

# SAMANARA DHARMA IN THIRUKKURAL

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## Abstract

‘Samanara’ is a Tamil term that stands for *śramaṇā* in Sanskrit and *samaṇa* in Prakrit. Several Tamil Jains popularly known as *samanaragala* lived in large numbers in ancient Tamil Nadu now nearly an extinct community with a mere 0.13% of the total population of the state. This article brings out *samanara* (Tamil Jain) ethics and ideas presented in *Thirukkural* as it is one of the most researched scriptures in terms of its native religion, author’s nativity, and period of its first publication. *Thirukkural* is estimated to have been written between the 3<sup>rd</sup> BCE to 5<sup>th</sup> CE. This establishes that *Thirukkural* must have been written in Tamizhi, a variant of the Brahmi script that was prevailing then in Tamizh Land. The nativity of this book and the author Thiruvalluvar are the most debated topics. To put these claims to rest this article focuses on the concept of *samanara* in *Thirukkural* by comparing it with the prevailing *samanara* literature.

## Introduction

The *Thirukkural* is called the Veda of the Tamils. It is also prescribed in various school curricula in Tamil Nadu. Written in Tamil, *Thirukkural* is one of the world's most discussed and debated collections of sacred couplets. It is considered a sacred text on Jain ethics. All religions that had a footprint in the Indic region during the 1<sup>st</sup> CE claim that *Thirukkural* has its religious ideas. Apparently, this text is considered a secular work that doesn't promote the tenets of any religion or godhead. It is widely accepted that this text provides a code of conduct for the common man for ethical living as it discusses public and private morals. Notably, Thiruvalluvar, the author of *Thirukkural* was a Jain saint who lived in the second half of the first century BCE, and the work's composition must be about that time (Chakravarti, Introduction lxix).

Many interpreters provide different interpretations to the verses of this text as it discusses various topics on ethics and way of life. Most researchers accept that the text was composed between the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE to the 5<sup>th</sup> Century CE. The text's antiquity proves the antiquity of Jainism or the *samaṇa* tradition as it must have already been established and popular at that time. It also shows that the values of nonviolence, minimalism, and other virtues have been a part of the way of life of the Jains for a long-time making Jainism a relevant tradition.

The *Thirukkural* is classified into three major sections: *arama* (virtue), *porula* (wealth), and *inbama* (happiness) which mean the ‘way to ethical living.’ It suggests how to prioritize things in life. This text suggests an ideal way of life. As the moral sciences of the world explain about

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staying away from consuming meat and alcohol, it also dedicates many verses to the same and allows its followers to become kind. In this way, it suggests ethics for a good lifestyle. These lead to the three jewels and help in achieving ultimate happiness.

### Period of Thirukkural

There are varied opinions about the timeline of *Thirukkural*, but in general, it is accepted that it should have been written between the 3<sup>rd</sup> BCE and the 5<sup>th</sup> CE. The recent research by The International Institute of Tamil Research, published in *Thirukkural in Thiruvalluvar Period Script* in 2018 establishes that *Thirukkural* must have been written in “Tamizhi,” a variant of the Brahmi script that was prevailing then in Tamizh Land<sup>2</sup>. (Muruganandham)

Francis Whyte Ellis, the then Collector of Madras, was the first person to translate *Thirukkural* into English and issued a gold coin with the picture of Thiruvalluvara in 1818 (HandWiki). This shows his popularity and importance in the Tamil area.



Gold coin with a picture of Thiruvalluvara

### Śramaṇa Ethics in Thirukkural

*Ahimsā* or nonviolence is the central value of *śramaṇa* tradition, particularly Jain tradition. *Ahimsā* in Jainism is not just an external activity of non-killing as commonly understood, but it refers more strongly to the internal activities of mind, along with the activities of body and speech.<sup>3</sup> On the same line, The *Thirukkural* (317) says: “Never to cause wilfully any kind of evil to any living being, this is the greatest virtue”. It also mentions, “Even in the case of a person who causes injury without any provocation, retaliation by doing evil for evil is sure to cause innumerable inescapable woes” (Tirukkural 313).

According to Jainism, the final goal of human life is to attain liberation from cycle of birth and death. Due to ignorance, one forgets the true nature of the soul which is infinite bliss. Ignorance creates bondage and leads us to the transmigration cycle, which is called *saṃsāra*. When one conquers over the ignorance which is the root cause of bondage, he attains infinite bliss, i.e.,

<sup>2</sup> Tamizh land, also known as Tamilakam or Tamizhakam, refers to the historical region inhabited by the Tamil people. This area primarily includes the modern-day Indian state of Tamil Nadu, parts of Kerala, and the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka.

<sup>3</sup> *saṅkalpātḥṭakāritamananat yogatrayasya carasatvān | na hinasti yattadāhuḥ sthūlavadhāt viramanam nipuṇāḥ ||* (Ratnakaraṇḍaka Śrāvakācāra 53)

*mokṣa* or liberation.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the *Thirukkural* says: “The moment of affection towards external things is renounced, all bonds of *saṃsāra* are broken. Otherwise only the impermanent world of *saṃsāra* will be seen” (Tirukkural 349). The pathway to liberation is defined as three jewels: *samyagdarśana* (right faith), *samyajñāna* (right knowledge), and *samyakcāritra* (right conduct)<sup>5</sup>.

- **Samyagdarśna (Right Faith)**

Jain philosophy defines Right Faith as “believing in reality as it is”<sup>6</sup>. A similar content is found in the *Thirukkural* which says: “Whatever thing in whatever form appears, to discover its true nature is called, Tattva Jñāna or the knowledge of reality” (Tirukkural 355). Further, it is said that wrong belief, non-abstinence, negligence, passions, and activities are the causes of bondage, which is the cause of worldly misery.<sup>7</sup> A similar content is found in the *Thirukkural* which says that misery of birth arises due to delusion that takes the unreal for the real (Tirukkural 351). This *kurala* (verse) indicates the consequences of wrong knowledge.

Jain Ācārya Samantabhadra defines Right Faith as “believing in true *deva* (*jina*/god), *śāstra* (*āgama*/scriptures), and *guru* (*muni*/ascetics)”. Further, he identifies the true *deva* as “the one without fault, with omniscience, and the one delivering the right sermon”.<sup>8</sup> The *Thirukkural* also has similar ideas. For example, The *Thirukkural* (4) also addresses detachment and omniscience as the most important qualities of *deva* and says that no evil will befall those who reach the feet of the one beyond likes and dislikes.

Ācārya Samantabhadra identifies the true scriptures in six ways: ones that are descended directly from the omniscient, cannot be refuted by anyone, are perceptible and dear which cannot be protested by inference, depict the true essence of reality, are beneficial to all, and prohibit the wrong path.<sup>9</sup> The parallel message is given in the *Thirukkural* in such a way: “...learn without error or fault all that is to be learnt. After learning, let him carry out in life the lessons so learnt” (Tirukkural 391).

The third component of the definition of right faith, according to Ācārya Samantabhadra, is the true *guru* who must have the following four qualities: has conquered desire and restraint over the five senses, is not industrious in acts that harm living beings of all kinds,

<sup>4</sup> “*bakndhahetvabhāvanirjarābhyām kṛtsnakarmavipramokṣo mokṣaḥ*” (Tattvārthasūtra 10.2)

<sup>5</sup> “*samyagdarśana-jñāna-cāritrāṇi mokṣamārgaḥ*” (ibid 1.1)

<sup>6</sup> *tattvārthasraddhānam samyagdarśanam* (ibid 1.2)

<sup>7</sup> “*mithyādarśanāvīratipramādakaṣāyayogā bandhahetavaḥ*” (ibid 8.1)

<sup>8</sup> *śraddhānam paramārthānāmāptāgama tapobhṛtām | trimūḍhapoḍham-aṣṭāṅgam samyagdarśnam-asmayam || aptenocchinnadoṣena sarvajñenāgameṣinā | bhavitavyam niyogena nānyathā hyāptatā bhavet ||* (Ratnakaraṇḍaka Śrāvakācāra 4-5)

<sup>9</sup> *āptopajñam-anullaṅghyam-aduṣṭeṣṭa-virodhakam | tattvopadeśakṛtasārvaṃ śāstram kāpatha-ghaṭṭanam ||* (ibid 9)

is without internal and external possessions, and is habitual of the practices of knowledge and meditation.<sup>10</sup> The *Thirukkural* also praises these ideas through the following verses:

The greatness of one who has conquered the five senses, no one can adequately assess except Indra the King of the Devas in the wide realms of Swarga. (Tirukkural 25)

What is the virtuous deed? It is not to kill. Killing brings all the other evil deeds. (Tirukkural 321)

If a man ought to desire anything, it is freedom from being born again. This will come of its own accord if you hope to get complete desirelessness. (Tirukkural 362)

Who attains his pure and perfect self, him all other person's worship in adoration. (Tirukkural 268)

- **Samyagjñāna (Right Knowledge)**

The second of the three jewels in Jainism is right knowledge. The *Ratnakaraṇḍa Śrāvakācāra* by Ācārya Samantabhadra defines right knowledge as the one that knows the whole reality in totality – no less, no more, as it is, is without conflicts, and without doubt.<sup>11</sup> The *Thirukkural* also praises the idea of Right Knowledge through the following verses:

Those who get rid of all doubts acquire clear knowledge of the real and will find the heaven much nearer than the earth in which they live. (Tirukkural 353)

Whatever thing in whatever form appears, to discover its true nature is called Tattva Jñāna, or the knowledge of reality. (Tirukkural 355)

When ignorant delusion which is the cause of birth disappears, the soul has the vision of its true nature which is the ultimate reality. This is true knowledge. (Tirukkural 358)

- **Samyakcāritra (Right Conduct)**

The right conduct, according to the *Ratnakaraṇḍa Śrāvakācāra* by Ācārya Samantabhadra, violence, telling lies, stealing, unchastity, and accumulating possessions are the big drainages of sins, and getting away from these is the right conduct.<sup>12</sup> Jainism also discusses five vows for householders that are called *aṇuvrata* that help in starting the journey towards liberation. The *Tattvārthasūtra* named them as aversion from injury,

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<sup>10</sup> *viṣayāśāvaśātīto nirārambho'parigrahaḥ | jñānadhyanātoraktaḥ tapasvī sa praśasyate ||* (Ratnakaraṇḍaka Śrāvakācāra 10)

<sup>11</sup> *anyūnamanatiriktam yāthātathyaṁ binā ca viparītāt | niḥsandehaṁ veda yadāhustajjñānamāgamināḥ ||* (ibid 42)

<sup>12</sup> *hiṁsāṅṛtacauryebhyo maithunasevā parigrahābhyām ca | pāpaprāṇālikābhyo viratiḥ samjñasya cāritram ||* (ibid 49)

*hiṁsāto'ṅṛtavacanāt steyaādbrahmataḥ parigrahataḥ | kārtsnyaikadeśavirateḥ cāritram jāyate dvividham ||* (Puruṣārthasiddhyupāya 40)

falsehood, stealing, unchastity, and attachment.<sup>13</sup> The *Thirukkural* also glorifies Right Conduct as “the essence of noble birth. If one loses that he will be degraded in social status.” (Tirukkural 133). It dedicates individual chapters to each of the vows.<sup>14</sup>

The Jain scriptures are classified into four types called *anuyoga*: *prathamānuyoga* (contains stories about legends), *karaṇānuyoga* (explains the cause and effect, describes the universe), *caraṇānuyoga* (tells the Jain code of conduct), and *dravyānuyoga* (is philosophical and spiritual). The entire text of the *Thirukkural* covers all four kinds of scriptures. In 1330 verses, it contains topics like the qualities of an omniscient by explaining the biography of Ṛṣabhadeva – the first *tīrthamkara*; it also includes the consequences of good and bad karma; talks in detail about good conduct; and explains in detail about substance and knowledge.

Moreover, the *Tattvārthasūtra* gives ways to stop the influx of karma through self-control (*guṇti*), carefulness (*samiti*), virtue (*dharma*), contemplation (*anuprekṣā*), conquest by endurance (*pariśahajaya*), and conduct (*cāritra*).<sup>15</sup> The *Thirukkural* also focusses on self-control as an object of great value and says, “there is no greater wealth than this to the soul” (Tirukkural 122). It emphasises it in many verses. For example, “If a person realises that the wise course for him is to have self-restraint and accordingly walks the path of righteousness, his conduct of self-control will be recognised by the wise and ennoble him in the eyes of the world” (Tirukkural 123).

## Conclusion

*Thirukkural* is the most researched text to identify its religion and the author. It has an ocean of information within the size of a mustard. We can keep digging for new meanings of the couplets every day. The importance and applied relevance of this text can be seen at all times. The underlying message of this text is minimalistic living without harming other beings. It teaches self-restraint, nonviolence, and control of desires.

Uncontrolled desires are the root cause of conflict in society and in the world at large. Ego, fanaticism, and material sensual pleasures ultimately drive the current world. Religious conflict is one of the most top-rated issues in the world today. Śramaṇa traditions, particularly Jain philosophy and religion provide a solution to numerous such issues. Jain philosophers and thinkers have composed many scriptures on ethics and way of live and have emphasised a lot on right conduct. The *Thirukkural* is one such text written in Tamil which discusses the moral behaviour and code of conduct in a righteous way for everyone.

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<sup>13</sup> “*himsānṛtasteyābrahmaparigrahebhyo viratirvratam*” (Tattvārthasūtra 7.1)

<sup>14</sup> See: chapters 14-15, 28-30, 33, 37, 76, etc.

<sup>15</sup> “*āsraṇavirodhaḥ saṁvarah | sa guptisamitidharmānuprekṣāpariśahajayacāritraiḥ ||*” (Tattvārthasūtra 9.1-2)

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