



## SPECIAL FEATURE



# THIRUKKURAL :

## Life Lessons Short, Crisp and Simplified

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### INTRODUCTION

Thirukkural, written by Thiruvalluvar, is one of the most notable literary and ethical treatises in the Indian languages. There is a consensus among the historians and academic authorities that Thirukkural was written around 2,000 years ago. Thirukkural is one of the few literary works that have survived over the past 2,000 years and is regarded as relevant. Thirukkural aims at guiding human beings to lead a moral, ethical, and valuable life in this world. According to Thiruvalluvar, “One who lives an ideal life in this world will be ranked amongst the Gods in heaven.” Thirukkural deals with certain essential but permanent aspects of life in an ever-changing world, such as morality, ethics, politics, and romance. Well-known philosophers like Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, Plato, and Machiavelli have generally dealt with selected aspects of human values and experience. But Thiruvalluvar covers the whole spectrum of human experiences very comprehensively. In its essence, Thirukkural is a treatise par excellence on the art of living. Kural is considered one of the most widely translated non-religious works in the world. As of 2014, this work has been translated into about 82 world languages. English language alone has about 57 versions available so far.

### ABOUT THIRUVALLUVAR



- Thiruvalluvar Statue at Kanyakumari

**Thiruvalluvar**, popularly and affectionately called **Valluvar**, is the author of the great Tamil literary work, Thirukkural. According to one legend, he was born in Mylapore, a part of the present-day Chennai in Tamil Nadu, but moved to Madurai to submit the Thirukkural for the then Pandian King and his college of poets. He is sometimes called **Theiva Pulavar** (Divine Poet), **Valluvar**, **Poyyamozhi Pulavar**, **Senna Pothar**, **Gnana Vettiyan**, and **Ayyan**. Literary accounts indicate that he was a weaver by profession. There are various claims as to who he was – A Jain. Whoever he was, his thoughts have been addressing universal values. Jains claim

that he might have been influenced at least with the tenets of Jainism, like **Ahimsa** (non-violence), **Asteya** (virtue of self-restraint), and **Aparigraha** (non-possessiveness). But these tenets are drawn from a yogic concept developed by ancient Rishis and Munis and cannot be narrowed down to a subset of universal philosophies.

The **Thirukkural**, also called **Kural**, is a collection of 1,330 couplets organized into 133 chapters. This literature belongs to the Sanga Tamil period. Kural consists of three main groups called **Aram** (Dharma/Ethics), **Porul** (Wealth), and **Inbam** (Love). Each of these groups has multiple sections that are called **Iyal**, and each of those has several chapters called **Adhikarams**. Each chapter has ten couplets, and each couplet has two lines. The first line has four (4) words, and the second line has three (3) terms.

The **first group Aram** or virtue has four chapters **Praising God**, **The Importance of Rain**, **Greatness of Renunciation**, and **Asserting Virtue**. These four concepts are a foundation to the whole work and not just the book on virtue. In the first four introductory chapters, Valluvar acknowledges **God's Primordial** and places his values in the context of the whole So. For example, he says on learning and limits of rationalism:

What has learning profited a man if it has not led him to worship the good feet of him who is pure knowledge itself. He says of the concept of **good** vs. **evil** and that these opposites are illusionary, and one may transcend these opposites by meditating on that which is immutable. Valluvar makes the non-sectarian references to **God** referred to as «infinity, the immutable, worshipful one.»

Having sent in place the limitations of reason, good, evil. So on, the weaver focuses on the importance of the ecology and man's relations to it: “It is the unfailing fall of rain that sustains the world; therefore, look upon rain as the nectar of life.”

“Rain produces man's wholesome food, and rain itself forms part of his food besides.”

Emphasizing the cyclical destructive and creative powers of nature, he says: “It is rain that ruins and rain again that raises those it has ruined.”

On man's reliance on nature and the importance of nature relative to human functions such as charity and spirituality: “Unless the heavens grant their gifts, neither the giver's generosity nor the ascetic's detachment will grace this wide world.”

The importance of the primal spirit and nature is the qualities and significance of spiritual leaders or renunciates. This echoes the ancient Tamil belief that the world is sustained not just by the forces of the physical plane (i.e., the power of nature such as rain) and by spiritual forces; an imbalance in either could lead to the destruction of the world. As with the rest of the Kural, which is a secular work, the chapter does not refer to organized or institutionalized religion, merely noting by way of definition of

#### ARAM (RIGHTEOUSNESS – DHARMA)

Chapters 1-4:  
Prayer

Chapters 4-24: Domestic  
Virtues  
Family  
Spouse  
Love  
Kindness  
Discipline & conduct  
Charity

Chapters 25-38:  
Ascetic Virtues

Compassion  
Non-killing  
Penance  
Banishing Anger  
Avoiding meat  
Renunciation  
Consciousness of Truth

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#### PORUL (WEALTH – ARTHA)

Chapters 39-63:  
Politics & Governance  
Leadership  
Education  
Wisdom  
Good governance  
Espionage

Chapters 64-73:  
Cabinet Governance  
Ministering  
Eloquence  
Purity of Action  
Fearlessness

Chapters 74-78:  
Country & Security

Chapters 79-95:  
Friendship & Alliance

Chapters 96-108:  
Miscellaneous

#### INBAM (LOVE – KAMA)

Chapters 109-115:  
Pre-Marital Love  
Signs of Love  
Joy of Union  
Praise of Love's Ecstasy  
Clamour and Gossip

Chapters 116-133:  
Post-Marital Love  
Pangs of Separation  
Sweet Solace of Dreams  
Longing for Lover  
Symptoms of Love  
Pouting

- Chart of Organisation of the Kural



spirituality that:

“Pious men are called the priestly ones for, they are clothed in robes of compassion for all life.” The final introductory theme is the nature of virtue, outlined in broad brush strokes across the ten couplets in this chapter. For example, the alternative interpretations of virtue include: “Virtue is living in such a way that one does not fall into these four: envy, anger, greed and unsavory speech” and “Virtue is merely that which should be done in life and vice merely that which should be avoided.” The body of the book of virtue, following on from the introduction, is structured into the following themes:

“the way of the householder,” “the way of the renunciate,” and “destiny.”

The **second group Porul** (wealth), has the following themes: «Reality,» «Ministers,» «Qualities of a Country or State,» and a general section on the qualities of people and various other aspects of wealth.

While “The way of the householder” is a description of Tamil culture's core personal values, the book on wealth addresses themes of leadership and group structures.



- Tirukural in French on a train in France

Thus, on what it takes to be a “householder,” the Kural says:

“He alone may be called a householder who supports students, elders, and renunciates pursuing their good paths.” By way of example, in discussing the functions of a householder, the Kural has an entire chapter on hospitality, that most familiar of Tamil verse:

“The whole purpose of earning wealth and maintaining a home is to provide hospitality to guests.”

“When a guest is in the home, it is improper to

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hoard one's meal, even if it happens to be the nectar of immortality." "Charity's merit cannot be measured by gifts given. It is measured by the measuring the receiver's merits".

The *third group Inbam* (Love), deals with the subject matter of love, including pre-marital love and post-marital love. There are no instructions here, nor any guidelines. Thiruvalluvar simply exhibits the poet in him at his best, a must-read for any human (above a certain age! The age limit is to understand the nuances dealt in here and not because of explicit sexual content, another common misconception about this book).

## ANECDOTAL

*Karkka kasadara karpavai katrapin  
Nirka atharkku thaga!*

The above-quoted famous Thirukkural couplet provides a moral compass for living for the Tamils. It tells them:

*"Let a man/woman learn thoroughly whatever he/she may learn, and let his/her conduct be worthy of his/her learning."*

If learning the couplet doesn't come easy for Tamils, *Laura Brent Frederiksen, a Grade 9 student from Denmark*, presented quite a challenge. Yet, she and her fellow students from *Odsherreds Efterskole School in Faarevejle, Denmark*, were able to learn and recite the above Kural and other couplets and explain their meanings. These students from Denmark, who was in Chennai on an exchange program, recited several couplets of Thirukkural and explained their intentions to Tamil Govt. Minister for Tamil Official Language and Tamil Culture, Mr. K. Pandian, and his staff at the Secretariat campus. The Minister presented all the exchange students with copies of *Thirukkural* and *Ponniyin Selvan*.

## QUOTES OF WESTERN SCHOLARS ON THIRUKKURAL

1. **Dr. Albert Schweitzer - French-German Theologian, philosopher, Physician & Nobel Peace Prize Winner** while Bhagavad Gita in a forced and chilly manner gives as a motive for remaining inactive life that it is in accordance with the order of the universe, the *Kural* justifies it – what an advance! - by the idea of ethical activity. Work and profit place a man in a position to do good. On the varied questions concerning the conduct of man to himself and the world., Thirukkural's utterances are characterized by nobility and good sense. There hardly exists in the literature of the world a collection of maxims in which we find so much lofty wisdom. Earth and life negation are located in the thought of Jesus in so far as he did not assume that the Kingdom of God would be realized in this natural world. On the contrary, Valluvar believed that the liberated man could find his heaven in this very real world and said that perfect bliss could be attained by an individual in this natural world itself, and it is unnecessary to wait indefinitely for the transformation of the world to transform oneself. Thus, he took life and world affirmation to a loftier plane than Christ did.

2. **Rev. Dr. J. Lazaas - One of the authors of a commentary in English on Thirukkural.** The *Kural* is composed in the purest Tamil. In about 12,000 words that the poet has employed to convey his thoughts, there is scarcely fifty Sanskrit origin. No known Tamil work can even approach the purity of Kural. It is a standing rebuke to the modern Tamil.

3. **Alexander Phtigorsky - Greatest Philosopher of Russia in the 20th & 21st centuries; a Philologist, well-versed in Russian, Latin, English, German, Italian, French, Tamil, Sanskrit Pali, and Tibetan. He joined Moscow's Institute of Oriental Studies to study Tamil and Hinduism. He compiled the first Russian-Tamil dictionary in 1960.** The *Kural* is rightly considered a Chefs



- Valluvar Kottam in Chennai

d'oeuvre of Indian and world literature. This is due not only to the great artistic merit of the work but also to the lofty humane ideas permeating it, which are equally precious to people worldwide, of all periods and countries.

4. **Arno Lehman - 19th-century Dravidologist** The style of the Kural was matchless comparable only with the perfection of the manner in Greek; the Kural was to Gaul; the *peerless of pearls in this old and rich classical literature of the Tamilians* - as also in our time the Kural was called 'the greatest masterpiece of Tamil literature and according to our learned editor, embodying the nationalization and synthesis of the wisdom and ideas of the earlier Tamil literature.

5. **Leigh Lisker - (from the Encyclopedia Americana Vol. XV – Page 26** The third type of



- Statue of Thiruvalluvar at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at Russell Square in London

early writing is exemplified by the *Kural* (literally couplet), perhaps the most widely known Tamil classic. This is a work of didactic morality whose 1330 couplets are remarkable for their economy and clarity of style, for the wide range of human situations for which they provide guidance, and their unique blend of worldly wisdom and idealistic ethics.

6. **Brother Lucien - Durban, South Africa** Large numbers of people in the West are hopefully thirsting to know what ancient India has to contribute to the philosophy of life. The *Thirukkural* stands with distinction amongst those Eastern literature treasures that go to make their hopes well-founded.

7. **Kamil Zvelabil - A Czechoslovakian Tamil Scholar – Tamil Culture Vol. V, No. 4.** Thirukkural is a contribution of the Tamil creative genius to the world's cultural treasure and should be familiar to the whole world and admired and beloved by all in the same way as the poems of Homer, dramas of Shakespeare, the picture of Rembrandt, the Cathedral of France and the sculptures of Greece. The kural is one of the world's most excellent books, one of those singular emanations of human heart

and spirit that preach positive love and forgiveness and peace.

8. **John Murdoch - 19th Century Christian Missionary in Ceylon and India.** Indeed, it is generally acknowledged that no treatise is equal to the *Kural* in any Indian language.

9. **Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) - Father of Indian Nation, Philosopher, and Writer.** I wanted to learn Tamil, only to enable me to study Valluvar's *Thirukkural* through his mother tongue itself. No one has given such treasure of wisdom like him.

10. **Rev. George U. Pope - One of the early Christian Missionaries to Tamil Nadu and translated Kural to English** Thiruvalluvar's poem is by no means a long one. However, in value, it far outweighs the whole of the remaining Tamil literature and is one of the select numbers of great works that have entered into the very soul of a whole people and can never die. Complete in itself, the sole work of its author has come down the esteem of ages uninjured; hardly a single various reading of any importance is found. Thirukkural is an integral painting of a civilization that is harmonious in itself and which possesses a recognizable unity.

## Memorials

1. **Valluvar Kottam in Chennai, Tamil Nadu** A temple-like memorial to Thiruvalluvar, Valluvar Kottam, was built in Chennai in 1976. This monument complex consists of structures usually found in Dravidian temples, including a temple carved from three people. Of granite and a shallow rectangular pond. The auditorium adjoining this memorial is relatively large and can seat up to 4,000.

2. **Statue at Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu,** There is a 133 feet tall statue of Thiruvalluvar erected at Kanyakumari at the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent, where the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean converge. The 133 feet denote Thirukkural's 133 chapters or *athikarams*, and the show of his three fingers represents the three themes *Aram, Porul, and Inbam*. They are the three sections on Morals, Wealth, and Love. The statue was designed by V. Ganapathi Sthapati, a temple architect from Tamil Nadu.

3. **Statue at Russell Square in London, England** There is also a statue of Thiruvalluvar outside the School of Oriental and African Studies in Russell Square, London.

4. **Thirukkural couplets displayed in French in trains in France** We know that Thirukkural couplets are displayed in Tamil Nadu State buses. A French translation of couplets has been seen on trains in France.