

Ancient Indian Wisdom and the OECD Guidelines: A Cross-Civilizational Dialogue on Responsible Business Conduct

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Abstract

This paper explores the deep consonance between the *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises* and the ethical frameworks embedded within ancient Indian texts. It examines each of the eight core principles of the OECD - ranging from transparency and human rights to environmental stewardship and anti-corruption. The paper traces their philosophical and practical counterparts in scriptures such as the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Artha Shastra*, *Manu Smriti*, and *Bhagavad Gita*. Through detailed textual analysis, the study demonstrates how *Sanathana Dharma* offers a timeless and nuanced vision of corporate responsibility, inclusion, justice, and sustainability. Key concepts such as *Sama Darshana* (equal vision), *Vidya-Dhana* (knowledge as a gift), and *Dharmic Governance* align closely with contemporary global norms around ethical business practices. The paper not only bridges ancient and modern paradigms of governance but also proposes a spiritually enriched, culturally inclusive foundation for ethical enterprise in the 21st century.

Keywords: *sanathana dharma*, transparency, sustainable business, anti-corruption, inclusive governance

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Introduction

The *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises* represent a comprehensive framework of voluntary standards aimed at fostering ethical and sustainable business conduct across borders. Though not legally enforceable, these principles are officially endorsed by governments of OECD member and affiliated states and are intended to guide multinational enterprises operating in or originating from these jurisdictions (OECD, 2011, p. 19). The Guidelines encompass domains ranging from human rights and labour conditions to environmental responsibility, anti-corruption, consumer protection, taxation, and disclosure practices (OECD, 2011, pp. 23–45).

Central to their implementation is the expectation that enterprises conduct risk-based due diligence to identify, prevent, and address potential negative impacts arising from their operations and supply chains (OECD, 2011, p. 31). Their design aligns with major international frameworks such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and International Labour Organization conventions (OECD, 2011, p. 12). To facilitate application, participating countries institute National Contact Points (NCPs), which promote the Guidelines and provide a non-judicial platform for resolving conflicts (“specific instances”) between companies and stakeholders (OECD, 2011, p. 72).

Eight Core Principles

The OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises (OECD, 2011 p. 34) outline eight core principles for responsible business conduct:

- 1) **Disclosure:** Enterprises should transparently report their structure, operations, and financial performance (OECD, 2011 pp.27 -30).
- 2) **Human Rights:** Businesses must respect human rights, avoid causing harm, and address adverse impacts linked to their activities (OECD, 2011 pp. 31 – 24)
- 3) **Employment and Labor Practices:** Fair treatment of workers, including non-discrimination, collective bargaining rights, and occupational safety, is required (OECD, 2011 pp. 35 – 41)
- 4) **Environmental Stewardship:** Companies should adopt sustainable practices, mitigate environmental risks, and assess ecological impacts (OECD, 2011 pp. 42 – 46)
- 5) **Anti-Corruption:** Firms must combat bribery, extortion, and other corrupt practices in all operations (OECD, 2011 pp.47 – 50)
- 6) **Consumer Protection:** Products and services must be safe, reliable, and marketed truthfully (OECD, 2011 pp. 51 – 54)
- 7) **Science and Technology:** Enterprises are encouraged to promote innovation and knowledge transfer to support host-country development (OECD, 2011 pp. 55 – 56)
- 8) **Competition:** Fair and lawful competition is essential, with prohibitions against anti-competitive behavior ((OECD, 2011 pp. 57 - 59).

Problem Statement

Despite the widespread adoption of the *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises* (OECD, 2011, pp. 19–59) as a global standard for responsible

business conduct (RBC), modern corporations often struggle to integrate ethical frameworks that are culturally inclusive and spiritually grounded. While these guidelines emphasize transparency, human rights, and environmental stewardship, their implementation frequently lacks philosophical depth, relying heavily on Western-centric models of governance (OECD, 2011, p. 12). Concurrently, ancient Indian texts, such as the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Artha Shastra*, and *Bhagavad Gita*, contain well-articulated ethical principles that align with, and in some cases predate, contemporary RBC norms (Govindacharya, 2003, 2008; Nikam & McKeon, 1978). However, these civilizational insights remain underutilized in mainstream corporate ethics. This paper addresses the gap between modern RBC frameworks and ancient wisdom by exploring how *Sanatana Dharma* (eternal ethical principles) can enrich and contextualize global business standards for diverse cultural settings.

Research Objective

- o Compare the eight core principles of the *OECD Guidelines* (OECD, 2011, pp.27–59) with analogous concepts in ancient Indian texts (e.g., *Sama Darshana* in the *Bhagavad Gita* [5.18], transparency in the *Ramayana* [Ayodhya Kanda 2.100.26–27], and anti-corruption in the *Artha Shastra* [1.9.1]).
- o Analyze the philosophical foundations of Indian ethical traditions (e.g., *Vidya-Dhana* as knowledge sharing in *Manusmriti* [9.206] and ecological ethics in the *Atharva Veda* [Bhumi Sukta 12.1.0.12]) to identify synergies with OECD principles.
- o Propose a cross-civilizational RBC model that integrates *Dharma*-based governance (e.g., Ashoka’s edicts on accountability; Nikam & McKeon, 1978, pp. 55–56) with modern compliance mechanisms.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative analysis of primary and secondary sources. The textual analysis comprises of close reading of the *OECD Guidelines* (OECD, 2011) and ancient Indian scriptures (e.g., *Mahabharata* [Shanti Parva 99.17], *Chandogya Upanishad* [6.8.7], and *Yajnavalkya Smriti* [2.118–119]) to identify thematic parallels. Conceptual Mapping includes categorization of OECD principles (e.g., human rights, environmental stewardship) alongside *Dharma*-based concepts (e.g., *Tat Tvam Asi* for equality). Historical Contextualization includes examination of practical implementations of ethical governance in ancient India (e.g., Kautilya's consumer protection laws in *Artha Shastra* [Book IV, Ch. 2]; Shamashastry, 1915) and their relevance to modern RBC challenges.

Literature Review

Modern Frameworks for Responsible Business Conduct (RBC)

The *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises* (OECD, 2011) represent the most widely recognized voluntary standards for ethical business practices, covering human rights, labor, environment, and anti-corruption (pp. 19–59). Scholars note their alignment with other global frameworks, such as the *UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights* (Ruggie, 2011) and *ILO Conventions* (OECD, 2011, p. 12). However, critics argue that these guidelines are rooted in Western legal traditions and lack cultural adaptability (Buhmann, 2018), often failing to resonate in non-Western contexts where spiritual or communal values influence business ethics (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999).

For instance, while the OECD emphasizes transparency through disclosure requirements (OECD, 2011, pp. 27–30), its implementation often reduces accountability to procedural compliance rather than moral leadership. This is a gap that ancient Indian texts address by linking transparency to *Dharma* (righteous duty) in the *Ramayana* (Valmiki, n.d., Ayodhya Kanda

2.100.26–27) and *Artha Shastra* (Shamashastry, 1915, 1.9.1). Similarly, the OECD's environmental stewardship principle (pp. 42–47) focuses on risk mitigation, whereas the *Atharva Veda's Bhumi Sukta* (12.1.0.12) frames ecological responsibility as a sacred duty (*Dharma*), offering a spiritually compelling rationale for sustainability (Venkata Rao, 2005). The integration of ancient Indian wisdom with modern frameworks such as the OECD Guidelines on Responsible Business Conduct provides a valuable cross-civilizational dialogue, emphasizing ethical business behavior grounded in time-honored principles. Ancient Indian philosophy, as discussed in Mishra and Aithal (2023), underscores the creation of *ethical capital* through human resource development, advocating leadership and organizational practices anchored in *dharma*—righteousness, duty, and moral responsibility. This emphasis aligns closely with OECD's standards, which focus on transparency, accountability, and sustainable, socially responsible practices.

Mishra (2019) highlights the implementation of value management within Nepal's project management context, revealing an indigenous inclination toward ethical decision-making and stakeholder respect—a reflection of the dharmic ethos. This alignment illustrates how Nepal's evolving business and governance structures continue to reflect foundational values emphasizing fairness and collective welfare, resonating with OECD principles.

Further, Yadav et al. (2016) examine ethical behaviors in Nepalese procurement practices, identifying motivations and impacts within complex institutional frameworks. Their findings emphasize the importance of integrity and accountability—pillars that both ancient Indian ethics and the OECD Guidelines uphold for achieving responsible business conduct. This is critically relevant in Nepal, where governance systems are consolidating post-federalization, and the demand for transparent, ethical procurement and contracting is growing.

Mishra's (2020) comparative study on project management across countries emphasizes adapting context-specific ethical frameworks. In Nepal, this adaptation involves the confluence of indigenous ethical heritage and international best practices, such as the OECD Guidelines, to foster sustainable economic development and equitable stakeholder engagement.

In his recent comprehensive Reference Book on Comparative Assessment from the Eastern Approach (Mishra, 2022), Mishra delves deeper into Eastern philosophies, articulating how these ancient frameworks provide pragmatic governance and business models that prioritize community welfare, long-term sustainability, and ethical stewardship. This holistic vision underpins Nepal's evolving institutional ethos, where federalism and provincial autonomy are testing grounds for embedding these cross-civilizational principles into real-world policy and practice.

Ancient Indian Ethical Traditions and Governance

Transparency and Accountability

Ancient Indian texts prescribe governance models that anticipate modern RBC principles. The *Ramayana* illustrates transparent kingship through Rama's counsel to Bharata: rulers must act openly, prioritize public welfare, and avoid arbitrariness (Valmiki, n.d., Ayodhya Kanda 2.100.26–27). This aligns with the OECD's disclosure norms but adds a *Dharmic* dimension - leaders are morally bound to truth (*Satya*), not just legally compelled (Govindacharya, 2003). The *Artha Shastra* (Shamashastry, 1915) institutionalizes this through systems like meritocratic appointments (1.9.1), where ministers are tested for integrity, prefiguring modern anti-corruption due diligence (OECD, 2011, pp. 47–50).

Human Rights and Inclusion

The *Rigveda* (10.191.2) declares unity across social divisions (“*Let all humans meet as one*”), mirroring the OECD's non-discrimination principle (OECD, 2011, p. 35). The *Chandogya Upanishad's Tat Tvam Asi* (“You are That”; 6.8.7)

radicalizes this by asserting the divine equality of all beings (Lokeswarananda, 1998), a philosophical foundation for inclusive workplaces. Meanwhile, *Manu Smriti* (8.27) and *Artha Shastra* (Shama Shastry, 1915, Book IV) mandate protection of marginalized groups, echoing OECD's emphasis on vulnerable populations (OECD, 2011, p. 23).

Environmental Ethics

The *Bhumi Sukta* (Atharva Veda 12.1.0.12) venerates Earth as a mother (“*Earth is my mother; I am her son*”), framing sustainability as a karmic duty (Venkata Rao, 2005). This contrasts with the OECD's technocratic approach (pp. 42–47) by embedding ecological care in spiritual consciousness. Kautilya's *Artha Shastra* operationalizes this through regulations on resource use (e.g., forest conservation), akin to modern ESG frameworks (Shamashastry, 1915, Book III).

Anti-Corruption and Consumer Protection

The *Artha Shastra's* anti-corruption measures—such as public audits and penalties for bribery (Shamashastry, 1915, 2.8)—parallel OECD's “zero tolerance” stance (OECD, 2011, p. 47). Ashoka's edicts (Nikam & McKeon, 1978) further model ethical governance by punishing misconduct and prioritizing public welfare. For consumer rights, *Artha Shastra* (Book IV, Ch. 2) and *Narada Smriti* (Jolly, 1889) mandate fair pricing, product quality, and grievance redressal, presaging OECD's consumer protection clauses (OECD, 2011, pp. 51–54).

Gaps in Existing Scholarship

While prior research examines OECD guidelines (Buhmann, 2018) or Indian governance (Thapar, 2003; Olivelle, 2005) in isolation, few studies bridge these domains. Exceptions include Singh (2008), who traces Mauryan trade policies' relevance to global business, and Govindacharya (2008), who analyzes *Artha Shastra's* management principles. However, none systematically map *Sanatana Dharma* concepts (e.g., *Sama Darshana*, *Vidya-Dhana*) to all eight OECD principles, as this paper does.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study draws on stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984)—which aligns with the *Mahabharata*'s emphasis on collective welfare (*Shanti Parva* 99.17)—and *Dharma*-based ethics (Hiltebeitel, 2011) to argue that RBC frameworks gain legitimacy when grounded in local cultural-spiritual values. For example, *Vidya-Dhana* (knowledge sharing; *Manusmriti* 9.206) reframes OECD's technology transfer (Principle 7) as a moral imperative rather than a transactional exchange (OECD, 2011, p. 56).

Transparency

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) emphasizes transparency as a cornerstone of responsible business conduct for multinational enterprises (MNEs). According to the *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises* (OECD, 2011 p. 13-15), MNEs must ensure open communication about their operations, organizational structure, and financial performance to enable stakeholders, including but not limited to, investors, employees, and communities, to make informed decisions (p. 27). This commitment to transparency fosters trust, accountability, and stronger stakeholder relationships (OECD, 2011, p. 19).

Beyond trust-building, transparency serves as a safeguard against unethical practices such as corruption or exploitation. By providing accurate, comprehensive, and accessible information, MNEs allow for external oversight, aligning with broader OECD principles on human rights, environmental sustainability, and ethical governance (OECD, 2011, pp. 27–30). Transparency is thus both a regulatory expectation and a strategic advantage, enhancing corporate governance and long-term viability (OECD, 2011, p. 28).

Key Aspects of Transparency

Clarity and Accessibility. Information should be timely, relevant, and easily understandable to ensure stakeholders comprehend corporate decisions and policies (OECD, 2011, p. 28).

Accountability. Openness minimizes risks of misinformation, reinforcing organizational integrity (OECD, 2011, p. 27).

Ethical Alignment. Transparency supports corporate social responsibility (CSR) by promoting honesty and public trust (OECD, 2011, p. 19).

Historical Parallels

Notably, classical Indian texts, such as the *Arthashastra* and *Manu Smriti*, also advocate openness and accountability in governance, mirroring modern transparency principles in financial and administrative conduct (Shamasastri, 1915/1967, p. 112; Olivelle, 2005, p. 89). These parallels highlight the universality of transparency as a governance ideal

Ramayana

The *Ramayana*, classified as an *Itihasa* (historical narrative) in ancient Indian literature, recounts the life of Rama, regarded as a divine incarnation. Although the precise historical period of the *Ramayana* remains debated, traditional accounts place the events in a distant past, often believed to span several millennia. The epic serves not only as a spiritual and cultural cornerstone but also as a guide to moral conduct, illustrating how righteousness can be upheld even amidst severe trials.

In the *Ayodhya Kanda* of Valmiki's *Ramayana* (specifically in the *Ayodhya Kanda* – 2.100.26-27 (Valmiki, n.d.), a pivotal conversation occurs between the divinity as the elder prince Rama and his younger brother Bharata, where Rama offers guidance on the principles of ethical governance. He underscores the need for justice, fairness, and transparent rule, advising that the welfare of the citizens must remain the ruler's primary concern. According to Rama, a king should govern with clarity, making decisions openly and ensuring that his subjects are well-informed and treated equitably.

Rama's counsel highlights that leadership founded on honesty and public accountability is essential for maintaining social harmony.

By advocating for transparent administrative practices, he sets a standard for integrity in public office, aligning the ruler's moral character with the expectations of responsible governance. This episode illustrates how transparency is not only a modern administrative ideal but also deeply rooted in ancient Indian thought, particularly as a foundation for just and ethical leadership.

Mahabharata

The *Mahabharata* is the other great *Itihasa* (historical texts) of ancient India. Traditionally, it is believed to have been composed around 3,100 BCE, based on astronomical calculations and practices that continue to this day. It is the longest epic poem in the world, attributed to the sage Vyasa. The epic spans 100,000 verses across 18 books (Parvas) and covers a wide range of topics, including cosmology, metaphysics, governance, diplomacy, warfare, economics, and gender roles. Its themes remain relevant and resonate with modern society.

At the heart of the *Mahabharata* is the story of two royal families—the Paṇḍavas and the Kauravas—who are cousins fighting for the throne of Hastinapura, an ancient kingdom in present-day Delhi. The central event is the Kurukshetra War, a massive conflict that involves not only these two families but also kingdoms as far as Greece and Siberia.

However, the war is not just a physical battle; it represents deep moral dilemmas, questions of loyalty, honour, and duty (known as *dharma*). Alongside the main narrative, the *Mahabharata* presents numerous philosophical discussions and codes of conduct for rulers, warriors, and everyday people. One of the most famous parts of this epic is the *Bhagavad Gita*, a spiritual dialogue between Prince Arjuna and Lord Krishna, which addresses ethics, leadership, and inner peace.

The *Mahabharata* is more than just a literary work. It is a civilizational guide that has influenced Indian thought for thousands of years. It has shaped cultural values such as truth, family duty, and justice, as well as political philosophy around

kingship, law, and statecraft. It is not a collection of idealized heroes, but rather a depiction of flawed, human characters, making it a timeless reflection of both personal and societal conflict.

In the *Santi Parva*, Chapter 80 (Ganguli, 1883–1896), the elder Bhishma offers a unique perspective on transparency in governance. He argues that transparency should be balanced with discretion. According to Bhishma, a ruler should share information selectively, considering the nature of the people and the sensitivity of the situation. He advises that a ruler's actions and decisions should be made with an understanding of human nature, and trust should only be placed in those who have proven themselves worthy. This reflects the idea that transparency must not come at the cost of strategic governance and leadership.

Bhagavad Gita

In the *Bhagavad Gita* (16.1-3) (Bhagavad Gita, 1968), the Divine as Lord Krishna outlines key virtues that align with a divine nature, many of which are crucial for transparent governance and ethical leadership. These virtues, including truthfulness, straightforwardness, fearlessness, and compassion, emphasize the importance of clarity, simplicity, and openness in both personal conduct and decision-making processes.

Krishna's advocacy for truthfulness calls for individuals to avoid deceit and misrepresentation, ensuring that communication remains clear, honest, and free of hidden motives. This approach mirrors the OECD guidelines on transparency, which stress the necessity for clarity in public actions and policies. By adhering to truth, individuals create an environment built on trust, where decisions are made transparently and without manipulation (OECD, 2011 p. 30).

Similarly, the value of straightforwardness encourages simplicity in both words and actions, aligning with the OECD's principle of clear communication (OECD, 2011 p. 30). It underscores the importance of consistency between one's words and actions, thereby eliminating hypocrisy or obfuscation. This aligns with transparent

leadership, where intentions are visible and easily understood by others.

Krishna also emphasizes fearlessness and purity of mind, both of which are essential for transparency in governance. Fearlessness, as highlighted in the Gita, encourages openness and the courage to act honestly, even in the face of adversity. In line with OECD principles, this fearlessness translates into transparent actions that are not driven by personal interests or hidden agendas. Purity of mind, which Krishna speaks of, relates to a clear and ethical conscience, ensuring that decisions are not clouded by bias or corruption. This resonates with the OECD's emphasis on decision-making that is free from undue influence and is based on integrity and moral clarity.

Compassion and a lack of covetousness further contribute to transparency, as they promote selfless actions. Leaders and individuals who embody these virtues are motivated by the common good rather than personal gain, aligning with the OECD's calls for public actions that prioritize collective well-being over individual interest.

In sum, Krishna's teachings on virtues align closely with the OECD's guidelines on transparency, emphasizing the importance of openness, integrity, and clarity in both personal and governance practices. These values not only promote transparency as an external practice but also reflect an inner commitment to righteousness and moral conduct, ultimately fostering a society based on trust, honesty, and ethical leadership.

Human Rights

Ancient Indian texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Mahabharata*, *Smritis*, and *Artha Shastra* highlight key principles that align with modern human rights standards, such as those in OECD Guidelines (pp. 31 - 34). These texts emphasize the dignity, equality, and respect of all individuals, which are central to human rights.

Rig Veda

The Vedas are ancient sacred texts that form the foundation of *Sanathana Dharma*, composed

in Sanskrit and believed to be over 10,000 years ago. These texts are viewed as divine revelations and cover a broad range of knowledge, including hymns, prayers, rituals, and philosophical teachings (Govindacharya, 1998). The Vedas are divided into four parts: *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda*, and *Atharvaveda*, each with its own focus. *Rigveda* offers philosophical poems, *Yajurveda* presents teachings in prose, *Samaveda* is connected through music, and *Atharvaveda* includes hymns by Sage *Atharva*. Together, they provide insights into early Indian society, cosmology, and nature, influencing various philosophical, scientific, and literary traditions worldwide (Govindacharya, 2005).

The Vedas and Upanishads emphasize the inherent unity and dignity of all beings, promoting an inclusive and respectful approach to human interactions. The *Rigveda* advocates for unity and collaboration across diverse groups. It states that people should come together in harmony, listen to each other's joys and sorrows, and work towards a common goal (Govindacharya, 2010).

In *Rigveda* 10.191.2 (Wilson, 1866), it says:

There should not be separate groups among human beings, but all should come together in one thread; live together, meet so that they can communicate with each other; listen to each other's joys, sorrows, and opinions; and communicate so that everyone's mind becomes one. There should be only one aim. That only one aim is this – just as the wise kept attaining true happiness by working together for mutual benefit, you too should keep doing the same.

Equality and Non-Discrimination

The idea that “there should not be separate groups among human beings” aligns with the OECD's commitment to equality and non-discrimination (OECD, 2011 p. 35). The OECD advocates for the elimination of barriers that divide people based on characteristics like race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or social status (OECD, 2011 p. 32). In this view, all individuals should be treated equally and can contribute to society, emphasizing the value of unity and shared human dignity.

Participation and Dialogue

The emphasis on communication - “live together, meet, listen to each other's joys, sorrows, and opinions” - echoes OECD principles that advocate for participatory democracy and dialogue (OECD, 2011 p. 34). The OECD underscores the importance of consultation and active participation of all individuals in societal processes, particularly in decision-making. This creates an environment where individuals can share their perspectives, listen to others, and collaboratively work toward solutions (OECD, 2011 p. 81).

Solidarity and Mutual Benefit

The idea of a common aim, “working together for mutual benefit”, resonates with the OECD’s emphasis on solidarity. Human rights, in the context of the OECD, are not just about individual freedoms but also about fostering social solidarity and mutual respect, especially in achieving collective goals (OECD, 2017 p. 7). The concept of mutual benefit reflects the interdependence of all individuals within a society, where the success of one person is linked to the well-being of others (OECD, 2011 p. 19)

Social Cohesion

The call for people to come together and have “only one aim” speaks to the OECD’s understanding of social cohesion - the creation of a society where individuals feel connected, respected, and committed to the common good. This principle encourages societies to overcome divisions and work collectively for shared prosperity, peace, and human dignity (OECD, 2011 p. 15, 54).

Chandogya Upanishad–The Philosophical Base

The Upanishads are ancient philosophical texts that form the concluding part of the Vedas. They outline the core principles of human life and spiritual wisdom.

One of the most significant teachings from the Chandogya Upanishad is the principle “Tat Tvam Asi” (“You are That”), found in Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.7 (Lokeswarananda, 1998). This teaching states that the individual self

(Atman) is ultimately a reflection of the supreme reality (Brahman), meaning that every person is intrinsically connected to the Divine.

“Tat Tvam Asi” emphasizes the inherent unity and interconnectedness of all beings, suggesting that the dignity and rights of every individual are inseparable from the Divine. In terms of human rights within organizations, this principle encourages managers and employees to recognize the sacredness in every person they interact with. It asks individuals to treat each other with the same respect and reverence as they would show if they were face-to-face with the Divine.

This teaching goes beyond the support and respect promoted by frameworks like the OECD, urging a deeper, more personal recognition of the dignity in others (OECD, 2011 p. 31). It calls for ethical behaviour where every person is treated with the utmost respect, as though they were God themselves.

For corporations, “Tat Tvam Asi” provides guidance for a more holistic approach, where the rights and dignity of all stakeholders—employees, customers, and communities—are upheld. By following this principle, businesses can foster ethical, responsible, and inclusive practices that align with OECD Human Rights Principles, promoting a culture of fairness and respect in all their operations (OECD, 2011 p. 41).

Manu Smriti

Manu Smriti (specifically from Section VIII, concerning law, civil, and criminal matters) (Govindacharya, 2003) reflects themes of government responsibility, protection of the weak, and fairness, concepts that resonate strongly with the OECD’s human rights principles.

Government Responsibility to Protect the Weak

Manu Smriti stresses that the king and his ministers have a responsibility to protect the weak. This principle resonates with OECD human rights frameworks which emphasize the obligation of the state to ensure the protection of vulnerable and marginalized populations, particularly those who

are at risk of exploitation or abuse (OECD, 2017 pp 40 – 41)

Manu Smriti's (8.27) focus on the king's duty to protect aligns with the OECD's principle that the state must uphold the rights of all citizens, especially those who cannot protect themselves. Governments have a duty of care to create policies and systems that defend the most vulnerable in society from harm (Govindacharya, 2003)

Fairness and Justice

Manu Smriti (8.10-13) advocates for fairness in law and the proper functioning of courts in a kingdom, where the rights of individuals are upheld by an impartial judiciary (Govindacharya, 2003). This principle of justice is a cornerstone of OECD human rights frameworks, which prioritize equal access to justice, due process, and non-discrimination in legal proceedings. (OECD, 2011, pp. 31 - 34).

The OECD emphasizes access to justice and ensuring that legal systems are fair, transparent, and accessible to all citizens. This includes the right to a fair trial, protection from arbitrary detention, and the ability to challenge governmental decisions that violate rights (OECD, 2011, p. 14). The king and ministers' role in ensuring fairness in legal matters directly reflects the OECD's belief that justice should be impartial and that courts should serve as a means for individuals to seek redress and protection from abuses.

Respect for All Creatures

The principle of respecting all creatures is an aspect of ethical governance that reflects a broader understanding of human dignity and environmental stewardship. The OECD has recently placed increased emphasis on environmental sustainability and the protection of living beings as essential components of human rights. This extends to respecting nature and animal rights as part of the broader principle of justice (OECD 2011, p. 30).

While traditionally focused on human rights, the OECD now also supports environmental rights, including the protection of ecosystems and animal

welfare, in its efforts to ensure long-term human well-being (OECD 2011, pp. 42 - 47). This reflects the idea that respect for living beings contributes to a just, sustainable world.

The king's responsibility to treat all creatures with respect can be viewed as an early form of what we now understand as environmental justice. The principle recognizes that human rights and the protection of the environment are interlinked. A government that protects human beings also has a duty to protect the natural world, which sustains life.

Responsibility of Rulers and Leaders

Manu Smriti (8.8 - 24) gives a special focus to the role of rulers (the king and his ministers) in upholding justice and fairness ((Govindacharya, 2003). It underscores the importance of governance in maintaining societal harmony by ensuring that the laws are justly enforced, and that the rights of citizens are protected under the rule of law. This principle closely aligns with the OECD's emphasis on good governance and effective institutions that uphold the rule of law and ensure the protection of human rights (OECD, 2017 p. 6).

The OECD supports good governance, transparency, and accountability in government (OECD, 2011 p. 49). This includes a clear recognition that leaders must act responsibly to protect the rights and interests of citizens, and ensure that public institutions are efficient, fair, and accessible to everyone. The reference in *Manu Smriti* to the king and ministers' duty to serve the common man reflects the OECD's ideal of transparent and accountable governance, where leaders are tasked with protecting the rights of all—especially those who are most vulnerable in society (OECD, 2011 p. 52).

Artha Shastra

Kautilya's *Artha Shastra* [I.19] (Shamashastry, 1915, Rangarajan, 1992) [~300 BCE] deeply align with the OECD's human rights principles, particularly around justice, fair governance, active participation, and protection of marginalized groups.

Justice and Fairness as Foundational Principles

Kautilya (Shamashastry, 1915, Govindacharya, 2008) (emphasizes that justice and fairness are essential for effective leadership and governance. He insists that authority figures, specifically the king, must act with integrity and ensure that all matters of the state, from administration to social welfare, are handled justly.

Kautilya's insistence on justice as the cornerstone of effective leadership mirrors the OECD's emphasis on the importance of rule of law and fairness in public administration. Leaders and governments must ensure that they implement policies impartially and act with integrity in all dealings with citizens.

Active Participation and Accessibility

In the *Artha Shastra's* (Shamashastry, 1915, Govindacharya, 2008) description of the king's duties, there is a clear call for active participation and accessibility in governance. The king must personally engage with the people and address their grievances without making them wait, ensuring that petitioners' issues are dealt with promptly and fairly.

Kautilya's vision of a ruler who is personally accessible to his people aligns directly with OECD principles of accountability and engagement. It highlights the importance of governments being responsive to citizens, especially when they have grievances or needs that must be addressed (OECD, 2011 p. 34). This fosters a system where people feel empowered and heard, reducing feelings of alienation and injustice.

Protection of Marginalized Groups

Kautilya (Shamashastry, 1915) stresses that the king must pay special attention to the needs of marginalized groups, such as women, children, the aged, and the helpless. This reflects a core element of justice, ensuring that vulnerable populations are not overlooked in the administration of state affairs.

Kautilya's emphasis on considering the urgent needs of marginalized groups aligns with the OECD's emphasis on social protection and

equity (OECD, 2011 p. 23). It acknowledges that true justice cannot be achieved without addressing the unique vulnerabilities and needs of these populations. A fair and just government ensures that no one is left behind.

Avoiding Inequality and Unfair Treatment

The *Artha Shastra* (Shamashastry, 1915, Govindacharya, 2008) stresses that the king's duty is to prevent inequality and ensure that unfair treatment does not occur. The ruler is tasked with creating a system where all citizens, regardless of their status or background, are treated equally and are given fair opportunities to thrive.

Kautilya's focus on preventing inequality is in direct alignment with the OECD's stance on equality. The ruler (or government) must establish policies that reduce social inequalities and ensure that all citizens, regardless of their identity, have equal access to justice, opportunities, and resources (OECD, 2011 p. 35).

Governance with Integrity

Integrity is a central theme in Kautilya's governance model, emphasizing that rulers and officials must handle state affairs with honesty and accountability. This includes a moral duty to address citizens' grievances fairly and act in the best interest of the people (Shamashastry, 1915, Govindacharya, 2008).

The OECD places strong emphasis on good governance as being built on integrity, transparency, and accountability (OECD, 2011 p. 49). Public institutions must function without corruption, ensuring that leaders and officials are held to the highest ethical standards, and that decisions are made in the public interest. Kautilya's concept of governance with integrity aligns with the OECD's principle that leaders must act ethically and be accountable to the people they serve. A government that operates with transparency and honesty will build trust with its citizens, which is essential for the stability and effectiveness of a society (Govindacharya, 2008).

Inclusive Culture or Sama Darshana

The OECD principle of fairness and non-discrimination emphasizes the importance of businesses fostering a workplace environment that is inclusive and equitable (OECD, 2011 p. 15). This principle mandates that companies uphold fair employment practices, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their background, have equal opportunities for employment, advancement, and treatment within the organization (OECD, 2011 p. 35). By actively promoting non-discrimination, businesses are required to eliminate biases based on race, gender, age, religion, disability, or other protected characteristics, creating a diverse and inclusive workplace (OECD, 2011 p. 35). Additionally, the principle encourages businesses to respect workers' rights to freely associate, whether for the purposes of collective bargaining or other legitimate activities, ensuring that employees can express their interests without fear of retaliation or discrimination (OECD, 2011 p. 35).

Moreover, the OECD calls for businesses to prioritize the safety and well-being of their employees. This includes ensuring that working conditions are safe and healthy, thereby reducing workplace hazards and protecting employees from physical or mental harm (OECD, 2011 p. 36). The commitment to fair employment practices also extends to maintaining a work environment where workers are treated with dignity and respect, and where their rights are safeguarded. By adhering to these principles, businesses contribute to the overall welfare of their workforce, promote a positive work culture, and comply with global standards that protect employees from exploitation and discrimination (OECD, 2011 p. 38)

Mahabharata

The *Mahabharata* promotes core values of justice, equality, and respect for the dignity of all individuals, which are in harmony with the OECD Principles.

In the *Shanti Parva* (99.17) (Ganguli, 1883–1896) it states:

“The welfare of all beings should be the goal of the ruler. He must uphold justice and ensure the well-being of the people.”

Similarly, in the *Anushasana Parva* (29.13) (Ganguli, 1883–1896), it is stated:

“A ruler must uphold the dignity of every individual, ensuring that none are discriminated against.”

The teachings from the *Shanti Parva* (99.17) and *Anushasana Parva* (29.13) in the *Mahabharata* align closely with the OECD principle of fairness and non-discrimination in business practices, particularly regarding upholding justice and ensuring the well-being of all individuals within a society or organization.

In the *Shanti Parva*, the ruler's responsibility to prioritize the welfare of all beings and uphold justice directly parallels the OECD's call for businesses to ensure fair treatment and non-discrimination (OECD, 2011 p. 38). Just as a ruler must work to ensure the well-being of his people, businesses are encouraged to create environments where all employees are treated fairly, irrespective of their race, gender, or other characteristics. Upholding justice in the workplace involves ensuring that individuals are not subjected to bias or unequal treatment, promoting fairness and equity in hiring, promotions, and pay. Both the ruler's duty and the business's role revolve around safeguarding the dignity and rights of individuals, ensuring that no one is left behind or marginalized.

The *Anushasana Parva* stresses the importance of a ruler upholding the dignity of every individual and preventing discrimination. This concept directly connects to the OECD's principle that businesses must maintain non-discriminatory practices (OECD, 2011 p. 38). Just as a ruler must ensure that no person is discriminated against, businesses must create a work environment where individuals' rights are respected, and their personal and professional dignity is protected. This includes respecting freedom of association, ensuring a safe and healthy work environment, and eliminating any form of discrimination in the workplace (OECD,

2011 p. 35). Both sources underline the need for leadership, whether in governance or business, to act in ways that uphold the inherent value of everyone, fostering an environment of fairness and respect (OECD, 2011 p. 35).

Thus, both the ancient wisdom in the *Mahabharata* and the modern OECD guidelines emphasize that leadership, whether governmental or corporate, should be rooted in justice, fairness, and respect for all individuals, ensuring that discriminatory practices are actively avoided, and the dignity of all is upheld (OECD, 2011 p. 35).

Bhagavad Gita–Spiritual Base for Inclusion

In *Bhagavad Gita* 5.18 (Bhagavad Gita, 1968), Lord Krishna declares:

‘vidyā-vinaya-sampanne brāhmaṇe gavi hastini
śuni caiva śva-pāke ca paṇḍitāḥ sama-
darśinaḥ’

‘The truly wise see with equal vision a learned and humble *Brahmana*, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and a dog-eater.’

The concept of *Sama Darshana* (equal vision) as articulated in *Bhagavad Gita*, where the Divinity, as Lord Krishna, urges viewing all beings with equal regard regardless of their status or background. This principle strongly resonates with the OECD principle of fairness and non-discrimination in business (OECD, 2011 p. 15). Krishna’s call for a mindset that transcends social, economic, or cultural divides parallels the modern imperative for businesses to uphold fair employment practices (OECD, 2011 p. 21), where all individuals are treated equitably, with dignity and respect.

Sama Darshana teaches that true wisdom and humility lie in perceiving the inherent value of every individual, irrespective of their caste, status, race, gender, or background. In the context of business and employment, this aligns with the OECD’s principle that companies should ensure no employee faces discrimination based on their identity or perceived worth. Just as Krishna

advocates for seeing the learned *Brahmana* and the marginalized dog-eater with the equal regard, businesses are called to create work environments where every employee, regardless of their position, is treated with fairness. The principle of non-discrimination and fairness within the workplace fosters a culture where all employees have equal opportunities for growth, advancement, and recognition, free from bias or prejudice.

Moreover, *Sama Darshana* goes beyond mere equality. It emphasizes empathy and the recognition of everyone’s intrinsic value, regardless of their external characteristics or societal role. This aligns with the OECD’s call for businesses to uphold psychological safety and freedom of association (OECD, 2011 p. 38). When organizations embrace this deeper sense of inclusion and fairness, where the dignity of every individual is respected, they not only promote equal opportunity but also foster a work environment that is free of discrimination and where all employees feel safe to express their ideas, collaborate freely, and contribute without fear of marginalization (OECD, 2011 p. 39).

Incorporating this spiritual principle into modern business practices means that leadership should not just implement policies for equal treatment but also internalize these values, practicing them with a commitment to equity. By doing so, businesses can build cultures of true inclusion, where all employees feel valued, supported, and empowered. This leads to healthier, more cohesive teams and contributes to long-term ethical and sustainable growth, with values deeply rooted in universal respect and fairness, as exemplified by the teachings of *Sama Darshana* in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the OECD guidelines for fairness and non-discrimination.

Ecological Ethics

Modern enterprises are increasingly expected to adopt proactive environmental stewardship, integrating sustainable practices into their core operations to mitigate ecological degradation (OECD, 2011, p. 42). This entails resource efficiency (e.g., water / energy conservation),

waste and emission reduction through circular economy models, and investment in eco-friendly technologies (UNEP, 2020, p. 15). Such measures align with the *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises*, which emphasize corporate responsibility in addressing global challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution through preventive environmental management systems (OECD, 2011, pp. 42–44). By embedding sustainability into business strategies, companies not only comply with international standards but also contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action) (United Nations, 2015, para. 12.2). OECD encourages businesses to go beyond compliance with environmental laws and to adopt voluntary initiatives that demonstrate environmental responsibility and innovation (OECD, 2011 p. 42).

In addition to sustainable operations, enterprises should also conduct regular assessments of environmental risks associated with their activities. This means identifying potential environmental impacts, consulting with stakeholders, and implementing effective measures to prevent or mitigate harm (OECD, 2011 p. 44). Transparent communication about environmental performance and risks is essential to building trust with the public and investors. Through responsible environmental stewardship, companies not only contribute to a healthier planet but also create long-term value and resilience for their business (OECD, 2011, pp. 42–44).

Bhumi Sukta from Atharva Veda

Section 12 of the *Atharva Veda* (Griffith, 1895; Venkata Rao, 2005), known as the Bhumi Sukta, is one of the world’s oldest declarations of environmental ethics. It is believed to have been composed well before 4000 BCE. This sacred hymn presents Earth as a living, divine being, deserving of reverence and care. It encourages a life of respect, responsibility, and restraint, reminding

us that we are part of the Earth, not separate from or above it (Venkata Rao, 2005). The famous verse,

“*Earth is my mother; I am her son*” (Atharva Veda 12.1.0.12)

The verse expresses a profound spiritual connection between humanity and the Earth, emphasizing not only reverence but also responsibility. This sentiment of deep kinship aligns closely with the principle of *Sama Darshana* (equal vision) as taught in the *Bhagavad Gita* and further complements the OECD principle of environmental protection, which calls upon enterprises to adopt sustainable practices and assess environmental risks (OECD, 2011, pp. 42–44).

Sama Darshana, or equal vision, involves seeing all beings — human, animal, or otherwise — with equal respect and value. When applied to the natural world, it extends beyond social equality to ecological inclusion, recognizing nature not as a commodity but as an equal stakeholder in our shared existence. If we truly see the Earth as a living entity — a mother, as the *Atharva Veda* suggests — then exploiting her resources without regard becomes not only unsustainable but morally irresponsible. This perspective encourages enterprises to adopt environmental practices that are not merely regulatory but rooted in ethical responsibility and long-term stewardship.

In relation to the OECD principle, *Sama Darshana* inspires businesses to approach environmental sustainability with empathy and reverence, not just obligation (OECD, 2011 pp 42 – 47). It calls for practices that honour the intrinsic value of nature by minimizing harm, conserving resources, and ensuring that corporate actions do not compromise the well-being of ecosystems or future generations. Just as one would not harm a mother or a sibling, enterprises guided by this vision would prioritize environmental protection as a moral imperative, adopting sustainable methods, reducing pollution, and integrating environmental risk assessment as a core component of ethical business conduct.

By internalizing the worldview that all life, human and non-human, is interconnected and equally worthy of respect, businesses can move beyond compliance into conscious action. This holistic approach not only fulfills the OECD's guidelines but embodies a spiritually informed commitment to protecting the Earth, our shared home.

The *Bhumi Sukta* of the *Atharva Veda* (12.1.0.63) (Venkata Rao, 2005; Whitney, 1905/2003, p. 678; Griffith, 1895, p. 152) offers a profound ethical reflection on the human relationship with nature. In the verse,

“Whatever [wrong] I have done in fields or forests, in waters or at home,

Whatever I have taken from Earth, O Earth, may you not harm me harshly for that”

Rishi Atharva expresses both humility and responsibility, acknowledging the impact of human activity on the Earth and seeking forgiveness for any harm caused. This verse deeply resonates with the spirit of *Sama Darshana* (equal vision) and directly supports the OECD principle that calls on enterprises to protect the environment through sustainable practices and environmental risk assessment (OECD, 2011 p. 43). Extending this principle to the natural world means recognizing the Earth not as an inert resource to be exploited, but as a living entity deserving of respect and moral consideration. Just as one would not discriminate between a scholar and a labourer, or between a human and an animal, *Sama Darshana* encourages us to regard the Earth itself as worthy of care and dignity. This spiritual equality compels enterprises to view environmental sustainability not merely as compliance, but as an ethical obligation rooted in interconnectedness.

When businesses embrace this worldview, they are more likely to engage in practices that minimize harm to the environment. The plea in the *Bhumi Sukta*, a request for forgiveness for extracting from the Earth, reflects a conscious awareness of environmental impact, something the OECD urges all enterprises to assess and manage

(OECD, 2011 pp. 42 - 47). *Sama Darshana* adds a deeper layer of mindfulness to this principle: the Earth is not just a source of materials but a coexisting being whose well-being is tied to our own. Therefore, sustainable business practices, renewable resource management, pollution reduction, and environmental impact assessments become not only strategic decisions but moral imperatives aligned with both ancient wisdom and modern global standards.

In essence, the Vedic principle of reverence for the Earth, combined with *Sama Darshana*, provides a powerful ethical foundation for the OECD's environmental protection principle. It encourages enterprises to act not just in the interest of profit or regulation, but from a place of equality, respect, and responsibility toward all forms of life — including the planet itself. Shivani

Bribery & Corruption Prevention

The OECD principle on combating bribery and corruption emphasizes the critical need for integrity in all business operations. Enterprises are expected to actively prevent and resist any form of unethical conduct, including bribery, improper payments, solicitation, or extortion (OECD, 2011 pp. 47 – 50). This principle reinforces that corruption not only undermines fair competition but also erodes trust in institutions, distorts markets, and damages both reputations and economies. Businesses must establish robust internal controls, clear anti-bribery policies, and transparent reporting mechanisms to ensure that all employees and partners operate with honesty and accountability (OECD, 2011 pp. 47)

Beyond compliance, this principle calls for a proactive ethical stance. Companies must foster a corporate culture where integrity is non-negotiable and where unethical behaviour is identified and addressed swiftly. (OECD, 2011 p. 49). This includes conducting due diligence on partners and third parties, providing anti-corruption training, and encouraging whistleblowing through safe and confidential channels (OECD, 2011 p. 47). By embedding anti-corruption practices into their governance structures, businesses contribute to

building transparent, trustworthy, and sustainable global markets, reflecting both legal responsibility and moral leadership (OECD, 2011 p. 50).

Artha Shastra

The *Artha Shastra* (1.9.1) (Shamashastry, 1915) presents a structured and ethical framework for appointing *amatyas* (ministers) that strongly emphasizes merit, integrity, and competence over heredity, favouritism, or personal influence. Candidates are to be assessed based on moral character, education, practical experience, loyalty, and interpersonal skills, with each quality rigorously tested through observation, performance evaluations, and background checks (Shamashastry, 1915, Govindacharya, 2008). This approach reflects a clear rejection of corruption, nepotism, and unqualified appointments, aligning with the OECD principle that organizations must actively combat bribery, solicitation, and extortion in all operations (OECD, 2011 pp.47 - 51).

Kautilya's model directly supports anti-corruption objectives by requiring that public appointments be based on transparent, performance-driven criteria and free from improper payments or undue influence. His insistence on evaluating not just competence, but also ethical behaviour and loyalty to public service, parallels modern standards of governance accountability. The system includes graded appointment tiers - high, middle, and low - based on how well candidates meet these strict qualifications, offering a scalable model for institutions today (Shamashastry, 1915, Govindacharya, 2008). Furthermore, the involvement of ethical-spiritual oversight (through advisers knowledgeable in both Vedic wisdom and statecraft) reinforces the importance of ethical leadership and safeguards against conflicts of interest or exploitation (Shamashastry, 1915, Govindacharya, 2008).

This ancient but rigorous meritocratic system serves as a powerful reference for modern policy frameworks aiming to eliminate corruption, uphold ethical appointments, and ensure that all

delegations of power are based on capability and public trust rather than personal gain or coercive influence.

Ashoka's Inscriptions, Corruption & Governance

Ashoka the Great (reigned c. 268–232 BCE), the third emperor of the Mauryan dynasty, is celebrated as one of India's most transformative rulers. Initially a militaristic leader, Ashoka underwent a profound conversion to Buddhism after the Kalinga War (c. 260 BCE), becoming a pioneer of non-violent governance (Thapar, 2003, p. 178). His reign was marked by ethical rule, religious tolerance, and public welfare, disseminated through rock and pillar edicts inscribed across his empire (Singh, 2009, p. 332). These edicts, written in Prakrit and Greek, promoted *dhamma* (moral law) and social harmony, establishing Ashoka as an early model of benevolent leadership in world history (Strong, 1989, p. 45).

At its zenith, Ashoka's empire spanned from the Hindu Kush (modern Afghanistan and eastern Iran) to the Bay of Bengal, and from the Himalayan foothills to near peninsular India (including parts of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka) (Thapar, 2003, p. 185). This made the Mauryan Empire the first nearly pan-Indian political entity, covering approximately 5 million square kilometers (Keay, 2000, p. 82). The empire's administrative efficiency, coupled with Ashoka's welfare policies (e.g., hospitals, roads, and irrigation systems), set benchmarks for future Indian states (Singh, 2009, p. 340).

Emperor Ashoka's First Separate Rock Edict (Dhuli) (Nikam & McKeon, 1978 pp. 55–56) issued during his reign, serves as one of the earliest recorded models of ethical governance and anti-corruption measures, aligning closely with the OECD principle that calls for actively combating bribery and corruption and avoiding all forms of improper payment, solicitation, or extortion in public or business dealings (OECD, 2011 pp.47 – 51).

Ashoka's declaration, "*All men are my children,*" reflects a leadership philosophy rooted in fairness, compassion, and accountability. He denounces arbitrary punishment and partial judgments, calling upon judicial officers to exercise impartiality, integrity, and discipline in the administration of justice—principles that clearly reject the abuse of power for personal gain. The edict explicitly warns against the influence of anger, fatigue, or favouritism in judicial decisions, recognizing these human flaws as potential entry points for corruption or misconduct (Edicts VIII, VI, V & X) (Nikam & McKeon, 1978 pp. 37 - 39).

Further reinforcing an anti-corruption agenda, Ashoka institutionalized transparent oversight mechanisms, deploying *Mahamatra's* (trusted high-ranking officers) from key centres like Pataliputra, Ujjayini, and Takshashila to monitor local administrations. These officers were tasked with ensuring that laws were implemented fairly, that misconduct was investigated, and that public servants upheld high ethical standards. These regular audits and supervisory systems prefigure modern compliance frameworks aimed at preventing bribery, solicitation, or extortion — core elements of the OECD's anti-corruption guidelines. For Ashoka, adherence to such integrity was not merely administrative, but a moral responsibility, combining good governance with ethical leadership to create a sustainable and just political order (Nikam & McKeon, 1978)

Consumer Interest

The OECD principle on safeguarding consumer interests emphasizes that companies have a responsibility to prioritize the safety, reliability, and overall well-being of their customers (OECD, 2021 pp. 51 - 54). This involves offering products and services that meet established quality and safety standards, are free from harmful defects, and are transparently labelled and communicated (OECD, 2021 p 36, 40, 51). By ensuring that what is offered in the market is dependable and safe, businesses not only protect consumers but also build long-term trust and loyalty (OECD,

2021 p 45). This principle is particularly critical in sectors like food, pharmaceuticals, electronics, and transportation, where product failures can have serious consequences (OECD, 2021 p 53)

In addition to product safety, the principle stresses the importance of honest marketing and fair business practices (OECD, 2021 p 54). Companies must avoid misleading claims, deceptive pricing, hidden fees, or exploitative sales tactics (OECD, 2021 pp 51 - 54). Consumers have the right to make informed choices based on clear, truthful information (OECD, 2021 p 51). Ethical marketing, transparent return policies, and respectful customer service are all key components of this approach (OECD, 2021 p 51). Upholding these standards not only complies with regulatory expectations but also fosters an ethical marketplace where businesses compete fairly and consumers are treated with respect and dignity (OECD, 2021 p 51 – 52).

Artha Shastra

The Mauryan Empire under Chandragupta played a crucial role in fostering international trade and diplomacy, establishing active commercial links with Persia, Central Asia, China, and the Hellenistic world, particularly Greece (Singh, 2008 pp.324 – 330). Trade routes such as the Uttarapatha in the north and connections through the Indus Valley facilitated the exchange of goods like spices, textiles, ivory, and precious stones, while also allowing for the import of horses, wine, and luxury goods. The diplomatic ties between Chandragupta and the Seleucid Empire, evidenced by the presence of the Greek ambassador Megasthenes at the Mauryan court, further enhanced cultural and commercial exchanges (McCrinkle, 1877 pp.30 -36, 45 - 52). These interactions laid the foundation for India's role as a major hub in early transcontinental trade networks, which continued to flourish in later centuries.

Artha Shastra (Book IV Chapter 2) (Shamashastry, 1915, Govindacharya, 2008) is titled "Protection Against Merchants," Kautilya lays out a comprehensive regulatory framework

to safeguard consumer interests. It is an approach that resonates with the OECD's call for responsible business conduct. The text mandates strict oversight by the superintendent of commerce to prevent fraud, adulteration, and exploitation in trade. Sellers were required to prove ownership of goods. All sales were subject to inspection of weights, measures, and pricing to ensure fairness. Any discrepancies in weights or fraudulent practices, such as substituting inferior goods for superior ones, using false balances, adulterating products (e.g., grains, oils, or medicines), or misrepresenting the origin or quality of goods, were punishable by heavy fines and restitution.

Moreover, the *Artha Shastra* prohibits collusion among merchants, price gouging, and deceptive brokerage practices. It sets profit margins—5% for local goods and 10% for imports—beyond which penalties apply. It also ensures that essential commodities are sold at fair prices, especially during high supply, and requires that merchants remain “favourably disposed toward the people.” These provisions reflect a deep commitment to honest marketing, product integrity, and consumer welfare, aligning with the OECD principle that businesses must offer safe, reliable products and fair pricing, and actively avoid bribery, deception, and exploitation in all dealings (OECD, 2011 pp. 51 – 54)

Yajnavalkya Smṛti - Vyavaharadhyaya

The ancient Indian legal thought, as captured in texts like the *Yajnavalkya Smṛti* (Kalita, 2018), contains significant parallels with modern regulatory principles, including the OECD guideline that “companies should safeguard consumer interests by offering safe, reliable products and engaging in honest marketing and fair business practices”. Although the terminology and context differ, the essence of this principle can be traced in rules related to contractual obligations, apprenticeship, fair treatment in service relations, and accountability within *śreṇis* (guilds and trade bodies).

In the section on *abhyupetyāśusrūṣā* (Pandurangi, 2002), Yajnavalkya addresses the ethical foundation of the employer-servant relationship, underscoring the importance of honouring service contracts and protecting individuals from coercive or fraudulent labour arrangements. This anticipates modern ideas of consumer protection in labour markets, especially the ban on bonded labour and human trafficking.

In the discussion on *saṃvidvyatikrama* (Nagaraja Rao, 2011; Pandurangi, 2002), the breach of established usage or contract, Yajnavalkya emphasizes that business associations such as *śreṇis* and *naigamas* must maintain internal discipline, ethical conduct, and adherence to custom. Leaders are expected to be free from greed and act in the public interest, much like modern corporate governance codes require ethical leadership to ensure fair dealing and consumer protection.

These ancient provisions reflect an expectation of ethical commerce, where service providers (including artisans and guilds) are accountable to both their members and the wider community. The rules concerning compensation, trust, and fidelity to organizational duties align with the OECD’s consumer safeguard principle. By demanding fairness, reliability, and moral integrity within economic exchanges, *Yajnavalkya*’s legal prescriptions lay an early ethical groundwork for what today is codified as honest marketing and safe consumer practices.

Narada Smṛti

The *Narada Smṛiti* (Jolly, 1889, Govindacharya, 2017), in its Ninth Title of Law: Rescission of Purchase, outlines a robust early framework for consumer protection, aligning closely with the OECD principle that:

“Companies should safeguard consumer interests by offering safe, reliable products and engaging in honest marketing and fair business practices.”

Protection of Consumer Rights and Honest Trade

The *Narada Smriti* (Govindacharya, 2017) provides a structured legal process for rescinding purchases based on product dissatisfaction or defect, which reflects a commitment to fair commercial dealings and consumer redress. For instance, the text allows a purchaser to return an item on the same day if it is in undamaged condition (Verse 2), and offers a graded penalty for delayed returns (Verses 3–4). This ensures that vendors are held accountable for the quality and integrity of their goods, and buyers are protected from deception or poor-quality products.

It also mandates that consumers have the right to examine goods thoroughly before purchase, from animals to textiles to metals, with clearly prescribed examination periods (Verses 5–7). This foresight into product transparency and testing underscores the ancient emphasis on informed consent in transactions, much like modern laws that encourage product disclosures, warranties, and return policies.

Regulation of Product Quality and Ethical Manufacturing

The *Narada Smriti* (Govindacharya, 2017) goes further by specifying acceptable depreciation rates for goods (Verses 8–15), including textiles and metals, and requires that artisans compensate for any excessive loss or damage during processing. This creates a legal expectation of product reliability, proper handling, and compensation for defects, ensuring accountability from producers and suppliers.

In Verse 16, the text explicitly advises that a merchant must not annul a sale after knowing the quality of goods, reinforcing the importance of honest marketing and informed trade. Merchants are expected to understand and disclose the profit and loss margins of goods, advocating a form of business ethics and transparency.

In essence, the *Narada Smriti* anticipates many of the consumer-focused values modern frameworks like the OECD promote like fair

business practices, quality assurance, honest disclosure, and redress for defective goods. It presents an early legal model of balancing commercial activity with ethical responsibility and consumer protection.

Technology Sharing or Vidya-Dhana

OECD Principle 7 (OECD, 2011 pp. 55 - 57) encourages multinational companies to play an active role in improving science and technology in the countries where they operate. This means they should invest in research and development, support innovation, and help build local technical skills (OECD, 2011 p. 56). The aim is not only to grow their own business, but also to support the scientific and technological growth of the host country in a lasting and meaningful way (OECD, 2011 p. 56).

A major part of this principle is knowledge transfer (OECD, 2011 p. 14; p. 56). This involves ethically sharing technical skills, industry knowledge, and new innovations with local employees, institutions, and partners. It can take the form of employee training, working with universities, forming public-private partnerships, or offering open access to useful technologies (OECD, 2011 p. 55). These efforts help boost local economies, reduce gaps in innovation, and support inclusive and long-term development. In this way, business goals and social progress go hand in hand (OECD, 2011 pp. 55 - 57)

Rig Veda – Foundational Philosophy

Rigveda 1.89.1 (Govindacharya, 1998)

“Let noble and auspicious thoughts come to us from all directions, unfettered and illuminating our minds.”

The above *shloka* [verse] is rich in metaphor and meaning. It literally invites noble thoughts and innovations from all directions, suggesting an openness to wisdom, knowledge, and creativity, regardless of origin. This shloka interpretation says that in a manner that a house that brings comfort and happiness in all seasons, so also learned people, knowledge, and skilled craftsmanship serve as the foundation for enduring well-being of all beings.

This metaphor aligns closely with the OECD Principle 7, which encourages businesses and institutions to contribute to science and technology development and engage in responsible knowledge transfer, particularly in ways that benefit host countries. Just as the Vedic house offers shelter and comfort in every season, knowledge, when shared ethically and applied wisely, creates social and economic environments that are resilient, innovative, and inclusive (OECD, 2011 p. 55).

In this Vedic view, intellectual and technical exchange is a moral duty, not merely a transactional act. By fostering open channels for research, innovation, and training, modern enterprises echo the Rigvedic spirit of welcoming noble ideas from all quarters, ensuring that science and technology serve the collective good, especially in developing or host communities.

Vidya-Dhana

Vidya-Dhana has a dual nature. Vidya is etymologically made up of two words – vidya [knowledge] and *dhana* [donate or distribute]. ‘Vidya-Dhana’ means ‘*Gift of Knowledge*’ (Monier-Williams, 2008, p. 963; Govindacharya, 2007, p. 45; Sharma, 2012, p. 112)

Vidya as the Supreme Wealth

In ancient India, *Vidya* [knowledge] was considered the most valuable possession a person could acquire, surpassing material riches (Govindacharya, 2007, p. 45).

Manusmṛiti 9.206 (Govindacharya, 2003)

The wealth of knowledge (*Vidya - dhanam*), wherever it resides, indeed belongs to its possessor. And likewise, the gifts or benefits received due to friendship, marriage alliances, or *mādhuparka* ceremonies are the rightful possessions of the individual.

The above verse establishes the rightful ownership of specific types of wealth that are personal and non-material in nature. It states that the “wealth of knowledge” (*vidyādhana*) belongs solely to the individual who possesses it. Unlike physical property, which may be

inherited or transferred, knowledge is considered an intrinsic asset, gained through personal effort and learning, and must be respected as such. The verse emphasizes that intellectual merit cannot be claimed or redistributed by others, underscoring the ancient recognition of individual entitlement over one's education and learning. This reflects an early understanding of intellectual property, well ahead of its formal recognition in modern legal systems.

Yajnavalkya Smṛiti 2.118-119 (Govindacharya, 2003; *Vidyarnava*, 1918 pp. 118 - 119) reflects the same sentiments. This verse clearly states that knowledge is an individual's true and ultimate wealth. Unlike material wealth, which can be stolen, lost, or depleted, knowledge is an eternal asset that grows with sharing and remains with the individual across lifetimes. It is the key to personal growth, spiritual liberation (*moksha*), and societal prosperity.

Vidya-Dana as the Highest Charity

“Vidya-Dana” refers to the act of gifting or imparting knowledge. This act was highly revered and considered superior to all other forms of charity (Govindacharya, 2007). Puranas frequently extol the virtues of *Vidyadana*, often placing it above gifts of daughter (*streedana*), land (*bhumidana*), food (*annadana*), or wealth. The benefits derived from imparting knowledge are described as immense, both for the giver and the receiver, leading to merit and spiritual advancement.

The Spiritual & Philosophical approach implies ‘knowledge as Supreme Wealth.’ This is the higher, all-encompassing understanding. True knowledge (*Vidya*) is the most valuable and enduring wealth a person can possess. It is not limited to academic or professional skills but extends to wisdom, self-realization, and understanding the nature of reality. Unlike material wealth, it does not diminish when shared; it often grows. It cannot be stolen, lost, or destroyed. It remains with the individual across lifetimes (in a spiritual sense). Knowledge liberates a person. It leads to personal growth and dispels ignorance.

Spiritual and Material Significance in an Individual's Life

For an Individual, *Vidya-Dhana* provides inner peace, wisdom, clarity of thought, and the ability to navigate life's challenges with discernment. It empowers them to seek higher truths and perfection. It fosters ethical conduct and a sense of purpose beyond material accumulation (Govindacharya, 2007).

It equips the individual with skills and expertise that enable them to earn a livelihood, gain respect in society, and achieve financial independence. It is the foundation for a stable and prosperous life, as their skills are their personal, undeniable asset.

Spiritual and Material Significance for a Company

While the texts do not explicitly talk about “companies,” we can apply the principles.

A “company's *Vidya-Dhana*” would be its collective institutional memory, expertise, ethical culture, and shared wisdom. This includes its patents, intellectual property, accumulated best practices, and the deep understanding of its market and mission.

This collective “knowledge wealth” is what gives a company its true enduring value, its ability to innovate, adapt, and serve society. An ethical and knowledgeable culture (akin to “*Dharma*” in the texts) fosters trust, longevity, and a positive impact. Sharing this internal knowledge responsibly (*Vidya-Dana*) builds a stronger, more resilient organization, where employees grow and contribute effectively.

The “gains of learning” for a company are its revenue, profits, market share, and competitive advantage derived from its unique expertise, innovation, and skilled workforce. A company's “*Vidya-Dhana*” (its R&D, employee training, proprietary technology) directly translates into its material success and its ability to generate tangible assets. This knowledge is its exclusive competitive

advantage, much like the individual's “gains of learning” are their sole property.

OECD emphasizes open science, data sharing, and international collaboration to drive innovation and address global challenges (OECD, 2011 pp. 55 - 57). There are striking parallels with *Vidya-Dhana*.

The OECD recognizes that knowledge (research, data, innovation) is the primary driver of economic growth, societal well-being, and global problem-solving. This aligns with knowledge being the “foremost of all wealth.” Both OECD and Indian texts acknowledge that intellectual capital, not just physical capital, is the most critical asset for progress.

OECD principles advocate for open science, data sharing, and cross-border collaboration. This is the modern equivalent of “*Vidya-Dana*.” The rationale is that by sharing research, data, and insights, the collective knowledge base grows faster, leading to quicker solutions for climate change, health crises, poverty, etc. The underlying philosophy is similar (OECD, 2011 pp. 55 - 57).

While OECD promotes openness, it is not absolute. There are principles around responsible data sharing, intellectual property rights, data privacy, and ethical research conduct. Knowledge is not just “dumped” on anyone. It is shared responsibly, ensuring its proper use and preventing misuse (e.g., dual-use technologies). This echoes the idea that knowledge should be imparted to those who are “desirous” and will use it appropriately, and that the “giver” (researcher/institution) has ethical obligations [Manu Smṛti 2.114] (Govindacharya, 2003). Both systems recognize that knowledge transfer must be guided by ethical principles to ensure benefit and prevent harm.

While promoting open science, OECD also acknowledges and respects Intellectual Property (IP) rights (patents, copyrights, trade secrets). This is the modern “material *Vidya-Dhana*.” Companies and individuals who innovate invest resources, and their “gains of learning” (new technologies,

products) are protected as their exclusive property to incentivize further innovation and provide a return on investment. This balances the need for sharing for collective good with the need to protect the fruits of individual or organizational intellectual labor to ensure continued innovation and economic viability (OECD, 2011 p. 56).

In essence, the ancient Indian concept of *Vidya-Dhana* provides a robust framework that seamlessly integrates the philosophical understanding of knowledge as ultimate wealth with the practicalities of its acquisition and ownership. It finds remarkable resonance with modern principles of knowledge management and sharing, emphasizing both the collective benefit of open knowledge and the individual incentive for its creation and protection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper reveals a profound convergence between the *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises* and the ethical tenets of ancient Indian wisdom, particularly as articulated in texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Artha Shastra*, Yajnavalkya Smriti, *Narada Smriti* and *Manu Smriti*. These sources emphasize principles of transparency, equity, environmental stewardship, and ethical governance that mirror, and in many cases, deepen, the modern frameworks of responsible business conduct. By exploring concepts like *Sama Darshana* (equal vision), *Vidya-Dhana* (knowledge as wealth), and Dharmic leadership, the study demonstrates that ancient Indian philosophical traditions offer not only historical parallels but also enduring moral foundations for contemporary corporate ethics. Integrating such civilizational perspectives into global standards can foster a more inclusive, spiritually grounded, and ethically resilient model of enterprise in the 21st century.

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Data Availability Statement

All references used in this study has been included in the paper. Any data that is required is to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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