

Thirukkural -
A Study of the Relevance and Application of Virtue to
the Modern World

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Abstract

Thirukkural, one of the eighteen Didactic works of the Post-Sangam period, also known as the Tamil Veda and Tamil Marai, holds a very crucial place in history and it is an ancient treatise by Thiruvalluvar which transcends all barriers of Mankind. Comprising of two lines verses, this ethical work contains deep thoughts and deals with all kinds of virtues. The essence of the Thirukkural is to create a world devoid of evils, filled with good values and where it is worth living. The poet's profound thoughts and his venture into the elements related to the aspects of elementary values present a Code of Conduct that are crucial to bring about righteous way of living. The Code leads the followers to a life of perfection and widening of knowledge amidst the community. It is a book which is based on life experiences that transcends all barriers be it spiritual, cultural or social. This paper deals with virtue as depicted by Thiruvalluvar.

Keywords: *Thirukkural*, Thiruvalluvar, Didactic works, elementary values, profound thoughts, Code of conduct, life experiences.

Introduction

Written by Thiruvalluvar, also known as Deivappulavar, Nayanaar, Poyyappulavar, the *Thirukkural* is one of the oldest literary works in Tamil. The Thirukkural, as stated by Kulandaisamy, the former Vice Chancellor of Anna University of Tamil Nadu, is 'an extraordinary treatise on the Art of Living. It dwells deep into the unshifting foundations of human life, the society in general, and for the individuals of the society.' It has incorporated quite a huge amount of virtuous deeds called Aram. These virtuous qualities are intended to transform the world into an ideal one. *Thirukkural* not only deals with the home and the family but also covers every aspect of human life.

Thiruvalluvar's concept of virtue in some ways are in line with that of the great Philosophers like Confucius and Aristotle. His focus on Goodness of mankind, abstention from evils, warmth in the conjugal life reveal his high level of thoughts and his deep insights into human

nature. So, in this paper an attempt will be made to highlight virtues enunciated in Thirukkural and the focus will be mainly on the need for the application of the virtues in the modern world.

Aim of the Research

The aim of this research is to analyze the different elements of Virtue in Thirukkural and its relevance and application to the modern world.

Hypothesis

Living a life of virtue only can lead Man to a life of Excellence.

Methodology

The study is a qualitative one. The main focus of the study is on virtue. Hence, the methodology used is grounded on the sources of information from real life experiences and from books and websites.

Significance of Virtue

The meaning attributed to Virtue has known a change over the years. Virtue at the beginning meant manliness or valor. Now it is being defined as the moral excellence of a person. Indeed, virtue is a transliteration of the Latin word ‘virtus’ meaning manhood.

Morally excellent people have a character made-up of virtues valued as good. The people are generally kind, honest, respectful, grateful and possess a forgiving mind. They tread on the right path and are not inclined to do harm to others. Instead they act according to values and principles.

According to Philosophers, to live a life of excellence one needs to cultivate Virtues. If one possesses these virtues these will help them to redirect their life and ultimately lead them to a life of fulfillment.

Theorists’ Views about Virtue

According to Manarishi Suddhananda Bharati, ‘The Thirukkural is the guiding light to humanity. It leads one to live in moral purity, in eternal wisdom, in spiritual knowledge, and in perfect prosperity, wealth and health. It is a faithful friend to the family man, to the mother, to children, to teachers, artists, rulers and politicians’ (https://www.projectmadurai.org/pm_etexts/pdf/pm0017.pdf).

High influential thinkers like Confucius and Aristotle went deep into the ethical thought. In the book written by Jiyuan Yu entitled *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue*,

the author discusses the way in which these thinkers ground their ethical values in a concept of Human Nature.

Confucius was a thinker who concentrated on ethics and moral philosophy. For him virtue is human excellence or goodness with regard to human function. He quoted:

“Virtue is more to a man than either water or fire. I have never seen men die from treading on water and fire, but I have seen a man die treading the course of virtue” (<https://www.quotes.net/quote/1290>).

Indeed, the Confucius’ concept about virtue is similar to that of Aristotle. The latter believes that ‘the virtue of a human being will likewise be the state that makes a human being good and makes him perform his function well’ (<http://buildthefire.com/btf-philosophy-aristotles-golden-mean/>).

Abraham Lincoln who is full of wisdom believes that folks who have no vices have very few virtues (https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/abraham_lincoln_161243)

John Locke who was an English philosopher and physician, was one of the most influential of Enlightenment thinkers. For him, ‘virtue is harder to be got than knowledge of the world; if lost in a young man, is seldom recovered’ (<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7619102-virtue-is-harder-to-be-got-than-knowledge-of-the>)

Professor David Carr, research professor at the University of Birmingham in the UK, regarded virtue and vices as not innate but acquired. For him virtue and quality of character are closely related, and these cannot only improve man but can make him morally better.

According to Mahatma Gandhi, Thirukkural is a textbook of indispensable authority on moral life. Being himself a virtuous man, he says that ‘you must not lose faith in Humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.’ He firmly believes that ‘That which is inherent in man is his Virtue.’ His concepts about Truth, Goodness and Beauty are being in line with those of Thiruvalluvar.

Indeed, these philosophers share the views that ‘an aesthetics of virtue that prizes inner moral which result in elegant behavior - it is precisely this behavior that will shape the society’ (<https://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/ConfGandhi.htm>). So, all philosophers will dream of an ideal world, free of sins, a world where it is good to live.

The Importance of Virtue

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Virtues are basic qualities that are recognized throughout the world. Man is in constant search of power, freedom, bliss and peace. Hence by practicing virtue he will help not only build our character but will help the individual to fulfill his goals. Thiruvalluvar, through his maxims, reiterates the idea that once forgiven, all resentment and anger will be dissolved. However, by so doing he must not indulge in corrupt things.

The Indian Schools of Philosophy emphasize on ‘The Forget and Forgive Policy’, a theme which all the followers of God preach. Thiruvalluvar also in his couplets lays emphasis on it. He believes that the best punishment for those who do evil to you is to shame them by returning good for evil.

Attributes of Virtuous People

It is not an easy task to lead a virtuous life. But, in order to live a life full of virtues, one should possess a character full of seriousness, dignity, satisfaction and kindness, trust, gratitude. Becoming virtuous is an attribute that a person himself may not be aware of. Not only his act but the way people will react to it as well will yield results that will reflect his virtuousness. Only virtuous people will be reliable and trustworthy.

Hence, to develop our potential and to live a more purposeful and better life, one should practice these virtues. These virtues will exhibit not only in the outcome of one’s act but in the response of people. Virtuous people will have a virtuous mind and people will not hesitate to seek help from him. By practicing these virtues man will develop his potentials and will live a far better life.

Human Values and Virtue

The German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 –1900) was the first one to have used the word ‘Values’ in 1880. He used the word Values to denote moral attitudes and beliefs. Values indeed comes from the word ‘Value’ meaning worth of something.

(<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche-moral-political/>)

Human Values and Virtue cannot be dissociated from one another. Since time immemorial traditional values like reverence to elders, strong family ties among others have been emphasized upon by our elders. Respect for others is indeed one core value which aims at achieving peace, harmony and sustainable development. Virtues are indeed imbibed in these very values. In our life human Values and culture are subject to changes. However, Valluvar while referring to universal moral values, pointed out that the basic rules of morality are the same across cultures. For him, the universality of the moral values he preaches are meant to be applied to all Human Beings across all cultures.

Thirukkural and Virtue

Composed by the great sage Thiruvalluvar during the post-Sangam period *Thirukkural* is a ‘Universal Tamil Scripture. As pointed by G. Rajagopal, this didactic work is a grand mosaic of cultural Creation, a repertory of universal thoughts and Truths.

Being a guide for all individuals, this work consists of 3 sections, namely, Aram (Virtue), Porul (Wealth) and Inbam (Love). The first section encompasses all the ideals of a virtuous life. Aram brings about all kinds of virtues which Thiruvalluvar summarizes into 38 chapters. His couplets are enshrined in the hearts of the whole population. Though a lot of drastic changes occur in today’s society, yet a lot of virtues as quoted by Thiruvalluvar are glorified in Tamil society.

According to Thiruvalluvar, virtue exhibits itself in different forms. In the chapter on virtue, he refers to the power of virtue which, according to him, is a drive that brings man to act with humanitarian mind, contribute to the betterment of the society while putting his own life at stake. As pointed out in kural 34, a pure mind will make the individual to abstain himself from all vices and evils. The one possessing a spotless and pure mind possesses all qualities of virtue.

**“A spotless mind is virtue’s sum
All else is empty noise” (kural 34)**

It is very important for someone to have a spotless mind to practice virtue. The one living a virtuous life should not think about his own gains. Hence, he will be someone upon whom one can rely upon as compared to the one whose mind is filthy and corrupt and who will go about boasting about himself, without so much contributing to society. He will yield unfruitful acts and will utter baseless words, and this will lead him to his downfall.

By referring to the law of virtue Thiruvalluvar is advising man to be cautious in life. One should not think about his gains at the expense of society. He firmly reiterates the ideal of virtue by counseling man ‘to avoid even thoughtless ill’ for ruining others’ life out of forgetfulness may lead to his own downfall. (kural 204)

For Thiruvalluvar everyone cherishes a goal in life, but then the means to achieve it should be fair and just.

In several of his kural, Thiruvalluvar reiterates that an evil mind will lead to evil act. So, if one really loves himself, he should refrain from doing harm to others. (kural-206, 209, 210)

In the first 38 chapters on virtue, Thiruvalluvar emphasizes that a virtuous mind is crucial for the smooth running of the world and this will bring about positive vibes in society. A virtuous mind will refrain someone from indulging in crimes, evils and social sins. For him consuming meat, cheating and causing injury to others, resorting to all sorts of evil acts out of anger will destroy not only him but the society at large. Man, once rid of these acts, will be freed from vices, hence it will lead him to have a happy and harmonious life.

The remarkable work in the couplets on virtue, by their very feelings and content, bears a great similarity to Greece gnostic poetry. Indeed, Thiruvalluvar provided some of the most essential Code of Conduct to Human Beings. For instance, in kural 321, he refers to the act of non-killing which he conforms as being a virtuous act.

**“The sum of virtue is not to kill
All sins come from killing” (kural 321)**

From this it is clear that Gandhian thought in line with the Valluvar’s thought. Gandhi had a strong belief in Ahimsa which he preached to mankind all during his lifetime.

Non-injury of any form is considered to be of highest virtue. Indeed, Swami Shivananda shared common views with Thiruvalluvar. Both of them firmly believed that causing injury to a living creature is a greatest sin. Hence, Swami Shivananda’s thought is in line with Thiruvalluvar’s couplet on non-killing: “Do not injure any being or creature in thought, word or deed.” Thiruvalluvar, by convincing man to refrain from killing in any form, seems to favour vegetarianism. However, it may also be noted that plants are also living beings. Hindu theology of *samsara* and *karma* announces that humans could have a rebirth in the form of plants, etc. based on their *karma*.

Alagappa Rammohan rightly pointed out in his version of ‘Thirukkural, The Handbook of Tamil Culture and Heritage’, unless man gets rid of violence from his mind and thought, he cannot show compassion to his fellow creatures. Violence is disruptive and will not lead to unity among people without which no peace will prevail on earth. For Rammohan, ‘if someone practices non-killing out of respect for all lives, he practices a supreme virtue. But if someone has resort to killing, he is showing irreverence to life.’

Sharing one’s food, refraining oneself from telling lies, stealing, cruelty and doing things out of anger, indulging in good deeds like charity even though being hurt by others are all those attributes to virtue. Thiruvalluvar believes that a good man’s mind is filled with virtue whereas a thief’s mind is filthy, hence it is filled with greed and deceit.

Virtue as the Essence of Domestic Life

A great attribute has been assigned to the spouse who is considered to be the pillar who sustains the family united, brings about fame and not malign the family. As William Shakespeare rightly pointed out, 'Behind every successful man there is a woman.'. Indeed, this has been proved since ancient times. Indeed, Thiruvalluvar has drawn the picture of the perfect householder in his verses.

Thiruvalluvar in the chapters on Domestic life and Wife, Life's Noble Partner, glorifies the wife and household. He highlights the concept of virtue. For him the Domestic life when freed from blame (kural 49) is virtue in itself. The essence of domestic life is love and virtue. These qualities are very crucial without which domestic life would have been deprived of its essence.

Kuruntokai, a compilation of Sangam era classic poems dealing with love and family life, shows the lover/husband would part ways with the woman with whom he is in love, and would go to paramours and war. But the wife would wait patiently and faithfully for her husband or lover to return. Another vivid example is found in the great epic *Silappathikaram* in which Sage Ilango describes Kannagi as a very submissive faithful wife, fulfilling her duties towards her in-laws even after being separated from her husband Kovalan.

Thiruvalluvar also glorifies the wife by attributing several good qualities to her. A true wife is considered as the noble life's partner of man and whose virtues match her home and who lives within her husband's means. The wife is considered to be the pillar of society. She brings about her contribution in terms of support to her husband, family and works towards the progress of the family.

In some sense, patriarchy was the dominant form of family then and now. The role of the wife, in recent years due to social reformation movements, will be defined and described different from what ancient Tamil literature, including Thiruvalluvar's *Thirukkural* describes.

Virtue of Charity

Virtue is indeed one quality that makes man more cultured and it elevates him to a higher level. Thiruvalluvar's concept of charity is not restricted to only bestowing of alms to others, but it englobes all the social services to all living creatures.

**“To give before hearing “I lack”
Is the mark of the well-born.” (kural 223)**

Virtue as an Investment

One of the qualities that raises man to a higher level in society is virtue. Virtue not only yields greatness and pride to people but bestows wealth as well. Thiruvalluvar, in the chapter on virtue, sees virtue as an investment in life that will bear fruits in future. What better investment than virtue which yields both wealth and release to the living? (kural 31) By that he means that virtue is a quality that can secure one's life. Man, once equipped with virtue, is ready to confront the world. One does not need to search for virtue as it is inborn in himself. So, once he is aware of it, he should be at the disposal of Man at the expense of his own happiness.

For Thiruvalluvar, only virtue will lead man to creativity. If there is no virtue no creativity of any type will result. A person if acquires the quality of virtue is considered to be the wealthiest of man.

There is no greater gain than virtue. Hence, virtue once forgotten will lead someone to ultimate loss.

The Righteousness of Virtue

Leading a virtuous life will lead an individual to a proper life, to success and progress in life. One who possesses virtue is considered to be a wealthy man. However, when forfeiting it, evil may befall him. Man should keep on practicing virtue as this will help him to refrain from all sorts of vices.

Virtue alone leads to happiness and bliss in the family. All else is without praise. So avoid vices and indulge in virtuous deeds, says Thiruvalluvar. (kural 40)

Virtue / Non-Virtue

Thiruvalluvar ponders upon the true meaning of virtue. He hesitates between virtue being an act or a word. He goes deeper and looks down upon it as being a thought. Someone should be filled of virtue to live a life of perfection. The mind is at the basis of all action and thought. So purity of the mind is first and foremost. So does virtue. One whose heart is devoid of evils and is full of virtue is known to be a virtuous person., hence will lead a harmonious life.

For Thiruvalluvar, envy, greed and harsh words are qualities that will have negative impact on man. Envyng the status and position of others, longing to have more and more wealth, possessing a mind filled with anger and constantly using harsh words that will hurt the feelings of others are the negative qualities that can bring about one's downfall. Once these negative qualities are rid of, virtue will prevail, says Thiruvalluvar. (kural 35).

**“Envy, greed, wrath and harsh words –
These four avoided is virtue.” (kural 35)**

In kural 96 Thiruvalluvar makes an appraisal about the power of words. If a man uses useful and sweet words, his sins will diminish, and his virtue will increase. Well-chosen words are used by great leaders as they will yield good results and will have good impact on man. Harsh Words can either destroy someone's peace, ultimately bringing him to his downfall, contrary to sweet words that will have a positive impact and will yield good fruits.

Conclusion

To conclude it is befitting to say that Thiruvalluvar is a great genius of his era. His focus was centered on life and he believed that for a man to lead a complete life he should be full of virtue. His principles about life, the moral values he preached, when adopted by man will help him lead a life of fulfillment. By sharing these high valued thoughts about virtue, Thiruvalluvar has helped humanity. Hence, it is befitting to say that the principles about virtues will definitely elevate Man and will bring him to achieve excellence in life.

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