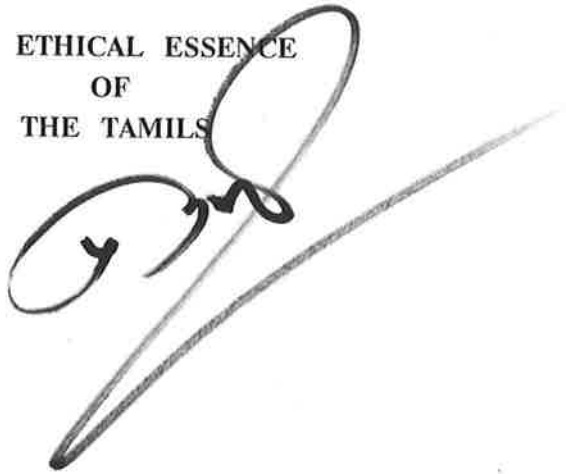


**THE ETHICAL ESSENCE
OF
THE TAMILS**

S. SRISKANDARAJAH

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OF
THE TAMILS**

By

S.SRISKANDARAJAH.B.Sc.,LL.M.(Lond.)

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by A. J. International, London.

This book is dedicated to
.my mother
Kanthimathy Chelvatamby

The couplets treated in the book

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

It is estimated that there are more than ten thousand Tamils living in and around London. More than half of them are children who arrived in the United Kingdom within the last seven or eight years. The environment in which the Tamil children of this country live is such that they barely have the time or the opportunity to learn their language and literature or imbibe and practise their culture. Though there are many Saturday/Sunday schools in the London and greater London areas run for the benefit of the Tamil children by public spirited Tamils yet the kind of instruction given there is, at best, minimal and uncoordinated.

Bearing these short-comings in mind, Mr. Sriskandarajah started writing the literary articles contained in this book with a view to introducing the Tamil children to their rich heritage. When they were serialised in an English fortnightly called "Tamil Voice International" they were well received. I am pleased to have the privilege of publishing those articles in the form of a book now.

Mr. Sriskandarajah has been known to me for more than two decades as an eloquent-speaker and a prolific writer. He has two books to his credit published during the time he was working as a Senior Assistant Legal Draftsman in the Ministry of Justice, Sri Lanka. This is his third. There are a few more, in the pipeline.

Mr. Sriskandarajah, who is a regular contributor to many Tamil and English newspapers and magazines published by the Tamils in this country, has established himself as a forceful writer and critic on matters relating to Tamil literature and Tamil culture.

He deserves the support and the cooperation of all for the commendable service he continues to render to the Tamil community. I am hopeful that the Tamil speaking population the world over will welcome this publication and encourage him to continue his services to the Tamil community at large.

N. JOTHY,

A. J. INTERNATIONAL,
27, Undercliff Road,
London, SE13 7TU.

01-03-1993

FOREWORD

by

Prof. A. Jeyaratnam Wilson

Mr. S. Sriskandarajah, a lawyer by profession and a researcher by nature, has given us in this book an original and accomplished interpretation and commentary of pertinent sections of the sacred Kural by Thiruvalluvar, the quintessential Tamil poet of universal virtue.

Thiruvalluvar's genius influenced Tamil classics of the genre of Puranaanooru (there is a quotation in it from the Kural), Silappathikaaram (there are two quotations) and Manimaekhalai (one quotation). There was not an area of life itself which this glorious poet, who wrote some time between 100 B.C. and 300 A.D., did not probe. Thiruvalluvar has been called a divine teacher and his Kural, "The ethical Bible of the Tamil people".

Mr. Sriskandarajah has in pellucid language given us his thoughts of those verses of the Thirukkural which impinge most commonly on our daily lives. Mr. Sriskandarajah has placed his observations in a contemporaneous context. In doing so, he has poured

into our lives a stream of consciousness which we might not have otherwise realised. Thiruvalluvar is a poet for all seasons and Mr. Srisikandarajah's work without a doubt indicates to us the worth of the great Kural in the historic times of our modern age.

I wish to congratulate Mr. Srisikandarajah for the grace and dignity with which he has carried out this assignment.

Department of Political Science,
University of New Brunswick,
Fredericton, New Brunswick,
Canada.

APPRECIATION

by

Dr. Saraswathi Ramanathan

Tamil language is unique by reason of its philologic structure and the culture it enshrines and permeates. Works of literature and religion as well as moral and ethical codes are aplenty in Tamil. The Thirukkural however stands out as a work for mankind. It has been translated in to several languages the world over. Mr. Sriskandarajah has presented an excellent rendering of select verses of Thirukkural with his interpretation and some thought provoking posers.

In his introduction to the book Mr. Sriskandarajah asks a pertinent question "Can we say that science has done us good when we see wars and miseries wherever we look ?" Even the avowed advocates of science cannot dispute this whole-heartedly. With the advancement of technology mankind has no doubt become more civilized; but hardly have we become more cultured than our forebears were. What is the reason? The reason is that our hearts have not developed as our brains have. It is this lopsided development which is the root cause for all the

miseries around us, says the author and we cannot agree more with his conclusion. I am struck by the refreshing approach adopted by the author in the interpretation of the chosen verses. Rather than interpreting the verses in the abstract he has interpreted them illustratively in the modern context while not failing to draw examples from the ancient epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha. Though it is difficult to say that the exposition of any one verse is better than the other yet to give an insight into the interpretational skills of the author, I would refer to a couple of verses.

கற்க கசடறக் கற்பவை கற்றபின்
நிற்க அதற்குத் தக.

“Katka Kasadarak Katpavai Kattapin Nitka Athatkuth Thaha” is a well known Kural. The author has given a new and original interpretation to this verse. It is not mere learning to perfection that Thiruvalluvar advocates; but learning to cleanse oneself of the impurities and imperfections of a mortal life. To be meaningful and purposeful, learning should help purge one of the impurities says the author. This interpretation, though non-traditional and novel yet is plausible and relevant.

எப்பொருள் யார்யார்வாய்க் கேட்பினு மப்பொருள்
மெய்ப்பொருள் காண்ப தறிவு.

Another verse that attracted me was .“Epporul Yaaryaarvaayk Kerdpinu Mapporul Meipporul Kaanpa Tharivu”. It is a very instructive and useful verse in anybody’s day-to-day life. It says that an administrator, while having to take everything he hears with a pinch of salt should be thoroughly unsuspecting. Listen to your officers, appear to trust them; but trust not entirely, says the author. The cliché in Tamil “Nampa nada; nampi nadavaatheey” is verily pithy. The verse composed centuries ago is directed towards the monarchs of those times. Yet its relevance and aptness even today, not only to statesmen and authorities but also to a man on the street, is irrefutable.

தலையின் இழிந்த மயிரனையர் மாந்தர்
நிலையின் இழிந்தக் கடை.

“Maintain your decorum” is an article in the book expatiating the Kural “Thalaiyin Izhintha Mayitanaiyar Maanthar Nilaiyin Izhinhak Kadai”. This article deals with the Devendra - Ahalya episode. Human hair merits care as long as it is on the head. Once it falls no one cares. The verse draws a parallel between fallen hair and the people who have degraded themselves and urges people not to detract from the path of rectitude.

Though Mr. Sriskandarajah says that he has randomly selected the verses yet the book as a whole

has a fullness about it by reason of the variegated subjects it covers. He has done a splendid job. There can be no two opinions about the author's depth of knowledge, his insight or his command of the Tamil and English languages. I am pleased that the code for mankind has been brought out in a highly readable, digestible style for the benefit of the non-Tamil speaking peoples. I commend this book to anyone who wishes to know about Tamil culture and Tamil ethics.

I wish the author all success in his efforts.

Professor of Tamil,
Head of Tamil Department,
S. A. College for Women,
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Tamil Nadu,
India.

5th February, 1993.

PREFACE

Thirukkural is a masterpiece. I do not think that I would be branded impertinent or fanatical if I venture to say that there isn't in any extant language a piece of literature which is of universal application, wherein pithy eternal truths are couched in one and a half lines of seven words.

Thirukkural has all along been such an attractive piece of literature that many an eminent scholar had tried to interpret or comment upon it. The interpretations and commentaries have not ceased; they still continue. Even Westerners have tried their hand at it. Rev. G. U. Pope is one such figure.

The present book is yet another attempt to interpret a few couplets from the Thirukkural. I have tried to interpret as I perceived them. I have illustrated them wherever possible with the help of episodes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha. This book is not a systematic attempt and therefore the articles that appear in the book do not follow any set pattern. I have written them as they occurred to me. I started writing them for an English fortnightly "*Tamil Voice International*" which espoused the cause of the Tamils. Never did I expect when I started writing them that I

would be able to put them together in the form of a book. The articles were written between 1988 and 1990 when the Tamils of Tamil Eelam underwent the severest of trials and tribulations at the hands of an army of occupation. These articles, to some extent, are a product of that painful period and therefore have indelibly imprinted in them the scars of that period. Though I had tried to steer clear of partisan politics in this literary effort yet certain quasi-political views have crept into some of the articles. These inevitable intrusions might discolour or add colour to the literary value of the book; I am unsure. Even so I have left them untouched for fear that any tampering might do more damage. Perhaps it is right that they should remain as they are.

There were many good souls who gave me encouragement to write these articles. Mr. C. J. T. Thamotheram, the Founder, of the West London Tamil School who is endowed with a great capacity for lucidity and concise expression has helped me immensely through his discussion and suggestions. I owe him a great debt of gratitude. I also thank Mr. N. Seevaratnam but for whose constant reminders and entreaties these articles might not have seen the light of the day. I cannot forget Professor A. Jeyaratnam Wilson of the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, who not only

appreciated and admired my writings but also urged me on several occasions to bring out the articles in the form of a book. I am grateful to him for the nice Foreword he has given to this book.

I know not how to thank Dr. Saraswathi Ramanathan, Professor of Tamil, S. A. College for Women, Pallatur, Tamil Nadu, India, for the fine Appreciation she has written about this book. I am thankful to her for the honour she has done me. My thanks are also due in great measure to my friend Mr. Thirunavukarasu of Arasan Printers, Colombó, Sri Lanka for splendidly reading the proofs and setting the format of the book. Finally I thank my friend and admirer Mr. Sivananthajothy Nagarajah of Karampan, Kayts, Sri Lanka, for the great pains he has taken to have this book published. He has put me under an eternal debt of gratitude by his solicitude.

I do hope that the Tamil world which was kind enough to support my first two publications - (1) Law and Tamil, (2) Law of Partnership] will support me in this venture also.

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England,
U.K.

19th February, 1993.

Chapter 1

THIRUKKURAL

INTRODUCTION

Thirukkural, or the sacred *KURAL*, is a *Tamil* classic generally ascribed to 300 A.D. Attributed to a poet called Thiruvalluvar whom we know very little about, the *KURAL* treats of Virtue or Righteousness, Wealth and Love in 133 Chapters of ten distichs each. Unbiased by any sectarian prejudices, Thiruvalluvar presents a moral code for the whole humanity, regardless of colour, creed or community. This, at least partly, explains why the work has already been translated into many languages throughout the world. What follows is an introductory comment on the *KURAL*.

The Tamil language is rich in literature, both mundane and spiritual. Tamils can be proud of an ancient heritage. The literature of the Tamils dates back to the pre-Christian era. Of course, Tamils have produced literature of great richness even after that.

The vast mass of ancient Tamil literature is broadly classified into *Pathinen-maet-kanakku* (the group of 18 long classics) and *Pathinen-keel-kanakku* (the group of 18 short classics). *Edduththohai* (the eight anthologies) and *Paththuppaaddu* (a collection of ten long poems) come under the category of *Pathinen-maet-kanakku*.

Thirukkural belongs to the category of *Pathinen-keel-kanakku*. Thiruvalluvar is said to be the author of *Thirukkural*. There are many interesting stories about Thiruvalluvar. Most of these stories appear to be concoctions. Some of these stories appear to create a consanguine relationship between Thiruvalluvar and Avvaiyaar, an ancient Tamil poetess. There are controversies as to whether there was only one Avvaiyaar or many Avvaiyaars. It is not worth paying attention to these hair-splitting controversies.

What is important to remember is that there is in existence a piece of literature in the Tamil language called and known as *Thirukkural*, that it contains 133 chapters, and that each chapter contains 10 couplets of immense practical wisdom.

The worth of *Thirukkural* has been so recognized by our forebears for ages that it is said that we would never falter on our words or deeds if we paid heed to these gems of couplets.

Many of our children in the U.K. have been willy-nilly denied the opportunity of getting to know something of this treasure known as *Thirukkural*; or, for that matter, even other pieces of Tamil literature. Voices may be raised that traditional literature has no place in the educational curriculum of today. There may be some force in that argument. But, we should not lose sight of the fact that in spite of the economic advancement and the physical comforts which the technological development has brought about, mankind has not become happier; miseries have not been reduced. Why? Is not peace and happiness the *summum bonum* of life? Could we say that science has done us good when we see wars and miseries wherever we look ?

With the help of science we might have become civilized; but we have not become cultured. Civilization and culture are two different things. Civilization is a matter of the exterior, whereas culture is a matter of the interior. The exterior of mankind has tremendously developed; the interior of mankind has remained stunted and perhaps atrophied. Mankind can never be happy until the growth and development of the interior catches up with the development of the exterior.

Neglect of the Humanities is said to be one of the many reasons for this retardation in the development of the interior. The Orientals and the Occidentals appear to begin to recognize this. Whether there is sense in this new awakening cannot be prejudged. Therefore, it is not altogether a bad idea to have a go at it.

Our Tamil children in this country who could not get a chance to know of their rich heritage should be given a chance. Let us therefore start with the Thirukkural which contains the essence of Tamil ethics and culture.

There is no doubt that a taste of the Thirukkural will lead our children on to learn more of their rich and vast literature.

Chapter 2

THE NEED TO BE DISCREET AND JUDICIOUS

எப்பொருள் யார்யார்வாய்க் கேட்பினு மப்பொருள்
மெய்ப்பொருள் காண்ப தறிவு.

“Eppotul Yaaryaarvaayk Kerdpinu Mappotul
Meippotul Kaanpa Tharivu”.

“Whosoever the person one hears from, whichever the thing, the
function of wisdom is to ascertain the truth of it.”

This is an often quoted Thirukkural and it deserves to be borne
in mind by all and sundry. We have chosen this Kural to be our motto
and guiding principle for the mission we have set ourselves to pursue.
This is the third Kural in the chapter on “Possession of wisdom”.

Education apart, Wisdom is a *sine qua non* for an
administrator whether he is kingly or homely or otherwise. For
the purpose of effective administration, an administrator
should be gathering information relating to all facets of his
ministerial function. However careful he might have been in
the selection and choice of his various functionaries, the
information and messages he receives from various sources at
various points of time are bound to be coloured and biased
according to the perception and predilection of the person

who gathers, interprets and passes the information. Therefore an administrator has to be extremely cautious in regard to these matters; hence this advice by Thiruvalluvar to an ideal administrator.

This does not necessarily mean that an administrator should never trust anyone. Thiruvalluvar says that one has to be careful in the selection of one's functionaries and warns that it would be disastrous to suspect the conduct of a functionary after having chosen him. What Thiruvalluvar tries to emphasise is that an administrator should not be oblivious to the vagaries of the world and that he should always have his wits about him; he should always be circumspect. To put it bluntly, he says that the administrator should behave as if he does not suspect while taking everything with a pinch of salt. "Nampa nada; nampi nadavaathey" (நம்ப நாட; நம்பி நடவாதே).

Day in and day out, we hear a lot of things from different quarters and read many a matter from various sources. Human beings are very gullible and our tendency is to believe them without questions put. It is this that Thiruvalluvar warns us against; it is this pit that he does not want us to fall into. Just because it has been said by so and so, we tend to believe it; just because it has been found in a newspaper which is normally known for its non-partisanship and independence, we are prone to take it as true. This is not good. Whichever be the source, whoever be the person let us pause for a minute to ponder over it before forming opinions or passing judgment. Let us take time to listen to the other versions of the information we receive. If we do this we will not falter or

flounder about and we will never fall an easy prey to the machinations and tricks of the unprincipled.

Tamil readers are not unaware of the story of Nakkeeran and Tharumi. Tharumi was assisted by Lord Shiva in the composition of a verse for a competition, wherein there was an indication that the hair of the heavenly women was naturally fragrant even without an artificial addition of decocted scent and incenses. Nakkeeran, who was the court-poet of king Pandian, disagreed with the veracity of the content of the verse and challenged the correctness of the statement. According to the story, Lord Shiva himself manifested before Nakkeeran and made him understand that it was He who was behind the composition of the verse. Even at that moment, in spite of his knowledge as to what would befall him in the event of his defying God, Nakkeeran maintained his stance and reiterated that it was not possible even for heavenly damsels to have naturally sweet-smelling hair. Such should be the principle of all of us. This Kural, though mainly addressed to administrators of the highest order, is equally applicable to all of us.

Recent events that had occurred in our homeland affecting the Tamils had been interpreted with a lot of prejudice and predilection by diverse media that are overwhelmingly powerful; and our folks had formed visions and notions that have been later proved wrong and misleading, or partially distorted and mutilated.

If we follow Thiruvalluvar we may avoid such slippery pit-falls and pot-holes.

Chapter 3

WHAT IS WISDOM?

தொட்டனைத் தூறு மணற்கேணி மாந்தர்க்குக்
கற்றனைத் தூறு மறிவு.

“Thoddanaith Thooru Manatkerni Maanthatkuk
Kattranaith Thooru Marivu”.

“The more the sandy spring is dug up, more water wells up in it.
The more men learn, the more of wisdom will there manifest.”

Out of the 133 chapters in his sacred Kural, Valluvar has allocated four chapters to Education - under the headings of *Learning, Illiteracy, Listening and Possession of Wisdom*. Of course, there are many instances elsewhere in *Thirukkural* where he has stressed the importance of education. *Education is the manifestation of knowledge already in man* said Swami Vivekananda. Man is endowed with knowledge when he is born. It is already there in every human being. It is latent, not patent, and covered with various layers of *impurities*. These layers differ in density from person to person. The purpose and aim of education is to allow that knowledge to manifest itself. This philosophy of education has been succinctly stated by Thiruvalluvar in the above couplet.

The parallel used by Thiruvalluvar is worthy of admiration. When we dig up a well we use a spade, crowbar,

pickaxe and even dynamite for breaking and clearing the mass that prevents the spring from issuing forth. But the tools and the aids that are used to break up the soil and the rock do not form part of the spring, and they are never mistaken for the spring. They are only aids that help bring the spring forth. The implements help only to the extent of removing the mass of earth, gravel and rock that stand between the surface and the spring.

In the English language, the word “educate” comes from the Latin word *educare* which means to bring out.

Let us now go back to the second limb of the couplet under consideration. The wisdom of a man manifests to the extent to which he learns. So, now comes the question, “*What is education?*” Luckily in the foregoing lines we have made Swami Vivekananda answer this question. We acquire numeracy and literacy; we learn logic, drawing, art, dance, music and so on and so forth; and some of us excel in some or many of them. But the eminence and excellence we attain is not wisdom. According to Thiruvalluvar these acquisitions are only aids comparable to the tools used in the digging up of the well. Even as how the tools used in the digging cannot be equated with the spring, so also in the sphere of knowledge, academic acquisitions cannot be equated with wisdom. The truth is that the former is only an aid to the realisation of the latter. Thus, the purpose of education is the blooming or the unfolding of the supreme knowledge called *Gnaanam* or Wisdom. But, unfortunately, we puny creatures who have acquired a little bit of knowledge here and there which is allowed to run riot, masquerade as intellectuals and pundits

What is wisdom?

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forgetting that we have only collected a few tools that are needed for the purpose of making *Wisdom* well up.

The above couplet may appear to slip the grip of comprehension. But it deserves to be cogitated over. In understanding this particular couplet, what is to be borne in mind is that Wisdom which Valluvar calls *Arivu* in chaste Tamil is not something that is gathered, but something that manifests within. In this couplet we must mark the word *Oorum* - (ஔரூம்) which means issuing forth or springing.

As we have seen above, Wisdom is already there in all human beings, and it is this pure knowledge that is needed for one to become perfect and divine. In some human beings the *impurity* that covers Wisdom is so dense and hard that much effort is needed to enable this Wisdom to issue forth. Most of us belong to this category.

In a few others, this *impurity* is so thin and light that Wisdom begins to issue forth with the least effort. It is these precious few that we call prodigies.

Now the question may arise as to what accounts for the variation and difference in the amount of *impurity* that surrounds the Wisdom in different individuals. An effort to give an answer to this question might take us deep into the ocean of metaphysics. Suffice it to say that our *Karma* decides that. It may be interesting to remember that *Thiru-Gnanasambantha Nayanar* became a Gnaani when he was three years old; but it took decades for *Appar* to so become. Further, is it not true that in Jaffna (in Sri Lanka) some wells are 10 feet deep while some others about 40 feet

deep? In the former, the spring can be sighted with the least effort whereas in the latter, a Herculean effort is required before the spring can be sighted. In fine it may be said that Valluvar stresses the importance of academic acquisition which is a *sine qua non* for the manifestation of Wisdom.

Chapter 4

THE PURPOSE OF LEARNING

கற்க கசடறக் கற்பவை கற்றபின்
நிற்க அதற்குத் தக.

“Katka Kasadarak Katpavai Kattrapin
Nitka Athatkuth Thaha”.

**“Learn so as to remove imperfection. Having so learnt,
maintain the poise.”**

In our last article, we tried to show how Thiruvalluvar had distinguished Knowledge from Wisdom. In this article we shall endeavour to understand the more plausible interpretation of an often quoted and most popular couplet of Thiruvalluvar. This couplet is the first Kural in the chapter on Education.

“Acquire thoroughly the knowledge that is worth acquiring; and after acquiring it, conduct thyself in accordance therewith” is the English rendition given by those who interpret this *Kural* in the traditional way. According to the traditionalists, this couplet tells us the manner in which one should learn the various sources of knowledge, and in consonance with that line of interpretation, they say that *Thiruvalluvar* ordains us to learn all areas of knowledge, be it science, humanities or metaphysics thoroughly and without

doubts or ambiguity; and then, having studied all those that are worthy of being studied, to conduct and maintain ourselves in conformity with that thorough knowledge.

There is a new school of thought which feels that the traditionalists' interpretation is somewhat defective and therefore cannot be the correct interpretation. According to this new school of thought the self-same Kural is rendered in English as **learn with a view to purging yourself of the impurities and ignorance; and having learnt those that are necessary for such purge, maintain the poise.**

The reason for the above interpretation appears to be this. One may acquire a lot of knowledge and that too thoroughly. One may have understood and comprehended them without doubts. But if these acquisitions and **punditry** have not helped him to weed out the impurities of ignorance that are in him, then that knowledge is not of much use. **If those impurities have not been removed then he could not be said to have manifested wisdom; and as long as he has not manifested wisdom,** he cannot maintain himself steadfastly on the track of rectitude and righteousness.

In view of the above-stated flaw in the traditional interpretation of the couplet under consideration, the new school of thought opines that the couplet does not tell us about the manner in which we should learn but the purpose for which we should learn. According to the new school that **purpose is the removal of the impurities of ignorance.** Thus, *Thiruvalluvar* wants us to learn for the purpose of becoming enlightened in the exalted sense. Once that is done, a man becomes wise and it will then be possible for him to tread the

path of righteousness. This view of the new school appears to be gaining currency and seems to hold water.

A person may study a lot and also may have understood them without doubts. Still, if that learning had not purged his crudities and imperfections, then he has not manifested wisdom. **Without wisdom one cannot separate the chaff from the grain, nor the sheep from the goats.** Such a person cannot be expected to tread the correct path because he does not know which is correct and which is incorrect.

As Thiruvalluvar, in the second limb of this couplet, wants us to conduct ourselves in accordance with the dictates of our supreme knowledge, it would be safe to say that this couplet declares the purpose of education rather than the manner and mode of education. The new school can still be wrong. **Can we afford to forget the words of Valluvar ? -**

*“எப்பொருள் எத்தன்மைத் தாயினும் அப்பொருள்
மெய்ப்பொருள் காண்ப தறிவு”.*

*“ Eppotul Eththanmaith Thaayinum Appotul
Meippotul Kaanpa Tharivu”.*

Chapter 5

THE IDEAL YARDSTICK

குணம்நாடிக் குற்றமும் நாடி அவற்றுள்
மிகைநாடி மிக்க கொளல்.

**“Kunamnaadik Kuttramum Naadi Avattrul
Mihainaadi Mikka Kolal”.**

**“Consider the merits and also consider the demerits; see which
weigh more and choose the person with greater merits.”**

It was Kautama Buddha of Kapilavasthu, the first protestant of Brahminism, who resoundingly declared, **“We have the best in the worst of us and the worst in the best of us”**. As if to reinforce the above declaration of the Buddha, Swami Vivekananda, the cyclonic Hindu of India, reiterated that *there are Brahmins among Paraiahs and Paraiahs among Brahmins*. Jesus Christ succinctly revealed this universal truth, when, upon seeing people incriminating and condemning a woman as a whore, he uttered, **“If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw the stone at her”**.

Thiruvalluvar drives home this eternal truth through the above Kural. This is the fourth Kural in the chapter captioned **“Selection of Functionaries”**. Although this Kural is an advice mainly to an Administrator, it applies equally well to others

also in regard to their day-to-day dealings. Most of us run into difficulties and find it difficult to fit with the society because we fail to bear the import of this Kural in mind.

Kuttram Paarkkil Suttram Illai is a proverb in the Tamil language. **It means that if we try to find fault with people, then we will have none at the end as friends or relatives.** What this means is that human beings are full of frailties and that no human being is perfect, and that it is utterly futile to expect man to be perfect.

Let us now get back to the couplet itself to see what it says. As it is primarily an advice to a ruler, it states in no uncertain terms that the ruler should bear clearly in his mind that nobody is free from blame, that if he were to look for somebody who is perfect in every sense and devoid of blemishes, then he would never succeed in finding such a person. If the truth is that everyone is defective but only in different areas and manner, then how are we to choose the ones whom we could befriend and whom we should not? The answer to the question is contained in the couplet under consideration.

Since appearance is deceptive, one has to have his wits about him and be circumspect. This is what *Thiruvalluvar* says: “Using common sense and physiognomical considerations put your recruit on probation. Analytically study his good qualities; also assess his negative points; weigh the two. If you find good qualities outweighing bad qualities, consider him as a good person. If bad qualities overshadow good qualities, deem him as bad.”

Given above is the selection test *Thiruvalluvar* has set. There is no point in grumbling that this person is that or that person is this. There will be no end to our grumbling and never will we find one against whom we will have nothing to complain. That being the stark reality, we must apply the test of *Thiruvalluvar* in the selection of friends and functionaries. Realisation of this truth will make life much more tolerable for most of us.

In our epic the Ramayana, Rama was an incarnation of Lord Krishna. But when God took human form as Rama, Rama was depicted by sage Vaalmiki to be possessing at least some of the defects of ordinary mortals. If Rama had been so depicted, it was to show to the ordinary person of the world that to **err is human** and that human beings are not perfect.

Chapter 6

DON'T TRUST "YES" MEN

இடிப்பாரை இல்லாத ஏமரா மன்னன்
கெடுப்பார் இலானும் கெடும்.

"Idippaatai Illaatha Aemataa Mannan
Keduppaar Ilaanum Kedum".

**"The king who is without the guard of men who can rebuke him
will perish even though there be no one to destroy him".**

Two heads are better than one. A king used to have a council of ministers. A prime minister or a president of a country has a cabinet of secretaries or ministers. These ministers or secretaries, as the case may be, are not mere functionaries responsible for the governance of the country. They are more than that; they are trusted friends of the leader of the country in question; they are the confidants of the leader; be it the king, prime minister or president. Apart from the public function they are expected to discharge, they have a private duty to perform too, namely, to be a friendly and well-meaning counsel, friend and adviser all rolled into one. Their function is not to be Yes-men always. Their function is to lead him in the correct path. It is in this sense they are to be friends of the leader. As *Thiruvalluvar* says in some other context - **Friendship is not for pleasant laughter but for harsh**

advice, promptly to be given when one swerves from the right path. It should be their duty to tell the leader what is right, even if such right advice were to bring death and downfall to them. In the epic Ramayana, King Dasaratha is said to have enjoyed the company of such ministers. This perhaps is the reason why he could rule over Ayodhya for such an incredible length of time.

Now, to turn to the couplet under consideration. **If a king does not have a council of ministers who are so dutiful, right-thinking and selfless as to reprimand their leader whenever he shows signs of deviation from the track of rectitude, then no external force is necessary to ruin him. He will court ruination automatically. Even without an external force causing destruction, he will destroy himself.**

Our ancient epics, the Mahabharatha and the Ramayana, time and again remind us of this fact. All was well with Dhirtarashtra as long as he relied on the counsel of Vidhura, the incarnation of Dharma. Bhishma, the grandsire, had appointed him while he was still a teenager as the chief counsellor of King Dhirtarashtra. When Duryodhana was made the king he found Vidhura unacceptable as the chief counsellor and followed the evil advice of Sakuni, the embodiment of wickedness. When Dhirtarashtra, at the pestering of Duryodhana, gave his permission for the game of dice, Vidhura, the personification of knowledge, justice and virtue, fell at his feet and protested, saying "strife will set among your children." But the doting Dhirtarashtra, carried away by his passion for his wicked son, surrendered his better judgment, disregarded the counsel of Vidhura and sent his

fateful invitation to Yudhishtira (Tharuman) for a game of dice. The result was the battle of Kurukshetra. The battle culminated in the total annihilation of a dynasty. If only Duryodhana had heeded the advice of Vidhura, how powerful Kauravas and Pandavas would have become! But then, perhaps we might have lost the Bhagavad Gita!

The Kural under consideration applies not only to sovereign rulers and royal kings but also to organisations which have a set mission. The alcohol of power and success is bound to make the leaders falter in their steps. Ill-meaning advisers can mislead their leader with sugar-coated words. The words of the well-meaning advisers may taste bitter to the leaders. **Therefore a leader who is not prepared to be corrected or rebuked is bound to kiss destruction.** It is only a matter of time. Listening to the advice of a good and honest counsellor is like chewing sugar cane from the top; while listening to the advice of a dishonest and hypocritical counsellor is like chewing sugar cane from the bottom. It will taste sweet first; when you reach the end you will find it totally unpalatable. This then is the essence of the couplet, “Idippatai Ilaatha Aemaraa Mannan, Keduppaar Ilaanum Kedum”.

Chapter 7

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

வருமுன்னர்க் காவாதான் வாழ்க்கை எரிமுன்னர்
வைத்தூறு போலக் கெடும்.

“Vatumunnar Kaavaathaana Vaazhkkai Etimunnar
Vaiththooru Poalak Kedum”.

“Like a stack of hay in a consuming flame, will be destroyed the life
of one who does not guard against faults.”

Prevention is better than cure. But non-prevention does not always end up in a curable stage. Failure to prevent can also lead to a point where no cure at all can be thought of. Therefore, in such instances, it would be idle to compare prevention with cure and say that prevention is better than cure. In such situations, failure to prevent results in utter loss and irremediable destruction.

Compared to the proverb in the English language, Thiruvalluvar's statement is unqualified. He says that one should always be on the guard and avert anything untoward happening:

Forethought is indispensable for all of us in all walks of life at all points of time. Patriots of Pakistan say that Jinnah

had the vision, forethought and planning. Notwithstanding the fact he had implicit faith in Mahatma Gandhi, he stood firm and demanded that he should have a separate land for his people. He foresaw what was in store for his people and averted the calamity at the very outset. This is why the people of Pakistan adore him as the father of their nation.

Tamil historians now say that the self-styled leaders of the Sri Lankan Tamils lacked this forethought and failed to prevent the calamitous situation into which they have now been inextricably bogged.

In so far as a king is concerned, he should not fall prey to certain faults that are capable of pushing him off the track of rectitude. It is said that a king should be free from faults such as Conceit, Wrath, Lust, False Sense of Honour and Parsimony. If a king commits any of the faults he has had it, because these faults are so heinous that they are capable of wrecking him and bringing untold misery to him and to his kingdom.

The success of a king depends on his ability to avoid committing any of these faults. If he falls a prey to any of these, then his life will be ruined even as how a haystack in the midst of a conflagration will be consumed.

Hindu literature is replete with many examples to illustrate this fact. **The insatiable lust of Ravana for Sita brought about his downfall in the hands of Rama.** Irreverent conceit of Soorapathman of Skanda Puraanam notoriety condemned him into utter annihilation. The sporadic wrath of the all-powerful Visvaamitra thwarted his never-ending

attempt to surpass the psychic powers of Vasishta, the Brahma Rishi:

If Ravana, Soorapathman and Visvaamitra had overcome the temptations and shortcomings at the very beginning, their fate would have been different.

We study literature and history not because they are old and are our heritage, but because they have a lesson to teach. Let us learn this lesson- soon and avert destruction. This then is the essence of the Kural - "*Vatumunnar Kaavaathan Vaazhkkai Etimunnar Vaiiththooru Poalak Kedum*".

Chapter 8

DEEDS MUST MATCH WORDS

ஒலித்தக்கால் என்னாம் உவரி எலிப்பகை
நாகம் உயிர்ப்பக் கெடும்.

**“Oliththakkaal Ennaam Uvati Elippahai
Naaham Uyirppak Kedum”.**

**“Though the rats send forth their battle cry
like the surging sea, yet what? The moment
the Serpent breathes upon them, they disappear.”**

The current happenings in Sri Lanka prompted me to discuss this Kural. This couplet occurs in the chapter on “The importance of an organised army”. Thiruvalluvar has devoted two full chapters on the subject of army, one captioned “Padai Maadchi” (Chapter 77) and the other Padai-ch-Cherukku (Chapter 78).

He epitomizes the qualities of an army by saying “that alone deserves the name of army which knows no defeat, which is incapable of being corrupted and which has a long tradition of valour behind it”. In other words, boldness, bravery, military pride, tradition of chivalry and trustworthiness are the four corner-stones that make a regiment invincible.

Now to the Kural under review. Even if the army of rats as enormous as an ocean produces a deafening rumble yet the

moment a snake hisses and breathes the rat army will simply perish or disappear. The purpose of the Kural is to stress that unless the army is congenitally brave and convincingly dedicated, bare numerical strength will not do. Even the qualities of bravery and daring are secondary. It is the firm conviction in the mission, the tenacity of purpose and the determination to achieve the altruistic goal that are essential. It is difficult, almost impossible, to subdue a force whose members in addition to being bold and brave have the tenacity of purpose and the courage of conviction.

If the statistical information released from time to time by the Indian Peace Keeping Force and the Sri Lankan government are anything to go by, then by now the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam should be assumed to have been marginalised if not totally annihilated. But contrary to expectations and defying all comprehension the Sri Lankan government has chosen to have commensal with the Liberation Tigers to the utter consternation of the mighty India. This inscrutable gesture of Sri Lankan government can be taken to be indicative that the Liberation Tigers have become a force to be reckoned with and treated at par, an honour which the Sri Lankan government does not appear to have conferred on the "elected" provincial council. *Ipsa facto* this implies that the Liberation Tigers have the mass support though they are said to be not in the so called political main stream.

While a few disgruntled groups continue to cackle that the Liberation Tigers have been marginalised and are made a spent force and that they would soon be tamed, yet an

interview given by the provincial council leader in one of the Tamil weeklies of Tamil Nadu, reinforces the contrary. He has quite frankly confessed that their group and its army are no match to the Liberation Tigers and that the Indian forces should stay in Sri Lanka to protect them from the inevitable and inescapable ferocity and onslaught of the Liberation Tigers.

According to conservative estimates the army of the North-East provincial council is said to be ten thousand strong compared to the reported few hundreds of the Liberation Tigers. Yet the mighty India fears that the five figure strong army of the provincial council would be ruthlessly destroyed the moment it leaves; the same appears to be the candid opinion of the foreign correspondents and the university dons; and the considered view of the provincial council leader does not appear to be far from the preceding two views.

Why? That is the question! If the Liberation Tigers don't have mass support why should India fear? Can't they be complacent that the fate that overtook the JVP, which is said to have estranged and alienated the people, would overtake the Liberation Tigers also?

If the Liberation Tigers are a bunch of recalcitrants or a gang of gunmen, then why should the five figure army of the ruling group be fearing that they will be pulverized once India leaves?

The answers to the foregoing questions appear to be contained in the Kural. To repeat the Kural, the rats however great they may be in number are by nature timid and incapable of defending themselves; the snake is their dead enemy. If

only the rats band themselves together and attack with single mindedness, snake could be immobilised and put to death. But because rats are feeble and selfish they are incapable of putting up a united front. The moment a snake hisses, why, even at the sight of a snake, they run helter-skelter.

“Who is to bell the cat” is a classic parable that illustrates the intrinsic quality of rats. Rats, according to the fable, were many; they were overpoweringly numerous; but they could not execute their decision to bell the cat. Such was their resolve, bravery and altruism!

If the Liberation Tigers are numerically small and yet are respected by the people, hailed by the International media as guerilla veterans and also terribly feared by their arch enemies, is it not perhaps because they have permeated into the hearts of the people as "boys" with good and honest intentions, that they have the sincerity of purpose and that they are convinced beyond doubt that Eelam is inevitable and that Tamil Eelam is the panacea.

It is this conviction and satisfaction that the Tamil people are behind them and the thought that they are prepared to give their all for the liberation of their land and people that enable them to bstride the earth like Colossus.

Chapter 9

FORCE IS NOT OUT OF PLACE

சொல்லப் பயன்படுவர் சான்றோர் கரும்புபோற்
சொல்லப் பயன்படும் கீழ்.

“Sollap Payanpaduvar Saantroar Katumpupoat
Kollap Payanpadum Keezh”.

“The worthy can be commanded by a simple word; but the low, like the sugar cane, can be made to become useful only by a sound thrashing.”

Rules and regulations are meant only for the mean and the vicious. They are not intended for the worthy and virtuous, because they have their inbuilt and innate rules and regulations. Rules and regulations are necessary in the case of the mean and the low because fear is the only way or rule of conduct for the degenerates; fear is the only language which they can understand.

If you want to obtain juice from grapes or from mango fruit, you need not have to exert great pressure to extract it. You simply place the fruit in your palm and tighten your fist, and there will automatically trickle down the juice into the vessel. That is not the case with many other fruits. Juice from sugar cane or coconut cannot be extracted that easily. It needs the application of a great deal of pressure and force. Whereas

the worthy and virtuous may be compared to grapes and mangoes, the low and the mean may be compared to sugar cane and coconuts.

If you want something out of the virtuous, no sooner it is said than it is done by them; no force need be applied on them. But if you want something out of the mean and non-virtuous, then you cannot get it out of them unless you force them and 'crush' them even as one crushes sugar cane in a mill to obtain the juice from it.

Even as the writer is writing this, he is able to sense the doubt that is brewing in the mind of the readers. "Will not the timid and the cowardly also comply no sooner than it is said", one may ask. "Is it not a good quality of the brave and the bold not to comply with each and every demand that is made of them?" another may query. It is agreed that they are valid questions and carry some force. But, in this context we are referring to requests and commands made by the good-hearted ones for the common weal and not to the demands and pleas made by the ill-meaning ones for selfish ends.

The Kural under consideration tells us in an indirect way that laws are not meant for the ones who follow a code of conduct of their own and that they are absolutely necessary for the majority of us who understand only the language of sanction and punishment.

That this view of *Thiruvalluvar* has been echoed and endorsed by *Avvaiyaar* is borne out by her saying, "*Iranam Koduththaal Iduvar, Idaarey Saranam Koduththaalum Thaan*".

The Kural under review is the eighth Kural in the chapter on "Baseness" which is the 108th chapter in the Thirukkural and though this particular Kural in its contextual meaning refers to the nature of people who are tight-fisted, miserly and parsimonious, yet, in the view of the writer, it should not be narrowly interpreted. It should be deemed to have a broader connotation as has been adumbrated in the foregoing lines.

Chapter 10

WEEDING IS ESSENTIAL

கொலையிற் கொடியாரை வேந்தொறுத்தல் பைங்கூழ்
களைகட் டதனொடு நேர்.

**“Kolaiyt Kodiyaatai Vaenthoruththal Paingkoozh
Kalaikad Dathanodu Naer”.**

**“The king punishing the wicked with death is like the tiller rooting
out the weeds to help the crops”.**

Killing is bad; killing of human beings is worse; it is bad, however strong the reason therefor may be. Many will agree that in our large library of lofty literature, Thirukkural is the first to condemn killing outright. The 33rd chapter of Thirukkural is on “Non-killing” (“Kollaamai”). Thiruvalluvar abhors killing to such an extent that he declares, **“Let no one do that which would destroy the life of another although he should lose his own life”.**

As for Thiruvalluvar, non-killing is the creed and the rule. He accepts the fact that it is a rule and therefore impliedly concedes that every rule has its exception. Whereas he declares non-killing as the rule in the “Virtue” section of the Thirukkural, he has shown the exception to this rule in the “Wealth” section of Thirukkural. It is this exception which forms the basis for the Kural which is under consideration.

If Thiruvalluvar, the protestant of Hinduism and proponent of Ahimsa and Non-violence, himself permits an exception to the rule against killing, then there must be a cogent reason for it.

Let us now focus our attention on the Kural which reads, “Kolaiyit Kodiyaatai Vaenthoruththal Paingkoozh Kalaikad Dathanodu Naer”.

It is paramount for a farmer to look after his crops. He will do all within his power to ensure that the crops grow luxuriantly. To ensure the safety and well-being of his crops he removes all the weeds in his farm that are harmful to the growth of the crops. His main purpose is not the extermination of the weeds. The well-being of the crops is his main concern. But, to achieve his chief objective he makes it a point to remove anything that hinders or is likely to hinder, the growth of the crops.

Just as the farmer tends his crops, a king looks after the welfare and interests of his subjects. The well-being of his subjects is of paramount importance to a leader. When the king finds that the well-being of his subjects is held back by social human weeds, then he uses the state machinery of justice to keep them away from the field of human crops by incarcerating these elements. When such attempts prove useless and he finds that the existence of such human weeds shows signs of stifling the progress and well-being of the human crops, he exterminates them altogether. This is our daily experience and we observe this phenomenon in all civilised countries.

The government of any civilised country uses its laws and law enforcement agencies to discipline the anti-social elements by imposing punishment on those that are proved to be guilty of one offence or another. If the crime is such that the perpetrator of that crime is going to threaten the very existence of the members of society, then such a perpetrator is executed. This act of extermination of anti-social and incorrigible criminals was viewed by some libertarians as barbaric and inhuman, and they have managed to abolish the death penalty in some western countries. These very countries which abolished the death penalty sometime ago, are now beginning to wonder whether it is not necessary to re-introduce it.

Whatever be the view of modern thinkers and sociologists, Thiruvalluvar was of the opinion that anti-social elements should be mercilessly removed if they are proved to be inimical to the well-being of society as a whole.

Having said all that, we must still pause for a while and ask the question, "Can a human being kill another, even if the law and circumstances demand it?"

Chapter 11

THE GREAT AND THE ORDINARY

செயற்கரிய செய்வார் பெரியர் சிறியர்
செயற்கரிய செய்கலா தார்.

“Seyatkatiya Seivaar Petiyar Siriyar
Seyatkativa Seikalaa Thaar”.

**“The great ones are they who can achieve the impossible;
the feeble ones are those who cannot.”**

This is the sixth Kural in the chapter on “Greatness of Ascetics”. The term “greatness” is not easy to define. It can have different connotations for different people. To some, inventors may be great; to some others, artistes may be great; and to yet others divine men may be great. As for Thiruvalluvar, the great are those that can accomplish the most difficult or impossible deeds. According to him, those that cannot accomplish difficult tasks are feeble and ordinary.

Let me illustrate this Kural with the help of an episode from the Mahabharatha: The great king Santanu had a son by the name Devavrata, who later came to be known as Bhishma, the grandsire. When Devavrata was twelve years old, his father crowned him as “Yuvarajah” (crown prince). Though the king, Santanu, was reasonably old, yet, he was not free from passions. One day, when the king was perambulating the banks

of the river Yamuna, he accidentally set his eyes upon a maiden who was bewitchingly beautiful. The king approached the maiden, revealed his identity, and asked if she would consent to be his wife. The maiden, who appeared to be very coy and shy, modestly answered and requested the king to seek the consent of her father who was the Chief of the fishermen in the Yamuna area.

The Chief of the fishermen, who was courteous but shrewd, told the king that he would give his daughter to him provided the child born of his daughter would be the king after him. In spite of the overmastering desire of the king to possess the daughter of the Chief, he could not give that promise to the Chief because of the love he had for Devavrata, and therefore returned to the palace dejected and baffled.

Devavrata, the Yuvarajah, who was very observant, found his father to be very sad, and asked him as to what was worrying him of late. The king beat about the bush and tried to divert the attention of his son. But Devavrata approached the charioteer of his father and found out the truth. As a dutiful son, he went straight to the Chief of the fishermen and asked him to give his daughter in marriage to his father, the king. When the Chief unhurtingly told the same reply as he had given the king earlier, Devavrata unhesitatingly promised that he would renounce his rights as heir-apparent to the throne, and took a vow to that effect. When Devavrata did this, the Chief could not believe it. He was overwhelmed with astonishment, joy and wonder, and readily declared that Devavrata could then and there take his daughter to his father, the king, to be given in marriage.

Even as the Chief declared his readiness to part with his daughter, a streak of doubt crossed the mind of the Chief, and he falteringly said, “ I have no doubt in your promise and am certain that you will not go back on your word; but what can my daughter or her children do if your children try to snatch the kingdom from my daughter’s children?” This question stunned Devavrata for a while. But his determination to fulfil the desire of his father was such that he made his supreme renunciation, and declared: “I shall never marry, and I dedicate myself to a life of unbroken chastity.” This renunciation which Devavrata made is so rare and great that Sage Viyasar says in the Mahabharatha, the Gods in heaven themselves showered flowers on Devavrata; and cries of “Bhishma! Bhishma!” reverberated in the sky. The term “Bhishma” is applied to a person who undertakes a terrible vow and fulfils it too.

Only persons of the calibre of Devavrata are worthy of being categorised as great. Others are mere ordinary mortals

Chapter 12

ADVERSITY HAS ITS USES

கேட்டினும் உண்டோர் உறுதி கிளைஞரை
நீட்டி அளப்பதோர் கோல்.

**“Kaeddinum Undoar Uruthi Kilainarai
Needdi Alappathoar Koal”.**

**“Even in misfortune there is good for misfortune is the yardstick
wherewith one can fully measure the loyalty of friends”.**

We say that we have friends and we do say too that so and so is our best friend. Thus we have friends of different degrees and varying qualities. But seldom do we pause to ask the question “What is friendship?” Let us today ask this question. What is friendship? Friendship is that which prevents ways leading to ruin, persuades entry into ways that are right and shares the suffering in the time of adversity. In other words friendship may be said to be the readiness, willingness and solicitude of a person to help his friend even as how the hand of a person spontaneously rushes when his garment slips away from his waist. It may be, as we have seen, easy to define friendship, but how can one test whether one is a real friend or not? What this test is, is contained in the 796th Kural of the Thirukkural and that test is the subject matter of this article.

Whether a person is a friend or not can be tested only in one’s adversity. There will be thousands of friends

surrounding you like honey-bees when you are doing fine. You must see how many of them stand by you when you are in difficulty, powerless and penniless. If there is one who is by your side even when you have been afflicted by poverty and misery then he is a true friend, a friend indeed.

“When the pond is full and the fishes are abundant many are the birds that throng the bank of the pond as if the pond is a bosom friend of theirs. But when the pond becomes dry and the fishes are finished none of the birds that swarmed the bank of the pond could be seen there. They all go away like the fleas and the mites that desert a dead ox. It is only the water plants like ‘Koddi’ and ‘Aampal’ that share the misfortune of the pond and perish. It is only the people of the quality of ‘Koddi’ and ‘Aampal’ who can be called true friends” says Avvaiyaar, the great Tamil poetess.

Adversity is unbearable and un-welcome. It is bad. But if one is discreet, one will find that there is something good about that also. What is it? Adversity gives one the opportunity to test one’s friends; that adversity serves as the real touchstone to see whether a person who masquerades as a friend is a friend or an opportunist. Thiruvalluvar attempts to hammer into our head the hard fact that there is no situation that is absolutely bad, and that everything has something good about it and that we must make the best out of the worst. In other words positive thinking and optimistic orientation are essential for one’s success in life.

Let us try to understand the Kural under consideration with the help of a story we know. Kumbhakarna is a well known character in the Ramayana. He was the younger brother of

Raavana, but was elder to Vibhishana. Like Maareesa his uncle and his younger brother Vibhishana he also did not approve of the kidnapping of Sita and her confinement in Ashok Vana. He advised Raavana to release Sita and befriend Rama. But Raavana's amorous and immoral passion for Sita and his overconfidence in his superiority made him deaf to logic and blind to arithmetic. Kumbhakarna knew that defeat and disaster were imminent. He continued to advise his brother Raavana even in the face of courting the murderous wrath of Raavana. But Raavana would not listen. When Raavana's intransigence grew adamant and he ordered Kumbhakarna to get out of the place if he was not prepared to do as he (Raavana) commanded, Kumbhakarna begged of his mighty brother to excuse him for all his lapses of the past, entreated him to return Sita in the event of his death in the battle-field and rushed to the battle-field like a hurricane.

When Raavana decided to go his own way, Vibhishana for right or wrong reasons, decided to desert him and to join the foe however great, just and divine that foe might be, and having gone to the foe even agreed to be crowned as the would-be-king of Lanka. But Kumbhakarna decided to perish with his kith and kin rather than join with the enemy to aid and abet the killing of his dear and near. At the battle-field when Vibhishana tried to win Kumbhakarna over to the side of Rama by offering the Kingdom of Lanka (upon the sure death of Raavana) he said that he had gone to the battle-field to fight Rama and not to receive crumbs and that he will not get back home without laying down his life for his dear brother Raavana who fed him, bred him and gave his all to him to make him worth his salt.

Adversity has its uses

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It is persons of Kumbhakarna's calibre and quality who stand by their kith and kin and the dear and near during times of adversity, down-fall and suffering who could be called friends; others are hypocrites and time-servers. They are found out during times of adversity and crisis.

Chapter 13

MAINTAIN YOUR DECORUM

தலையின் இழிந்த மயிரனைபர் மாந்தர்
நிலையின் இழிந்தக் கடை.

“Thalaiyin Izhintha Mayitanaiyar Maanthar
Nilaiyin Izhinthak Kadai”.

“Men fallen from high estate are like the hair fallen
from the head”.

Hair-care is nothing new. It had developed as an art even during the time of Thiruvalluvar. In more than two contexts he has referred to hair-care. People all over the world spend a lot of time, energy and money for the purpose of keeping the hair on their head. Males and females, young and old, are particular about keeping their hair in proper form. Girls spend a good part of their earnings in perming and curling and singeing their hair. Old men and women in Europe expend hundreds of pounds to ensure that they look smart and youngish.

If one sits back and ponders as to how much time and money are spent on grooming one's hair one will simply be stunned. Care and attention are given to the hair only when it is intact on the head. **But once a single hair falls off from the head how do we treat it? We treat it as dirt and even filth and often feel loath to touch it. Of course, it is the self-same hair**

to which we quite religiously and regularly applied cream, shampoo and scent. But the moment it has been displaced from its position and descends to the ground we regard it as loathsome and it becomes untouchable.

Such is the condition of people who fall from their position of rectitude and honour. Even those who are exalted like a hill will be held low if they commit deeds that are debasing, even if such deeds are of a minor nature. If a person is honest and righteous, people will adore, admire and respect him. But if he commits the unacceptable and stoops to any mean level, then people will cease to regard him and start to treat him as dust and dirt. *Thiruvalluvar* likens the fallen hair to a person who has descended from a position of honour, with a view to driving home the importance of good and virtuous conduct.

The mighty Raavana of Lanka was held in high esteem as a man of valour and honour until he slipped and slid into the quagmire of ignominy and infamy by coveting the wife of another. When he fell from his height of nobility, even his much adored and faithful wife *Mandothari* treated him as a nonentity. The *Devendra*, the Chief of *Devas*, himself became small when he coveted *Akalikai*.

In the view of Thiruvalluvar, as good conduct or good demeanour makes for excellence, it ought to be preserved more carefully than life itself. If we fail to conduct ourselves well, then we are certain to be treated as dirt by our fellow beings.

Chapter 14

ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD

கணைகொடிது யாழ்கோடு செவ்விது ஆங்கன்ன
வினைபடு பாலால் கொளல்.

“Kanaikodithu Yarlkoadu Chevviu Aankanna
Vinaipadu Paalal Kolal”.

“The arrow though straight in shape is deadly; the yarl (lute)
though crooked in shape is mellifluous. Let people be judged by
their actions and not by their appearance”.

We have a tendency to take everything at its face value without looking at its intrinsic value. This is a tendency we have to guard ourselves against. It is easier said than done. Nonetheless, unless we are very circumspect in regard to this matter, we are likely to meet frustration at every turn in our life. To drive home the truth that appearance is more often than not deceptive, Thiruvalluvar employs a couple of illustrations in the chapter on “Inconsistent Conduct”. One of such illustrations is contained in the Kural under consideration.

The arrow is straight and direct but in its function it is deadly and cruel. Compared to the arrow the lute is curved and crooked but functionally it produces beautiful music and

soothes our heart and soul. Therefore, the quality and character of a person should be decided not by how he looks but by what he does. Many men, though foul-hearted, appear holy, bathe in sacred waters and pass for great men in the eyes of the world. The world has people whose outside appears as fair and reddish as the berry of the Abrus (Kunrimani) but whose inside is as black as the nose of that berry. The berry of Abrus is bewitchingly beautiful with its red colour and barrel shape and is very tempting. But the berry is lethally poisonous. If one were to judge it at its face value and then consume it as if it were an edible fruit, then one would be committing an irretrievably fatal mistake.

Our *Puranas* and *Ithikasas* are replete with instances where people have fallen prey to the machinations of the wicked by reason of their taking the wicked at face value and appearance. The great *Rama* himself fell into the trap of *Raavana* when *Mareecha* transformed himself into a wonderful deer and bewitched *Rama* with its surpassing beauty. Much against his wish, *Mareecha*, at the instance and importunity of *Raavana*, transformed himself into a beautiful deer and appeared in all its splendour and colour and spots before *Sita* and attracted her innocent attention. When the magic deer wandered and coursed here and there in the sight of *Sita* busy gathering flowers, she set her eyes on the peculiarly bewitching deer and stood spell-bound at its wondrous beauty. So uncontainable was her desire to possess it that she called *Rama* and *Lakshmana* to have a look at it. Both of them came out of the cottage to see it. So exquisite and marvellous was the beauty of the deer that *Lakshmana* paused for a while to assess it and evaluate it. He hesitated to take the

deer at its face value and he grew suspicious. *Rama* on the contrary, unable to resist the entreaties of his wife *Sita*, believed it to be a real deer and wanted to capture it for *Sita*. The cautioning advice of *Lakshmana* notwithstanding, *Rama* set out to capture the deer. The golden deer played games of deceit and disguise and took *Rama* far into the forest. It was then that *Rama* realised that *Lakshmana* was as usual right and that it was not really a deer but a transformation of a *Rakshasa*, and darted an arrow towards the wicked deer. When it pierced the deer *Mareecha* recovered his natural form and cried "*Oh Sita! Oh Lakshmana!*", in response to which, *Lakshmana* left *Sita* alone in the cottage and rushed towards the direction from where the cry of alarm came. *Raavana* then approached the unprotected *Sita* and carried her away to Lanka. What followed, you readers know.

Rama was simply deceived by the external appearance of the deer and fell an easy prey into the trap set by *Raavana*.

When such is the case with men of *Rama*'s sagacity and wisdom, you can imagine how more prone and gullible we ordinary mortals will be. Let us therefore be very wary in our judgment of men and matters. This is the lesson the above *Kural* attempts to teach us.

Did not the great *Avvaiyaar* say that in spite of its mightiness the ocean is saline and useless, but the small spring on its coast is potable and useful?

Chapter 15

IRRESPONSIBLE MINISTERS

பழுதெண்ணும் மந்திரியின் பக்கத்துள் தெவ்வோர்
எழுபது கோடி யுறும்.

**“Pazhuthennum Manthitiyin Pakkaththul Thevvoar
Ezhupathu Koadi Urum”.**

**“Far better are seven hundred million of enemies for a king than
a minister whose counsel brings ruin to the king”.**

Advisers and counsellors are essential and indispensable assets of an administrator. The above Kural now taken for discussion kept on resurging and resurfacing as I lay musing and cogitating over the happenings in the Tamil lands of Sri Lanka. For a moment I forgot the ethics of the tribal war and pondered on the unprecedented miseries and hardships of our Tamil brethren in Tamil Eelam. Cannot somebody help at once to end the carnage in Tamil Eelam, my conscience asked. The thought “whoever be in the right or wrong, whatever be the whys and wherefores of the internecine killings and recriminations, Tamil population in Sri Lanka is diminishing, economic progress has been retarded, the educational process has been halted and the social etiquettes of conduct have been obliterated” rankled through me. In a state of hopelessness and anguish I wishfully wondered whether any spiritual force

can bring the warring Tamil factions together and consolidate their wasting resources to put up a brave front against our common enemy. This wishful thinking reminded me of the Kural under discussion.

It is the duty of a minister to give decisively what is right and good though the king be unwise and therefore refuses to heed the advice. But if a trusted minister happens to be wicked and ill-meaning then he will spell doom for the king. Thiruvalluvar says that it would do the king lesser harm to have millions of enemies by his side than to have a minister who thinks not wisely and honestly.

This statement of Thiruvalluvar is verily true and is amply demonstrated by many episodes in the Mahabharatha. The first of a series of events that led to the devastating slaughter on the battlefield of Kurukshetra was the gambling match into which Yudhishtira was inveigled by the crafty and ruinous advice of Sakuni who was Duryodhana's evil genius. When Duryodhana was burning with jealousy at the sight of the prosperity of the Pandavas at Indraprastha he thought of waging a war against the Pandavas to drive them out of Indraprastha. If the ministers of Duryodhana had endorsed his view and waged the war, Mahabharatha might not be what we now know it to be, full of intrigues, treachery and foul play. But Sakuni, the evil genius, advised the course of a game of dice to snatch away the kingdom of the Pandavas. There were many lucid intervals where there were signs of sanity dawning on Duryodhana. But at every such juncture Sakuni led Duryodhana up the garden path.

If the Kauravas failed to see reason and justice, the Pandavas at least could have avoided the Kurukshetra battle.

Of course Yudhishtira tried his very best to avoid the blood bath at all cost. In fact it is this desire to avoid enmity and blood bath that led to Yudhishtira's giving consent for the game of dice. But there were certain unreasonable advisers on the side of the Pandavas too. Bhima was one such person. Whatever justification elders may offer, Krishna himself was criminally responsible for Kurukshetra. When the battle commenced at Kurukshetra, Arjuna powerfully pleaded with Krishna and said, "Although to fight and kill his enemies is Kshashtra's dharma, what joy can he get out of power, position and wealth acquired by slaughter and grief inflicted on brothers, friends and near relations?" Krishna, in the opinion of one school of thought bluffingly explained the principles of man's activities and the proper discharge of his duties. But in point of fact what Arjuna felt and argued has a great deal of force and there is more truth in it than what appears on the surface. As we all know the Pandavas defeated the Kauravas and became the unquestioned sovereigns of the land. But in victory they did not find the joy they had expected. The lesson we learn from the Mahabharatha is that man pursues madly the object of his desire until it is achieved. Once achieved he becomes the slave of another desire and he finds no peace.

The painful and blood curdling episodes of the Mahabharatha parade one after the other when one hears of the bellicose stance of the various groups in the Tamil homeland. There may be some force in the argument of each one of these groups. But in the smoke and fume discharged during the super-charged arguments what is lost sight of is the fact that whichever the group that "wins" at the end, the lives

What are lost are Tamil lives, the properties that are lost are Tamil properties and the ignominy that is earned is for the whole Tamil race.

Cannot the advisers and counsellors of these warring groups pause for a while to consider this Kural and advise their leaders to avoid the path of race destruction. If they don't act wisely now, it may be too late very soon. Tamil energy and Tamil lives should not be wasted in vain.

Let us remember: "இடிப்பாரை இல்லாத ஏமரா முன்னன் கெடுப்பார் இலானும் கெடும்" (448). The king who is without the guard of men who can rebuke him when needed will perish even though there be no one to destroy him.

Chapter 16

TIMELY HELP IS PRICELESS

காலத்தி னாற்செய்த நன்றி சிறிதெனினும்
ஞாலத்தின் மாணப் பெரிது.

“Kaalaththi Naatseitha Nantri Siritheninum
Gnaalaththin Maaṇap Petithu”.

“Timely help, even small, transcends the world.”

“You who are born to do good should at least refrain from doing evil even if you can’t do virtuous deeds”, said Swami Vivekananda. Thus Swami has made us understand that it is a human duty to help others. All the religions and every ethical code of the world insist that we should help the needy. Rendering help is good for the doer and good for the recipient. It gives satisfaction and contentment to the giver and comforts the anguished and anxious heart of the receiver. The doer of good deeds receives a plus point through his act. But the doer should not do such acts in the hope that he would receive something in return. Any help that is done with the expectation of a reward is not a help at all. It is true that many of us, or rather most of us who are lesser mortals, help others in the hope that we will receive something greater in return from the recipient. This attitude, Valluvar says, is improper. We must help even as the sky helps us with rain. “Benevolence seeks not

return. What does the world give back to the clouds?" declares Valluvar.

But rare are people who benefit others without expecting any reward. It is hard to find people who help others because others are in distress. As our forebears were aware of the nature of human beings they have at every turn extolled the virtues of benevolence and exhorted us to be kind to our fellow beings. Thus, the great Avvaiyaar says, "If you have benefited anyone, do not be longing for the day when that person will return that benevolence to you. It will come to you somehow. Take the case of the coconut palm. You pour water and sprinkle fertilizer at the ground level. If you expect the palm to return your good act at the ground level you will be disappointed. The return comes not from the exact point of help but from elsewhere. The help comes from the crown of the palm in the form of sweet and beautiful coconuts.

Every act has a reaction which is equal and opposite. **Good acts will have good reactions and evil acts will have unpleasant reactions.** It is this rule of the physical sciences that the words of *Avvaiyaar* expound.

It is customary to give the ocean, mountain or earth as examples of the biggest things in the world, though there are things bigger than these. Thiruvalluvar also chooses to give ocean, earth and mountain as examples of things that are great. First two of these examples are used by *Thiruvalluvar* in the context of *gratitude*.

The couplet under consideration in this article is the second in the chapter on *Gratitude* (Chapter 11). A favour that

is rendered at the appropriate time of need is much larger than the world even if that favour be small in value. It is not the value of the benefit that is material. In considering the worth of the benefit it is the context in which such benefit was conferred that should be taken into consideration. **Giving a palm-full of life-saving water to a wounded soldier in the battle-field by a thirsty old man who is almost at the point of death for lack of water is a far greater help than any big wealth to that soldier which the king may bestow on him when he returns from the battle-field.** The comparison is not between water and wealth. The consideration should be the contextual nature of the help.

Chapter 17

ESCHEW WHAT SOCIETY CONDEMNS

மழித்தலும் நீட்டலும் வேண்டா உலகம்
பழித்தது ஒழித்து விடின்.

“Mazhiththalum Needdalum Vaendaa Ulagam
Pazhiththathu Ozhifththu Vidin”.

“Neither matted hair thou wantest nor shaven head
if thou abstain from what the world condemneth”.

We pay a lot of attention to our external appearance. We wish to appear commendably comely and personable. Human nature is such that everyone wants to appear more handsome and beautiful than he or she really is! It is because of this our forebears had a saying “Aarl paathi, aadai paathi” - meaning only 50 per cent is natural beauty, the balance is artificial adornment. To the ordinary men and women, it is the external appearance that is more important; they care not much about the internal. It is this lack of concern for the inner-self and the obsession with the exterior appearance that is retarding the progress of humanity. This state of affairs is not peculiar to our times; it has been prevalent even during the times of Buddha, Socrates and Thiruvalluvar. Peace, tranquillity and happiness

could be acquired only through paying attention to the inner-self.

Man does not become great by sporting this kind of hair-style and that kind of hair-do. **Greatness lies in how pure and poised his mind is. He will be judged by his virtues and by what he is, not by what he looks.** The learned know that appearance is deceptive and therefore they will judge a person only by what he intrinsically is. This is what Thiruvalluvar tells us in this couplet under consideration.

He says that there is no need for a shaven crown or shaped hair-style if a person could abstain from those deeds which the wise have condemned. Now the question arises, “What are these prohibited deeds?” They are numerous and hence impossible to catalogue. Therefore it would be safe to say that whatever is done with a spotless mind is virtue, all else is evil and vanity. In other words, whatever we do when our mind is not happily poised is evil. **Virtue consists in avoiding envy, lust, wrath and the harsh word.** It may be correct to say, according to Thiruvalluvar, that our mind will be pure and clean when we have flushed these out from our mind. When our mind is cleansed of all these four sinful qualities all our acts will be virtuous and meritorious. If a person avoids envy, lust, wrath and the harsh word, then there is no need for him to grow his hair or to trim it; in fact, he will not care to do it.

Let us illustrate the point. Take the case of Mahatma Gandhi. Sir Winston Churchill called him “Half naked fakir” disparagingly. Mahatma was not hurt; he did not care two hoots. He never worried about his exterior. He spent very little on his clothing and chose to wear a cheap piece of cloth to

cover his shame. He in fact loathed to wear costly habiliments. As his mind was pure he did not feel that he should adorn himself. Perhaps it may be correct to say that it is those that are not internally honest and pure that seek to dress well with an eye to cover up the internal shortfall. Honesty was the best policy of Mahatma. The story of Harishchandra enraptured him even as a boy of ten years of age and captured his mind and soul so much that he developed an implicit faith in truthfulness and practised veracity to the very hilt. He knew that his mind could be purged of impurities and kept pure only through speaking truth and accordingly led a life of absolute truthfulness. It is this purity in thought, word and deed that enabled Gandhi to secure Independence for India without engaging in a military war. Again it is the leading of a pure life that elevated this ordinary mortal of Porbander to the status of divine being thus proving the age old philosophical concept of India that humans are replica of the Almighty and that humans can become divine through pursuit of pure life of which Gandhi was an embodiment.

Chapter 18

GOOD DEEDS BEGET GOOD RESULTS

அறத்தாறு இதுவென வேண்டா சிவிகை
பொறுத்தானோடு ஊர்ந்தான் இடை.

“Araththaarū Ithuvēna Vēndaā Sivihai
Poruththaanoadu Oornthaan Idai”

“Why search for the fruits of Dharma? Behold the one in the palanquin and the palanquin-bearer”.

Men are often confused and perplexed at the way things happen in day-to-day life. Even as babies at home and children in the school, we are told and taught time and again that we should do good and avoid evil. We are also taught the reason why we should engage in virtuous deeds and abstain from doing evil. Mentors at school and parents at home tell us that meritorious deeds would stand us in good stead and reward us, and also that evil deeds would plunge us into abysmal depths of danger. Being words that come from elders whom society recognizes we heed such words and try to behave as far as possible in accordance with those precepts. But when we grow up and begin to react to society's pressures we start to find life quite different from what we have been told it to be. We find, for some inexplicable reason, the virtuous ones suffer

and the wicked ones thrive. It is then that we begin to raise doubts and question the correctness of the morals and ethics we were forced to learn when we were young and credulous.

It is on such despairing occasions the Kural under consideration comes very handy to explain to us the reality. This kind of despair is not peculiar to us average people or to the people of a particular era. The Pandavas of the Mahabharatha themselves fell into such melancholy and hopelessness and posed questions of a self-defeating nature. Balarama, the great archer, who visited the Pandavas while the latter were living incognito in the forest, himself unable to bear the miserable life led by the Pandavas, turned to Krishna and commented thus: "Oh Krishna, it would seem that virtue and wickedness bear contrary fruits in this life; the wicked Duryodhana is ruling his kingdom clad in silk and gold, while the virtuous Yudhishtira lives in the forest wearing the barks of trees; seeing such unmerited prosperity and undeserved privation, men have lost their faith in God. The praise of virtue in the Sastras seems mere mockery when we see the actual results of good and evil in this world".

Balarama was a learned man and he knew the implications and interpretations of the Sastras and of ethical teaching. **Even so, the love and regard he bore for the Pandavas were such that he, like an ordinary mortal, lamented the vagaries of the world and uttered such words.**

A virtuous person may be undergoing untold hardships and a wicked one may be leading a splendidly comfortable life. It is to explain these seemingly contrary fruits, the ancient Indians formulated the theory of Karma and Re-birth. It is only

Good deeds beget good results:

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through this theory this paradoxical situation in our day-to-day experience could be explained.

Now to the Kural. **“Why search for the fruits of Dharma? Behold the person who is seated majestically in the palanquin and the people who are carrying the palanquin. Why is the one who is in the palanquin so comfortable and the carriers miserable?”** The one who is in the palanquin may be leading a mean wicked life and the carriers of the palanquin may be honest and fair-minded people. Yet the wicked palanquin-rider is comfortable and the virtuous carriers are miserable. There is a reason. The wicked palanquin-rider reaps the fruits of his virtuous deeds in a previous birth and the virtuous carriers are reaping the fruits of their wicked acts in their earlier births. In other words, if somebody does meritorious deeds or wicked deeds in this birth he will not see the fruits of his acts in this life; he will reap them in his subsequent birth. Therefore it is idle for good ones to lament that misery follows them in spite of their good acts. They must understand that these sufferings are results of their past deeds in past births.

As good will always beget good, Thiruvalluvar exhorts us to unflinchingly do good, remembering the case of the palanquin-rider and the palanquin-carriers.

Chapter 19

FATE IS SUPREME; BUT DON'T DESPAIR

ஊழிற் பெருவலி யாவுள மற்றொன்று
சூழினும் தான்முந் துறும்.

“Oozhit Petuvali Yaavula Mattrontru
Choozhinum Thaanmunth Thurum”.

“What is stronger than fate? If we think of an expedience to avert it,
it will itself be with us before the thought.”

This is the 380th Kural. It is an easy Kural and therefore a household one. It tells us that everything is predetermined and that, however we may try, it is difficult to defeat destiny. This does not mean that one should rush to the conclusion that Thiruvalluvar is a fatalist; no, far from it. He believes in human effort also and goes to the extent of stressing that those who endeavour unflinchingly can defeat fate. This should not be interpreted as a contradiction of his conviction. While subscribing to the view that fate is invincible he is trying to drive home the fact that we should not become fatalists and abandon all efforts and thus lose grip on life.

The story of Savitri and Satyavaan is a classical instance our forebears have bestowed on us to illustrate the point that

Fate is supreme; but don't despair

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God Himself would come to the assistance of those that strive relentlessly to achieve their goals.

Let us now illustrate the Kural under discussion, though by reason of its simplicity it needs no illustration or further interpretation. Let me once again paint an episode from the great Mahabharatha to drive home the point of the Kural.

Yudhishtira (Tharumar) performed his Rajasuya Yaaga and received the title of "Emperor". Sage Vyasa, who had gone to witness the Rajasuya, while bidding farewell to the Pandavas, warned them that much sorrow and suffering were in store for thirteen years to follow. The words of Vyasa filled Yudhishtira with grief and he felt miserable. He prostrated himself before the Almighty and implored Him to give him wisdom and protection. He took a vow not to speak harshly to any-one and resolved to avoid any possibility for conflict. Also he took a vow not to give way to anger which, as repeatedly stressed by Thiruvalluvar, is the root cause for enmity in the world.

Yudhishtira had taken every precaution to avoid the pitfalls that could force him into an irretrievable situation. Still, when Sakuni, the evil genius of Duryodhana, invited Yudhishtira for a gambling match, his resolve dissolved, and he inexplicably agreed. How? Why? Why did the wise and nice Yudhishtira allow himself to be inveigled into this tricky step, the disastrous consequences of which he was not unaware? Had he temporarily mortgaged his sane brain, and, had the innate passion in him for the game of dice got the better of him?

It is not correct to say that he forgot even for a fleeting moment the evil consequences of the game of dice. Then, why

did he agree to this game which eventually resulted in the annihilation of a race through internecine killings? The reason was his fixed resolve to be friendly with his cousin Duryodhana and others by not turning down their invitation. Because of his superabundant anxiety and wish to foster goodwill, he fell an easy prey to the designs of destiny. Though Yudhishtira had taken all efforts to avert confrontation with and enmity towards his cousin, the all-powerful destiny manoeuvred events in such a way as to have its own desired way.

This episode is an illustration of the futility of the plans of human beings, however well-meant unless aided by the Almighty. The best wisdom of Yudhishtira was in vain, and useless against fate. Fate had its way and the righteous resolve of Yudhishtira proved to be of no avail.

In the course of the game of dice Yudhishtira lost his all-kingdom, wife, brothers, gold and jewels. At this stage of disgrace and helplessness Dhirtarashtra gave back all that Yudhishtira had lost and asked him to return to Indraprastha. And Yudhishtira departed with his brothers. Duryodhana was thoroughly upset by what his father had done and taunted his father for having let the Pandavas go. The taunt was so piercing that the doting Dhirtarashtra gave permission to call back Yudhishtira for another game of dice and a messenger was sent forthwith to fetch Yudhishtira and his brothers.

Once bitten, twice shy, we say. But Yudhishtira appeared ignorant of this. When the second invitation came he could have declined. But he would not; and he did not. When he heard the messenger extend the invitation, he said "Good and evil come from destiny and cannot be avoided. A challenge to

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dice cannot in honour be refused. I must accept it". Thus, destiny prevailed on him, and his wisdom and experience deserted him.

Such is the power of fate. **Even so, -let us not yield to despondency or despair. To endeavour, again and again, is our duty, whatever destiny may have in store!**

Chapter 20

LOVE IS BLIND

எழுதுங்கால் கோல்காணாக் கண்ணேபோல் கொண்கன்
பழிகாணேன் கண்ட இடத்து.

**“Ezhuthunkaal Koalkaanaak Kanneypoal Konkan
Pazhikaanein Kanda Idaththu”.**

**“Like the eyes that see not the pencil that paints the eyebrows,
I cannot see my husband’s fault just when I meet him.”**

This is the 1285th Kural and occurs in the third part of the Thirukkural, namely, the part dealing with “Kaamam” which may be translated as love or affection between a male and a female. As this Kural could be best understood and appreciated in a contextual situation, let me explain it by unfolding the scene and setting.

A girl had started courtship with a boy-friend of equal standing and compatible temperament with the connivance of her foster-mother who was worldly-wise. The lovers used to meet at pre-arranged venues and times without the knowledge of the natural parents. Once it so happened that the boy-friend for some reason or other could not meet his girl-friend at the appointed time and place. The girl who was thoroughly disappointed by the unpunctuality of the boy and became furious beyond control started swearing in the presence of her

foster-mother. The foster-mother who realised the heart pangs of the girl started consoling her by saying that there must have been some good reason for the failure of the boy to turn up as promised and that she should quietly explain the embarrassment and frustration caused by such an irresponsible act of the boy when they meet again, which would be soon. The anger and anguish of the girl were such that she could not be comforted or pacified and she started recalling the various instances when he had let her down like that and swore that she would not set eyes on that “cheat” and “humbug” when he comes the next time, and pledged to repay tit for tat.

A few days passed and the love-torn girl received a message to the effect that the boy had planned to meet her at a certain place and time. The very mention of the boy sent an electrical impulse that coursed through her whole body to make her feel supremely ecstatic. Even so, she feigned as though the message had no effect on her and she appeared apathetic.

The day came and the minute arrived and the girls’ heart was thirsting and hungering to rush to the rendezvous. But she pretended to be busy otherwise. As the foster-mother feared that a failure to keep the appointment could lead to further complications, she hurried to the girl’s apartment and reminded her to keep it. The girl put on a practised long face and proceeded reluctantly along with the foster-mother to the venue where the boy was waiting with a heavy heart laden with amorous feelings.

No sooner the girl set her eyes on the boy than all her pretensions melted away and she bloomed like the radiant sun.

The foster-mother who anticipated some untoward things to happen was taken aback. She, who feared a serious altercation to ensue, could not believe her eyes. Not having the mind to stand there and dampen their pleasure like a wet blanket, she departed leaving the couple to themselves.

The girl, after giving full vent to her pent up passions and feelings, returned to her apartment surreptitiously though she saw the foster-mother on the way. The foster-mother who was sagacious but well-meaningly naughty, followed the girl into her apartment and chuckled. The meaning of the chuckle was obvious. Still the girl asked what the cause for it was. The foster-mother spoke thus: "I can't understand the behaviour of love-struck girls like you. It was only the other day you called that boy names and swore at him; but today what happened when you saw him? You didn't even ask him why he disappointed you on the last occasion. You simply ran into him and clung on to him like a climber twining round an espalier. Is this your resolve?"

The girl blushed and bluffed her way through intelligently by offering the tenor and purport of the above Kural. I said bluff, yet I was wrong. It is not bluff; it is a fact.

The lover spoke thus: "My dear, let me explain my situation. You and I use an eyebrow pencil to adorn our brows. Before we begin to paint our eyebrows, the pencil is there and we are able to see the pencil clearly. But the moment we lift the pencil and take it close to our eyebrow we cease to see the pencil and in fact we don't see the pencil because the concentration goes elsewhere. Then on our concentration is on the eyebrow and not on the pencil. Similarly when my

boy-friend is away from me I see his faults and lapses clear and magnified. But when he is close to me, even as how we cease to see the pencil when it is near the brow, I forget his faults and blemishes. Such is the nature of love and my partiality for my lover. When I see him I do not see any faults. But when I do not see him I see nothing but faults”.

Let us cast aside this romantic story for a moment and concentrate on the lesson this Kural tries to teach us. The mistakes of those who are far and alien to us appear to be big and glaring. But the mistakes of those who are dear and near are not caught by our eyes, mental and physical. This is the natural tendency of an ordinary human being. We must guard ourselves against selfishness which makes us blind and refuses to see even that which is obvious.

Chapter 21

LOVE AND LIQUOR

உள்ளக் களித்தலும் காண மகிழ்தலும்
கள்ளுக்கில் காமத்திற் குண்டு.

**“Ullak Kaliththalam Kaana Mahizhthalam
Kallukkil Kaamaththit Kundu”.**

**“To please by thought and cheer by sight is peculiar, not to
toddy, but to love.”**

Like the Kural we discussed in our earlier article, this one is also from Kaamaththuppaal. Like many other Kurals of Thiruvalluvar, this Kural also shows the profundity and punditry of Thiruvalluvar.

This Kural may be taken as a follow-up to the episode portrayed in our earlier article. The love-torn girl and her boy-friend had several meetings and the time came for the boy to depart on a mission outside his town and he came to bid goodbye. Though on earlier occasions, when the time for parting arrived, the girl sulked and grew gloomy, on this occasion the girl remained calm and collected. On seeing this unusual behaviour the foster-mother of the girl asked her why she was remaining abnormally unperturbed on this occasion. She expected the girl to react uncomfortably. But the girl sported a smile and gave the above Kural as her reply.

Thiruvalluvar has in his great Thirukkural allocated a full chapter to the subject of taking toddy which is meant to include taking of all kinds of liquor. Chapter 93 of the Thirukkural dwells on "Non-consumption of toddy". From the manner he has treated this chapter it is evident that Thiruvalluvar had done a thorough research on the effects of liquor. He has employed his knowledge of liquor, in Kaamaththuppaal, to picturesquely portray the many tender feelings of love and affection.

Now, back to the reply given by the girl to her foster-mother. "You have, my mother, concernedly asked me as to why I did not make a hue and cry when my dear lover bade me goodbye. One reason is that we have now got to know each other fully and have developed an understanding. The other reason is that the love and affection that has now grown between us is such that the very thought of him, his actions and noble qualities make me feel jubilant and enthralled all the time. What a wonderful power this feeling of love has! I have heard the addicts of liquor say wonderful things about the euphoric effect of toddy. But that euphoria cannot hold a candle to this wondrous feeling of love. A tippler never feels elated at the thought of toddy; he does not feel cheered or tickled even on seeing the stuff poured into the drinking vessel. But this divine feeling of love is marvellous and has no parallel. Even when my lover is not by my side, when I think of him and his love-making, I am transported to a dreamy world of pleasurable titillation. When I see him I am cheered, aroused and feel on top of the world. By reason of this magical power of love that has of late electrified my whole being, I don't nowadays feel the pangs of separation that I used to feel at the initial stages of my contact with my lover. This then is the reason why I took it cool when he came a while ago to take leave of me".

Chapter 22

POSSESSIVE LOVER

வழுத்தினாள் தும்மினே னாக அழித்தழுதாள்
யாருள்ளித் தும்மினீர் என்று.

“Vazhuththinaal Thummine Naaha Azhiththazhuthaal
Yaatullith Thummineer Enru”.

“When I sneezed she blessed me, but at once changed her mind
and wept, asking ‘At the thought of whom did you sneeze?’”

Once again we are discussing a Kural from Kaamaththuppaal which subtly and succinctly portrays the difficulty in explaining the innermost emotional feelings of a girl who is inescapably gripped by the tentacles of love.

Thiruvalluvar says that sulking adds delight to love-making; and hastens to say further that it should be like the pinch of salt which is sprinkled on our food. If sulking is not in the appropriate proportion, it could not only make life insipid but could also wreck life. Dishes without a dash of salt are bland and tasteless; but if added in excess it could lead to blood-pressure also.

As love is tenderer and more delicate than the softest of flowers, Thiruvalluvar has taken great pains at every point to stress the need for and importance of sulking. The Kural that is being discussed tells us of one of the several subtle ways in

which sulking may be initiated by a lover. The present style of sulking, as spoken of in this Kural, is based on the Tamil traditional belief that women are very possessive and selfish, and that they continue to harp on the age-old theory that men are biologically promiscuous or at least more promiscuous than women.

Let us now see the contextual setting of this Kural. As scheduled, the girl and the boy-friend dated and courted at the appointed place. They exchanged pleasantries and spoke on odds and ends of things including the question of breaking the news of their love affair formally to their respective parents. As this conversation was in progress umpteen number of thoughts criss-crossed the mind of the boy and he had occasion to sneeze somewhat violently. The care and concern of the girl for the boy was such that even before he ceased sneezing she wished him "Nooru" (long life). But not a fraction of a second passed before she entertained funny and unwholesome suspicions for which her society is responsible.

There is a belief, almost bordering superstition, that sneezing is generated in a person when somebody dear and near to that person living far away or even closeby thinks or speaks of or refers to the one sneezing. The girl in our episode, being a creature of the society that moulded and brought her up, was naturally disturbed when her boy-friend, whom she had entrapped, sneezed. Immediately her imagination took wings and ran riot. She came to the conclusion that even as her lover was trying to pacify her, another girl-friend of his had thought of spoken of him and that was why he sneezed. So, without second thoughts she asked him crudely, "Who is that

fair lady who is right now pining for you so as to spark off a sneeze in you?"

The boy who was quite innocent and devoted solely to this girl used all his powers of persuasion to convince his lover that she was wrong and that she was doggedly holding fast to a superstition concocted by her forebears and that such superstition has no scientific basis. But the girl wouldn't agree and continued to pout. As the boy was making further efforts to convince the girl that she was the only girl to whom he had surrendered his heart and soul, he felt that another lightning-like sneeze was on its way and he strenuously made all efforts to suppress it. Who on earth can stop a sneeze which is reckoned as the fastest natural thing in the world, having a speed of about 167 kilometres per hour? The girl who was astoundingly observant, was quick to react. Even as the boy struggled to prevent the sneeze at its primordial stage, the girl quite unkindly cut in and said, almost sobbingly, "I know; I know well now. Some other fortunate girl is thinking of you right now and because you want to hide that you are in love with another pretty girl you are unsuccessfully striving to contain your sneeze. It is useless trying to hide your infidelity. Come on, speak the truth; who is that girl?"

What can the poor boy do? How can he drive his faithfulness and purity into the head of this girl who is seizing every opportunity to find fault with him and continue with her sulking?

When he sneezed she fumed and feigned anger. When he tried to control the sneezing also she exploded. Such is the nature of possessive women. They are **cruelly** possessive and

their love can indeed be cruel. Thiruvalluvar who knows the vagaries and ways of the world has magnificently succeeded in picturesquely presenting the tender and fragile feelings of women torn and tormented by love.

In which other literature of the world can you find such grandeur of style in the expression and exposition of the intricate and noble human feelings and emotions?

Chapter 23

DON'T · BACKBITE

கொல்லா நலத்தது நோன்மை பிறர்தீமை
சொல்லா நலத்தது சாஸ்பு.

“Kollaa Nalaththathu Noanmai Pirartheemai
Sollaa Nalaththathu Saalpu”.

“Penance consists in the goodness that kills not, and perfection in the goodness that tells not other’s faults.”

One may not be happy with the rendition of this Kural. Certain concepts in the Tamil language are such that the words conveying such concepts defy all efforts to translate them into another language. Perhaps it is true with many other languages too. It is perhaps this practical difficulty that had forced the English language to bodily incorporate thousands of Latin words connoting legal concepts.

The word **Saalpu** in the Tamil language embodies in itself a variety of subtle and noble qualities that an exact equivalent in the English language cannot be found. The word "Perfection" is a far cry from what the Tamil word "Saalpu" pregnantly means. Still we have used that word as the English equivalent for want of a better term.

The Kural under consideration is to be found in the chapter on **Saantraanmai** (Perfection). "Saantraanmai"

means the quality of possessing and maintaining a combination of many lovable and affable qualities. Many lovable qualities are necessary to make up a perfect man. But, according to Valluvar, two great qualities are essential if one were to be deemed perfect. It is these two qualities that the Kural we are dealing with is speaking about.

One such quality is the abstinence from killing while the other is the refraining from speaking of the faults and defects of others. According to Thiruvalluvar these qualities are core qualities, indispensable for a perfect person.

If one analyses this Kural, one will find that Thiruvalluvar requires a perfect being to be kind in deed and word. He wants the perfect one to be kind by not killing and to be kind by not speaking ill of the faults or shortcomings of others. It is idle to compare the two qualities spoken of in this Kural and to state as to which is nobler than the other, because they are of equal importance and nobility. Still, if one were to make an assessment based on the words employed to describe the two qualities one may be inclined to think that Thiruvalluvar gives greater importance to the quality of abstaining from backbiting. In other words it may be correct to say that Thiruvalluvar is of the view that abstinence from backbiting is a greater virtue than the abstinence from killing. Not only does he say that abstinence from backbiting is a nobler virtue, but also implies that it is a more difficult virtue.

How, one may ask. A person who wants to kill may refrain from killing out of sheer helplessness as, for example, if he couldn't find the instrument or weapon necessary for the killing. The instrument necessary for backbiting is the tongue;

and the tongue is always there and he can twist it any time and anyhow and therefore there is every chance of his giving vent to his feelings and emotions without let or hindrance. Therefore, the question of helplessness does not arise in the case of a person who wants to burn another with words. If such a person restrains himself, then it is obviously a great quality. This, then is the reason why we said earlier that the restraint of the tongue is a greater virtue in the view of Thiruvalluvar.

There is another Kural which lends support to our view that abstinence from backbiting is a nobler quality. Let us transliterate that Kural.

“அறங்கூறான் அல்ல செயினும். ஒருவன்
புறங்கூறான் என்றல் இனிது”.

“Arankkooaraan Alla Seyinum Otuvan
Purankkooaraan Entral Inithu” (Kural 181).

This is what it says: Though one speaks no words of virtue and does only ill-deeds, yet to be praised that he does not backbite is great indeed. So great is the virtue of avoiding backbiting that Thiruvalluvar states that non-backbiting is a far greater virtue than many of the other virtues he has himself exhorted us to develop and practise.

For many of us backbiting is a great national pastime. Nothing pleases us more than gossiping and we always find time for it. Gossiping is nothing but backbiting. It is a game which we play effortlessly and with gusto. But that is the game that causes great harm to those that are away from the scene and that is the one which Thiruvalluvar despises most.

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If we pause for a second and cogitate over it we will never fail to realise the stark truth that it is the most venomous of vices. It is no wonder that Thiruvalluvar exalts the person who is free from such vice as the most virtuous and perfect.

Chapter 24

GOOD CONDUCT MAKES FOR EXCELLENCE

ஒழுக்கம் விழுப்பம் தரலான் ஒழுக்கம்
உயிரினும் ஒம்பப் படும்.

“Ozhukkam Vizhupam Thatalaan Ozhukkam
Uyitinum Oampap Padum”.

“As good conduct makes for excellence,
it ought to be preserved more carefully than life itself.”

We are at the cross roads. In fact, the whole world is at sixes and sevens. None of us appears to know which way we are heading.

Still we claim that we are at the height of civilization. Having had, through technology, whatever we wanted to make our life more comfortable, we are now competitively exploring the possibilities of reaching the Moon and Mars. With all the comforts and conveniences technology has secured for us we are not happy and we don't have peace. There is strife and tension every-where. We often fall into a state of melancholy brooding and musing why we are less happy than our forefathers were. To them life might have been slow but it was full; it was more peaceful and harmonious. To us life is fast, but full of stress and strain.

What has gone wrong? Why has it gone wrong? In one of our earlier articles we had highlighted the seemingly distinctionless difference between “culture” and “civilization” and drove home the truth that it is the lopsided development of civilization and culture that is responsible for our pitiable plight today. Outwardly we have developed very well. In other words, we have become civilized but inside we have not developed and therefore we are not culturally complete. Until our interior is developed, the strife and the stress will continue. The “interior” could be developed only through self-discipline and good conduct.

It is this realization that enabled Thiruvalluvar to show us the above Kural. Let us see the Kural once again. *As good conduct makes excellence, it ought to be preserved more carefully than life itself.* Thiruvalluvar is of the view that laws and orders cannot set social short-comings aright if the society fails to emphasize the need for self-discipline, righteousness and good conduct. For the maintenance and sustenance of discipline and good conduct certain prerequisites are essential. These prerequisites are spelt out by Thiruvalluvar in the first four chapters of his masterpiece, the Thirukkural. Valluvar is of the view that faith in the Almighty, unfailing rain, righteous living and respect for the great are essential for a person or a society to be a disciplined one. If they are not there, law making and law enforcement will be of no avail.

If Thiruvalluvar could be consulted today to find the cause for the indiscipline and topsyturvydom prevalent in our families and societies, he would unhesitatingly state that it is faithlessness and total disregard for righteous living coupled

with callous disrespect for the elders and the great that have contributed to our present impasse.

Now to the Kural. As propriety of conduct rewards one with excellence and greatness it should be regarded and preserved more importantly than one's life. If we ponder deeply we will realize that there are two things which cannot be retrieved once lost. One is our soul and the other is our conduct. It is significant to note that Thiruvalluvar who needed a comparison for virtuous conduct has chosen soul which also once lost is not retrievable.

For most of us there is nothing dearer than life (soul). Thiruvalluvar cuts in and says that there is one thing that is more precious than life itself and that is good conduct. Everyone has a soul or life and all those who have life are not regarded as great. It is those of good conduct who are regarded as great.

The importance which Thiruvalluvar gives to virtuous conduct is such that when confronted with a situation where we have to choose between good conduct and one's life we should choose to lose our life, rather than sully our conduct.

Those who have maintained good conduct even at the cost of their life really live even after they are physically dead. Mahatma Gandhi is a case in point. On the contrary those who have saved their soul (life) at the expense of good conduct and virtue are living corpses though nominally alive.

The Kural we have reviewed needs a thorough study because it has the cure for many of the ills of today. But the prescription is so unpalatable that many of us will find it

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difficult to swallow. Has it not been said that truth is always bitter and that truth, because it has few to support, is an orphan?

To those who feel diffident and confused about the prescription couched in the present Kural may we give the essence of another Kural. "The world goeth on smoothly because of the men of good virtue; verily but for them all this harmony would be dead and buried in the dust."

Chapter 25

APPEARANCE IS DECEPTIVE

உருவுகண்டு எள்ளாமை வேண்டும் உருள்பெருந்தேர்க்கு
அச்சாணி அன்னார் உடைத்து.

**“Utuvukandu Ellaamai Vaendum Utulpetunthhaerkku
Achchaani Annaar Udaiththu”.**

**“Let there be no scorn on seeing the external appearance;
the world has men who are like the axle-pin of a big rolling car.”**

Every rule has an exception and exceptions are important, and exceptions prove the rule. To those who ignore the exception, Thiruvalluvar at times sounds controversial and his diction appears contradictory. Unless the couplets of Thiruvalluvar are seen in the correct perspective, Thiruvalluvar would be seen to be at variance with himself.

There are many instances in which Thiruvalluvar has stressed the importance of one's appearance. A specific instance occurs in his chapter on “Envoys”. Therein, while enumerating the qualities of a proper envoy, Thiruvalluvar says: “Let him be sent as envoy who in abundant measure possesses a good personality and natural wisdom as well as acquired knowledge of arts and sciences”. A good personality is important not only for an envoy but also for anyone, because the way of the world is to go by appearance. Most people pay

attention to face value and not to intrinsic worth. Intrinsic value can be at variance with face value. It is this unnoticeable and difficult-to-know variance that has thwarted the efforts of many a man throughout history. It is this history which Thiruvalluvar wants us to bear in mind.

The size and enormity of anything is not material. "The ocean is enormous but its water is salty and not drinkable, while the spring near the beach though small is yet drinkable. The flower of the pandanus is large but not fragrant; but the flower of 'Makizh' though small is sweet smelling. Therefore the worth and importance of a thing or a person cannot be decided from the external appearance" says Avvaiyaar of Tamil Sangam fame.

Let us now revert to the Kural. All of us know our traditional "car" (சேதர்), the non-automobile vehicle used in our temples on which the presiding Deity is circumperambulated around the temple. This car is pretty large. But the wheels on which the whole architectural structure of the car rests are kept in position by a small iron pin called axle-pin. It is small and slender; but the purpose it serves is tremendous. If one were to go by the size of the axle-pin, one will dismiss it as a non entity. But if one takes time to study the function it performs, one will simply be amazed. Just like this axle-pin, there are men also who are small and dwarfish, silent and simple with capabilities that are immeasurable. This being the nature of the world, Thiruvalluvar draws our attention to the exception to the general rule and tells us that appearance is deceptive and that we should always look into the core and not to the cortex of anything.

Our epics, books of ethics and literature are replete with advice of this kind. Still, time and again, men when drunk with power and arrogance, forget this advice and fall prey to the machinations of craftier people. Let us illustrate this Kural with the help of an epical episode.

Once upon a time there lived a king called Mahaabali. He was the son of a good "Asura" (Demon) known as Prahalaada. Through his penances and tapas he acquired tremendous powers so that Devendra himself became jittery.

Fearing that Mahaabali would become intoxicated with power and destroy the Devas and Devendra himself, Kashyappa and his wife Aditi prayed to Lord Vishnu and begged Him to be born as their son to protect Devendra and the Devas. In answer to their prayers Vishnu was born as Vaamana. When the ripe time came, Vaamana, in the form of a young pupil, went to the Yaaga that was being performed by Mahaabali where all were welcome to ask for anything their hearts desired. When Vaamana arrived at the Yaaga scene, it aroused the suspicion of many, and they advised Mahaabali not to entertain him. But Vaamana appeared so puny that Mahaabali did not care two hoots to the advice offered by the elders and bade Vaamana ask for what he pleased without hesitation. Vaamana, the god incarnate begged for only three paces of ground as would be paced by him. Mahaabali smiled at the request of Vaamana and regarded the diminutive student from head to foot, and said "So be it; pace and take". The little Vaamana all of a sudden grew in size and with one step measured the earth and with another the entire heavens. And there being no room left for the third pace, he set his foot on Mahaabali's head and crushed him. So goes the story.

Let us not split hairs here about the possibility or otherwise of the truth of the story. Suffice it to say that the dwarfish size of Vaamana misled Mahaabali and he succumbed to the designs of Vaamana. When Raavana confronted Rama for the first time, he also was deceived by the appearance of Rama. So was Soorapathman deceived when he mistakenly regarded Lord Muruga as a babe. Their Himalayan miscalculations based on mere appearance brought their downfall. Let the Kural we reviewed guard us against the possible pitfalls.

Chapter 26

END DOES NOT JUSTIFY THE MEANS

என்றும் ஒருவதல் வேண்டும் புகழொடு
நன்றி பயவா வினை.

**“Entrum Otuvuthal Vaendum Puhazhodu
Nantri Payavaa Vinai”.**

**“Those actions should be eschewed which bring
neither fame nor good”.**

“No matter who pounds, what is wanted is the rice grain” says a Tamil saying. This is a saying which we hear time and again in our circles. Whether it is a correct approach to good living is a moot point. Thiruvalluvar appears to have a different view.

Machiavelli, as many of us know, was a notorious politician and writer who said that “the end justifies the means”. For him all was well that ended well. He cared not about the means employed as long as the end was achieved. He made no scruples about the means. In fact he was viciously unscrupulous. Western view, which supports the notion that all is fair in love and war, seems to have sided with Machiavelli at least in so far as it related to politics and government. But Thiruvalluvar is totally opposed to this view. He is of the firm

conviction that the end will not justify the means and that the end cannot be honourable if the means used are foul. For him an activity that is tainted with crookedness can never yield fair fruit. If a course of action is unfair and deceptive, then, whatever the fruit, it should be shunned. Thiruvalluvar feels that it is preferable to suffer from the very evil to ward off which a particular course of action is employed than to enjoy the fruit of deeds tainted with sin and sinister motive. Thus, Thiruvalluvar says: "The pinching poverty of the pure is far better than wealth earned by disreputable means". In other words Thiruvalluvar tells that means employed should be clean and fair and that good ends cannot be achieved through bad means.

Mahatma Gandhi steadfastly followed the precept of Thiruvalluvar. The following story illustrates the steadfastness of Mahatma Gandhi to this golden principle of Thiruvalluvar. In 1922, Mahatma Gandhi gave notice of his intention to embark on civil disobedience as a means of freeing India from British rule. Accordingly, in February 1922, he started the campaign and a procession of more than a million people was winding its way through a town called Chowri Chowra. The British police, not wanting Gandhi to succeed, opened fire and continued raining bullets until they exhausted their stock. But the procession, unmindful of the human casualties that had resulted, proceeded undaunted and unbowed, and the police took refuge in a garrison nearby. A few of the demonstrators who chose to take advantage of the situation forgot the rules of true Satyagrahis and set fire to the very garrison much against the strict orders of Mahatma Gandhi. When the building caught fire the entrapped policemen began to emerge

and the enraged demonstrators resorted to the most shameful act of killing them.

When Mahatma Gandhi heard of the inhuman and immoral conduct of the renegades and the recalcitrants he was shocked and ashamed and at once cried halt to his civil disobedience movement and abandoned it. The followers of Gandhi whose feelings of nationalism and freedom had reached fever pitch questioned the propriety of his conduct. Mahatma Gandhi who was endowed with a faculty for concise expression said, "That which you obtain through foul means may be a great and precious thing, but it is not desirable; he who seeks equity should go with clean hand". Thus the civil disobedience campaign was abandoned at least temporarily until the people were really ready morally and spiritually for it.

The life of Gandhi, which was an experiment with truth, is a glowing example refuting and repudiating the philosophy that "the end justifies the means". Thiruvalluvar said it but Gandhi lived it. Let the life of Gandhi inspire us into living a morally impeccable life in spite of the temptations of expedience and convenience.

Chapter 27

LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP

எண்ணித் துணிக கருமம் துணிந்தபின்
எண்ணுவம் என்பது இழுக்கு.

**“Ennith Thuniha Katumam Thuninthapin
Ennuvam Enpathu Izhukku”.**

**“Think carefully before launching into action. To think of the ways
and means in the course of action is fatal”.**

The above Kural is a household one. This is an opportune time for us to address our minds to this Kural. The future of any individual depends on how he or she confronts a crisis. Only those who have made the right decision at the right time have succeeded and prospered in life. Decision-making being an art, some people think that those who have it are born endowed with that faculty. But it is not so. Just like learning a technique or acquiring scientific knowledge it could be developed and cultivated. What is wanted are forethought, keen observation and deliberation. In the West, decision-making has developed as a science and it is being taught in the Universities. But in the East this subject is still in an embryonic stage. Thiruvalluvar appears to have felt the need for the decision-making skill and has therefore devoted a full chapter to it which he calls “Thetinthu Seyalvahai” (acting with due consideration).

There are certain rules to be followed in decision-making. If we bear those in mind we will be able to weigh the pros and cons for any decision that we may take. Decision-making is an opportunity given to us to shape our life as we want it. Our decisions may be irrevocable and may make or mar our lives. Therefore great importance should be attached to this issue.

Before arriving at a decision we must study the problem in hand, assess it in our mental eye and observe its different facets. Having evaluated the dimensions of the problem we must set about finding its cause. Once this has been done we must move on to formulate our aim which may be a short-term one or even long-term one and then judge how the decision we are going to take will assist the attainment of our goal. When we try to think of the practicability of attaining our goal, several questions will stare at us. Where are we strong? And where weak? What are the obstacles that we may have to surmount in the event of our choosing a certain course of action? What will be the consequences if we fail in our chosen course? In the process of trying to answer these questions, sanity and even wisdom may dawn on us and we may be compelled to think of alternate courses of action. We may even be inclined to take a second opinion from somebody whom so far we did not consider as one of consequence. It may result in our seeing other paths of action one of which we can choose and forge ahead.

The fact that we considered all aspects before deciding to take the plunge does not necessarily mean that we will positively be successful. Even the best planned actions can end

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in disaster. What Thiruvalluvar says is that we should discipline ourselves, plan our actions and we should not just act on the spur of the moment. Be it marriage or funeral, child-bearing or child-rearing, education or employment, fighting or negotiating, there must be planning.

Though Thiruvalluvar, who had known the almost incorrigible and incurable weakness of the Tamils, had warned us in advance through his “gems”, yet, time and again, we have been committing the self-same mistakes, and today we are in this mire of uncertainty and confusion. During the late seventies, the Tamil leaders of Sri Lanka took one decision and today’s leaders appear to have taken another decision, promising the Tamil mass that their road will lead them to freedom; perhaps it will. But some still wonder whether the gullible Tamils will once more be led up the garden path. Let us therefore remember the Kural yet again “*Ennith Thuniha Katumam, Thuninthapin Ennuvam Enpathu Izhukku*”, and act wisely. No one can afford to make mistakes eternally.

Chapter 28

AWAIT YOUR TIME

பொள்ளென ஆங்கே புறம்வேரார் காலம்பார்த்து
உள்வேர்ப்பர் ஒள்ளி யவர்.

“Pollena Aankey Puramvetaar Kaalamparthu
Ullvaerppar Olli Yavar”.

“The glorious, once of wrath enkindled, make no
outward show instantly. They bide their time,
while hidden fires within them burn”.

The wise will not immediately and hastily show their anger; they will await their time and hold their anger. This is indeed wise. However, it is easily said but extremely difficult to practise. Only those who are balanced and can maintain their composure could cultivate this as a regular habit. It is practised by the enlightened not only because it is an exemplary quality but also because it has immeasurable utilitarian value.

Thiruvalluvar felt the need for restraint of anger in all individuals and has devoted one full chapter to ‘Not being angry’ (Vehulaamai - Chapter 31). “If a man would guard, let him guard against anger; if he does not, anger will kill him”, says Thiruvalluvar. Though Thiruvalluvar extols the great virtues of not falling prey to anger, yet human beings do at

times indulge in anger and anger looks righteous at times. But our Puraanams and Ithikaasams (Epics) have shown that none, even those who had acquired the best of divine powers through their penance and blessings, had escaped the inevitable consequences of succumbing to anger. Visvaamitra who competed vainly and conceitedly with Vasishtha to excel in psychic powers is a case in point.

Let us now turn to the Kural under consideration which is not one intended to extol the virtues of not becoming angry. It occurs in the chapter on "Knowing the fitting time" (Kaalam Arithal). It is a piece of advice to kings. It is a sound advice reiterating the saying "Haste is waste". The Kural is telling the king that nobody is strong and firm at all points and at all times and that everyone has weak points and strong points and that even the strongest can be beaten at his weakest point and the weakest will be difficult to be subdued at his strongest point. Those who thoughtfully consider and wait for the right time for the right action can even conquer the world. At a time when one should exercise self-control one must restrain himself like a stork which though tempted and attracted when small fishes pass by yet holds back and waits until a fit and fat fish passes by. That is very important for anyone who wants success in life.

If we react or over-react, we are doomed to fail. For some one who wants success it becomes necessary to suffer the insult and eat humble pie. Therefore the wise will not react openly when they are taunted or humiliated or offended if the time is not opportune and the place is not appropriate. They will abide their time. They will make it a point to remember *Aanaikku Otu Kaalam, Poonaiikku Otu Kaalam*. ஆனைக்கு ஒரு காலம்,

புணைக்கு ஒரு காலம். In the words of Thiruvalluvar, in such trying circumstances the wise will not react hastily so as to make the opponent feel that he has been humiliated. Instead, they will pretend as if nothing has taken place and will devise a course of action to pay back the opponent in the same coin. This is a very good piece of advice which though intended for a king can be digested and adapted even by lesser mortals like us.

In the Mahabharatha, Duroa, the great master of archery, when humiliated and disgraced by Durupada felt as if the very ground he was standing on was caving in. But being wise he pocketed the insult and kept mum. He did not react; he went home laden with indignities. Having borne the venom for some time, when the opportune time came, he sent his students to seize the conceited Durupada and to bring him to his house. When Duroa's students carried out the command and Durupada stood before Duroa shorn of his royal power and majesty he asked Durupada to recall the incident when Duroa stood like a destitute haplessly before Durupada, the conceited, and chuckled. The chuckle of Duroa almost killed Durupada. But the decent Duroa did not taunt him. He only advised the king to be more royal than majestic and let him go unharmed.

Occasions are many when we go wayward and mess up while confronted with precarious situations. At such situations we should remember this Kural and act wisely. There is a time and place for everything. Those who know the right time and right place are wise; others are not.

Chapter 29

NIP IN THE BUD

இளைதாக முள்மரங் கொல்க களையுநர்
கைகொல்லுங் காழ்த்த இடத்து.

“Illaithaaha Mulmatank Kolha Kalaiyunar
Kaikollunk Kaazhththa Idaththu”.

“Cut down thorn-trees while yet they are young;
for when they are overgrown, they will themselves
cut the hand that attempts to fell them”.

This is a sound couplet of great practical value. There is an equivalent in the English language which is common. **To nip in the bud** is an English saying. It means that we should put a stop, if necessary, at the initial stages. In other words anything that has the potential for producing disastrous consequences should be suppressed or destroyed at its birth. Thiruvalluvar has expanded on the English saying by giving the example of a thorny tree. Thorn or pine of any plant when young is quite tender and fragile and is not capable of pricking or hurting the fingers that tamper with it. When it matures and hardens it defies any attempt to nip it. On the contrary it hurts the fingers that try to pluck it.

The Kural in question occurs in the chapter on “Knowing the quality of one’s foes” (Chapter 88) and is basically meant

for a ruler. But it is of great use and importance to ordinary householders also. To put it in another way, nothing, however small, should be treated as trivial. By this Kural Thiruvalluvar tries to say that it is unwise for a king to allow his foe to grow in strength. The moment he sees a pocket of opposition he must quell it then and there. If he neglects it and procrastinates, it will pave the way to ruin after proving doubly difficult to find a solution. Thiruvalluvar further advises that enemies, both powerful and weak, should be dealt with at the most opportune moment. Even a weak foe should not be ignored because even a little spark, if overlooked, may cause a great conflagration. Great fires are often caused by small sparks. Is it not true that a great banyan tree begins with a tiny mustard-like seed?

This Kural will prove useful to people who are blessed with children. Sigmund Freud claimed that humans are biologically promiscuous and his claim may be questioned by modern sociologists who are themselves likely to be questioned by the next generation of sociologists. Whatever it be, I would go a step further and say that children, being social animals, are by nature delinquent though that delinquency may be explained as part of the process of maturation. Whether delinquency is part of the process of maturation or not, it should be the duty of parents to check and reprimand children whenever they are seen doing wrong; it should be pointed out and reproved. If reprimanding or reproving were to be shunned just because modern sociologists and psychologists say that children should be permitted to act freely without inhibition and that they should not be imposed

upon, then things would prove difficult later in life. In fact it has often proved to be so.

In the sixties, the revolutionary ideas and liberated thinking of some academic sociologists took the people in Great Britain by storm and they had a go at these novel ideas propounded by the new elite of the society.

The result is that today we find 52,000 offenders in jails built a few decades ago to hold 35,000. Those involved in the juvenile justice system of today now say that there is sense in the saying: **Spare the rod and spoil the child.** The truants, offenders and delinquents of today in the U.K. are the generation of youths to whom the theories of the new-sociologists were applied in the sixties. *To nip in the bud* still holds good. We must catch our children when they are young and catching implies a little bit of thrashing also!

Now to the Kural again. Even as how a potential thorny plant should be destroyed when it is quite young and less harmful, anything that has the capacity to create a problem at later stages should be wisely exterminated at the start itself. Tomorrow may be too late. Let us all take this Kural to heart.

Chapter 30

RESTRAIN YOUR TONGUE

யாகாவா ராயினும் நாகாக்க காவாக்கால்
சோகாப்பர் சொல்லிழுக்குப் பட்டு.

**“Yaahaavaa Taayinum Naahaakka Kaavaakkaal
Soahaappar Sollizhukkup Paddu”.**

**“Whatever else you may not control, control your tongue
lest you should repent your indiscreet words”.**

This is a couplet that occurs in the chapter on “Self Control” to which Thiruvalluvar attaches great importance. The importance he attaches is such that in the very opening Kural he says that self-control places one among the Gods and that the lack of it leads one to darkness of hell. If only one could control his five senses, he will experience bliss for ever. Thiruvalluvar cites the case of a tortoise in a troubled situation. When a tortoise is in trouble and wants to protect itself from harm it withdraws its five exposed parts (the head and four legs) and remains motionless like a rock. This instinctive act of the tortoise, which is also practised in a marvellous way by the hedgehog, enables it to ward off danger and to live peacefully.

Of the ten couplets in the chapter on “Self Control”, Thiruvalluvar has devoted three couplets for control of speech.

It is significant to remember that Thiruvalluvar has a special chapter on "Power in Speech" (Sol Vanmai - Chapter 65). In the view of Thiruvalluvar, if knowledge is power, speech is super power or double power.

Let us now return to the Kural taken for review. Whatever else people may fail to control, they should keep guard over their lips. Through the fault of their tongue they may shed bitter tears. There are many things which people should guard against but it may be difficult for them to guard against all dangers. Even if this be so, there is one thing which they should at all costs guard against - control of one's tongue. It is easier said than done. Nevertheless it is very important to restrain one's tongue.

Speech is a feature which distinguishes humans from animals. But the very tongue by the twisting, turning, and twirling of which speech is made many a time pushes human beings into the animal kingdom. This then is the reason why we should be careful in the use of the tongue as an instrument of speech. Though speech is the feature that helped the early primates to metamorphose into human beings, yet speech has become so simple and easy to use that we find it difficult to control it. This precisely is the reason why Thiruvalluvar says that we have to be extremely cautious in the use of our tongue. History is replete with instances where a minor slip of the boneless tongue has cost the loss of millions of lives as well as the destruction of established empires.

Why speak of ancient empires and forgotten Emperors when we have a classic example of a woman minister in the United Kingdom. Because she gave vent to her dogmatic views

without ascertaining all the facts and statistics beforehand she had to forgo her ministerial position. No amount of prevarication, excuse, explanation or interpretation, could put her original wrong right, nor convince the people.

It would be refreshing to note below a Kural applicable to the episode referred to in the preceding paragraphs. "Aakkamum Kerdum Athanaal Vatuthalaal Kaaththoampal Sollinkan Sorvu". That is, as both prosperity and ruin are caused by words, one must guard against imperfections in one's speech.

Let us therefore think twice before we speak. The tongue is a good servant but a dreadfully dangerous master. Let us therefore be masters of our tongue if we want to prosper in life.

Chapter 31

CULTURED MEN

பெயக்கண்டும் நஞ்சுண் டமைவர் நயத்தக்க
நாகரிகம் வேண்டு பவர்.

“Peyakkandum Nanchun Damaivar Nayaththakka
Naagatikam Vaendu Pavar”.

**“Those who desire to be styled the very emblem of courtesy
will drink even the poison that has been mixed for them
before their own eyes”.**

Those who have the quality of graciousness in great measure will be prepared even to consume poison mixed in their presence if such an act would beget prosperity and happiness to the majority of the people.

The Kural we have taken up for comment is one which defies any generally acceptable interpretation. Even so, an attempt is made to interpret it in the most reasonable manner possible in the sincere hope that it will kindle the thoughts of our readers.

To get a better grip of this Kural we must understand the background in which this is set. This Kural occurs as the last couplet in the chapter on “Benignity”. Benignity may not be the exact equivalent of the Tamil term **Kannoaddam**; but it is the closest. Benignity means benevolence, the desire for the

well-being or comfort of others. This is a rare quality that is hard to find and few are those who are endowed with it. The greatness of this prince of qualities is such that Thiruvalluvar emphasises the greatness of this quality in yet another context when he says *The world abides for worthy men its weight sustain Were it not so it will fall to dust again*. Not all of us desire the well-being and comfort of others. Even if we so desire, do we generally translate that into action? And to what extent could this translation go? It is this extent that will decide the degree of benevolence. Let me once again take you through an episode in the Mahabharatha to illustrate this Kural.

This episode relates to an incident which took place on the fourteenth day of the Kurukshetra War. Drona, the veteran archer, was leading the army of the Kauravas against the Pandavas. Drona spread fear and destruction in the Pandava army. When Krishna realised the situation he told Arjuna in no uncertain terms that the Pandavas could not cope with Drona without discarding dharma (righteousness). Krishna said, "There is no other way open except one. If Drona hears that his son Aswathaama is dead he will lose interest in life and throw down his weapons. One of you must therefore tell Drona that Aswathaama has been slain". Arjuna shrank in horror and even the others were not inclined to perpetrate a fraud. This was a real trying moment for Yudhishtira. He reflected deeply and resolved the deadlock by agreeing to bear the guilt of slipping from the path of rectitude.

Bhima lifted his iron mace and killed an elephant named "Aswathaama" and, going near where Drona was commanding his forces, he thundered, "I have killed

Aswathaama". Duroa heard these words as he was in the process of discharging a missile. Not having the mind to believe that his son was vincible he wanted to verify Bhima's statement from Yudhishtira and asked, "Yudhishtira! Is it true that my son has been slain?" Duroa believed that Yudhishtira would not utter a lie. When Duroa posed that question Krishna was perturbed that Yudhishtira might let them down by telling the truth. Yudhishtira himself stood trembling in horror not knowing what to say. It was a real *Dharma Sankadam* for him. He hardened his heart and said, "Yes, Bhima has slain Aswathaama" and added inaudibly the words "the elephant". The last two words got drowned in the din of the battlefield and were not heard by Duroa. When Duroa heard that his son had been slain he threw his weapons away and sat down. At that moment Dhrishtadyu man cut off the head of Duroa. Let the story stop here. Let us concentrate on the moral. It was strange that Yudhishtira stooped to such an unthinkable level. The God of Virtue Himself did not approve of the act of Yudhishtira. When words of untruth came out of the mouth of Yudhishtira the wheels of his chariot, which until then had remained four inches above the ground and had never touched it, came down at once and touched the ground. This was the justice that was meted out to him who until then had never swerved from the path of rectitude.

Why did Yudhishtira behave as he did? Can we justify his action? According to our Puraanas, when the ocean was churned and the dreadful poison that emerged threatened to consume the heavenly beings, did not Rudra consume the poison and save the celestials? In the Ramayana, Rama was driven to bear the sin of killing Vaali in total disregard of the

rules of fairplay. Likewise, Yudhishtira decided to bear the shame of telling a lie because he thought it would do good to many. If it is understood that he took the “poison” of being branded as a liar only for the purpose of destroying the wicked and saving the virtuous, then one may be able to appreciate the seemingly improper conduct of Yudhishtira. Great souls care not about their personal name or fame. They are so selfless that they are prepared to lose their all for the common weal. This then is the meaning of the Kural we have reviewed.

Chapter 32

PLAN YOUR ACTIONS

சிறுபடையான் செல்லிடம் சேரின் உறுபடையான்
ஊக்கம் அழிந்து விடும்.

“Sirupadaiyaan Sellidam Saetin Urupadaiyaan
Ookkam Azhinthu Vidum”.

“ If the prince whose army is smaller only betaketh himself to a proper theatre of war, all the endeavours even of the strongest foe would be in vain against him.”

In one of our earlier articles we stressed the importance Thiruvalluvar gives for forethought and planning. But planning alone will not do, because difficulties can arise while trying to execute the plan. Execution of a planned course of action involves the assessment of the strength of the foe, deciding the appropriate timing and the theatre or place of action. And it is the third of the above aspects that the present article is concerned with.

It is more than plain that even to the most valiant and mighty warriors the possession of a strong fortress yields many benefits. Therefore Thiruvalluvar warns that an army should not embark on any attack on its enemy until it has effectively entrenched itself in a secure position. Even a weak army will become powerful and invincible if it selects the right field of

action and guards itself adequately. The importance of the theatre of action would be best understood if we think of the crocodile. When a crocodile is in the water it overpowers all; even an elephant may not be safe. But once it is out of water even weaker animals may be able to defeat it. Everyone, weak or small, has a place where he or she is stronger and more powerful. If that place is correctly chosen and action taken from there, one sees no reason for him to falter or fail.

The Kural under consideration focuses attention on these lines. An army need not worry too much that it is small in size. Numerical superiority has never been a consideration with armies that have a firm purpose and tenacity of will coupled with careful planning and timing. If one turns the pages of history, one will find that mighty armies suffered defeat for want of proper planning, timing and the choice of battle ground. The invasion of Russia by Napoleon Bonaparte resulted in a rout for him in spite of his numerically superior and valiant army. This was because the smaller but shrewder Russian army chose the appropriate time and place for the final battle.

If Napoleon's invasion, in 1797, is too far a date to remember and too hoary an incident to recollect, let me refer you to the present ongoing war between the Tamils of Eelam and the Indian army. Going by the estimates of the Indian Government confirmed by the Sinhalese army commander and the international press, the strength of the Tamil combatants is said to be only two thousand. It is said that the Indian army now in Sri Lanka is about 100,000. This again is a conservative estimate. In spite of the overwhelming numerical

superiority of the Indian army the Tamil combatants have not been mowed down. The freedom fighters have not surrendered. On the contrary the Sri Lankan government having lost faith in the capability and resolve of the Indian army and realising that the Tamil combatants are a force to be reckoned with, have agreed to meet them around a table for peace negotiations.

How is it that this bunch of nondescript Tamil combatants fighting a guerilla war managed to defy the world's fourth largest army and qualify for recognition? It is these questions which the Kural under consideration seeks to answer. It is not numbers that matter. It is not even weapons. It is the dedication, the sacrifice and the purity of purpose coupled with the choice of time and place that matter. It is this that has enabled them to succeed so far. And it is this that has endeared them to the Tamil masses in spite of the unbearable miseries brought in the wake of the war. And again, it is this that will stand them in good stead and take them to the altar of success.

Let me end this article with yet another couplet which is popular and which buttresses the Kural we reviewed.

“ஞாலம் கருதலும் கைகூடும் காலம்
கருதி இடத்தாற் செயின்”.

“Thou canst conquer the whole world if thou chooseth the proper time and the proper objectives”.

Chapter 33

FELLOW FEELING

அரம்போலும் கூர்மைய ரேனும் மரம்போல்வர்
மக்கட்பண் பில்லா தவர்.

**“Atampoalum Koormaiya Taenum Matampoalvar
Makkadpann Pillaa Thavar”.**

**“Though they are sharp as files the men that are devoid
of human culture are no better than wooden stakes”.**

In one of our articles in this book we made an attempt to show that wisdom is different from knowledge, that wisdom is essential for the sustenance of this world and that wisdom is inseparable from culture and virtue. The above Kural tries to show this distinction without much difference, in a subtle way. Bertrand Russel explained this difference between knowledge and wisdom in the following words: **“With every increase of knowledge and skill wisdom becomes more necessary, for every such increase augments our capacity of realising our purposes and therefore augments our capacity for evil if our purposes are unwise. The world needs wisdom as it has never needed it before and, if knowledge continues to increase, the world will need wisdom in the future even more than it does now.”**

The term wisdom is very wide. It connotes comprehensive vision; it also includes intellect and necessarily

encompasses human feeling or fellow-feeling. Thiruvalluvar, while illustrating wisdom, says, “There are people whose intellect is sharp, knowledge is all-pervasive, but fellow-feeling is nil”. Such people lack wisdom of the kind the Kural under review speaks of. Such men did wreak and continue to wreak havoc among people. Adolf Hitler is a classic example of such a class of people. In the context of what is happening in Tamil Eelam, one wonders whether we who claim to be the cream of the intelligentsia in Sri Lanka are crassly insensitive to the plight of the wounded Tamils.

If media reports are anything to go by, many Tamil civilians and even combatants are languishing in Eelam hospitals and dispensaries moaning and groaning. Many of them have lost their limbs; some of them have lost their sight and hearing. A few of them have lost their all, kith and kin. But their plight has escaped our attention somehow. The hospitals and dispensaries are so ill-equipped, deliberately, that the maimed and the butchered are not receiving proper medical care. Many of the wounded whose condition worsens day by day for want of proper nursing have made attempts to end their lives, unable to bear the pain and agony caused by the gaping wounds that are allowed to fester. Some of these wounded civilians, who were denied treatment by the Indian forces in Sri Lanka, have managed to be smuggled into Tamil Nadu. But their lot has not improved there either because of the deplorable sanitary conditions in the areas where these ill-fated are living stealthily and hopelessly; they appear to have fallen from the frying pan into the fire.

Even the laws of war require that the captives, wounded or otherwise, should be treated with human dignity. Prisoners,

including the Tigers, have all the rights of an ordinary citizen. But the heads of Lanka and India do not appear to know what is obtaining in the civilised world in regard to the wounded and the maimed.

If the governments are complacent it may be understandable. But can one justify the apathetic attitude of those of us who are in this country? Should those Tamil academics and professionals living outside Tamil Eelam, firmly perched in positions of great wealth and power, turn a blind eye to the plight of their brethren who are in the throes of death and danger?

Why can't they for a moment think of what Thiruvalluvar says? This is not the time for any of us to discuss and debate the whys and wherefores of what has happened and who has been responsible for this or that. The fact remains that our brethren in Eelam are suffering untold hardships. This is the time when they need our help. There are ways and means. We can help them politically without aligning ourselves with any group; we can help them materially; we can help them professionally. But what is lacking is the will, the heart, to help. If we don't show our humanity now, then our learning is worth nothing and we should feel ashamed of our intellect. An intellectual of high order bereft of compassion and fellow-feeling, is like dead wood, says Thiruvalluvar.

Thiruvalluvar likens those intellectuals who are as sharp as a file but devoid of human culture to the tree which is said to possess only one of the six senses. By implication he compares such barren intellectuals to a file. He says that they are like a file functionally. As we all know, a file is a hard steel

abrading tool with ridged cutting edges. It does the work of disintegrating any object it comes in contact with. If the intellectuals of our community do not combine culture and wisdom to round off the angularities and the ridges that surround them, then they will do the same thing which a file does, namely disintegrate others. Disintegrating others is not constructive work. Let us for a moment give a rest to our intellect by desisting from condemning and criticising others and activate our wisdom and culture by contributing our mite towards the amelioration of the disabled, disowned and dispossessed. This is the time for us to act. Otherwise, we will become perfect examples of those the Kural of Thiruvalluvar condemns. Let each one start today, to give till it hurts. "He gives twice who gives promptly".

Chapter 34

BALANCED DIET

மிகினும் குறையினும் நோய்செய்யும் நூலோர்,
வளிமுதலா எண்ணிய மூன்று.

**“Mihinum Kuraiyinum Noaiseyyum Nooloar
Valimuthalaa Enniya Moonru”.**

**“If (food and work are either) excessive or deficient
the three things enumerated by (medical) writers,
water, bile and phlegm, will cause disease”.**

The Kural taken up for discussion in this article occurs in the chapter on “Medicine”. The dictionary defines medicine as “a substance possessing, or reputed to possess, curative or remedial properties.”

Though the 95th chapter of the Thirukkural is captioned Medicine, yet almost all the ten couplets speak of food rather than of medicine. According to his view, a person’s disease may be Karmic or causative; that is, a person’s diseases are the result of his deeds in a previous birth or the consequence of his bad food habits. As diseases caused by reason of one’s Karma cannot be cured, but only endured, Thiruvalluvar in his chapter on “Medicine and Medication” speaks more about food habits which according to him are the main cause of most of our diseases.

In this Kural Thiruvalluvar advises us that the first principle to be observed is moderation. Therefore follow its golden rule - food taken in excess, even ambrosia, will become poison - "Alavukku Minchinaal Amilthamum Nanchu". What must be noted is the effect such excessive or deficient consumption has on the three humours of our body. Though present-day Western medicine does not appear to endorse the aforesaid Ayurvedic principle of humour, yet the ancient Western medical world believed it. They believed in three humours - rheum, phlegm and bile - and were convinced that these three humours should be in the right proportion and that one will fall a prey to disease if this proportion is disturbed. Thiruvalluvar says that this proportion depends on what kind of food one takes. This is why Thiruvalluvar stresses the importance of right food in right quantity.

It has been believed for some time that cholesterol is a factor that is responsible for most cases of heart attack. Consequently people were medically advised to refrain from taking food items that are rich in cholesterol. A news item which appeared in one of the recent issues of *The Guardian* says that the reduced consumption of cholesterol has resulted in people becoming more prone to cancer. Excessive consumption of cholesterol causes heart ailments and a low consumption of cholesterol makes one an easy prey to cancer! Hence the need to follow the golden path.

If we understand the present Kural one will not fail to realise that it is this aspect of excess and deficiency that Thiruvalluvar has asked us to guard ourselves against. An excess intake of anything is as bad as reduced intake and can

cause illness. This is true in regard to cholesterol also. Reduction of cholesterol may have some salubrious effect in controlling heart ailments but at the same time it may have some malignant effect on the lungs and bones.

The fact that people in Switzerland, Finland and Denmark whose diet consists of dairy food have few deaths from heart diseases goes to show that the trouble is not with the food, but with the quantity and the quality of the food that we take. Our physical constitution has a balance. Our artificial food habits deny us the essential ingredients required to maintain this balance. It is the maintenance of this balance the Kural under review emphasises.

Chapter 35

TAKE NO ALCOHOL

உண்ணற்க கள்ளை உணில்உண்க சான்றோரார்ள்
எண்ணப் படவேண்டா தார்.

**“Unnatka Kallai Unilunka Saanatroataan
Ennap Padavaendaa Thaar”.**

**“Let no one drink liquor. Only those who don't want to be
recognized by the virtuous may drink it”.**

A news item that appeared in *The Guardian* of 20th June, 1989 made interesting reading and that dictated the selection of the above Kural for discussion. The news item started as follows:

**“One person in two starts drinking alcohol before the
age of 18 years, according to a survey carried out for the
Health Education Authority and published today to mark the
National Drinkwise Day.”**

In this regard, as in many other matters affecting morality, Western countries are trying to lock the stable door after the horse has bolted. But it is a consolation that they still have faith in the saying “Better late than never”.

Thiruvalluvar is one of the many ancient sages and seers who rejected and denounced liquor. Lord Buddha, Jesus Christ,

Prophet Mohammed, Guru Nanak and Mahatma Gandhi have all condemned the drinking habit in no uncertain terms.

The views of Thiruvalluvar on liquor were very strong and he felt it necessary to stamp out the habit root and branch and so has devoted a full chapter to prohibition. According to him, alcohol is bad for whatever reason it is consumed and whoever the person be that recommends it. The sense of well-being which alcohol is supposed to give to the tippler is highly deceptive. The word euphoria is sometimes euphemistically used to denote unconsciousness. Thiruvalluvar says that it is the height of folly to spend money to buy unconsciousness (*Kaiyari Yaamai Udaiththey Potulkoduththu Meyyari Yaamai Kolal - Kural 925*).

We should pause for a while to ask ourselves why tippling is denounced by the wise and the virtuous. It is perhaps because liquor deprives one of his senses. The moment one loses his senses he lowers himself to the level of an animal, thus becoming a menace to himself and to society.

The ancient Tamils singled out five vices as major ones which they called "Pancha Maa Paathakangal". Lying, Murdering, Tippling, Thieving and Lusting. It is significant to note that although Thiruvalluvar had despised gambling as well in his great work, yet the sagacious ancient Tamils thought it fit to leave it out of the classified major vices. This fact goes to show that tippling has been considered worse than gambling. It is generally thought that a mother is very tolerant and always turns a blind eye to the faults of her children however serious they may be. But even such a mother will not tolerate a child who drinks liquor, says Thiruvalluvar. If a mother

is intolerant of a child who drinks, it is because she considers as does Thiruvalluvar, that “those who drink are like those who eat poison and are comparable to the dead”. It is because a mother does not want her child to die, she gets wild with a child who drinks.

In the opinion of Thiruvalluvar there is another good reason why one should never get intoxicated. Words can be put into the ears of any evil doer; he may not heed but certainly will fall in his ears. But that will not be the case with one who drinks and becomes inebriated. Because the brain of the intoxicated person becomes blunted and benumbed, whatever said is not received by the brain to be acted upon. Thiruvalluvar uses a classic comparison to illustrate the difficulty of advising an intoxicated man. That comparison is contained in the 929th Kural, the translation of which is as follows: “Behold the man who argueth with one who is intoxicated and endeavoureth to convince him of the evils of drink; he is like a man who searcheth torch in hand for one who is immersed in water.” Let me paraphrase it. It is useless to attempt to advise a man who is under the influence of drink. Because it is like searching for a drowned man with the help of a blazing torch. No sooner the torch is taken into the water than the torch will be put out. Even the advice that is proffered to a drunken man will be lost as soon as it is spoken. This then is the reason why Thiruvalluvar thinks that a person who is a drunk is incorrigible.

Let us therefore pay heed to Thiruvalluvar and remain teetotallers for ever. The ignominy and disgrace that today envelopes Ben Johnson of Olympics fame will engulf us if we neglect the sterling advice of Thiruvalluvar.

Chapter 36

BEG NOT

ஆவிற்கு நீரென் றிரப்பினும் நாவிற்கு
இரவின் இளிவந்தது இல்.

“Aavitku Neeten Ritappinum Naavitku
Itavin Izhivanthathu II”.

“Even if what is requested be water for the cow, nothing is
so degrading to the tongue as begging.”

The sombre thought of how nice it would be if normalcy returned to Sri Lanka changed into melancholy as I left Room No. 2 of the High Court in the High Court of Justice, London, after following the proceedings of the case in which the Home Office, having failed to lodge appeal papers within the specified time, were trying to gain a locus standi to proceed against the determination of the Adjudicator who had ordered five Sri Lankan Tamils deported to Sri Lanka only to be tortured there to be brought back to London as early as possible.

The thought that we Tamils who prided in denouncing begging and scrounging have willy-nilly been constrained to demeaningly seek asylum and beg benefits from England and other countries made me think of our past and the above Kural flashed across my mind. What a noble and ideal view we Tamils

had entertained for centuries! What other literature in the world has even dreamt of such a view of life !

I am not sure what the English word “Shame” or “Disgrace” is capable of encompassing. But the Tamil equivalent of it “Izhivu” means many things. Etymologically “Izhivu” means to come down from a higher status or pedestal. Even before Thiruvalluvar told us what “Shame” is, an ancient Tamil poet of the pre-Christian era had told us in unambiguous terms what the term “Izhivu” connotes.

Over the years peoples of different ages and climes have considered various things as shameful and degrading. The Britishers had said that it was a shame if their flag was dishonoured; the Germans claimed that it was a disgrace for their country to be bereft of colonies; the Russians said that it was a degrading for the workers to work under those who don't; and the Japanese have felt that it was shameful for Japan not to have a market for its manufactured goods.

But the thinking of a Tamil poet of the 1st Century B.C. was different. An inquisitive person went to the poet and asked him what the poet considered as a shameful act. The poet did not hesitate. Pat came the reply, “to ask another person for some favour”. The inquisitive Tamilian did not leave the poet at that. He asked the poet whether there was anything more shameful than begging itself and the poet declared that it is more shameful for the “begged” to say no to the person who begged. The poetic lines say thus:

“ஈ என இரத்தல் இழிந்தன்று அதன் எதிர்
ஈயென்றல் அதனினும் இழிந்தன்றே”. (புறநானூறு 204).

The couplet under review shows that Thiruvalluvar has gone further than what the Puranaanooru poet had proclaimed. Thiruvalluvar illustrates his points as follows: Imagine that you are walking along the road and you find a cow on the roadside panting for breath with parched throat. It is suffocating. You feel that the cow can be brought back to life if it could be given some water. You rush to a nearby house and ask for water with a view to reviving the cow which is in the throes of death. Let the imagination stop here. Your intentions are good. But Thiruvalluvar intervenes and says, "My dear friend; your motives are altruistic; I know that you need the water not for yourself, but for the cow; still I don't approve of your begging for water; it is shame; even if it may mean some time and effort, go to the well, draw the water yourself and help the cow; don't you beg; don't beg from Peter to give to Paul". Let not Thiruvalluvar be understood in the simple literal sense. Try to understand why Thiruvalluvar says that we should not beg.

Thiruvalluvar says that there is nothing more shameful to the tongue than begging. This is not the only shame begging results in. What is shamed is not only the tongue. Wanting to beg is a shame to the mind; asking one to give is a shame to the mouth; extending the hand to receive is a shame to the hand. These are all shames by implication.

It is unfortunate that a race, an ancient race rich in culture, literature, philosophy and fine arts, which believed in self-reliance and perseverance has perforce been reduced to this status of seeking asylum and assistance from all and sundry. May we Tamils shake off this dust of complacency and

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lethargy and recover our lost glory and enviable tradition. Let us stop asking for the mercy of others and start fighting relentlessly for our birth right and lost glory while discharging our social human obligations justly and fairly.

Chapter 37

CHOOSE THE RIGHT MAN

இதனை இதனால் இவன்முடிக்கும் என்றாய்ந்து
அதனை அவன்கண் விடல்.

**“Ithanai Ithanaal Ivanmudikkum Enraainthu
Athana Avankan Vidal”.**

**“Consider how the choice of means would accomplish
such work and upon being satisfied that he could
accomplish it entrust that work to him”.**

This is a golden Kural on public administration. The doctrines expounded by Thiruvalluvar on Public Administration are quite relevant even to this day. The management philosophy of Thiruvalluvar on Public Administration is contained in about five hundred and sixty couplets and each one illustrates an aspect of it. The Kural taken up for elucidation is on the doctrine of delegation as propounded by Thiruvalluvar in chapter 52 of the Thirukkural which is headed *“Thetinthu Vinaiyaadal”*.

In our day-to-day life it is common to allow our emotions and feelings to cloud our thinking. Because of this we don't think objectively. And the result is that we fail to achieve what we really want to accomplish.

As long as we allow our emotions and sentiments to get the better of us our course of action cannot flow freely. A detached mind and a dispassionate view are essential if we are to progress successfully. Thiruvalluvar says that the delegation of power cannot be properly effected unless one has a detached frame of mind.

We should not entrust a task to a person just because he happens to be the relation of such and such a person. We should analyse and see whether he is endowed with all the qualities that are necessary to successfully finish the task. It is when a selection is made after due consideration of all these traits that the task will be free of hitches. A particular person may pass the test in regard to his good conduct or physical prowess or mental make up, but when the question of accomplishing a task arises he may be a miserable failure. In other words an individual may pass every manner of test but may still fail when the responsibility of accomplishing a particular task is entrusted to him. Hence the advice by Thiruvalluvar - Investigate carefully and declare "This man, because of these reasons will do this assignment" and leave it to him to complete.

If one muses for a while and ponders over the recent past history of Sri Lanka one will not fail to note that the Sinhalese as well as the Tamils have cared not a rap for this gem of a Kural. We all voted to power absolute misfits who made vain and hollow promises to provide free rice. The Sri Lankans who never fought to earn adult franchise nominally exercised that right without the least consideration for the Kural under review. We paused not for a moment to consider whether

Senanayake or Bandaranaike was equipped to steer properly the wheel of public administration. We always allowed ourselves to be carried away by emotions and the result is that we are today in this predicament. The Tamil leaders were no better. Politics was sports for the contestants and the electors treated the polling season as a period of fun and frolic. If the Tamil population had been critical and detached we would have produced leaders of consequence who would have made life for the Tamils more peaceful and purposeful.

The reason for examining this Kural is not to rue the day but to make our people sit back and consider whether we freely delegated our powers and with due consideration to the proper people to decide our fate and whether we sincerely believe that those behind whom we have thrown our weight are capable of delivering the goods.

It would be fine if this discourse would kindle the thought of the people who think constructively and make them bridge any short-comings that may be apparent in those valiant few who have up-to-date defended Tamil rights against heavy odds.

At a time when all and sundry under one pretext or another claim to be leaders of the Tamils, it is incumbent on the Tamil people of Eelam to exercise their power in the manner enunciated by Thiruvalluvar through this Kural.

Chapter 38

ELIMINATE FACTIONS

பல்குழுவும் பாழ்செய்யும் உட்பகையும் வேந்தலைக்கும்
கொல்குறும்பும் இல்லது நாடு.

**"Palkuzhuvum Paazhseiyyum Udpahaiyum Vaenthalaikkum
Kolkurumpum Illathu Naadu".**

**"The country which is free from factions, desolating
internal strife and assassins harassing
the kings is the ideal one."**

In the Kural above Thiruvalluvar tries to give the definition of an ideal country. His definition is quite different from that of political scientists. (These scientists may define the term as "a sovereign political community organised under a distinct government"). One may say that a country which does not seek help from another is the ideal country. Another may say that a country which continues to be free from starvation, disease and strife is the exemplary one. Yet another may say that it is a great country where harvests never fail and where saintly men reside. But Thiruvalluvar would say that they are but incomplete definitions. According to him it is the people of the country and the quality of the administration that matter. Thus he defines, in this Kural, an ideal country as one which is devoid of factions, debilitating internal strife and free from terrorising elements. If a country is not free from all

these drawbacks then however affluent it may be, it cannot have peace and tranquillity.

This thought of an ideal state as envisaged by Thiruvalluvar made me grow pensive and the distressing plague of my country came to mind. The cold-blooded murders and the numerous vendettas perpetrated currently in the South of Sri Lanka kindled nostalgic thoughts in me. The thought that this one-time Granary of the East and Pearl of the Indian Ocean reputed for its hospitality and tranquillity has been plunged into this chronic state of confusion rankled through my whole system.

Sri Lanka is now writhing in political pain not knowing which way to go. It is in the identical situation of the Panchatantra monkey whose tail got caught between the semi-split halves of a wooden plank when it attempted to pull off the wedge that had been placed to keep the halves apart. "The Independent" of London of 19th September 1988 has aptly reported that Sri Lanka is "reeling under an anarchic wave of massacres, atrocities, political assassinations and revenge killings". Be it North or South, East or West, there is anarchy and pandemonium reminiscent of the satanic administration portrayed in Milton's "Paradise Lost". In short, civil administration in Sri Lanka has come to a grinding halt.

"Why"?, one may ask. The reason is not hard to find. Sri Lanka has long ceased to be a state as defined by Thiruvalluvar. There are many factions and political groups in Sri Lanka bitterly opposed to one another; even within the cabinet they have ceased to work as a team and they act in a way only beneficial to themselves individually. To cap these all

the country is riddled with armed militant groups which are impervious to reason and logic. The civil strife that was until two years ago confined to the Tamil provinces has now spread to other areas.

It is this chaotic situation which Thiruvalluvar wanted a wise administrator to guard against. If the successive rulers of Sri Lanka had been wise and cared to take a leaf from the sacred book of Thiruvalluvar they could have removed the cankerous growth in the body politic of Sri Lanka way back in 1948. Instead of diagnosing the disease and treating it at the incipient stage they were engaged in a cosmetic exercise of dealing with the external symptoms little realising that internally the malady was going on unchecked. And the result is that what started as a cancer in the Tamil homeland has now spread all over Sri Lanka making any treatment mightily difficult, if not impossible, through the growth of numerous factions, deep divisions and menacing militancy.

If Sri Lanka is to survive, it is imperative that these factions, subversives and militants, should be disarmed tactfully and peacefully. It could be done only by one who is sagacious and trusted. Whether the present Sri Lankan president can retrieve the situation is the question. But the more important one is whether the militant groups in the North-East and the South who are trying to wrest power from the present administration will try to remember this Kural.

Chapter 39

DHARMA IS THE ONLY SHIELD OF MAN

சமன்செய்து சீர்தூக்கும் கோல்போல் அமைந்தொருபால்
கோடாமை சான்றோர்க் க்ணி.

**"Samanseithu Seerthookkum Koalpoal Amainthotupaal
Koodaamai Saantroatk Kani".**

**"To incline to neither side, but to rest impartial
as the even fixed scale is the ornament of the wise."**

This Kural is commonplace; so common that it could be called a household Kural. It is often uttered when people want others to be fair and square. The Alpha and Omega of righteous life is propriety and propriety requires that one must give each person his due whether he be a stranger, a friend or an enemy.

A balancing scale is so impartial that it registers and records the correct weight of anything that has been put in the scale. Whatever be the object that has been put in the scale to be weighed it indicates the weight properly. Be it gold or copper, pearl or gem, chaff or grain it records the weight impartially.

Thiruvalluvar says that a righteous person should behave in the same fashion when he is called upon to make decisions

or express opinions. It is common knowledge that selfishness is blind and that the decisions of men are discoloured by passion and dimmed by wickedness.

During the course of ordinary human activity it may be possible for ordinary mortals like us to follow the path of rectitude without swerving. But during critical times it becomes difficult to walk without faltering on this narrow path of righteousness. Our ancient literature provides us ample instances to illustrate this point. In the Ramayana, Kumpakarnan's partiality for his brother Ravana got the better of him and he abandoned reasoned justice and took the side of the erring brother. Kaikeyi herself, gripped by the selfish desire to crown her son Bharathan, lost her sense of justice and fairplay.

Such is the gripping force of selfishness. If a person gives himself or herself up to such passions and desires, then such person would be said to have foresaken the path of righteousness. Such persons are not persons of exemplary character worthy of emulation.

The Mahabharatha provides a commendable example of a person who steadfastly resisted all temptations to be swayed from the path of Dharma, except in one instance. He is Yudhishtira. It was a trying time where gods themselves might have slipped. But Yudhishtira the eldest and the jewel among the Pandavas managed to be above board. This trying hour was during the end of the twelve year period when the Pandavas were living in the forest incognito. One day, worn out by the futile chase of a deer which they could not capture, the five brothers were resting under a banyan tree. As thirst tormented

them Yudhishtira sent his brother Nakula to fetch some water from a nearby pool. The pool belonged to a Yaksha. When Nakula attempted to drink water from the pool the Yaksha said that the pool belonged to him and that he could not drink the water until he had answered a couple of his questions. When Nakula defied the commands of the Yaksha and dipped the cupped palm of his hand into the water an inexplicable drowsiness overpowered him and he fell down, to all appearances, dead. Concerned that Nakula had not returned, Yudhishtira sent Sahadevan to find out what the matter was. Sahadevan also met the same fate as Nakula. Puzzled that Sahadevan also did not return he sent Arjuna who also succumbed to the magical spell of the Yaksha. The anxiety of Bhima knew no bounds and he set out to find the whereabouts of his dear brothers. When Bhima went there he saw his brothers lying dead. Undaunted by what had happened to his brothers he defied the orders of the Yaksha and as is to be expected, he fell dead too.

Unable to understand the mystery, Yudhishtira himself went to the pool. But he acted wisely by agreeing to answer the questions plied by the Yaksha. He answered the questions so superbly that the Yaksha said, "O King, one and only one of your dead brothers can be revived. Whom do you want revive?" Yudhishtira thought hard for a while and then replied, "May Nakula arise". The Yaksha was pleased at this and asked Yudhishtira, "Why did you choose Nakula in preference to Bhima who is your real strength, hope and confidence?" Then Yudhishtira replied, "O Yaksha! Dharma (virtue) is the only shield of man and not Bhima or Arjuna. If

Dharma is the only shield of man

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Dharma is set at naught, man will be ruined. Kunthi and Madhuri were the two wives of my father Paandu. I am a son of Kunthi and I am surviving and therefore my mother is not bereaved. As it is, Madhuri is bereaved. In order that the scales of justice be even, I ask that Madhuri's Nakula may revive."

The story goes that the Yaksha was so pleased with Yudhishtira's impartiality that he restored life to all his brothers. It is this kind of impartiality that the Kural under review speaks of.

Even if we cannot emulate this example, it would do us a lot of good if we could at least appreciate such conduct.

Chapter 40

FEATHER CAN BREAK STEEL

பீலிபெய் சாகாடும் அச்சிறும் அப்பண்டம்
சால மிகுத்துப் பெயின்.

“Peelipei Saakhaadum Achchirum Appandam
Saala Mihuththup Peyin”.

**“Even the axle of a cart laden with the lightest things
such as peacock feathers would give way,
if loaded in excess.”**

Feathers in general are examples of things that are light, almost weightless. Just as air has weight, feathers though capable of floating in the air have weight too. Even such feathers are capable of breaking the strong axle of a cart when such feathers are loaded in the cart to excess. In other words, even the smallest and the lightest thing has an inherent capacity to break the strongest of things in the world. There is a parallel saying in the English language about the last straw that breaks the camel's back. Perhaps the English saying is a direct translation or modification of an Arabian or African adage. What is important to note is that everything, animate and inanimate, has a limitation and that fact should not be lost sight of. Even the strongest of things has a limit of resistance; likewise even the weakest has great potential.

The Kural under review occurs in the chapter on "Assessing One's Strength" (Vali Arithal) and it is solid advice to an administrator. In plain terms it tells an administrator that however strong and invincible he may feel, it would be useless if he has too many enemies however negligible they may appear to be. Even as individual feathers piled up in great quantity are capable of breaking the very axle of a cart, he also will be morally debilitated and physically destroyed if he has rivals and enemies all around him. In other words the success of any king depends on whether he has few or more enemies. Therefore it behoves a leader to minimise the number of enemies. Of course minimising does not necessarily mean actual elimination of personalities though the king at times might see reason to do that also. If the foes could be made to melt away diplomatically it would be ideal and be acclaimed by all and sundry. This perhaps is the reason why Jawaharlal Nehru somewhere said that leadership is the art of reducing foes and multiplying friends.

This Kural is relevant in the context of the political happenings in Tamil Eelam. Tamil Eelam appears to be embroiled in a web of fratricidal war. Because of the involvement of foreign forces in Tamil Eelam, in spite of the military superiority of one movement, and notwithstanding the fact that it has by and large endeared itself to the Tamil people, there prevails a stalemate, paving the way for the annihilation of the Tamil people. It would be ideal if the party that has all along been the apple of the Tamil eye could resolve the issue without further blood letting. It would do all concerned good if the people affected could learn from the Kural outlined above.

This Kural has another related connotation in the context of the Tamil liberation struggle in Sri Lanka. For long we have concentrated our attention on the various Tamil militant movements all proclaiming and promising the same thing, namely Tamil Eelam. Tamils in Sri Lanka want it, and want it at any cost. Nobody can deny that. It is because the Tamils wanted it, we were able to sustain a guerilla war for the past 18 years. The Tamils of the North-East have undergone all manner of troubles, miseries, trials and tribulations. They have almost reached breaking point. They seem to murmur "Enough is enough". They now want peace. The leaders of the movements should grant this peace now. How? This is a difficult question. But the Tamil masses also have their threshold in so far as their resilience and sacrifice go.

Chapter 41

WORDS CAN BE LETHAL

தீயினாற் சுட்டபுண் உள்ளாறும் ஆறாதே
நாவினாற் சுட்ட வடு.

“Theeyinaat Chuddapunn Ullaarum Aaraathae;
Naavinaat Chudda Vadu.”

“ The blister caused by fire will heal;
but the brand of a bitter tongue will never heal.”

If every person scans his own faults as he does his neighbour's, no evil can befall a living man. But that is not the case with most of us. We use double standards. We use a magnifying glass when we look at the fault of others, while using a plain glass when looking at ours. This is more evident in the area of the use of our tongue. Whereas we wag our tongues as we like, we complain that others have evil tongues. This is the way of the world.

Possession of self-restraint is a great virtue. Self-control places one among the gods. Lack of self-control leads one to the darkness of hell. Even if one word of you causes pain to another, all your virtue is lost. Therefore we have to be very cautious and sparing in the use of our tongue. As both prosperity and ruin are caused by words we must guard against imperfection in the use of our tongue.

As *Thiruvalluvar* is of the firm conviction that the majority of our human conflicts and personality clashes are generated by the abuse of our tongue he extols the virtue of restraint of tongue in more than two chapters, namely chapters 13, 19 and 65.

The Kural under consideration is the ninth Kural in the chapter on "Possession of Self-restraint". Let us paraphrase the Kural again. The wounds inflicted by weapons or fire may close in time; scalds may heal gradually; but wounds inflicted by words remain painful as long as one lives. The wound caused by fire will heal soon even though it may leave a scar on the surface of the body; but it does not leave any scar in one's mind. That is not the case with a wound inflicted by taunting words that are caustic in character. The wound caused by words does not leave any external mark but it leaves an indelible internal mark in the mind of the person at whom these words were directed and it serves as the seed for further strife and conflict.

This Kural is best illustrated by an episode from the great epic *Mahabharatha*. *Dronaachaariyar* and *Drupada* were friends. They were class-mates. They were so intimate that *Drupada* who was the son of a king used to tell *Dronaachaariyar* that he would give him half his kingdom when he ascended the throne. *Dronaachaariyar* learned archery under *Parasurama* and became the unrivalled master of the military art. Meanwhile *Drupada* had become the king of *Paanchaala* on the death of his father. *Dronaachaariyar* who had fallen on evil days, heard of the coronation of his friend *Drupada* and went to him in the hope that *Drupada*

Words can be lethal

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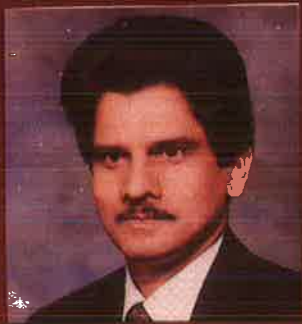
would remember his boyhood days and treat him generously. When *Dronaachaariyar* introduced himself as an old friend, *Drupada* felt that kind of introduction was an effrontery and roared: "Oh! Brahmana, how dare you address me familiarly as your friend? What friendship can there be between an enthroned king and a wandering beggar? What a fool must you be to presume on some long past acquaintance to claim friendship with a king who rules a kingdom? How can a pauper be a friend of a wealthy man?" *Dronaachaariyar* was turned out of the palace with scorn in his ears and a blazing wrath in his heart. *Dronaachaariyar* could not forget and did not forget the mordant remarks made by *Drupada* and waited for an opportune moment. That time came when *Kauravas* and *Pandavas* to whom *Dronaachaariyar* had thereafter become a master became experts in the martial arts. He sent *Arjuna* to seize *Drupada* and bring him alive. *Arjuna* defeated *Drupada* in battle and brought him captive to *Dronaachaariyar*. *Drupada* stood before *Dronaachaariyar* his face turned to the ground in shame and disgrace. "Aren't I your equal now?" asked *Dronaachaariyar* and chuckled. *Dronaachaariyar* thought this sufficient revenge for the insult he had suffered at the hands of *Drupada* and set him at liberty and treated him with honour.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Sellathamby Sriskandarajah is a man of many parts - a writer, speaker, legal draftsman, lawyer and a Tamil scholar.

He was in the civil service of Sri Lanka between 1961 and 1980 serving in various capacities - Legal Translator, State Counsel, and Senior Asst. Legal Draftsman in the Ministry of Justice. He had also functioned as a Visiting Lecturer at the Vidyodaya University, Vidyalandara University and at the Colombo Technical College, and served as an Examiner to the Council of Legal Education, The Institute of Bankers and the Dept. of Examinations.



The gathering political storm in Sri Lanka drove him out of the country in 1980 to Nigeria where he taught Law and English at the Polytechnic of Sokoto and at Haliru Abdu Teachers' College, Birnin Kebbi.

A graduate in Science of the Madras University, and a holder of a Masters Degree in Law from the University of London, he is currently serving as a Principal Legal Officer in the Government Legal Service of England and Wales.

Whereas Law met Mr. Sriskandarajah's earthly needs, Tamil language, literature and Tamil arts have been the fibre of his soul. He has contributed many articles, both in English and Tamil to various dailies and periodicals on a variety of subjects. He has written two books on the subject of law, the first one Chattamum Thamilum (Law and Tamil) co-authored with the late Mr. K. K. Poornanandan, LL.B., in 1971, and the second one Pankanmai Chaddam (Law of Partnership) in 1979. He is now bringing out his third book 'THE ETHICAL ESSENCE OF THE TAMILS'.

He is a son of the late Proctor Manickam Chelvatamby and of Mrs. Kanthimathy Chelvatamby of Puloly East, Point Pedro, Sri Lanka.