



# VALUE OF GOOD CONDUCT IN THE LIVELIHOOD OF THE HINDUS - A STUDY BASED SPECIALLY ON 'SUKRANEETHI'

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## Abstract

*Among the books written in Sanskrit on economy without any conflicts with the works on morality the Sukraneethi written by Sukra is of great importance. It is a work that explains in two thousand two hundred slokas , all ethical principles to be followed by kings. Though there is some conflict over the period of Sukraneethi, the general idea prevailing among scholars is that it must have been written during the 10th century A.D. Good conduct is regarded as the first and foremost, among the special characteristics of mankind. The term good conduct refers to uninterruptedly adhering to virtues that are esteemed high in life. The main purpose of this research is to bring out how the thought on the good conducts pertaining to the norms followed by those belonging to the four varnas, viz. Brahmins, Kstariya , Vaisys and Sutras and also by those adopting the ashrams of Brahmacharya, Grhasta, Vanaprasta and Sanyasas are to be followed at the broad levels of individuals, family, society and the world as such. This research is conducted following discussive methodology and analytic methodology together with comparative methodology, since it studies matters in comparison with other literary texts. The Sanskrit text Sukraneethi was translated by Pandit M. Kathiresan Chettiyar. It forms the source of this research, which tries to identify 'Sukraneethi' as a work of foresight, which illustrates good conduct, befitting all times.*

**Key words:** Sukraneethi, good conduct, Hindu society

## Introduction

The Hindu texts on morality and economy fall into two categories, viz; the treatises on (1) polity and ethics, (2) legal matters. The Indian Sub-continent is considered to be the breeding ground of spirituality. Hence, every language prevailing in this country has its legal objectives. Legal aspects in Indian languages are illustrated in the forms of commentaries as well as (anecdotes) stories. Indian poets, who realized the indispensability of these texts, defined them as the target of literature. This definition is emphasized in both Tamil and Sanskrit through proper terms meaning morality, wealth, pleasure and liberation.

The texts written by great scholars of the past, fall into four categories based on the four topics they deal with viz: morality, economy, pleasure and liberation. These texts vary in such ways that while some of them deal in total with the effects of all the subject matters mentioned above, others deal with them individually. Within those texts that deal with them separately, the number of Tamil texts paying particular attention to economy is rather rare. Though morality based texts like *Thirukkural* deal separately with matters of economy, works that pay special attention to economy are but rarely seen. Wealth is indispensable to the lives of people. It denotes the earth which supports them. The earth creates mankind. Works that deal with the ways of acquiring and protecting land are works on economy. Those who wrote Sanskrit texts on economy were Guru, Sukra and Chanakya. The best three of their works were *Parukatpathiyam*, *Ousanasam* and *Koudilyam*. Out of these *Ousanasam* was compiled by Sukra. As *ousanasam* was too broad a text, it was later abbreviated under the name “*Sukraneethi*”. Hence it became “*Sukraneethi abstract*.”

### The Science of good conduct - A general explanation

The human race is endowed with many characteristics among which good conduct is given the highest priority. The term good conduct is derived from the root stem. –“to follow – which means ‘incessantly committed to follow good conduct’. Thus, good conduct denotes the incessant following of good behavior anywhere at any time in the life of a person. “Good conduct” encompasses several meanings including – lifestyle, virtue, duty conscience, behavior in-keeping with worldly trends, soft speech, following good methods, greatness and good birth. Sanskrit scholars call good conduct *acara*. This indicates a behavior in-keeping with one’s birth and status. The *acara* way of living is the linchpin of Indian religious. Thus, good conduct forms the best quality of Indian religions.

The elements of good conduct can be seen in love, morality, compassion, friendship, patience, and loyalty etc. Good conduct illumines on the base of each of its elements, and attains its highest state.

The Vedic texts exposed by the supreme power and heard by great sages, were handed over to others in a ‘hear – say’ method. As these were developed in such a ‘hear - say’ method, they were known as *Srutis*.

The works produced by such sages who had grasped them, are known *Smritis*. The following *sloka* exposes the basis and definition of morality:

आचारः परमो धर्म आचारः परमं तपः। आचारः परमं जानम् आचरात् किं न

साध्यते॥

“Good conduct is the highest *dharmā*, it is the greatest penance. It is also the greatest knowledge. What can’t be achieved through good conduct?”

Morality was also considered to be the path of conduct to guide the individual as well as the society. Virtuous life is considered indispensable for the betterment and progress of temporal life and mind culture. Though the word virtue has several meanings, it was used mostly to indicate good culture or conduct. It also embodies the meaning – justice.

### ‘Sukraneethi’

Among the various books on economy written in Sanskrit without being controversial to the books on virtue, *Sukraneethi* stands in the fore front. The fact that Sukra was considered leader of those authors who produced works on economy, may be seen in the preface to *Koudaleeyam* - a treatise on economy..... “ The lotus feet of Sukra and Brhaspati are adored, so that they may produce the valuable texts on economy”... Sukra and Brhaspati were leaders among those who produced books on economy. It seems that the works known as *Ousanasam’ and Parkapatyam* were respectively produced by them. Sukraneethi is but an abbreviation of *Ousanasam – usanas – sukra*. These were the very works about which Kambar comments as follows:- “They would say silver and gold as a rule” – From these, it will be known that Sukra was considered to be the leader among those authors who wrote books on economy. There is no wonder that Sukraneethi which is an abbreviated form of *ousanasam*, which again is a treatise by Sukra who bore the name of one of the nine planets, had earned such great fame. There is no other book on justice anywhere in all the three worlds, comparable to this book produced by Sukra. Therefore it is worth mentioning that, what Sukra produced was the true book of justice. All other books are not so useful to those engaged in worldly life. Most authors of books on justice have produced theirs, following Sukraniti. In his book known as ‘Yukti Kalpatara’, King Bhoja of the 11th century, says that he has explained only the rules acceptable to those purported by Brhaspati and Sukra. Among the works on economy, *Sukraneethi* belongs to the medieval period. In depth of meaning, it is the foremost. It deals with Indian politics broadly and explanatorily. Scholars like Binaikumar Sarkar are of the opinion that more than Chanakya’s *Koudilyam* or its abbreviated form the *Kamantakaniti*, it is *Sukraneethi* that deals with ancient Indian political civilization elaborately and explanatorily.

The book *Sukraneethi* was first printed by scholar Goodstaff Herbert (?). This rare Sanskrit work was translated into Tamil by Pandit M.Kathiresa Chettiyar. Its first and second editions were published in 1926 and 1982 respectively.

This study on the values of good conduct is based on the translation of Pandit M.Katheresa Chettiyar.

### Date of 'Sukraneethi'

*Sukraneethi* is a work that deals with social, political and economic fields very elaborately and explanatorily. This work belongs to a period when King Balar was ruling in Bengal, and King Rajarajan in South India. The period from 800A.D to 1200A.D is known as the period of Tantra works in Bengal. It was during this period that a note is found in the book called "Agattiya mata". to the effect that only the nine gems should be used to satisfy the nine planets. These nine gems are depicted as the "greatest gems", in the 'Vishnutarmotra-purana' of the 10th century. During that period a treatise was written by astronomer Sripathy under the name 'Jotis Mala'. The book says that the nine gems are the most suitable to the nine planets, which is confirmed in Sukraniti too. Those who compare *Sukraneethi* with *Thirukkural* are of the opinion that the latter belongs to the 10th century A.D. (Professor K.S.Pillai says that *Sukraneethi* belongs to the 10th century A.D). Though there may be differences of opinion over the period of *Sukraneethi*, it is worth mentioning here that some researchers opine that *Sukraneethi* abbreviated from *Sukraneethi* may have been written during the 10th century A.D.

### The contents of 'Sukraneethi'

*Sukraneethi* is a Sanskrit treatise which explains all good principles to be followed by rulers. It contains two thousand two hundred slokas. There are five chapters in this treatise. Except the fourth chapter which has inner divisions called *prakaranas*, all other chapters are continuous. The fourth chapter contains seven *prakaranas*. The introduction to the chapters herein, emphasizes the following matters for the establishment of good conduct and particularly for the better development of a political system:

- a. The knowledge of texts on justice is indispensable.
- b. Both fate as well as effort have effects of their own.
- c. The king must have the qualities of the deities who protect the eight directions.
- d. The king has to be self-restrained over his five sense organs.

Following these it speaks about the varieties of measurements pertaining to lands. Then it explains about the construction of the King's town, palace, royal paths and various types of inns. Thereafter it explains about the daily duties to be performed by the king, the orders he has to make, how to announce such



orders and also about the nature of war, hunting and sports activities. These are followed by the examination of matters like the selection of persons to the royalty, formation of the royal court, protecting the royal emblem, providing all educational facilities to the subjects, and how the king has to act with relentless vigilance and training in arms.

In the second chapter *Sukraneethi* speaks about the good effects accruing to the king through his association with good and honest friends, and also about the evil effects that result from his association with wicked friends. As *Sukraneethi* emphasizes "Mitralabha", Panchatantra also upholds Mitralabha. Thereafter, this chapter deals with the qualities of ministers, advisers, delicates, (NguhsH) , judges . mahouts, army chief, heads of inns, examination chief and the chief tax collector, followed by detailed methods of selecting them. It also explains that documents are manifold and that it is important to write and preserve them.

The third chapter deals with the ways and methods for the subjects to lead their lives smoothly. It also says that one should never feel haughty on account of the education, valour, high birth, strength, wealth or self-respect possessed by them. Generally this is a section that could be compared with Tamil texts like *Thirukkural* and *Asarakkovai*. As already said the fourth chapter is very broad. The methods of adopting peaceful, financial donation, threatful or punishment to achieve something along with the types of punishment are given here. Matters like treasury, qualities of the nine gems, caste distinction based on labour, the occupation of the four castes, thirty two artifices, and sixty four arts, have also been discussed. The four types of *ashrama* conduct, the methods of constructing temples, as well as the divine images and their conveyances are also mentioned. The fifth *prakarana* elaborately deals with the ways to hear cases, courts, the members of the bar, their qualifications, personality, the nature of documentary and other evidence etc. The fifth *Prakarana* examines the four types of defense structures such as water, land, mountain and forest. The seventh *Prakarana* deals in detail with war equipment and the nature of war forces like chariots, elephantry and cavalry. From among war equipment, what is surprising is the discussion of canons that emit sparks. Besides, it is worth mentioning that war is of three types Viz: those fought between divine beings, *Asuras* and human beings.

The fifth chapter deals with various strategies the king has to adopt for winning a war. It also deals with all remaining matters of justice, beneficial to the seven sections of the state as well as to other people, in keeping with those earlier treatises on justice. At the end of the fourth chapter, the number of slokas has been given as two thousand two hundred. However, as the present text

contains two thousand five hundred and sixty *slokas*, one is prompted to think that three hundred and sixty *slokas* might have been subsequently interpolated.

The meaning of this text with five chapters, is classical to the extent mentioned in the fourth chapter, in telling about a King's good and just rule, and also being a treatise on economy, recommending the best ways to procure wealth without prejudice to the contents of the *Vedas* and other works on virtue.

### The good conduct of kings

Since Sukra was the preceptor of *Asuras*, he had carefully noticed the conduct of asuras and produced this treatise on politics in a splendidly acceptable way. The author of *Sukraneethi* in his effort to emphasize that the knowledge of books on justice is indispensable to kings- says,

Just as the physical body cannot last without food, even so the virtuous conduct of all worlds cannot survive without works on justice (*Sukraneethi*, Ch.1-11)

Just as those who eat acceptable food live without diseases, even so those committed to justice will never have enemies." (*Sukraneethi*, Ch.1-12)

In such ways *Sukraneethi* very clearly illustrates the importance of the knowledge of works on justice. This book on justice, paves the path for *ksatriyas* towards prosperity, by following good conduct.

As long as the king is committed to virtues, he shall ever remain as king.

But if he fails in his virtues, the world will meet disaster and the king also will be ruined. (*Sukraneethi*, Ch.4-1.414)

By pointing out as said above *Sukraneethi* indicates that the king should lead a virtuous life.

*Sukraneethi* speaks of seven qualities that could be seen in a king who pleased his subjects:

A king who has the qualities of seven people, viz: Father, mother, teacher, brother, relative, Kubera and Yama. He who is devoid of such qualities cannot be a king. (*Sukraneethi*, Ch.1.78.)

Just like a teacher who educates his students and admonishes them, a king offers education to his subjects and teaches them good conduct. Like a brother offering shares from his father's property to his brothers in keeping with the rules in the texts of morality, a king looks after the benefit of his subjects. (*Sukraneethi* Ch.1.80.)

Though the author insists here that the desire for alcohol and gambling must be totally avoided, he also speaks about the benefits accruing through limited use. The reason for such reversal is the desire to teach the asuras who are very eager to consume them. It is in fact to promote the intelligence to consume less and thereby gain pure knowledge, fearlessness and mental strength.” (*Sukraneethi* Ch.1.102.)

Though an avoidable cause may have been stated as an observable rule; any exception there -to must be determined only after understanding the inner notion of the author. Through some minor rules, the author may appear to accept here and there some vice like hunting and consumption of liquor. However, one must protect even the smallest of lives like worms and ants just as one protects his own life. As for kings, humbling and consumption of alcohol are detestable. It was because of these three sins, that Pandu, Nalan and Yathavas suffered much humiliation in their lives (*Sukraneethi*,Ch.1.142). From what the author of *Sukraneethi* points out as the evils accruing from killing, drinking of alcohol his inner idea is quite apparent.

The fact that a king must be humble in his attitudes, is illustrated by the statement that – “The king must first make himself humble and then respectively train his sons, ministers, other employees and the subjects to be humble. (*Sukraneethi* ,Ch-1.13.).

Humility is a quality required ,essentially for one to behave himself with good conduct. The basis of good conduct is, not to harm anyone even unintentionally. Humility and good conduct are qualities achieved through mind, word and action.

“How can a king who cannot hold back his own mind, bring under his control this vast earth surrounded by the sea?” (*Sukraneethi* ,Ch.1.100.)

Humility is important for a king to be possessed of good conduct. While telling about the importance of humility, *Sukraneethi* says that it should start as a feeling of the mind, followed by humility in words and then in action. It is quite obvious that people who wish to control others, are not controlled in their own self. Therefore this is a discipline that has to be practiced not only by *Ksatriyas* but also other *Varunas* and *ashrams*.

As stated above, *Sukraneethi* says that *Ksatriyas* must first free themselves from the six types of evils. Then by pointing out as examples, to the lives of kings who had ruined their lives, it places forward rare ideas for the *ksatriyas* to improve their lives by adopting good conduct.

Therefore the king must study the works on justice, put himself in the correct path and properly carry out his duties as a king, which grants him pleasure both in this birth as well as in the next.

### **Brahmacarya (celibacy) conduct**

Among the growth steps of a blooming society the first and foremost is education. This is also the firm stand of celibacy.

The author of *Sukraneethi* while telling about the glory of education, also explains that one should not get disgusted for slowly acquiring education and wealth.

When one is engaged in acquiring knowledge and wealth, he must be confident of living long. If he thinks that he would live only for short period his efforts would be in vain. The way in which the author explains the foregoing fact is worthy of special mention. Man's education can be classified into two types. One is education for knowledge and the other is education for life. Education for knowledge involves tackling temporal situations and following good conduct. The education for life indicated living the two types of life, viz: household life and ascetic life in the ways exemplified by the learned and noble men of the past. Both types of education are meant to help one to reach the feet of the supreme power, which is the most fruitful result of this birth.

### **Household life conduct**

Household life is one in which a man gets married to a female with noble qualities, follows a virtuous conduct, and leads a happy life supporting good people, protecting Brahmins and serving ascetics.

As given above, the author points out the common errors committed by females. He also explains the method of giving one's daughter in marriage. A daughter should be given in marriage to a man only after examining his income, caste, conduct, appearance, strength and suitable time. If such a son-in-law is noble, he must be bestowed thick friendship. (*Sukraneethi* Ch.3).

(Father's good conduct)

*Sukraneethi* speaks about the conduct of a son as follows:

A son who always obeys the words of his parents, relentlessly serves them at all times, always follows them like a shadow, makes efforts to earn wealth and is well versed in all arts – gives immense pleasure and satisfaction to his father and mother. Whereas a son who has qualities totally controversial to those given above, and one who wastes wealth, hurts the feelings of his parents (*Sukraneethi* Ch.3.211.).

*Sukraneethi* also beautifully expresses the good conduct of a mother in the above lines. Thus, it will be realized that good conduct is most indispensable for the fulfilment of a perfect household life. A life of treating the needy with meals is the best way of life in this world. *Sukraneethi* further speaks about the indispensability of feasting, in the following lines.

### General conduct

In addition to the disciplinary conduct to be followed by those abiding in their varnashrams, there are also general conducts to be followed by all as human beings. Such conducts are also mentioned in *Sukraneethi*. As far as the individual is concerned, what is expected of him is only good conduct.

*Sukraneethi* speaks about the use of pleasant words. We must always please the world with pleasant speech. Those who speak harsh words will be hated by others, even if he is a liberal donator.

*Sukraneethi* speaks also about the control of the five senses. Talking about one soul that gets destroyed through taste in the first verse, and about another which meets its end through its attraction to smell in the next verse, the author firmly maintains that total destruction is sure to occur by the conjunction of all five senses. From these it could be inferred that the control in the life of Hindus, is asserted.

This work also contains ideas about efforts. Great people endowed with good conduct and knowledge, and honoured by all opine that effort is more important than fate. But those inefficient and feminine charactered people always trust in fate which only increases the karmic effects of previous births. (*Sukraneethi* Ch.1.123.).

Thus, the author clearly points out the importance of making efforts in life. This is a very appreciable notion.

### 'Sukraneethi' and other works - A comparison

Good conduct is indispensable to *Brahmins*. This is expressed by the following lines:

All others including the king fear and respect when they see a Brahmin seriously engaged with his duty. But they will never so fear if that Brahmin errs in his birth conduct. Therefore a Brahmin must maintain his good conduct very effectively.

(*Sukraneethi* Ch.3.272)

*Vedas* once learnt if forgotten by chance, may be learnt again, but if a Brahmin slips in his good conduct, he is doomed forever (*Thirukkural* - 14).

Only those who are endowed with the qualities of truthfulness, charity patience, good conduct, modesty, penance and compassion are fit to be deemed Brahmins. If a *Brahmin* so called, is devoid of such noble qualities he is no *Brahmin* at all (M/Bharata Vanaprva 180-21,25,26)

They are really infatuated fools, who call themselves Brahmins, possessing no truthfulness, or knowledge, who forget the Vedas they had learnt and have no sense or piety or dedication to God.

The fact that greatness or indignity does not accrue simply through birth or wealth is asserted by Sukraneethi as follows: “Being a Brahmin, Vaisya, Sutra or even a fool, is not through one’s birth. It is something acquired only through the inborn qualities of people. (*Sukraneethi*.Ch.1.38)

The birth of all beings is similar but their highness or lowness cannot be deemed on the basis of the work done by them (*Thirukkural* – 98).

It is not proper to defy a person who speaks the truth clearly as a non-Brahmin. He who does not budge away from truth in any situation is by all means the “real *Brahmin*”..

Thus the quality of good birth, irrespective of the caste one is born in, is in strictly adhering to the proper conduct of his caste. Failure to do so will degrade him to low birth (*Shandokya Upanishads*.4.4.1-5).

The foregoing is an idea expressed by Sukraneethi , which is in- keeping with the ideas propagated in other treatises on virtue. Protecting their chastity and thereby reaching divine state, is a noble quality of females. Females are prohibited from living or talking to other males in public. Likewise deliberating into such freedom, and staying in the homes of others even for a moment must be avoided. (*Sukraneethi* ,Ch.3.13) “What is there greater than a female who is committed to her chastity?” (*Thirukural* 6.54).

A female must never think of staying alone away from her father, husband or children. If she is free and away from them, she will bring disrepute to the castes of both her birth and marriage. (*Manudharma sastra* Ch.5.149). The ideas expressed by Sukraneethi On the conduct of women are comparable to those in other books on virtue. The body, language and mind must be controlled from wavering towards evil paths. The indispensability of controlling the sense organs is expressed in the following lines:-

“The uncontrollable senses compared to wild elephants roaming about in the forest of mind must be brought under control with the good of knowledge and be tamed.” (*Sukraneethi* ,Ch.1.98)

One who controls all five senses with the good of mental strength, shall open his path towards liberation. .(*Thirukkural* –).

Senses are compared to elephants and knowledge is compared to the goad used by the mahout. Thiruvalluvar says that the senses (elephants) must be controlled by knowledge. (good). One must always speak pleasant words. This is expressed by Sukraneethi in the following lines.

Just like a peacock that always echoes the rustling of its naturally beautiful feathers, good people always utter only pleasant words with their friends as well as enemies.( *Sukraneethi* ,Ch.1.138).

A person, who speaks only pleasant words with anyone, will be relieved of all the distresses that pain him.” (*Kural* 10:94)

Offering meals to others occupies an important place among the duties of a householder. In a household life which includes the common duties highlighted by Valluvar, the most compulsory duty of the husband is to earn wealth, and that of the wife is providing feasts. Infact offering food to the three categories of people including visitors, relatives and ascetics is the duty of all those engaged in household life. This is explained by Thiruvalluvar through the following kural;

Householder is the supporter of the other three categories of people including visitors, relatives and ascetics, who are helped by him in their path of good conduct. (*Kural* 5.41).

*Thirumanthiram* advises as to how to make up one’s daily life bestowing love towards others and helping all others to fulfil their needs. Upanishads too contain various thoughts related to senses, and disciplinary conducts to be followed in this worldly life. Thus it could be seen that the ideas put forward by Sukraneethi regarding the assignment of giving a proper place to the feasting of others which leads to a prosperous house hold life, are similar and comparable to those given in *Upanishads*, *Thirukkural* and *Thirumanthiram*. The books on virtues also explain that a husband who marries a faultless wife must also be committed to chastity. There is no other action that can reduce the life span of a man, than having sex with another man’s wife. (Manu, ch.4.134.)

The greatest quality of manliness lies in refraining from looking amorously at the wife of another man, and that is also the best of conducts” . (*Thirukkural* – 15.148).

Thus, the books on virtue point out the greatness in avoiding the interest in the wives of others.

## Conclusion

The ideas so far placed forward, make one realize that *Sukraneethi* has expressed thoughts that were befitting the lives of the people who lived during a certain period, and that many of them are applicable even to the present. Some of these ideas have been pointed out rather superficially. Therefore a detailed study of the good ideas promulgated in this book is a necessity of the day.

According to the time we live in, older matters wade off while new ones crop in. (*Nannool*)

This is an edict from *Nannool*. Accordingly, we have to avoid what is not suitable to the time we live in. At the same time, if there are old treatises containing valuable ideas that are suitable to the time, it is also worthy, speaking about them and explaining them.

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