

THE ETHICS OF HUMANIST VALLUVAR AND RATIONALIST VEMANA - A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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‘Ethics’, according to the New American Encyclopaedia, is the branch of Philosophy which deals with morals in the same way the aesthetics deals with beauty and epistemology with possibilities of human knowledge’.[1] This time-tested science of morals investigates the reason for and forms of human conduct (Ibid). Like a rationalist it sensibly puts the question what is right and what is wrong. It never stops here. It goes one step further and seeks explanation about the rightness or wrongness of certain actions and to goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions.[2] Considering this aspect of ethics Encyclopaedia Britannica says: ‘It is not a positive science but a normative science’, and it continues to define it: “ethics is not primarily occupied with the actual character of human conduct but with its deal, not so much with what human conduct is as with what ought to be.” [3]

A majority of our moral philosophers have, without mincing words, attempted to define ethics: “The business of ethics merely consists in cleaning up current conception and unfolding the ultimate presuppositions involved in them (5). Though it is not the specific function of ethics to discover new moral ideas, humanist Valluvar and investigative journalist type rationalist Vemana, have, by taking the circumstance of their times into consideration, formulated new codes of conduct through their authentic writings. The main object of their writings is to borrow the expression from Thomas Hardy, not to get a man into heaven but to get heaven in him .[4]

Tiruvalluvar of Tamil Nadu and Vemana of Andhara Pradesh (In those days the country was not divided in the name of Language) were the powerful seismographs of their times. Being the flesh and blood of society they have correctly and honestly recorded the upheavals of their respective contemporary societies. Valluvar belongs to the later half of first century B.C.[5] The then society was flooded with the philosophies of three major religions namely Jainism, Buddhism and Vedic Brahmanism.

The Rishabha Deva cult of Ahimsa had gained momentum. Buddhism was slowly losing its hold over the society of thought was just waiting in its wings to gain entry into lives of general public. His efforts to amalgamate the aforesaid three schools of thought have culminated in the form of his magnum opus Tirukkural. The three parts of his works throw a search light on three kingdoms of those days namely Chera, Chola and Pandya three schools of thought-Jain, Buddha and Vedic and three Purusharthas i.e Dharma, Artha and Kama. It is in fact the confluence of ‘Righteousness, Honesty and Truthfulness’.

About Vemana’s time nothing can be definitely said. Critics of Vemana feel that he might have lived in the 16th or 17th Century A.D. The dreadful

disease of caste system had spread like wild fire and had engulfed the society. Religion and state were fighting with each other to gain supremacy over the other. Vemana according to some scholars was part of administration. Having known the society of his times Vemana launched his verbal attack on the beliefs, the conventions and the misconceptions of those days. In his attempt to call a spade, a spade, he did not spare even Gods. He could successfully stir the time-worn thoughts of the society by crating new ethical ripples. Both Valluvar and Vemana have through their appealing poetic talent, strived to see that the timeless, ever green phoenix of ethics rises once again in this land of honey and milk.

Valluvar and Vemana have preferred the ethic of 'absolute good' to relative good'. [6] They wanted to establish the fact that the God is but one. Tiruvalluvar starts his work with this ethnic truth: Akara mutala elutt ellam ati pakavan mutarre ulaku (All the letters of the alphabet have the letter 'a' as the beginning. Similarly the world has its beginning the first Lord, the All-knower). Vemana too emphasises the fact that the God is the 'All Knower'. He says: Darsanamula verus daivamo nokkati. [7] (Different schools of thought may say different things. But God is one).

Like Valluvar who glorifies the importance of 'a', Vemana feels that "Om" is an important letter. Here is the relevant stanza: He that will not be entangled in the forest of (Akshara) letters but considering the (nobleness) charms of (Akshara) the indestructible and in this earth adores the prime letter (Om) this man shall become imperishable (Akshaya). This is sufficient (Verses of Vemanas C.P. Brown, Andhara Pradesh Sahitya Akademi, Hyderabad, 1967 . Verse 114 p.35). Vemana further explains the universalness of God thus"

'He exists in the shape of the universe and is the general soul. He is the all-witnessing spirit. He hath truly converted himself into the soul. Look at the Universal world. He is himself all and even exists in truth'. (Ibidid, Verse No.162).

According to our age-old ethical belief we are all puppets in the hand of the Omnipotent God. God, the Grand Master moves us and we the pawns move according to his direction. As poet Iqbal says 'Wohi hota hai jo manjore e- khuda hota hai' ('Only the will of god prevails and nothing else'). Both Valluvar and Vemana believed in the saying. "Mother gives birth to children but each brings with himself his destiny". [8] About destiny-both good as well as bad-Valluvar says

'If evil destiny appears it will produce folly. But When good destiny occurs it will lead to the expansion of knowledge '(A. Chakravarthy – Kural 373).

In Kural 376 too Valluvar points out this eternal truth:

'What is destined not be your own will slip out however firmly you hold it. Whatever is destined to be yours stick on to you even when you cast it away'. (A. Chakravarthi).

Like Thulasi Das, the bard of Ramcharitmanas, .. hoga wahi jo ram rachi rakha (only according to the writings written on forehead) Vemana too feels that nobody can alter the lines that are inscribed by the God on our forehead [our fate).

The writing written by the hand perishes (spoil) not though thou blot it out (Spoil it) what is written by fate cannot be done away with water. The writing of fate in the forehead will not be gone though thou rub it with sorrow (Verses of Vemana- Stanza No. 601 p.No.148).

Ethically Valluvar and Vemana were against caste system. A.Chakravarthi in his introduction to TirukKural says: He (Valluvar) did not recognise the legal system either civil or criminal based upon caste distinction, In this respect also it is distinctly in conflict with the ancient Hindu ideal of Law and Justice (p1xii). Valluvar consider that all men are equal. In Kural 972 he highlights this point thus. Parappokkum ella uyirkkum cirappoua ceytolli verrumai yan (All men are born equal. The difference among them are entirely due to their occupation). The word occupation, according to some critics, glorifies caste system. In Kural 134 we come across a Dharma Sastra, belong to superior caste. The Kural reads: if a effort, but if he loses right conduct he forfeits his higher status in society which is his birth right (A. Chakravarthi). As far as condemnation of caste system is concerned we find greater vehemence in Vemana's verses. The reason for this vehemence may be the influence of Sarvajna on Vemana.[9] Sarvajna says:

Nadevudonde bhumi, kudivudonde niru
Suduvagni yonde enutiralu
Kula gotra naduve yettanadu Sarvajna (Ibid)

The land on which we walk is the same. The water we drink is the same. The same fire bums us. Then how come the question of caste and creed arise). [10]

Vemana rather prefers to use fiery words to condemn the caste system of the society. Look at this stanza: ‘

Why dost again and again abuse as parayar (Mala)? Are not his blood and flesh and thin one? Of what caste is he who is immingled with him? The deity animates his entire works’ (Verses of Vemana 893).

In another stanza he says: "Why take thy caste and pride thyself on it. The plant grows where the ground is prepared'. (Verses of Vemana 859).

As per A.Chakravarthi's observation, Valluvar was a Jain and a staunch follower of Rishabha Deva's Ahimsa i.e. non-violence. For the propagation of

this cardinal ethic of Jainism Valluvar has developed Chapter XXXIII of his TirukKural Mahatma Gandhi who knew Tamil would have drawn inspiration from this chapter. The world knows how successful he was in his life. In his famous Kural (323) he places the ethic 'not to kill' on a highest pedestal. He says: 'Not to kill is the one good deed par excellence. Next to this comes the virtue of speaking the truth' (A.Chakravarthy). In Kural 329 he compares those who indulge in killing others to Chandalas: Those who are engaged in the work of killing are considered to be Chandalas, of heinous occupation, by those who are able to discern evil wherever it is (A.Chakravarthy). Valluvar did not believe in the age old ethic 'eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth. In Kural 313 he says the policy of retaliation is bad. He goes one step further and says do good to even those who have harmed you. The Kural 314 says: The best way to punish the person who caused injury to you is to make him hang his head in shame by doing good in return: Though Vemana was not a Jain by birth or by faith he firmly believed in the ethic "Ahimsa Paramodharma". There are a number of stanzas where Vemana comes down heavily on those who indulge in killings. He says: What are we to think of the slaughters of these cruel half caste wretches (born out of the limits of the caste) who being themselves retained slain animals without any offence and guilty and eat them (Verses of Vemana 582). Like Valluvar Vemana too compares the slaughterers to Chandalas and says they are better positioned than the slaughterers. He writes: "The height of excellence is to abstain from slaying. Thus say the Brahmins, Lords of earth and still commit slaughter of animals in sacrifice. Better is the Chandala who devours dead cattle'. (Verses of Vemana 856). He has condemned them in choicest word.

Those wretches that destroy animals while either sleeping, drinking water or standing still and singing shall at the end in the same manner perish (Verses of Vemana 1077).

Vemana firmly believes in the ethic that those who preach by sword will be eliminated by sword. In the stanza: "Campa dagina yati satruvy tana ceta" Vemana says you pardon even that enemy who has to be executed. 'Conciliate him by goodness and bid depart, this itself is death to him'. In this similar context Valluvar used the word 'shame'. Vemana in his typical style uses the word 'death'.

Valluvar being a householder, lays down certain ethics for them. According to him 'Elders on death bed, God, Guests, Relatives and oneself, to cherish these five is the main duty of the householder (Kural 43). A Householder is expected to support ascetics, the indigents and the destitute ones who take refuge in his house in their last moments (Kural 42). Whoever meticulously follows the ethics of Valluvar is bound to get into heaven without any difficulty. He says" If a house-holder lives his life without swerving from the path of righteousness ordained for him he will occupy the foremost place among all those that strive spiritual realisation (Kural 47). Valluvar is of the opinion that the happiness of 'Grhastha' (Householder) depends on his understanding and virtuous wife. Stressing this particular point he states: The glory of the household is in the hands of his wife. If she fails in this all other glory in life is as if it did not exist (Kural 52). Valluvar frowns at people who indulge in adultery, woman who are not chaste and fair sex which takes pleasure in immoral traffic.

The qualities which his wife Vasuki had –at least as per belief- are the ones he prescribes for a housewife. The expression which we find in Kural 55 is similar to the expressions of John Milton who is supposed to be a Puritan. Milton says: “woman has to worship God through her husband and not directly.”

Vemana being a rationalistic ascetic holds diametrically opposite views about women. He adores an ideal housewife but admonishes characterless women who is given for carnal pleasures. Valluvar in Kural 56 defines an ideal wife. Vemana in his style describes the qualities of wife who is not devoted to her husband. He calls her fate but not mate. Here is that relevant stanza:

A woman who gives no food or drink is no true
wife to her husband . She is rather his destiny. The
husband who is united with such a woman perishes
without chance of being born again. He will perish
degraded and become a reptile (Verses of Vemana 752).

Having praised the ideal house wife- he wants her to be a better half and not a bitter half- he condemns women in forcible words: composed of desire and cupidity and of stubborn hearts are women. What can we say the conduct of women. Faithfulness is their chief virtue. They are in other respects figs, fair without but worms within. (Verse of Vemana 753)

Valluvar and Vemana prescribed some social as well spiritual ethics also. But stress on the importance of truth. Valluvar in Kural 292 says that if asatya (lie) can do good to all that asatya is better than satya. In Kural 300 Valluvar takes truth to sublime heights that there is nothing more valuable than truth. Here is the translation :”Of all the virtues that we learn by study of sacred scriptures we do not find anything more valuable than truth’. Vemana outrightly condemns falsehood. He says that alone is mouth (which does not speak falsehood) that daily speaks falsehood is not a mouth but a mouth below (Verses of Vemana 885).[11] Vemana further says that a person in public service and who constantly moves with people should always speak truth only. Only then he will be respected (Vemana Padya Ratnakaram ,2405).

Being very noble in their behaviour as well as in their writings both Valluvar and Vemana speak about the ethical qualities of Ascetics. Kural 981 and 987 speak about that Justic Maharajan touching on this aspect of Kural says: Tiruvalluvar conceives his ‘canror’ to be sage who has liquidated his ego, who has an unclouded vision of ultimate reality who is in a perpetual state of bliss, who is full at compassion for his fellowman, who has profound concern for all lives that are in distress on earth and who, without any limitations of caste, creed, community or nation rushes to help anyone in distress and thus practices universal love [12] Vemana in very simple word explains the qualities of Yogin thus:

He who looks upon rain, mind and sunshine as
equal and abstain from thinking of honour or the
like and continue in subjection. This is a stout
hearted saint. (Verses of Vemana).

Valluvar and Vemana are of the opinion that the wealth of a rich man should be spent on worthy causes which can benefit poor. Valluvar has in chapter 22 (Kurals from 2111 to 220) given details about how wealth has to be distributed. Vemana says a rich should arrange for community feast-Saha pankti bhojanam. He should strive to wipe out caste discrimination. (Vemana Padya Ratnakaram 280).

Both Valluvar and Vemana have propagated pure vegetarianism: They were against the consumption of liquor. Both have said that the anger is to be conquered and desire to be curbed. They have stated that all that is white is not milk and all that is black is not water. They have warned humanity not to go by the outward. In Kural 279 he says judge not men by their appearance, judge them by their deeds. Vemana says “salt and comphor look alike, but if you examine and try the flavours then taste differ”. Thus do the virtuous differ from the ordinary. (Translation by G.N.Reddy). About the Virtuous Vemana says: Only that man is living who feels the sufferings of his fellowman as being his own (Tr. by N.D.Sundaravelu).

As far as the ethics of our Purusarthas: Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha are concerned one finds fundamental difference between Valluvar and Vemana. Valluvar has spoken about only the first three Purusarthas. The critics of Valluvar are of the opinion that Valluvar did not take up Moksha because the by-product of the first three Purusartha will be Moksha. That which one automatically gets by following Dharama, Artha and Kama need not be stressed upon. Vemana, being Yogi-critics like Gandham Appa Rao may not relish the Yogi. Suffix or Prefix to Vemana’s name- is of the opinion that unless you give up the fourth one i.e. Moksha give up the other three i.e. Dharma, Artha and Kama. (Vemana Padya Ratnakaram 1213).

As different rivers flow towards the same ocean, Humanist Valluvar and Rationalist Vemana approach the same truth from different directions. Having viewed the truth from different angles they have once again proved the fact that truth is one sages call it variously. (Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti). Though the time and language divide the, Valluvar and Vemana their common ideology and thought, unite them. They are the sentinels of our ancient land Bharat. we owe our past, present and ever future to the.

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