

REFLECTION ON GOOD GOVERNANCE IN TIRUKURAL-UNIVERSAL RELEVANCE

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[Two thousand years ago, Tiruvalluvar, the saint poet of Tamilnadu wrote the Tirukural and just like Manu in Manusmṛti, Vyasa in Mahābhārata, Kauṭilya in his Arthaśāstra, he also dealt with the guidelines for well run administration. This paper attempts to reflect on some practical teaching related to good governance as advised by the great saint Tiruvalluvar.]

1. Tirukural- an introduction

Tirukural, composed by Tamil poet Tiruvalluvar, is a collection of one thousand and thirty three couplets arranged in 133 chapters each containing ten couplets. The chapters are grouped in three sections. They are *Aram (Aratuppal)*, *Porul (Parutappal)*, and *Inavam (Kāmātuppal)*, meaning righteousness, wealth and love respectively. Each chapter presents different aspect of human life. While *Aram* and *Kāmam* discuss about ethical living by an individual, *Porul* deals with public affairs. This section reflects Valluvar's knowledge of political philosophy and practice as well as on political economy. 'Porul', is a treatise on political philosophy and practice as well. It is addressed to the leader or the Ruler. This part has 700 couplets and is two times the size of the first and three times the size of the third part which shows the importance Tiruvalluvar gives to politics and governance.

The term '*Tiru*' in Tamil is an address of reverence or honour. The Tirukural composed by Valluvar is called so to show respect to the great personality. Tiruvalluvar is said to have lived about 2000 years ago (approximately 4th- 5th century BC).

2. Objective & Methodology

During his time, 2000 years back, which was named as post Sangam period, the kings were the Rulers (leaders). Today,

majority of countries follow the democratic system of governance and as such, instead of kings we have presidents, prime ministers as the leader of the administrative system of the state. But whatever the Saint poet mentioned about good governance in the Tirukural is applicable to all times and to all Rulers (leaders). The broad purpose of this paper is to analyze Valluvar's reflection on governance in comparative lines with ancient Sanskrit texts. It attempts to explore the lessons of good governance in Tirukural and their relevance in modern day context.

A qualitative research methodology known as Hermeneutics is applied in writing this paper. The word is derived from the Greek word 'hermeneuo,' which means 'to translate or interpret'.¹ It is related to the name of the Greek God Hermes who was believed to be the interpreter of the messages of the gods. In the present context, hermeneutics can be described as the interpretation and understanding of ancient literatures and religious texts. It is also used in contemporary philosophy to denote the study of theories and methods of the interpretation of all texts and systems of meaning. The concept of 'text' is here encompasses written documents and any number of objects subject to interpretation, like experiences. A hermeneutic is defined as a specific system or method for interpretation, or a specific theory of interpretation. The scope of hermeneutics also includes the investigation and interpretation not only of ancient texts but also of human behaviour generally, including language and patterns of speech, social institutions and ritual behaviour. Hermeneutics is widely applied in many field of social science such as philosophy, religion and theology, law, sociology and also international relations.²

3. Rājadharmā or Governance in ancient Sanskrit Texts

Rājadharmā as a concept means the judicious duties of the King towards his subjects. The basic concern of the *rājadharmā* is welfare of the people. In ancient Indian classics the spirit of *rājadharmā* was to ensure peace, justice and prosperity to the people. King or the leader was considered to be the key necessity of the state or administrative system in ancient India. He was expected to shoulder social responsibility and obligations to his subjects.³ As per principles of *rājadharmā* laid down in ancient Indian literature it was expected from the King to perform his duties in a righteous

manner. The Vedic philosophy insists that quality of work and service needs to be achieved by a king for long-term sustainability, besides an equitable redistribution of wealth after having acquiring it. In the Bhagavadgītā, this basic principle expounded in Vedic philosophy is reasserted when Śrīkrishna advises the mankind to perform in Yajña spirit, i.e. to work for the welfare of the community as a whole without selfish interest. He also says that socially conscious members of the society should feel satisfaction in enjoying the remnants of their *anna* (material wealth) achieved by karma performed in Yajña spirit.⁴ The Vedas and Upaniṣads, Smṛtis, Purāṇas and other ancient Sanskrit literature always stressed on right actions, right moral practices and *jñāna* or *vijñāna* (complete understanding of spiritualism) which essentially form the basis of righteous human life. The four objectives identified by the Vedic philosophy are *dharma* (values or virtue), *artha* (money or wealth), *kāma* (desires or urges) and *mokṣa* (salvation). It is advised to aim at achieving the ultimate objective guided by value system and the urges and acquiring wealth should be followed as forms of tools to achieve *mokṣa*. The Vedas emphasize on following right path in accumulating money⁵ and use them for the welfare of the society. Manu also states that the value system protect him who follows it.⁶ Swami Vivekanada in his reflection on the Gītā maintains that the basis of social and political system rests on the goodness of man.⁷ The Bhagavadgītā even emphasizes the importance of good leadership. The king or the head of the administrative affairs of the state may not have anything to be achieved to fulfill his personal need; even then he must not sit idle or keep away from his duties and responsibilities and always be active and relentlessly perform for the welfare of the people; otherwise people will also follow his path and there will be chaotic condition.⁸ This doctrine of karma enunciated in the Gītā is echo of the idea contained in the Īsopaniṣad where it is advised that one should wish to live for hundred years being active throughout in righteous way.⁹ The *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, the two great epics are replete with the art of good governance. The *Rāmāyaṇa* contains guidelines regarding the manner in which the king should consult his ministers, learned men, and the chief officer of the army in formulating the policies of the state on various issues and matters. Stress is laid on the importance of moral values while

implementing the state policies. The epic allots a very high place to personal righteousness and conduct of the king and his people. In Ayodhyākāṇḍa the younger brother of King Rāma, Bharata proclaimed that a King who took the unrighteous path should be imprisoned after considering his case on merit.¹⁰ Like *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata* also categorically declares the fulfilment of righteousness to be bounden duty of the king. Dharma, the epic proclaims, is the fundamental principle of human conduct. The King upholding dharma is the very epitome of ethical conduct. The creatures are grounded in the King. The King who rightly upholds dharma is indeed a king.¹¹

Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra is one of the ancient Indian literatures which provides insights to governance. The roots of this treatise on economics and politics can be traced in the Rgveda. Written in the 300 BC, this book provides a complete manual for running the state efficiently in all the branches, i.e. legislature, executive and judiciary. It deals with all aspects of state administration such as establishing a governing hierarchy, appointment of officers in various branches, their duties, levying taxes, laying down laws, punishment for breaking laws so on and so forth. Kauṭilya maintained that a king should not have self interest; he should sacrifice his own happiness and joy for the greater cause of the people of the state. The king's satisfaction lies in the welfare of his subjects.¹² In Kauṭilya's view, the king is required "to benefit and protect his citizens, including the peasants".¹³ He asserts in that, the ultimate source of the prosperity of the kingdom is its security and prosperity of its people, The Arthaśāstra maintains that the essential qualities and duties of a king are obtaining what is to be obtained, protection of what has been obtained and taking measures to increase it and use it properly.¹⁴ Kauṭilya spells out three main responsibilities of a king, viz *rakṣā* (security), *pālana* (growth and development) and *yogakṣema* (welfare of the state)¹⁵. Thus, all ancient Sanskrit texts stress on value system (*dharma*) which is the driving force for right objectives. Wealth accumulation (*artha*) and fulfillment of desire (*kāma*) are to serve the objectives. Governance in Indian philosophy thus sits deep-rooted in the concept of dharma which is to conform to truth. Dharma, therefore is, the basis of both social and moral order.

4. Basis of Good governance in Valluvar's view

Dharma, the core principle of good governance expounded by the Vedic and classical Sanskrit literature is reengineered by Valluvar in his Tirukural. The law of karma as enunciated in Sanskrit texts is accepted by Valluvar also, while dealing with his deliberation on a well run administrative system. He gives the basis for good governance pertaining to each and every aspect of administration starting from the king, cabinet, officials, army, judiciary etc. These are briefly discussed below.

King

The poet speaks of the attributes required by a king as well as those associated with state administration. The king, as Valluvar says, must be righteous, vigilant, industrious, cordial, zealous and above all diligent. He says if the king acts according to justice or *dharma* then dharma itself will protect him. Valluvar maintains that efficiency of a king depends on six things, viz, a trust worthy and responsible army, industrious people, treasury enriched with ample food resources, wise and efficient ministry, friendship with foreign counterparts and well equipped and dependable fortress.¹⁶ He is an excellent ruler if he is unfailing in honesty, humility and politeness, remains wedded to valour, guards his honour zealously, rules the country according to canons of propriety and impartially. The duties of a ruler are production and accumulation of wealth, conservation of resources, ensuring proper distribution of wealth of the nation and security of the people. As a result, people will live happily under the umbrella of that king who listens to the advice of his ministers even though they are not pleasant.¹⁷ A king who possesses the four qualities such as benevolence, fortitude, rectitude and concern for the welfare of the people is considered as the lamp who sets an ideal for the kings as a successful ruler. Dharma and all the codes set by the learned teachers are ultimately dependent on the leader. It is not the strength of arms that gives success to the king, but his just rule and uprightness. Moreover, the right attitude of learning is required by the head of the governing organization while courage gives him the ability to face challenges and take right decision. If the ruler is accessible and not harsh in speech and behaviour, people will extol

him and the world will exalt that country. Tirukural enumerates the right attributes of a leader, be him a king, President or Prime minister in monarchical, federal and democratic system of governance in chapter 39th to 100th. As Valluvar says if these people are honest and upright the state is also well-governed.

Valluvar maintains that a king should be circumspect before taking up any venture or embark on war. He should take due consideration of five aspects while planning an action. These are resources, means, time, place and nature of execution. Proper reconnaissance and reflection are very essential. A leader should reflect on what will be the loss, what will be the ultimate gain. He should never take up an action which has possibility of ruinous result.¹⁸ Furthermore, the king should be very selective in making friendship with worthy people so that he can foil any of his enemies.

Cabinet & Officials

The cabinet is a vital part of the state administration. Ministers are called eyes of the king. Therefore the king has to be very careful in selecting the members of the cabinet. Valluvar points out four factors which are to be taken into consideration while selecting a minister. These are honesty, free from lure of property, devoid of weakness for sensual pleasure, and fear of loosing life. High birth is an important quality. Because persons belong to respectable lineage are endowed with qualities such as courteous behavior, consistency of thought, speech and action, humility and is ever resistant from doing anything mean or improper. Both Manu and Kauṭilya while enumerating the qualities of a minister emphasized on the same as Valluvar.¹⁹ The king, as Valluvar says, must examine his credibility. Or else his future generation will also suffer.²⁰

People are among key resources in government. Tiruvalluvar maintains that the king should appoint only those who are capable of scanning both positive and negative sides of a matter. Employment should be directed towards those people who can help enrich resources and royal treasury and remove checks. Valluvar argues that preference of personal loyalty to knowledge and diligence should be avoided at any cost in choosing an official. The poet also added that once the right person is found, he should be entrusted the respective responsibilities. The king should not

doubt the credibility of the person who is sincere and steady in discharging his duties. Then only his country will prosper. Furthermore, the king must always observe the behaviour of his employees.²¹

The State

The saint poet also discusses the salient features that country should have in chapter 74 of his book. The requisites of a prosperous state are high yielding fertile land, industrious and capable people, wealthy merchants, bountiful production of harvests. A country is great where there is peaceful co-existence among the people, where all habitants stand together when disaster befall the country. A nation enjoys peace when it is free from famine, irremediable epidemics, anti-social and destructive internal elements and ruinous enemy. Valluvar argues that a state should be free from rapid growth of conflict and dissatisfaction among people, treachery against a legitimate ruler, and feuding groups which affect the stability of a state. Similar thought is echoed in the Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya who lived a millennium later, when he said that a king must ensure that no harm befalls the subjects either from him or his retinue.²² The five elements such as good health of both the ruler and the ruled, abundance of resources and production, wealthy citizens, happiness and sense of security from the invaders ensured by a leader's protective reign are like ornaments which make the country a beautiful place to live, Valluvar says. After enunciating all attributes which make a happy state, the poet says that unless there is harmony between the leader of a nation and the people the attributes possessed by a state are of use. The prosperity of a nation depends on a righteous and efficient leader.

Fortifications

Fortifications are military constructions or buildings designed for the defense of territories in warfare, and also used to solidify rule in a region during peace time. These were very important part of security measures for a state or kingdom in ancient times. Valluvar maintains that a fort is an essential means of warfare for confidence of those who march against their enemies as well as

for taking shelter when there is danger of attack by the foes. He holds that a fort should be built in place which is less vulnerable to attack. These should be well fortified with strong and high rising walls so that these are not easily accessible. It should have availability of crystal clear water, plough able land, hills, and equipped with plenty of food resources and weapons for defense against any kind of attack. An well-planned fort, as Valluvar says, always provides security however strong the attack may be. But unless it is looked after by efficient and active people, a fort does not serve the purpose in spite of all good qualities.²³

Army

Valluvar maintains that among all that a country should possess the most important is well manned army with indomitable courage, fearlessness and fortitude. Valour, sense of honour, trustworthiness, and high tradition of chivalrous conduct - these are the four qualities which make an army invincible. It should consist of well trained efficient soldiers who know how to face any attack and can tackle the situation charging an attack on the enemy from the back if situation demands. It is also emphatically asserted that army brings victory only under capable leadership. Decisive leadership is crucial to victory even though it has brave and sacrificing soldiers. The ruler must see that the components of the army is always satisfied. It is only then it serves with dedication and fights well to achieve victory.

Envoys & Messengers

Valluvar holds that essential attributes of an envoy or a diplomat are patriotic feeling, noble birth, amiable behaviour agreeable to the king. In depth knowledge on various affairs, a friendly disposition, eloquence - these are the three sine qua non qualifications of a diplomat. An envoy setting out for a mission should possess an impressive personality, erudite scholarship, and sagacity. He should be capable of conveying a message in concise and apprehensive manner. An envoy who is capable of analyzing the pros and cons of a matter with due consideration of time and place, well educated, confident and can assert his point with his eloquence commands respect of his employer and the head of the

foreign state. Such a diplomat will be sincere in his pursuit and will never swerve from his assigned mission even at the cost of his life.

Spy or Intelligence Service

The department of spies was considered one of the most important branches of public affairs in olden days. Spies were employed to collect information not only about enemies but also about people's movements within the state. As for Kauṭilya the goals of the secret service was to test the integrity of government officials, spy on cartels and population for conspiracy, to monitor hostile kingdoms suspected of preparing for war or in war against the state, to check spying and propaganda wars by hostile states, to destabilize enemy states, to get rid of troublesome powerful people who could not be challenged openly.²⁴ He dedicates many chapters on the need, methods and goals of secret service, and how to build a network of spies and then use their service for the state. The spies, states the text, should be trained to adopt roles and guises, to use coded language to transmit information, and be rewarded by their performance and the results they achieve Chapter 59 of the Tirukural deals with the attributes to be possessed by a spy. Valluvar proclaims that the spy and universally esteemed treatise on laws should be deemed as two eyes of a king. Like Kauṭilya, Valluvar too holds that a spy should keep an eye on enemy and all government officials, relatives of the king as well. The ruler must keep himself abreast of all the happenings at all times with the help of the spies. He should employ the spies in such way so that one may have no knowledge of the other. He should take action only if the information collected by three persons separately tally. Moreover, he should not show any favour or preference to any of them publicly. If he does so he would be divulge his own secret. One of the important criteria for selection of a person for intelligence service is his skill in assuming different guises which raise no suspicion.

Administration of Justice

Valluvar maintains that righteous ruler must examine a criminal case thoroughly and analyze all the aspects before giving his judgment. He must not be biased or partial to anyone while

inflicting punishment. The king shoulders the responsibility of protecting the entire world. Therefore it is the duty of the ruler to see that punishment is not excessive. Otherwise, his popularity among the people and his power of resistance against his enemies as well decrease gradually. However, it is not the fault of the king to punish the people for committing crime, but it is his duty to maintain law and order for the protection and uphold of his subjects. Rather, inflicting capital punishment for criminals is like removing weeds from paddy field. The king must reflect on the evil consequences while administering justice, or else he will lose both his wealth and confidence of his subjects.²⁵

Valluvar's concept of law and punishment is a notable reflection of the social perspective which dominates the brahmanic perception of just administration of punishment. This perspective is evident in the definition of 'criminal law' as '*kaṇṭakaśodhana*' in Manusamhitā (Ch.9, 252-253) and Arthaśāstra²⁶ (4.1) Kauṭilya maintained that it is essential duty of government to maintain order. He ascribed a lot of importance to '*dharma*'. According to him, 'the ultimate source of all law is *dharma*'. By this term '*dharma*' Kauṭilya refers to sense of honour and duty and human dignity, moral responsibility and enlightened patriotism. It's quite intelligible that the judge in the Arthaśāstra was called '*dharmastha*' or upholder of dharma.

5. Concluding remarks

Integrity and sincerity are two important qualities required in Administration. Without these qualities an Administrator will not be able to deliver his best which should be for the development of the subjects in particular and society at large, without any personal interest. For good governance each and every one associated with administrative affairs including the Judiciary essentially have to be upright. But we see just the opposite in the political and administrative scenario in India today. We hardly see honesty and uprightness in people in power. Vested interest has made them corrupt. Their indifferent attitude towards public interest given rise to utter discontent among people. In consequence, secessionist groups are posing as threat to the unity and integrity of the country.

In this paper we have explored the philosophy of governance deliberated in Tirukural with reference to the same in some ancient Sanskrit texts. Although the insights provided in the article are limited to Indian context, some of the ideas of good governance can be applied universally. The Kurals enriched with lofty ideas are highly valuable nowadays in a world passing through turbulent times. It is noteworthy that a book on ethics written by a Saint poet 2000 years back deliberates on good governance in such detail which is relevant even today. There are many management concepts which are still applicable in today's governing system. Thus the concept of *rājadharmā* as enunciated in Tirukural and other ancient texts as well still holds value for an orderly, peaceful and prosperous life for society and good ethical conduct in polity. Society has changed much even then the norms of political life essentially require the basic principle of *rājadharmā* for better governance of a country.

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