

SAHITYA AKADEMI AWARD-WINNING TAMIL CRITIQUE

The Immortal Kural

V.C. KULANDAI SWAMY



Sahitya Akademi

The *Kural* by Tiruvalluvar is an ancient work of the Sangam Age. Being a treatise on such a mundane theme as 'the Art of Living', and written under a political, social and economic milieu of such vast difference as may hardly be comparable with the modern age, one would expect it to face the inevitable fate of obsolescence. On the contrary, scholars and thinkers, increasingly admire and advocate the *Kural* as relevant even today and claim for it the virtue of universal and timeless appeal. It is against this background that the author of this book raises the query: "What is it that makes the *Kural* immortal?", and tries to seek an answer.

The author highlights Valluvar's penetrating insight into the unshifting foundations of life and his extraordinary genius for abstraction and generalization. It is strikingly different from any book or commentary so far written on the *Kural*. Presenting the Award for 1988, the Sahitya Akademi in its citation states that for the "perceptiveness, analytical approach and scholarly treatment, the book has been hailed as a contribution to contemporary Tamil Literature."

Rs. 55.00



THE IMMORTAL KURAL

The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, Mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi.

Sahitya Akademi Award-winning Tamil Literary Critique

THE IMMORTAL KURAL

V.C. Kulandai Swamy

Translated by the author



SAHITYA AKADEMI

The Immortal Kural: English translation by the author V.C. Kulandai Swamy, of his Akademi Award-winning Tamil literary critique *Vazhum Valluvam*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi (1994).

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To my parents

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Foreword

When I read Dr V.C. Kulandai Swamy's book in Tamil, *Vazhum Valluvam* which won for him the Sahitya Akademi Award, I found a new exposition of the *Tirukural*, also referred to as the *Kural*, which has not been attempted earlier. There have been many commentators of the *Kural* but they were all scholars and philosophers. For the first time a scientist, who is also well versed in the Tamil language, has studied the book from a scientific angle. This study has brought out and emphasised certain aspects which makes the *Kural* immortal. I suggested to Dr. Kulandai Swamy that he himself should translate his book into English so that this unique study and interpretation of the *Kural* may be available to a larger audience apart from the Tamil knowing people. I am glad Kulandai Swamy has done the translation, and, if I may say so, in an exemplary manner showing his command of the English language also. I would like to congratulate him on his excellent achievement. I am confident this will find a wide readership not only in India but in other parts of the world also.

The *Kural* was written two thousand years ago by a great Tamilian, Tiruvalluvar, also referred to as Valluvar. His greatness has been poetically acknowledged by Mahakavi Subramania Bharati when he says Tamil Nadu has attained glory by giving to the world the *Kural's* author, Valluvar.

The *Kural* contains three parts, dealing with three aspects of human pursuits, 'Aram,' 'Porul' and 'Inbam.' In

Sanskrit these are expressed as 'Dharma,' 'Artha' and 'Kama.' These are called purusharthas or human pursuits. There is a wrong impression that Indian spiritual tradition looks down upon 'Kama,' organic satisfaction and 'Artha,' wealth which serves as the means to 'Kama.' On the other hand, these are considered as valid human pursuits or purusharthas. But what is frowned upon are 'Lobha' (greed) and 'Moha' (delusion), arising from uncontrolled excessive organic cravings; they are unethical and cause problems in society—becoming anti-social. It is the third purushartha, 'Dharma' which controls 'Artha' and 'Kama' and makes them acceptable and beneficial to society. This is what Swami Ranganathananda states in regard to the place of 'Dharma,' 'Artha' and 'Kama' in Indian philosophy.

Indian tradition refers to 'Dharma,' 'Artha' and 'Kama' as the 'Thrivarga,' the inseparable group of three, treats them as the universal warp and woof of all ordered human society, theistic, atheistic or agnostic and presents Moksha, absolute freedom of spirit, as the fourth purushartha, which is an optional trans-social pursuit meant for those who desire and who dare, to dive deeper into the spiritual dimensions of reality and realise one's true nature in all its glory.

Valluvar has not dealt with the fourth purushartha, moksha. The author has translated 'moksha' as 'Heaven' as many do. This is not a correct translation. Moksha means spiritual liberation.

There is a popular impression that the human goal is the post-death attainment of 'Heaven,' which is expressed as Moksha. This is a wrong interpretation of moksha which really means attainment of spiritual liberation, or reaching fulfilment in life. When a person strictly follows the first three purusharthas diligently, he reaches the goal of human life, not in another birth but in this very life itself. When a man serves humanity and brings joy to a large number of people, that achievement itself is moksha, the

fulfilment of life's mission. The *Kural* does not consciously deal with moksha ('veedu' in Tamil); the first three purusharthas are adequate for human fulfilment.

The *Kural* was written two thousand years ago. We are living in an ever-changing world. This world is considered as 'maya.' 'Maya' means illusion. But it has another meaning—impermanence, what exists at a particular moment does not exist the next moment. This is a scientific truth. Change is the unchanging law of nature. During the last two thousand years, vast and revolutionary changes have taken place in every field of human activity. Social structures have undergone radical changes. Under these circumstances, whether what had been enunciated regarding the art of living which is the essence of the *Kural* would be relevant to modern societies or not would be a moot point. Dr Kulandai Swamy in his exposition of the *Kural* has argued logically and forcefully how most of the pronouncements in the *Kural* are still valid. Therein lies the genius of Valluvar.

To fully understand the validity of the *Kural* even for modern conditions, one should know what is meant by Dharma (Aram) in the *Kural*. Dharma has many meanings. The word Dharma traditionally means religion, ritual, duty, alms, righteousness, ethical values, both individual and social. It also implies justice, truthfulness, freedom from fear, faith, solace, fulfilment and peace. In the *Kural* it essentially means righteousness or ethical values, individual and social. There are certain values which are eternal; they are applicable to all people and at all times. These fundamental human values are expressed in three simple and beautiful words, 'Satyam, Sivam and Sundaram,' i.e. Truth, Love and Beauty. Each of these is equated with God. Truth is God and God is truth. So also beauty and love. These are called 'Tattvas'—eternal never-changing values. There are other values which change with time. These are called Yuga Dharmas. The first

category is akin to scientific truths which do not change with time.

Dr Kulandai Swamy has dived deep into the verses in the *Kural* and has brought out this feature in his study. Valluvar deals with all activities of the human species. This is how the author sums up the enduring nature of the pronouncements in the *Kural*.

In every topic that he (Valluvar) has dealt with, he has endeavoured to abstract the core of the subject and succeeds in making his observations so general that they lend themselves to interpretation in terms of contemporary developments, thus accounting for all the changes that may take place in human progress. It is this approach, this refined strategy, in the adoption of which he is consistent in every topic, that has substantially contributed to the *Kural* transcending the limitations of space and time and enabled it to be relevant, centuries after it was written.

This conclusion the author draws after giving numerous examples from the *Kural*.

The main point which emerges from Dr Kulandai Swamy's thesis is the scientific outlook which Valluvar has exhibited in dealing with various subjects. He could not have been a scientist, since science as it is understood today was not developed before the 17th century. But a scientific outlook is perhaps as old as human civilization. Valluvar was one of those rare human geniuses who acquired this attitude two thousand years ago. In the chapter on 'Scientific Outlook,' Dr Kulandai Swamy has elaborately cited instances where Valluvar's scientific outlook becomes quite evident. One cannot but fully agree with what the author has stated on this point in Chapter 6:

One could hardly look for a clearer definition of, or a more emphatic statement of a scientific approach to finding truth. Whatever the subject that Valluvar touches one finds that there is in his treatment an extraordinary streak

of rationalism, a flash like that of lightning that aims at revealing the innermost secrets of a subject. He reaches the base; touches the root and stands on what might be considered the relatively solid foundation of the subject matter. It is this great virtue which imparts immortality to his work.

Man is not just an individual. He is a social being—a citizen entitled to what we have resolved to secure in the Preamble of our Constitution:

Justice, social, economic and political;
Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;
Equality of status and of opportunity, and to promote
among them all:
Fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual.

There are corresponding duties for him. The *Kural* defines the pathways for man to tread to reach the human goals.

Man passes through four stages in life according to our Indian tradition — Brahmacharya, Grihasthya, Vanaprastha and Sanyasa. The last Ashrama, Sanyasa, is confined to a very small minority. They are more concerned with the fourth purushartha—moksha. It is the Grihastha who sustains society; all the three purusharthas, Dharma, Artha and Kama, are applicable to Grihastha. It is not given to any other Ashrama, the task of creating and acquiring wealth and enjoying the fruits thereof subject to Dharma. It is the Grihastha's duty and privilege to maintain the Brahmacharis, i.e., students, the Vanaprasthas (the modern pensioners) and the Sanyasis. The *Kural* mainly addresses itself to the duties and responsibilities of Grihastha.

Man is the architect of his own life and the life of the society. He can create a heaven on earth as great men like Mahatma Gandhi attempted, or degrade it into hell as Hitler did, bringing misery and suffering on a global scale. The *Kural* is a human document shining as a guideline to humanity to promote human happiness, harmony and

peace. The *Kural* is thus a document of universal application.

It is to the credit of Dr Kulandai Swamy to have struck a new path in studying and investigating the *Kural* from a scientific angle. I hope many more scientist scholars will come up to carry forward this task, thus presenting to humanity a pathbreaking document from Tamil Nadu for the promotion of human welfare and happiness.

C. Subramaniam

(Former Union Minister)

President, Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan

Preface

Man is not immortal: but he alone is capable of creations that are immortal; among them, books last longer than most others.

Books again vary in content and kind and the longevity of their relevance depends on their audience and their appeal. In a field like science and technology, where the life of knowledge is short and is becoming shorter day by day, obsolescence sets in fast. Even in other disciplines the relevance of a treatise diminishes, though relatively slowly, and becomes dated in a matter of some years. But scriptures, philosophical enquiries, great literary works and studies that dwell in the domain of human wisdom rather than human knowledge have the potential to sustain themselves and resist obsolescence.

The Bible will endure as long as Christianity lasts; so will the Koran as long as Islam has its followers. No one who is a believer in a religion will question the validity or relevance of its scriptures. They are supported and sustained by the respective faiths. Epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* remain immortal because of the beauty of the poems and the portrayal of characters that have a perennial appeal. When it comes to lyric poems, lines such as 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever' or 'The old order changeth, yielding place to new, lest one good custom should corrupt the world,' are poetic truths that will never age. But books on diplomacy or statecraft or norms of conduct and counsel for monarchs, ministers or managers cannot last long in a fast-changing world in terms of their

practical value and validity. We do praise Chanakya's *Artha Sastra*; we admire Machiavelli's *Prince* for the insight evident in the treatment. But no one seriously advocates them for adoption by modern rulers, administrators or managers. These ancient works represented an extraordinary understanding and perception of the affairs of the state by their authors at the time they were written and may have some limited relevance even today, but no university is likely to prescribe them as textbooks in economics or political science.

Valluvar's *Kural*, written nearly two millennia ago, deals with what may be called the 'Art of Living'. Society as it existed then in Tamil Nadu was different; perhaps beyond any comparison with the one that we now have. Most of the modern concepts and practices, considered simple and self-evident today, did not exist at that time. Democracy, socialism, welfare state, social justice, equality, dignity of the human individual and many other concepts were unknown. Science and technology, in the form in which we know of it today, is essentially a post-Galileo phenomenon and did not exist then. In other words, Valluvar lived and worked in an age, in a society, whose problems, challenges, ambitions, aspirations and even values were vastly different from those of the present. How could anyone hope that a book dealing so intimately with so practical and so mundane a subject as the 'Art of Living' involving day-to-day duties and responsibilities and written so long ago will be relevant today?

I am no scholar in Tamil. I do not belong to the world of Tamil Studies either. I cannot claim to have studied the *Kural* comprehensively or in depth. I fully realise my weakness. A knowledge of one's weakness is a strength in itself. It will help one to ensure caution and maintain moderation and I must state here, that I am not attempting any commentary on the *Kural* nor am I trying to present to the world its content in general. My task

concerns an enquiry into the relevance of the *Kural* today and the inherent factors that make it endure.

The *Kural* has been held in high esteem through the centuries. Among the works in Tamil, it has been translated into the maximum number of languages, more than 80, and in some languages more than one translation* is available. It has been quoted in one form or the other by successive generations of poets and thinkers in the Tamil land. However, it has been treated essentially as a book dealing with ethical and moral values and advocating or prescribing norms for right conduct. In recent decades, attempts, though feeble, have been made to understand, from the *Kural*, the social life of the Tamils of the period of Valluvar. Studies on themes like the economic concepts, management principles and political philosophy of Valluvar have appeared. From being a book confined to scholars and classrooms, it has slowly emerged as a book that offers scope for research into the life of the people of his age. These are welcome developments; but the theme of the book that I have undertaken to write is different.

We claim that the *Kural* is a treatise on the art of living. If it is so, it should not remain within the classroom; nor should it be confined to the forums of scholars and the world of researchers. It must reach the people; must form a part of their inheritance; must be as pervasive as the proverbs and maxims that people in general quote spontaneously as the occasion demands. At least the Tamils in whose language it has been written must have an acquaintance with, and knowledge of, its content even at the level of the common man. They must understand that its appeal is secular and that it belongs to the Hindus, Christians, Muslims and the others, all alike.

Some efforts are being made to take the *Kural* to the people. But here again there are problems. Some who are

*S. Maharajan: *Tiruvalluvar*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1979.

active in what may be called 'the *Kural* movement' happen to be those regarded by many, rightly or wrongly, as Tamil chauvinists who adore the *Kural* more from ethnic pride and loyalty than from an objective study of the book. There are yet others who quote from the *Kural* in support of certain radical, though not necessarily popular views that they hold on social reform, religious practices, faiths and beliefs. Consequently their appeal becomes partisan, limited and fails to be universal in impact.

There are also others who look at the *Kural* as another scripture. They approach it as devotees and endeavour to establish almost a faith out of it. Anyone who would differ even by a trifle is condemned as an enemy of the Tamil race or Tamil culture as the case may be. In their view, the *Kural* must be accepted without any change even of a comma or a semicolon. As and when they themselves realise that the contents of some couplets are indefensible in terms of modern concepts, they try to interpret them differently and labour hard to import into or impose on them, by such interpretation, their ideas and convictions. Such efforts are unnecessary and futile. These enthusiasts, in the ultimate analysis, only detract from the greatness of the *Kural* rather than upholding it effectively or helping it gain acceptance.

Ancient Tamil culture has a unique characteristic; it is a healthy one too. There is no book that is attributed to God or God's incarnation or His Messiah. Great works are the creations of the great among men and women. These men or women might be considered as divinely inspired; yet their words are those of human beings and are so treated. There is no book in Tamil which has to be accepted literally even by an orthodox individual, whatever be his religious faith. All the books therefore can be subjected to an objective enquiry. One can accept or reject a part or the whole of any of them without any fear of losing his religion or facing any serious ostracism. This is valid for the *Kural* too.

It is really healthy for an ideology or a concept or a theory to be subjected to a test every now and then for validity and relevance. Nothing that is living should claim immunity from inquiry into its applicability. Such a preparedness will add to its strength.

We are aware that the *Kural* was written nearly two millennia ago. Its author could have only written it standing on the shoulders of his ancestors; standing on the ground with all the environmental influences impinging on him, and soaring high into the sky, commanding a broader view, penetrating into and anticipating the future as far as his genius could have enabled him to. It is possible, that some couplets are free from the impact of contemporary influences and are relevant irrespective of time and place. But it is not easy to prepare a whole text of 1330 couplets on so temporal a subject as 'the Art of Living' and present the contents in a manner that they still hold good, in spite of the immense changes that have taken place. We hail those as Sages or Saints who almost intuitively show an insight into the nature of human society, a perception of its progress, an understanding of the permanent and the ephemeral: but how far can they anticipate the future?

There is also the danger that a theory or a counsel that is general may be too general to be of interest to any particular application. That kind of generalization may ensure acceptability without having any strength of applicability in any real-life situation. As mentioned earlier, it is not enough that a treatise endures through the ages as a collection of general statements: it must also be useful and applicable to real-life situations. Otherwise it cannot help a society as a source of guidance in its day-to-day life and conduct.

It may not be out of place to compare the present age with the age of Valluvar. He was a product of the early stages of agricultural civilization which flourished, progressed and developed for centuries, until humanity

entered, towards the end of the 18th century, the industrial civilization. The age of Science and Technology began and brought in its train momentous changes. The human society has seen upheavals and revolutions as an all-pervasive phenomenon. They need not be elaborated here. Starting from the middle of this century, we have seen another breakthrough and have entered the Era of Knowledge. The development in nuclear science, the invention of the computer, the adventures in space and the achievements in the life sciences, have almost transformed the world and given it a new form and numerous new tools. Above all these developments, knowledge has emerged as a new resource—a resource that is renewable; a resource that can be generated and augmented; a resource that can compensate for the absence of all other resources.

Valluvar lived and wrote in the age of the bullock cart: we are in the age of Boeings and space vehicles. He lived at a time when monarchy was the only form of civilized government; today monarchy as it existed then has disappeared and the concept of the welfare state has come to be accepted.

Can a book, written at a time when education was meant only for a few, when kings enjoyed unlimited powers, when the ruler and the ruled were the accepted system, have any relevance in an age when man-made satellites are in orbit; knowledge doubles every decade; universalisation of education has become the objective of the world; human rights have come to be accepted as sacred and government by the people, for the people is the goal? If the answer to this question is 'Yes,' then what are the inherent characteristics of the book that lend it immortality? This volume is a modest effort to find an answer to this question. It is an attempt to find an answer; perhaps not an answer in itself.

In the affairs of the world, many questions, many challenges arise: some are old; some new. Even the old questions now need new answers: the old challenges need new preparations. Today's answers may be different or more elaborate; today's preparations may need new tools, new strategies. Therefore, whatever Valluvar might have said then on various issues, should have, inherent in it, an anticipation of the developments of the future and a scope for interpretation and understanding that will fit into the modern situation. In other words, we are asking for a treatise in which words and sentences do not change but they have yet such resilience that their interpretation can make them dynamic, and accommodate and absorb all the changes that are inevitable with the passage of time. Could one achieve such a feat? If yes, what are the factors that contribute to such an accomplishment? In short, what makes the *Kural* an immortal work? What makes it relevant, two millennia after it was written? A search for an answer to this question is this book. It does not deal with the greatness of the *Kural* in general; it does not try to present in any comprehensive form the message of the *Kural*.

When I thought of soliciting a foreword, the name that spontaneously came to my mind was that of Sh C. Subramaniam; leader, statesman and an intellectual of the Gandhian era, he is an institution in himself. He is a person with a deep knowledge and understanding of the ancient heritage of India; a thinker with a resilient mind, a modern outlook, an intimate knowledge of the course of human progress through centuries and a discriminating knowledge of the role and impact of science and technology in the social, cultural and economic life of the people. He has the courage to reject that which is obsolete in our ancient tradition and to accept that which is valuable and relevant to the modern world. He knows what to accept from outside and what to keep out. In the words of Robert

Frost he is a great Indian “who has something there is, that does not love a wall.” If we are to build a wall:

Before building it he would ask to know
What we are walling in or walling out.

I am extremely thankful to him for graciously consenting to write the foreword.

The original in Tamil entitled *Vazhum Valluvam* (Immortal Kural) was written on the basis of a series of lectures that I delivered at the University of Madras in March 1987 and at the Valluvar Day celebrations in Singapore in April 1987. This is not a collection of those lectures but a book making use of the subject matter contained in them. I must acknowledge my indebtedness to all those associated with the organization of these lectures. It may be mentioned here that as the author of the original, I have taken the liberty of rendering it in a form appropriate to the English version; the content has also been abridged or enlarged here and there.

I am thankful to the Sahitya Akademi for coming forward to publish this English version of my original work in Tamil.

V.C. Kulandai Swamy

Every Book : Good For Its Age

“The Tamil land attained immense reputation by giving unto the world Valluvar”*: so proclaimed poet Bharati with a sense of great pride. It is Bharati’s assessment that the relevance of the message of the *Kural*, the monumental work of Valluvar, is not confined to Tamil or Indian society, but embraces humanity in its entirety. Bharati is well-acquainted with the religions of the world; the scriptures of ancient civilizations; scholarly treatises on human affairs acclaimed over the ages and the trail-blazing contributions of revolutionary leaders and thinkers. He has a clear perception of those that are ephemeral and those that would endure in human affairs. It is his firm belief that the *Kural*, a book written nearly two thousand years ago,** is still worthy of being referred to and owned with pride. During the past centuries and the earlier part of this century, many Westerners and that too missionaries who came to this country to spread their religion, studied the *Kural* in depth, mostly on their own initiative and interest

* The name of the author is Tiruvalluvar, also referred to as Valluvar; the book by him is mentioned either as *Tirukkural* or simply the *Kural*. We use Valluvar for the poet and ‘the *Kural*’ for the book. The individual poem in the book is referred to as kural or couplet (since it contains two lines) or stanza.

** It has by and large been concluded by researchers that the *Kural* was written around the first century B.C. and well before the second century A.D.

and were attracted by the way it approaches, presents and treats the problems of life. They looked at it from many angles, appreciated the penetrating insight into the firm foundations of life that Valluvar has shown and translated it into their mother tongues. Those who came to convert the pagans and in their mercy wanted to help them gain eligibility for entry into heaven, were converted into becoming great admirers of the culture and heritage of the land and the society that could produce a Valluvar.

The Tamils who professed Hinduism (Saivism, Vaishnavism or any other sub-faith) or Christianity or Islam, adhered to the respective sacred books or scriptures like the Bhagavad Gita, Thevaram, Thiruppavai, Bible or Koran. They did not take any special interest in the *Kural* to grasp its finer aspects and spread its message. In other words, the *Kural* has no followers based on faith. Its appeal and acceptance are derived from its inherent worth. It has the singular honour of being one of the few ancient works that have been translated into a large number of languages of the world, more than 80 in the case of the *Kural*,* on the strength of their universal appeal.

In general, the *Kural* is referred to as the 'Tamil Veda.' It may be valued or looked upon as reverentially as a 'Veda' or a scripture but it does not get circumscribed as it would, if it was considered one of the religious scriptures. It may be stated here for clarification that the *Kural* is not a Tamil Veda, but a secular book with the dimensions of a Veda that the Tamils have given to the world. There are today many in Tamil Nadu who advocate that the Tamils should order their living in accordance with the way of life advocated by Valluvar and some even demand that it be declared as the 'national book' like the national anthem. Though, in a small measure, one sees here and there in Tamil Nadu, efforts to propagate the *Kural*, for a long time

* S. Maharajan: *Tiruvalluvar*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1979.

it was, by and large, looked upon as a book of norms, taught in the classrooms, analyzed, annotated and summarized in a pedantic way by teachers and scholars and not as a book that has a relevance to the people at large as a guide to living. Even in public discourses, it did not claim as much importance as the *Ramayana* of Kamban or the *Mahabharata* of poet Villipuththoorar or the works of Nayanmars* or Alvars** or other saints.

It is mostly in recent years that we see in Tamil Nadu an awareness of its greatness outside the realm of traditional scholarship, and in sporadic movements an attempt to spread the essence of its message. At this juncture, a society that is changing and developing must ask itself the following question:

How appropriate and proper is it to expect, and more than that claim, that a book dealing with what may be the 'Art of Living,' written two millennia ago, could guide us today and provide guidance to countless generations in future? How far can one subscribe to such an expectation or perhaps belief?

It is certainly a necessary and healthy approach to raise these questions. We are living in an era of knowledge; an age that is dynamic, characterised by rapid changes and developments. The progress and prosperity of a society depend today on the level of knowledge it has, its mastery over relevant disciplines; its ability to create new knowledge and its capacity to use it for development.

The era of knowledge is an era of research, enquiry and investigation. The usefulness of any enquiry depends on the questions asked or the problems posed. You will get useful answers only if you raise meaningful questions. Trivial questions will yield only trivial answers.

No purpose will be served by undertaking scholarly studies and investigations on unimportant topics. The world of scholars will not recognise such efforts.

* Saivite saints

** Vaishnavite saints

A progressive society should develop an outlook, an approach and a culture of asking healthy questions while deliberating on the problems that may confront it. Progress and prosperity will elude the people who develop a predilection for debating on frivolous topics and fighting for petty causes. To ask good questions is not easy either; for that, one may need deep scholarship in certain situations: high objectives in certain other situations and yet on other occasions, extraordinary courage.

Some adore and advocate the *Kural* with such fervour and faith as a sacred book that it is quite unacceptable to them even to contemplate raising doubts, or asking questions about its relevance to this age and to the future. But there seems to be no way out. The present generation asks, in all areas of human affairs, a common question: "Is it relevant today?" It may raise the same question about the *Kural*. Even before it is asked we must be ready with an answer. An orthodox person cannot ask such a question about the scripture on which his religion rests. If he does, he will be branded as one who has lost faith in the religion. Scriptures are meant to be quoted and followed, not to be questioned and doubted. The *Kural* is not a scripture, not a Veda. It is a secular book and does not advocate any faith. Since it deals with 'the way of life' or 'the art of living' in this world, it is not above investigation and can be and must be subjected to rigorous scrutiny. As a matter of fact, if the *Kural* is still a help, we can take it; if it is obsolete in parts or in full and becomes a hindrance, we can reject it.

The present generation declares that it will never allow its freedom of thought to be chained or shackled. It will proclaim even before God Almighty that the freedom of its mind is its exclusive right and it will zealously guard it. The *Kural* must accept and face the challenges of the new generation.

Human society is continually changing and developing. That which is past, remains a matter of the past and shall

never return. Whether we consider the floods in the river or the waves in the ocean, yesterday's phenomenon is not repeated today and today's will not be repeated tomorrow. The world is a perennial spring of newness. It is an incontrovertible fact that things that do not change, do not develop and that which does not develop, does not survive. This law, however, will endure and will ever remain true.

Perception of Truth changes

'Dharma' changes

Life's strategies change

Code of conduct changes.

The postulates, once believed

true and beyond doubt,

will see change and improvement.

What is permanent

is 'change and motion'.*

In a world that undergoes change and evolves continuously, how long can any book or concept endure? In case it endures, what is the source of its eternal relevance? In the context of claiming immortality or continuing relevance for a book or a concept we need to find answers to these questions.

We use the term 'education'. It is in vogue today and was in use during the days of Valluvar too; but only the word remains the same: the content then and the content today are far different; even the role of education keeps changing with time. The word 'Dharma' was in use then and is in use now. However, what it signifies today is very different from what it signified in the past. Man's concept of Dharma changes with his own cultural evolution and the development of civilization. The word is a container; the

* Kulothungan: *Welcome to Those Who Could Create a Heaven* (Collection of Poems in Tamil): Bharati Pathippakam, Madras, 1984.

container remains the same: but the content changes as we develop.

Man is not immortal, but he alone is capable of creating things that are relatively immortal. Among the things he creates, books endure longer than others. Certain concepts live longer than concrete objects whether these be of stone and mortar or steel and other metals. The great poet Bharatidasan declares while speaking about books that "they are good for the age in which they are written." The word 'age' may mean a generation; maybe a few centuries. But the central idea is that no book can be valid for all societies, for all times to come. Bharati expresses himself more explicitly on this subject.

To suit all the needs of time,
To meet the changing concepts
of every age,
Acceptable to the
wide world and
enduring forever—
Such a book does not
exist.

Bharati's declaration is rather categorical. This, in essence, is what the great social reformer Periyar Ramasami and others like him have been proclaiming in their messages.

As human society evolves and develops, the nature of its requirements changes: its interests change. Commensurate with this, the old order changes yielding place to new: the old values change and new ones emerge. Consequently the currency of old writings slowly or rapidly, but definitely, diminishes. It is normally inevitable. Many scriptures which some fanatically adhere to as a matter of faith are slowly becoming burdens rather than blessings. Obsolescence is relevant not only to machines and materials but also to concepts and convictions. It is valid for objects as well as ideas.

There is no doubt that certain aphorisms are eternally valid. For example,

“The old order changeth yielding place to new”

“A thing of beauty is a joy forever”

are poetic truths and will ever remain true. It also appears possible, therefore, that one can get at the root of the unshifting foundations of human life and perhaps find truths and laws that endure, that remain eternally valid.

Many books become obsolete during the lifetime of the author; some after a century; some others after a few centuries: but obsolete they do become. The *Kural* as a book that deals with ‘the Art of Living,’ is gaining increasing acceptance. The question therefore arises now: what makes the *Kural* transcend spatial and temporal boundaries; what makes it immortal and applicable universally as is claimed? In the case of the *Kural* there are, in my opinion, five characteristics which seem to make it immortal. They are:

- (i) dealing with issues concerning wisdom in preference to knowledge
- (ii) generalization
- (iii) scientific outlook
- (iv) extolling human effort
- (v) presenting a possible ideal world.

In the chapters that follow we may look into these aspects in some detail.

Wisdom: Not Knowledge

We make use of such words as information, knowledge and wisdom. These are obviously not the same; but in one way or another, one contributes to the other. Information is often of momentary importance and is fleeting in nature. It deals with events and facts concerning situations. It is not of any significance for the subject we deal with here. We may take up for consideration knowledge and wisdom. Kenneth F. Boulding considers nine stages of knowledge in increasing degree of complexity (vide Table 1). They can perhaps be simplified, grouped and viewed as dealing with four broad systems:

- (i) physical systems
- (ii) biological systems
- (iii) social systems
- (iv) metaphysical systems.

Of the four, the first one, namely physical systems, falls under what we refer to as 'exact sciences'. Subjects like Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Applied Sciences like Engineering and Technology, come under this category. The second one consists of such basic disciplines as Botany, Biology, Zoology and applied fields such as Medicine and Agriculture. These will normally be empirical in nature and exact knowledge as in Mathematics or Physics is not yet possible. Social systems deal with human affairs of a mundane nature. Economics, Politics, Sociology and allied fields come under this category. Though the suffix science

TABLE 1: HIERARCHY OF SYSTEMS

Keyword	Characteristic	Example of system at level
1. Framework	Static structure	Geography of earth, anatomy of cell
2. Clockwork	Predetermined motions	Steam engine, solar system
3. Thermostat	Transmission of information	Furnace, homeostasis
4. Cell	Open system throughput of material and energy, system maintained in the face of throughput	Flame, river, cell
5. Plant	Division of labour among parts but not at the sensory level	Any plant
6. Animal	Self-awareness specialised receptors, increased intake of information to form image (different from the information)	Any animal
7. Human	Self-consciousness, knows that it knows, language and symbols	Human being
8. Social organisations	"Role" and communication, history, messages, music, art	Human societies
9. Transcendental systems	Unknowables	Unknowables

Boulding, Kenneth E.: "General systems theory—the skeleton of science" *Management Science*, Vol 2, April, 1956.
 Goode, H.: "A decision model for the fourth level model in the Boulding sense" Chap.6 in Donald P. Eckman (ed), *Systems: Research & Design*, Wiley, 1961.

is used in social systems too as in Political Science and Social Sciences, they are still not amenable to treatment by scientific methods. The metaphysical systems transcend sciences: they are not amenable to rigorous logic, reasoning and proof.

In physical and biological systems generally, we have well defined methods of approach for improving our understanding and for creation of new knowledge. Social systems go beyond mere knowledge and enter the domain of wisdom. Metaphysical systems have a bearing on wisdom but go beyond and deal with concepts that border on revelations and mystic experiences where reason and logic have, if at all, a limited role to play.

Of the nine stages of knowledge that Boulding deals with, starting from the first one, each stage is more difficult than the preceding one. A static system like a beam or a wall in a building is easy for analysis and design. Under a given load, one can determine the stress and strain. At the same time, if it is a dynamic system, for instance the wing of a plane, and the system or its part is subject to varying stress and strain, its analysis and design become more difficult. We come next to systems, not static but in predetermined motion: an instance may be given of a clock, or a planet like the sun or the moon. It is easy to predict the time when the sun will rise in Madras on a particular day. We can predict with great accuracy such events as a solar eclipse or lunar eclipse that is to occur some months or years from now. These are objects lakhs of kilometres away but still we can predict their behaviour since their motion follows a well-defined law which we now know.

The next stage is a feedback system, for example a thermostat in an air-conditioning unit. It regulates the temperature and when it exceeds a set limit it automatically starts and when it falls below, it stops. It is a system which is regulated by its own output. A more difficult stage of knowledge is reached when we are to deal

with systems that are not deterministic but probabilistic. While we are able to predict with absolute accuracy the time when the sun will rise at Madras on a given day, we can hardly predict with the same accuracy, the time of arrival of a particular train or plane from Delhi to Madras on a given date. Similarly the rains, the floods and the storm are not as predictable in advance with any significant accuracy. These systems are probabilistic and can at any time be predicted only in terms of probability and not certainty.

So far we have been dealing with objects that have no life. We now move to living objects like plants and animals. Our knowledge of biological systems is far less than our knowledge of physical systems. Biological systems take us to fields like Agriculture and Medicine. The clarity of understanding we have in Engineering and Technology is not available in Agriculture and the clarity that we have in Agriculture is not available in Medicine.

In general, biological systems are more difficult and complex to deal with than physical systems. When we launch a satellite in orbit, or a space vehicle is to land on the moon, we reasonably expect our calculations to be accurate and even hold the persons concerned somewhat accountable for the computations and predictions. But when two doctors give different prescriptions for a simple disease, we do not order an enquiry into what they have done. Both may justify their diagnosis. It is so, because medicine belongs to the domain of the biological sciences which are still empirical in nature. In these systems, however, knowledge advances rapidly and we are better informed today than yesterday and will be more advanced tomorrow than today.

If one has written any treatise on these subjects in the past, it would have been replaced by the new ones that arrived later on the horizon. Any attempt to create new knowledge carries with it the fate that as time passes, it

will be improved upon or may even be proved wrong. The divine Bible for instance talks about the creation and appearance of inanimate and animate objects and particularly the creation of man and woman. Later the Darwinian theory of evolution proved the biblical narrations about creation to be wrong. Slowly, reluctantly but steadily the position has been accepted by members of the Christian faith.

When we come to human beings, the extent of knowledge that we have about the human body, we do not have about the human mind. Again, the understanding that we have of the psychology of an individual, we do not have of the psychology of a crowd. A crowd no doubt is a collection of individuals: but a knowledge of the behaviour of individuals is not adequate to predict the behaviour of a crowd. From the individual to the crowd, is not a physical mixture but a chemical change; a metamorphosis. If one is a specialist in the psychology of an individual, he may, at the most, become a professor of psychology in a university. If one understands the psychology of a crowd, he can become, perhaps, the prime minister of the country. Social systems consisting of groups of individuals are infinitely more difficult to understand and are intractable. It is here that human relationship plays a part; laws and regulations enter governance and control becomes necessary. The sum of human experiences bequeathed over generations acquires relevance. It is wisdom rather than knowledge that helps and guides.

Aristotle held almost unquestionable sway over many fields of knowledge until about the 17th century. But thereafter he has been found progressively inadequate or wrong, almost in every subject he dealt with. Knowledge grows today at an incredibly fast rate. What we claim to achieve today when we make a new invention or innovation, falls under the category of new knowledge. It is not a contribution to wisdom.

If it is only a matter of knowledge, Valluvar would not have possessed the knowledge of a present-day high school student. He had no access to the enormous fund of knowledge that education and research have accumulated over the centuries. We are older than Valluvar by nearly 2000 years in terms of our knowledge and experience. We are more advanced by 2000 years. But we cannot claim that we are wiser than the society in which Valluvar lived and worked. There are any number of cases where a school child has more knowledge than its parents but that does not mean that the child is wiser.

Valluvar has been extremely careful not to deal with matters of knowledge that grow and change with time. It is here that he demonstrates an extraordinary perception of things that endure and those that shift with the passage of time. He has not endeavoured to talk about the physical world in terms of its dimensions or characteristics or motion; he has not entered the animal or the plant world and discussed any aspect that is biological in nature. Had he embarked upon such an effort, it is not unlikely that the world today would have found him wrong and listed many inadequacies and errors. He has scrupulously avoided any such treatment in the entire work. It is not as though Valluvar had no knowledge of them at all or had not thought about them. He was possibly aware of the incompleteness or inadequacy of anything he might say on matters of this nature. When it comes to talking about man he deals with him as a component of society; as the member of a family; as the citizen of a country. He neither speaks about the physiology of his species or the psychology of individuals.

Perhaps in two chapters he has departed from this path: one is when he talks about 'Rains': another, when he devotes a chapter to 'Medicine'. In both these cases, however, he has taken remarkable care in dealing with them in such general terms and observations as lend themselves

admirably to be interpreted to suit the modern state of knowledge. We shall come to this again later and take a detailed look.

We find new truths about the things we associate ourselves with, things we deal with; we become certainly more knowledgeable; but not necessarily wiser. One may ask whether the accumulation of knowledge may not result in our becoming wiser; may be in an imperceptible way, but not beyond what a man of extraordinary genius like Valluvar could perceive for a span of 2000 years and incorporate by way of broad generalisations. Matters of wisdom do not change perceptibly with time. In the world of knowledge, at the present rate of growth, even a decennium is a significant period; but in the domain of wisdom a millennium or two may hardly matter. If what Valluvar said was valid then, it could be valid now; if it was not valid even then, it may not be valid now. The passages in the *Kural* are essentially words of wisdom and the expression of a mature mind that have an eternal relevance except for certain minor adaptations that may be made; for instance what was said for the king then, is relevant today to those at the helm of affairs of either a country or an institution. We may see for example a few couplets.

If he is easy of access and
avoids the use of harsh language,
the whole world will exalt the land of the ruler (386)

The whole world will come under the umbrella,
of the king who is capable of listening
with tolerance to words that are
critical of him and therefore bitter (389)

Friendship is not for fun and laughter;
it is for administering a rebuke beforehand
when one tends to become guilty of excesses (784)

These observations were meant for kings; but they are equally valid today for anyone in authority or position of responsibility. One can substitute in the place of the king

Minister, Chairman, Manager, Director or one in any comparable position.

There are couplets that make observations of universal truth. They are as valid, true and applicable today as they were during the days of Valluvar. As examples we may see a few:

Though of a small magnitude,
a help rendered in time
when it is most needed
is larger than the world itself (102)

The value of an act of help is not
in the help itself;
it is in the greatness and worth
of the person who receives it (105)

Whatever control you may or may not exert,
but exercise control on your tongue,
lest you should regret and feel sorry
for having made unbecoming statements (127)

The above statements will be valid, as mentioned already, as long as human beings live in a society and not as unrelated individuals. These are maxims that are ageless. As we contemplate the content of the *Kural*, we find that what Valluvar has done is amazing. He has thought of human society as a whole, considered its characteristics, its strengths and weaknesses, and extracted the essence and essentials that run through the system as the core. He has established those truths of life that are basic, that will endure, and has so stated them as to be of use to society for observance in daily life. Political organizations may change; the form of governance may change; economic policy may change; social habits may change and these changes may occur in time and space. Transcending all these rather superficial changes and relatively shortlived developments, deep in human life are certain relatively unshifting foundations. Valluvar reaches these depths and brings out guidelines and norms for conducting one's affairs of life as

a member of a social system. It is this aspect which makes the *Kural* relevant even today. We may see further evidence for these observations in subsequent chapters.

No Life Without Water

It was mentioned earlier that Valluvar avoids any discussion about physical systems and dwells in the domain of human affairs, his observations being in the nature of wisdom. However, the chapter entitled 'The Importance of Rain' goes contrary to this norm. Rainfall is part of the physical systems of the world. Because of continuous studies and research, our knowledge of precipitation has considerably improved. Valluvar's society might have had only a fraction of this knowledge.

Valluvar, while speaking about the importance of rain, has not attempted to deal with the occurrence of rain and its causes; but contents himself with emphasizing the indispensability of water for life on earth. It is not only agricultural economy but the industrial economy too that depends on water. As a matter of fact, with advancing civilization, the human race has found increasing uses for water. As Oscar E. Meinzer* would put it:

Its several properties, such as its solvent ability, its high specific heat and its occurrence in the solid, liquid and gaseous states within convenient temperature intervals and with high latent heat in passing from one state to another, lend themselves so remarkably to the needs of civilized man in his multitudinous domestic and industrial operations, recreational activities and therapeutic applications that it seems as if these properties were providentially designed for his benefit.

*Meinzer, Oscar E.: *Hydrology, Physics of the Earth-IX*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York.

Water is basic to life next only to air and any song or poem in praise of this resource could have eternal value. Valluvar places the chapter on rains next only to that entitled 'In Praise of God.' The ten couplets in this chapter emphasise the importance and indispensability of rains and will be relevant as long as we need water for life. Among the ten couplets, the last one (20) specially attracts our attention. This kural is interpreted differently by scholars. Among the commentaries on the *Kural*, the one that has been and is uniformly acclaimed is that of Parimelalahar. A review of the interpretations leaves me convinced that his is about the most reasonable and appropriate for this kural in the given context. The Kural reads as follows in the translation by Rev. Drew and John Lazarus:

If it be said that the duties of life
cannot be discharged by any person without water,
so without rain there cannot be the flowing water (20)

It certainly appears to be an obvious and simple statement of fact. What is so easily taken for granted today, did not look so self-evident to the ancients. It may be appropriate here to discuss the uncertainties and misunderstandings that existed in the West until about the 17th century.

We see in the world many live springs and numerous perennial rivers. They flow on all the days of the year; but rain is not a phenomenon of daily occurrence. There are countries like India where rainfall is restricted to a few months in the whole year; many months are dry. If that be the case, how does it happen that we have springs and rivers that are perennial? The thinkers of the West raised this question nearly 2,500 years ago. They developed a belief, somehow, that the total quantity of water derived from the springs and flowing in the river is more than the quantity of water that reaches the earth by way of precipitation. The following observation of Meinzer* is relevant here:

*Meinzer, *ibid*.

Prior to the later part of the seventeenth century, it was generally assumed that the water discharged by the springs could not be derived from the rain, first because the rainfall was believed to be inadequate in quantity and second because the earth was believed to be too impervious to permit penetration of the rain water far below the surface. With these two erroneous postulates lightly assumed, the philosophers devoted their thought to devising ingenious hypotheses to account in some other way for the spring and stream water.

There were two schools of thought to explain the phenomenon. They are:

- (i) Water is derived from huge inexhaustible subterranean reservoirs.
- (ii) Water is derived from reservoirs replenished by water from the ocean reaching them by way of subterranean channels.

Thales in his writings (7th century B.C.) has stated that springs and streams draw water from the ocean. He believed that sea water is driven into the rocks by winds and is elevated in the mountains by the pressure of rocks. Plato (427-347 B.C.) has also stated in his discourse "Phaedon" that waters that form the seas, lakes, rivers and springs come from vast caverns known as Tartarus and all these waters return through various routes to Tartarus.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) developed a theory of subterranean condensation drawing the parallel from the condensation of atmospheric water vapour. The subterranean theory gives rise to the questions:

- (i) How is salt water purified?
- (ii) How is water lifted upto the springs?

The removal of salt was sought to be explained by certain vague theories of filtration or distillation. The elevation was ascribed to vaporization and condensation,

pressure of the mountains, pressure exerted on the sea by the wind and waves and to the belief that the sea stands higher than the springs and thus provides the necessary head.

The Roman philosophers generally followed the Greek ideas. Pliny and Lucretius adopted the sea water concept and Seneca, the condensation concept of Aristotle. According to Adams all the philosophers believed in the flow of water through subterranean channels. It was almost a heresy to doubt it.

Marcus Vitruvius, the great Roman architect who lived about the time of Christ, recognized that ground water was mainly derived from percolation. However, the two old Greek theories persisted till about the middle or end of the 17th century.

The infiltration theory was enunciated by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), an extraordinary genius, and Bernard Palissy (about 1509-1589), a French paleontologist. He was born of a poor family and was not educated in Greek or Latin. He was perhaps in an advantageous position in that he was not influenced by the earlier writings on this subject. He relied on his own observations and conclusions. He wrote:

I have had no other books than Heaven and Earth which are open to all.

While the contributions of these men are substantial and remarkable, one would say the originators of what we understand as the science of Hydrology are Pierre Perrault (1608-80), Edme Mariotte (1620-84) and Edmund Halley (1656-1742). They conducted experiments and adopted a quantitative approach. In the Seine River at a station in Burgundy, Pierre Perrault measured the run-off from the basin. He calculated the area of the catchment and also computed the precipitation received in the form of rain and snow. The calculations were naturally crude and approximate. He found, however, that the total quantity of

water received in the basin above Burgundy was about six times the discharge measured in the river. He proved that the postulate of inadequate rainfall to account for the discharge was fallacious. Similar measurements were made by Edme Mariotte in the river Seine in Paris and he too came to similar conclusions. Edmund Halley made observations on the rate of evaporation and proved that the quantity of water that evaporated from the Mediterranean sea was adequate to supply the entire quantity of water returned to it.

The aim of this very brief review is to demonstrate that there were many postulates, assumptions and theories about the source of water on earth. About the time that Valluvar lived and wrote, no clear concept existed in the West on this subject. Moreover, certain erroneous assumptions held sway centuries after this period and a definite view was taken only towards the end of the 17th century. Viewed against this background, the categorical statement of Valluvar that "without rain there cannot be any flowing water" is amazing. He happened to live in a land that depended on seasonal rainfall and for nearly nine months in a year there was no rainfall. A live spring or a perennial river should certainly have evoked such questions as the Greek and Roman philosophers faced. It is not known whether the society in which Valluvar lived had an enlightened view of this phenomenon and Valluvar reflected it, or whether it was his own observation. We do not also know whether it is an observation made after a deep consideration of the source of occurrence and volume of water on earth or is just a simplistic assumption based on a general observation of rainfall and runoff. We cannot say anything for certain. It is obvious that his statement is definite, categorical and also true. This is one of the few occasions where he touches a phenomenon in physical systems and exposes himself to the possibility that later

developments may prove him inadequate or even wrong; but he has come out unscathed. He must have made his observation with the definite conviction that this would be eternally true.

Generalisation

In our search for truth we generally start with particular objects or events and study them. As we make advances in the study of a number of related objects or events, we make attempts at generalisation. If we take the three laws of Newton, we find that they are valid for all physical objects, irrespective of the material of which they are made, or their size or shape. They are valid for the earth or the moon or other planets and objects on earth. Newton's laws on which the entire treatment of dynamics in physical sciences is based, comprise only a paragraph of a few lines. The laws deal with 'matter' in general and we can apply them to any physical object.

In the early stages, men identified individual objects. For instance, in the case of trees, it is a palm, a plantain or a pine. It is only later that he identified them as belonging to a particular category termed 'tree' and brought them under one group. Initially he identified the animals as lions, bears, tigers, etc. It is only later that he could group them as 'animals.' Whether it is Science or Engineering or any other field of knowledge we move from the particular to the general and generalization indicates advancement in knowledge. Valluvar really excels in generalization in his treatment of every subject that he takes up.

Valluvar scrupulously avoids the use of names of places, objects, events and, in general, proper nouns to an astonishing degree. For instance, he devotes a whole chapter to 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 or city nor of the kingdoms that existed then in the Tamil land or elsewhere on the subcontinent. He refers to the necessity of having perennial rivers but does not refer to any river. Neither the Ganges nor the Cauvery finds a place in his treatise. 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 of the Cholas, Pandavas, and Cheras as well as the kingdom in which he must have lived and worked, do not find mention. In any area of activity where one applies knowledge, one can see that the knowledge utilized has universal components and local components. Science is universal; but its application is not. It will have local dimensions. The moment Valluvar refers to a language or a country or a dynasty of rulers, he may have to ensure its relevance to a given situation. The fulfilment of this requirement will 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. Francis Bacon adopted a similar approach in a limited way some sixteen centuries later. When he translated his book the *Advancement of Learning* from English to Latin for a wider readership, Francis Bacon* took care that his work in passing from English into 'the universal language' should become as general and as generally acceptable as possible. In his letter written to King James on presenting the Latin edition, he says "I have been also mine own *Index Expurgatorius*, that it may be read in all places. For since my end of putting it into Latin was to have it read everywhere, it had been an

*Francis Bacon: *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis*; preface by Thomas Case, Oxford University Press, London.

absurd contradiction to free it in the language and to pen it up in the matter."

Valluvar would often speak of scholarly books and advise his readers to "do as stated in authoritative treatises or as suggested by acknowledged authors"; but one does not come across the name of any book or author in the *Kural*. The reference here is to authoritative books on different subjects accepted as such, at a given point of time; similarly authoritative authors at any given time. In the first two of the three parts of the *Kural* there are numerous occasions on which he could have mentioned the name of a book or an author. It is with a design and determination that he avoids particularization and makes it possible for us to substitute that book or that author relevant to that subject at that point of time. Any author or any particular book may become obsolete; but the need to consult acknowledged treatises and great authors will always be there and the advice and stress on such a need will remain valid forever. This is an approach that Valluvar employs to make his observations enjoy continued relevance and one sees that this design pervades every chapter. Valluvar's capacity for 'abstraction without losing sight of the concrete for application' is really astonishing.

In the part on 'Wealth', choosing the appropriate time for action is given a chapter. In a couplet on the choice of the right time and the right tool, he says:

Is there an impossible task
for the one who chooses
the right moment and the [right] tool [483]

The tool for a job will change with time, with place. One must do today's job with today's tool. If you do today's job with yesterday's tool, tomorrow you will be out of business. Valluvar speaks of the use of the appropriate tool in more than one place, but never refers to any particular tool. If he had done so, it could now be only a piece of historical information giving us the name of a tool, maybe concrete

or conceptual, in vogue at that point of time and it may have no relevance today. He uses just the word tool on all occasions. You may fill up that place by the 8,000-year-old plough or the most modern tool, the personal computer. He has made room for the use of an appropriate tool by the reader on the basis of his understanding of the problem at a given point of time. The tool proper will change with time and place, but the need to use the appropriate tool will ever remain.

If we examine the progress of human civilization, we will realize that it is connected with the development of tools. Man is the only tool-making animal. We even refer to the periods in history as the Stone age, Iron Age, Bronze Age, etc., by identifying them in terms of the materials of which tools have been made. Some 7,000 or 8,000 years ago, the plough was invented by an unknown genius. It ushered in the age of agriculture. It is truly the plough that sowed the seeds for the beginning of human civilization.

Valluvar lived at a time when agriculture was the predominant occupation. He speaks about the inevitability of farming and the independence that it gives a person. In this context he has to refer to ploughing. He would again speak of the 'ploughing tool' and the 'ploughing operation.' As long as agriculture lasts, there will be ploughing and a tool for that purpose. It may be the wooden plough or the tractor. We may use, in place of the ploughing tool, any device meant for tilling the soil.

It was in the eighteenth century that the steam engine was invented and it brought about the Industrial Revolution. Similarly the computer invented around 1950 inaugurated the high technology era, or more correctly, the knowledge era. In a period of about eight millennia, three great epochs in human history were brought about by three new classes of tools.

Valluvar while referring to tools for accomplishing a task would only say, as already pointed out, 'the tool

appropriate for the occasion.' Nowhere has he attempted to list the tasks on the one side and the corresponding tools on the other. Had he done so, it would be a passage relevant only to history and not to our needs today.

There is perhaps no book dealing with human virtues that does not stress the need for 'decorum' or the propriety of 'good conduct.' Valluvar emphasizes 'decorum' and devotes a whole chapter to it. In the ten stanzas of the chapter, he speaks of the need for, and the greatness and propriety of, good conduct. He also devotes a chapter to deal with the evils of 'inconsistent conduct.' But in both the chapters he avoids listing what would be considered 'good conduct' and those traits that would be deemed 'inconsistent conduct.' He says:

Propriety of conduct leads to eminence:
therefore should be preserved
more carefully than life [131]*

From propriety of conduct
men obtain greatness;
From impropriety comes insufferable disgrace [137]*

Propriety of conduct is the seed of virtue;
Impropriety will ever cause sorrow [138]*

He goes on in a similar strain in the two chapters dealing with 'propriety of conduct,' 'inconsistent conduct' and the consequences accompanying them: but he does not state what constitutes good conduct or what would be termed the opposite of it. One may wonder: of what use it is, if one just says what might be an obvious observation that the propriety of conduct is good and the absence of it is bad, and does that in many ways and many forms without defining 'propriety of conduct.' He does devote one kural to define decorum or propriety of conduct. According to him:

Good decorum is what the wise men of the time
decide as such.

*Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

He would assert that

Those who do not know
how to act agreeably to the world,
Though they have learnt many things,
are still ignorant

[140]*

In Tamil tradition the term 'world' denotes 'the wise' of the time. Propriety of conduct is not a static phenomenon. It changes with time, as society evolves, and as its values undergo change. The eminent rationalist and intellectual, Bertrand Russell, would advise that it is desirable that a common man accepts what the knowledgeable ones on the subject say; if the experts differ among themselves, the common man had better suspend judgement.

Some find fault with the advice of Valluvar that one should act agreeably to the world. If the son thinks and acts agreeably to the father or the grandson agreeably to his father, there would then be no change, no reform, much less a revolution. This would lead to a stagnant social order and result in the absence of all progress. It is a criticism that deserves attention.

Change, reform and revolution are not things that every common man should attempt. Even to advocate change, attempt reforms, or lead a revolution, one needs a background, a necessary preparation. It is not as though everyone needs to experiment and investigate everything before accepting it. We accept certain things on the basis of our own understanding, certain others on the authority of those acknowledged as knowledgeable. Life is too short for one individual to aim at understanding everything fully by himself before accepting it. We must know what to accept and what not to accept on authority. An ordinary citizen is not generally a researcher, a crusader, a reformer or a revolutionary. In general, his behaviour and conduct should conform to the tradition as obtaining at that time

*Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

and he should accept changes as may be agreed upon by those acknowledged as wise and knowledgeable.

The expression 'good decorum' is acceptable to all societies, at all times; it is a part of every religion. The problem really arises only when you try to define what good decorum is. That will not be common to all. Will Durant demonstrates the diversity in, and the variability of, good decorum among nations and societies with an effective illustration.

Imagine that we take a society; pick up whatever is considered good decorum in that society and list it. We repeat that exercise for every other society we know of and we will have before us an exhaustive list. Then we start removing from the list whatever may be considered 'not good' in a society and we repeat it for all the other societies we initially considered. At the end of this exercise nothing may be left in the list.

While every society will unhesitatingly accept the virtue of good decorum in general, there is bound to be difference of opinion in day-to-day life as to what constitutes good decorum. This is a basic fact of life. Certain things considered as part of good decorum in a society at a particular period may not be accepted as such in the same society at a different period. 'Sati' was accepted as proper conduct in certain parts of India. Modern India will not accept it. Even in those days, it was not part of good decorum in many parts of India; even in a given part, not in every community. Even today polygamy is permissible among some; punishable among many.

We may take another commonly accepted virtue, chastity. By and large it is exalted as a great virtue over the ages and in modern times too. But at no time was there a universally accepted interpretation of chastity. Among the ancient Tamils, the poets declared that a truly chaste woman would not be coveted by another man. It is not

enough if she does not allow any weak thought about a man other than her husband to enter her mind; she should be so pure that none but her husband would entertain a desire for her or covet her. It is a tall order, absolutely unpracticable, but that was the limit to which the definition of this particular virtue had been carried. We have at the other end, societies that permit a woman to marry more than once and consider her chaste as long as she is faithful to the man she is married to at a given time. Polyandry is still not a matter of the past. It is still a permissible conduct in some societies. If one would prepare a compendium of what chastity meant in different societies in the past and what it means today, it may constitute an encyclopaedia. Living in a limited society, and at an age when mobility was so poor and knowledge of other societies so limited, we find it surprising that Valluvar could consider the local and ephemeral nature of the accepted social behaviour of individuals in a society and avoid categorizing good decorum in detail. Not to define good decorum would also mean that the book is of no help in that respect. Consequently, after emphasizing and reiterating the importance of good decorum he has said, as pointed out already,

Those who know not
 how to act agreeably to the world,
 Though they have learnt many things are still
ignorant [140]*

Tamil tradition defines, as already stated, the term 'world' as a body of wise men/women. Therefore good decorum is what the great men of the society lay down from time to time. Thus, by a single definition Valluvar takes care of, and accounts for, all possible incarnations that the concept of 'good decorum' may take in every part of the world and in every age or period of time.

We may take education as another example. Valluvar devotes a chapter to 'Education'. He also has a chapter on

*Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

the 'Absence of Learning.' Yet another chapter that he has on the virtues and importance of 'Listening' will also fall under education since it emphasizes the importance of instruction in learning. In all the thirty stanzas, he extols the virtues of education: the power of knowledge and the baseness of illiteracy. He goes to the extent of comparing the uneducated person with the animal. He stresses, in an effective way, the importance and advantage of learning by listening to men of knowledge. But in all these thirty stanzas, he does not make any mention of the subjects to be learnt or the books to be studied though he mentions more than once the need to study scholarly books. If the chapter was meant for monarchs, he could have referred to the 64 arts that were recommended in those days for kings to attain proficiency. If it was meant for others, he could have referred to grammar, language, literature, medicine, logic and many other subjects that were then normally learnt. But he does not mention them. He says, under education, "Learn what has to be learnt." What has to be learnt varies from time to time, profession to profession. If a list of what has to be learnt was prepared in detail in the period of Valluvar it may have very little significance today. Even in this century the content of this list today will be vastly different from what it would have been in the beginning of this century; or may I say, even in the middle of this century. Before 1950, the computer was not a subject to be learnt; Space Science and Technology was not part of the curriculum of any university. Education is an organic entity. It changes with time: it grows and expands and responds to the needs of the contemporary society. By laying down the criterion, "Learn what has to be learnt," Valluvar embraces all professions and all periods. He chooses to stress, with all the force at his command, the need to learn; but he would not specify what is to be learnt. That is for each one to decide in accordance with the prevailing needs. It is a matter of unending wonder that in

three full chapters that are relevant to learning, he would not refer to any subject, any book, any author.

We may take up another example; he devotes a chapter to 'the Glory of Defence'. Invading and conquering was the sport of the kings in those days and every ruler had to be in readiness for effective defence. The defence forces and protective devices were given the topmost place in the scheme of things. In those days four components of the defence forces were well-recognized: the soldiers on foot; those on chariots; the fighters on horses; and those on elephants. Valluvar, while describing the defence forces, says:

The defence force which is
complete in its components and conquers
without fear of being hurt is
foremost among the possessions of a ruler [761]

He would say that the forces should have all the components; must not be afraid of the sufferings of war; and must have the ability to win the war. Though the four components were well-established then, he does not either mention the number or refer even casually to any of them in this chapter. Today for the term components, we may substitute the Army, Navy and Air Force. He undoubtedly makes room for it, whether at the time of writing, he consciously meant to make room for such developments or not. Unless it is by deliberate design, he could not have failed to mention, at least in one of the ten couplets, the four components. He merely says, "the defence force must be complete in its components." While he knew that the defence forces will have components, he was also aware that the components may vary from country to country and even in the same country from time to time.

It was stated earlier that Valluvar has avoided dealing with subjects that fall under biological systems, but the chapter on 'Medicine' is an exception. Here again, his

specifications and descriptions are absolutely general. During the days of Valluvar, at least two systems of medicine were in vogue: Ayurveda and Siddha; perhaps there were other lesser-known systems. Nowhere does Valluvar mention the name of any of the systems. It is only the commentators who mention the names of the systems that existed then.

In order to appreciate the degree of abstraction and generalization resorted to by Valluvar, we may take a few stanzas from the chapter on medicine. He says:

The man who learnt medicine must
 assess the condition of the sick person,
 the nature of the disease and the season and then
 decide on treatment (949)

He would only say the person who has learnt medicine, but would neither refer to the system or the acknowledged treatise on medicine or the names of the authors of such books, even though at least two systems existed and many books had been written and followed and many hallowed names existed. Again he would say:

Let the physician enquire into
 the nature of the disease, its cause,
 the method of cure and treat it faithfully
 according to the medical rule (948)

Here mention is made of the method of cure. Four methods existed then; they were (i) drugs, (ii) bleeding, (iii) surgery, and (iv) cauterizing. In all the ten stanzas in the chapter on medicine, nowhere does he refer to the four methods. He would only mention 'methods.' If he had mentioned in detail the methods in use in his days, it is obvious that bleeding and cauterizing would be considered obsolete today. He refers to four components of medicine in a couplet:

Medical science consists of four parts:
 the patient, the doctor, medicine,

and the doctor's assistant.

Each of these contains again four subdivisions (950)

These four components are as valid today as they were then. He carefully uses very general, yet fully identifiable terms for the four components. There is a couplet, in interpreting which the commentators differ. Valluvar says:

If excessive or deficient, the three things
enumerated by authors of (medical) books, namely,
flatulence, biliousness and phlegm will cause
disease (941)

There are two schools of thought. The term 'excessive or deficient' is interpreted by some commentators as overeating or deficiency in food; there are others who take it as excess or deficiency of wind, bile and phlegm. There is no reason to conclude that Valluvar meant 'food intake' when he used the expression, 'excessive or deficient.' The basis for such an interpretation is that in a number of other stanzas in the chapter on medicine he stresses the need for restraint and care in eating. The problem is one of interpreting the expression 'excessive or deficient'; stated simply, the two interpretations are as follows:

- (i) (If food intake is) in excess or deficient, then, the three things, i.e., wind, bile and phlegm will cause disease.
- (ii) If the three things, i.e., wind, bile and phlegm are in excess or deficient, they will cause disease.

As far as this kural is concerned, it appears that the interpretation of the second category of commentators is more reasonable. If that is conceded, the content of the couplets will not be disputed by the doctors even today.

In this kural again, he mentions 'authors of (medical) books.' In the earlier one, he referred to the 'one who learnt medicine.' It is not by chance that in the entire chapter he avoids mentioning the name of a book or an author or a system. It must be part of a decisive approach or design that, in the kind of book that he had undertaken to write,

he was determined to avoid particularization. He has maintained meticulously and zealously the strategy of a generalized treatment of the subject throughout the book.

He has devoted a chapter to 'Selection of Personnel for Employment.' He refers to the choice of persons to accomplish a task. Many of his observations would fit in extremely well with the modern principles of management. One of the oft-quoted kural is as follows:

After having considered that
this man can accomplish this (task)
by (employing) this means, choose that man and
leave that (task) to him. (517)

One could not consider achieving a greater degree of generalization in propounding a principle. Whatever he has stated is perfectly valid today. In place of 'this (task),' you can substitute any work; in place of 'this means' we may use any tool, device, or strategy appropriate for the task. In place of 'this man,' one can use a worker, an officer or a professional. 'This task' would encompass those that we have today and those that may arise centuries later; 'this means' would accommodate devices and strategies that we may not know today, may not have even thought of and may be developed in the future. 'This man' will be valid for any kind of worker, manual or intellectual. In algebra, we have such formula as $(a + b)^2 = a^2 + 2ab + b^2$. Whatever quantities you may substitute for 'a' and 'b', the formula will be valid. We find that in his observations, whatever be the subject, Valluvar makes it possible to adopt a method of approach that enables you to use the concept, device, or tool, appropriate for the contemporary situation. While he speaks of scholarly writings or books, he does not mention the name of any book. Today, one may use in the place of 'medicine' any system of medicine now in existence or to be invented in future; in the place of 'scholarly books' a modern one today or the one to be

written years later. There are very few exceptions in the whole book to this kind of generalized approach.

In every topic that he has dealt with, he has endeavoured to abstract the core of the subject and succeeded in making his observations so general that they lend themselves to interpretations in terms of contemporary developments thus accounting for all the changes that may take place in human progress. It is this approach, this refined strategy, in the adoption of which he is consistent in every topic, that has substantially contributed to the *Kural* transcending the limitations of space and time and enabled it to be relevant centuries after it was written.

Numbers And Letters

We have mentioned that Valluvar gives pride of place to education. He has devoted three chapters to topics related to learning. In each of them he stresses the need to learn. However, he has avoided dealing with details which would change with time. Consequently, the momentous changes that have taken place or the changes that now take place at an incredible speed in the field of knowledge do not come into conflict with, or render obsolete what he has said. Even in the two chapters, where 'learning' forms explicitly the core theme, he has not listed or even remotely indicated the subjects to be learnt. In those days the kings were expected to learn sixty-four arts; the scholars were to be proficient in grammar, literature, logic and philosophy. Only commentators like Parimelalahar mention these arts and certain subjects in the commentary. Many of them are obsolete and relatively irrelevant today. As was pointed out earlier, Valluvar is content with exhorting, "Learn well what has to be learnt" and avoids reference either to a system or to authors or books. The advice that 'one must learn well, what has to be learnt' is universal, timeless and will never become obsolete.

What has to be learnt is not static: it is dynamic. Many disciplines that are important today did not exist even in the middle of this century, not to speak of the days of Valluvar. In the treatment of every topic he has taken up, Valluvar seems to give consideration to those aspects that endure and those that are ephemeral, and limit his observations to the enduring. One perceives Valluvar's

extraordinary understanding and vision in looking into the future as well as into the nature of change and progress that human society may undergo. As such, aspects of life and nature that may change are not dealt with. However, there is one kural where he makes a specific reference to numbers and letters. This again is general; but a close look at the couplet raises some interesting questions, which may not directly be connected with the theme of this book. The kural is as follows :

What we call number and
the other one called letter,
these two are the eyes
of the living being (392)

This is a well-known and oft-quoted kural. Parimelalahar, the commentator, would say that number means 'mathematics' and letter means 'word', therefore, all literary works. Here, Valluvar speaks of knowledge and refers to two major components: one represented by numbers (i.e., mathematics) and the other by letters i.e., words (all literary works).

One could see that Valluvar places numbers in the first place and letters only in the second. Is that intentional? Does it have a significance? One may argue that he has to mention both of them anyway and since he has equated them to the two eyes, the order of mention may not indicate a preference or difference in importance. We may take a second look at the kural. He says that 'the number, and the other one called letter, these two are the eyes'. The use of the expression, "the other one", fairly indicates that the ordering may be deliberate or at least Valluvar does give in this kural something of a pride of place to the discipline of mathematics as represented by numbers.

Education in the past essentially meant, literacy, numeracy and the ability to gather knowledge from written sources, to communicate and contribute new knowledge. It was a matter of language, grammar, literature,

logic, philosophy and, in essence, all that was contained in written or spoken words. As between words and numbers, the place of numbers is often restricted to arithmetic which means certain elementary operations. Here words play the most dominant role. The scriptures of great and esteemed religions or the philosophical treatises or metaphysical discourses of the world's thinkers and seers are in letters. The Vedas, the Upanishads, the teachings of Buddha, the thoughts of Confucius, the Bible and the Koran, the wisdom of Sankara, the songs of Alvars and Nayanmars are all in the form of letters only. The immortal literary works in prose and poetry of Valluvar, Ilango, Kamban, Bharati, Kalidasa, Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, and the numerous literary giants of the world are in letters. Letters obviously dominated the scene of education and mathematics as a discipline was neither pervasive nor so prestigious as to give numbers pride of place while speaking of education. Even today an average individual will not put numbers above words. We may perhaps take a closer look at this issue. In the modern world, the entire progress we have made in science is based on mathematics. Whether it is the laws of Newton or the theory of Einstein, their language is mathematics. Without mathematics there is no science; there will be no nuclear age; there will be no space adventure. Science and Technology is based on numbers and not on words. The physical sciences are based on mathematics. The innermost secrets of nature could be approached, probed into and revealed only in mathematical symbols. We find that nature, its behaviour and its processes could be understood and predicted only in the language of mathematics. As biological sciences advance, they tend to depend heavily on mathematical analysis. In general, the language of science and technology is the language of numbers. It may be mentioned in passing that many of the great philosophers and thinkers of the past were at the same time great mathematicians.

Man, as we mentioned earlier, is a tool-making animal. The computer, the most modern and the most versatile of the tools he invented, is used today not only to study physical and biological systems, but is also used to model the brain, the processes of thinking, remembering, analysing as well as understanding the mental and creative faculties of human beings. The computer uses the binary numbers '0' and '1'. Basically it functions through a language built on binary mathematics.

The power and beauty of mathematics is well recognised today. The contributions to mathematics made in the 19th and 20th centuries are enormous. For a rough idea of the development of mathematics over the centuries, we may look at an account of the history of mathematics available. Moritz Cantor has written in German what may be considered an extensive History of Mathematics (*Geschichte der Mathematik*) in four volumes running to 3,600 pages. It covers developments in an outline form up to A.D. 1800. According to E.T. Bell, a similar outline for the developments in the nineteenth century alone will run into about 20 volumes of the size of Cantor's and may occupy about 17,000 pages. In the period before 1800, the contributions in the eighteenth century, that is, the period of Newton and Leibniz are substantial. Earlier than 1700, one may have to go to the golden age of Greek mathematics. According to Bell, in comparison to the nineteenth century, the contribution of glorious Greece is a penny candle before a bonfire. To what extent could Valluvar who lived around the 1st century B.C., have known or comprehended the role of mathematics in human progress?

It is desirable to look at the perception of numbers and mathematics as obtaining in Greece during the golden period of its mathematics. In the 6th century B.C., a Pythagorean philosopher made the following observation:

Bless us divine Number; thou who generatest Gods and men

Plato, the father of the concept of democracy and a great student of Socrates, is said to have displayed at the gate of his Academy a board which read :

Let no man ignorant of geometry enter here

Plato also said:

God ever geometrises.

Those who acclaimed numbers and mathematics as divine, and those who declared that God Himself is geometrising all the time, are not ordinary people. For generations they have been esteemed as great and rare geniuses. It is therefore clear that numbers and mathematics have, in the scheme of things even in ancient days, claimed a place greater than what we have understood or generally granted.

It is conceivable that Tamil Nadu, or India of the period of Valluvar, might have had as much understanding of the place of numbers and mathematics as in the Greek scheme of things since ancient India has a claim to original contributions to mathematics. The following account by S. Maharajan will give an idea of the state of development of Tamil Nadu during the period of Valluvar.

What kind of Tamil Nadu is it that gave Tiruvalluvar his catholicity and universality of outlook, his wisdom, inspiration and language. There is reason to believe that he lived between the third and the first century B.C. During this period, the dynasties of the Chera, Chola and Pandya kings ruling over different parts of Tamil Nadu, had wide international contacts with countries ranging from Egypt, Greece, and Rome in the west, Burma, Malaysia and China in the east, Ceylon in the south and the Himalayan kingdoms in the north. A representative of the Pandya king attended the coronation of Emperor Augustus in

Rome, as mentioned by Strabo, a Greek who wrote his Geography in the first century A.D. R.B. Dixon, the celebrated archeologist and historian, asserts that Tamils had extensive trade with Malaysia, North Borneo and Northern Philippines even in the first millennium B.C., and that trade led to the colonisation and conquest of those countries by the Tamils. According to Paul Pelliot, there is evidence in Chinese literature, of diplomatic relations between the South Indian coasts and the Chinese empire as early as the 2nd century B.C. A Chinese writer Pan Kou who lived at the end of the 1st century mentions the fact that in the time of the Hua Emperor, the Chola king sent embassies to China (vide K.M. Panikkar, *India and China*, pp. 17 and 19).

These contacts may not have been restricted to commerce and diplomatic exchanges; there might have been the sharing of knowledge among scholars. Tamil Nadu must have been exposed to the advances made in Mathematics in Greece and China. It would have both borrowed and contributed, though unfortunately no documented details are available so far.

One may reasonably assume that Valluvar, when he says 'Number and the other one called Letter', has done so with an understanding of the significance of mathematics, though one would neither claim nor expect that he could have perceived the role that mathematics was to play in the modern world. But whatever topic he touched upon, he sifted it, analysed it in its innermost details and selected for his discussion only those components that have an enduring value.

What really surprises one is the Tamil word '*En*'. The Tamil equivalent for 'number' is '*En*'. The word '*En*' also means mathematics. The same word means 'mind' as well as 'thought'. It is somewhat astonishing, even intriguing, that the Tamils have chosen to use the same word for 'mind', for 'thought' emanating from the mind, for mathematics which is a discipline based on abstract thinking

and for numbers used in mathematics. One may examine whether we could get some evidence from these studies to understand the state of knowledge in arts and science the Tamils might have reached at that point of time.

Scientific Outlook

The ultimate objective of human endeavour is finding truth. It is in this pursuit that humanity has involved itself for generations and centuries. Whether it is religion or philosophy or science, the destination is basically the same: it is the understanding of what is true, what is real. In general, love, devotion, faith and fidelity, however highly motivated they may be, are impediments in the search for truth. Love for one's land, language and race may be considered a noble sentiment; but when it comes to a study of one's own land, language or race, such sentiments will be like screens that may cover, conceal or at the least blur the visibility and render a critical study difficult. An ordinary individual may not be able to strip all veils and view a problem with the clarity of objectivity. Anyone who seeks truth should be capable of penetrating through many veils and curtains that emotions and interests create to block clear perception. The procedure we use in the modern world in the pursuit of truth is often based on methods of science. A scientific approach is not exclusive to the world of science or to be used only by scientists. Science is one thing, a scientific approach is another. There are many scientists who do not necessarily have a scientific outlook or a scientific temper. Among those who do not belong to the world of science, there are many who possess a scientific outlook, a scientific temper. If a person gives full scope to his reason and accepts the decisions or conclusions arrived at on the basis of logical reasoning, transcending his own personal likes and dislikes, we consider him as one

endowed with a scientific outlook. The method of approach arising out of such an outlook is referred to as the scientific approach. A study of science may help develop such an outlook; but it is still a matter of individual endowment. Science promotes objectivity, but objectivity need not be taken for granted among all scientists, or the lack of it assumed among all others. India has today great scientists of world renown. It has institutions and laboratories comparable to some of the best in the world. It has a record of publications which gives it a place among the top few nations in scientific capability; but India is yet to acquire, as a nation, a scientific temper—a characteristic that Nehru had been so fervently and so consistently advocating throughout his life.

The 'scientific method' as we now know it, took shape mainly in the 17th century. Galileo is the major contributor to the development of this tool. Today it has its grammar and rules of application. It is widely used in every area of knowledge. Among the ancient thinkers there were many who possessed a scientific outlook and used a scientific approach in their pursuit of knowledge. They were capable of rising above the limitations of their age; they could cast aside the prevailing traditions, whenever necessary, penetrate into the possible developments of the future and analyse the problems on hand against this background. They no doubt exhibited an extraordinary perception and a combination of reasoning and intuition for understanding reality. They exhibited a capacity to rise for a moment above their own faiths and beliefs and study the problem with an open mind. One finds these characteristics in Valluvar. He possessed a truly modern mind. We may see a few typical examples.

We normally believe that 'Dharma' triumphs in the world. If so, the righteous ones must be happy and prosperous and the situation must be reversed in the case of the unjust. But we do see from the dawn of civilisation, cases

where the just ones suffer and the unjust live in plenty and prosperity. Valluvar sees this contradiction. He says:

The prosperity of individuals
who are envious and jealous and
the poverty of the righteous
need to be pondered over (169)

Valluvar raises a question: "Why is it that we find that some among the envious and the jealous are very well off and the righteous ones suffer?" He does not give an answer, but concedes that this requires investigation. Considering the period in which Valluvar lived, and the faiths and beliefs that existed at that time, even to raise such a question is rather unusual. It is even more remarkable that he does not choose to give a definite answer and confesses that it has to be thought over. The believers are never short of answers to such questions; they always have a ready answer for every question—it is fate or it is God's will and inscrutable are His ways. But Valluvar does not approach the problem in this manner.

Valluvar believes in God, he believes in previous births and in rebirth. He speaks about heaven and hell. He also believes that the consequences of one's actions in the previous births follow in the present and the actions in this birth will have their effects in the next birth. Within this framework, he could have easily found an answer to the question. He could conclude that if a righteous person suffers in this birth it might be because of his evil deeds in the previous birth; if an envious person is prosperous, he is perhaps enjoying the benefits of his good actions in the previous birth. Since questions like rebirth and the consequences of one's actions following one from birth to birth are issues endlessly debated, no one would disapprove if Valluvar resorted to finding an answer within this framework, especially since he believes in rebirth and the theory of *karma*. But he does not resort to finding such a simple answer. He concludes that it must be investigated.

In general, believers have established a model within which answers can be found to all questions. If no other explanation can be found, they have the final answer, "It is God's will". Since no one has any record of what comes under God's will and what falls outside, such an answer is final; one may accept or reject it; there could be no argument beyond it. But we see in this kural, Valluvar's view that notwithstanding our faith in God, notwithstanding our belief in rebirth and our acceptance that the consequences of one's action in one birth follow one in subsequent births, there are still questions in human lives that cannot be answered and need further study. He concedes that neither our faith, nor our wisdom, nor our knowledge can provide all the answers. There are still things that lie beyond all the systems, human or divine, that we have on hand. This kural demonstrates the resilience and openness of Valluvar's mind and the streak of a scientific approach in his outlook. Surprisingly not many have highlighted this aspect or taken a close look at this couplet.

The following two couplets almost lay down a definition for a scientific approach:

True knowledge or wisdom is the
perception of the truth
in everything, whatever be
the nature of the thing (355)

True knowledge or wisdom is the
discerning of the truth
in everything said,
no matter by whomsoever it was said (423)

In the first case, he demands that whatever be the nature of a thing investigated, our aim must be to find the truth and our attachment to it or aversion to it or regard for it should not influence our approach.

In the second case, in any statement made, the personality or the relationship or the standing of the person who made the statement should not influence our

judgement. Whoever the author of the statement may be, we must look for the truth in it.

One could hardly look for a clearer definition of, or a more emphatic statement of, a scientific approach to finding truth. Whatever the subject that Valluvar touches, one finds that there is in his treatment an extraordinary streak of rationalism, a flash like that of a lightning that aims at revealing the innermost secrets of a subject. He reaches the base; touches the root and stands on what might be considered the relatively solid foundations of the subject matter. It is this great virtue which imparts immortality to his work.

In the days of Valluvar, religion played a major role in society and in the life of an individual. Even the king heeded the advice of the religious heads and conducted the affairs of the state giving due importance to their guidance and counsel. Faith was a decisive factor in the way of life. But Valluvar does not refer to any religion. The very first chapter is 'In praise of God'. He speaks of Him as an eternal being, as a possessor of pure knowledge and stresses the need to worship Him and get united with Him; but he does not get involved in any discussion of a religious nature or analysis of various faiths. He, as a believer in God, must have adhered to a particular faith. But even in the chapter entitled 'In praise of God' he does not say anything that refers to, reveals or even implies the religion that he might have followed. It is somewhat extraordinary that he writes a treatise on the 'Art of Living', deals with virtue, wealth and enjoyment in this world in as many as 1,330 couplets, but does not give any indication whatsoever of his religion, not to speak of advocating any religion.

In his book entitled *Buddhism in Tamil Literature*, Thiru V. Kalyanasundaranar says that according to his modest capacity for research and the establishment of truth, Valluvar's work has as its basis the Dharma of Jainism. Prof. Vaiyapuri Pillai, a great researcher in

Tamil, observes that such descriptions as one finds about God in the chapter 'In praise of God' lead one to conclude that Valluvar must have been a Jain. But Thiru Vajravel Mudaliar, the great Tamil scholar who has researched in the *Kural* extensively, would conclude that the soul of the message of the *Kural* is Saiva Sidhdhanta. Maraimalai Adihalar, a Tamil scholar of great repute, in his book entitled *Saivism is the Faith of Ancient Tamils*, argues as follows: The Buddhist and the Jain monks denounce married life and extol renunciation. It is to refute this approach that the 'divine Valluvar' places domestic life on a great pedestal and, in keeping with the tradition of the Tamils, values domestic life above renunciation. Reverend Father G.U. Pope would say that the *Kural* is but an echo of the Sermon on the Mount. Whatever be the religion of Valluvar, the fact stands out that his observations in his book do not reflect any preference for any religion. He has not given any clues by which the religion to which he belonged can be surmised. He has written his book transcending the bounds of individual faiths, including his own, and rising above and looking at life and the world with the objectivity of a true researcher. *It is truly a secular book.*

The modern world accepts the power of knowledge. We realise today that knowledge is a resource by itself; that whether it is to find solutions to day-to-day problems or for ensuring prosperity and wealth, it is one's knowledge, one's thought and action that really matter. We have come to take this almost for granted in the latter half of this century. But this was neither the tradition nor the pervasive thinking of the people in the days of Valluvar. But Valluvar, while speaking of knowledge, declares:

Those who possess wisdom/knowledge
possess everything;
those who have not wisdom/knowledge
whatever they may possess, have nothing (430)

A clarification is needed here. In Tamil there are no two separate words to differentiate knowledge from wisdom. A

single word 'Arivu' is used. It has to be interpreted according to the context. In the above kural, what is implied is knowledge. Parimelalahar, while commenting on this kural, explains:

Since all wealth is created and protected by knowledge, Valluvar says that one who has it, has everything. If one has wealth, one needs knowledge to protect it from loss and destruction, and if due to divine 'will' it is lost or destroyed, one who is without knowledge does not have the tool to create it again and, therefore, Valluvar says that those that do not possess knowledge, whatever they may have, have nothing.

Parimelalahar implies that those who have knowledge are capable of creating wealth even if it is not there in the natural process. The statement of Valluvar and the explanation of Parimelalahar are astounding. We are aware that knowledge today can help create resources that do not exist in nature for direct extraction and use. For instance, we need haematite, the iron ore, to make steel; we need bauxite to make aluminium. But when we come to the design and manufacture of a space vehicle, we need a material that is preferably light in weight, heat-resisting and capable of withstanding high stress and strain. Nature does not provide an ore from which such a material can be directly extracted. It is now created in the laboratory. Man is able today to create a material that he needs, not necessarily from a corresponding ore but from matter itself. In other words, he can create on the basis of his level of knowledge the resources he needs but which do not exist directly in nature. The power of knowledge did not reach such heights in the distant past. We would not claim that Valluvar could have visualised or perceived even remotely the achievements of the era of knowledge. But still his statement that "Those who have knowledge have all" and the commentary of Parimelalahar that those who have knowledge can create wealth if there is no wealth or

recreate it if it is lost due to destruction, is extremely significant as a proof of the realisation, on the part of Valluvar, of the power of the mind which in the modern world unfolds itself with astonishing manifestations.

In many of the advanced countries, in about two decades from 1950, the average annual income of persons almost doubled. This development was not based on the discovery of any new mineral resource or oil resource. The prosperity was a phenomenon essentially designed in the research institutions and laboratories and produced in the offices, factories and fields. It is the gift of knowledge.

The wealth and prosperity of a nation today does not depend on the area of the land or the natural resources or the population. It depends on human resources which represent the level of education and skill or the knowledge and training of the people. In the second half of this century, humanity has entered the information era or the knowledge era. Its message is:

“Those who have knowledge have all”

This precisely and almost verbatim is what Valluvar says in kural 430. It was in the 17th century that Bacon the great thinker declared that “knowledge is power”. Even during his period, the statement was more prophetic than factual. The observation by Valluvar, nearly 16 centuries earlier that “those who possess knowledge, possess all”, shows the powers of an intuitive mind that sees, in a tiny seed, the mammoth banyan tree. We go back again to the chapter on ‘Selection and Employment’ of persons for accomplishing a task. An oft-quoted kural referred to earlier in Chapter IV is repeated below:

After having considered that this man can
accomplish this (task) by (employing) this means,
choose that man and leave that (task) to him (517)

This couplet deals with the choice of persons. It emphasises a guideline. Defining the task, making a right

choice, and entrusting it to an individual and giving appropriate delegation are certainly difficult, but this has to be done by those in charge of management. Some of the observations of Valluvar in this chapter can be the envy and wonder of even the modern-day specialists in management. Valluvar advises:

A task can be assigned only to the one who has the knowledge and the endurance to pursue till accomplishment.

It is not of a nature to be given to one on the basis of personal attachment

(515)

When you choose a person to do a job, he should primarily have the knowledge to understand it, the capacity for devising appropriate means and the ability to perform it. Important though knowledge is, it is not by itself enough. He should have the endurance to face obstacles, bear pain and exhibit patience. He must climb if he confronts a mountain; swim if a river intervenes or walk through if it is a dark forest. Knowledge, without the capacity to strive, cannot accomplish the task. Having defined the attributes needed, Valluvar also enumerates the considerations that should not be allowed to influence the decision. According to him, a task in general has the characteristic that it should not be given to a person on the basis of attachment. Parimelalahar in his commentary says, that "a task does not have the nature of being assigned to persons other than the right one on the ground that a person is attached or affectionate (to the person making the choice)". If it is to be stated in simpler language, choosing a person for assigning a task is not an occasion for conferring a favour on the basis of personal attachment. Perhaps it is for us some consolation that even during the days of Valluvar, there was the need to caution that selection for employment should not be made on the basis of personal attachment. In another couplet he makes this observation even more explicitly:

To choose ignorant men through partiality is
the height of folly (507)*

It looks as though favouritism in employment is a weakness that follows public life inseparably like a shadow. One would agree that the message of this kural is more valid today than it might have been during the days of Valluvar.

We may make the choice with great care, understanding and enquiry. Still, it does happen that when they are tried on the job they do not come up to the expectations or they may change when they are on the job. Valluvar says:

Even when they are selected
after being tried in every possible way
there are many who prove to be different
when they are on the job assigned (514)

Obviously, even after careful selection, Valluvar feels that their performance must be carefully watched in the initial stages. Only after this exercise, important responsibilities be entrusted to them. This phase of observation in the modern world is the well-recongnised period of probation. He would say:

Having finally chosen a person for the task,
prepare him to be fit enough for the task (518)

'Human resources development' is essentially a concept of the 20th century, perhaps the concept of the second half of the 20th century. Its importance and potential had not been recognised earlier. It is not surprising because this really is the consequence of the emergence of knowledge as a resource. If we attribute to this kural the advocacy of human resources development, one may say we are crediting Valluvar with too much of modern thought, but one cannot deny that this kural has in it all the seeds and substance of human resources development.

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

The principles of management stress the need for appropriate delegation and avoidance of interference once a task is assigned and the goals are defined. Each one should be allowed to take decisions according to his judgement subject to such checks as may not be avoidable. The importance of this factor in management is being increasingly realised. A kural from Valluvar on this aspect almost astonishes us. In the chapter on 'Selection and Confidence' he says:

Choose no one without previous consideration;
Having so chosen place confidence in him and
do not entertain doubts and reservations (509)

He also cautions the employer about the human limitations and observes that one should not expect to have in one, all that one may look for. He observes:

When even men, who have studied
the most difficult works and who are free from faults,
are (carefully) examined, it is a rare thing to find them
without areas of ignorance (503)

In other words, we may have chosen the best among those available, but we may find that even they are deficient in certain respects. It is not practical to expect and much less demand everything from an individual. In the two chapters on 'Selection and Confidence' and 'Selection and Employment', he deals with the need for objectivity in selection, giving due consideration to fitness for the job, the need to train the individual to be fully equipped for the task and the delegation of powers to or placing of trust in him, in a manner and in a language of such generality that one can derive from them some of the principles of modern management. Though it is obvious that his comprehension of jobs and manpower needs would have been confined only to the circumstances prevailing at that time, his capacity to extract from them an approach reflecting the strength and weakness of human beings, the qualities that

would always be required of an employee, and the competence that would generally be expected of a candidate and his ability to state them in a language that allows interpretation to suit contemporary needs are what one sees in his treatment, which show an unfailing streak of an analytical mind characteristic of the world of science.

Of the four components (Purusharthas), namely, Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha, the first three concern this world; the last one concerns the world beyond. Whatever pertains to life on this earth lends itself to liberal investigation. It can be subjected to an objective enquiry. There is no inhibiting factor in our search for truth. But the moment you enter the world beyond, be it Heaven or Hell, religion enters the scene; faith follows and objectivity becomes alien. Every religion has a scripture; it is the word of God, or His Messiah. To accept it as such and believe in it fully and unquestioningly is a prerequisite for faith. Those who do not believe are outsiders, and outsiders are opponents: so goes the history of religion. There is no end to the enmity that religions have created, the wars waged, the sufferings undergone, the lives sacrificed, all in the name of religion. The human sufferings caused in the name of religion constitute some of the gory pages of history.

Tamil culture speaks about Akam and Puram. Pan-Indian culture speaks of the four Purusharthas, namely, Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha or in other words Righteousness, Wealth, Enjoyment and Heaven. These were familiar to the Tamils of the days of Valluvar. However, Valluvar chooses to deal with only the first three and does not speak about salvation explicitly. The *Kural* contains only three parts dealing with the first three, i.e., Righteousness, Wealth and Enjoyment. By this single step, he keeps religion outside his discussion and removes all obstacles to objectivity, all factors that may inhibit or exclude an enquiry into the contents; keeps all problems of unquestioning faith outside the purview of the discussion

and presents to the world a secular treatise or a secular Veda.

When we discuss the three laws of Newton, or the theory of relativity of Einstein, we do not have such categories of persons as followers and opposers. Discussions bring about difference of views, but no discord, no enmity. The same is not true of religious scriptures. Any questioning will invite or incur the wrath of many. Though the *Kural* is also referred to as the Tamil Veda, it deals with this world. One can examine it, question its content, accept or reject it fully or in part.

One may raise the question, whether Valluvar has totally rejected the concept of salvation or Heaven, when he confines his treatment to Dharma, Artha and Kama. Has he no interest in Moksha? Does he not believe in it? His approach is somewhat different. He believes and maintains that if a man conducts the affairs of his life in this world in accordance with the rules of Dharma, then he should as a consequence get a place in Heaven, should there be one. It is no credit to an individual if he follows the path of Dharma, not as a matter of conviction and conscious decision, but as a preparation for getting a place in Heaven. While singing the glory of 'Aai' a great philanthropist-king of the sangam age (circa 1st century A.D.), a poet says:

'Aai' does not practise philanthropy with the hope that what he does in this birth will bring him salvation hereafter. He is no businessman in Dharma.

While referring to men of character, the Tamil tradition would say:

They are men of such strength and detachment that they will not develop a desire even for Heaven.

Valluvar declares his conviction eloquently and unequivocally in a couplet:

He who on the earth lives in the conjugal state
as he should live, will be placed
among the Gods who dwell in Heaven (50)*

He even implies that such people need not go to Heaven. It comes to them and they achieve divinity here itself. He makes it abundantly clear that what ultimately counts is not what religion you believe in or what philosophy you expound or what prayers you offer. It is the way you live and your actions that matter. He declares:

It is one's deeds (and none else)
that form the touchstone
for one's greatness or smallness (505)

He makes this observation in the original with an assertion which unfortunately could not be brought out in translation. While there may be other yardsticks for the measurement of one's greatness, finally and decisively it is only the action that matters. We live in this world. Life in this world is what we have in our hands. It is within our power to regulate it and make it meaningful and satisfying. It must be our aim to strive to make what is available, rich and whole. We must strive to improve upon and perfect what we have on hand rather than neglect it and yearn for something elusive, uncertain, something which lies hereafter.

Anyone who has conducted the affairs of this world with propriety and magnanimity must necessarily be ensured all blessings in life hereafter as a consequence. Heaven, if there is one, must have been built on the foundations of one's way of living on earth and cannot be unconnected with it. The blessings of 'hereafter' can only be the sprouting of the seed sown here. If that seed is infertile then neither water nor manure can produce any

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

result. Since life here in a way decides the life hereafter too, our concern and worry must be about the life on earth.

Time was when we thought that science and religion are antithetical to each other. One finds now that an enlightened view of both may not see any conflict. One may look at religion as a pursuit of truth that starts where science finds that its enquiry in its contemporary state of development cannot proceed further.

There is a famous Tamil aphorism which says that what we know is as little as a handful of earth and what we do not know is as large as the world. It was true in the past, it is true today, and will remain so forever. When we find an answer to one question, it gives rise to nine more by which we mean that every invention reveals more things unknown. Valluvar would say:

The more you learn, the more you realise
the extent of your ignorance (1110)

When we take one step beyond what our logic and reason can perceive and penetrate, we enter a domain where faith starts, where reason does not hold full sway. However, one who is endowed with a scientific outlook will look at even problems of faith as a matter for some discussion and analysis and will not deride or denounce non-acceptance and create hostility and enmity. Perhaps materialism based on a high value system may not vastly differ from spiritualism: even if it differs, it may not be inferior to it.

If we look at life in this world dispassionately, we realise that it constitutes both the medium and the maker; our own life is the stone, we are the sculptors. It is left to us to carve out any piece of art that we like to create. Valluvar confines his treatment to enquiring how best we can do it and presents his design and the tool. What we make out of it is our choice.

Valluvar avoids the possible hostilities that inclusion of religion in the scheme would bring about. Therefore he

steers clear of established faiths. At the same time he ensures that one does not miss, by taking the path advocated by him, whatever bliss religion may offer. Valluvar bridges what have always been considered as two different worlds. He stands firmly on the ground and stretches his arms to reach Heaven. Standing in the world of reason and logic, and using the language and grammar of this world, he tries to understand and interpret the path to spiritualism. It is only during the latter half of this century that there is a realisation among men of science as well as men of metaphysics that there is an interface between science and spiritualism and one need not exclude the other. The kind of approach that Valluvar chose to adopt nearly two millennia ago is somewhat amazing and refreshing. It needs to be studied in greater depth than has hitherto been the case.

In Praise Of Human Endeavour

From the beginning of history, every forward step taken, any progress made, is the result of relentless human endeavour: the achievement of endless human pursuit.

He is the perennial spring of
ambitions and emotions that break all
chains and continue onward march
His is the scripture that proclaims
that the inaccessible and the impossible
have no place in his faith.

From the beginning of life the journey that
he undertook, he continues tirelessly
He created many religions
He is the creator of all angels, gods and other
heavenly beings that the world talks about,
He is also the father of the sciences
that destroyed many myths.
It is he who devised the means, the method
and form for growth and he continues to grow.*

The achievements of human striving are momentous and beyond quantification. Man is an explorer in a continuing expedition, a traveller in an endless journey and keeps moving, maybe creeping and crawling, fumbling and faltering, but onward with the conviction that he would not give up or concede defeat. *Anything that can be*

* Adapted from Kulothungan: *Earth is Paradise Enough*, Allied Publishers Ltd., New Delhi, 1993.

conceived, can be achieved. Only those writings that acclaim human endeavour and applaud man's success will serve as sources of inspiration and energy for a people. It will be such books as motivate, infuse confidence and encourage continuous ascent that will endure and remain relevant.

Action is what counts: art and literature must exhort us to a million deeds*

The above lines express the conviction that art, besides having an aesthetic appeal, must also motivate people to act. Even in the age of knowledge that we are in, what ultimately counts is action: the deeds done and the results achieved.

From the primitive stage till today, the progress made is the result of creation of new knowledge and its application; thoughts given form by action, concepts concretised by action. There is no denying the fact that over the millennia humanity has progressed, has marched forward. There are some who write and speak as though the world was all heaven in the past; milk and honey flowed in abundance and the people were angelic. According to them, it is only in the present that everything has gone bad: the prosperous days have disappeared, values have deteriorated, culture has been transformed into crude forms and the world has become a place of want, crime and misery. Obviously there is no basis for the kind of picture painted by those who have a nostalgia for the past. Poverty and deprivation existed then, they exist now. But those who die of hunger and want are relatively few. Poverty exists but famine is not such a widespread phenomenon as it was in the past. We can transport food materials from one end of the globe to the other. Diseases existed then, they exist now; perhaps even newer ones have emerged; but many epidemics have been virtually eradicated, many others have become curable;

* Kulothungan: *Earth is Paradise Enough*, Allied Publisers Ltd., New Delhi, 1993.

where they cannot be cured, pain and suffering have been reduced. The longevity at birth has remarkably increased. We have even today the rulers and the ruled; but no longer the master and the slave, barring some pockets of exception which will also disappear before long. In general, the dignity of the human personality has improved significantly; his sentiments receive acknowledgement; his self-respect is recognised. Even in countries where these do not happen as yet, world opinion makes it necessary for them to claim or pretend that it is being done. The ability of mankind to use the forces and resources of nature to meet its needs is continuously increasing. In extolling the virtues of human endeavour, Valluvar stands apart, he rises steeply above his contemporaries like the Himalayan peak.

According to him the 'human will' has boundless potential. It has a power of its own. When it is strong and persistent there is hardly anything that it cannot achieve. The human mind is a mine of energy: the more you explore, the more you discover; its bounds expand and appear limitless. There is nothing in the world that the mind with determination and concentration cannot achieve.

The psychologists of today talk about the subconscious and its powers. Valluvar lifts to great heights the power of human will and he does it in many ways:

Strength in action is (simply) one's
strength of mind; all others (abilities)
are not to be treated as strength (661)

If those who have contemplated (an undertaking)
possess the firmness of mind (in executing it)
they will obtain whatever they have desired
even as they have desired it (666)

Bharati, while singing about the aspirations of one's sub-conscious mind declares:

If in the depth of one's mind
a desire persists, the

result of it will certainly manifest
tomorrow (if not today)

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The undying wish that
overwhelms one's mind, will
accomplish all that is desired

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If one with a concentration of
his soul, mind and all the senses,
would fervently aspire for great goals,
He will surely accomplish them.

Valluvar's *Kural* is a book that eulogizes the virtues of human endeavour. It encourages, advocates and extols, wherever it can and in whatever form possible, human effort, pursuit and perseverance. It is a fountain from which humanity can derive enormous confidence in its own potential.

Valluvar, as can be seen from his work, is a believer in God. He starts a couplet with the proposition:

If it is assumed that fate or
divine will cannot accomplish... (then what?)

For a believer, if it is concluded that something cannot be achieved, through fate or divine will, the normal course of action will be to accept the inevitable and abandon the effort. A believer will not ever dream of endeavouring to achieve anything that lies beyond 'divine will'. But Valluvar does not give up. He says, that even in such circumstances physical effort and labour (i.e. human endeavour) will yield its rewards.

Although it be said that
through fate it cannot be attained,
yet labour with bodily exertion
will yield its reward

(619)*

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

It is difficult to come across another person among his contemporaries who glorifies and places human endeavour on such a high pedestal. Valluvar believes in fate. The Tamil society of Valluvar's age placed great faith in the inexorable course of destiny. Ilango Adihal wrote a whole epic to establish that fate would follow its own course and its effect would manifest itself. The Tamils believed that 'the course of life moves in the direction of fate as the boat moves along the current of a mighty river that flows through the valleys of mountains'.

Valluvar too emphasises the strength of fate. He declares:

Even those who might have amassed millions,
will be able to enjoy them
only as has been predetermined
by the disposer of all things (377)

In other words one may acquire wealth by various efforts; but one will be able to enjoy what has been acquired only if one's fate favours it. In another couplet he raises the rhetorical question:

Is there anything stronger than fate? (380)

implying that there is none. The debate over fate and free will continues from the day human beings started thinking about themselves. It will continue endlessly and as long as we can imagine. Many thinkers in the past have thought and written on the subject; many do write on it today and the enquiry will continue. There is an explanation that modern thinkers have advanced. We may compare the events in life to playing cards. You cannot decide the cards that will be dealt to you: it is what fate does. But the skill with which you play is still yours. The role of fate and free will may be somewhat similar to what falls to your lot and what you do out of it. Over the former, you have no control; over the latter, you have.

Valluvar enters into an enquiry of the relative strength of fate and human will and effort. Notwithstanding many of his statements where he emphasises the strength of fate in no uncertain language, he ultimately concludes :

Those who continue to work hard
on right lines and without any decline in commitment
will vanquish even fate (620).

This statement is categorical and unequivocal. It is remarkable and revolutionary since Valluvar lived in a society which believed that

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

The Tamils of Valluvar's period, as mentioned earlier, placed great faith in fate. Valluvar in his declaration in kural 620, certainly goes, and that too decisively, against the tide of his time. In a way he has chosen to crown human endeavour as no one had done at that time.

According to him, our real strength is not in tools; not in the assistance available; not in numbers; not in anything that is "without", but from "within." It is in one's mind; in one's strength of will. It is astonishing that nearly 2000 years ago when human progress was so limited, when man's mastery over the forces of nature was so feeble, when muscular strength and physical feat decided the might, either of a nation or of an individual, when the powers of the mind in terms of knowledge and its potential had hardly manifested themselves in comparison with what we observe today, Valluvar chose to give such a pride of place and proclaim such great faith in what human endeavour can achieve. Valluvar's *Kural* is verily the 'Magna Carta' of human effort.

Human beings keep evolving; they grow and develop and the process will continue. Man is a traveller in an endless march, in a continuing ascent. In his competence and quality of status he is higher today than yesterday; he

will be higher tomorrow than today. If there is such a thing as the 'state of Devas in the Heavens' or 'the divine state', he is capable of achieving it in this world, in this birth by virtue of his way of life and the strength of his values. One may look at the dreams and aspirations of Bharati.

It is an island surrounded
by a sea of pure honey;
Stimulating, pleasant breeze
sweeps through.

There the Devas of the Heavens
become our friends and drink
nectar in our company.

He imagines that the Devas whose abode is in the Heavens descend from there and come to drink nectar with us; but he is not content with that. He would get closer; they must become our relatives. How?

The Devas acknowledge our success:
They must marry our women:
We must embrace the sweet
ladies of the Devas and jump in joy.

Bharati envisages and pictures such a state of elevation for human beings. So does he wish; such are his dreams. His ambitions are unbounded. He yearns :

Can we not grab at everything that the eyes see;
there at a distance the skies touch the earth:
will they not come under our possession?

From time immemorial, human beings have thought of Heaven as something that is somewhere away from this world and beyond us in this life. It is something that a few may enter after death. Bharati cannot wait that long; nor can he accept that as a state realisable only by a few. It must be possible in this life, on this earth and for all. He states this explicitly:

India will show the path to the world for all to reach
the state of the Devas.

It is his confident declaration. Valluvar makes the same declaration in a more general way as he is wont to do, when he says:

He who lives in this world in conjugal state
in accordance with the way one should live
will be ranked with the Gods who abide in the
Heavens (50)*

The aim of his treatise is to lay down the guidelines for *living in this world in accordance with the way one should live*. His intention is to suggest a way of life; the world of Valluvar has the human being as the head; its culture is to

Aim high, whatever is aimed at.

His wings for the flight are ceaseless endeavour: unending striving. With these wings, there is no height to which he cannot soar; there is no distance that he cannot travel; no goal that he cannot attain.

As veins in the muscle and air in the atmosphere, an aspect that pervades Valluvar's work, whatever be the topic he may deal with, is the stress on perseverance; tireless striving and an ambition to aim at and seek out the highest.

Achievements are the results of a combination of opportunity and competence. "When an opportunity that is rare to come by, does come", says Valluvar, "use it to achieve goals that are exceptional and unprecedented" (489).

"The great are those that perform deeds that are uncommon and admirable": that according to Valluvar is the definition of the great. It is ultimately the action, its quality, its dimensions that determine one's stature:

One's deeds are the touchstone of
one's greatness or smallness (505)

The high and the low are determined by their performance. Achieving the ordinary, and that in large

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

numbers or in huge quantity, does not qualify for greatness; the stress is on great accomplishments, that are truly rare. He exhorts:

Yield not to the feebleness which says
 "this task is too difficult and
 far above my competence":
 The attempt to do the task itself will give
 the greatness (of mind) necessary (611)

Valluvar has no interest in those who stand threatened and feel weak at the dimensions of a task. Valluvar establishes here a remarkable maxim: as you strive to achieve greater objectives, you become great in the process. The greatness of your goal lends you greatness. You become as great as your objectives.

Valluvar condemns, wherever possible, indolence. He observes:

Land, the benevolent maiden, will laugh
 at the sight of those who are lazy
 and accept a life of poverty (1040)

The commentators of the past only refer to agriculture when they come to the use of land. Valluvar has only said, "land, the benevolent maiden"; he does not refer to cultivation or agriculture in this couplet though the couplet comes under the chapter on 'Agriculture'. Land will give us food; will give us oil resources; mineral resources. She possesses everything you need to create wealth. Consequently she laughs at the lazy person who suffers poverty and pleads helplessness.

Avoidance of indolence is necessary for the ordinary citizen and more so for those who rule the land. It is not enough if one gets busy occasionally and then relapses into procrastination.

According to him, those who rule, should avoid procrastination. Laziness and delay in decision-making are great enemies of the king. Not being satisfied with applauding action, Valluvar thinks it fit to have a whole

chapter on : 'Against Idleness' or 'Non-indolence'. He declares:

By the darkness of idleness,
the indestructible lamp of family (rank)
will go out and be extinguished (601)*

Family (greatness) will be destroyed,
and faults will increase in those men
who give way to laziness and
put forth no dignified exertion (604)*

It is a rare thing for the idle
even if they receive the aid of kings
to derive any great benefit from it (606)*

And so he goes on, condemning in every way laziness and inaction. The might of indolence is such that it can destroy even what may be thought of as indestructible. It is a single weakness that is enough to ruin all that a family might have acquired and accumulated through generations.

Valluvar is a bard who sings the glory of action: a poet who makes performance the criterion for greatness; a philosopher who assures a heaven on earth for the endeavouring and persevering who opt for living in accordance with the way of life that one is expected to adopt. No one acclaimed action as unreservedly and in as favourable a light as he did. No one crowned human endeavour as Valluvar did.

The one who is settled in conjugal life; conducts himself in conformity with the world as conceived by great men; thinks high, is not awed by the difficulties of a task; learns whatever is required to be learnt and leads his life the way it should be led—he does not have to go in search of Heaven: he would enjoy the status of divinity on this earth itself. This is the message of Valluvar. His book will remain relevant and will inspire generations of humanity as long as humanity has faith and confidence in itself and in its endeavour for progress and development.

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

A Possible Ideal World

From the beginning of civilisation, man has been motivated by an aspiration to strive for and achieve something higher; something beyond the constraints and limitations of this world. The angels, the Devas and the Heaven are in a way the manifestations of this ambition which is deeply rooted in the human psyche. It reflects a desire for achieving a state higher than the one he is in. There may exist or may not exist Devas: but we should entertain an ambition to become like them. There may or may not be a Heaven: but one should strive to achieve, something like that rather than be satisfied with what there is.

There have been many intellectuals and thinkers who wanted to transform this world into one good enough to match Heaven. They had no patience to wait till the day when they may be blessed with the privilege of being allowed an entry into and a place in the heaven. They started creating in their mind ideal living conditions; started developing the idea of an ideal world or an ideal society. The Republic envisaged by Plato is perhaps the earliest of such an attempt. In Italy, Campanelle wrote in the 17th century the *Civitatis-Solis*. Somewhat earlier than he, in the 16th century Thomas More recorded his dreams of an ideal society in his book *Utopia* which has come to be accepted in English usage to denote something that is unattainable. Again Francis Bacon in his book *New Atlantis* presents his version of an ideal society. There have been similar efforts all over the world in one form or the other. In India, there has been a tradition of creating

a land, a society, an individual in the person of a king or a prince, a queen or a princess representing the ideal to be aimed at. The poets will describe the country of a benevolent and great ruler where it rains regularly thrice a month; where the lion and the lamb go together to drink water in the same river or spring; the tiger and the cow live as part of a big herd with no fear of any danger on the part of the cow. It is in keeping with this tradition that the great poet Kamban, who wrote the *Ramayana* in Tamil describes the Khosala land, ruled by Dasaratha, as follows:

There was no philanthropy since
no one was poor;
There was no great strength (of Army)
since there was no enemy;
There was no truth, since
falsehood was unknown;
There was no one to be considered as
enlightened, since education flourished among all.

Obviously Kamban is describing an ideal country. In general, the heroes and the heroines of our epics were often the personification of ideal men and ideal women. Savithri the heroine represents the unlimited power of the love of an ideal wife. For chastity it is Kannagi of *Silappatikaram*; for the principle of one man - one woman as partners in life with absolutely unswerving fidelity to each other, it is Rama and Sita. We have not thought of them as characters that represent the members of a society that all could follow. They are characters, representing an ideal to be emulated but normally unattainable. The tradition has been to picture 'something that is good, but is not there and would be good if it were there'. The countries depicted with the abundance of wealth and prosperity are ideal; but non-existent. It will be really sweet if such a thing could ever come to pass in the real world.

But Valluvar has endeavoured to present to us a treatise, on the Art of Living that is to be practised and not

to be regarded as an ideal and therefore of no significance to model our conduct in day-to-day life. It speaks of Dharma for an individual. It speaks of certain characteristics of a country or a society to be wished for or aimed at. The question arises: what is the nature of the society that Valluvar presents in his work? Is he attempting to suggest ways and means of improving the existing society or is he endeavouring to develop the grammar of a new world of his imagination?

From the age of Plato to the days of Bacon, the great thinkers created a society that did not exist, but envisaged one that would be ideal, if one such could be created. In so doing, they represented by and large the value system that was regarded highly in their days. It is but inevitable.

In the Greek Society in which Plato lived, philosophical enquiries, search for truth, intellectual pursuit, and in short, the Socratic approach were dominant. Consequently, in Plato's *Republic* the men in responsible position were to be philosophers above 50 in age. Thomas More lived in the 15th and early 16th centuries. A brief description of the conditions in England at that time is as follows:

The internal condition of England was deplorable. Agriculture had been almost destroyed by the wholesale conversion of arable into pasture land for the purpose of breeding sheep to obtain wool ... while the peasant and labourer were either starving or swinging on the gibbet—for they were hanged in hundreds for petty larcenies—the nobility, capitalists, and abbots were revelling in the wealth which had been acquired by the infliction of this misery.... In London and in the towns the administration of justice was conducted with merciless severity. The punishment for larceny was death; and each year many hundreds, sometimes twenty at a time, perished on the gallows. Sanitary regulations were unknown. The poor lived

* Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*: Introduction by J. Churton Collins, Oxford University Press, 1964, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv.

like pigs, their habits too being loathsome to describe. Many of the streets of the city were little better than open sewers... The consequence was the periodical visitation of decimating epidemics ... such was the world, the elements of which, whether as inspiration or theme, entered into the composition of the Utopia.

It was the period of Reformation in Europe. There were widespread debates on economic organisation, political structure and the governance of a country. The period had in its womb, many changes, many revolutions; therefore in the land of Thomas More, there is a king—not a hereditary one, but one to be elected by the people. The economic organisation he develops is not one of private ownership; he presents a society advocating public ownership and foreseeing the seeds of the later developments in the form of socialism and communism.

Bacon (1561-1621) belongs to an age when science was gaining importance; Bacon himself is considered as the prophet and partly a parent of modern science. He creates in his *New Atlantis*, the Solomon's House, the objective of which is:

the knowledge of causes, and secret of motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible.

Bacon by and large uses the opportunity to give expression to many of the anticipated developments in science, agriculture, medicine, technology and the development of tools.

It was not the aim of Valluvar to create a new economic organisation or a political structure. He keeps in mind the monarchy then in existence; the economic organisation of the period; the political structure and the social system. He lays down guidelines for an individual who will be the basic component of any social, political and economic system. These systems will change and will continue to change. Valluvar, therefore, concentrates on the individual, the

molecule, and deals with him. He looks at the individual as a king, as a citizen, as the head of a family, as a father, as a son, as an ascetic, as a minister and defines for him, in each position, in each state a way of life, a code of conduct that would generally be valid, irrespective of the political or economic system that may exist.

Valluvar has not created in his mind an ideal society of his choice and organised the content of his treatise to fit that ideal. Had he done that, the *Kural* would have become another *Utopia*, or if he had written the book concentrating on practical wisdom aimed at success in life irrespective of the means, it would have been one like the *Prince* of Machiavelli or the *Arthasastra* of Chanakya. It might be an ancient version of the numerous books that we now see under such titles as 'How to be a success in life'. It would not have been a contribution, universally acclaimed as the finest piece of art depicting a way of life and an art of living that have appeal and application, weathering the successive social and political revolutions that history has witnessed.

Albert Schweitzer, one of the greatest of philosophers who had his head and heart among the people he lived with, in his day-to-day life, while referring to the *Kural* in his book entitled *Indian Thought and its Development* observes:

There hardly exists in the literature of the world a collection of maxims in which one finds so much lofty wisdom.

It is not at the same time a book written after studying laboriously and analysing the contents of many treatises written by authors and extracting from them what might have been considered the essence of those works. It is no anthology. As Justice Subramanian says:

Kural is not a mosaic taken from several faiths or cultures and pieced together to form a work of art.

The *Kural*, on the other hand, is an integral painting of a civilisation which was harmonious with itself and which

possessed a clearly recognisable unity. The following observation of Dr. G.U. Pope deserves mention:

It is certainly not an anthology but the perfect and most elaborate work of one 'master'

It may perhaps be relevant to recapture the assessment of M. Ariel, the great French savant, who says:

that which above all is wonderful in the *Kural* is the fact that its author addresses himself without regard to castes, peoples or beliefs, to the whole community of mankind; the fact that he formulates sovereign morality and absolute reason; that he proclaims in their very essence, in their eternal abstractedness, virtue and truth; that it presents, as it were, in one group, the highest laws of domestic and social life; that he is equally perfect in thought, in language and in poetry, in the austere metaphysical contemplation of the great mysteries of the Divine nature as in the easy and graceful analysis of the tenderest emotions of the heart.

It is not our intention to reproduce here the observations made by many men and women in praise of the *Kural*. That would constitute a book by itself. We only want to draw attention to the universal appeal that the *Kural* has. In this chapter we are trying to look at the way of life that Valluvar presents and examine whether it concerns just an ideal society, or whether it is an approach that is relevant to the real world. A mature consideration would show that Valluvar develops his thesis of a way of life that would fit into what may be called "*A Possible Ideal World*". It might appear to be bridging together two contradictory states of existence. But that is what Valluvar does.

In Science and Technology we imagine ideal situations in order to find a classical or analytical solution. We idealise, simplify and find a solution under conditions which are not true to nature. Having found a solution on the basis of certain assumptions that are convenient for analysis and treatment, but not fully representative of the

real world, we take the next step. We start applying corrections to bring the solution closer to the real world situation.

Similarly, Valluvar has in mind a way of life that is ideal; but then he takes note of the practical limitations and problems and applies corrections so that the contents become valid and remain well within realisable heights. We may consider some examples to see how Valluvar performs this feat.

He observes that if you were to ask him the single most important virtue to be preserved, it would be *non-killing*: if you would ask him for the next, it would be *avoidance of falsehood*.

Not to destroy life is an incomparably
great good:
next to it in goodness
ranks freedom from falsehood (323)

Valluvar has devoted a whole chapter to 'Truth', stressing in many ways the avoidance of falsehood.

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

There is no praise like the praise of
never uttering a falsehood
without giving any suffering;
it will lead to every virtue (296)*

Amidst all that we have seen
(described) as real (excellence)
there is nothing
so good as truthfulness (300)*

In general, no one can dispute these observations. But situations do arise in life when you find it inadvisable to speak the truth. Consider a situation where a helpless

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

woman being chased by a drunken husband with a knife in hand and with the intention to hurt her, takes shelter in a place you are aware of and the drunkard asks you:

“Did you find a woman coming this way?”

Your answer has to be yes, if you are to be true; but should you speak the truth in this context? Here one should see Valluvar’s approach to truth itself. Truth for him is not just being factual. It is much more : it involves a concept, a philosophy of life, the issues of right and wrong. He raises the question :

‘What is truth?’

One may think whether such a question needs to be asked at all. ‘Information’ is simple; ‘fact’ is subject to physical verification; but ‘truth’ is not that simple. Valluvar defines that :

Truth is speaking of such words as are
free from the least degree of evil (to others) (291)

In other words, looked at from a larger perspective truth cannot be harmful. In the context of the example we have taken, telling what may be considered the truth will result in the lady being hurt by the drunkard. If you say that you have not seen her, it will obviously be false. If you say, “I know, but I will not tell you,” he might hurt you: Gandhiji might say that one who follows the path of non-violence and truth must be prepared to face such an eventuality; he has not provided for exception from truth. But Valluvar propounds an extraordinary theory. He says:

Even falsehood has the
nature of truth, if it
confers a benefit that is
free from blemish (292)

Commenting on this Parimelalahar says:

Stating that an event has occurred, when it has not, will be reckoned as true if it does good; it will be considered as falsehood if it does harm

It is truth if one says what has occurred and such a thing does good: it is still truth if one says what has not occurred, but it does good.

It will be falsehood if one says something that has not occurred and does not do good: it will be falsehood if one says something that has really occurred, but by so doing will do harm.

According to him truth is not in the statement itself; it is not in its verifiability. Truth is in the consequence of what is said; it is linked to the circumstances: to the value system of an individual: a society; there is no absolute truth or absolute falsehood in day-to-day life. There may be situations where certain statements about what has occurred or not occurred may not lead to unmixed good to all or unmixed harm to all. A statement may be treated as true or false in terms of the consequence that follows, considering larger interests. It is a down-to-earth, absolutely practicable, definition of truth and will be valid in any society in any age. One may almost write a whole volume on this single statement, 'Even falsehood has the nature of truth if it confers a benefit free from blemish'. It is an extraordinary and profound statement. It is not a sanction to utter falsehood, but a new definition of truth itself. I do not really know whether anyone has defined truth this way. One would see in Valluvar a similar pragmatic but morally sustainable approach on all issues of life.

Valluvar devotes a whole chapter to 'Renunciation'. He does sing the glory of those who have renounced worldly pleasures. He declares:

He who destroys the pride
which says 'I' and 'mine',
will enter a world which is difficult
even to the Gods to attain

(346)

It is difficult to say anything more complimentary than this in praise of renunciation. He realises at the same

time that there are many who wear the garb of renunciation; but have not really renounced anything. Everyone who professes asceticism is not necessarily an ascetic. The saffron-clad are not all saints; beards do not guarantee priesthood.

Valluvar is aware of this rather unhappy situation and considers it necessary to warn the people against the fraudulent ones. He realises that society abounds in wolves that wear the skin (and assume the form) of innocent lambs. Frauds transcend all religions, all races, all nations. They are ubiquitous. Having devoted a whole chapter in praise of those that have truly renounced all, he considers it necessary to give equal weight to speaking about the ones whose conduct is not consistent with the garb they choose to wear. In the chapter on 'Inconsistent Conduct' he acknowledges that not only are there frauds that flaunt the robes of sanyasins, but there are many among them who are in exalted positions.

There are many men of masked conduct
who perform their ablutions and make a show
or enjoy a position of greatness,
while their mind is defiled with guilt (278)

He proclaims a bitter truth in all frankness. Wherever needed, he presents to the world both sides of the coin; while he may soar high, he also ensures that he is not uprooted from the realities of the world we live in.

According to Valluvar, real virtue does not depend on such external display as in wearing a special dress or growing a beard or tonsuring the hair. He states categorically :

There is no need of a shaven head,
nor of bearded face, if one abstains from
those deeds which the wise have condemned (280)

Here again he would only say, "abstain from those deeds which the wise have condemned". He would not

state what they are; he would not attempt listing them. One can list them at a given point of time, in a given place, but not for all places, for all times. What the wise may condemn will change from place to place and age to age and Valluvar accommodates them.

The world of religion has many prescriptions; many practices. The priestly order in every religion has its own dress; its own discipline. There are many rituals; many taboos. Individuals are expected to suffer penances; offer prayers; make pilgrimages. When it comes to religious heads, a greater rigour and a life of asceticism are stipulated. Celibacy, renunciation and other practices that are often against the laws of nature are prescribed. Valluvar brushes aside all these demands in one sweep. The most desirable is the life of a citizen in a society; the life of a family man with all the happiness that the company of a loving wife and beloved children can offer. He may have all the affections and attachment that are appropriate to a family man, an ordinary citizen. Living in this state one may attain all that one aspires to. Whether it is a heavenly abode or a divine state, it is well within his reach. He needs to lead a life that is free from blemish; abstain from deeds as advised by the wise.

He who on earth has lived
in the conjugal state as he should live,
will be placed among the Gods
who dwell in heaven

(50)*

A simpler and more practical prescription is almost impossible. Even the most radical reformer or a rationalist of this century cannot improve on it.

It is possible to consider an ideal life in the realm of a world order consistent with the laws and demands of nature. Such things as heavenly bliss and a divine state

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

are not reserved only for those who have to suppress all natural instincts, forgo all worldly pleasures and lead a life of austerity and abandonment against the needs and demands of nature. The observation that the highest of bliss that one can aspire to is well within the reach of the humblest of family men, is revolutionary for the age in which he lived and composed the *Kural*. It is significantly different from the views widely prevalent in his time. It will be considered radical even today by many.

Whether it is the age of Valluvar or the era of high technology, deprivation and hunger have been following humanity as though they are its shadows. Notwithstanding all the developments in arts and humanities, breakthroughs in Science and Technology, progress in the exploitation of natural resources like land and water, oil and minerals and the successive economic and political revolutions, we have not yet created a world free from hunger. In the days of Valluvar, poets had satisfied themselves with singing of the glory of rulers, their magnificence, philanthropy, heroism and their hereditary virtues. Poverty was known. But no one frowned upon it. The sufferings of the poor have not been the subject of poems. Concepts like socialism and communism were not even in the womb of time. Valluvar exercises his mind on the condition of poverty. He raises the question:

What pain, what suffering
is worse than that of poverty ?

After a survey of all that afflicts humanity, he concludes

There is nothing that
afflicts (one) like poverty (1041)*

One may sleep in the
midst of fire, but by
no means in the midst
of poverty (1049)*

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

When the day dawns, the thought that tortures the poor is:

Is the poverty that killed
me yesterday, to come
again today too ? (1048)

Perhaps the cruelty of poverty cannot be described more effectively. Valluvar was born in a society that was accustomed to poverty as a part of life. He was heir to a tradition that had not revolted against it. While he did not endeavour to inquire into the cause of poverty, he comes to the conclusion that whoever is responsible, for the condition, deserves no pardon. Whether it is the Creator or the ruler who has made it necessary for one to live by begging, deserves to perish.

If the Creator of the world has decreed
even begging as a means of livelihood,
may he too go abegging and perish (1062)*

Though the observation is meant to emphasise the disgraceful nature of mendicancy, the root of the problem is poverty and the necessity of begging rather than being able to find work and earn one's sustenance.

Valluvar is against the use of harsh words and advocates the return of good for evil.

To use disagreeable words when
agreeable ones are at hand,
is like eating unripe fruit
when there are ripe ones (100)

Why does he use harsh
words who sees the pleasure
which sweet speech yields ? (99)*

The proper punishment to
those who have done evil
(to you) is to put them

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

to shame by doing good
and forgetting (the events) (314)

But in denouncing the one responsible for making people beg for sustenance, he does not follow his own advice. He does not use sweet words but employs the harshest language of condemnation. He does not think of showing kindness and putting him to shame, but awards the severest of punishments, that he go 'abegging' and not manage to survive, but perish. Here it is a curse that he goes 'abegging' and perishes and the curse is against no less a person than the Creator Himself.

He does not fail to recognise the fact that there is poverty and some are constrained to seek redressal by resorting to begging. He curses in the strongest language the one who may be responsible for such a state. He does not throw the whole blame on the poor by tracing it to their fate or offering some such explanation. If at any time one could locate anyone who is proved to be responsible, he deserves to be dealt with appropriately. He is not for seeking a remedy for poverty by begging.

There is no greater folly than the boldness
with which one seeks to remedy evils of poverty
by begging (rather than by working) (1063)*

Even thin gruel is ambrosia to him
who has obtained it by labour (1065)*

He devotes a whole chapter to discourage begging. He would say that :

There is nothing more disgraceful to one's tongue
than to use it in begging even water for a cow (1066)

Even the whole world cannot sufficiently praise
the dignity that would not beg
even in the midst of destitution (1064)*

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

But he realises the fact that there is poverty and there are beggars. He would not wish away something that is there and has a prospect of continuing for periods long or short. He, therefore, makes an appeal to those who can give and also has a piece of advice to those who beg.

The one who begs ought not
to be angry (at a refusal) (1060)

This advice will hold good for anyone who seeks help. One may even approach a person for assistance for a great public cause. Anger must be avoided by those who seek help. While he condemns begging, and curses those responsible for the existence of begging, he does not want to close his eyes to the fact that among the clients for advice and guidance from him, those who beg are also there. Here we see that while the world without the need for begging is his ideal, he accommodates an existing situation and devotes some thought to it. The world of Valluvar is one where there is a bridge that connects the dream and the reality.

In a chapter on 'The Land' or 'The Country', he describes the characteristics that a country should have.

A country is one in which (those who carry on)
undiminishing cultivation, virtuous persons, and
merchants with inexhaustible wealth live together (731)

A country is one that continues to be
free from excessive starvation,
irremediable epidemics and destructive foes (734)

The learned say that the best country is the one
which knows no setback (from its foes)
and if injured (at all)
suffers no diminution in its wealth (736)

A country should have undiminishing harvest; should be free from starvation and persisting disease. It should not fall into bad days; even if it does it should not suffer from paucity of wealth.

Such a country is not handed over to us on a platter; one does not get it as a gift; nor does it descend on its own like rainfall. Wealth must be created; the wealth created must be collected; it must be protected and properly distributed. That is the responsibility of the king or the Government as the case may be. While stressing the importance of wealth, he also emphasises the fact that it is something that has to be created.

In general the wealth of a nation depends on (i) population (ii) natural resources (iii) education (iv) economic and political organisation and (v) the capacity for innovations. While this is generally true, the emphasis has slowly shifted and now it is mainly on the level of education and the capacity of a nation for innovations.

As we approach the end of this century and knock at the door of the next one, if we review the progress made during the 20th century we will find that the most important achievement of this century is not the development in nuclear science, or the invention of the computer, or the achievements in space or the breakthrough in life sciences; but it is the emergence of knowledge as a resource, a resource that is inexhaustible and renewable, a resource that can be created, augmented and can compensate for the absence of other resources. Resource is for development and use; development of knowledge as a resource brings us to the modern concept of Human Resource Development.

Whatever be the political or economic system, the leadership of individuals in every area of activity is important. In spite of all the developments that have taken place, we have not yet devised a system that can dispense with the need for the initiative and leadership qualities of individuals. Remarkable achievements have often been the result of the contributions of individuals. Valluvar stresses the need for an individual to strive to distinguish himself and attain fame.

If you are born in this world
distinguish yourself and

attain fame: for those
 who cannot achieve renown,
 it will be better not to
 have been born at all (236)

Not to beget fame will
 be reckoned by the wise as a disgrace for
 all the people in the world (238)

These are his exhortations to individuals to strive for achievements in life. But there is another kural which is important and carries a far-reaching message. He says:

The land that supports the body (of a person)
 who has no claim to fame will suffer
 diminution of its blameless rich produces (239)

What message does he convey through this kural? A land cannot but support the bodies of the citizens who have no claim to fame; it cannot reject them; cannot deny them its citizenship. What is it that is expected of the land to avoid bearing the burden of a population that has no fame to its credit? People of fame are not born with it; one attains fame by one's actions, one's achievements. In any society, that talent will flourish and blossom which is sought after, recognised, encouraged and rewarded. Excellence is what you aim at, strive for and achieve. A society should create conditions conducive to the emergence of men and women of eminence.

Initially he exhorts individuals to strive for and achieve fame. Then he declares that a land which bears the burden of persons of no renown will neither grow in its wealth nor even maintain its existing riches. He implies thereby that a society also has the responsibility to enable its citizens to distinguish themselves. The concept of a society having to show concern for the development of its citizens to attain fame has not been the philosophy of the ancient; they recognised the ones that were gifted; but that is different from the promotion of talent. Valluvar emphasises the

responsibility of **the** individual as well as the society in valuing and **promoting** achievements that lead to fame. This displays an **intuitive** understanding on his part that ultimately it is **the** quality of the human beings that counts.

The Tamil tradition lays great stress on the virtue of impartiality. It is **one** of the most essential components of Dharma in the **value** system. In every book it is stressed again and again. Naturally Valluvar devotes a whole chapter to 'Impartiality' and extols it as a great virtue. In a society that depended on men of wisdom for justice, the elevation of this **virtue** to prominence is understandable. Impartiality is **the** quality that an individual possesses and one that **helps** him to render justice irrespective of whether a person is a friend or an enemy or of neutral standing.

The equity which consists in acting with equal regard to each of the three divisions of men —enemies, strangers and friends— is **a** pre-eminent virtue.

The wealth of the man of rectitude
will not perish; but will bring happiness
to his posterity* (112)*

Loss and gain come not without cause;
It is the ornament of the wise to preserve
evenness of mind (under both) (115)*

To incline to neither side; but to
rest impartial as the even fixed scale
is the ornament of the wise (118)*

Valluvar who speaks so highly of impartiality, has also a chapter on 'Benignity'. The Tamil word used is 'Kannottam'. Parimelalahar explains this term as follows.

Inability to decline what those who have moved with them closely may ask or request.

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

It almost means obliging those whom “you have known and cultivated”. In this chapter he stresses the virtue of *benignity* as strongly as he emphasises impartiality in the other.

The prosperity of the world springs
from the benignity (Kannottam);
The existence of those who have
no benignity (Kannottam) is
a burden to the earth (572)

Beyond appearing to be in the
face, what good do they do,
those eyes in which there is no
well regulated kindness ? (574)

In the chapter entitled ‘The Right Sceptre’, i.e. the just rule of a king, Valluvar positively speaks against benignity.

To examine into; to show no favour (Kannottam)
to anyone; to desire to act
with impartiality towards all,
and to inflict such punishments
as may be wisely resolved on,
this is the right way (541)

One may wonder whether the advocacy of benignity (Kannottam) and obliging those that you have cultivated, will not come into conflict with impartiality and equity. We do see that he advocates the quality of ‘kannottam’ in a chapter of the same title and specifically advises against kannottam (541) in the chapter entitled ‘The Right Sceptre’. One negates the other. Valluvar does see the possible conflict and the confusion in mind that these two chapters may give rise to. He sets boundaries. You may oblige your companions, show them favour, provided such act does not hurt or harm the discharge of your responsibilities, the performance of the affairs entrusted to you.

It is a human world that we live in. Human relationship has its values: seeking for help and expectations of kindness from those with whom you have been associated is natural;

one does not behave like an automaton devoid of feelings, one has to be humane; but that should be subordinated to one great requirement: it should not result in any departure from rectitude. It is here that we see Valluvar's ideal society to which he applies certain corrections to make it possible, to make it realisable. He advocates :

The world will be theirs who are able to show
kindness (Kannottam) without causing
any harm to the task of just governance (578)

There are occasions when you can help persons, show them kindness without in any way deviating from the path of fairness and justice. It is necessary to show consideration (Kannottam) in these circumstances.

Our ancestors have often tended to rate spiritual values highly and given a relatively low priority to material prosperity. In the chapter on 'Possession of Benevolence' Valluvar would say:

The wealth of kindness is the real wealth
among all the wealths :
The wealth of prosperity is possessed
even by the basest of men (241)

Those who are without wealth, may
at some future time, become prosperous;
Those who are destitute of kindness
are utterly destitute;
For them there is no change (248)*

He speaks about the greatness of benevolence and concludes that it needs a certain elevated mind to be in possession of it. Possession of material wealth needs no such inherent virtue in the individual. But, at the same time, life in this world needs material wealth. He realises the role it plays in day-to-day life. He understands what sufferings one may undergo if one is poor in material wealth. He would not underestimate its importance. He declares in unequivocal terms that this world is lost to those who do

not possess material wealth. They will not be able to command the advantages and pleasures that this world offers. Wealth makes even the worthless ones to be reckoned as worthy men.

Besides wealth, there is nothing that
can change people of no importance
into those of importance (751)

All despise the poor; (but)
praise the rich (752)

To those who have honestly
acquired an abundance of
riches, the other two, virtue
and pleasure, are things easy
of acquisition (754)

Therefore he advises:

Accumulate wealth; it will destroy
the arrogance of foes;
There is no weapon sharper than that (759)

He does not, as many others of his time have done, denounce material possessions. He gives it the place it deserves in the world we live in and his advice is categorical and it is, "accumulate wealth". While on one side he would extol spiritual values and place them far above material possessions, he realises the value of wealth and the role it plays in the affairs of the world. Unhesitatingly and in full measure he stresses its importance and categorically declares that for those who do not have it, this world is lost and therefore his unequivocal exhortation: "accumulate wealth", but by honest means (754). He has in every aspect of man's life, kept a balance between the ideal and the practical and thus rendered what he advocates as attainable.

Another characteristic highly valued in Tamil tradition is 'self-esteem'. The Tamil word is 'Maanam' and perhaps an English term fully conveying the meaning of 'Maanam'

does not exist. 'Self-respect' or 'Self-esteem' are perhaps the closest. There are instances of Tamil kings who took their own lives when they perceived that they suffered a loss of self-respect. Almost every Tamil literary text of the Sangam age would stress that one had better not choose to live after having lost one's self-respect.

Valluvar devotes a whole chapter to 'Self-respect' (Maanam). He declares:

Those who have fallen from their position
(descended to lower levels of behaviour)
are comparable to the hair which has
fallen from the head (964)

Maintenance of self-respect requires that one would not do anything that would mean resorting to levels of conduct unworthy of one's position. If, through circumstances it happens that he falls from his position of honour though it be due, not to his choice but to fate, even then it would be better for him to take his own life than live in shame.

Those who give up (their) life
when their honour is at stake are
like the yak which kills itself
at the loss of (even one of) its hairs (969)*

The world will (always) praise and adore
the fame of the honourable who would
rather die than suffer indignity (970)*

Having emphasised and extolled the place of honour in such glowing terms and having said unequivocally that one should prefer honour to life, Valluvar makes an exception. There are some who have taken upon themselves the task of serving their community. They are exempted from considerations of self-esteem and personal dignity. According to Valluvar, those who have taken upon

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

themselves the responsibility and task of serving the interest and seeking the welfare of their community, should free themselves from considerations of the appropriate season, the tendency for indolence and the sense of self-esteem and personal dignity.

There is no season (good or bad) for those who strive to raise their family; if they are inclined to indolence and entertain a (false) sense of self-esteem, the cause will suffer.

(1028)

Family here means community or the society in which one is born. If he has dedicated his life to serve society, he should not attach any importance to his own dignity; he should not be indolent; he should not wait for an auspicious time or favourable season. If he is too concerned about what he may perceive as his dignity or honour, he will not be able to strive for the larger interests of society. One can see that while Valluvar advocates a particular virtue as all-important, he does at the same time make exceptions recognising situations, where the same virtue may become a hindrance rather than help. It is such accommodation which tempers his ideal society into a possible one.

We mentioned earlier that Valluvar mentions *non-killing* as the single most important virtue. Here his ban on killing applies to all living beings including animals and birds. The question that now arises is: what would a king or a ruler or those in charge of law and order do in the case of criminals guilty of murder?

For a king to punish criminals with death
is like removing the weeds
in the field of green crops

(550)

In such a situation, it is like removing a weed; it has to be done to protect the crop. Valluvar realises that no rule can be without exception in a human society; there is no absolute prescription. All virtues are to be subordinated to certain larger interests of a society whose health and welfare are the ultimate aims.

In every area of activity, Valluvar establishes the ideal, investigates its maintenance and where he sees an inevitable need for exceptions and adjustments considering the paramount importance of the interests of society, he applies corrections to bring the ideal closer to the real world. He makes room for the dreams of tomorrow; but takes into account the needs of today. His compromises are not the compromises of the opportunist; but the compromises of the wise. It is this approach which, among others, endows the *Kural* with inherent strength and a resilience which makes it possible for it to absorb new impacts and to stretch itself to withstand new stresses.

No Panacea For All Ills

Among the books in Tamil, the *Kural* is the most quoted by the later authors. In almost every work in Tamil, in the later centuries, the *Kural* is quoted either directly or indirectly. Its influence has been and continues to be pervasive. As people attach importance to logic and reason, as blind adherence to faiths and beliefs yields place to objective enquiry and as the scientific temper grows, we see the *Kural* emerging into greater prominence, getting wider acceptance.

Poems composed by 54 Tamil poets of the distant past have been put together under the title *Tiruvalluva Malai*, i.e., the Garland of Tiruvalluvar: it is in effect a garland made of flowers of poems in praise of the *Kural*. These poems seek to bring out and pay tribute to the greatness of the *Kural*.

Madurai Tamil Nahanar, one of the authors in *Tiruvalluva Malai*, declares:

Everything (worth knowing) is in it.

There is nothing (worth knowing) that is not in it.

According to a poem attributed to Avvaiyar, each kural is so pregnant with meaning that Valluvar is said to have managed to contain, within an atom, the seven seas.

We realise that poets do resort to exaggeration and this may be one such case or it is also possible that in the state of knowledge that then existed, the statement might be substantially true. But today we cannot assume that what is contained in Valluvar's work is adequate and we have

all that is needed to guide us in our life. We may concede the uniqueness of the *Kural*; we may admire the sound wisdom and depth of understanding of the world that Valluvar has shown in the work. It is remarkable. We must still keep in mind two important facts:

- The *Kural* cannot be an answer to all the questions of today and tomorrow
- We cannot also take for granted that everyone of the 1,330 couplets written about 2,000 years ago will be relevant and applicable in letter and spirit today and tomorrow

These are rather obvious; they do not warrant any explanation or proof. Nevertheless, it is considered necessary to emphasise this aspect. There are people who swear by the *Kural* and declare that there is nothing worth knowing that the *Kural* does not contain and what it does not contain is not worth knowing. We will not argue with such persons; it will not help. We ourselves should not, in our admiration for the *Kural*, approach it with any such sense of piety and unenquiring faith.

We see, even from the titles of many chapters, that in the environment in which Valluvar lived and worked and the value system that prevailed in his age, his views were radical and revolutionary. In this book we have attempted to make a study of those characteristics of the *Kural* that enabled it to endure through centuries and remain relevant today. We have not talked about the richness of the *Kural* in general; nor have we attempted an in-depth interpretation of the various ideas contained in each chapter. This book is neither a commentary nor a treatise on the *Kural*. There are numerous commentaries that have dealt with the subtleties of the work; with the breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding displayed by Valluvar. There have been differences in interpretation and scholarly discussions on them. It has been interpreted and elaborated by great scholars who have devoted their

lifetime to a study of the *Kural*. Our objective has been a limited one. It is to take a critical look at those characteristics which contribute to the immortality of the *Kural*, to its continuing relevance, notwithstanding the vast and revolutionary changes that have taken place in the social, political, economic and intellectual environment of the world. The *Kural* has not so far been looked at from this angle. The importance of this study lies not so much in the scholarship that we have brought to bear upon it, but in the nature of the issue we have chosen for an enquiry.

Valluvar has been a progressive thinker; his views were far ahead of his age. But that does not mean that everything that he said would remain progressive for ever. Such an achievement is impossible and should not be expected of any author. We may consider, for instance, his views on women. In comparison with the status given to women in his age, he has accorded them a much higher place of honour. He raises the question:

“What is greater than a woman?” (54)

The emphatic way he has asked the question must enable the feminists of this century to quote Valluvar proudly in their favour. When he talks of domestic life, he refers to woman as life's companion in the chapter heading. Whether the title of the chapter was given by Valluvar or by the commentator, it certainly reflects the spirit of the chapter. He says:

If his companion at home is one of
dignity and eminence, what does (he) not have?
If she be one without excellence,
what does he have? (53)

He does not believe that external restrictions on women are of any use or significance. Her guard is her own inherent quality, her own fullness of virtue.

What avails the guard of a prison?
The supreme guard of woman is
the fullness of her virtue (57)

The word chastity is used in translation for the Tamil word 'karpu' which connotes the possession of certain virtues and is much more than what 'chastity' conveys. In the above kural he emphasises the fact that the good conduct of a woman is that which comes of her own conviction and understanding and not that protected by watch and ward or imposed by restrictions and reservations.

He casts aside substantially many traditional concepts concerning women in his age and accords them pride of place. Nevertheless we must realise and accept that no human being, however great he may be, can be fully liberated and unaffected by the impact of the age and the influences of the society to which he belongs. There are certain uses of words and approaches in the *Kural* that today, may not meet the expectations and emerging values of contemporary society. In the chapter entitled 'Not Coveting Another's Wife', he refers to one's wife as his property.

The folly of desiring her
who is the possession of another
will not be found in those who know
(the attributes of) virtue and wealth in life (141)*

During his days, it might have been acceptable to look at one's wife as one's possession in the sense that she belonged to him; a woman really was looked at as one belonging to her husband. It is so in many societies even today but modern women will not even remotely accept the concept of being 'the possession of the man'. Let us take another kural:

She who does not worship God, but
who on rising worships her husband,
if she says, "let it rain",
it shall rain (55)*

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus.

That a virtuous woman can command nature and that it will obey her orders is an exaggeration that a poet is entitled to. We do not suggest that Valluvar literally meant it. But still, the concept of a woman waking up from sleep and starting the day worshipping her husband will not be acceptable today. There are some who interpret this kural differently. Among them are many who believe in and plead for the equal status and dignity of women. At the same time, they are so attached to Valluvar that they would labour hard to so interpret every kural that it would be acceptable to the modern mind.

Tiruvalluvar uses the word 'rising' which, in the given context, has been interpreted as rising from sleep. But some take it as 'rising in status' so that her husband would worship her. While there is extraordinary scope in the kural for interpreting it to suit the value system prevailing at any given point of time, and that precisely is the strength of the *Kural*, it may not be appropriate to force on his sayings, rather in a laboured way, our convictions and concepts. Sometimes attempts are also being made to introduce corrections in a kural, saying that the present version might not be the original but has undergone changes in transmission through the centuries, or some have wantonly introduced corrections. Such efforts will not be accepted by the world of scholarship. They are neither useful nor necessary.

Valluvar lived in an age when men dominated the scene. They continue to do so in many societies even now. In no society, even today, are the women really the equals of men, barring some pockets where matriarchal traditions might allow them some privileges. In Valluvar's days, women were thought of as those to be protected and cared for by men. The men were to be at the helm of affairs. As mentioned earlier, even at the end of the 20th century, no great change has occurred in most of the countries. There, no doubt, is a realisation that they deserve or are entitled

to a better status. It is written about, proclaimed on platforms, demanded in processions, written in the law books. But the position is that we see mostly a one-sex-dominated world. The following lines from a poem by Kulothungan* describe the situation faithfully. The lines are valid even today for many societies:

If the child born is a female
it is greeted by a deep sigh of sorrow

* * *

The remnants of a life for
women as slaves among slaves
have not yet disappeared.
Their existence as dolls, as objects of
enjoyment and as playthings
for men is not a matter of the past

* * *

For them marriage is like
bargaining in a market;
The cruelty of dowry is
a torture under which they
sigh and sob and even
get burnt: the story continues

* * *

The evil of 'Sati' is still on the scene
Woman is still a commodity in markets
The fate of widowhood continues
Freedom for women, remains still
a fraud on them in many a case

* * *

Covering their face and the full body,
in a corner of the world they languish
Suppressing their feelings they suffer

* Kulothungan : *Welcome to Those Who Could Create a Heaven*, op.cit.

Chastity and Dharma have become, for the women,
perhaps chains made of gold.

* * *

They hardly enjoy any right,
and are not even aware that
they are devoid of them
They have no property; but
they live as property in this world.

It is a question we raise with anguish as to when this situation would change. Equality and empowerment of women remain even today our objective, our goal, albeit a distant goal. We are far from realising it. There is no dearth of men and also women who even today argue against reforms. It is not proper, therefore, to endeavour to impose on any kural by means of laboured and unconvincing interpretations some of our views that are essentially characteristic of this age.

The sufferings of women will not continue eternally; the existing circumstances may not last for ever. It may take years, decades or even centuries: but things will change; they are bound to change. It can neither be avoided nor prevented. Therefore the concept of a woman waking up in the morning, worshipping her husband rather than God, is not a virtue that can continue to be accepted; it cannot be advocated unless it is demanded to be reciprocated. Considering the traditions and values that existed in the days of Valluvar, we need not wonder at Valluvar's observations.

There is another chapter, which again reflects somewhat adversely on women. It is the chapter on 'Being Led by Women'. Writing on it Rajaji observes*

The wife is generally treated with great consideration in the *Kural*. But the following verses deprecate wife-rule as

* Rajaji: *Kural, The Great Book of Tiruvalluvar*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1965.

a certain cause of weakness and disgrace for rulers and men of action. Feminists should not be upset by things said in so old a book as the *Kural*. Wife-dominated statesmen hardly command respect or confidence even in modern times. What is condemned here is the domination of the husband's judgement by the wife and not love and not mutual respect between husband and wife.

Rajaji does not defend Valluvar, but pleads for understanding him. In this chapter, Valluvar says : Those who are governed by their wives are unable to act generously and boldly in respect of larger interests, friends and society in general. Determination by one's wife leads to narrowness of outlook and initiative. [908, 909]

He that fears his wife will always
be afraid of doing good deeds (even)
to the good (905)*

At a time when women were confined to their homes, farms and the daily chores, and were denied opportunities to play any larger role in society, it is no wonder that their outlook was comparatively narrow and that they were unable to see things in the larger perspective. In the great epic the *Ramayana* the role of Kaikeyi and the action of *Dasaratha* in a way bear testimony to the warning that Valluvar administers in this chapter.

On one side, Valluvar asks, "What is more eminent than a woman?" and says on the other, "Beware of woman's domination". It is in a way a conflict between his own noble concept of women and his acceptance of the situation that existed in the society at that time because of the limited exposure and experience that women had.

Further elaborating on this topic Rajaji argues as follows:

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus

This view about the direct or indirect interference of wives in the public affairs managed by their husbands and the weakening of policy by reason of excessive attachment to one's wife or fear of displeasure at home is not inconsistent with the dignity and equality of women's status. Nor has it to do with woman's capacity for public life. No man or woman can serve two masters satisfactorily. One who holds a public responsibility cannot permit himself or herself to be guided by another who has not been entrusted with the responsibility. If the other is a wife, the danger of a clouded judgement is all the greater. Though on first reading, these verses may appear to be old-fashioned in outlook, it must be admitted that domination by one's wife even in modern times cannot be deemed satisfactory where the husband holds the responsibility, any more than the converse. Where the wife is by reason of her qualification discharging a public responsibility, domination by one who happens to be her husband would be equally unsatisfactory. If the domination is based on subservience to a better judgement or wider experience or deeper knowledge, the case would be an exception. But where the domination is based on mere *uxoriousness* the result is obviously bad, and it is this that is condemned by *Kural*.*

One may not take exception to the explanation given by Rajaji. One may not even consciously argue that, in practical terms, the warning given by Valluvar is totally irrelevant. Many societies have not advanced that far as to make these stanzas really obsolete. Nevertheless the picture that emerges of women in this chapter is a reflection of the past beliefs and faiths, and modern women may not look at this chapter as understandingly as Rajaji does.

Again when it comes to chastity, Valluvar's reference to it is only as the virtue of women. It was so treated in his times. The word 'Kanni' in Tamil, meaning 'Virgin', has no masculine form. For that matter the word virgin has no masculine form in any language that we know of. Today

* Rajaji, *ibid*.

the dictionaries may refer to virgin as applicable to both sexes, but in the past it was only a feminine state. The Tamil literary works of the past adore the concept of 'Nayahan' and 'Nayahi' or 'Talaivan' and 'Talaivi', meaning in essence 'one man' and 'one woman'. But the rights and liberties granted to 'the one man' were not granted to the 'one woman'. Even the society of today has not done it.

The Tamil word 'Karpu' has no equivalent in English. It can perhaps be explained, but not expressed in translation by another word. It signifies the essence of the value system that evolved in Tamil society over centuries and epitomises certain virtues and qualities that go to make a woman of great virtue. Such words as 'Aram' and 'Salbu' in Tamil again cannot be expressed by single words in translation. These refer to the values that the Tamil society has developed and an explanation of 'Karpu', 'Aram' and 'Salbu' as understood in Tamil culture will constitute a volume for each of the words. The word 'chastity' meaning, 'faithful to one's partner' reflects just one part, though an important part, of 'Karpu'. Chastity does not fully convey the meaning of 'Karpu'.

The uniqueness of Valluvar is to be seen in the fact that he has discarded many accepted practices then existing and expressed views that constitute a strong condemnation of them. He lived in a society where prostitution was in practice. He devotes a whole chapter to condemn it in the strongest possible language:

The false embrace of wealth-
loving women are like (hired men)
embracing a strange corpse
in a dark room

(913)*

Those who are destitute of
a perfectly reformed mind will
covet the shoulders of those
who embrace (them) while their
hearts covet other things

(917)*

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus

The delicate shoulders of prostitutes
with excellent jewels are hell into which
are plunged the ignorant base (919)*

Chastity was considered, as stated before, essentially a feminine virtue. It was appreciated if found in men, but considered an indispensable requirement of women. In such an environment, he has found it possible and necessary to stress the need for chastity in men also by devoting one chapter to the evils of 'Coveting Another's Wife' and another chapter to 'Wanton Women'. Valluvar certainly has looked far ahead of his days. Nevertheless, when he says,

What is more excellent than a wife if she
possesses the stability of chastity? (54)*

he has also looked at chastity essentially as a feminine virtue as was the tradition in his age. In many societies, even today considerable indulgence is taken for granted for men in this regard. It is difficult to infer from Valluvar that he has stressed it equally for both, though he has expressed the need for it on the part of men. The modern women belong to the age of Bharati who proclaims:

They speak of chastity: let
it be equally applicable
to both the parties.

The women of today are dreaming about and marching towards this stage. They may not find Valluvar fully acceptable though they would agree that he was progressive and even revolutionary for his age. The woman of Bharati's dream still remains a dream in the real world, though in principle she is accepted.

It has often been argued that if the kind of restraints and guard are removed, the feminine virtue may be in peril. Bharati describes the woman of his conception as follows :

* Rev. Drew and John Lazarus

She walks erect : looks straight
She is proud of her knowledge
She preserves her virtue
because of her pride in her intellect
and in her self-esteem

Good conduct comes and should come out of understanding and wisdom and not out of compulsion and constraint. If it is imposed, it will not last. Valluvar says almost the same when he asks :

What avails the guard of a prison ?
The supreme guard of woman is the fullness of
her virtue (57)

But taking Valluvar's observations concerning women, the modern mind would conclude that he was modern and progressive for his age but he falls short of the expectations of the present and he does reflect, admittedly, traces of the values of the old world. The women of today have grown above those of Valluvar. It is quite understandable, and conceding it will not in any way detract from the greatness of Valluvar.

Valluvar was progressive, far-sighted, and penetrating in his approach. He could analyse the components and sub-systems that go to make the system of human society; can see those that are enduring and those that are ephemeral and liable to change. He can extract from the million aspects of human life what may be considered the essence: but still he cannot free himself from the impact of the age in which he lived; traces of them are bound to be seen. To expect anyone to liberate oneself totally from the influence of one's age and environment without even a trace is impractical.

There are also here and there observations and references to practices which must be treated only as useful for history. In the chapter on 'Ways of Making Wealth' for a state by the ruler, he lists out three kinds of properties that belong to the king.

Unclaimed wealth, wealth acquired
by taxes, and wealth got by
conquest of foes are (all) the
wealth of the king (756)*

In the past it was the practice that when a king conquered another country he used to get from the king of the conquered land, payment by way of taxes. We no longer have such kings today; the kings that exist no longer have the practice as in the past of invading a country, conquering it and collecting regularly taxes from the conquered ones. Such practices today are a matter of history. Similarly, Valluvar talks about 'Fortification' for protection from the foes.

A fort is that which has
everlasting water, plains
mountains and cool shady
forests (742)*

The learned say that a fortress
is an enclosure having these four
(qualities) viz., height, breadth,
strength and inaccessibility (743)*

Perhaps today such devices will not offer any protection from modern warfare. But even today we talk of air raid shelters and underground bunkers against air attacks. Some of the kurals are so general that they may be applicable to today's situation too.

A fort is that which cannot be captured,
which abounds in suitable provisions and affords
a position of easy defence to its inmates (745)*

A fort is that which has all
(needful) things and excellent heroes
that can help it against destruction (by foes) (746)*

Anyway the fact remains that the fort of Valluvar's conception belongs to the age when defence meant only defence against an army and no attack from air was contemplated. The descriptions naturally conform to the situation as it existed then. Today it has very little relevance; it is only a piece of historical information. The occurrence of such passages is to be expected and inevitable in a book that treats statecraft in detail. These will not detract from the value of the *Kural* in so far as it deals with the way of life or the Art of Living.

Valluvar does not enter into an enquiry into, or a debate on, what kind of Government is desirable. He does not go into considerations as Plato did of the problems of monarchy or democracy or dictatorship or oligarchy.

Valluvar lived at a time and in a society where monarchy prevailed. The kings and their descendants ruled the country. He does not go into the desirability or otherwise of monarchy, nor does he consider alternatives. Any inquiry into it is not in his scheme of things. Accepting the situation as it obtained, he speaks about the ruler, the minister or adviser, the components of the government, the tools, the competence and equipment expected of persons in various positions and responsibilities. What is important is the fact that many of the guidelines, counsel and caution that his work contains are quite relevant to those holding positions of comparable responsibilities today. What he has said of a king is valid for the one who is at the helm of affairs today. His norms for the minister are valid for one who is in a similar position.

Since Valluvar has spoken about kings, kingdoms and the components that go with monarchy, one should not conclude that he supports monarchy. He did not go into that issue, he did not raise any question and therefore we cannot look for any answer in this regard.

He speaks about fate, heaven, hell and the consequences of one's deeds following one in subsequent births. There are people who believe in them, there are others who do

not. The debate on this will continue almost endlessly; these problems will remain immortal. A final answer may never be found. Therefore nothing said in this regard may ever become obsolete or irrelevant to the age. What Valluvar has said is debatable. All will not accept it, nor will it be rejected by all. It will remain in the domain of constant enquiry and continuous debate.

The *Kural* as a treatise on the 'Art of Living' will be acceptable to people of all shades of views. It will be acceptable to a rationalist, a communist, and a capitalist. It will be acceptable even to a modern feminist, notwithstanding certain reservations that she might express. All of them may differ with Valluvar in certain details here and there; this we should expect and make allowances for. Perhaps the situation may not be different with regard to any work on the 'Art of Living' that one may write even today. Valluvar had said:

Whatever you may hear and from
whomsoever you may hear, you should
endeavour to see the truth in it (423)

This maxim of Valluvar is applicable to his *Kural* also. We can certainly use the touchstone that he has provided us. Everyone who examines his *Kural* for its validity in the contemporary world is only following the guidelines provided by him.

If we approach the *Kural* with objectivity and an open mind we will find that there are views here and there that are disputable. There are views that may be considered unacceptable. There is nothing to be wondered at about such a situation. We do not have any ancient work on the art of living that is valid today word for word. There is no such work of even recent origin. We must realise it and accept it.

The *Kural* does not have the advantage of being a religious scripture to command the unquestioning faith of certain followers. It is not the message of God or His

incarnation. It is not a piece of literature or epic dealing with love and heroism. It is a treatise on the 'Art of Living' born out of the culture of the Tamil society. It is the contribution of a genius that the Tamil country has produced. Valluvar has the background of civilisation and culture that he has inherited, the learning that he has acquired. He has examined all aspects of life; analysed it in its details and complexities; considered those that are fleeting and those that are enduring and endeavoured to extract the essence and presented it as a treatise on the art of living. The basis for its immortal and universal appeal is to be seen in its secular character, clarity of thought, depth of understanding, perception of the unshifting foundations of human life, penetrating insight into the essentials and his capacity to present them in an extremely generalised form avoiding carefully any particularisation.

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 civilisation 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. Tiruvalluvar, 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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A well known writer in Tamil, his literary contributions comprise mainly poems; he has also written articles and books on varied topics ranging from literary criticism to modernization of Tamil language. His poems under the pen-name *Kulothungan* have appeared in four volumes.

The University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka conferred a D.Litt. (*honoris causa*) on him. Prof. Swamy was conferred the national honour of *Padma Shri* by the President of India in 1992.

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