

## Thiruvalluvar—the Author of a Realizable Utopia

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From the beginning of Civilization, philosophers and poets in different parts of the world have been endeavouring to design a Heaven on earth. The earliest work, perhaps, is **The Republic of Plato**. **Kamban** depicts one in the description of King Dasaratha's, empire. It was Dr. Thomas More's concept that carried the designation, 'Utopia', identified later, with any unrealizable ideal.

It goes to the unique credit of Thiruvalluvar, truly a representative of the philosophic heritage of ancient Tamils, that he succeeded in scripting an Utopia that is realizable. We may, in the following paragraphs, see a brief treatment of the theme.

Thiruvalluvar establishes, as the base, a universally acceptable and for his times a revolutionary axiom, **that all human beings are born equal**. Neither the Sudra of Manu, nor the slave of Aristotle has a place in his scheme of things. He proceeds further to provide his edifice a substratum that is **secular**, a concept unknown at that time.

Problem of life on earth is a problem of choice among alternatives. He provides two cardinal tools to weigh and measure any issue and draw conclusions.

- **Whosoever be the author of a given statement, wisdom lies in perceiving the truth in it**
- **Whatsoever be the nature of the object, wisdom lies in seeing the truth in it.**
- **Neither the stature of the person who makes the statement, nor the sacredness of the object investigated, must influence one's decision.**

Having established a base for support and guidelines to construct, he proceeds further to raise his edifice of a Heaven on earth. He is convinced that one does not have to look up and wait till one's demise for a place in the Heaven. Thiruvalluvar postulates as follows:

**Whether it is a heavenly abode or a divine estate, it is well within one's reach in this world itself provided one lives in accordance with the appropriate norms for a healthy living.**

Having assured that living in accordance with appropriate norms will ensure a life on earth equal to the state of the Gods in the Heaven, he endeavours to set the norms. The process normally consists of a code of conduct with prescriptions such as:

- Thou shall not tell a lie
- Thou shall be compassionate and kind to all
- Thou shall be just

and so on. Practical experience shows that in day to day life, adhering to an ideal often presents a dilemma of having to choose between ethics and common good. An example is that you see a woman fleeing to escape from impending danger and chasing her comes a man who enquires you about her. To say that you do not know anything will be uttering falsehood; to tell the truth will be endangering the poor woman's life. In the real world, one must bear the responsibility for the consequences of one's action. One cannot take shelter under the virtue of speaking the truth. It is typical of problems faced by philosophers and moralists even today.

Thiruvalluvar devises a unique system to find an acceptable approach to meet the situation mentioned above. He holds non-violence and truth as the highest among the virtues. Referring to abstaining from falsehood, he declares:

**If one has the power to abstain  
from falsehood-yes, abstain from falsehood,  
Virtue will be well with him  
Even though he practises no  
other virtue-yes, even though  
he practises no other virtue ..... (297)**

Having made this declaration, he develops a unique philosophy of truth and falsehood. He says:

**What is truth? It means  
Speaking of such words  
As are totally free from  
causing any harm .....(291)**

Referring to falsehood, he comes out with the following postulate:

**Even falsehood has the nature of truth  
If it confers a benefit that is absolutely  
Free from blemish (292)**

**Truth is not merely telling the fact, but must be free from causing any harm and falsehood has the nature of truth, if it confers a benefit and is free from any harm.** It is an extraordinary and profound statement. It is a new and unique definition of truth itself. Similarly in every case of a puzzle in living upto an ideal, he devises means of surmounting practical difficulties by adding a rider without in any way compromising with the main objective.

In general Thiruvalluvar's approach to life is positive. He extols human endeavour; reposes great confidence in hard work and unrelenting pursuit of an objective.

He lived at a time when it was popularly believed that every thing moves according to what is pre-ordained. The effect of fate in life has been and is a crucial question that we face even today. Discussing at some length the course of fate and the power of human will, he concludes that consistent hard work will overcome fate. He declares:

**Those who continue to work hard  
With unrelenting perseverance  
Will vanquish even fate ( 620)**

The statement is categorical and unequivocal. It is a revolutionary observation considering that he lived in a society which believed that:

**Other than in accordance with His will even an atom will not move**

Human progress has gone through four stages, namely Agricultural Civilization, Industrial Civilization, High Technology Era and what is now known as the Knowledge Era. In the agricultural age production and economy depended

on craft and might of muscle power. In the continuous struggle among the power of money, the might of muscle and the influence of mind, we witness now the decisive triumph of mind. But 2000 years from today, living in the age of craft and agricultural civilization, Valluvar declared as follows:

**Those who possess, wisdom/ knowledge**

**Possess every thing**

**Those who do not possess wisdom/knowledge**

**Whatever they may possess, have nothing .....(430)**

The majestic statement that those who have knowledge have all without any qualifying rider, speaks volumes about his insight into the power of the mind and supremacy of knowledge.

We are living in an age when things change fast and obsolescence sets in rapidly. Change and motion alone are permanent in this world. If Valluvar was to establish a realizable Utopia, laying down the norms for the art of living, it is unthinkable that his guidelines, prescribed 2000 years from now, could be acceptable to the modern generation. In order to ensure that his statements enjoy relevance, irrespective of place and time, he adopts two strategies. He keeps himself away from such phenomena as may change with time. **He does not discuss issues in the areas of Knowledge which continues to change and develop. He confines himself to those aspects that concern wisdom.** When it comes to perceptions that may change even in the areas of wisdom, he employs in an admirable manner a method of generalization where our interpretation can change with our perception. As an example we may take the importance of 'Good Conduct'. It is certainly a topic of great importance in a book on the art of living; but the concept of good conduct varies from country to country and even from place to place and from time to time. There can be no universal agreement on details as to what constitutes good conduct. Thiruvalluvar after due deliberation on the importance of good conduct defines it as follows:

Good conduct is what the wise men of the given period, in a every society decide as such. According to him:

**Those who know not how to act**

**Agreeably to the world.**

**Though they have learnt many things**

**They are still ignorant.....(148)**

In Tamil tradition the expression, 'the world' denotes the elites/wise men of the society. Thiruvalluvar lays down that for the members of the public, norms of good conduct are as laid down by the wise, which in general, constitute the tradition of the society.

Thiruvalluvar does not discuss such macro-systems as the political system or economic system and make recommendations. He considers the indivisible element of the society, that is **an individual** and considers him in various capacities. He applies his mind to relatively unshifting foundations in life. He considers such values as courtesy, humanity, philanthropy, love, kindness, friendship, gratitude, loyalty, integrity and other components which go to constitute the quality of life on earth.

In order to illustrate Thiruvalluvar's strategy of generalization, I may quote one more example. He devotes three chapters related to learning and education. In all the three of them he stresses the virtue of learning; the power of knowledge, the baseness of illiteracy, and the importance of gaining knowledge by listening to scholars; but he does not even remotely refer to the subject to be learnt or the book to be studied. He would only say:

**Learn what has to be learnt**

The statement is a universal container that can hold whatever is appropriate in a given situation.

He has through out his treatment, resiled from mentioning proper names: for instance, he devotes a whole chapter to stress the importance of the power of speech, but would not mention the name of any language, including his own mother tongue 'Tamil'. He has a chapter on State and the characteristics of a prosperous Country, but does not mention the name of any country/place/city nor the kingdoms that existed then in Tamil Land or elsewhere on the

subcontinent. He refers to the necessity of having perennial rivers, but does not refer to any river. He talks at length about the rulers, ministers and governance of a country; but does not refer to any dynasty, any king, even the great Tamil royal dynasties, the Cholas, Pandiyas, and Cheras . Thiruvalluvar knew that the moment he referred to a language or a country or a dynasty of rulers, he would have to ensure its relevance to a given situation and that would militate against the universal appeal of the book. He has therefore scrupulously avoided any mention or reference that might circumscribe the applicability of his observations to a country, race or religion.

The Kural is a book that the Tamils must study in greater depth; let the rest of the country know more of it. It is an essential part of the heritage, not only of the Tamil land but the country as a whole. The book in a way also bears evidence to the height of civilization and culture as well as intellectual attainments that humanity reached nearly 2000 years ago. Perhaps the discussion may be concluded with the following observations of K.M. Munshi:

**“In its essence, Tirukkural is a treatise par excellence on the art of living. Thiruvalluvar, the author, diagnoses the intricacies of human nature with such penetrating insight, perfect mastery and consummate skill absorbing the most subtle concepts of modern psychology, that one is left wondering at his sweep and depth. His prescriptions, leavened by godliness, ethics, morality and humaneness are sagacious and practical to the core. They cut across castes, creeds, climes and ages and have a freshness which makes one feel as if they are meant for the present times”.**

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