

The Proverbs and Tirukkural as “Immortal Pieces of Proverbial Literature”: A brief Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article lays focus on the wisdom which is the subject matter under the value system of life discussed in The Proverbs and The Tirukkural. It also throws light on how these enhance and enable the readers/ lovers of literature to lead a life of morality. Both the works are the quintessence of great wisdom which had crystallized in the social consciousness of the human society/ people.

Key words: *The Proverbs, The Tirukkural.*

It is an accepted fact that Comparative Literature is an academic discipline and a subject of scholarly investigation. It is essentially a humanistic education aiming at evaluating a work of art with other areas of knowledge and art. As David Malone puts it, “the fullest meaning and the final evaluation of a piece of literature can result only from comparison”. (P2) Human life is actually a major theme which includes not only social and political issues but also the probing, searchings and speculations of philosophy, truths and revelations of religion and morality in its fullest measure. A moral sense is traditionally considered a unique attribute of the human personality. The transformation from a solely biological organism to a socially responsible individual is the hallmark of the development of personality and a shared social development is necessary for viable human life.

Moral norms are usually interpreted as values of life, regarded high among the most attractive guides to conduct. Philosophers who profess moral values display wide agreement

on the fundamental rules of morality. These include rules prohibiting persons from killing other persons, from inflicting injury on them or from depriving them of freedom and opportunity. What is true is that human values change from time to time and culture to culture. But when the term ‘universality’ is used with reference to moral values, it signifies the fact that at least, the basic rules of morality are the same across cultures. For instance, the rule “thou shall not kill”. (P13) The universality of moral values also signifies the point that the rules are to be regarded as something applying across cultural lines presumably to every human being. All who are human are members of the moral community and bear the rights and responsibilities of this status.

The Proverbs and The Tirukkural present some of the most essential codes of conduct to human beings. The core of the message presented by these two classics is ‘morality’. Though both classics are separated widely by time and space, they justify truly the observation, “Great minds think alike”.

The Proverbs is nothing but a collection of topical maxims and a product of the Wisdom school in Isreal. Solomon's proverbs were written by 931 B.C and under Solomen, Israel was at its spiritual. According to I kings 4.32, he spoke 3,000 proverbs. Only about 800 of his 3000 proverbs are included in the two solomonic collections in the book of Proverbs. No man was better qualified than soloman to be the principal contributor. He asked for wisdom and God granted it to him to such a degree that people from foreign lands came to hear him speak. His breadth of knowledge, aptitude, skill and perception were found to extraordinary. It is likely that Solomon collected and edited proverbs other than his own. According to the Ecclesiastes, "he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs. (P 666)

The Proverbs is one of the few Biblical books that clearly spell out their purpose.

"That man may know wisdom and instruction, understand words of insight, receive instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice and equity; that prudence may be given to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth – the- wise man also may hear and increase in learning and the man of understanding acquire skill, to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles" (The Interpreter's Bible 97)

The purpose stated here is twofold: i) to impart moral discernment and discretion and ii) to develop mental clarity and perception. The Proverbs deals with the most fundamental skill of all: practical righteousness before God in every area of life. Chapters 1-9 are designed to create a felt need for wisdom and the proverbs as a whole is designed to prevent an ungodly life style. The book proverbs serves as a manual to impart the legacy of wisdom,

prudence, understanding, discretion, knowledge, guidance, competence, correction, counsel and truth from generation to generation as found in Tirukkural.

'Kural' means anything short. It is a couplet containing a simple complete idea, often expressed in an epigrammatic form. It is a form that is admirably suited to the expression of ideas and Tiruvalluvar has handled this difficult medium with extraordinary skill and felicity. The combination of brevity of expression, grace of language, metre and highly refined ethical ideas make Tirukkural a unique literary work. Tirukkural contains 1330 couplets. There are one hundred and thirty-three chapters, each chapter containing ten couplets. Each is headed by one major idea such as 'friendship', 'wisdom', 'justice' and so on. The ten verses under each major idea enable the poet to expound one particular idea and various aspects of that idea in depth under different circumstances and conditions. Tirukkural is considered to be antecedent of Cilappatikaram and Manimekalai because the latter classics quote from Tirukkural. Obvious language resemblance could be seen between Tirukkural and Cankam works quite often. In Tirukkural, the style of structuring the couplets and the mode of expression of ideas belong to one person. The following quotation speaks better for the authorship of the ancient Tamil classic. It says:

"There is considerable internal evidence to show that the whole text belongs to one another. Apart from the prosodic metre which is throughout the same, the general pattern to which the text is made to conform and certain mannerisms of expression go to show that the text is from the pen of one and the same author" (P xiii)

Tirukkural is essentially a book on ethical philosophy. It portrays moralistic way of life and lays down a code of conduct. Mr. Gower says that Tirukkural is essentially the highest type of verbal and moral excellence among the Tamil people as ever Homer was among the Greeks” (Piii). Tirukkural preaches perfection in character based on affection, dread of sin, benevolence, benignity and truth. To justify this ancient work of Tamils one can quote the notable scholar Schweitzer who had great reverence for it. He wrote:

“With such strokes, the Kural draws the ideal of the simple ethical humanity. On the most varied questions concerning the conduct of man to himself and to the world, its utterances are characterized by nobility and good sense. There hardly exists in the literature of the world a collection of maxims in which we find so much lofty wisdom” (P iv)

So it is clear that this classic work is a string of do's and don'ts good advice and bland statements of proverbial wisdom. The Proverbs and The Tirukkural belong to the genre called Proverbial literature. As pieces of proverbial literature, these texts deal with moral values through brief, precise and pointed statements one of the characteristic features of such works is to include human values like wisdom, righteousness and love.

Wisdom is the subject under values of life discussed in the Proverbs and Tirukkural. Wise knowledge about facts leads a man in the right path just as ignorance leads him to face undesirable consequences. Human mind is freed only when sparkling revelations about truth occur. This type of revelation occurs when one goes on reading scriptures, didactic document and maxims as found in the Proverbs and Tirukkural. In general, the thrust

of sayings in the book of Proverbs has a universal quality and Tirukkural is the most distinguished example of proverbial literature in the Tamil Language. It is the quintessence of great wisdom which had crystallized in the social consciousness of the people to whom the author belonged. The observation of Dr.Subramanian on the form of Tirukkural is apt quoting here:

“The Kural is in form and in substance proverbial and had better be treated on par with Chinese and Hebrew proverbial literature of ancient times” (P xxiv)

Idaikkadar, the well-known commentator, has described Tirukkural as “a little mustard seed which has been bored to hold all the waters of the seven oceans”.

“Kudukait tulaittu elu katali putatti
Kumkattaritta kural (P 44)

This commentary speaks well of Tirukkural's terseness of expression and profundity of ideas. In short, the Proverbs and Tirukkural resemble each other not only in their message but also in outward framework. In the proverbs, the lines are arranged almost in couplets. A certain number of Triplets occur then and there. The Proverbs may be described as a manual of conduct, or as Bruch, an eminent theologian, has said an “anthology of gnomes” (Toy xvii). Its observations relate to a number of forms of life, affairs, domestic, agricultural, urban, commercial, political and military. Many of the sayings are simply maxims of commonsense, prudence which need to be practiced with vigil and caution. For instance,

“Go to the ant, O sluggard; Consider her wise and be wise without having any chief, officer or ruler, she prepares her

food in summer and gathers her sustenance in harvest” (Proverbs 6,7,8.)

in disgrace and sorrow”(The Proverbs 38, 39)

The message of this extract is that an ant-hill is a busy place. Every member of the colony seems to be at work. Even those little insects are able to prepare themselves for the days of winter. How much more should a man learn this prudence and industry, that too in times of harvest? Generally speaking, the proverbs compress an insight into a short, striking sentence. Usually such compressed formulations are meant to be essentially ‘moral’. The condensed form of moral value, in such sayings, either encourages the reader to do good actions or restrains him from bad actions. The proverbs present many interesting illustrations for encouraging virtuous actions. For instance,

“my son, keep sound wisdom and discretion; let them not escape from your sight and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck. Then you will walk on your way securely and your foot will not stumble” (Proverbs 3,4,5,6).

A similar specimen can be cited from Tirukkural for the emphasis of statements encouraging virtuous actions. Thiruvalluvar stresses that the principles of righteousness, virtue etc., are only for those who take life seriously and thereby limit more and more of their external acquisitions and increase the internal awakening:

“If you do good all thy life without a single wasted day, thou wallest day, thou wallest up the road that leadeth unto future births

They alone are joys which flow from a virtuous life all other pleasures end but

Moral content in proverbial sayings stimulates the person. Who reads it, to know what truth is. For leading a life of truthfulness, one must be able to realize what truth is. No one knows everything. But everyone is expected to have the sense to discriminate good from evil. According to Jesus Christ, the knowledge of truth sets everyone mentally free. This mental freedom ultimately leads men to attain intellectual, spiritual and physical happiness as well. The words of Christ are as follows:

“And you shall know the truth, and the truth, shall make you free” (John 8:32)

Tiruvalluvar also stresses the point that whatever may be the nature of a thing; finding out the inherently true character of it can alone be knowledge (T 354). The key to virtuous actions is virtuous thoughts. The attainment of a mind free from complex, confusing and evil thought is the aim of the very life. The quintessence of moral teaching wrapped up within a proverbial saying serves better to lift people out of their ignorance. The decoction of more matters in a few words in the sayings of the Proverbs and Tirukkural enhances and enables the readers to lead a life of morality. The ultimate aim of the moral content in the verses of the Proverbs and Tirukkural is to thrust knowledge of truths and thereby chasing the darkness called ignorance. One of the characteristic features of the proverbial expressions is to condemn social evils like prostitution, consuming liquor, gambling etc. The Proverbs and Tirukkural speak more about these social evils. Both speak equally well on tongue’s creative force. There is nothing which seems more in substantial than speech No doubt, the words which issue out of the lips have the greatest power in human life. There is a harmonious

appreciation in both these monumental texts for words that have a tremendous power for good or ill;

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those Who love it will eat its fruit” (P 18: 21)

The quotation is from the Proverbs and a strikingly similar one from Tirukkural is also worth mentioning here:

“Prosperity and ruin are in the power of the tongue; guard thou therefore against imprudence of speech” (Tirukkural 642)

One can understand why sages and teachers are conscious of the power of speech, since much of their life is given to communication through words.

The Proverbs makes many suggestions regarding the use of the tongue. Restraint in speech is commended. Persons who speak rashly, who pour forth words before they have given themselves a chance to think, will get into trouble. Words cannot be recalled after they have been spoken, any more than an arrow that cannot be called back after they have left the bow. “The mouths of fools pour out folly” 21 (Prov 15:2) one can almost hear the cascade of words as they fall from the lips of the garrulous individual:

“When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is prudent” (10:19)

The rash and voluble talker has the law or averages against him, for sooner or later, he will cause damage by some unguarded remark. Tiruvalluvar assigns that words that are sweet to the ear must be spoken. To resort to bitter speech is like preferring to eat an unripe fruit instead of a ripe one. Words from the mouths of those men who have attained realization of ultimate truth are sweet,

tempered with mercy and free from deceit. Nothing else but humility and sweet speech can be an ornament to a man;

“Behold the man who useth hard words when ones serve; he Preferreth the upripe fruit to the ripe” (Tirukkural 99:100)

Why should a person resort to offensive words when he has realized the pleasure of the efficiency of sweet words? Since speech has so many hazards, the sages who weigh circumstances aright and then speak might be expected to urge everyone to form suitable friendship. They used words, they taught by means of words and they believed in the efficacy of speech in bringing help and life to people. The Proverbs speaks thus:

“The mouth of a righteous man is a well of life” (10:11)

“The tongue of the just is as choice silver” (10:20)

Tirukkural affirms:

“Weigh each circumstance aright and then speak the speech that is fit for the increase of righteousness and profit there is no other thing of more worth than it” (Tirukkural 644)

If ideas are effective in guiding action, they can be communicated through the medium of language. Through moral and ethical speech, we can communicate with one another and through our words, we can instruct and edify one another. Tirukkural, in its form and content, comes very close to the proverbs when it is rendered into English version V.V.S. Aiyar, a notable translator of Tirukkural, observes:

“The resemblance of thought and diction of Tiruvalluvar to the greatest

masterpieces of the Bible, and especially to the Ecclesiastes, the proverbs and wisdom of Solomon, and the Sermons of Jesus, struck me forcibly” (P xii)

To Conclude,

Both the Proverbs and Tirukkural touch upon every facet of human relationships, and their principles transcend the bounds of time and culture. Both are the most distinguished examples of proverbial literature in the Hebrew and the Tamil languages respectively. As it is the characteristic feature of pithy sayings, the proverbs and Tirukkural encourage virtuous actions and condemn absurd behaviour and social evils. The greatness of a person is measured by the virtuous life he leads. He rises his dignity to spiritual heights only by steadfast adherence to the practice of virtues. For this noble end, self-control is an essential virtue. According to Tiruvalluvar, endless glory adorns the personality who knows that self-control leads to wisdom and therefore practices it steadfastly. Such purified personalities acquire a permanent place in the memory of humanity and thereby become immortals. Both approve that wisdom is an insightful understanding about the consequences of an action. Tirukkural presents different views on wisdom under the title ‘understanding’. The key word in the Proverbs is wisdom, the ability to live life skillfully. ‘wisdom’ and ‘understanding’ should be brought into closer relationship as the best means of preserving the young man from the evil which besets his path which, if not shunned, will lead to his ruin. Wisdom guards life from pitfalls and holds forth the highest rewards. All these get neatly projected in The Proverbs and Tirukkural.

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