

“ETHICS OF TAX PLANNING: WHERE DOES LEGITIMACY END AND ILLEGALITY BEGIN?”

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ABSTRACT

Tax planning has a complicated place in the context of fiscal jurisprudence, being at the border of the realm of legality and ethical duty. Although legal legitimate tax planning is accepted to be the legal way to reduce tax liability, the boundary between the fair and a crime tendency is not always clear. Judicial precedents and decisions vary in their purpose of differentiating permissible tax planning and colourable devices to avoid tax proposals, as seen in McDowell and Co. Ltd. v. CTO and Union of India v. Azadi Bachao Andolan. The current paper is a critical analysis of the ethical aspects of tax planning, and it raises the question as to whether adherence to laws is adequate when it comes to establishing legitimacy. It also examines the impact of aggressive tax planning activities on the zeal of tax laws, hampering government revenues, and confidence in the system. The paper states that such a balanced approach is necessary, which entails the incorporation of legal norms with ethical principles in taxation.

INTRODUCTION

Taxation acts as the foundations of the economy of a nation as the main source of revenue to governance and general welfare. In this context, tax planning is practiced by taxpayers to minimize their tax legally. Although such practices are entirely legal, they present significant ethical issues when the applied practices take advantage of the legal loopholes. The line that should be drawn to distinguish between legitimate tax planning, tax avoidance and tax evasion has been a long standing legal and academic debate especially in countries such as India whose tax regulations are quite complex and dynamic.

In the past the courts have been instrumental in defining the sphere of tax planning. In McDowell and Co. Ltd. v CTO, the judiciary took a firm attitude towards avoiding taxing evasion denouncing artificial and colourable devices.

This position was subsequently diluted in Union of India v. Azadi Bachao Andolan in which the Supreme Court accepted the validity of tax planning within the law. Such change underlines the continuing conflict over the legal permissibility and ethical responsibility in taxation.

In this modern era, globalization, digital economies and advanced financial structures have further complicated this argument. MNCs are known to use aggressive tax planning techniques which are legal but in reality, they weaken the purpose of tax policies. These practices put questions on fairness, equity and general integrity of the tax system.

This paper aims at critically assessing the ethical limits of tax planning based on legal principles, judicial trend, and implications. It tries to provide a key question: is it possible to be just compliant with the letter of the law and

not violate the spirit of the law too to judge whether the tax planning practices can be considered legitimate.

MAIN BODY

1. Conceptual Foundations of Tax Planning, Avoidance and Evasion.

The phrase tax planning can be perceived generally as the organization of finance in a way that they will reduced tax liability without violating the law. It is a valid practice that enables the taxpayers to enjoy exemptions, income tax deductions, refunds, and incentives offered by law on tax guidelines. On the contrary, tax evasion is an illegal activity that is characterized as hiding of revenue, falsification or distortion of records to avoid the payment of taxes. However, tax-avoidance exists in a grey field- it implies adopting legal means by which the tax payment can be lowered, which is usually done by applying loopholes or another loophole in law.

The difference between these notions does not simply lie in the semantics but has certain legal and ethical implications. Tax evasion is evidently illegal and punishable but tax avoidance poses complicating issues on whether it is legitimate or not. The question on whether or not acts that satisfy the literal meaning of the law but the intention the law is meant to achieve should be judged acceptable by the courts and scholars has frequently been debated.

The judiciary in India has tried to provide these concepts in terms of decision. Substituting a formalistic approach to the interpretation of tax laws with a more purposive one is an indication of the increasing awareness that the issue of the legitimacy cannot be solely determined by legality. This is a vague conceptual basis of the ethical dilemma of tax planning.

2. Ethics Aspects of Tax Planning.

Tax planning is the subject of an ethical concern that can be seen through the conflict between the rights of individuals and the responsibility of groups. On one hand, the

taxpayers are legally entitled to ensure their affairs are set up in a way that will avoid maximum tax liability. Conversely, the state cannot operate without taxation and cannot provide universal services in the form of healthcare, education and infrastructure.

What renders aggressive tax planning in an ethical perspective is that it compromises the social contract between the state and the people. When people or companies are able to evade tax payment by taking advantage of legal loopholes, they leave the task to other taxpayers, thereby increasing economic inequality. This calls into suspicion the issue of fairness and distributive justice.

There is also the alternative theory of ethics. The overall impact on the welfare of the society would be used as the basis of assessment of tax planning in the utilitarian approach, and the ability of the legal rules and duties would be applied in the deontology approach. Whereas the former can denounce aggressive tax avoidance due to the harmful social impact that it entails, the latter can be rationalized provided that it is done within the framework of the law.

The ethical aspect is even more complicated in the Indian context where the compliance with the taxation is sometimes determined by other factors, including the inefficiency of the administrative system and the debt of confidence to the governmental institutions. Instead of simply asking whether tax planning is legal or not, the issue is whether it is a morally right thing to do.

3. Tax Planning Evolution in India in Judicial Systems.

Indian courts have been instrumental in defining the lines that are followed in tax planning. Initially, the liberal approach was being taken by the courts whereby the taxpayers enjoyed much freedom to organize their matters. This method was followed in initial rulings whereby the primary focus was on the literal interpretation of tax laws.

This however changed everything with the historic ruling in *McDowell and Co Ltd v CTO*. In this instance, the Supreme Court denounced the avoidance of tax under colourable devices and also pointed to the fact that planning of tax should not be a tool to avoid tax legitimacy. The Court noted that tax planning under the law is not forbidden, but rather it should not be encouraged when it goes against the intentions of the law.

This repressive measure was not revisited as *Union of India v. Azadi Bachao Andolan* saw the Supreme Court take a more moderated opinion. The Court believed in the validity of tax planning but differentiated it with tax evasion and acknowledged that it is the right of taxpayers to organize their affairs in a tax-efficient way. The ruling would have been a departure to a more realistic thinking where internationalized economy is recognized as real.

Yet another insight that came out of the ruling in *Vodafone International Holdings v. Union of India* is the intricacies of contemporary tax planning, especially the cross-border tax planning. The Court also stressed on the importance of respecting the legal form of transactions, without certain transactions being sham or artificial.

These court cases demonstrate how tax jurisprudence in India is changing and there is a constant battle to not only provide certainty to the law but also to be ethical.

4. Rules that Regulate Acceptability of Tax Planning.

To curb high-risk tax schemes, courts have come up with a number of doctrines which they use as constructs of guidance. A principal principle of one such, is the principle of substance over form which sets out that authorities may take the legal form of a transaction as good as its true substance. This makes sure that the tax payers are not allowed to evade liability by artificial set ups.

The other relevant doctrine is that of coloured schemes which is schemes meant to look

legitimate but are having their own agenda behind avoiding taxation. The courts have always ruled that these devices are not acceptable.

The concepts of the doctrine of piercing the corporate veil are also applicable in situations where corporate frameworks are applied to avoid taxation. The ignorance that a company is a separate legal personality allows courts to make individuals responsible in paying tax.

The legal framework further has been enhanced in recent years by the introduction of the General Anti-Avoidance Rules (GAAR). GAAR will enable these tax saving authorities to disallow tax benefits brought about by arrangements which lack commercial substance and whose main purpose is to avoid tax.

These principles signalize the attempt to exit a strictly legalistic framework and introduce the ethics-oriented thinking into the tax-judicial process.

5. Ethical Concerns and Corporate Tax Planning.

The corporate entities, especially the multinational corporations are usually at the focal point of the tax planning debate. These entities have access to advanced financial product and access to international networks that facilitate elaborate tax planning procedures which lead to substantial reduction of tax liability.

Such methods as the transfer pricing, shifting their profits as well as the employment of tax haven help corporations to take advantage of the dissimilarities in tax systems of various jurisdictions. These practices might be legally acceptable, but they are very relevant in terms of ethical issues.

The problem is quite major especially in developing states such as India where tax revenues play an important role in economic development. The fact that corporations reduce their tax payments restricts the government on providing vital services as well as increases socio-economic inequalities.

Additionally, the good will of non-aggressive companies will be kept at bay by unethical business conduct of corporations which attracts the attention of tax authorities to conduct aggressive tax planning and avoid tax duties thus offering them a competitive edge over smaller businesses that would not be able to avail of these services. It negatively affects the principles of fairness and competition.

Ethical responsibility of corporations is not only about legal compliance, it also involves the aspect of corporate contribution to the society. As there exists an increasing awareness of the importance of transparency of the taxation as well as accountability to form part of corporate governance.

6. Globalization and Digital Economy Effect.

With globalization, the taxation process has changed and it is now very hard to control the activities behind tax planning. The emergence of the digital economy has made it even more challenging because conventional rules of taxation do not work effectively enough to regulate the issues of digital transactions.

Firms within the digital environment are able to make huge revenues in a country without a physical presence hence escaping taxes. The result has been the so-called base erosion and profit shifting (BEPS), in which the profits are artificially relocated to the low-tax jurisdictions.

India has been undertaking a number of efforts to overcome these issues such as the implementation of equalization levy as well as being part of global efforts headed by the OECD. The efficacy of these measures is, however, a controversial one.

Tax planning is a worldwide issue and so there is need to have harmonious efforts among the nations to see that the tax systems become functional and equitable. Devoid of such collaboration, the disparity between legality and ethics in tax planning is bound to be increased.

7. Technology and Compliance Mechanism Role.

The technological development has had both adverse and positive impacts when it comes to tax planning. On the one hand, they have made more advanced manipulation of taxes possible. Conversely, they have improved the capability of the tax bodies to learn and prevent such activities.

Digitization of tax records, e-filing systems and data analytics are some of the initiatives in India that have enhanced transparency and compliance. Tax evasion has also been minimized by the introduction of GST together with e-invoicing.

Technology, however, will not be able to adequately solve the ethical concerns of tax planning. It should be accompanied by sound laws and enforcement systems.

8. Identification of the Boundary: Legitimacy vs Illegality.

The main issue of the research is on which side to put the boundary between acceptable tax planning and illegality. Although there are certain rules and principles of the law and court that, to an extent, offer us guidance, it is not always obvious where the line is.

A legal approach would simply mean complying with the set laws and ethical approach would imply taking into consideration the motive and effects of tax planning activities. They have to combat these viewpoints.

The idea of a purposive interpretation of laws of taxes is one of the potential solutions, which considers the objectives of the legislation. The use of this method enables the more subtle evaluation of the tax planning practices.

The issue of morality of taxation is another significant component which states that the tax payers have the obligation of paying towards the community good. The culture of voluntary compliance encouragement may reduce the disparity between legality and ethics.

In conclusion, the issue of legitimacy must be a balanced one that should take the legal and ethical aspects into account.

9. Problems and the Solution.

Nevertheless, many obstacles are behind the efforts to ensure that the ethical issues related to tax planning will move in the right direction. These comprise: complicated tax laws, ambiguity in the law, and internationalisation of tax aversion measures.

These issues have been met with the need to introduce wholesome reforms that ease the tax regulations, enhance their enforcement mechanisms and encourage cooperation between countries. Another crucial point is that there is the necessity to make taxpayers and corporations ethically aware.

Transparency programs and educational programs, corporate governance changes can be very instrumental in enforcing ethical tax practices. Aligning ethical principles and legal systems can also be a way to establish a fairer and more sustainable tax system.

A significant dimension that must be inserted before the conclusion is the relationship between taxpayer confidence and voluntary compliance. Every tax system ultimately depends not only on penalties and audits, but also on the willingness of citizens and corporations to comply in good faith. When taxpayers believe that the system is fair, transparent, and uniformly enforced, they are more likely to disclose income honestly and meet their obligations on time. However, when aggressive tax planning by wealthy individuals or multinational corporations becomes common, ordinary taxpayers may perceive the system as unequal and discriminatory. This creates a psychological sense that tax burdens are unfairly distributed, reducing moral commitment toward compliance. In such circumstances, even honest taxpayers may begin to justify concealment or evasion on the belief that others are escaping liability through technical devices. Therefore, unethical tax

planning does not merely reduce revenue directly; it can indirectly damage the culture of compliance upon which the entire fiscal structure rests. Another relevant aspect is the role of professional advisers, including chartered accountants, tax consultants, lawyers, and financial planners. These professionals occupy a powerful position because complex tax laws often require expert interpretation. While many advisers help clients lawfully organize their affairs, some may design aggressive schemes that technically comply with statutory language while frustrating legislative intent. This raises the ethical question whether professionals owe duties only to their clients or also to the public interest. Since taxation funds governance and welfare, advisers cannot be treated as neutral technicians detached from social consequences. Many jurisdictions increasingly impose disclosure obligations, reporting standards, and disciplinary consequences upon advisers involved in abusive arrangements. In India as well, strengthening ethical standards for tax professionals can play an important preventive role. If advisers prioritize responsible compliance over artificial avoidance, the gap between legality and legitimacy can be substantially reduced. A further issue concerns the importance of simplification of tax laws. Excessive complexity often creates loopholes, interpretational ambiguity, and opportunities for manipulation. When tax statutes become too technical, sophisticated taxpayers gain an advantage over ordinary citizens because they can afford expert assistance and cross-border structuring mechanisms. Simpler laws with clear drafting, fewer exemptions, rational rates, and consistent enforcement reduce the scope for avoidance while improving public understanding. Simplicity also supports ethical behaviour because taxpayers can more easily recognize what is expected from them. Thus, one of the most effective responses to unethical tax planning is not merely stricter punishment, but the creation of a fair, understandable, and predictable tax regime. A transparent system

encourages compliance, limits abuse, and strengthens trust between the State and taxpayers.

CONCLUSION

The ethical morality of tax planning actually then depends on the fine balances between what is legally allowed and what is ethically obligatory. The right of taxpayers to organize their financial affairs in the manner that allows minimization of the tax liability is acknowledged by the law; however, this right does not attract an absolute status. It is observed that the line between legitimate tax planning and illegality is obscure when such arrangement, albeit technically within the limits of the statutory provisions, serves to derail the objective and ethos of tax laws. This tension identifies the intrinsically restrictive nature of using only legal frameworks to enforce regulating behaviour of taxpayers.

Court decisions in India have played a major role in developing this boundary. The shift in the rigid position in opposition to tax evasion to a more subtle approach of permitting acceptable tax planning can be said to be the effort of the judiciary to strike a balance between legal certainty and the reality of the economy. Nevertheless, aggressive tax avoidance approaches have not diminished, and this fact suggests that legislation cannot be used solely to eliminate the issue. Ethics have to be the focal point on whether or not tax practices are legitimate.

With a growing globalizing and digital economy, the issues relating to tax avoidance have been complexified and extended in their scope. The MNCs and high-net-worth individuals keep taking advantage of the loopholes in national and global tax clearing systems, thus diminishing the tax revenue and causing the decline of the trust. This requires more powerful regulatory tools, improved cooperation between countries and increased openness of financial transactions.

Finally, it is impossible to establish the legitimacy of tax planning based only on whether it complies with the letter of the law. It should also be in line with the greater goals of equity, fairness and social welfare. It should not just be the enforcement of a tax structure which should be designed as sustainable but it must be a culture of ethical compliance whereby taxpayers appreciate their contribution to the common good.

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