

# **Back to the Roots with *Acharakkovai***

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(Published in *Back to Roots*, Ed. Lata Rajendran, Chennai: Dr. MGR-Janaki College for Women, pp. 273-283)

## **Abstract**

The most ancient preserved Tamil texts are the Sangam texts. These are a group of eighteen texts: the ten songs (pattupattu) and the eight anthologies (ettutokai). Followed by these Sangam texts are another set of eighteen texts which are called the Lesser Eighteen Texts (patinenkilkanakku). The well-known *Tirukkural* is among these texts and *Acharakkovai* by Peruvayin Munni is another important text. This text consists of one hundred verses and deals with a lot of rules pertaining to daily observances by the individuals. These topics fall under main categories such as code of observances by individuals from morning to night, rules and regulations pertaining to eating, spitting and pollution, code of conduct before kings, elders and assembly of learned people, observance of discipline, and pursuit of Vedic studies etc. The text starts with emphasis on good conduct (*olukkam*) and ends with description of those with bad conduct. Many topics that are dealt with *Acharakkovai* form an integral part of the Tamils' way of life. In this paper, I highlight the ethics of good conduct as depicted in the *Acharakkovai* and show how the dharmashastric ideas and way of life were very vibrant in medieval Tamil country. Some of the rules laid down in the text are still followed by people. This shows how the *Acharakkovai* has enabled *dharma* to penetrate in their lives. Following the ethical way of life as prescribed in the *Acharakkovai* will enable us to return to our ancient way of life as practiced by our ancestors. Thus I bring out the importance of *Acharakkovai* in the Tamil society.

*Acharakkovai* is authored by Kalattur Perivayin Mulliyar. Mulliyar was the son of Perivayin and he hailed from Kalattur. This text consists of one hundred verses. Various kinds of metres (*venbas*) such as *kural venba*, *cintiyal venba* etc., are used in the text.

The term *Acharakkovai* can be explained as a collection of disciplines or codes of conduct. The term *achara* is mentioned in other texts belonging to the patinenkilkanakku as well. Thus *Tirukkural* (1075) mentions fear as the code of conduct of the inferior (*accame kilkalatu acharam*), *Nanmanikadigai* (93) equates *achara* with education (*acharam enbatu kalvi*). The author of *Acharakkovai* has used the word *achara* in the senses of discipline, code of conduct, way of life etc. Verses from this text are cited in the commentaries of Tamil classics such as *Pattupattu* and *Sivagasintamani*, and in the commentaries of Tamil grammatical texts such as *Nannul*, *Ilakkanavilakkam* and *Pirayogavilakkam*. The text has been commented by many scholars such as Punnaivananadha Mudaliyar, Irasaram etc.

The text starts with emphasis on good conduct (*olukkam*) and ends with description of those with bad conduct. The verses deal with the contents such as code of observances by individuals from morning to night, rules and regulations pertaining to eating, spitting and pollution, code of conduct before kings, elders and assembly of learned people, observance of discipline, and pursuit of Vedic studies etc. I now provide some instances from the text and analyse how this tradition is being accepted today.

While dealing with the pursuit of Vedic studies the following verse is found:

“Brahmins do not recite the Vedas on the eighth day of the fortnight (*attami*), on new moon day (*amavasai*), full moon day (*pournami*), the fourteenth day of the fortnight (*chaturdasi*), the days when the king is in danger, when earthquakes occur, when there is thunderstorm and when there is impurity.” (47)

It is interesting to note that this practise of reciting the Vedas or learning the Vedas by rote traditionally is followed even today. Traditional scholars who learn the Vedas treat these days as *anadhyayana* days, the day on which Vedic study is

not done . In this connection I recollect that when I studied under Mullaivasal Krishnamurti Sastrigal, a text that was required for my Ph.D thesis on Advaita and Dvaita. he chose these days to teach me

As far as respecting brahmins are concerned, the text (61) emphasises that learned people should respect brahmins who are pure in character and well versed in four Vedas as if they are their own elders. This statement from the text is worth analysing. In the first place, it has to be accepted that the number of brahmins who traditionally do the Vedic studies is diminishing day by day. Many brahmins choose other professions and even among those brahmins who have gone to Vedapatashalas, number of people who send their children to traditional learning is less and they prefer sending their kids to regular schools. However, with the existence of handful of orthodox learned brahmins who send their kids to traditional learning, this practise is still surviving with great difficulty. Nevertheless, it has to be pointed out that in spite of doing other jobs many brahmins are still interested in learning the Vedas and many of them send their kids to Vedapatashalas in the morning in addition to learning at regular schools.

This is effective only to some extent. To balance the tradition and keep up with modernity the best solution in my opinion is to bring the Vedic education along with the regular schooling system. The importance of Vedic education is revived and values based on Vedic learning is emphasised in many educational institutions. In my college, for example, I am in charge of teaching ethics to all the first-year students and I can see that among the younger generation there is an increasing interest in the pursuit of Vedic studies.

In this connection I cite a recent news report in the Hindu dated Saturday August 5, 2017 on the speech given by Prof. M.S.Ananth, Former Director of IIT, Madras:

“As for the structure of education, he pointed out that some of the best insights for life came from poets like Avvaiyar, Tiruvalluvar and Tirumoolar who did not have any formal education. He regretted that while the West had taken to research into Vedas and Sanskrit literature, little was being done in India.”

While mentioning about duties to be performed in morning and bathing, the text cites the following:

“Early in the morning one should brush teeth with a stick used for these purposes and after washing one’s eyes should salute the favourite deity. In the evening, one should not worship the God while standing.” (9)

“One should take bath before worshipping the God, when one has a bad dream, at times of impurity, after vomiting, after shaving one’s head, before eating, after waking up from sleep, after having conjugal union, after touching the body of low persons, and after passing urine and stools.” (10)

“One should not take bath without wearing a cloth on oneself and will not eat food just wearing one cloth on their self. One will not squeeze water from their dress in water and will not go to the assembly of scholars wearing one cloth. These are the codes of conduct as prescribed by the elders.” (11)

The following specifications mentioned in the text invite some discussions. While both the Āyurvedic and Siddha traditions specify the importance of neem and banyan sticks for brushing teeth, in the times of modernity these practices have been slowly discarded. However, in the recent times, there is a revival of indigenous medicinal methods and there is more awareness about these things among people.

While belief in God continues to exist among people the change in life style of people does have an impact on the religious practices of the people. At the same time, the tremendous growth in population too must be taken into consideration. People have very little time to devote for religious pursuits. Although the text prohibits standing while worshipping God in the evening, that practise is totally inapplicable in two cases: one during the grand celebration of *pradosha* in Shiva temples which takes place only in the evening and the other during the specific worship of Lord Ganesha.

Worship of Ganesha is very popular in Tamilnadu and what can be said as an unique practise is the presence of small Ganesha shrines in street corners, on compound walls of individual houses and especially in the places where three streets meet. Very popular with Ganesha worship is worshipping him in the evening of the fourth day of the black fortnight (*krshnapaksha*) which is called as *Sankashtaharachaturthi*, popularly referred to as *Sankataharachaturthi*. People gather in street corners in the evening to perform *abhisheka* and various *pujas* for Ganesha. The placement of these temples forces people to stand on the streets during the entire *puja*. Hence on these occasions it is difficult to follow the injunctions set in the text.

Although Shiva temples are mostly located in spacious locations, the enormous number of people participating in the *pradosha* makes it difficult for people, especially in big temples such as the Mylapore Kapaleeshwara temple to sit and participate in the *puja*.

As far as taking bath is concerned most of the people take bath before worshipping God and for hygienic reasons after they have vomited. The practise of taking bath after one returns from a barber shop exists still in many families,

especially the orthodox ones. The person who returns from a barber shop is treated in a way similar to when he returns after being present in the vicinity of a dead body. He is considered polluted and people do not touch him, and it is referred to as pollution (theettu).

While taking a bath in the morning is mostly observed, taking a bath after taking a nap in the afternoon is mostly due to humidity arising from the heat and sweat rather than scriptural injunctions. Likewise, taking a bath after having conjugal union is mostly observed by women, mostly for hygienic purposes rather than scriptural injunctions. Taking a bath after passing urine or stools is still practised by orthodox people. Of these when one passes urine, bath is replaced by washing the limbs and rinsing one's mouth. In situations that require purification, say during preparing *prasada* for *puja*, then this purification is maintained by sprinkling water mixed with turmeric.

Bathing with a cloth on the body is still practised. Many people of the older generation follow this even when they take bath within their household in closed areas. People who take bath in open tanks follow this. However, people do squeeze water from their clothes in water even when they take bath in public tanks. Good dress code is followed by people not only when they go to assembly of scholars but even in day to day life.

The text further prohibits the following :

“Wise people will not look at their shadows in the water. They do not scratch the ground. They do not rest under the trees during night. Even if they are sick they do not take oil bath on prohibited days without touching water as prescribed in the scriptures. After applying oil on their bodies they do not look at others without taking bath.” (13)

The first two injunctions have almost disappeared. Avoiding to rest under tree, especially the drumstick and tamarind, are still being emphasised through storytelling. The practise of taking oil bath is slowly disappearing in times of modernity where the markets are bombarded with various kinds of chemical shampoos. The indigenous medical practitioners such as Ayurvedic and Siddha doctors continue to enlighten people about the greatness of taking oil bath through various magazine articles and television shows. However, it is on day of the Deepavali festival that the practise of taking bath in oil is still followed. At this time early morning oil bath in hot water is emphasized. The belief that the river Ganges is present in every container of hot water used for bathing after applying oil is still vibrant. It is a practise to enquire others if their Deepavali festival went on well by asking if the person has taken a bath in the Ganges (*ganga snanam accha?*).

“Those people who are in the virtuous path will not swim while they take bath in tanks etc. They do not spit in waterbodies. They will not immerse themselves in those waterbodies and take a bath. They do not play sports in that. Even if their hair is dry without oil they will not stay in the water until their neck.” (14)

The above-mentioned injunctions in the text are not at all practised today. It is so unfortunate that the waterways have been contaminated to the maximum possible extent. Much of the drainage water are being dumped into good rivers and what we see today is nothing but stinking polluted rivers. The best examples I can provide from my experience are the two rivers in Chennai: Kuvam and Buckingham Canal. A few decades ago both these rivers were used for navigation of articles, especially food and vegetables. For example, the market on Tiru. V.K. Road in Mylapore near the Anjaneya temple is called as Tannitthurai Market because it is located close to the Buckingham Canal and a few decades ago many

fresh vegetables and fruits were transported through this canal early in the morning. Unfortunately, these days these polluted rivers are no longer used for transporting vegetables and fruits. Transportation occurs only through roadways thereby increasing the environmental pollution.

Regarding the ethics of eating food the *Acharakkovai* makes the following specifications:

“One should bathe, wash his legs and clean his mouth, should circumambulate his food with water and then eat. A person who eats this is considered to have eaten his food and have derived the benefits therein. People who do not observe this merely eat and wipe their mouths at par with others, whereas the true benefit of eating that food is taken away by demons.” (18)

“One should sit facing east while eating. He should then salute the food and eat it slowly without moving, without looking at anything else, without talking and without spilling.” (20)

“Wise people of good conduct eat after feeding guests, old people, cows, birds and children.” (21)

“One should not eat while sleeping, standing, and in open space. One should not eat too much out of desire. One should not eat while sitting on the bed. One should not eat forbidden foods.” (22)

Regarding the ethics of eating food, well learned Vedic scholars especially and orthodox brahmins still follow majority of the rules mentioned in the text, such as circumambulating the food with water before eating it, and avoid talking while

eating and sitting well on the floor while eating. The concept of demons etc., are considered superstitious.

In the modern times exposure to different varieties of food from all over the world and the presence of preservatives and chemicals in the food, makes it impossible for majority of people who are not so orthodox to follow the rules prescribed in the text. It can be said that many people do not even know that such rules pertaining to eating food exists. Road side stalls are increasing day by day and eating outside is considered as normal and past time. While traditional south Indian food is served on banana leaves, nowadays these healthy banana leaves have been replaced by plastic sheets. It is very common to see people standing in many roadside stalls and eating all kinds of food without bothering about the harmful ingredients in those foods. The busy and fast paced life style has made people to become addicted to readymade and instant foods available in super markets. At the same time, much awareness is created among people especially about the indigenous varieties of rice and small grains and people do take effort to accommodate traditional hand pound rice and millets in their daily diet.

Feeding the guests and children first is still practised as an integral part of the culture and as a necessity. The practise of feeding a handful of rice in the morning to crows is very vibrant. Cows are religiously fed greens (*agattikkirai*) especially on the day of the twelfth day of the fortnight (*dvadasi*). Cow worship is practised popularly although sarcastically there was a protest and demonstration of beef eating when the BJP government imposed the law banning the slaughter of cows for meat. Although eating while sitting on the bed is avoided for hygenic purposes, it is very common to see people sitting on bed and eating while watching television in their bedrooms.

With more women coming into work force, immigration of Indians abroad for economic purposes, reduce in tolerance among people and disintegration of joint family systems and formation of nuclear family systems, many old people are forced to move to old age homes. Given this, the practise of feeding old people first is questionable. However, it has to be mentioned that even in families where old people have the fortune of staying with their grand-children, mostly it is daughters who take care of their parents than sons. In this connection, the following injunction from the text is cited in reminiscence of ancient times:

“One should wake up early in the morning and think of righteous things to do and righteous measures to earn wealth. After sunrise should prostrate his parents and then should continue with his activities. This is the way of life prescribed by our ancestors.” (4)

The following prescription in the text deserves mention:

“Wise people will never call back those who have started to leave. They will not stand behind them and call them. They will not sneeze. They will never ask “where they are going?” They will not go ahead of them, stand in front of them and speak to them. However, they stand by their side and talk to them. They cross the people on their right side.” (58)

It deserves mention that this injunction prescribed by *Acharakkovai* is followed by people. Sneezing is considered a bad omen not only when people are leaving but also when any auspicious occurring takes place. Likewise, stumbling over something, or getting hit in the head while leaving are equally considered bad omens. Asking people where they are going while they are leaving is remark of bad culture.

As I skim through the *Acharakkovai*, it is very interesting to note that some of the injunctions laid down in the text are still practised by the people. However, in the wake of modernity, people are impelled by their aggressive desire to become economically powerful and spread their wings, and consequently many prescriptions are slowly dying out. While there was an impact of atheism and Self-respect movement that shook the state in the mid twentieth century, people are slowly coming out of these impacts and many of them are indeed religious and are interested in supernatural events. Commentators on the *Acharakkovai* point out that many of the injunctions laid out in the text are indeed borrowed from Sanskrit dharmashastric texts such as *Apastamba Grhyasutra*, *Apastambadharmasutra*, *Bodhayanaadharmasutra*, *Gautamasutra*, *Vishnudharmasutra*, *Vashishtadharmasutra*, *Manusmrti*, *Ushanasasamhita* and *Laghuharitasmrti*. While these show the parallel influence of the Sanskrit and Tamil traditions in medieval Tamilnadu, the injunctions prescribed in *Acharakkovai* do give us solutions to some of our present-day problems such as environmental pollution and health problems. In this way, I think the study of *Acharakkovai* is very relevant not only to solve some of our problems and thereby enhance the quality of life of people, but also to return to our ancient way of life as practiced by our ancestors.

## References

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