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Thirukkural as a Non-Sectarian Text: Rational Ethics and Human Formation

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Abstract

The Thirukkural is a unique work of Tamil intellectual history that comes to represent a non-sectarian ethical statement that crosses religious, caste, dynastic and regional lines. This study takes a look at the Thirukkural not only as a classic text of literature but also as a rational and universal text for ethical and social formation which can be applied to the contemporary public arena and to general moral and social formation. The paper examines the role of the Thirukkural as a universal code of ethics among the Tamil society, which has several religion-specific scriptures and a code of ethics. It also charts the historical institutionalization of Thiruvalluvar through the establishment of Thiruvalluvar Day and the Thiruvalluvar Year, as well as the preservation and worldwide translation of the work from the palm-leaf manuscript tradition to the print culture. The study also examines the systematic ethical framework of the Thirukkural, which is composed of a few sentences, but is rational, orderly and models human development through family, education, practical wisdom, ethical wealth, virtue and effort in a particular sequence. Finally, the paper suggests that some of the concepts of 20th century Dravidian ideology and current Tamil Nadu welfare administration such as education access, equality in society, nutrition and capability enhancement can be considered as re-interpretations of ethical ideals that can be traced to the Thirukkural. The study finds that the Thirukkural is still operating as the memory text of a culture and as a secular set of ethical guidelines for socially responsible living.

Keywords: Tamil Civilization, Scriptures, Philosophy, Architecture, Wisdom, Bible, Dravidian, Jainism.

Introduction

Language-based unity is one of the long-standing bases of the Tamils. Tamil identity has evolved over many centuries as a civilizational consciousness focused on the Tamil language, and not

on religion, caste or regional identity (Zvelebil, 1975; Blackburn, 2000). In this cultural context, there are sacred texts and devotional practices among the Tamil religious communities: Tamil Saivites - Tevaram and Tiruvasakam; Tamil Vaishnavites - Naalayira Divya Prabandham and Upanishadic tradition; Tamil Muslims - holy Quran; Tamil Christians - holy Bible. However, these texts are mostly related only to communities adhering to religious doctrines. Crossing such religiously based divisions, Tamil Nadu (Tamilakam) has a unique literary work; it has been widely accepted as a normative guide shared by all—this is the Thirukkural (Pope, 1886/1962). The Thirukkural is a unique piece of Tamil literature, as it does not function as a language of worship, theology or any specific religion. It instead proclaims a moral vision of virtue, social justice, education, family responsibilities and economic prudence, governance, and human dignity. Its teachings are not for any specific religion, but for all mankind. The purpose of this article is to investigate the historical, social, ethical and philosophical values of the Thirukkural in this vast historical and intellectual background and understand the evolution of this palm-leaf manuscript into the world-renowned literary composition. It focuses on the creation of Thiruvalluvar Year and Thiruvalluvar Day, while it also discusses the wide cultural acceptance of Thiruvalluvar in Tamil society. Moreover, this study introduces Tirukkural as a framework for rational analysis and global human values, education, that includes family life, practical wisdom, equality and ethical wealth. Lastly, the ethical attitude of Tirukkural is contrasted with the salient points of the Dravidian ideology to highlight the continued relevance of the text in today's social and political debates.

Religious Pluralism and Ethical Universality in the Thirukkural: The Institutionalization of Thiruvalluvar year and Thiruvalluvar Day

The scholars have attributed the period of Tirukkural (Thirukkural) from 1st century BCE to 5th century CE but this is being debated. The style of the language, the morals of the stories and the reference to early Tamil society suggests that this is a post-Sangam literary work of the Tamil tradition (Zvelebil, 1973). The close parallels of the Thirukkural in the concepts of non-violence, vegetarianism, asceticism, self-control and compassion for all living forms are evident in the Jain philosophy. Others, such as Kamil Zvelebil (1973) and Sundaram (1990), suggest that Jain thought may have had an impact on Thiruvalluvar; and at the same time, there is evidence of many links between Jainism, Buddhism and the indigenous Tamil religious-ethical traditions during the early historical period in the South of India. At the same time, the parallels in some aspects of Tirukkural and Buddhist ethical teachings are mentioned, with special focus on the concepts of leaving behind desires, being moral, compassion, and the impermanence of the world (Dundas, 2002).

But this is not a book that makes any explicit claims to any religion. Rather, it has a moral structure which is not religious, but universal, promoting a moral philosophy for all humankind. The Tirukkural has been accepted by the Jains, the Buddhists, the Christians, the Saivites, the Vaishnavas, the Muslims and the secular scholars due to this openness, which has helped it to withstand its highly esteemed position in the world as one of the important moral literary works. Additionally, many scholars draw parallels between the Tirukkural and the Bible's teachings in terms of moral lessons. There are similarities between the moral values of the Kurals and the Christian moral values in the Bible, as pointed out by G. U. Pope, the translator of the Tirukkural into English in 1886; especially, the strong emphasis on love, humility, forgiveness, charity and a righteous life (Pope, 1886). In addition, some of the principles of the Tirukkural are similar to those in the New Testament's Gospel of Matthew, as Deivanayagam (1980) has suggested. The following are sometimes listed as examples of these principles: responding to evil with good, showing compassion to fellow humans, awareness of truth, and disciplined self-control.

Most present-day scholars however do not restrict the Thirukkural to any particular religion but highlight its moralistic and universal character in view of the interrelationships of multiple philosophical and cultural streams that gave rise to the ancient Tamil society. The universalism of the Tirukkural was slowly beginning to take root in the Tamil communal life, not only in the context of literary appreciation, but also in the 20th century as Tiruvalluvar became a common cultural symbol.

The celebration of Thiruvalluvar Day started in 1935 at Pachaiyappa's College under the leadership of Maraimalai Adigal, V. Kalyanasundaranar, T. P. Meenakshisundaranar and other Tamil Scholars (Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission Thervupettagam 2024). This was done to establish a communal cultural literary festival which could bring Tamils together irrespective of caste, religion and sectarian differences (Drishti IAS, 2024). These literary commemorative events gradually evolved over time into cultural celebration with government support. A significant milestone in the institutional recognition of Thiruvalluvar was established under the leadership of M. Karunanidhi with the official observance of Thiruvalluvar Day. The Government of Tamil Nadu officially accepted the system of the calendar based on Thiruvalluvar in 1971 in Government Gazette and Thiruvalluvar Year (Thiruvalluvar Aandu) was adopted for administrative purpose from 1972 (Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission Thervupettagam 2024). According to this system, 31 years are added to the Gregorian calendar year; thus, 2026 CE corresponds to Thiruvalluvar Year 2057. The approach to this calculation has been developed with the intention of developing a Tamil Calendar unique to Tamil culture based on their literature. Currently, Thiruvalluvar Day is officially celebrated on the day following the Pongal festival in the Tamil month of Thai (typically 15–16 January) and is observed as a public holiday in Tamil Nadu (The Times of India, 2017). This official recognition has strengthened Thiruvalluvar's place in the civic, cultural, and literary consciousness of Tamil society, making the celebration an annual state-sponsored tradition. However, debate regarding Thiruvalluvar's historical birth date remains unresolved. While the state observes Thiruvalluvar Day in Thai, some Tamil scholars maintain that his birth anniversary falls in the Tamil month of Vaikasi (mid May– mid June) and commemorate it accordingly.

Thiruvalluvar Statue and Public Thirukkural Culture in Tamil Nadu

In Tamil Nadu, the enduring influence of the Thirukkural extends far beyond literary and educational spheres into public monuments, cultural institutions, and everyday civic life (Fig 1). One of the most prominent memorials dedicated to Thiruvalluvar is Valluvar Kottam in Chennai. Conceived by the Government of Tamil Nadu and inaugurated in 1976 during the tenure of Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, the monument was designed by the renowned architect and sculptor V. Ganapathi Sthapati. Modeled after the traditional Thiruvarur temple chariot (Ther), Valluvar Kottam is notable for having all 1,330 couplets of the Thirukkural engraved on granite panels, symbolizing the enduring legacy of Tamil literary and ethical thought.

In recent decades, the fame and influence of Thiruvalluvar among Tamils and the global Tamil diaspora have been further strengthened by the 133-foot Thiruvalluvar Statue at Kanyakumari. Standing majestically on a rocky islet at the confluence of the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and the Bay of Bengal, the monument has become a powerful symbol of Tamil cultural identity. The project was proposed by Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi in December 1975. Although Prime Minister Morarji Desai laid the foundation stone in 1979 in the presence of Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran, the project remained dormant for several years. It was revived in 1990 under the DMK government led by Karunanidhi, and the sculptural work was carried out under the direction of V. Ganapathi Sthapati. The monument was subsequently completed and officially inaugurated on 1 January 2000 (Hardgrave, 2003; Government of Tamil Nadu, 2000). The M. K. Stalin inaugurated the first over-the-sea glass bridge connecting the Thiruvalluvar Statue

and the Vivekananda Rock Memorial, further enhancing Kanyakumari's cultural tourism appeal. Selected Thirukkural couplets are widely displayed in TNSTC buses, promoting ethical values, civic responsibility, and moral awareness among passengers. Through these public initiatives, Tamil Nadu has successfully institutionalized the teachings of the Thirukkural and ensured their continued relevance in contemporary society.



Figure 1 (a) Valluvar Kottam Cultural Landmark, Chennai (b) Thiruvalluvar Statue, Kanyakumari (c) Thiruvalluvar Day Celebration (d) Over-the-Sea Glass Bridge Linking the Thiruvalluvar Statue and Vivekananda Rock Memorial and (e) Thirukkural Couplets Displayed in TNSTC Buses

Thirukkural from Palm-Leaf Manuscript to Printed Global Text

The Thirukkural is one of the foremost works of classical Tamil literature that has survived through centuries of transmission on palm-leaf manuscripts, alongside many texts from the Early Historic Tamil period (traditionally associated with the Sangam era) and the post-Sangam period (ca. 300–600 CE). Recent excavations at Keeladi, with radiocarbon dates extending to approximately 580 BCE, provide archaeological evidence for an earlier Early Historic Tamil civilization than previously recognized, leading many scholars to prefer the term Early Historic Tamil period over Sangam Age in archaeological contexts. Despite the loss of numerous ancient Tamil works due to the fragile nature of palm-leaf manuscripts and interruptions in manuscript transmission, the Thirukkural was preserved through continuous copying. According to the writings of Pandithar Ayothidasar, his grandfather Kandappan helped preserve Thirukkural manuscripts and facilitated their transmission to Francis Whyte Ellis with the support of George Harrington, contributing to the text's transition into print. The first printed edition, published in 1812 (Blackburn, 2000), marked a turning point in its dissemination. The Thirukkural subsequently gained worldwide recognition through translations, beginning with Constanzo Giuseppe Beschi's partial Latin translation (ca. 1730) and culminating in G. U. Pope's influential complete English translation (1886). Today, the Thirukkural has been translated into more than 60 languages. In 2024, P. Sahaya Darcus published a Korean translation, further extending its reach within East Asian academic and cultural

communities. These sustained efforts in preservation, printing, and translation have ensured the enduring global legacy of the Thirukkural.

Modern Perspective of Thirukkural, a Rational and Scientific Text for Human Formation

An outstanding aspect of the Thirukkural is its well organised moral system. It consists of 1330 couplets, which are divided into 133 chapters, and the chapters are grouped in three main parts: virtue (Aram), wealth (Porul), and love (Inbam). This is not a random series of morals or statements, but a well-designed sequence from the level of individual morals to social order to emotional satisfaction (Blackburn, 2000). Likewise, its usefulness is also crucial. Explanations provided in different religious systems are included in this book, but the principles outlined here are foremost in terms of human behavior, social relation, and practical effects rather than in terms of sectarian teachings or ritual obligations. The relationship between behaviour and what happens as a consequence of it is continuously emphasised throughout the book by Thiruvalluvar. He demonstrates how honesty, self-control, wisdom and patience are the factors of stability and growth, whilst greed, anger, lies and immorality are the factors of decline and suffering (Zvelebil, 1975).

Textual Uniqueness and Deliberate Universality in the Thirukkural

The Thirukkural has numerous distinctive intrinsic literary characteristics in addition to its historical dissemination and moral lessons. These contribute to its standing as a timeless, global, and predominantly secular civic book. These characteristics show a purposeful compositional approach meant to lessen divisions based on caste, politics, and religion rather than being merely literary oddities. One of the most remarkable features of the Thirukkural is that, although Thiruvalluvar is traditionally associated with Tamil Nadu, the word “Tamil” does not appear anywhere in the text. Unlike many literary traditions where language serves as a marker of collective identity, Thiruvalluvar avoids referring to his language or region. This deliberate omission prevents the work from being confined to a particular cultural context and enables it to function as a universal ethical text whose teachings are applicable to all people, regardless of linguistic or social background. Similarly, the Thirukkural contains almost no references to specific dynasties, rulers, or political geography. Unlike Sangam literature, which frequently celebrates the Chera, Chola, and Pandya kings, Thiruvalluvar avoids linking his teachings to any particular monarch or political system. This absence of dynastic and historical references enhances the text’s universality, allowing its ethical principles to transcend political boundaries and historical contexts. As a result, the Thirukkural remains relevant across diverse societies and periods.

Traditional interpretations of the Thirukkural have long emphasized its remarkable literary structure. The opening couplet begins with the letter “அ” (A) in the phrase “அகர முதல் எழுத்தெல்லாம்” (Agara Mudhala Ezhuththellaam), while the final couplet (Kural 1330) concludes with the consonant letter “ன்” (n) in the phrase “ஊடுதல் காமத்திற்கு இன்பம்: அதற்கின்பம் கூடி முயங்கப் பெறின்” (Oodal Kaamaththirku Inbam; Atharkinbam Koodi Muyangap Perin). Tamil scholars have often interpreted this arrangement symbolically as representing a journey from the beginning of language to the fulfillment of human experience. Its universality is further strengthened by its non-sectarian philosophical orientation. Although the Thirukkural acknowledges a divine principle, it does not explicitly identify that principle with any particular deity, religion, or theological tradition. The text makes no direct reference to Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma, Buddha, Mahavira, Christ, or any specific religious identity. This deliberate inclusiveness has enabled readers from diverse traditions—including Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Jainism, Buddhism, rationalism, and secular humanism—to interpret the work within their own intellectual frameworks while

accepting its ethical teachings as universally relevant (Zvelebil, 1973; Cutler, 1992; Blackburn, 2000). Another notable feature of the Thirukkural is its remarkable conciseness and restraint in the use of imagery. Whereas Sangam poems often contain elaborate landscape descriptions (Kurinji, Mullai, Marutham, Neithal, and Paalai) and extensive natural symbolism, the Thirukkural employs imagery sparingly and purposefully. Flowers such as Anicham and Kuvalai, and plants such as the palm and bamboo, are used primarily for ethical, emotional, or illustrative comparisons rather than decorative embellishment (Zvelebil, 1973; Hart, 1975). The text is also distinguished by its highly structured composition. It consists of 1,330 couplets, each composed of two lines written in a seven-metrical-unit form. Numerical references such as “1,” “2,” and “7” appear in various contexts, while Tamil literary scholars have long noted the apparent absence of the number “9,” although no definitive historical explanation has been established for this observation (Zvelebil, 1973).

The Thirukkural establishes an all-encompassing philosophy that covers ethics, governance, economics, family life, emotional ties, and personal conduct within this condensed framework. Its conciseness makes it easier to remember and pass on to future generations. Thiruvalluvar’s purposeful self-effacement is equally important. He focuses attention on the moral precepts expressed in the text rather than giving explicit details about his ancestry, birthplace, patronage, caste, or exact religious membership. Therefore, the Thirukkural’s authority is based on the persuasiveness of its moral reasoning rather than political power, supernatural revelation, or the identity of its author. When combined, these textual elements show that the Thirukkural’s timeless appeal stems from both its literary style and its moral lessons. The work remains intellectually open, philosophically inclusive, and accessible across cultural, religious, and historical boundaries by eschewing linguistic nationalism, dynastic glorification, sectarian divisions, and excessive historical specificity while upholding remarkable brevity and stylistic restraint.

Thirukkural on Family Relationship: The Formation of Emotional and Social Identity

Emotional and social identity formation in the context of family relationship as outlined in Thirukkural. It is impossible not to notice this ancient literature when looking at the way Thiruvalluvar builds each of the stages of human life in a sequence. Of these family is on the base. For Thiruvalluvar, the family is not just a biological, economical, or social entity, but the very first school in which affection, responsibility, restraint and social consciousness are nurtured. Society’s moral stability starts with the moral stability of the family as it is here that the person first learns to harmonise love and duty, personal inclinations and social obligations (Thiruvalluvar, trans. Pope, 1886/1962). The loving relationship between Thiruvalluvar and his wife comes across more vividly in the sections explaining this relationship. Here in the world of pleasure, he speaks of the ‘Ūḍuthal’ or ‘difference of mind’, a mild altercation that takes place between lovers or spouses: “Ūḍuthal kāmalthiruk inbam; atharkkinbam kūḍi muyangap perin” (Kural 1330). The couplet states that a the charm of love is the lovers quarrel; greater delight is the loving reunion. Mature relationships are not without conflict, but they are able to transact conflict and create new intimacy. This is also evident in his depiction of the relationship between parent and child: “Amiḷṭinūm ārra iṇitētam makkaḷ ciṟukai aḷāviya kūḷ” – (Kural 64). Here, food touched and served by the tiny hands of one’s children is sweeter to parents than even nectar. This is a joyful understanding of the family which is continued in another well-known Kural: “Kuzhal inidhu yāzh inidhu enbatham makkaḷ mazhalai chol kēḷādhavar” (Kural 66). It is in Thiruvalluvar’s imagination that the child’s babbling, the flute and the music of the yāz is sweeter/pleasant because the home is a place of gentleness, a mind-set of listening, patience and support. In this way, the family becomes the first emotional educational field that sets the emotional stability of the human being, the basis for the following phases of human life.

Education and Success: The Formation of Intellectual Identity

Thiruvalluvar then identifies education itself as the next stage of human development, after the significance of family relationship. Education fosters intellectual clarity, ability to make decisions and social progress, whilst the family develops an emotional base. Learning is not simply literacy or technical skills, but is seen as the development of knowledge that leads to a change from personal to public social relevance (Zvelebil, 1975). This concept has been very clearly captured in Kural 400: “Kēdil vizhucchelvam kalvi; oruvarkku māḍalla mattraḥ yavaḥ”. That is, amongst all the types of wealth that can be achieved, education is the best; it is the one wealth that remains with a person. In this place, education is considered to be an immortal treasure. It cannot be taken, it can’t be lost and it doesn’t expire. The only real basis of human progress is then education and not inheritance.

The social transformative power of this philosophy becomes even more evident in Kural 409 which reads: Merpirandhaa Raayinum Kallaadhaar; Keezhppirandhum Katraar Anaiththilar Paatu, or that ‘birth with learning is equal, education elevates even those who are born lower in the inherited social hierarchy. Thus, the Thirukkural promotes a merit-based ideology, where cultivated knowledge serves as the foundation for human value, instead of blood. (Raj Gautaman, 2011). This focus on transformation through learning means that there is an extremely high level of parental responsibility for education. Kural 67, “Thandhai magarkkārum nandri avaiyaththu mundhi iruppach cheyal”, is a statement that implies parental duty is not to just give the children food, but to educate them with their intellects to enable them to play a positive role in public affairs.

Thiruvalluvar is also clear that learning is not complete without bringing about good behavior in the social sphere. Kural 140 – “Ulagaththōdu otta ozhugal palakatrum kallār arivilā dhār” – is one of those kurrals which emphasizes that knowledge that does not blend in with the society is incomplete. Adaptability, humility and relational intelligence, therefore, are the characteristics that the true education must foster. This is reiterated in Kural 482: “Paruvaththōdu otta ozhugal thiruvinaith thīrāmai ārkum kayirū” – here emphasis is laid on acting in an appropriate manner at the proper time, on learning and social sensitivity and moral awareness. Then naturally Thiruvalluvar turns his gaze to judgement and decision making, from education. Success happens when you make choices that you reflect on, you have the timing right, and you have foresight (Blackburn, 2000). This is noted in Kural 631: ““Karuvium Kaalamum Seykaiyum Seyyum; Aruvinaiyum Maantadhu Amaichchu” - which highlights: Careful use of resources, timing, actions, nature of the task, and consequences. Constantly working without examining the effort will be impulsive, and after doing the examination, any action that is worked on will be strategic and successful. “Nandri Marappadhu Nandrandru Nandralladhu; Andre Marappadhu Nandru” - for children, this couplet (Kural 108) teaches gratitude as a fundamental virtue and emphasizes the importance of remembering and appreciating the good deeds and kindness shown by others. In this manner, Thiruvalluvar has revolutionized education for an ongoing process. It develops from acquiring knowledge, to disciplined conduct, and ultimately culminates in disciplined judgment. Thus, learning comes to full fruition in practical wisdom.

Accumulation of Wealth

Thiruvalluvar addresses the ethical aspect of riches after education has fostered intelligence and practical wisdom has produced competence. Material success is seen as an essential basis for security, dignity, and societal stability rather than as avarice or luxury (Zvelebil, 1975). According to Kural 759, “Seyga porulai serunar serukkarukkum eḡgadhanīn kūriyadhu il,” properly obtained wealth serves as a social resource that is more potent than physical force, offering strength and protection. This legitimacy is contingent, though. Only when prosperity is based on moral behavior does it take on significance. Kural 112, “Seppam udaiyavan ākkam sidhaivinri echchatthirukku

ēmāppu udaiththu,” highlights that wealth derived from honesty is steady and long-lasting, providing security for both the individual and future generations. According to this theory, moral responsibility and economic advancement are inextricably linked, making wealth an essential component of moral and balanced living rather than just a material accomplishment.

Virtue and Effort

The combination of virtue and persistent effort is the last sustaining force in this human process. Wealth may offer stability, wisdom may foster competence, and education may foster knowledge, but these achievements remain unfulfilled in the absence of internal moral discipline. The core of all success, according to Thiruvalluvar, is mental purity: “Manaththukkaṇ mācilaṇ āthal anaiththaraṇ āgula nīra pīra” (Kural 34). Since all external righteousness stems from inner clarity, freedom from interior impurity is given as the cornerstone of virtue. Persistent effort is accorded equal weight with this ethical inwardness. Thiruvalluvar states in Kural 619, “Deivaththāṇ āgādhēninum muyarchi then meyvaruththak kūli tharum,” that persistent and self-driven labor, rather than fate or passive reliance on destiny, determines human advancement. Therefore, success is not determined by luck but rather by persistent work. His vision of capable government, “Iyattralum īṭṭalum kāththalum kāththa vaguththalum valladhu arasu,” is the pinnacle of this logical faith in human agency (Kural 385). According to Thiruvalluvar, a good ruler—whether as a king, prime minister, or chief minister—should be someone who has the ability to generate wealth through righteous means, protect it through wise governance, and share it intelligently for the welfare, prosperity, and benefit of the people. According to this final structure, wealth guarantees social usefulness, effort gives ongoing momentum, and virtue provides moral guidance. When taken as a whole, they provide a comprehensive picture of human growth that combines practical action with moral clarity to create a well-rounded and productive human life.

Thirukkural and Equality

The Thirukkural says that man’s worth is seen in his conduct and character rather than in his rank or origin. Kural 972: Pirappokkum ella uyirkkum..... clearly asserts that all are born equal. The moral code, justice, the ability to be humble and to be compassionate are the true criteria of human greatness, which the Thirukkural endlessly declares, rather than the traditional Varna system, in which social positions were often assigned by birth; for example, Brahmins are priests and the Shudras are groups of labourers. Academics have found that Thiruvalluvar has replaced moral and intellectual traits with birth-based ones as the basis of human value (Zvelebil, 1973; Raj Gautaman, 2011). According to many scholars, the book is an ethical code which is open to all and based in merit, as virtue, learning, and disciplined behaviour are always preferred to one’s social birth (Cutler, 1992). Tamil social reform groups later discovered an ethical terminology in the Thirukkural to attack the caste system and advocate social equality because it assigns people value according to their actions and deeds, not birth (George, 2025).

Thirukkural and Dravidian Ideology: An Analytical Comparison

The Dravidian movement of the 20th century could be taken as a modern-day social-political evolution of ethical concerns that existed in the Thirukkural. Despite its political expression in the ideas of E. V. Ramasamy (Periyar), C. N. Annadurai, and M. Karunanidhi, its core principles of social equality, labour dignity, educational progress, anti-casteism, rational ethics and welfare-based governance represent the humanistic moral philosophy of Thiruvalluvar (Valluvar, trans). Rajaram (2009) and Pope (1886). Thirukkural, though not a political manifesto, helped create an indigenous ethical vocabulary which enabled Dravidian social thinking to be articulated later in

terms of social responsibility rather than inherited privilege, knowledge instead of birth, and effort instead of fatalism (Hardgrave, 1965; Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998).

Morality, Learning, Justice and Compassion are true measures of human worth, as opposed to the inherited hierarchy related to the traditional varna system, which is always withered (Thirukkural is continually asserting this). Later anti-caste and Dravidian intellectuals were able to reframe the text as a basis for social equality because of this ethical perspective. The ethical framework of the Thirukkural was employed by anti-caste (Dalit) and Dravidian intellectuals to critique caste hierarchy and hereditary privilege. Reformers such as Iyothee Thass drew upon its ethical ideals to promote rationalism, equality, and social emancipation (Varusakkani, 2023; Arni, 2024). The modern Dravidianism is better seen as a political reconstruction of its moral principles than its disjunction from Tamil culture.

This continuity is most clearly illustrated in the administrative history of Tamil Nadu, where the process of gradual transformation of engineering ideas into engineering policy measures can be thoroughly traced out. Prior to the firm establishment of the Dravidian party's rule, K. Kamaraj paved the way for the democratization of education by expanding school education in rural areas, free education and strengthening the midday meal scheme to diminish unequal access to education (Arooran, 1980; Pandian, 2007). The reforms reflected the Kural's saying that education is the greatest and indestructible wealth: "Ketil Vizhuchchelvam Kalvi Yoruvaru Maatalla Matrai Yavai" (Kural 400). It was greatly extended during the leadership of M. G. Ramachandran, when the Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme was introduced in 1982, which combined education and nutrition and enhanced enrolment and retention by disadvantaged children. This effort was in line with the ideal of governance of the Thirukkural as "Iyatralum Eettalum Kaaththalam Kaaththa Vakuththalam Valla Tharasu" (Kural 385), "Urupasiyum Ovaap Piniyum Serupakaiyum Seraa Thiyalvadhu Naatu" (Kural 734), that material support is a structural requirement for human development, rather than charity.

It was during J. Jayalalithaa's tenure (1987–2014) that the concept of dignity protection as a part of governance was reinforced among the vulnerable groups and the government stepped up its efforts to deliver welfare through public distribution systems and social support measures.

This is the path that this journey has been continuing since 2021 -2026 under the leadership of M.K.Stalin, this path is referred to as the 'Dravidian Model'. This strategy not only focuses on economic development but also on education, welfare, access to nutrition, and enhancing the capacity of people (Jeyaranjan, 2023). Government initiatives like the Kalaigarn Women's Rights Scheme, the Chief Minister's Breakfast Program, expanded health security schemes, and the Naan Mudhalvan program show Tamil Nadu's broad commitment to social welfare, education, and human resource development. Specifically, the Naan Mudhalvan SCOUT scheme takes this further by giving students international research experience and global opportunities. This approach aligns with the teaching of the Thirukkural, "Paruvaththotu Otta Ozhukal Thiruvinaith Theeraamai Aarkkung Kayiru" (Kural 482). Keeping your knowledge up to date with modern science and technology is essential for safeguarding your wealth and achieving sustained success. In all of these governments an ethical trajectory appears – from Kamaraj's support of education, to MGR's health and nutrition inclusion, to Jayalalithaa's welfare consolidation and Stalin's capability driven government. Political issues aside, the policy agenda of Tamil Nadu continues to demonstrate a shared sense of priorities and underlying principles: education, dignity, social protection and equitable development. These principles cannot be imported from elsewhere but are in tune with the secular moral structure of the Thirukkural. In this context, Dravidian governance is a dynamic form of modern administration in the spirit of Thiruvalluvar's ethical vision of humans. A summary comparative study between Thirukkural ethics and modern Dravidian social thought can be done as below Table 1.

Table 1 Thirukkural Principle and Dravidian Ideological Expression

Concept	Thirukkural Principle	Modern Dravidian Ideological Expression
Social Equality	“Pirappokkum ellā uyirkkum; sirappovvā seythozhil vērrumai yān” –(Kural 972). Birth is common to all beings; distinction arises only from differing deeds.	Anti-caste politics, communal reservation, self-respect movement, abolition of hereditary social superiority
Education as Social Mobility	“Kēdil vizhucchelvam kalvi; oruvarkku mādalla mattraī yavai” –(Kural 400). Education is the imperishable wealth; all other riches are secondary.	Free education, noon meal expansion, scholarship schemes, laptop schemes, state educational democratization
Merit above Birth	“Mērpīrandhār āyinum kallādhār; kēzhpīrandhum katrār anaiththilar pādu” –(Kural 409). The high-born without learning are low; the low-born with learning stand above all.	Critique of Brahminical hierarchy, merit through learning, and social uplift through public education (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998; Omvedt, 1994)
Women’s Dignity and Household Agency	“Pennin perundhakka yāvula karpennum thinmai undāgap perin” – (Kural 54). Womanly dignity and moral firmness sustain domestic virtue.	Women’s education, inheritance rights, widow welfare, marriage assistance, political representation
Just Governance	“Muraisēidhu kāppārrum mannavan makkatku iraiyenRu vaikkappadum” – (Kural 388). The ruler who protects with justice is revered by the people.	Welfare state model, subsidized food, public healthcare, transparent governance, social justice administration
Labour and Productive Economy	“Uzhuvār ulagaththārkkū āni; athārrāthu ezhuvār ai ellām poruththu.” – (Kural 1032). Farmers are the linchpin of the world, sustaining all others.	Dignity of labour, agrarian schemes, worker-centered welfare, rural development
Rational Effort over Fatalism	“Deivaththān āgādhēninum muyarchi than meyvaruththak kūli tharum” –(Kural 619). Even if fate fails, effort yields reward.	Rationalism, self-respect, anti-superstition, human agency, progress through action

It is interesting to note that the social equality, education democratization, women’s dignity, welfare governance, economy based on labour and rational human effort are some of the fundamental concerns of the Dravidian movement that can be seen well in the secular ethical architecture of the Thirukkural. This means that Thiruvalluvar’s humanistic values had pre-existing ideas that were politically repackaged as part of contemporary Dravidian ideology, not created afresh.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the enduring significance of the Thirukkural lies not merely in its antiquity or literary excellence, but in its remarkable continuity of socio-cultural relevance and normative applicability. Free from sectarian doctrines, hereditary privileges, and narrow political affiliations, the text has long served as a universal ethical guide reflecting the civic values and cultural consciousness of Tamil society. Its careful preservation, its being translated to different parts of the world and its popular institutionalisation through public events like Thiruvalluvar Day and Thiruvalluvar Year, only serves to further render it as a traditional literary text and not just that. The main strength of the Thirukkural is, however, its intrinsic scientific design. Thiruvalluvar did not make any abstract moral pronouncements; instead, he offers a holistic approach to developing a full human person. This process starts with emotional development in the family, then it moves to

education and cognitive decision making skills in developing wealth under the moral standard and finally it reaches to virtue, effort and responsible social leadership. In a continuous evolution this book has a logical and analytical atmosphere; in the same time it seems to be very contemporary even today. Therefore, the Thirukkural remains to be a symbol of Tamil civilization and it is still a secular philosophy of disciplined human life.

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