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Ethical Leadership in Modern India: Insights from Deendayal Upadhyaya's Integral Humanism

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Abstract

The paper discusses ethical leadership in contemporary India through the lens of Deendayal Upadhyaya's principle of Integral Humanism, a philosophy rooted in Indian cultural and spiritual traditions. It envisions human life where material progress is balanced by spiritual and moral development, guided by Dharma (moral duty). Upadhyaya critiques Western political ideologies like capitalism and socialism for their materialist and reductionist tendencies and proposes a balanced approach that respects individual dignity and social harmony. This framework emphasizes the need for ethical leadership that is culturally sensitive and promotes social justice and inclusive development. Given challenges such as corruption, inequality, and weak governance, leadership must pursue not only economic goals but also moral and ethical responsibilities. Integral Humanism offers an ethical foundation valuing truthfulness, responsibility, community empowerment, and respect for India's socio-cultural diversity. Advocating decentralization and self-reliance, it aligns with emerging grassroots governance models. By examining Upadhyaya's vision, the paper shows how ethical leadership inspired by Integral Humanism can bridge policy-practice gaps and foster compassionate, sustainable social welfare. Ultimately, Integral Humanism provides a culturally rooted, morally sound roadmap for India's pursuit of holistic and sustainable development.

Keywords

Dharma, Ethical leadership, Integral Humanism, Moral integrity, Value-based leadership, Welfare state.

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1. Introduction

Ethical leadership is one of the inalienable aspects of successful governance, and especially in such a multicultural and multifaceted society like India, where several cultural, social, and economical aspects interact and require a leadership model that is founded on powerful ethical values and mutual values. Ethical leadership, in contrast to economic or political structures, proposes to bring morality, welfare and sustainability in the governance processes, and thus social harmony and equitable development. This practice has been becoming more evident in the world with more democratic systems being faced with the challenge of increasing transparency, accountability, and trust in them.

Integral Humanism, the improvement of which was propounded by Deendayal Upadhyaya (1916-1968) a progressive political thinker and philosopher, is one of the most powerful native systems of ethical leadership in India. Integral Humanism was a concept expressed in the 1960s by Upadhyaya and proposed as an explicitly Indian socio-political philosophy to inform the task of nation-building of the post-independence Indian state, offering a radical alternative to western political ideologies, including capitalism and socialism (Upadhyaya, 2002). Based on the ancient Indian cultural values and Vedantic philosophy, Integral Humanism is the philosophy of the holistic combination of individual, society, nature, and the spiritual aspect, highlighting the interdependence of these aspects to the long-term human development (Das, 2025).

At the heart of the vision of Upadhyaya lies the statement that human life is not limited to a single dimension but rather a combination of the physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual aspects which are equally vital and interrelated aspects that the framework of governance and policies must respect (Singh, 2025). This is a shift away of Western paradigms that tend to separate economic development or political liberties of moral and spiritual principles.

The idea of Integral humanism allows envisioning the world in which economic well-being (Artha), wishes and passions (Kama), ethical obligations (Dharma), and spiritual emancipation (Moksha) are in equal balance by positioning the human being at the centre of all developmental endeavours (Bhukya, 2023). Dharma, which can be interpreted as the right duty, social justice and moral responsibility is the pillar of goal that determines the behaviour of people and the system of governance (Shukla, 2002).

The current applicability of Integral Humanism is transferred to moral leadership in the present-day governance issues in India. Social inequality, corruption, inefficiencies within the administration, and communal tensions remain some of the major threats to inclusive development and citizen confidence in the democratic institutions (Saini, 2017). The ethical statement of Integral Humanism, which is based on universal moral norms and cultural anchoring, provides opportunities to enhance the integrity of governance, decentralized empowerment, and fair social welfare. What is more, the focus on sustainable development of Integral Humanism can resonate with such global programs as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where it is evident that the development of governance models that would manage to balance economic development and social equity and environmental conservation are required (Meena & Dhayal, 2025). Such convergence is captured in the changing policy environment in India, which is a combination of ancient knowledge and modern institutional reforms to tackle the intricate socio-economic issues.

The purpose of the paper is to clarify the main principles of the Deendayal Upadhyaya, the Integral Humanism, and examine how these principles can be applied to the ethical leadership in the modern Indian governance. Through delving into the basic philosophical ideas, ethical leadership qualities, and how they can be used in governance reforms, the research aims to close the gap existing in the academic literature and policy implications, and therefore help in achieving a more ethical, inclusive, and sustainable India.

2. Literature Review

There are basic ethical aspects of leadership that scholars have outlined, which are honesty, integrity, accountability, stakeholder engagement, and social responsibility. Empathy, moral courage, and ethical decision-making are further stressed as key to successful

leadership to promote the welfare of the organization and society by the transformational and servant leadership paradigms (Greenleaf, 1977). Integral Humanism makes these frameworks more complete by entrenching leadership in the Indian philosophical concept of Dharma righteous duty, or moral order, which obligates leaders to go beyond being legal in their actions, and to promote social welfare and justice (Lodha, n.d.). The given philosophical approach takes a critical look at the Western political theories that unilaterally address the materialistic or collectivistic ideas, suggesting that one should have a more balanced approach that respects the individual dignity and promotes collective harmony (Sharma & Nain, 2018).

The historical and contemporary discussions of the works of Upadhyaya shed light on integration of Indian cultural values and government ideals in Integral Humanism (Sunita, 2023). The perennial impact of Dharma on Indian leadership ethics, social justice, community welfare, fairness and moral accountability are some of the aspects that are in the concept. These ideals are reminiscent of the ancient writings of the Bhagavad Gita, whereby Svadharma, or personal obligation, is in line with some larger principles of ethics, to guide ethical leadership (Dwivedi, 2025). Interestingly, modern academia highlights the use of Dharma as an active ethical system that can be applied to contemporary management and corporate social responsibility and promotes such virtues as justice, openness, and empathy (Jha, 2025).

The effectiveness of ethical leadership in increasing the level of trust, commitment, and ethical climates in the Indian organizations is supported by empirical research (Kumar, 2025). Still, the inclusion of indigenous philosophical models like When indigenous philosophies in the modern theories of leadership is a relatively unexplored field. Gupta (2024) criticizes extant leadership models in the view that they overlook the cultural background, and proposes a culturally grounded leadership theory that cannot fail to internalize the Indian ethos. This approach is in line with the restored possibilities of such governance as ethics, a phenomenon that brings together institutional performance with moral accountability via Dharma (Jha, 2025).

Scholars have also contemplated on the dynamic nature of the relationship between Dharma and Svadharma (personal duty) in the context of making ethical decisions in the field of governance (Prakash, 2024). This balance enables the leaders to balance universal

moral laws and contextual necessities, and this enhances justice besides ensuring respect to individual autonomy and the diversity of societies. As an example, the concept of Nishkama Karma, meaning selfless action whereby there is no attachment to the consequences, which was introduced by the Indian philosophical doctrine, can be used as the basis of servant leadership as a duty-oriented, non-self-interested leadership theory (Abraham, 2019). Also, the models of corporate ethics like the VEDA Model predict that Dharma involves the consideration of the interests of all stakeholders and environmental protection, which is compatible with business goals and social welfare.

Although this intellectual legacy has existed, there remains a gap between these philosophical ideals and the modern-day implementation of the same in the political and organizational leadership in India. This paper tries to fill in that gap by synthesising the existing literature on ethics, leadership, and Indian philosophy, and consequently, to postulate a framework within which the ethics of Deendayal Upadhyaya, Integral Humanism, can be used to enhance and inform ethical leadership practices that are appropriate in the contemporary democratic governance.

3. Philosophical Foundations of Integral Humanism

Integral Humanism is a holistic and integrated conception of human being as expounded by Deendayal Upadhyaya and it is an integrated and holistic view of life which comprises physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual aspects of human life. It holds that there is need to protect this inherent nature by social, political and economic systems to promote balanced development of man and social well-being (Upadhyaya, 2002). The key to this philosophy is the notion of Dharma that cannot be related to the religious connotation. Dharma represents eternal, universal moral virtues such as truthfulness, non-violence, justice, compassion and selflessness, which guides individuals and leaders alike to responsible behavior with a commitment to societal peace and greater wellbeing (Lodha, n.d.).

Unlike Western system of individualism where the individual is a privileged and dominant factor over those of the group, the philosophy of Integral Humanism promotes a union of individual dignity and collective harmony (Kumar & Devi, 2021). It also stresses the fact that, a person is embedded in society and the universe and its

true development is not based on material adequacy but rather ethical and spiritual quality. This balance rejects the excesses of capitalistic materialism and socialist collectivism and promotes a compromise also based on Indian cultural and philosophical traditions but which does not ignore the uniqueness of each society in terms of its own Chiti or collective consciousness (Das, 2025).

Upadhyaya resorts to classical Hindu construct of the four Purusharthas, or legitimate purposes of human life, which include Dharma (righteous duty), Artha (material prosperity), Kama (pleasures), and Moksha (liberation). Integral Humanism gives greater importance to Dharma as the guiding principle arguing that Artha and Kama should be sought through the prism of Dharma which would ensure the maintenance of societal balance and prevent the moral decadence. The final spiritual aim of moksha must be in accordance with ethical life and duties (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2015).

In Integral Humanism, Western ideologies have been criticized as too much emphasis on economic wealth or political collectivity and not much on the ethical and spiritual aspects of human life. Upadhyaya argues that governance should be a manifestation of “Dhararajya a government that practices righteousness, which is a state where justice, non-exploitation, and morality governance is not only present but also embraced with political liberty. This type of polity acknowledges the reliance between the political, economic, social, and spiritual domains, and hence the responsibility of leaders to promote good well-being, self-sufficiency, and social cohesion by means of ethical behaviour and decentralization (Das, 2025).

The meaning of Dharma in the interpretation presented by the author Upadhyaya separates it with the elements of restrictive religious persuasions. He emphasizes the concept of Dharma as the universal moral law that cuts across the religious boundaries, comprising of individual, social and national obligations. At personal level, it guides self-control, sympathy, humility and service to the society. On the collective level, it fosters unity, respects diversity, and advances economic democracy by empowering the most vulnerable members of the society (Pandey, 2024). The concept of Svadharma – personal duty in accordance with the well-being of the society is also present in Integral Humanism. This idea motivates both leaders and citizens to be conscientious in their duties basing on the ethical practices and social work. Adherence to the Dharma will help the leadership to be self-less, transparent, inclusive, and

dedicated to sustainable development (Prajapati, 2025). The observance of Dharma guarantees that leadership is selfless, transparent, inclusive and dedicated to sustainable development (PMF IAS, 2025).

4. Ethical Leadership Principles in Upadhyaya's Thoughts

In his philosophy of integral Humanism, Deendayal Upadhyaya explains the system of ethical leadership that is strongly based on the Indian culture and morality metaphysics. His values are based on Dharma which includes universal moral obligations and social responsibilities that are not based on sectarian interests. These values emphasize five fundamental principles of ethical leadership moral integrity, Dharma-based governance, holistic development, respect of diversity and self reliance and empowerment. These are all elaborated below supported by scholarly evidence of their applicability and relevance in the present-day world.

4.1 Moral Integrity

Moral integrity is the core of the idea of ethical leadership created by Upadhyaya, the leaders should be characterized by unquestioning truthfulness, the integrity of morals, and genuineness. Moral integrity means that the practices of leaders are consistent with the claimed values and principles, and thus they are able to build trust and believability among the followers (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Upadhyaya states that the leaders must not just seek to use power in a practical way but inculcate moral principles in their system that define their personalities and choices (Parmila & Singh, 2021). The Indian notion of Satya (truth), which is the key part of Dharma, to tell the truth even in the hardest time is reflected in this virtue. This integrity acts as the anti-corruption and anti-opportunism factor that is common with political and business environments, hence highlighting the importance of ethical leadership as the basis of governance and interpersonal harmony (Kumar, 2025).

4.2 Dharma-Centered Governance

According to Integral Humanism, Dharma should be the basis of governance or a moral code which is based upon social justice, fairness, non-exploitation and righteousness but not limited to formal laws (Dubey, 2024). Upadhyaya envisaged a state, a Dharma Rajya, where the rulers will rule in accordance to the moral standards and do this with the interest of all classes and communities (Sunita,

2023). Dharma-based governance demands that the policy decisions should be considered in terms of ethical perspectives, so that economic or political benefits should not be achieved at the cost of the social justice and human dignity (Sharma, 2021). In the modern society, this principle can also be applied to inclusivity policies, which focuses on disadvantaged populations by providing equity and ethical management of resources (Singh, 2025).

4.3 Holistic Development

The concept of holistic development by Upadhyaya is a criticism of the reductionist concept of progress which focuses exclusively on economic growth. In lieu of this, it encourages a unified method to social, cultural, and spiritual well-being in addition to material prosperity (Das, 2025). Holistic development calls on leaders to put sustainable practices first, those practices fostering human values, community health, and environmental health (Lodha, n.d.). As an example, educational and health programs, cultural conservation, and livelihood assistance are important elements of this integrative vision. This ideal is in line with the international discourse on sustainable development and social corporate responsibilities that support the idea of ethical leadership as the key to a balanced development that will not undermine the interests of the next generations.

4.4 Respect for Diversity

Considering the pluralism of India, a concept known as Integral Humanism underlines the need of leaders to recognise and unite different social, cultural and religious identities (Dubey, 2024). Upadhyaya preached unity among diversities, and regarded heterogeneous traditions as the part of the strength of the nation as well as its disintegration. The ethical leaders should, thus, promote dialogue, tolerance, and inclusiveness in order to achieve social cohesion without subduing individual identities (PMF IAS, 2025). This principle also opposes the majoritarianism and exclusionary policies that weaken the integration of nations and the democratic ethics. In the present day, affirmative action programmes, interfaith endeavour, and community empowerment initiatives targeting constructive pluralism are used (Gupta, 2024).

4.5 Self-Dependence and Empowerment

Self-reliance is another unique virtue that guides leadership based on the Integral Humanism and stresses decentralized

autonomy and empowerment of individuals and societies (Upadhyaya, 2002). Upadhyaya considered empowerment as one of the drivers of Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) and believed that the leadership was to instill the capacity so that citizens could engage in the process of governance and economic life. Ethical leadership therefore involves the establishment of skill building, the decision making locally and social entrepreneurship and this has a negative impact on the having a dependency on centralized power structures (Lodha, n.d.). It is also upheld in Panchayati Raj institutions and new governance reforms that strengthen local governance and democratic participation.

4.6 Other Leadership Tenets in the thinking of Upadhyaya

4.6.1 Service-Oriented Leadership

Upadhyaya vision is based on service leadership (Seva). The leaders are servants of the society, and their interests are to the benefit of a group rather than their own benefit or political promotion (Pandey, 2024). This is in line with the traditional Indian philosophy of humility and sacrifice, whereby an ethical source of motivation is sought other than power and status.

4.6.2 Sustainability and Environmental Ethics

Integral Humanism incorporates the respect toward nature into spiritual and social responsibility, which imposes the ethical management of ecological systems. The leaders are also not only held responsible towards economic development but also to conserve the natural resources to be used by the future generations, as per the moral insights of non-violence (Ahimsa) and balance.

4.6.3 Transparency and Accountability

Ethical leadership requires that there be clear decision making and accountability procedures, the leaders must be accountable to the citizens and to ethical standards (Brown & Treviño, 2006). The focus on truth and justice of Integral Humanism makes corruption and transparency unreasonable, which defends the idea of moral governance, backed by a critical civil society.

Therefore, the ethical system of leadership offered by Deendayal Upadhyaya represents a distinctive unity of Indian philosophical knowledge and action-oriented governance, which creates the highly value-oriented, inclusive, and sustainable form of leadership. His ideologies have remained applicable in addressing the modern issues of inequality, lack of governance and cultural conflicts in

India. Adoption of these ethical principles can make leadership practice more fruitful, create greater legitimacy, and encourage a holistic growth in accordance with the rich cultural Indian heritage (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2015).

5. Application to Contemporary Indian Governance Based on Integral Humanism

The philosophy of Integral Humanism by Deendayal Upadhyaya provides a solid ethical guideline that remains extremely relevant to the modern issues of Indian administration such as corruption, inequality, and shortage in administration. The principles of the Integral Humanism have been empirically followed in the contemporary policy and governance reforms that pre-empt inclusive development, decentralized governance, moral responsibility and cultural rootedness. The discussion following specifies the implication of the principles of Integral Humanism in modern India with support of vivid examples and academic references.

5.1 Dharma-Centered Governance: Administration of Ethics and Transparency

Integral Humanism has a vision of governance based on Dharma, which is basically the moral duty and righteousness, hence obliging leaders and institutions to act in integrity, fairness and accountability (Singh, 2025). This moral stance denounces the paradigms of a materialistic or opportunistic government and requires attentiveness to the social justice and general wellness. Dharma focus has guided government action in strengthening transparency by, among other mechanisms, social audits, the Right to Information Act (RTI) and e-governance programs to improve citizen participation and oversight. Integral Humanism as an ethical leadership approach can support building trust in the government by emphasizing truthfulness and accountability to all the cohorts of the society, and marginalized groups in particular (Singh, 2022). The implementation of codes of ethics, anti-corruption efforts and citizen charters are some of the signs that there is a new recognition of Dharma-based government as critical to accountability.

5.2 Local Government Decentralization and Empowerment

Upadhyaya vision focuses on decentralization as a means by which people and communities gain the power to manage resources and come up with priorities, which are effective (Kumar & Devi,

2021). This principle is operationalized through the constitutional amendment of 1992 that strengthened the Panchayati Raj institutions by devolution of power to the local government bodies, hence promoting the grassroots democracy and self-reliance. The micro level of self-sufficiency that the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan initiative echoes, the drive to local entrepreneurship, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and rural job projects sound like the themes of Integral Humanism. Decentralized governance enhances culturally appropriate development solutions to development challenges, without standard policy prescriptions, and promoting community ownership of projects.

5.3 Inclusive Growth and Social Justice

The idea of Antyodaya (upliftment of the last person in society) of Integral Humanism forms the basis of inclusive development as one of the priorities of governance. The policies, programmes and schemes that tried to maximize the reduction of inequality and access to more healthcare, education, and financial inclusion are the ethical imperatives (Kumar & Devi, 2021). Social welfare programs specifically focused on the tribal and marginalized groupings show an interest in incorporating all segments of the society in the development process, thus nullifying past injustices. This emphasis on equity is in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which confirms the cross-cutting nature of Integral Humanism as regards global development agendas.

5.4 Holistic and Sustainable Development

Facing the inseparable character of the human existence, Upadhyaya argued that economic development should be balanced with cultural, moral and environmental sustenance. The efforts of organic farming, renewable energy, and environmental preservation are resonant with the teachings of Integral Humanism that advocates peaceful coexistence with the nature. Some of the main characteristics of the sustainable development models structured on the basis of this philosophy promote the long-term wellbeing over the short-term economic benefits, which promotes policy structures that balance industrial development and ecological conservation. The ethos of holistic development is also traced in the support of the government in reviving indigenous knowledge systems and traditional crafts (Pandey, 2024; Ray, 2024).

5-5 Ethical Leadership and Capacity Building

Integral Humanism emphasizes the development of ethical leadership values of selflessness, moral courage and integrity and service orientation of the public officials (Parmila & Singh, 2021). These ideals are implemented in practice by using leadership development programmes that focus on these values, training of civil servants in ethics and efficient systems of public accountability. The ethical leadership provides the momentum of confidence in the population and the mobilization of the national effort to the nation-building process as envisaged in the mighty Ideal State (Ram Rajya) basing on righteousness and welfare (Singh, 2025).

5-6 Cultural Diversity and Unity Respect

The pluralistic nature of India is also accepted by Integral Humanism, which asks the leaders to encourage unity in the area without overlooking cultural diversity (Sharma & Nain, 2018). Practices that are inclusive of federalism, protection of linguistic rights and cultural heritage as a strength of diversity. It is a method that negates the divisive nature since it promotes inclusive discussion, social unity, and democratic involvement, which are vital aspects of ethical leadership.

5-7 In line with Global Sustainable Development Goals

The principles of Integral Humanism have been mapped to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by recent studies that point out areas of convergence that focus on economic self-reliance, social justice, environmental management, and open governance. Unity is growing in the national development policies of India, which hopes to have a complete development based on the indigenous ethical patterns. Partnerships between government bodies and civil society and the business realm are a reflection of the spirit of collaborative and ethical governance that Integral Humanism heavily preaches.

6. Conclusion

Integral Humanism by Deendayal Upadhyaya is the highly significant and culturally acclimatizing theory of ethical leadership in modern India. It is based on the Indian philosophical tradition of Dharma and it goes beyond the traditional models of governance by incorporating moral uprightness, spirituality, and social responsibility into the structure of the public administration. This holism defies reductionistic leanings of western ideologies and

rebalances leadership towards equitable development, decentralization as well as sustainable wellbeing. India is facing long-term issues: corruption, inequality, governance shortage, and loss of social trust; now, Integral Humanism will provide an opportune ethical guide. Its focus on Dharma-based governance, diversity, and community empowerment is in line with constitutional values and development agendas of the world. In addition to that, the self-reliance principle, the service-driven leadership principle, and the principle of environmental stewardship is similar to the modern-day policy reforms such as Atmanirbhar Bharat and Panchayati Raj decentralization. With the ethical leadership entrenched as a part of the cultural and spiritual ethos in India, the ethical leadership not only reinvigorates the moral basis of governance, but also promotes the trust of the citizens and the legitimacy of the institutions. It urges leaders to be compassionate, foresighted and responsible attributes that one cannot do without in maneuvering around the intricate socio-political terrain of India. Finally, the approach to embrace the vision of Upadhyaya can trigger the paradigm shift into the ethically sound, culturally oriented, and inclusive developmental paradigm of governance, restoring the civilizational vow of harmony, justice, and holistic development of India. Upadhyaya's philosophy of Integral Humanism provides a rich ethical framework that remains deeply relevant for addressing India's governance challenges such as corruption, inequality, and administrative deficits. The core principles of Integral Humanism have found practical resonance in contemporary policy and governance reforms, emphasizing inclusive development, decentralized governance, moral responsibility, and cultural rootedness. The following points elaborate on how Integral Humanism's principles can be applied in modern India, with examples and scholarly backing.

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