

TIRUKKURAL AND ITS UNIQUE PLACE IN INDIAN LITERATURE

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Vedam Venkataraya Sastry was a scholar in Sanskrit, Telugu and also in Tamil. A poet, critic and essayist in Telugu language. His appreciation of *Tirukkural* is in a comparative aspect.

The greatness of *Tirukkural* in the history of Indian Literature, nay, in that of world literature cannot be over-estimated. It occupies a unique place both as a book of morals and an excellent piece of poetic composition. Though I wanted to confine myself to its Telugu translations and similar works in Telugu literature, I felt called upon, after going deeper into the book, that the subject needs wider treatment by its very innate universal appeal. As much is said of its poetic excellence, i.e. *Kural* as a book of morals.

Modern scholars, in their enthusiasm and admiration to the great teacher, are not tired of calling the book a religious one, and a moral code. They call it the Tamil *Veda*, Tamil Bible, Tamil Koran and so on at the same time emphasizing on its secular character and universal appeal standing above all sectarian and racial prejudices. These statements sound contradictory and some times make one feel that they are the outcome of confused thinking. Religious views seldom rise above the prejudices of sect, caste, creed or nationality and humanity at present is, on this basis, divided into airtight compartments making cultural contacts and emotional integrity difficult, if not impossible. From my humble cursory glance of this great book I do not find anything religious about it. By religion I mean anything about God and other worldliness. There is nothing otherworldly in it and the author appears to have had no mind to teach his readers any practical way to realise god or find happiness in heaven at the end of this life on earth. He definitely wants us to realise actual facts around us in this mundane earth, strive,

* Source: Sanjeevi. N. (ed.), 1973. *First All-India Tirukkural Research Seminar Papers (May-1972)*. Madras: University of Madras. pp.81-86.

to be happy in this birth in our present condition of flesh and blood and live a clean life without quarrels, differences and even small bickering. He does not worry about god without being atheistic at the same time. He wants us to pray to god but make no fuss about religiosity.

A cursory glance at the plan of his book confirms the above view. The treatise is divided into three parts usually known as Dharma, Artha and Kama (Üø¸-ªð£¼œ-Þ¸ð¸) and as we have no proper English equivalent words we can just be satisfied by translating these as Virtue, Wealth and Family life. Dharma is a very wide one. It may be called duty and man's duties are innumerable. He is bound by birth to behave in a particular way to his neighbours and react in a particular way to his surroundings. After praising god and mentioning of the blessing of rain, merit of ascetics and power of virtue, he dilates upon domestic and ascetics virtue. About domestic virtue married life and the happiness of a householder are made much of. Stress is laid on hospitality, gratitude, self-control, fear of sin and one's own duty to society. Regarding ascetic virtue non-violence, non-killing, compassion abstinence from flesh – eating and compassion are emphasized. All this shows that one should try to be as good as possible in every walk of life, as agreeable as possible to society and nature. In the second book or division he has taken up the state. From Domestic economy, if I can say so, he has gone to political economy. Herein he has prescribed a code of conduct for the rulers of a country. He has prescribed the state into seven parts, the king, the minister of ministers, territory, fort, treasury and army and finally a friend or good advisor. This is exhaustive and includes everything required for politics and political economy. The last part or book devoted to Þ¸ð¸ (Kama or love) He advises young men and women just trying to understand the world and to proceed in the proper path. Love is the most important factor in the life of a boy or a girl and any false step is enough to make the entire life a person miserable. A boy or a girl has to think twice and choose well one's own partner in life. Proper advice is necessary at the stage of adolescence. Herein the great author is at his best in analyzing human psychology and guiding humanity. Hence we find no advice given to anybody to become only God-minded. He does not ask us 'Bhaja Govindam' or say 'Namacha Sivaya' or 'Buddham Saranam Gachcami'. He simply says 'You have many things to learn on earth, learn them and be happy'.

Now coming to the life and times of Tiruvalluvar, much controversy has to be faced. No doubt he lived some two thousand years ago at the fag end of the third Sangam but his life history is surrounded in mystery. More stories are

current that he was a weaver and was living at Mylapore, or that he was a royal drummer or civil servant of a low origin and his wife Vasuki was a devoted wife. Whatever these stories expect us to believe one thing is clear that he did not belong to any high class in life and was one among the masses well acquainted with life and its different aspects. Some are of the opinion that Valluvar was not his personal name and denotes the office he held under the state. If this view were to be correct we can safely equate the term Valluva with Vallava or Vallabha of the Asokan and later inscriptions contemporaneous with the Sangam periods. Inscriptions say so and so king orders thus - '*mautri, purohita, saamanta, amaatya, aayuktaka, nigeektaka, aadhikaarika, mahattaraan sakala naiyogika Vallabhaan, ittham aajnaapayati*. Here the term *Vallabhaa* denotes an officer. Whether it is a Sanskrit term or a Dravidian one is not to the point but the term is found in use. As in later history many ministers and persons holding high posts in the service of the state are found as poets and writers it is not unlikely that Tiruvalluvar was in state service like Sekkilar of a later stage and wrote his book.

It is also curious to note that the famous author of *Panchatantra*, Vishnu Sarma, also lived at Mylapore a city that has great antiquity. *Panchatantra* mentions the place " *aste Dakshinaatyee Janapadee Mahilaroopyam naama nagaram*." Though *Panchatantra* is different in plan by way of its cock and bull stories it gives, the saptanga theory of state and prescribes a good moral code of conduct. It, of course, has no chapter on love. As *Panchatantra* is slightly later than the Sangam period it is likely that Vishnu Sarma was influenced by *Tirukkural* and made certain parts easy for the public, of course writing in Sanskrit. I would like to make one point clear. Whatever the language the thought was Indian for the great *Artha Sastra* of Kautilya was already in the field. Its date being 300 B.C. and Chanakya is also said to be a southern Brahmin there is no doubt that whole of India was thinking alike. Later authors did not like the unscrupulous ways of Chanakya and condemned his methods as we find in Bana's *Kadambari*. Tiruvalluvar being impelled by his compassionate nature appears to have taken the Saptanga theory of state and modified the approach to one of *ahimsa*. We see much similarity between *Tirukkural's* second book and many works on *arthasastra* and definitely Tiruvalluvar has improved upon his predecessors.

In Sanskrit we find many books on *Niti sastra*, *loka niti* and *rajya niti* and large chapters in *Mahabharata*. Some authors have dealt with these separately. Many of these are considered as later interpolations into the *Mahabharata*. If

mention a particular approach to salvation, Sivabhakti or Vishnubhakti would mar the secular character of his work. I think he wisely avoided unpleasant controversy but ignoring the chapter (sic). It is also likely that *moksha* is automatically assured if one follows the three properly as it is more in the nature of a reward for good way of life than a way of living itself. It is a reward of *phala* for *karma* or action.

Though there is no Sanskrit translation or adaptation of this great book, Telugu has the unique honour of being the earliest in Indian languages to have a translation. Indian translations were made earlier. The first Telugu translation was made in 1877 with elaborate notes by Venkatrama Srividyanandaswami of the Kanuparti family. He called it *Trivarga Dipika*, in 1892 Sri Sakkam Narasimhalu Naidu translated selections called *Trivargamu*. In 1906 another translation of selections was made by one Sri C. Lakshmi Narayana Sastri. The famous poet and translator of *Kamba Ramayana* into Telugu, the late Sri P. Sriramulu Reddi published his translation in 1948. My friend Challa Radhakrishna Sarma published his *Tamila Vedamu* in 1954. In 1955 Sri Jalayya Published it as *Nitisudha*. Recently in 1966 another friend of mine, Sri Sonti Sripait Sastry published his translation as *Sri Padula*. Having lived in Tamil Nadu together with the Tamils the Andhras also share the feeling of the Tamils and welcome any number of translations with pride.
