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**Philosophy of Education: a review**

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**Abstract**

*A careful analysis of the theories of education right from Plato through John Locke to John Dewey till the present day will reiterate on the need for a correct understanding of Philosophy of Education. It is pertinent here to remember the qualities that Plato seems to suggest – namely, quick intelligence, memory, sagacity, cleverness coupled with high-spiritedness and magnanimity. A teacher can do this only when he functions in an impersonal manner. Another factor that makes up a teacher is the fact that he should be able to combine his teaching abilities with a strict sense of governance. Tirukkural, a thematic presentation of the views from this text will definitely showcase the contribution of Tirukkural (G.U.Pope and Dr Cheyon) in the field of education too. It is important for one to define philosophy of education in such a way that it can contribute to the overall development of the child. Hence this paper has attempted to look into what philosophy of education ought to be in the light of these wise sayings.*

**Keywords:** Tirukkural, Plato, Philosophy of Education, John Locke, John Dewey, knowledge.

This paper is a review on how philosophy of education should be. A need has arisen today to study the discipline of education for the sake of understanding how it works, what its methods are and how it can be utilized for the betterment of humanity at large. Today's education has the dual responsibility of preparing students and also to foster the system of education for the future generation. A careful analysis of the theories of education right from Plato through John Locke to John Dewey till the present day will reiterate on the need for a correct understanding of Philosophy of Education that will not only look into the classical approach to this field but also take into account the need of today's student who is ready for more progressive, free and critical thinking as also creativity. One must also take into account the circumstances in which a child is learning (as information is more readily available today in the form of technological advancements like computer, internet with search engines, smart

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phones, etc.). Apart from understanding these circumstances, one must also look into the qualities required of the individual for education. It is pertinent here to remember the qualities that Plato seems to suggest – namely, quick intelligence, memory, sagacity, cleverness coupled with high-spiritedness and magnanimity - in those “to whom higher education is to be imparted and who are to share in any office or command (The Republic)”.

Here, one dilemma needs clarification is the important purpose of education – is mere acquisition of knowledge important? Or is the molding of our lives on sound lines the more important purpose of education? T.S.Avinashilingam answers this dilemma in the following manner –

Under the present-day educational system, boys and girls go to schools and colleges, to follow a syllabus which has been set for them. The teachers prepare lessons based on the prescribed syllabus and convey to the pupils all the information they have gathered. Many times, what is conveyed is not on the basis of understanding born out of experience or assimilation. The students consequently learn facts only for the purpose of passing their examinations. The result is, the information is not digested in their minds; and their lives do not reflect any evidence of their learning. Even in the study of practical sciences such as health, hygiene, dietics, nutrition and electricity, there is rarely any correlation between learning and daily living. All progressive thinkers and educationists have rightly condemned this type of education (T.S. Avinashilingam, 1964).

He concludes that molding of our lives on sound lines is a more important purpose of education (though acquisition is also important). A teacher, in this context, is not merely a person who repeats what is contained in the books he has referred, but who also serves as a catalyst in bringing out the high order of qualities in his student. How can he do this? What are the requirements of a teacher for this? Modern books, according to T S Avinashilingam, enlist some of them. They are:

1. A teacher should know his subject well
2. He must be an efficient communicator
3. He must be ever ready for updating his knowledge and for upgrading his skills
4. He must have a real love for his subject
5. He must also love his students and devote time and energy for them
6. In addition, he must have a good personality, determination, will-power and persuasive ability and understanding of the ways of the young (T.S. Avinashilingam, 1964)

A teacher can do this only when he functions in an impersonal manner. Nevertheless, a teacher should also always be on the lookout for the achievements of his students. An important feature in the student-teacher relationship is the mutual expectation of fulfillment in them. This interconnectedness between them stands testimony of the qualifications required of a teacher and a student.

Another factor that makes up a teacher is the fact that he should be able to combine his teaching abilities with a strict sense of governance. It must be added here that he need not be an object of hatred. That is, he should not be a sad or morose sort of a cold philosopher. If so, how should he be? And how should education be? What can be the outcome of such an education? This paper now tries to analyze these questions and the answers to them through an exposition of the canonical work in Tamil, namely the Tirukkural, written by the Tamil poet-

saint, Thiruvalluvar. This Tamil work of wise sayings is on ethics and it is very much practical. This work is universal in approach and hence called *ulaga podhu marai* (the world's common scripture). An important feature of this book is that it does not advocate any specific religion then prevalent in India – Hinduism, Jainism or Buddhism. On the other hand, it expounds various aspects of life including education. Tirukkural is a collection of 1330 Tamil couplets organized into 133 chapters under 3 sections. Each chapter consists of 10 *kurals* or couplets and has a specific subject ranging from “ploughing a piece of land” to “ruling a country”. The three sections are:

- அறத்துப்பால் – *araththuppāl* – chapter on law/virtue (*dharma*) – it deals with good ethical behavior with conscience and honour
- பொருட்பால் – *poruṭpāl* – chapter on wealth/politics (*artha*) – it deals with the right manner of conducting worldly affairs
- காமத்துப்பால் – *kāmaththuppāl* – chapter on desire/love (*kāma*) – dealing with love between man and woman.

Though a very old text, Tirukkural, a thematic presentation of the views from this text will definitely showcase the contribution of Tirukkural (G.U.Pope and Dr Cheyon) in the field of education too. The present exposition also looks at these *kurals* through certain questions (or as answers to certain questions that will eventually give a clear picture of how education should be understood). Hence it will serve as a review on philosophy of education from the angle of this ancient Tamil scripture. The questions are:

- (i) What is wisdom and from whom does it come?
- (ii) What is the nature of education for a man and how he should lead his life after being educated?
- (iii) How should the educated conduct himself with others?

The exposition now begins with the first question – namely, what is wisdom and from whom is it to be gained? Is there any rule for identifying who should impart education? In other words, it seeks to answer the question on the nature and status of the one who imparts education. *Kural* 423 defines wisdom. It says that there is no distinction between human beings on the basis of caste or creed when it comes to learning and that analyzing the truth in what has been said is the sole criteria. The *kural* states –

எப்பொருள் யார் யார் வாய் கேட்பினும் அப்பொருள்  
மெய்ப்பொருள் காண்பது அறிவு

**Tiruvalluvar says that discerning the truth from whomsoever is wisdom.** That is, one should not blindly accept what the other says about something. Instead, one should analyze for himself if that is true. He goes on to justify that what has been thus analyzed is real wisdom. Therefore, education should look for a student who grasps the truth rather than a parrot who repeats what he has heard. This *kural* lays down the foremost task of education - namely, developing the critical outlook in every student.

Why does Tiruvalluvar take this as the important task of education? Answer to this is found in two *Kurals*, namely 391 and 392 and this incidentally gives a clear picture of what education is to man, according to Tiruvalluvar.

*Kural* 391 states –  
கற்க கசடறக் கற்பவை கற்றபின்  
நிற்க அதற்குத் தக

**Let a man learn thoroughly whatever he may learn, and let his conduct be worthy of his learning.** This *kural* emphasises on what man has to learn, how much he should learn and also suggests how his learning shapes his behavior and outlook. It says clearly that a man shall learn everything that is possible not in parts but in full; notwithstanding this exhortation on how much he should learn, Tiruvalluvar also suggests that his conduct should be worthy of his learning (should reflect his learning). The following *kural* is a highlight here as it deals with what is education to a human being and hence presented along with the earlier one. This couplet (*Kural* 392) states –

எண்என்ப ஏனை எழுத்து என்ப இவ்விரண்டும்  
கண் என்ப வாழும் உயிர்கு

**Letters and numbers are the two eyes of man.** This *kural* talks of education at the basic level itself before talking of education at a higher level with the illustration of the significance of eyes for a living being. Everyone is aware how important the eyes are to any living being while travelling on any path. This particular *kural* claims that education is like the eyes as it provides human beings with the needed guidance for treading the path of truth. Tiruvalluvar does not stop with just mentioning what is education; he goes one step further in identifying what one has to learn basically – **the science of numbers and language**. It can be translated clearly as (education on) the science of numbers and (the education on) language are the two eyes for a man.

So far, two questions were looked into (namely, what is education and how should the educated lead his life). It's now time to turn attention to the third question, namely, how the educated should behave with others at all situations, be it in the presence of the ignorant or in the presence of the learned. What does Tiruvalluvar say here? Some *kurals* are organized and presented here as answers that one can discern from the Tirukkural.

First of all, it must be stressed that a learned man is not an island by himself and is very much part of the society and should also be beneficial to the society in which he lives. In other words, he should live for others. That is, apart from being benefited from the society through education, at a personal level, he is also expected to be useful to the society, at large. It was mentioned earlier that Tirukkural understands education to be like the eyes for a living being. The following *kural* goes a step further in order to show the usefulness of the learned man to society.

For instance, *Kural* 215 states –  
ஊருணி நீர்நிறைந் தற்றே உலகவாம்  
பேரறி வாளன் திரு

**A man of eminent knowledge and who desires to exercise the benevolence approved by the world can be compared to the city water-tank.** In other words, the wealth of a learned man who knows the nature of the world and who lives for the benefit of others is similar to a water tank in a city which is filled with water that is suitable for consumption to all. He not only makes himself aware of what is true but also simultaneously helps the society to learn from his knowledge. The ancient method of education (*gurukula* system) followed in India is significant because it not only talks of imparting what one has known but also insists on personal example as an added means of learning. Swami Vivekananda's unique message on education (based on divinity of the soul) is worth mentioning here. He clearly declared that education is the manifestation of the divinity already in man. According to him, it is the duty of the teacher to help in the manifestation of this divinity by positive help, encouragement and his own example (G.U.Pope and Dr Cheyon).

Then there is *Kural* 396 which deals with the ratio between what one has learnt and how much he is supposed to teach. It suggests that the two are proportionate to each other. This *kural* states –

தொட்டனைத்து ஊறும் மணற்கேணி மாந்தர்க்குக்  
கற்றனைத்து ஊறும் அறிவு

The knowledge that flows from a man of learning is equal to his learning and this is compared by Tiruvalluvar with the amount of water that gushes out from a well in accordance with the depth that is dug by us. Thus, this *kural* quantifies the teaching ability to be proportionate with how much has been learnt.

*Kural* 717 states –

கற்றறிந்தார் கல்வி விளங்கும் கசடறச்  
சொல்வதெரிதல் வல்லார் அகத்து

The learning of those who have read and understood (much) will shine in the assembly of those who faultlessly examine (the nature of) words (this is the translation of Tirukkural by Pope). The words of a learned man spoken in an assembly of men, who have understood the meaning of the words without any fault, will be easily recognized by all. This couplet should be taken up with the next one given here, namely, *kural* 722, which throws light on the respect shown to the one who is clearly understood.

This *kural* states -

கற்றாருள் கற்றார் எனப்படுபவர்; கற்றார்முன்  
கற்ற செலச்சொல்லு வார்

**One who is able to make his audience understand clearly what he has learnt is respected as the most learned among the learned.** This couplet indirectly conveys how a teacher should be because the hallmark of a teacher is to convey things clearly. This particular couplet even suggests that not only a student but also the learned will respect one who is able to make his audience understand clearly what he wants to convey.

Remember the requirements of a teacher mentioned earlier. The couplets taken here seems to emphasis the first three among them – namely, (i) the need of the teacher to know his

subject well; (ii) teacher being an efficient communicator and (iii) the need for the teacher to be ever ready for updating his knowledge. This leads one to the next important aspect of teaching – that is learning - as suggested in the last requirement mentioned above. The teacher-student relationship should be beneficial to both and it need not be restricted to mere deliverance of facts. The teacher should show equal eagerness towards listening. The *kural* (724) that is to be shown here is very crucial in this respect. It states –

கற்றாற்றமுன் கற்ற செலச்சொல்லித் தாம்கற்ற  
மிக்காருள் மிக்க கொளல்

This particular couplet teaches how a learned man should behave while imparting his learning to others who are less knowledgeable and at the same time, it also teaches how he should behave in the company of more learned people than him. The couplet thus maintains that a learned man should speak to his audience in such a way that his learning is imparted to them easily and clearly, on the one hand, and at the same time, it also exhorts that the learned person should be ready to listen to a more learned person than him. This facet of a teacher is very much important to all teachers and more significant for a teacher who imparts education to a child. Take for instance, W.F.Warde's reference to Rousseau's protest against subjugation of children's independence to the interests of the adults. "Nature wants children to be children before they are men . . . Childhood has ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling, peculiar to itself, nothing can be more foolish than to substitute our ways for them" (Daniel Gaido, 1960).

It is important for one to define philosophy of education in such a way that it can contribute to the overall development of the child. Hence this paper has attempted to look into what philosophy of education ought to be in the light of these wise sayings. Moreover, education is supposed to give to man what he does not have at the time of birth. In such a scenario, it is essential that education should be understood in all its dimensions. Hence reference was made to Tirukkural and its analysis of the nature of education, its impact on the individual and the society etc. were highlighted earlier. The author of the article "John Dewey's theories of education" (2012) suggests (in line with Einstein, he claims) that education has two functions central to it with regard to the individual and the society. They are: (1) to educate the individual as a free individual – understanding and using critical thinking skills for determining the truth for themselves and (2) to educate the individual as a part of society. Here, one must not forget the fact that society has contributed a lot to the children's education and that the children, in turn, should feel responsible enough to contribute back to the society. Simultaneously, the society should take the needs of the children into consideration instead of imposing the interests and ways of understanding of the adults on the children. There is an interconnectedness between the society's method of instructing the children and the children's responsibility towards the society. These two can be easily fostered when the understanding of Tirukkural, on what education is and how it can mould the educated, is studied. In other words, development of free thinking coupled with a sense of responsibility towards the society should be the aim of education. Now, can these two (development of free thinking and responsibility towards society) go together? Or is this suggestion a mere speculation or a grand philosophical ideal? It is concluded that the exposition of the couplets is definitely an answer to these two questions.

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