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Tirukkural and Environmental Ethics

Shubhangi Yadav^{ID*},

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of Delhi.

*Correspondence: paper4conference.research@gmail.com.

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ABSTRACT

Tirukkural was written around 2000 years ago which is a timeless work by Thiruvalluvar, the work transcends the boundary of caste, class, religion and culture. It is relevant to people of all culture and ethnicity. He uses to live with nature. Although it does not explicitly address contemporary environmental issues such as climate change or pollution, its core teachings provide a strong philosophical foundation for environmental ethics. Drawing on the theoretical framework of eco criticism it will examine the relationship between literature and the environment, it will reinterpret and connect Tirukkural with modern day ecological consciousness. The text focuses on virtues such as self-control, compassion, moderation, and responsibility which are essential for maintaining harmony between humans and nature. In the context of growing ecological crises driven by human greed, overconsumption, and exploitation of natural resources, the Tirukkural gains renewed relevance. It advocates a balanced way of life, discouraging excessive desire and promoting respect for all forms of life. These ethical guidelines indirectly support sustainable practices and environmental conservation. This paper examines how the moral framework presented in the Tirukkural aligns with modern environmental ethics. It explores the text's implicit ecological consciousness and its potential to guide contemporary society toward sustainable living. By reinterpreting its teachings in the present context, the study highlights the enduring significance of the Tirukkural as a source of ethical guidance for addressing environmental challenges and fostering a more harmonious relationship between humanity and nature.

Keywords- *Tirukkural, Thiruvalluvar, Sustainability, Eco criticism, Environment, Ethics, Ecology.*

Introduction

Thiruvalluvar was an ancient Tamil poet and thinker, best known for writing the famous book Tirukkural. He is believed to have lived more than 2,000 years ago in Tamil Nadu. Thiruvalluvar is respected not just in



Tamil culture but all over the world for his simple yet powerful ideas about life. It has 1330 kuralms each just two lines long but carries a deep meaning. The work is divided into 3 sections Aram (Virtue), Porul (Wealth), Inbam (Love). And that's how it talks about the complete life.

In the Tirukkural, he talks about how to live with honesty, kindness, and wisdom. His teachings focus on values like love, justice, self-discipline and respect. What makes him special is how he explains deep ideas in very short and easy to understand couplets. Even today, people find his words relevant because they speak about everyday human life and morality.

The Tirukkural may not directly talk about pollution, climate change, or environmental crisis, but its ideas still very relevant today. It teaches us to live with balance, avoid greed and think about others not just ourselves. If we look closely, many environmental problems today, like overuse of resources, deforestation, and pollution come from human greed and carelessness. The Tirukkural warns against exactly this kind of behavior. It also speaks about the importance of rain, agriculture, and living in harmony with nature. This reminds us how deeply human life depends on the environment. When we examine this text from eco criticism theory the text talks about ecological consciousness that critiques the human-centered approach and focuses on interconnectedness of all forms of life on earth. This will help reinterpret the text from a different perspective that acts as an environmental ethics. When we disturb this balance, we face problems like droughts, floods and climate change. Human greed has grown so much that they are forgetting that there are millions of other living and non-living beings that share the Earth. Humans want to control nature and its natural flow. This has created a major imbalance between humans and nature. In order to restore the natural balance humans have to stop interfering with environment. On Tirukkural, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam says, *"Tirukkural is considered to provide the code of conduct for the humanity of the planet earth for all time, which makes the past meet the present and creates the future."*

Tirukkural and Contemporary Environmental Issues

Environment is a system that provides natural surrounding for the existence of organisms. India's forest cover is 25.17%, according to 'India State of Forest Report 2023 and ranks 9th globally in forest area cover. But day by day human activity is increasing and interfering with the nature. Thiruvalluvar talks about the earth as a shared space between humans and other organisms like animal, birds, trees etc. He says, *"To divide one's bread with the needy and abstain from killing; these are the greatest of all the commandments of all the prophets."* (322). Sharing resources fairly and emphasizes on the peaceful co-existence among all kinds of lives. Earth is not just for humans but for everyone. Highlighting the core idea of balance of ecology and shared existence. Thiruvalluvar speaks in a very human and relatable way about kindness and responsibility. When he says that one should share food with others and avoid harming life (Kural 322), it is not just about personal goodness it is about how we treat the world around us. Sharing in this sense also means using nature's resources carefully, without taking more than we need. It reminds us that animals, birds, and plants also have a right to live and thrive. Tirukkural goes even further and says that the relationship between humans and ecology is reciprocity. Since nature is part of the Prakriti, a dharmic way of life should be in harmony with nature. When dharma is followed rigorously, nature would not fail people. This attitude is seen

in the everyday life of the people. It is customary for Tamils to say that we get rains because there are still good people in this world.

In recent times many man-made projects have been announced which could create a huge problem for humans, animals as well as nature as a whole. The Aravallis hills issue where honorable Supreme Court in 2025 gave a new definition to Aravallis, those landforms less than 100m hight will be removed from legal



protection which means 90% of the Aravallis will be on vulnerable position and can be used for mining and construction. They are the oldest mountain range and they act as a natural barrier between fertile land and The Great Thar Desert. This reflects human greed and disregard for nature. *“Water- courses, deserts, mountains and thick jungles all these constitute various kinds of defensive barriers.”* (Kural 742). Earth has its own natural barriers like Aravallis, Mangrove-forest to prevent flood, all these acts as a natural-barriers and important to sustain life and stability.

Sustainable development is a way in which natural resources are used wisely, there is a balance and resources are available for future generation as well. Progress should not come at the cost of harming and exhausting nature and its natural resources.

Wealth should not be acquired unethically-honesty and righteousness should be used to accumulate it. When people chase profit without the values they end up exploiting nature, which disrupts this balance and harms both the environment and society. Nature should not be exploited for that, in Kural 754 *“Behold the substance that is acquired by means that are not evil; righteousness floweth therefrom and happiness also.”* Exploiting nature for the profit without ethics leads to destruction and when wealth is earned in the right way, it naturally brings moral goodness and lasting happiness. We all know how the scarcity of water is the biggest crises the world is facing right now. Another very important element to sustain life on is water. Everyone sharing the life on earth requires it. Despite covering about 71% of the planet, only a small fraction of this water is freshwater and an even smaller percentage is accessible for human use. This small availability doesn't make it a resource but also a responsibility. Long before water scarcity and sustainability became global issues Tirukkural, emphasized the centrality of water in sustaining life and society. In Kural 20 *“Nothing on earth can go without water; that being so, thy conduct of even most virtuously minded of men dependeth ultimately on rain.”* Through Tirukkural, he reminds us that even the most virtuous human efforts depend on rain. Water is essential for the world to function, without rain and water human activity will be at halt. Through these lines he underlines the need to respect , preserve and use the resource wisely. But when we look at the present, there is a clear gap between what we know and how we act. In today's time it is neglected despite so much awareness. Excessive groundwater extraction, polluted rivers have led to the depletion of Fresh water. Rain water harvesting is poorly implemented and leads to the wastage of water. This also shows the disconnect of knowledge and action. The wisdom of Tirukkural becomes more relevant. In modern time large scale data center that power AI or Artificial Intelligence requires immense cooling to prevent over heat, for this they use millions of litres of water to maintain the temperature. It is a need of an hour to conserve water and follow environmental ethics. Seen through Thiruvalluvar's perspective, this is not just a technological issue but an ethical one. It reflects how far we have drifted from the idea of mindful and responsible use of resources. If we ignore limits, can end up harming the very foundation it depends on.

Ethical Governance for the Protection

Good governance is very important for the protection and conservation of the environment. Tiruvalluvar emphasizes on a just ruler must govern with righteousness and responsibly. It ensures proper use of resources, prevents exploitation and maintains balance between humans and nature. That's how they will protect and promote sustainable practices and ensure long term welfare. Many countries have completely banned the cutting of trees; Netherland has banned the cutting of Timber trees and imposed a heavy sanction. In India under The Forest Conservation Act, 1980 and Indian Forest Act 1927, prohibit felling of trees in protected areas, forest or even public areas without the permission of the authorities. But how much do we follow this is the real question. Illegal mining, cutting of trees are still there despite having such laws in

existence but at a grassroots level it is ineffective. Even though local and tribal communities do participate and protect the land, forest and trees but lack of awareness weakens the efforts.

Kural 545 *“Behold the price who wieldeth the sceptre in accordance with the law: seasonal rains and rich harvests have their home in his land.”* It means that ruler’s duty is not only to protect humans but sustain other resources and stop the misuse and exploitation. Tiruvalluvar was ahead of his time and visionary person. The ideas and values still align with today’s ideas of conservation, governance and protection. He connects good governance with the protection of natural resources and collective well-being of all living and non-living things. The teachings are very relevant and serves justice and respects nature to sustain future. In the Capitalist Economy where everything is commercialised and holds a price, only few people control the resources with rich people holding up-to 60% of the total wealth, Tirukkural talks about sharing the abundance of love, resources and everyone will feel fulfilled.

The Great Nicobar Project is a great and recent example which shows the human ambition. This is a massive infrastructure initiative to make airports, ports, Township. For this around 8 to 9 lakh trees will be cut down which will risk the life of many tribes and endangered species in such an ecologically sensitive area. When we look at this situation through the lens of the Tirukkural by Thiruvalluvar, it begins to feel less like just a policy decision and more like a moral dilemma. Thiruvalluvar speaks very simply but his message is powerful he warns us about letting our desires grow without limits. For him, desire is not just a small flaw in human nature. It is something that can quietly take over our thinking, pushing us to want more and more, even when it harms others or disturbs balance. It can lead us away from what truly matters. Kural 369 *“Even here a man shall have everlasting joy if he killeth that greatest misery of all, desire.”* And real happiness does not come from constantly building, expanding, or accumulating. Instead, it comes from knowing when to stop, from being content, and from living in harmony with other people and with nature. In Tirukkural the desire has been shown just as a weakness but also suffering that takes us away from the real happiness. The uncontrolled desire and other material gain only bring inequality and loss no real fulfilment is felt. This very project shows the urge of human desire to expand and control nature in the name of progress. The project will affect the environment massively. Shompen and Nicobarese tribes are dependent completely on the forest for their food and homes. This deforestation will not only be an ecological loss but it will displace the tribes and loss of ancestor lands. The approval of The Great Nicobar Project was given by The National Green Tribunal which highlights the weak governance and lack of ethical judgement, environment becomes the secondary and first priority is given to the development which can be very dangerous in the coming years. In this matter Supreme Court should have intervened and stopped the project with the immediate actions. All the natural calamities are occurring because of human greed and ignorance. Privatisation of forest and natural resources should be stopped resources belong to everyone and should be enjoyed equally. It can only happen under a stable and well-ordered government.

Conclusion

Tirukkural shows a deep intimate relation with Prakariti. It talks about moral responsibility, social harmony and environment balance and its interconnectedness. Rain, agriculture, water are not seen as different entity from humans. When human conduct declines imbalance comes in nature. Tirukkural itself is only a guide, like any great work it remains powerless if not used in practical life. Simply liking its work without applying it to daily life reduces it to words on pages. discipline and responsibility can only make a difference. The condition can improve with awareness, education, encouraging individuals to adopt simple habits aligned with its values. Governments and institutions can adapt from its principles to promote sustainable



development and environmental protection. Using media, art, and public discourse to reconnect people with its timeless relevance. Tirukkural already offers the wisdom that is needed only people have to use it their lives.

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