

Tirukural on War, Defense and Foreign Affairs
Pathmarajah Nagalinkam

"Only a few of us know the name of Tiruvalluvar. The North Indians do not know the name of the great saint. There is none who has given such a treasure of wisdom like him." Mahatma Gandhi

"I thought about the question, "Which is superior, Sanskrit or Tamil?" Sanskrit and Tamil are equal in their greatness. We cannot say that the one is superior to the other. The reason is that the Vedas are in Sanskrit, and in Tamil we have the Kural. If there were nothing equal to the Vedas in Tamil, Sanskrit should have been said to be superior. The Kural is present in Tamil as the equal of the Vedas. Both languages, Sanskrit and Tamil, are now seen to be equally great." Sankaracharya Swami Chandrashekharendra, Kanchipuram

"There hardly exists in the literature of the world a collection of maxims in which we find such lofty wisdom."
Dr. Albert Schweitzer

The world knows of Chanakya, also known as Kautilya (350-275 BCE) and his Arthashastra, as well as Sun Tzu (400-320 BCE) and his Art of War as it deals with statecraft and military strategies. Lesser known is Tiruvalluvar (circa 200 BCE, some say 200 CE) and his Tirukural which deals primarily in Ethics but devotes some chapters to statecraft and defence. Some of the main principles of war are discussed by highlighting some selected verses:

- The Elements of a Comprehensive Military Power (CMP)
- The Elements of Surprise & Timeliness
- The Elements of Intelligence & Spy Network
- The Elements of Preparation for War
- The Element of Courage and Valour
- The Elements of War Planning
- Other General Elements

The Principles Of War: The Elements of a Comprehensive Military Power (CMP) Verses 381-390

Verse 381

He is lion among kings who is well-endowed with these six possessions: Army, citizens, wealth, ministers, allies and fortresses.

Verse 875

Finding he faces two foes with no allies, a lone man lures one to side with him.

Comments: Here Tiruvalluvar lists sizeable and well equipped armed forces, a large population base, economic wealth, capable military leaders, allies, and well stocked defenses as the six components of a comprehensive military power.

The Elements of Surprise and Timeliness: Verses 481-500

Verse 481

A crow can overcome a powerful owl in the daytime. A king desiring to defeat his enemy must pick the proper time.

Verse 485

Those who aim to own the world must wait, unruffled, for the fitting hour.

Verse 487

When angered, men of understanding never show it outwardly then and there. Holding it inside, they watch for an opportune moment.

Verse 488

Bow humbly when greeting an enemy. His own head will bow humiliated when in time he greets defeat.

Verse 489

When a rare opportunity comes, do not hesitate, but swiftly accomplish tasks that are otherwise impossible.

Verse 490

There are times to stay still as a stalking heron. There are times to move swiftly as a heron's strike.

Comments:

Surprise, timeliness, patience, feigning inaction, appearing emotionless but remaining resolute to offensive actions are the keys to success. Let him restrain himself like a heron, motionless, and then strike swiftly, when there is a favourable opportunity.

The Elements of Intelligence and a Spy Network: Verses 581-700

Verse 581

Competent spies and the esteemed codes of law, consider these two as the eyes of a king.

Verse 583

Without assessing the intelligence reports of spies a king cannot enjoy conquests.

Verse 588

Before believing a spy's espionage, have another spy espy the information.

Verse 589

See that spies do not know each other, and accept their findings only when three reports agree.

Verse 633

He who can divide the enemy, bind friends more firmly and reunite estranged allies is indeed a minister.

Verse 673

Direct action is good whenever feasible, but when it is not, seek other means of success.

Verse 675

Before acting resolve all doubts through consideration of these five: cost, means, time, place and the action itself.

Verse 695

The emissary neither eavesdrops nor inquires into matters. Rather he listens raptly when secrets are revealed.

Comments:

This deals with the importance of spies, intelligence networks and foreign policy initiatives as crucial to a state. Furthermore he counsels that there be separate and independent spy networks, clandestine operations and all information be triply confirmed by three separate sources. Today this would mean satellite intelligence, human intelligence as well as electronic communications intelligence.

The Elements of Preparation for War: Verses 741-770

Verse 746

A worthy fortress, stocked with all needed goods, needs good men to fend off all attack.

Comments:

This chapter deals with importance of defences and preparations for war by stockpiling, countermeasures and offensive capabilities. In today's world an impregnable military base would be one with air defences, aerospace support and IRBM capabilities where appropriate.

The Elements of Courage and Valour: Verse 771-780

Verse 761

An army which is complete and conquers fearlessly is foremost among all a king's possessions.

Verse 763

So what if an army of rats roars like the raging sea? The mere hiss of a cobra will deaden their din.

Verse 768

Even without a winning offense and defense, a well-appointed (with competent commanders) army may win renown acclaim.

Verse 774

Having hurled his spear at a huge bull elephant, the hero finds another piercing his body and grabs it with glee.

Verse 775

Is it not a disgraceful defeat to the courageous warrior if his glaring eyes so much as blink when the lance is hurled at him?

Verse 967

Better to die right where you stand, the saying goes, Than to live running after those who despise you.

Verse 969

Shorn of its hair, the yak will refuse to live; such men exist, who prefer death to the loss of honor.

Verse 970

The world will extol and exalt honorable men who exult in death rather than dishonor.

Comments:

Valor by military leaders and battlefield soldiers alike and a willingness to go to war, seeking death, is what makes an armed forces worthy, the most important asset of the government. To die in battle is to have truly lived.

The Elements of War Planning: Verses 461-480

Verse 461

Before undertaking a project, ponder what will be gained, lost and ultimately achieved.

Verse 465

To strike out without a well-pondered plan is one way to cultivate an enemies' strength.

Verse 464

Those who dread derision and disgrace will not commence a task that is unclear.

Verse 471

The prudent act after weighing the strength a deed demands one's own strength and the strengths of allies and opposition.

Verse 671

When a decision is reached, deliberation ends. To delay that decision's execution is detrimental.

Verse 675

Before acting resolve all doubts through consideration of these five: cost, means, time, place and the action itself.

Comments:

Clarity of goals, full battle strategic and tactical plan with well thought out objectives, public relations, media management and exit policies are essential for success.

Other General Elements

Verse 855

Who is there who could conquer those who keep themselves free of all hostilities?

Verse 674

Reflect on this: Both efforts and enemies, if left unfinished, can destroy like an unextinguished fire.

Verse 679

Rather than bestow kind favors on friends, hasten to befriend your unkind enemies.

Verse 680

Fearing their people's inner apprehensions, men of minor realms bow before mightier rulers, accepting terms.

Verse 691

Those who associate with irascible kings should be like men who warm themselves at a fire, moving neither too near nor too far away.

Verse 862

How can the man who is unloving and who has neither powerful allies nor the strength to stand alone overcome his mighty enemies?

Verse 874

The world abides beneath the greatness of noble natured rulers who befriend their enemies.

Verse 894

For the powerless to wreak harm upon the powerful is to summon Death with the hand.

The consciousness exemplified in the Tirukural on war and statecraft is strategic, tactical, realistic and proactive or offensive. It is not a surprise that the most popular god among the Tamils is Lord Skanda-Muruga, the god of war!

Indian policy makers, military men and bureaucrats should study the Tirukural and reorient themselves. There is no one who is as merciless as Tiruvalluvar is to cowardice, dishonor and injustice! In Tiruvalluvar's eyes, India today would have been described as a disorientated, senseless and bumbling coward bringing dishonor to humanity and should be immediately put to death!

Verse 236

If you must be born, be born for glory, those born without it would be better off without birth.

NOTES:

The world knows of Chanakya, also known as Kautilya (350-275 BCE) and his Arthashastra, as well as Sun Tzu (400-320 BCE) and his Art of War as it deals with statecraft and military strategies. Lesser known is Tiruvalluvar and his Tirukural which deals primarily in Ethics but devotes some chapters to statecraft and defence. Yet the Tirukural, originally written in Tamil has been translated into over 30 languages, making it among the most translated and published book in the world after the Bible.

Tiruvalluvar, circa 200 BCE (some say 200 CE) was a lower class weaver, from the communities considered "dalits" today, and lived in Mylapore, Chennai in South India. King Ashoka's famed reign had

just ended and the great Chola Empire of Tamil Nadu where the weaver lived was just beginning its thousand-year rule. Here he wrote the Tirukural.

A "kural" is a short strope, a sloka in two lines, in the difficult and disciplined *venpa metre*. It consists of 133 chapters, each containing 10 slokas. Each chapter deals with one aspect of life. The 1330 slokas cover *Aram* (Dharma or Virtues), *Porul* (Artha or Wealth and Statecraft), and *Inbam* (Kama or Love). Due to its ecumenical tenets it is free of the dogmatic bias that commonly attends religious scriptures and therefore has been claimed by other religions as their own. In the matter of authorship, it is probable that not all the maxims are Tiruvalluvar's own, but that he also versified some which were already ancient maxims of the people. Today the Tirukural is sworn upon in the courts of law in Tamilnadu and taught in schools, where children memorise the verses and chant in competitions.

Aram translates as 'justness' (which flows from within as compassion, charity and justice, and which is inherent in everyone) and not dharma which is 'righteousness or duty' (imposed from the outside by society). There is no word in the Sanskrit language for *aram*. It is not in their vocabulary. Hence the shortcoming.

A great deal can be learnt of the character, life and status of Tiruvalluvar by the legends passed down orally relating to his wife, Vasuki, considered the epitome of devotion and wifehood; traditional intelligent cooperation with her husband that manifests the marvellous harmony in their marriage. When the proposal of marriage of Vasuki, daughter of an affluent farmer impressed with Tiruvalluvar, was brought to him, he decided to test his future bride. He gave her a handful of sand and requested that she boil it into rice. In perfect faith and without the slightest hesitation she boiled the sand which miraculously became rice which she then served her future husband.

To a question by a guest as to whether an ascetic life or that of a householder is better, Tiruvalluvar called for his wife who was drawing water from a well. Instantly abandoning her task she rushed to her husband's side, but to the astonishment of the guest, the bucket of water did not fall back into the well but remained suspended in mid air till Vasuki returned to her chore. Tiruvalluvar's unspoken answer to the question by his guest was it was best to follow the path of a householder if a wife is like Vasuki.

On her dying bed, Tiruvalluvar asked her if there was anything that he could do for her. Vasuki replied that she had only one question; all her life while she set out his meals, he had requested a cup of water and a needle to be placed along side, which she did. "Why did you bid me do this, although not once did you ever use it?" He replied that while serving him, if any rice dropped, he would have used the needle to pick it up and rinse it, but in all these years she never dropped a single rice grain and therefore there was no occasion to use it. With that Vasuki breathed her last. To this day, Vasuki is the role modal for the Tamil women in much the same way Sita and Savitri are in the north.

An English translation in prose has been used in this article, thereby losing the rhythmic beauty of the Tamil language as well as innuendos, nuances, admonitions, puns, wit, insinuations, and satire. Nevertheless it still serves well to impart the intended meanings.

The sage and lawgiver speaks of the king's duty to execute murderers, speaks of a strong military, of spies, advisors with personal agendas, of fools and their ways and wastage. He knows of the wiles of real enemies and has much to tell modern man about overcoming opposition and surviving the attacks of foes.

He speaks of making money and of how money is squandered. The weaver has no mercy when he speaks of the preservation of honor - no mercy at all.

Sir C.P. Ramasamy Iyer places a befitting tribute to the grandeur of the Tirukural on record. In his preface to the French Translation of Thirukural, Iyer says: "It has been rightly remarked that the Kural addresses itself to all classes and communities, and indeed to the whole human race and charges itself with the promulgation of virtue and of right conduct in the guise of familiar and friendly advice. In a series of pithy maxims, it lays down rules of universal acceptability dealing with most of our domestic and social problems and situations. In the well known words of the philosopher, Spinoza, it is written *sub specie eternitate* though characterized by tenderness and comprehensive human sympathy, human life and love in all their forms as well as the regular of existence in the social and economic fields are alike dealt with on the basis of practical spirituality".

Tirukural, the secular book on morals had been translated in many languages and is next to that of the Bible in the number of such translations. The French version of Tirukural rendered by the great littérateur Gnanou Diagou had fascinated many scholars. It is a matter of pride to all Pondicherrians that Gnanou Diagou is one of the illustrious sons of this soil having earned a name and fame in the 19th century.

Tirukural had been translated into the following languages: Burmese (Mr. Myo Thant, "Thirukkural"), Chinese (Mr. Chi Eng Hsi, "Thirukkural" 1967), Czech (Mr. Kamil V Zvelebil, Thirukural (1952-1954), Dutch Mr. D.Kat, (Thirukural, Netherlands, 1964), Fiji, Mr.S.L Berwick, (Na. Thirukkurala, 1964), Finnish (Mr. Aalto, Pentit, Kural - The Ancient Tamil Classic, 1972), German, Albrecht, Fenz and K. Lalithambal: (Thirukural von Thiruvalluvar aus dem Tamil, Madurai 1977), Mr.A.F Cammera, (Thirukural Leipzig 1803), Mr Karl. Graul, (Der Kural des Thiruvalluvar, London 1854), Mr. Karl Graul, (Der Tamu lische gnomes dichter Thiruvalluvar, Leipzig, 1865), Mr.Frederick Rickert (Thirukural, selections, Berlin, 1847), Mr. William and Norgate, (Der Kural des Thiruvalluvar, 2nd ed, London, 1866), French, Ariel, M, (Kural de Thiruvalluvar ,traduits du tamoul), Paris, 1848), Barrigue de, Fontaineu, G, (Le livre de l'amour de Thiruvalluva, Paris, 1889), Danielou, Alain, (Thiruvallouvar Kural, Pondicherry, 1942), Jacolliot, Louis, (Kural de Thiruvalluvar, selections, Paris, 1767), Lamairesse, M, (Thirukural in French, Pondicherry, 1867), Latin, Graul, Charles, (Kural of Thiruvalluvar, Tranquebar, 1866), Veeramamunivar, (Thirukural, Books I and II, London, 1930), Malay, Ismail, Hussein (Thirukural sastera kalasik Tamil yang, Kuala Lumpur, 1967), Ramily Bin Thakir (Thirukural in verses, Kuala Lumpur, 1964), Polish, Umadevi, Wandy Dynowskiev, (Thiruvalluvar Kural, Madras, 1958), Russian J.J Glazov and Krishnamurthi, A, (Thirukural, a book on virtue, politics and love, Moscow, 1963), Glazov, (Thirukural in couplets with illustrations, Moscow, 1974), Swedish, Frykholm Ingya, (Thirukural, Uddavalla, 1971). The list is incomplete.

The Tirukural is more well known for its ethics. A selection of verses on ethics:

Verse 31

Virtue yields Heaven's honor and Earth's wealth. What is there then that is more fruitful for a man ?

Verse 66

Sweet are the sounds of the flute and the lute," say those who have not heard the prattle of their own children,

Verse 83

If a man cares daily for those who come to him, his life will never suffer the grievous ruin of poverty.

Verse 100

To utter harsh words when sweet ones would serve is like eating unripe fruits when ripe ones are at hand.

Verse 110

Having killed every kind of goodness, one may yet be saved, but there is no redemption for those who let gratitude die.

Verse 156

The joy of the vengeful lasts only for a day, but the glory of the forbearing lasts until the end of time.

Verse 170

There are no envious men who have risen to prosperity. There are no men free from envy who have fallen from it.

Verse 176

Desiring grace and doing his duty, a man who desires wealth but acquires it wrongly is destroyed nevertheless.

Verse 203

To commit no wrong, even against one's enemies, is said to be supreme wisdom.

Verse 204

Only the forgetful plot another's ruin; others remember that virtue itself devises every plotter's downfall.

Verse 214

He who understands the duty of giving truly lives. All others shall be counted among the dead.

Verse 251

How can he practice true compassion who eats the flesh of an animal to fatten his own flesh?

Verse 999

To those who cannot smile in joy of the wide world lies engulfed in darkness even in broad daylight

Verse 1004

Unloved by even a single soul, what could such a man imagine he might leave behind?

Verse 1007

The wealth of a man who gives nothing to the needy is like a beautiful maiden growing old unwed.

Verse 1027

On a battlefield the burden falls upon the brave; In the family, a comparable weight is carried by the most competent.

Verse 1029

Behold the man who shields his family from all suffering. Has not his body become a willing vessel for affliction?

References:

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