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THE PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF KURAL WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO AHIMSA IN “A LETTER TO A HINDU” OF LEO TOLSTOY

Sukanya. J. K, Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, University College, Thiruvananthapuram

Dr. Ambili. S, Assistant Professor Department of Philosophy, University College, Thiruvananthapuram

Abstract

This paper is a discussion about the letter written by Leo-Tolstoy to Mahatma Gandhi, which is known as ‘a Letter to a Hindu’. In his letter to Gandhi Tolstoy introduces Gandhi the Great Tamil literary work Thirukkural, Which was written by Thiruvalluvar. In his letter Tolstoy took many verses from Thirukkural to explain the significance of the concept of non-violence which can be used as a weapon against violence by British empire. The paper focuses on the influence of Thirukkural on Tolstoy and Gandhi in promoting non violence. The principle of love and non-violence are the central concern of Thirukkural and which was again central to the social and political teaching of Gandhi and who was aware of the view that nonviolent protest, strikes, and other forms of peaceful resistance were the only alternative to violent revolution and these ideas ultimately proved to be successful in 1947 in the culmination of the Indian Independence Movement. The Letter by Tolstoy to Gandhi introduced him to the Ancient Tamil literature, Thirukkural, which Tolstoy referred to as the Hindu Kural. In this letter he quoted some Kurals based on non-violence. This paper highlights the socio political relevance of these Kurals to the modern world.

Introduction

There was a time not long ago when any incident of violence was treated as a matter of great concern. But violence has become so pervasive in the world today that most of such incidents occurring on a daily basis attract scarce attention. When something gruesome or shocking happens there is often debate about how to check violence. However, it has become a way with the world to treat evil with more evil. Using force to set a wrong right or to discipline a wrong doer has been adopted as a norm by humans at all levels of society. The whole issue of arms proliferation is based on the premise of promoting violence as a power and justifying use of weapons as a necessity to maintain peace, law and order. Is violence justified for a good cause? This is a critical question today and most people would react to it by pointing to terrorism, crime, the need for defense of vulnerable sections of society and so on. But history is witness to the fact that violence begets more violence. We can subjugate an enemy by use of force but can we subjugate hatred, resentment, mistrust and wickedness through force? The antidote for violence is to promote a culture of ahimsa – nonviolence. Ahimsa is considered the highest duty in Hinduism, Jainism and many other religious traditions and it also contained in ancient Tamil literature Thirukkural. In ancient India, people practically lived by the principle of non-violence is supreme conduct.

Philosophical significance of Thirukkural

Thirukkural – the brilliant Tamil literary work can be called the treasure house of worldly knowledge. It goes beyond any religion or creed. This great work is the creation of Thiruvalluvar who was a Tamil poet and philosopher. Through his work he analyzed the intricacies of human nature with pragmatic insights. Thiruvalluvar’s masterpiece is almost 2000 years old. Thirukkural is a moral treatise divided into three sections: aram (righteousness), porul (wealth), and inbam (enjoyment). These titles have an ideological component that suggests that in order to enjoy life, one must use moral methods to get wealth, and that this path to enlightenment is the only one that will bring about prosperity. The Sanskrit traditions of dharma, artha, kama, and moksha are comparable to this viewpoint. All the Kurals (verses) have only 7 words and thus all the 1330 Kurals fit within 133 chapters. Thirukkural has been translated in as many as 35 global languages, including 27 foreign languages such as English, French, and German etc.



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The philosophy of Thiruvalluvar is that of the common man, so he developed his ideals in such a way that man ought to live as a true human being and cherish all the human values, promote earthly virtues, establish social harmony, engage in domestic life, follow political ideologies, develop mutual assistance, adhere to the life of renunciation, enjoy all kinds of pleasures, and reflect deeply on a few metaphysical issues.

Thiruvalluvar espouses the virtues of God in the first chapter known as "the Praise of God," which is a prayer. He calls God the Supreme Being, the Ancient Lord, the God of Perfect Intelligence, the God of Flowers, the God who has transcended likes and dislikes, 'Iraivan', the guardian of the cosmos, the Lord without equal, the personification of righteousness, the Lord endowed with Eight characteristics, the Great Controller of Living Things.

In order to explain to people the link between God, people, and the world, the author never refers to the Lord by name. If he had spoken the name of God, people would have assumed that Tiruvalluvar's moral philosophy was founded on the teachings of the specific religion whose God's name had been mentioned. Tiruvalluvar had outlined the necessity of monotheistic divinity because he sought to create a society in which members of all religious groups may live in peace and harmony. The couplets contain a few religious terms, and researchers who have taken these expressions into account argue that they unmistakably refer to their God, Tiruvalluvar creatures, their religious cult, and his moral philosophy. The universalistic view of Thiruvalluvar's moral ideals would be a misnomer if he is restricted to a certain religion.

Thiruvalluvar purposefully avoided writing about emancipation or moksa. He may have believed that life on this world must be lived fully and honestly before thinking about life after death. The observers argue that moksa cannot be adequately described because it pertains to a delightful state of experience. As a result, there are no verified experiences of the condition of liberation, but there are a lot of speculative accounts that may be found in the revelations of the mystic saints. Tiruvalluvar may have believed that everyone who practices virtue in their personal, social, political, and moral realms will undoubtedly find immense satisfaction in all facets of their lives, *veed peru*. It is important to consider how Tiruvalluvar's description of *kama* or *inbam* (pleasure) in the third part contributes to the ever growing delight. Physical pleasure and mental contentment are available on the earthly level, but on the spiritual plane—which is mystic in origin and essence—the ecstasy must be experienced rather than comprehended. Hence, Thiruvalluvar encourages everyone to focus on life on earth rather than fantasizing about a life in paradise.

The world is referred to by terms like "ulaku," "vaiyam," etc., by the author in a number of places. Every couplet reflects his love for humanity and his fascination with the idea of our fellow human beings living as true humans free from social prejudice, linguistic fanaticism, racial inequalities, political unrest, religious fundamentalism, moral disturbances, mental imbalances, regional differences, national prejudices, economic upheaval, geographical divisions, etc. Almost every facet of human existence is thoroughly explored by him. He says repeatedly that man shouldn't live via his senses since that is nothing more than living like a raging beast. He anticipates that man will apply his sixth sense, or intellect, to resolve all of life's problems and lead a spiritual life that will offer peace and comfort to all of life's troubles.

The term "porul" means "wealth" in its literal sense. Yet it also suggests what life is all about. According to Tiruvalluvar, people must coexist quietly and cordially with one another. Education, which is the manifestation of perfection already present in mankind, is the most important condition for carrying out this ideal. Everyone should absorb the material thoroughly and selectively, but eventually, his behavior should be commensurate with what he has learned. Knowledge will flow from a man in proportion to his learning, just as water would emerge from a sand well in proportion to the depth to which it is excavated. According to Tiruvalluvar, ignorance is a sin and comes from illiteracy. Those who are knowledgeable about well-known works are surrounded by other men, just as animals are surrounded by humans. Tiruvalluvar places a strong emphasis on listening as a way to learn and gain information. His view is that the principal wealth is that which can be heard by the ear; it is the wealth of wealth.



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The final chapter of this monumental book focuses only on domestic life, especially the inner element known as conjugal love. He splits this section into two parts, the first of which discusses pre-marital love and the second of which discusses married life. This indicates that the ancient Tamils established grammar for both interior and outward aspects of human existence.

Today, when we imbibe West in all manners, we forget that our own literary classics have enormously rich material. It's pitiable fact that we can't draw relevance from them and relate them to needs and problems of the present. It seems Mahatma Gandhi learnt the concept of non-violence from a letter written to him by famous Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy who quoted couplets on non-violence from German translation of Thirukkural. The Father of the Nation had said that he came to know about Thirukkural first from Tolstoy

Leo Tolstoy's 'A Letter to a Hindu'

Both Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi had a great impact on the intellectual history of the twentieth century through their ideas of nonviolence. Though it seems that the concept of non-violence contained in the Leo-Tolstoy "A Letter to a Hindu: The Subjection of India- Its cause and cure" with special reference to Thirukkural. In this letter by Leo-Tolstoy mentioned that the non-violent way of India's Independence from British colonial rule.

"A Letter to a Hindu" was a letter written by Leo Tolstoy to Tarak Nath Das on 14 December 1908. The letter was written in response to two letters sent by Das, seeking support from the famous Russian author and thinker for India's independence from British colonial rule. The letter was published in the Indian Newspaper 'Free Hindustan'. The letter caused the young Mohandas Gandhi to write to the world-famous Tolstoy to ask for advice and for permission to reprint the letter in Gandhi's own South African Newspaper, Indian Opinion, in 1909. In "A Letter to A Hindu", Tolstoy argued that only through the principle of love could the Indian people free themselves from colonial British rule. Nonviolent protest, strikes, and other forms of peaceful resistance were the only alternative to violent revolution. These ideas ultimately proved to be successful in 1947 in the culmination of the Indian Independence Movement. (Wikipedia)

Leo Tolstoy in his letter mentioned some Kurals about non-violence. He called Thirukkural as the Hindu Kural. These Kurals are :-

"The aim of the sinless One consists in acting without causing sorrow to others, although he could attain to great power by ignoring their feelings." (Tolstoy. *A Letter to a Hindu*, Kural 312)

"The aim of the sinless One lies in not doing evil unto those who have done evil unto him." (Kural 316)

"If a man causes suffering even to those who hate him without any reason, he will ultimately have grief not to be overcome." (Kural 313)

"The punishment of evil doers consists in making them feel ashamed of themselves by doing them a great kindness." (Kural 314)

"Of what use is superior knowledge in the one, if he does not endeavor to relieve his neighbor's want as much as his own?" (Kural 318)

"If, in the morning, a man wishes to do evil unto another, in the evening the evil will return to him." (Kural 319)

Now we understand these Kurals are clearly mentioning the concept of non-violence. So Thirukkural may have had a big influence on how India got her freedom from British. That way Gandhi calls Tolstoy "a great teacher whom I have



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long looked upon as one of my guides”. (L.N.Tolstoy, *A Letter to Hindhu: The Subjection of India- Its cause and Cure with an introduction* by M.K. Gandhi, 1909)

Concept of Ahimsa in Thirukkural

The concept of Ahimsa or ‘Inna Seiyamai’ comes under in ‘aram’ or righteousness. It contains in chapter 32 in Thirukkural. Thiruvalluvar beautifully described how to practice non-violence and what is the real meaning of it. Totally 10 kurals give information about non-violence.

“SIRAPPEENUM SELVAM PERINUM PIRARKKUINNA

SEYYAAMAI MAASARRAAR KOL”. (311)

In the first kural numbered 311 simply says that wise people with good sense avoid doing things that harm to another people, if they get any precious wealth which is benefit to them. The main principles of wise people who don’t commit any kind of crimes such as lust, anger, infatuation etc.

“KARUTTHU INNAA SEYTHAV VAKKANNUM MARUTTHINNA

SEYYAAMAI MAASARRAAR KOL” (312)

This kural gives a great message to us; wise people don’t injure anyone else again, even if they hurt them in retaliation for whatever we did to them. The opinion is that elders do not care about the harms done by the ignorant.

“SEYYAAMAL SERRAAPKKUM INNAATHA SEYDAPIN

UYAA VIZHAMAN THARUM” (313)

Kural 313 says that even though they have never hurt anybody before, wise man never aims to do so, and even if someone is deliberately furious with them, they won’t consider hurting them again. “Through a ball on the well; it will come back to you with the same speed. But harm a good man who has no evil in his heart; you get back the same harm thousand fold increased.” (Narayanalakshmi 131)

“INNAASEYTHAARAI ORUTTHAL AVARNAANA

NAANAYANCHEYTHU VIDAL” (314)

Kural 314 emphasis that, if a person does evil to another person then that victim want to punish him. It is preferable to perform a good deed or a virtuous act that makes him feel guilty and ashamed as punishment.

“ARIVINAAN AAGUVATHUNDO PIRITHIN NOY

THANNOYPOL PORRAAKKADAI” (315)

This Kural says that, anybody who acquires knowledge forfeits its advantages if they do not consider the pain of others to be their own. The benefit of knowledge is to gain humanity. Knowledge will not benefit society if there is no humanity. “Becoming a man of renunciation does not mean that you are above all the common lost and have to act with a superiority feeling. You might be a scholar and might have mastered all the scriptures; but if you cannot think of all the beings in the world as Self and love them; if you cannot understand the pains that others undergo and help them, then you are an idiot of the worst kind,. Your learning has not borne fruit at all!” (131)



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“INNAA ENATTHAAN UNARNTHAVAI THUNAAMAI
VENDUM PIRANKAN SEYAL” (316)

The kural 316 gives a great message that is one should never intentionally inflict misery for another person if it miserable to oneself. So, avoid taking any behaviors that are thought to result in misery.

“ENAITTHAANUM ENJAANRUM YAARKKUM MANATTHAANAAM
MAANAASEYYAAMAI THALAI” (317)

Kural 317 says that the main virtue is to think with the mind and not to do harm to any kind of people or to the little ones at any time. One should not think or do evil to others.

“THANNUYIRKKU INNAAMAI THAANARIVAAN ENKOLO
MANNUYIRKKU INNAA SEYAL” (318)

This kural emphasis that, what atrocities were inflicted on him by others, the idea is that one who realizes this should not think of doing atrocities to others.

“PIRARKINNAA MURPAGAL SEYYIN THAMAKKU INNAA
PIRPAGAL THAAME VARUM” (319)

The kural 319 says that, if one does harm to another, it is certain that the wrong doer will be harmed tomorrow. He who done evil cannot escape. It is said that one will experience its effect immediately.

“NOYELLAAM NOY SEYTHAAR MELAVAAM NOY SEYYAAR
NOYINMAI VENDUPAVAR” (320)

And last Kural 320 emphasis all the miseries that befall a man in life, show that he has done them before. As a result, they shouldn't be repeated, and anyone who believes they won't suffer also shouldn't put others through it.

These are the main Ahimsa related principles reflected in Thirukkural.

Conclusion

Today, the entire human world has become hostage to violent forces – vices such as lust, anger, greed, attachment and ego. In fact, all human souls are innately good, but when we are disconnected from our true nature we violate ourselves and we lie, steal, cheat, covet, envy, hate and deride others – we kill our true nature of purity, peace and love. True non-violence means to be completely free from vices. Truth and non-violence go hand in hand. In fact, the first violation of truth happens when we consider the self to be a physical body instead of a soul. Our body-consciousness segregates us on the lines of gender, race, colour, and creed and brings us in conflict with each other on these lines of discrimination and hatred. When we realize that as children of God we have innate virtues that are god-like, then we begin to live in a truly non-violent way. Such a spiritual awakening can help us live in complete harmony with fellow humans and nature.

The concepts contain in the Thirukkural is still relevant because the Thirukkural, is one of the great books of the world with singular emanations of the human heart and spirit which preach positive love, forgiveness and peace.



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Thirukkural is a recital about life; what is and what should be. It is a guide to develop one's mind with the aim of making an individual a better human being who understands and loves others.

Today we face so many socio-political problems. Of course, these socio-political problems can be solved only through the non-violent methods. The Kural give a great message to us that the punishment to those who have done evil, is to put them to shame by showing them kindness, in return and to forget both the evil and the good done on both sides. It clearly shows that the relevance of Kural in this modern world.

Not only during the time of freedom fight, non-violence must be relevant in the modern world because of everyone is necessary to lead a peaceful life. Even the person or persons responsible for the violence do not live peacefully after committing it. They live in constant fear of being caught or punished for their victim. Result is the perpetrator is also constantly unhappy and stressed. Therefore, to make the world a better place, it is important to shun violence and understand the importance of non violence. If there is peace all around, people can work fearlessly for long hours. There is no stress of any kind, thus people at large world be happy and healthy.

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