

Echoes of Virtue: Yālpānam N Veeramani Iyer's Musical Journey through the Tirukkural

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Abstract

Mahavidwan Yālpānam N Veeramani Iyer has made a significant contribution to Carnatic music by reinterpreting the ancient Tamil philosophical text, Tirukkural, into kirtanas. These compositions, while maintaining the original essence of the Tirukkural, offer a unique blend of music and philosophy. The compositions explore the moral, ethical, and practical aspects of the Tirukkural. This creative fusion allows listeners to engage with the timeless wisdom of the Tirukkural in a new and meaningful way. By bridging the gap between ancient philosophy and contemporary understanding, Veeramani Iyer's work encourages reflection on universal truths and fosters a deeper appreciation for both art and ethics.

Keywords: Tirukkural, Kirtanas, Yālpānam N Veeramani Iyer, Carnatic music, Ethics, Panchamahabhutas, Thiruvalluvar

Introduction

The Tirukkural, authored by the ancient Tamil poet-philosopher Thiruvalluvar, is a timeless literary masterpiece consisting of 1,330 couplets or kuralas. Written over 2,000 years ago, it stands as one of the most revered works in Tamil literature and has been translated into numerous languages worldwide. The Tirukkural is divided into three sections: Aram (ethics), Porul (politics or governance), and Inbam (love), offering guidance on living a virtuous, balanced, and meaningful life. Each couplet distills profound wisdom into just two lines, making it both concise and powerful. The work addresses universal themes such as integrity, leadership, friendship, and morality, transcending time, culture, and religion. The simplicity of its language belies the depth of its philosophical insights, making it accessible to people from all walks of life. In Aram, emphasizes is given to moral virtues like honesty, patience, and self-control. Porul explores the dynamics of power, justice, and good governance, while Inbam delves into human emotions, particularly the complexities of love. The Tirukkural continues to inspire scholars, leaders, and individuals, offering practical wisdom for personal and societal well-being.

Here the Mahavidwan Yālpānam N Veeramani Iyer has expressed the Tirukkural in the form of kirtana without losing its philosophical insights.

Yālpānam N Veeramani Iyer

In addition to being a dancer, Mahavidwan Brahmasri Yālpānam N Veeramani Iyer was a famous vaggeyakara who made numerous outstanding contributions to the Carnatic genre. He was born in 1930 at Inuvil, Jaffna, as the son of the great violin Maestro Brahmasri. N Nataraja Iyer (Chinnathurai Aiya) and Sundarambal. Veeramani Iyer's masterpiece dance drama "Mylai Kuravanji," which was inspired by the deities of the Kapaleswaram Temple and featured the Ragamalika composition "karpakavallinin" from this Kuravanji, brought him immense recognition across the Carnatic region. Tirukkural Kirtanas, Tiru Christuva Kirtanas, 72 Melakarta Kirtanas, Soundaryalahari Kirtanas, and Mylai Kirtanas are some other compositions of this legendary composer. Even he is not popular in South India as in Sri Lanka, this work aims to highlight and promote his remarkable abilities.

Tirukkural Kirtana of Yālpānam N Veeramani Iyer

The first 80 kuralas fall under the section of Aram (virtue) and emphasize the importance of righteousness, duty, and moral behavior in life. These kuralas can be analyzed through a scientific lens



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by exploring how they reflect universal truths, human psychology, and ethical frameworks akin to scientific principles. Here, Yālpānam N Veeramani Iyer has converted these 80 Kurals into kirtana form without losing its actual essence. All these 80 kirtanas are arranged in 8 chapters as in Tirukkural. Kaṭavuḷ vāḷttu, Vāṇ cīrappu, Nīttār perumai, Araṇvaliruttal, Illaraviyal Ilvāḷkkai, Vāḷkkaittuṇai nalam, Putalvaraip perutal and Anṇuṭaimai are the 8 chapters. Each chapter has 10 compositions in different ragas which are composed in Adi tala and corresponding kurals are also mentioned at the beginning. Because of the major limitation of unavailability of audios and notation for these compositions, here only the compositions in the major ragas are taken for this study.

Kural / Kirtana

As the Panchamahabhutas, or the five elements of nature, are believed to be the basis of human existence and have a major influence on our health and well-being, these compositions are categorized under this perspective for this study.

Earth

Kural 23

“Irumai vakai terin tīṇṭaram pūṇṭār perumai piṇṇakirṇulaku”

“Behold those who have weighed the dual nature of things and followed the renunciate’s way. Their greatness illumines the world”*1

This is the kural from the 3rd chapter Nīttār perumai, which illustrate the characteristics of the renunciates, and the actual image of the world that it has a dual nature.

Veeramani Iyer says through his composition “Tuṇṇaṇam pūṇṭumikka” that the world is made up of Maya and those who have the ability to conduct himself with ascetic purity is the highest in the world. The world is being mentioned here, so the Todi raga is perfect for this composition as its corresponding element is earth.

Water

Kural 20

“Nīṇṇamaiaiyā tulakeniṇ yār yārkkum vāṇṇamaiaiyā toḷukku”

“No life on Earth can exist without water, and water’s ceaseless flow cannot exist without rain”*1

The element water is essential for the life is a basic scientific fact. Water is a vital natural resource, essential for human survival, ecosystem balance, and agriculture. This verse emphasizes the fundamental role of water, anticipating modern scientific understanding of water cycles and environmental sustainability.

While Thiruvalluvar says the importance of water in our life by this kural, Veeramani Iyer diplomatically presenting this idea by adding some simple poetical words through his composition ‘Nīṇṇāmal ulakanilai’ which is set in raga Śaṅkarābharaṇam. He says through his composition that, the world cannot exist without water and water cannot be provided without rainfalls and by the power of the water flowing like the nectar of the sky, the life of this land is made possible for us to live in the world of good things. It is believed that, the holy river Ganga an ornament (ābharaṇam) of Lord Siva (Sankara) is flowing from Siva’s matted hair so the raga Śaṅkarābharaṇam is very much suitable for this as the element of this raga is water.

Fire

Fire has strength and vitality. It represents creativity, passion, and energy. It motivates us to work towards our objectives by inspiring and igniting our aspirations. It is the element which cleanse and purifying our internal toxins and pollutants. All living things receive energy and vigour in return from it. It represents energy, desire, and metamorphosis.

Kural 69

“Iṇṇa poluṇ perituvakkum taṇṇamaṇaia cāṇṇōṇ eṇakkēṭṭa tāy”

“When a mother hears her son heralded as a good and learned man, her joy exceeds that of his joyous



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birth”*1

This part explains the importance of family life and molding the new generation. Veeramani Iyer also says about this in his composition ‘Pēriṇṇam eytiṭuvāl’ set in raga śubhapantuvarāli. A clean mind and thinking is very essential to create a good generation, so śubhapantuvarāli raga which is fire element is suitable for this kirtana.

Air

The water cycle relies heavily on air to transport water around the globe. Plants and other bodies of water release vapour into the atmosphere as their water evaporates. The vapour condenses into clouds at lower temperatures, and the wind controls the clouds till they fall as rain or snow.

Kural 11

“Vāṇṇiṇṇu ulakam vaḷaṅki varutalāl tāṇamiḷtam eṇṇuṇarar pārru”

“Rain is deemed a nectar of life As its unfailing fall sustains the world”*1

This is the kural from the second chapter describing about the importance of rain. Rain and air are closely related to each other. So here Veeramani Iyer used Shanmukhapriya raga to represent the Air element in this composition ‘Peyyum maḷaiyatu perumulakaṇaitaiyum’. He says that, rain cleanses the earth and protects lives and since, the rain gives us water, it also gave immortality.

Ether

Ether or Space represents all the empty spaces in our body. It is this element that all other elements derive from and return to. It is omnipresent and is the element that holds the other elements of life within. Wisdom and intuition are deeply connected to Ether.

Kural 2

Karṛataṇāl āya payaṇṇkol vālarivan

Narṛāl toḷā’ar eṇṇi.

Of what avail is learning if one worships not the holy feet of Pure Intelligence?*1

This is a kural from the 1st chapter discussing about the need to praise the God. It is said that without praising the God we can’t get wisdom and intuition. Veeramani Iyer explains this through his composition in Kalyani Raga in a simple manner. He says that, we were learned to been eloquent in this world which does not abound with virtues. That means, he says that we are little wise in this illusional world and to attain true wisdom we need unwavering devotion to God. As it discusses wisdom and awareness here, Kalyāṇi raga whose element is ether become very apt for this composition ‘Perrapayaṇ eṇṇa colvāy’.

List of the major raga compositions with the elements of the ragas:

The elements shown in this table are selected on the basis of Vedic Astrological System of Raga only not as per the lyrics of the compositions.

Kural / No	Chapter	Composition	Raga	Elements
23	3	Tuṛavaṛam pūṇṭumikka	Todi	Earth
6	1	Aintu poṛikaḷatu	Kharaharapriya	Water
20	2	Nīrillāmal ulakanilai	Śaṅkarābharāṇam	Water
28	3	Nīrainta moḷiyēpēcum	Keeravani	Water
34	4	Maṇattinṇaṇṇē nīrainta	Mayamalavagowla	Water
38	4	Aṛameṇum kallatu pīravip	Chakravakam	Water
40	4	Ceyvataṛkukantatu aṛamē	Charukesi	Water
49	5	Ēṛra tuṇai avaṇē	Harikamboji	Water
69	8	Pēriṇṇam eytiṭuvāl	Śubhapantuvarāli	Fire
8	1	Arakkaṭaltaṇil nīntum	Simhendramadhyamam	Air



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11	2	Peyyum maḷaiyatu	Shanmukhapriya	Air
71	8	Amiḷtamum nikarāmō	Kāmavarttaṇi	Air
2	1	Perrapayan enṇa colvāy	Kalyāṇi	Ether
12	2	Karuṇai marrum karuṇai	Vachaspati	Ether

Conclusion

Yālpānaṁ N Veeramani Iyer's reinterpretation of the Tirukkural through kirtanas not only preserves the philosophical depth of Thiruvalluvar's timeless wisdom but also enriches it by linking each composition to the five elements of nature. By exploring themes of ethics, duty, and the significance of natural elements, Iyer's work serves as a bridge between ancient philosophy and contemporary understanding, demonstrating the enduring relevance of the Tirukkural in guiding individuals toward a virtuous and balanced life. This creative fusion of music and philosophy leads the human beings to reflect on the universal truths embedded in these compositions, also it helps to fostering a deeper appreciation for both the art form and the moral principles it conveys.

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