

Contemporary Social and Cultural Relevance of the Poetry of Thiruvalluvar and Vemana

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“*Real kindness seeks no return.*” --Thiruvalluvar

What is the purpose of custom sans inner purity?—Yogi Vemana

Abstract: Literature has the obvious onus of crossing the limitations of aesthetics. Perhaps starting from the times of Oral Literature, Literature has always carried the essence of society as its core. Thiruvalluvar in his *Tirukkural* and Vemana in his *Satakas* have attempted to form the core of social and cultural values of Indian society. Though written and rooted in the times that were past, the two poets have remained relevant to the contemporary times through their eternal thematic and stylistic concerns. Specifically, the paper tries to unravel how their concern for ethics and essence of life, expressed in utter simple yet beautiful and striking language, makes them ever-relevant and more importantly ever enticing.

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Introduction: Literature is one of the achievements of the mankind which has helped human beings to go beyond the material basics of life. Human beings all the while have strived to think about the sublime life. The sublime life included the refined aspects like love, kindness, humanity, ethics, religion, morality etc. In fact humanity always finds itself in the conflict between the material and the sublime. In the process of being engaged in this tussle, the human kind has been always been guided by great scholars and philosophers across the globe all the ages. India, being an ancient civilization, is rich in this endeavour of the realization of the sublime. The engagement with the sublime has resulted in the refined build-up of society that is fortified by value-based socio-cultural concerns. The mission has been pursued by many a pioneering saint-philosophers, like Thiruvalluvar and Vemana in the South India through their *Thirukkural* and *Sathakas*, respectively.

It is not a cliché to state that among the many arts Literature is one of the long standing and long enticing arts cultivated by mankind. India, like in any other ancient civilization, the pioneering literary texts are both religious-ethical and aesthetic. The fact that Literature of the ancient times endowed with this double responsibility is always worth cherishing and verifying. What is surprising and delighting is the fine blending of religion and ethics on the one hand and aesthetics on the other hand.

Indian Literature has vast fund of literature which includes literature that has emanated from regional languages including Dravidian languages and Sanskrit-based languages. Notwithstanding the claims that have been overwhelming on the dispute whether Dravidian languages and literatures supersede Sanskrit and its offshoot languages. Notwithstanding the supremacy of the South/North and Dravidian Languages vs. Sanskrit and its offshoot languages, the contribution of these languages and literatures that have come from these sources has remained significant. The impact of this contribution has shaped pan-Indian socio-cultural ambience.

Accordingly, thus shaped, the ambience of socio-cultural of India has continued to be a force to reckon with. In the making of this socio-cultural ambience many a great saint-philosopher contributed substantially. These saint-poets' writings, while being philosophical and religious, have dealt with many a social and cultural aspects of human life. Since religion and philosophy was the fountain of ethics and socio-cultural practices, these poets have taken the roles of guide and philosopher in directing human beings the ways and means to lead life in a systematic way.

The Place of Thiruvalluvar and General Significance:

“Thiruvalluvar’s kural is one of the gems of the world literature. He stands above all races, castes, and sects, and what he teaches is a general human morality and wisdom. No wonder, the Kural has been read, studied and highly praised in the land of its origin for centuries, but also found many admirers in the West, ever since it has become known.”

-- M. Winternitz, a German Professor and Sanskrit Scholar

Thiruvalluvar is a philosopher, saint, humanist and psychologist. Indeed it is a rare combination of wisdom. While presenting rarefied knowledge, Thiruvalluvar happily blends the same with human life. In a way, he builds bridge between religion and philosophy on one side and human life and psychological aspects on the other side. In view of this great feat of connecting the mundane and sublime, Thiruvalluvar even today has remained intact not only in the hearts of the people of Tamil Nadu but in the hearts of the people all over the nation. In fact, his sagacity and humane qualities make him comparable to any poet of the world stature across time. Thiruvalluvar has been compared with Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Rousseau and the like.

Thiruvalluvar has not dwelt upon any abstract thought or dogma. He is intensely conscious of the practical world. The noble as well as the ignoble, the haves as well as the have-nots, the honest as well as the dishonest dwell side by side. He is solely concerned with the present world. To him, how one lives at present is

a matter of supreme importance. He does not consider ascetic life better than family life. He gives the ploughmen the highest place in the society because they provide food for all.

Thirukkural, authored by Thiruvalluvar (estimated to have lived between the 3rd and 1st century BC), is one of the most remarkable books of Tamil literature. It is the synthesis of the best of Indian religions at that time. The poet has codified values evolved in the thoughts of Vedic Brahminism, Buddhism and Jainism, after filtering out religious, ritualistic, exclusivist and sectarian ideas. In this way the book can be seen as a secularism-based treatise, with sound logic and reason.

Thirukkural holds a prime place among the ethical works. It is written in kural venpa, two line verse. The first line is having four cirs and the second is with three cirs. Since the whole work is written in kural verses, it bears the name *Thirukkural*. Other names like Muppall (a book containing three sections), poyyamoli (a book of unfailing truth) and vayurai valttu (a book of moral precepts) never gained currency among the people. Out of the four eternal values, virtue, wealth, love and liberation, *Thirukkural* dwells only on the first three aspects. There are ten couplets in each chapter and each chapter dwells on a particular human quality or principle.

Valluvar has explained the entire concept of Virtue in the first part of the book in 300 kural or in 30 chapters. The second part of the book contains 700 kural or 70 chapters. In that part Valluvar speaks at length about the mechanics of politics, the qualities of ministers as well as the subjects. The ideals of human love are described in detail in the third part of the book in 250 kural or 25 chapters. Those who read the first part of the book will be reminded of the gospel of Buddha. In the second part one can learn the consummate political scientists considered views. The role of Valluvar in the third part of the book is that of a superb poet who makes his characters speak on the virtues of human love. It is Valluvar's view that man should lead a life of high ideals. Sometimes a virtuous life may be a hindrance to world's life, still it is worth living. According to him, even in the face of death one should uphold virtue. This hash ideal is emphasized in many of the kural. Valluvar shows unmistakably the steps to be taken to lead a virtuous life.

Manimekalai and *Silappadikaram* contain stanzas which so closely resemble kural in form and content that one at once come to the conclusion that they are taken from kural for eg: "Study well the pithy saying of the poet who uttered nothing false, and said who in waking, bows before her spouse, but before no other God, may ask for rain and rain it will", (22; 59-61 Manimekalai). This verse of Manimekalai closely resembles the following Kural: "if she, who does not worship God, but who rising worships her husband, says 'let it rain', it will rain". (55)

As has been already indicated, Thiruvalluvar, is one of the rare poets who taking spirit from the all-time classic of “Manimekalai” focuses on the unique greatness love between a wife and a husband. This ability to see profound meanings in what is considered to be mundane is the greatness of Thiruvallur. In fact, Thiruvallur appears to have gone ahead of times and tried to form a base for Indian society by way of indicating healthy Man-Woman relationship.

What the contemporary society is arguing for was visualized by Thirukkural quite long back. Thiruvalluvar in fact has shown great pragmatism by according utmost importance to the Man-Woman relationship. Thereby he has given divine turn to Wife-Husband relationship.

22.208-209 of Manimegalai, which resembles Kural- 543, indicates the possibility of harm returning to the doer immediately, “... ruinous condition which falls upon that man in the evening, who in the morning plans another man’s rain (Silappaddikaram, 22; 34). This verse of Silappadikaram closely resembles the following Kural ; “if a man inflicts sorrow upon other in the morning, it will come upon him unsought in the very evening” (319) (also sil.23 resembles Kural-55).

Thiruvalluvar rooting himself in the religion of the land and ancient wisdom puts forward that how evil begets evil. While taking pride in the native wisdom, Thiruvalluvar expounds how a commonsensical and self-disciplined way of living will bring in happiness. Further Thiruvalluvar frankly points out how any person cannot escape from the evil he/she sows.

The Place of Vemana and General Significance:

One of the most remembered and quoted pots of Telugu language is Vemana. Telugu which was praised as the Italian of the East got sharpened in the hands of Vemana to bring out human nature in a candid way. The striking feature of Vemana is his unbridled way fo speaking the truth of Life. In fact, Telugu language and its sweetness does not require introduction. Subramanya Bharathi, the renowned poet from Tamil Nadu’s observation Telugu language needs to be recalled. It is a well-known fact that he called as the “sweetest language.” Many a person said that Telugu is the Italian of the East. Telugu was also praised as “ Desha Bhashalandu Telugulesa” (The greatest of all Indian Languages) by the Royal and multi linguistic emperor of Andhra Pradesh Sri KrishnaDevaraya. Telugu is also the mother tongue of music trinity (Thyagaraja, shyaamashastri and Muthu Swami Dikshit).

Vemana stands out from many a Telugu poet as he accords prominence to native wisdom and commonsense. More importantly Vemana’s poetry, known as “Vemana Satakas” attempts at removing social

evils, superstitions and caste-based discrimination, prevalent in the medieval Andhra Pradesh. Perhaps he is the first Telugu to have stood for the rights of the marginalized sections of the society. Further, he argued for the peace and friendship among the various peoples of the society. He strongly supported the moral and ethical dimension of education since without morality education becomes futile.

Vemana was a great philosopher and poet. His poems were written in the popular vernacular of Telugu in the meter of 'AATAVELADI' and are known for the use of simple language and native idioms. His poems discuss the subjects of wisdom and morality, ethical values of each stage of life. Many lines of vemana's poems are now colloquial phrases of the Telugu language. They end with the signature line ViswadhaabhiRaama, vinuravema, literally Beloved of Vishwadha, (also means lord of the universe) listen Vema, there are many interpretations of what the last line signifies. In his poems he used a unique way of expression as in the first two lines he talks about the material reality of the time and in the third line he gives the appropriate metaphor for that reality. His collection of poems are known as 'Vemanashatakamu' or Vemanpadyaalu.. Vemana's poem were first collected and published by C.P.Brown in the 19th century. His poems are of many kinds, social, moral, satirical and mystic nature. Most of them are in Ataveladi (dancing lady) meter which is considered to be famous "Desiyachand" (National melody meter of Telugu).

Vemana's poems are now colloquial phrases of the Telugu language. They end with the refrain line "Viswadhabhiraama Vinura Vema," literally Oh! God, listen Vema." In fact there have been different interpretations for the refrain line.

According to Vemana charity, Virtue, compassion, truthfulness, humility, courage valour, knowledge of administration- these are yogas of a king. He nourishes the earth, who relieves dependants, who forces what shall happen. Who undertakes upright conduct, who surpasses mortality, who respects every creed this man shall shine as royal saint. This reminds us of plato's conception of philosophes-kings.

Vemana no doubt praises truth together with the truth speakers in some verse but he thinks that truth in front of the mean who look down upon truth, but to speak it in the presence of truthful men. Vemana advised not to speak truth in front of the mean. Vemana denies the greatness of the Trinities, saying that they too commit mistakes and the god he perceived, was greater than the Trinities.¹⁹⁷ Ascending to he say purity of mind is the root of all acceptable worship. Vemana without self- possession, the mere favour of learning will never remove the doubts of the aspirant .so, strength of mind should be cultivated and lusts should be given up, if one wants to realize oneself.

In Vemana's poems we find logical reasoning as well as genuine feelings for all the aspects society. He is the Telugu poet who raised voice against discrimination against the subalterns and advocated for the equality and harmony in the society. He strongly supported the moral and ethical dimensions of education as without morality education becomes futile.

Conclusion: It goes without saying that both the poets, Thiruvalluvar and Vemana, remain greatly relevant to the contemporary society and to its social and cultural realms. The two poets in an unequivocal manner celebrate the diversity of the country in their cultural practices and social way of living. However, Thiruvalluvar and Vemana, through their poetry have given prominent place to the Common Man. It is the day-to-day life and our social, religious and cultural practices that are important since Divinity is not devoid of the mundane yet ground reality. It may not be an exaggeration to state that both the poets are visionaries and obviously ahead of times. The most striking and common feature of these two poets their concern for the core of life. Equally interesting common characteristic is their attempt to respect both the spiritual and the material life since the truth of life is in Life itself. However, both the poets argue for the need of overcoming the body and enriching the soul.

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