphasis. Table 2 compares them.

**Table 2. Points of convergence and divergence with major Western frameworks**

| Western framework | Convergence with IKS principles | Distinctive contribution of IKS |
|---|---|---|
| Shareholder primacy (Friedman, 1970) | Profit as a legitimate aim (artha) | Profit is bounded by dharma and non-harm, not merely by law and custom |
| Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) | Concern for multiple parties (loka-sangraha) | Duty-based rather than interest-based inclusion; emphasis on those without voice |
| CSR pyramid (Carroll, 1991) | Layered responsibilities | Responsibilities are integrated through dharma, not ranked, so "philanthropy" is not optional |
| Triple bottom line (Elkington, 1997) | Social and ecological concern | Inner discipline (viveka, aparigraha) alongside external reporting |
| Shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2011) | Alignment of business and society | Societal welfare valued intrinsically, not only where it creates advantage |
| Virtue ethics (Solomon, 1992; Arjoon, 2000) | Character and excellence | Detachment from outcomes and a cosmological grounding of responsibility |
| Integrative social contracts (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994) | Respect for context and norms | Context-sensitive but anchored in shared substantive principles |

Three divergences deserve emphasis. First, IKS locates responsibility in role and duty rather than in rights or contracts; the question "what do I owe?" precedes "what is due to me?" Second, IKS addresses the inner condition of the decision-maker (detachment, restraint, discernment) in addition to external constraints, a dimension that Rest's (1986) model touches through moral motivation and character but does not elaborate. Third, IKS treats ends and means as inseparable: legitimate wealth is defined by the means through which it is earned, which dissolves the common distinction between an ethical process and an economic result.

The convergences matter as much as the divergences. They indicate that an IKS-based framework need not be culturally parochial: it can sit alongside stakeholder, virtue and justice approaches, and may help translate global standards into locally resonant language. Sen's (2009) comparative approach to justice, which accepts a plurality of reasonable principles, supports such a pluralist reading.

### 4.3 The DHARMA Framework (RQ3)

To make the principles usable, they are sequenced into the DHARMA Framework, a six-stage protocol for significant corporate financial decisions such as pricing of financial products, capital allocation, mergers, executive remuneration, disclosure and dividend policy.

**Table 3. The DHARMA Framework: stages, guiding questions and decision outputs**

| Stage | Meaning | Guiding questions | Output |
|---|---|---|---|
| **D**uty clarity | Identify role-based obligations (svadharma) | What duties do I and the board hold in this decision? Who relies on us? | Duty map of fiduciary, legal and moral obligations |
| **H**armlessness test | Screen for foreseeable harm (ahimsa) | Who may be harmed, now or later, including those without voice? Can the harm be avoided or remedied? | Harm register with mitigation or rejection |
| **A**rtha legitimacy | Test whether wealth creation is fair (artha with limits) | Is the return earned by fair means and proportionate to value created? Are hidden costs shifted to others? | Fair-return assessment |
| **R**elational welfare | Assess net welfare of the wider community (loka-sangraha) | What is the effect on consumers, employees, suppliers, society and the environment? | Stakeholder welfare statement |
| **M**oderation and trusteeship | Apply restraint and stewardship (aparigraha) | Are we taking more than we need? What is left for future stakeholders? | Stewardship check on pay, payouts, reserves |
| **A**ccountability and awareness | Ensure truthful disclosure and reflective discernment (satya, viveka) | Can we disclose this decision openly? Are we deciding free of pressure for short-term outcomes? | Disclosure note and documented rationale |

The framework has three features that distinguish it from checklist approaches. It is sequenced: duty and harm are considered before return, which reverses the typical order in capital-budgeting practice. It is gated: the harmlessness test and artha legitimacy stage can veto a decision regardless of its financial attractiveness, while later stages refine rather than rescue it. And it is reflexive: the final stage requires the decision-maker to examine their own motives and the integrity of their disclosure, which converts abstract values into a documentable process suitable for board minutes and audit.

**Illustration.** Consider a lender deciding whether to introduce a high-fee, short-term credit product aimed at low-income customers. A conventional analysis would test profitability, default risk and regulatory compliance. Under DHARMA, the duty stage asks what the institution owes its customers; the harm test asks whether the product foreseeably traps borrowers in repeated borrowing; the artha stage asks whether the margin reflects risk and service or exploits limited bargaining power; the welfare stage assesses the effect on household stability; the moderation stage asks whether a reasonable and sustainable return would suffice; and the final stage requires clear, plain-language disclosure of all charges. The same product might be redesigned with transparent pricing and caps, rejected, or approved with monitoring. The point is not that DHARMA always produces a different answer, but that it surfaces questions that conventional screens may leave implicit.

### 4.4 Implications for consumer research and propositions

Because consumers are the audience for corporate claims, the framework suggests several propositions that merit empirical test.

**P1.** Firms that visibly apply a duty- and harm-based decision process (the D and H stages) will be perceived by consumers as more authentic in their responsibility claims than firms whose communication is outcome- or image-based. This builds on evidence that consumers discount corporate ethical claims that appear instrumental (Carrington et al., 2010).

**P2.** Transparent disclosure of pricing and financial terms (the A of accountability and the A of artha legitimacy) will increase consumer trust, and this effect will be stronger in high-risk, low-literacy financial services.

**P3.** Perceived trusteeship behaviour (restraint in executive pay, sharing of surplus) will positively influence consumer loyalty and willingness to pay, moderated by the consumer's cultural orientation towards collectivism and duty.

**P4.** Consumers who hold culturally rooted ethical beliefs will respond more favourably to responsibility communication framed in IKS vocabulary (for example, dharma and trusteeship) than to generic CSR language, although the effect may reverse among consumers who perceive such framing as opportunistic. This echoes the argument that ethical products can carry perceived trade-offs (Luchs et al., 2010).

**P5.** The intention-behaviour gap in ethical consumption (Carrington et al., 2010) will narrow where firms' financial practices are consistent with the principles above, since the cognitive dissonance caused by suspicion of the firm is reduced.

These propositions also fit the broader marketing-ethics literature, in which consumers' ethical judgements are shaped by both deontological and teleological evaluations (Hunt & Vitell, 1986). The IKS lens adds a third judgement dimension, that of role integrity: whether the firm and its leaders are seen to be fulfilling their duties.

### 4.5 Practical implications

For boards and managers, DHARMA can be embedded in existing governance architecture. Its stages map naturally onto the CSR committee mandate under the Companies Act, 2013, and onto the principle-based disclosures of the BRSR framework and the National Guidelines on Responsible Business Conduct (Government of India, 2013; Ministry of Corporate Affairs, 2019; SEBI, 2021). Companies could incorporate the harm register and stewardship check into capital-allocation templates, require a dharma statement in major proposals, and train finance professionals in the philosophy of the framework. For regulators, the framework suggests that disclosure regimes can be strengthened by asking not only what was spent or reported, but how decisions were reached. For educators, it offers material for finance and ethics curricula consistent with the national emphasis on integrating IKS into higher education.

### 4.6 Critical reflections and limitations of the framework

A credible indigenous framework must be critically engaged. Five cautions apply. First, **instrumentalisation:** firms may adopt dharmic language as branding, a risk that the final stage and external verification are meant to address. Second, **translation risk:** concepts such as dharma are context-rich and may be flattened in managerial usage. Third, **internal plurality:** IKS is not monolithic; Buddhist, Jain, Charvaka and other streams differ on key issues, and an account built on the sources examined here does not exhaust them. Fourth, **social critique:** parts of the classical corpus support hierarchical social orders that conflict with modern norms of equality, which is why selection and reinterpretation are necessary. Fifth, **feasibility:** trusteeship and moderation may be difficult in competitive capital markets, and the framework does not itself resolve the tension between restraint and investor expectations. These cautions are reasons for empirical testing and refinement, not for dismissing the approach.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Indian Knowledge Systems offer more than cultural heritage: they provide a coherent, structured and relevant source for rethinking financial ethics. Through hermeneutic and thematic analysis of the Arthashastra, the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, the Thirukkural and modern Indian economic thought, the study identified six principles (dharma, artha with limits, ahimsa, loka-sangraha, aparigraha and trusteeship, and viveka-satya) and integrated them in the DHARMA Framework for corporate financial decision-making. The framework differs from dominant Western approaches by

anchoring responsibility in role-based duty, treating means and ends as inseparable, and attending to the inner discipline of the decision-maker, while remaining compatible with stakeholder, virtue and justice perspectives.

The work contributes to business-ethics theory by demonstrating how a non-Western tradition can generate operational constructs, to practice by offering a sequenced decision protocol that fits existing Indian governance structures, and to consumer research by supplying propositions on trust, authenticity and ethical consumption. The central message is that ethical decision-making in finance need not choose between profit and principle: the Indian tradition's answer is that wealth is legitimate when earned rightly, held responsibly and used for the welfare of the world.

The study has limitations. It is conceptual and interpretive, relies on translations, uses a purposive rather than exhaustive corpus, and illustrates the framework with limited case material. The DHARMA Framework should therefore be treated as a theoretical proposal awaiting empirical validation.

## 6. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several lines of research follow from this work.

**Scale development and measurement.** Construct and validate measures of each DHARMA dimension, at both the firm level (decision-process quality) and the consumer-perception level.

**Experimental consumer studies.** Test propositions P1 to P5 through experiments and surveys, manipulating disclosure transparency, trusteeship signals and the use of IKS-based framing, across product categories and income groups.

**Practitioner-based qualitative research.** Conduct interviews and action research with CFOs, independent directors, CSR committees and ethics officers to refine the stages and identify implementation barriers.

**Comparative case analysis.** Compare Indian firms that have strong trusteeship traditions with firms that experienced governance failures, using multi-year disclosures, to test whether DHARMA-type practices are associated with better governance and stakeholder outcomes.

**Cross-cultural and cross-tradition research.** Compare IKS-based frameworks with other indigenous traditions (such as Confucian, Islamic or African ubuntu ethics) to identify shared and distinct principles for global finance.

**Digital finance and emerging domains.** Apply the framework to fintech, algorithmic lending, data monetisation and ESG investing, where harm to consumers may be diffuse and opaque.

**Regulatory design.** Examine whether principle-based, process-oriented disclosure inspired by the framework improves the effectiveness of BRSR and CSR regimes.

**Pluralism within IKS.** Extend the analysis to Buddhist, Jain and other traditions, and to critical voices within the Indian intellectual landscape, to guard against a singular or romanticised portrayal..

## REFERENCES

1. Arjoon, S. (2000). Virtue theory as a dynamic theory of business. Journal of Business Ethics, 28(2), 159–178.
2. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101.
3. Carrington, M. J., Neville, B. A., & Whitwell, G. J. (2010). Why ethical consumers don't walk their talk: Towards a framework for understanding the gap between the ethical purchase intentions and actual buying behaviour of ethically minded consumers. Journal of Business Ethics, 97(1), 139–158.
4. Carroll, A. B. (1991). The pyramid of corporate social responsibility: Toward the moral management of organizational stakeholders. Business Horizons, 34(4), 39–48.
5. Chakrabarty, D. (2000). Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference. Princeton University Press.
6. Chakraborty, S. K. (1991). Management by values: Towards cultural congruence. Oxford University Press.
7. Chakraborty, S. K., & Chakraborty, D. (2008). Spirituality in management: Means or end? Oxford University Press.
8. Connell, R. (2007). Southern theory: The global dynamics of knowledge in social science. Polity Press.
9. Donaldson, T., & Dunfee, T. W. (1994). Toward a unified conception of business ethics: Integrative social contracts theory. Academy of Management Review, 19(2), 252–284.
10. Easwaran, E. (2007). The Bhagavad Gita (2nd ed.). Nilgiri Press.
11. Elkington, J. (1997). Cannibals with forks: The triple bottom line of 21st century business. Capstone.
12. Freeman, R. E. (1984). Strategic management: A stakeholder approach. Pitman.
13. Friedman, M. (1970, September 13). The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits. The New York Times Magazine, 32–33, 122–126.
14. Garriga, E., & Melé, D. (2004). Corporate social responsibility theories: Mapping the territory. Journal of Business Ethics, 53(1–2), 51–71.
15. Ghoshal, S. (2005). Bad management theories are destroying good management practices. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 4(1), 75–91.
16. Government of India. (2013). The Companies Act, 2013 (Act No. 18 of 2013). Ministry of Law and Justice.

17. Hunt, S. D., & Vitell, S. (1986). A general theory of marketing ethics. Journal of Macromarketing, 6(1), 5–16.
18. Jones, T. M. (1991). Ethical decision making by individuals in organizations: An issue-contingent model. Academy of Management Review, 16(2), 366–395.
19. Kangle, R. P. (1972). The Kautilya Arthasastra (Part II). University of Bombay.
20. Krippendorff, K. (2018). Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology (4th ed.). Sage.
21. Kumarappa, J. C. (1945). Economy of permanence. All India Village Industries Association.
22. Lala, R. M. (2004). The creation of wealth: The Tata story. Penguin Books India.
23. Luchs, M. G., Naylor, R. W., Irwin, J. R., & Raghunathan, R. (2010). The sustainability liability: Potential negative effects of ethicality on product preference. Journal of Marketing, 74(5), 18–31.
24. MacIntyre, A. (1981). After virtue: A study in moral theory. University of Notre Dame Press.
25. Mayring, P. (2014). Qualitative content analysis: Theoretical foundation, basic procedures and software solution. Klagenfurt.
26. Mignolo, W. D. (2011). The darker side of Western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options. Duke University Press.
27. Ministry of Corporate Affairs. (2019). National guidelines on responsible business conduct. Government of India.
28. Muniapan, B., & Dass, M. (2008). Corporate social responsibility: A philosophical approach from an ancient Indian perspective. International Journal of Indian Culture and Business Management, 1(4), 408–420.
29. Muniapan, B., & Shaikh, J. M. (2007). Lessons in corporate governance from Kautilya's Arthashastra in ancient India. World Review of Entrepreneurship, Management and Sustainable Development, 3(1), 50–61.
30. Olivelle, P. (1998). The early Upanisads: Annotated text and translation. Oxford University Press.
31. Olivelle, P. (2013). King, governance, and law in ancient India: Kautilya's Arthasastra. Oxford University Press.
32. Patton, M. Q. (2015). Qualitative research and evaluation methods (4th ed.). Sage.
33. Pirson, M. A., & Lawrence, P. R. (2010). Humanism in business: Towards a paradigm shift? Journal of Business Ethics, 93(4), 553–565.
34. Porter, M. E., & Kramer, M. R. (2011). Creating shared value. Harvard Business Review,
35. 89(1/2), 62–77.
36. Radhakrishnan, S. (1948). The Bhagavadgita. George Allen & Unwin.
37. Rangarajan, L. N. (1992). Kautilya: The Arthashastra. Penguin Books India.
38. Rawls, J. (1971). A theory of justice. Harvard University Press.
39. Rest, J. R. (1986). Moral development: Advances in research and theory. Praeger.
40. Saldaña, J. (2021). The coding manual for qualitative researchers (4th ed.). Sage.
41. Santos, B. de S. (2014). Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide. Paradigm Publishers.
42. Schwartz, M. S., & Carroll, A. B. (2003). Corporate social responsibility: A three-domain approach. Business Ethics Quarterly, 13(4), 503–530.
43. Securities and Exchange Board of India. (2021). Business responsibility and sustainability reporting by listed entities (Circular No. SEBI/HO/CFD/CMD-2/P/CIR/2021/562).
44. Sen, A. (1987). On ethics and economics. Blackwell.
45. Sen, A. (2009). The idea of justice. Harvard University Press.
46. Solomon, R. C. (1992). Ethics and excellence: Cooperation and integrity in business. Oxford University Press.
47. Sundaram, P. S. (Trans.). (1990). Tiruvalluvar: The Kural. Penguin Books India