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## Ethical Values Expressed in the Poetry of Thiruvalluvar and Kabir

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### ABSTRACT

India is a country blessed with diversity-be it geographical or cultural. Despite the existence of diverse cultures, customs, philosophies, ideologies, traditions, languages and dialects, attire, and culinary habits, India remains bound together by a single thread, stretching from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. Despite considerable diversity, the spirit of integrity, unity, and public welfare remains the same, though expressed in various forms. India pursues egalitarian and human welfare objectives that embody the broader concept of “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*”. This article examines the ethical values expressed in the works of two such great saints of Indian literature: Thiruvalluvar and Kabir. Literature has been called the mirror of society; whatever transpires within a society is clearly reflected in the literature of that era. In their works, Thiruvalluvar and Kabir addressed the societal issues of their era-including religious ostentation, hostility, jealousy, hatred, and internal strife, and also preached how humans should lead their lives.

**Keywords** - Moral Values, Indian Thought, Thiruvalluvar, Kabir, Public Welfare, Virtue, Brotherhood, Self-restraint.

### Introduction

In Tamil literature, Thiruvalluvar is revered as a unique literary figure and a saint-philosopher. His work, *Thirukkural*, is immensely popular, not only in India but across the globe-due to its profound significance; consequently, it has been translated into numerous world languages, in addition to various Indian languages. *Thirukkural* is a treatise on ethics in which Thiruvalluvar has offered a comprehensive discourse on *Dharma*, *Artha*, and *Kama*. Indian philosophy mentions four *Purusharthas* (human goals): *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama*, and *Moksha*. However, rather than discussing *Moksha* separately, Thiruvalluvar posits that an individual attains liberation by duly observing *Dharma*, *Artha*, and *Kama*. Kabir Das holds a distinct place in Hindi literature as a *Nirguna* (formless) saint. His work, *Bijak*, is a highly significant text. Some of Kabir's verses are also compiled in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Despite the differences in time, language, and place between Kabir and Thiruvalluvar, a striking similarity is evident in their ideas. There is considerable disagreement regarding the parents and birthplaces of Thiruvalluvar and Kabir; however, both saints were weavers by profession. Both



saints depicted the political, religious, and cultural conditions of the societies of their respective times. Through his poetry, Thiruvalluvar preached virtuous conduct, discipline, the proper observance of *Dharma*, truthfulness, benevolence, and charity in order to eradicate the social evils prevalent in his time, Kabir, on the other hand, emphasized Hindu-Muslim unity, brotherhood, mutual harmony, the rejection of rituals and religious ostentation, and the establishment of humanistic values within the society of his era. The literature of both these saints self-evidently demonstrates its relevance in the present day. For the construction of a healthy society and for human welfare, it is essential to integrate the teachings of these saints into our conduct. Within the stream of Indian thought, the literature of these saints is both incomparable and unforgettable.

Man is a social being. An individual's conduct within society is the decisive factor in a healthy and civilized society. In Indian philosophy, modest conduct has been universally cherished. Thiruvalluvar referenced the virtue of gentle speech in the *Thirukkural*. He consistently advocated for the use of kind words. The following excerpt is notable in this context:

“இனிய உளவாக இன்னாத கூறல்  
கனியிருப்பக் காய்கவர்த் தற்று.”  
*Iniya ulavaka innata küral*  
*kaniyiruppak käykavarn tarru*

To speak bitter words when sweet words are existent, is to eat raw fruits when the ripe ones present. (*Kural*, 100)

Saint Kabir Das, too, has expressed a similar sentiment in his verses; he, too, regarded gentle speech as essential for proper human conduct. Therefore, he stated that one's speech should be such that even an angry person is calmed down.

Kabir strongly opposed the distortions that had crept into the religious rituals prevalent in his time—such as ritualistic practices, idol worship, and fasting. Kabir was not opposed to religion itself, but rather to the hypocrisy and ostentation that had infiltrated it. As long as a person harbors impure sentiments within their mind, they remain, in the true sense, far removed from religion; therefore, Kabir says:

“माला फेरत जुग भया, फिरा न मन का फेर,  
कर का मनका डार दे, मन का मनका फेर”

*Maala pherat jug bhaya, phira na man ka pher,*  
*Kar ka manka daar de, man ka manka pher.*

Thiruvalluvar, too, preached that an individual should renounce external ostentation and conduct themselves with a guileless mind, free from any envy or malice. He regarded purity of mind as essential for the practice of righteousness. In this context, the following lines are noteworthy:

“மனத்துக்கண் மாசிலன் ஆதல் அனைத்துஅறன்  
ஆகுல நீர பிற.”

*Manattukkan mācilan atal anaittu'aran*  
*akula nira pira*

In keeping the heart spotless, all the virtues found.  
Anything else is vain show and sound. (*Kural*, 35)

In other words, maintaining an unblemished mind is the true practice of *Dharma*. To undertake any action with an impure mind is merely a display of outward ostentation.

Mutual harmony, trust, a spirit of benevolence, and education are of paramount importance for the construction of a healthy society. Ego is a vice inherent within the individual—one whose renunciation has

been advocated by various scholars, thinkers, and saints within the stream of Indian thought. Unless an individual possesses a sense of humanity, benevolence, and altruism, their knowledge holds no significance—no matter how great a scholar they may be. Both Thiruvalluvar and Kabir placed great emphasis on an individual's ethical conduct, moral values, and spirit of selfless service; through their teachings, they exhorted people to embrace and uphold sentiments dedicated to the welfare of society. The following example clearly illustrates this.

“உலகத்தோடு ஒட்ட ஒழுகல் பலகற்றும்  
கல்லார் அறிவிலா தார்.”  
*ulakattoṭu oṭṭa olukal palakarrum*  
*kallar arivila tār (Kural, )*

Fools may be as instructed as thou pleasest; but they never learn to conform to the ways of the Righteous. In other words, a person who lacks an understanding of the refined manners and social customs of virtuous people—no matter how great a scholar he may be, is considered to be nothing but a complete fool.

“पोथी पढ़ि पढ़ि जग मुवा, पंडित भया न कोइ।  
एकै आषिर पीव का, पढ़ै सु पंडित होइ।”

*Pothi padhi padhi jag muva, pandit bhaya na koi,*  
*Ekai aashir peev ka, padhai su pandit hoi.*

It is stated in Indian philosophy that ten percent of wealth acquired through proper means should be given in charity to the destitute, holy men, and for the care of cows, etc. This philanthropic, altruistic sentiment is also reflected in the *Thirukkural*—

“ஊருணி நீர்நிறைந் தற்றே உலகவாம்  
பேரறி வாளன் திரு.”  
*ūrūni nīrnirain tarrē ulakavām*  
*perari valan tiru (Kural, 215)*

Behold the village tank filled with water to its brim; like unto it is the prosperity of the wise man that loveth the world.

That is to say, the wealth of a virtuous person who aids the world through benevolence and generosity is akin to a water-filled lake situated in the centre of a village, which proves to be of immense utility to the villagers.

In contemporary times, a consumerist mindset is visible everywhere throughout society. Individuals are sacrificing their very all in the pursuit of accumulating material wealth. They are even weighing relationships on the scales of money and riches; consequently, mental health issues such as stress, distress, loneliness, and depression have emerged in our society in a formidable and alarming form. Kabir was a visionary saint. In his teachings, he advocates for the accumulation of wealth as per one's needs, and urges that a portion of one's wealth and assets be spent on the needy. The following example serves as an illustration:

“साई इतना दीजिए जामे कुटुंब समाय,  
मैं भी भूखा ना रहूं साधु न भूखा जाए।”

*Sai itna deejie, jame kutumb samaye.*  
*Main bhi bhookha na ragoon, sadhu na bhookha jaye.*

To achieve anything in life, one must always conduct oneself in accordance with the times. Otherwise, once the moment has passed, one misses the opportunity to attain one's goal. Both saints, Thiruvalluvar and Kabir have highlighted this reality through their teachings. Kabir stated:

“काल करे सो आज करे, आज करे, सो अब

पल में प्रलय होगी, बहुरि करेगी कब।”  
*Kaal kare so aaj kar, aaj kare so ab.*  
*Pal mein pralay hoegi, bahuri karega kab.*

At the same time, Thiruvalluvar remarked-

“அன்று அறிவாம் என்னாது அறஞ்செய்க மற்றுஅது பொன்றும்கால் பொன்றாத் துணை.”

Anru arivām ennātu aranceyka marru'atu ponrumkäl ponrät tunai

Do deeds of virtue now and defer not anymore.

It is the undying friend at ying hour. (*Kural*, 36)

Both saints, Thiruvalluvar and Kabir, regarded involvement with another man's wife as detrimental to society; consequently, they advocated for its renunciation and condemned it as reprehensible- a stance clearly reflected in their poetry. Thiruvalluvar stated:

“அறன்வரையான் அல்ல செயினும் பிறன்வரையான் பெண்மை நயவாமை நன்று.”

Aranvaraiyān alla ceyinum piranvaraiyā! penmai nayavāmai nanru

He who covets not other's wife's womanhood,

Even if he does no virtue, is still good. (*Kural*, 150)

Even if one forsakes religious observances and commits a myriad of misdeeds, yet refrains from coveting another man's wife-that, indeed, is the highest virtue.

“कामी कदे न हरि भजै, जपै न कैसो जाप

राम कहाँ थें जलि मरे, को पूरिबला पाप”

*Kaami kade na hari bhajai, japai na kaiso jaap*

*Ram kahyan then jali mare, ko pooribala paap*

All Indian sages, ascetics, saints, and scholars have regarded good company as highly significant. An individual's character development also depends upon the company they keep. If an individual associates with a person who is greedy, selfish, and possesses a *tamasic* (dark or negative) temperament, they too become to a greater or lesser extent influenced by that person's thoughts. For this reason, all saints have regarded the company of good people as highly beneficial for the welfare of society. This teaching is evident in the works of both Saint Kabir and Thiruvalluvar. In this context, the following couplet is worth mentioning:

“कबीरा संगत साधु की, नित प्रति कीर्ति जाय

दुर्मति दूर बहावसी, देशी सुमति बताया”

*Kabira sangat sadhu ki, nit prati keerti jaaye.*

*Durmati door bahavasi, deshii sumati bataye.*

Likewise, Thiruvalluvar considered good companionship beneficial for mankind, stating it should be followed for a person's health and overall growth. This can be seen in the example below:

“நிலத்துஇயல்பால் நீர்திரிந்து அற்றாகும் மாந்தர்க்கு

இனத்துஇயல்பது ஆகும் அறிவு.”

*nilattiyalpal nirtirintu arrākum māntarkku*

*inattiyalpa tākum arivu (Kural, 452)*

Water altereth and taketh the character of the soil through which it floweth; even so the mind taketh the colour of the company with which it consorteth.

In other words, just as water adapts to the nature of the soil upon which it falls, so too does a human being transform to align with the nature of the people with whom they associate.

Without human virtues such as love, brotherhood, and humility within a person, any other qualities they possess are overshadowed. Hence, Kabir stated:

“बड़ा हुआ तो क्या हुआ, जैसे पेड़ खजूर  
पंथी को छाया नहीं, फल लागे अति दूर”

*Bada hua to kya hua, jaise ped khajoor  
Panthi ko chhaya nahin, phal laage ati door*

Saints have regarded humility as the adornment of an individual. Thiruvalluvar, too, has encouraged individuals to be affectionate and humble. In this context, the following verse is noteworthy:

“நலத்தின்கண் நார் இன்மை தோன்றின் அவனைக்  
குலத்தின்கண் ஐயப் படும்.”

*nalattinkan nār inmai tōnrin avanaik  
kulattinkan aiyap paṭum (Kural, 958)*

If rudeness of speech, showeth itself in a man coming of a good family, people would even suspect the legitimacy of his birth.

In other words, if a lack of affection is observed among the virtues of a person of noble lineage, one is compelled to cast doubt upon that individual's nobility.

Citizens of any nation who understand the importance of labor contribute significantly to the upliftment of their country and society. When an individual becomes idle, they inevitably undergo a moral decline. Prioritizing laziness over hard work, they seek to fulfill their needs without performing any labor- a mindset that leads them to willingly engage in even such undignified acts as begging. Both Thiruvalluvar and Kabir have criticized this in their sayings. In this context, this couplet is worth seeing:

“இன்மை இடும்பை இரந்துதீர் வாம்என்னும் வன்மையின் வன்பாட்டது இல்.”  
*inpam oruvarku irattal irantavai tunpam urāa varin. (Kural, 1052)*

Even begging will be a pleasure if thou canst obtain that which thou beggest without having to submit to any humiliation.1052

In other words, thinking you can end your poverty by begging without working is an act of cruelty exceeding mere cruelty.

During Kabir's time, individuals in society had begun to adopt a lazy disposition; admonishing them, Kabir inspired them to earn their livelihood through labor and hard work. He regarded acts such as begging as reprehensible. The following couplet is noteworthy:

“माँगन मरण समान है, मति माँगो कोई भीख  
माँगन से तो मरना भला, यह सतगुरु की सीखा”

*Maangan maran samaan hai, mati maango koi bheekh  
Maangan se to marna bhala, yeh satguru ki seekh*

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the ethical values presented in the works of Thiruvalluvar and Kabir are evident from the above discussion. Both authors created a vision of a society where everyone is inspired by mutual harmony, love, trust, brotherhood, and cooperation. While highlighting the problems prevalent in society, Thiruvalluvar has also outlined their appropriate solutions. Both saints have expounded upon virtues such as righteous conduct, self-restraint, truthfulness, gentle speech, abstinence from meat, avoidance of theft, renunciation of greed, prohibition of adultery, charity, wifely devotion, the excellence of women, benevolence, and humility in their poetry. The thoughts of Thiruvalluvar and Kabir remain just as relevant in

contemporary times. Within the tradition of Indian thought, the stature of both these saints is incomparable and unforgettable.

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