Learning from the Perennial
Wisdom of Tirukkural

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Classical literature remains always a source of wisdom. It inspires those who are open to it all the time and it is never exhausted by any one generation of interpreters, no one has said the last word on it. Tirukkural is an example of one such classic. Knowing the couplets by heart and reciting them again and again for their rhythmic cadence and aesthetic delight is one aspect of it. More significantly the wisdom of the ancients remains also a perennial guide for leading a meaningful life.

This article proposes to explore the Tirukku kural with reference to three aspects. Firstly, at examines the arguments in favour of Jaina origin of the text of Tirukkkural secondly, at contrasts the kural with Arthasastra and the Gita; thirdly, some hints on the political wisdom of kural are presented as guidance for modern Business Management experts.

1. A Lutheran Interpretation of kural

The Christian missionaries valued the Tirukkural very much for its ethical values. The Danish Missionary, August Friedrich Caemmerer, had, for the first time, translated it into German in 1800. In 1865 Karl Graul translated the Tirukkural into German. Beschi rendered it into Latin. G.U. Pope translated it in 1889 into English. It is obvious that Karl Graul tried to base the authority of the kural for the Tamil society on the one hand and on the other for the understanding of this society through a foreigner with the analogy of the Lutheran Reformation Ideal. As a cultural text the kural offers a model of Tamil worldview and also as a model for the right attitude to the world, closer to the Christian preaching, as Karl Graul claims.

The kural has 1330 stanzas, with 133 chapters in three parts – Aram, Porul and Inbam. A historical study shows that followers various religions - Saivas, Vaisnavas, Jains, Buddhists, even Christians claim the work as theirs. G.U. Pope went so far as to claim that Tiruvalluvar was influenced by St. Thomas in Mylapore. Kamil Zvelebil argues that the kural belongs to the Jaina reform movement, but it was Graul who first suggested this idea. Graul gives reasons why it must be of Jaina origin.
1. The Brahmins are not placed in a high position and all castes are equally treated.

2. Of the four classical four asramas - Brahmacharya, grhastha, vanaprastha and sannyasa - only two are mentioned by the kural namely grhastha and sannyasa.

3. The Brahmin gods are only allegorically used; they appear only as background.

4. The main goal of the work lies in the virtue of penance (detachment).

5. Abstaining from killing (ahimsa) is seen as the highpoint of virtue.

6. Caste rules are replaced by ethical norms.

The first verse of the kural uses atipakavan, which is cannot translated as God. Graul thinks that atipakavan must be of Buddhist-Jainist origin, since bhagavan is also an epithet of the Buddha. Lassen shows that the concept of the adibuddha was already in the first centuries known in Southern Buddhism. In the Jaina tradition of the Tamilnadu, arukan (Skt. arhat) is presented standing on the lotus flower. kural 1.3 uses the term malarmisaiyekinan. Parimelalakar comments on the term kural enkunathan (1.9) as eight characteristics of siva, but Graul quotes the authority of Sudamani Nikan†u, a Jaina lexicon by Mandalapurusa, to establish that these are Jaina characteristics. It is because of this stand taken by Graul that his version of the kural did not get much publicity as did Pope’s.

The traditional Sanskrit based four purusharthas are not mentioned in kural only three are mentioned, aram, porul und inbam. vedu is left out. vedu is not separately treated, but it is an expression of Buddhist-Jainist spirituality. The inner transformation which presents itself in practicing aram is already an expression of moksha, and the purity of selflessness leads one to a compassionate attitude towards the world.

Part 3 of the kural (inbam) is not equated with Sanskrit kama (in the sense of Vatsyayana’s Kamasutra), but with the Sankam poetic division of akam and puram. The three parts of the kural are placed as parallel to the “Church, State and House” by Graul. It is equated with Luther’s teaching of three hierarchies, a reformation work. The key message of the kural is not the progressive character of the asrama-
ideal, which the kural shows, from the stage of the life of a married man, who, through practice of virtue, social and political action, and emotional fulfillment before and after marriage, is led to physical, moral and emotional and intellectual perfection or fulfillment. But he interprets kural as a religious moral book for the Tamil community of people, in which a proper ethical attitude corresponding to the respective stages is presented.

The Aristotelian middle age view of society, made of oikos, polis, and ecclesia, which Luther in his writings has developed as part of the fourth commandment, is integrated with the kural by Graul, but also established as legitimate link for the Christian message. The kural also speaks of reformation ideal in the sense that the worldly realms of porul and inbam are considered as developments of aram. Thus, the dualism of the divine and worldly kingdoms are removed and State and House become part of the divine order to the one who lives a virtuous life. By placing on par the ascetic and householder stages, a parallel is seen to Luther’s anti-hierocratic function of the teaching of the three hierarchies.

2. The Worldview of Tirukkural

In the worldview of the Tirukkural (of the Tamil wisdom literature), the image of this world is different from that of the Hindu, i.e. the ancient Indian striving after moksha, i.e. liberation from this world. In the kural the ideal, peaceful life, defined by love and virtue in this world, is lovingly presented in all details. Above all the happiness of family life is shown as the highest ideal. This idea stands in opposition to traditional priestly value system in which penance, meditation serves as the most desirable goals. One does not wonder in the study of the kural that the reformation attitude hinted at indirectly through this new professional ethics can serve as a link for the new secular development in South India.

The ideal householder is presented further as a happy father whose children are his greatest treasure (7: 65-66). Love determines one’s life (Ch.8). Guests are always welcome (Ch.9). He is polite and kind in his speech (Ch.10). He is grateful for every act of friendship (Ch.11). He practices justice in his dealings (Ch.12). He is master of himself (Ch.13). He is conscientious in his dealings (Ch.14 and 22). He is pure and patient (Ch.16). He never slanders or uses mean gossip against others (Ch.19). He does not speak useless words (Ch.20). He avoids evil (Ch.21). He is generous (Ch.23). Finally, he is respected by all and known everywhere (Ch.24).
The attitude to the world expressed in the Kural is completely different from that found in the Bagavatgita. kural 140 says: “Those who cannot live harmoniously in the world are ignorant men, even if they are men of learning”. Leading a right life in this world is more important than learned wisdom about the next life (Ch.14). In this connection the kural sounds to be somewhat critical of the Brahmins. If a Brahmin forgets the Vedas, he can get it by reading again, says kural 134, but if he neglects right conduct, he loses even his birthright.

Not right knowledge, but rather involved right action in the world is highly valued by the kural “What is the advantage of great and exact knowledge”, it says, “if a man behaves meaninglessly with his neighbours through greed” (175). One contrasts the demand of the gita that the knower should get detached from his action in order to become free from the world (Bagavatgita IV,10). In the gita, a free, disinterested action is demanded that one in no way holds on to the fruit of the work, since by that he will be bound again. The goal is to become free from action (akarman). But in the kural it is completely not about inner freedom from possession, wife and children; having as if one does not have and doing as if one does not do contradict the values of the kural. The kural demands pure and interiorised worldly actions, but no world indifference or a mystically detached inner worldly action. This action differentiates itself also from the Christian action: ‘in the world, but not of the world’.

It does not surprise from this perspective that certain criticism of religion and gods is seen in the kural. kural 1073 says, ‘The unprincipled people are like the gods, because they can act as they please’. In the same connection it is said about the meanness of begging. “If the Creator intended that some people should beg in order to eke out their livelihood, may He too wander about in such a world and perish”. (1062)

The political ethics which reflects itself in the foundation of the State (Ch.74-95) and the behaviour of the minister of the State (Ch.64-73) discussed in the kural differentiates from the classical Hindu scripture on political governance, the Arthasastra of Kautilya. Not Right action (dharma), but only danda, the use of force, violence and punishment, is the recommended foundation of political power in the Arthasastra, even if the use of danda is recommended not in the form of naked violence (bali), but in the hidden, subtle form of cleverness or the power of secret dealings. In contrast to this, the kural demands from the ruler a righteous fulfillment of duty which
is comparable to the clouds which rain without expecting anything in return and brings to expression by this that dharma, (honesty, uprightness) and artha, (worldly business) should not be separated from one another, as in the Arthasastra.

3. *Tirukkural* in the world of modern Business Management Seven Factors necessary for a ruler

The second section of the *Tirukkural* (*Porul*) deals with state administration. In fact the management of public life is said to consist of seven factors dealt with in subsections: King’s art of governance (Chs.39-63), Art of administration by minister (Chs.64-74), Defence structure (Ch.75), Economic resources (Ch.76), Army structure (Chs.77-78), Allies (Friendship) (Chs.79-95) and Family (Chs.96-108).

The art of governance by the King

In the section on the art of governance by the king there are 24 chapters. It starts by defining the six attributes of a good king. A good king must have trained armies, responsible citizens, economic resources, capable minister, supportive allies and sustainable fortresses (39.381). The next verse 382 talks about the qualities of a good ruler, namely courage, generosity, knowledge, perseverance in abundance (382), alertness, learning, bravery (383), easy access to people and not harsh in words (386), rendering justice according to the laws of the land (388), acceptance of well-meant criticism with patience and forbearance (389). It finally states that he must have four attributes of generosity, graciousness, justice and concern for citizens’ welfare as essential qualities of a good ruler (390).

It is significant that justice is treated here as the core value. This value is elaborated in detail: being just while dealing with the criminals, justice as the ultimate basis of all religious and righteous living, the ruler being accessible to people and consulting men of wisdom in dealing with difficult matters. It is said that what gives victory to the ruler is not the spear that he carries as a powerful monarch, the symbol of his military might, but the scepter that he carries as symbol of justice. (546)

Management Styles

It is explicitly pointed out how management styles must be displayed. Chapter 68 sums this up in ten couplets. It is worth quoting this chapter in full.
A decision is taken after due deliberation, but once it is decided, delay in implementation and dilatoriness in execution are positively wrong (671).

Things which may be done at leisure could be implemented slowly; but things requiring prompt action should not be put off even for a moment (672).

Whenever the way is clear, to act immediately is right where this is not so, it is better to deliberate and arrive at the best method for implementation (673).

Unfinished work and un-reconciled enmity are like smouldering sparks in embers, which can rise up to overwhelm the perfunctory man (674).

Resources, means, action-plan, time and place are the five factors which need to be considered and cleared, before embarking on action (675).

Before commencing any action, it is wise to consider in depth the objective, obstacles, and benefits or reactions on completion (676).

In order to decide how best a particular job may be done, it is wise to tap the expertise of a person who knows it inside out (677).

It is a good policy to plan one successful project to lead to another, just as we use one elephant to capture another (678).

Even more urgent than rewarding friends is the need for making friends with your enemies (679).

The weak should free themselves from continuous alarms by entering into alliance with the strong (680).

Today’s management experts might look into these values: discerning ability in the process of decision-making, consulting the experts on this field, acting promptly once the decision is taken etc.

**Fostering friendship**

There is a section included under the title ‘Friendship’ as part of any administrative structure. It is given for a ruler who may have to deal with destructive forces both within his country and outside. In fact this chapter treats this question taking the human factor into realistic consideration: how one should select friends, how to master enemy characteristics and assess enemy strength, etc. are points which
are born out of wisdom of the ancients. They know that evil forces cannot be eradicated completely, but that one has to deal with them in a competent way given a particular situation or context. What is said about the King or a ruler in a nation is applicable to any company or management where several people are working together. Hence the chapter on friendship finds a rightful place as part of management technique in all sectors.

Friendship here means, not just mutual admiration, but includes also readiness to give harsh and ethical advice when needed. In a genuine friendship there must be freedom for correction. It is significant to note how ways of dealing with enemies (861) and assessing enemy’s strength are suggested. If a ruler has the tact and good relationship to convert enemies into allies, his sagacity will be praised by the whole world. (874) The ruler has to be careful about the enemy within of these are more dangerous. It is also said that it is prudence not to offend mighty rulers, holy men and learned scholars (891). In the context of allies or making friends, some advice is given about dealing with one’s own wife, or other women of questionable repute, abstaining from drink and gambling, since these factors would harm good relationship which is essential for a ruler or an administrator. This section ends with a chapter on medicine; here the medical advice consists of moderation in food habits, certain basic discipline regarding food and knowing one’s limitations and aptitudes. After all health is wealth and a healthy body indicates a healthy mind.

Today cleverness or intellectual ability are talked about as much as emotional intelligence; success depends on one’s ability to perceive things and to forestall oppositions or crises that are inevitable in any human organization. Hence a chapter on wisdom or what it is to act wisely finds a proper place here. In chapter 43 several hints are given about the man of wisdom. It is said the wise men who can read the signs and foresee developments will not be shocked by emerging distressful situations (429). Men of wisdom are prepared for what is coming (427). The wise ones know how the world moves and move accordingly, for it is a part of wisdom to conform to the ways of the world (426). To discern the truth, whatever source it emanates from is the true quality of wisdom. Wisdom is, after all, the ultimate and impregnable defence for protection against destruction. It is also the fortress of inner strength against enemy onslaughts (421). It is the hallmark of wisdom to concentrate on the wise and the good instead of letting the mind wander aimlessly everywhere (422).
In fact the *Tirukkural* takes pains to define what is meant by wisdom and it is worth quoting the ten couplets dealing with this aspect of managerial wisdom in chapter 43 entitled “wisdom”.

**Elements related to administration in public life**

The last 13 chapters of the section on “public life” (*porutpal*) are called *olipiyal* – i.e. miscellaneous items and apparently they do not seem to deal directly with politics or come under the purview of management. But then when one analyses the verses in this section, one discovers a deeper meaning of interconnectedness. That is, “rectitude and sensitiveness to shame come by nature only to people who are born of good families” (V.V.S. Iyer’s translation). Certain things are perceived spontaneously by people of noble birth because they are endowed with an intellectual power of discernment. Such traits cannot be taught easily if the inner disposition is not receptive or open to it. People endowed with such traits of character will not deviate from standards of conduct, even if they fall on evil days. “The nature of the soil is known by the seedling that grows in it; a man’s ancestry is known by his speech.” (959) “An instinctive aversion to evil is the secret of a happy and virtuous life (960) and thus is not a reasoned conclusion.

**Who is a wise administrator?**

Finally the question is who is the wise administrator? This idea is developed in the following chapters entitled honour, greatness, pursuit of perfection, courteousness, sharing what one has, modesty, etc. People with such traits are called “canron” – virtuous gentlemen who are characterized by (a) compassion for all lives, (b) sensitiveness to shameful conduct, (c) Social co-operation, extended to kith and kin and neighbours, (d) accommodating grace towards other people and their faults, particularly known persons, (e) upholding truth at all times. In a world of management or public administration, to desire to have such people is not asking for the moon.

421. Wisdom is the ultimate and impregnable defense for protection against destruction; it is also the fortress of inner strength against enemy onslaughts.

422. It is the hallmark of wisdom to concentrate on the wise and the good, instead of letting the mind wander aimlessly everywhere.

423. To discern the truth, whatever source it emanates from is the true quality of wisdom.
424. The wise express even profound thoughts in simple terms, but would grasp the subtleties of all what others say.

425. The wise man loves all the world with a certain constancy, unlike the kind of bloom that opens and closes frequently.

426. It is a part of wisdom to conform to the ways of the world (The wise ones know how the world moves and move accordingly).

427. Men of wisdom know and are prepared for what is coming; the ignorant do not know what is ahead of them.

428. The truly wise will fear what is to be feared; only the ignorant will be fool-hardy.

429. Wise men who can read the signs and foresee developments, will not be shocked by emerging distressful situations.

430. The wise have all blessings, even if not possessed with worldly goods, but the ignorant rich have nothing.

**In brief:** the qualities of a leader are summed up in two basic values: justice and wisdom, namely, the wise person is one who is endowed with:

a. compassion for all lives (not merely humans, but also the animal world)

b. sensitiveness to shameful conduct or mean behaviour,

c. ability to cooperate or get along with all and

d. upholding truth at all times.

**Bibliography**

