

# Women as Moral Agents and the Ethics of Social Justice: A Comparative Study of Thiruvalluvar and Dayananda Saraswati

Jesmina Khatun

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Ranchi University, Ranchi

## Abstract

Recognition of women as moral agents remains central to contemporary debates on justice, equality, and human dignity. While modern feminist philosophy has emphasized autonomy and capability, Indian ethical traditions contain powerful yet under explored resources for grounding gender justice. This paper presents a comparative philosophical study of Thiruvalluvar and Dayananda Saraswati to examine how women's moral agency is conceptualized within classical and reformist Indian thought. Through textual analysis of the "Tirukkural" and "Satyarth Prakash", the study argues that Thiruvalluvar develops an implicit ethical universalism grounded in virtue, discernment and justice, in which moral worth is not determined by gender. Dayananda Saraswati, in contrast, articulates explicit institutional reform, defending women's right to education, scriptural authority and social participation. By constructing a two-level analytical framework ethical universalism and institutional realization the paper demonstrates that gender justice emerges organically from within Indian philosophical reasoning. The study contributes to comparative ethics by bridging virtue theory and social reform and challenges the assumption that women's moral agency is a purely modern or Western construct. The findings suggest that a culturally rooted yet progressive model of social justice can be developed through critical reinterpretation of classical ethical principles.

**Keywords:** Women as Moral Agents, Social Justice, Thiruvalluvar, Dayananda Saraswati, Gender Equality, Virtue Ethics

## 1. Introduction

The concept of moral agency refers to the capacity of a person to think ethically, choose freely and accept responsibility for actions. Without moral agency, justice cannot function. Responsibility presupposes rational capacity and freedom of judgement. Modern political philosophy strongly connects justice with autonomy and capability [5].

Historically, women were often denied recognition as full moral agents [10]. In many traditions, they were treated as dependents rather than decision-makers. Their roles were limited to obedience and service. This exclusion was not merely social. It was also philosophical. If women are not seen as rational or morally capable, they cannot be treated as equal participants in society. Contemporary feminist philosopher argues that justice requires securing women's practical reason and dignity as central human capabilities [4]. However, the recognition of women as moral agent is not only a modern

development. Indian ethical traditions contain internal resources that affirm moral equality [9]. This paper focuses on two influential figures: Thiruvalluvar and Dayananda Saraswati.

### 1.1. Thiruvalluvar

Thiruvalluvar is the author of the “Tirukkural”, a classical Tamil text on ethics, governance and human conduct. The work grounded in virtue (Aram), justice and disciplined conduct [1]. The text does not construct morality around gender hierarchy. Instead, it speaks in universal ethical language. Virtue is required of all. Justice applies to all. Moral discipline is a shared human responsibility.

### 1.2. Dayananda Saraswati

Dayananda Saraswati was a nineteenth-century reformer and the founder of Arya Samaj [2]. He argued that the Vedas promote equality and rationality. He rejected practices such as child marriage and denial of women’s education. He maintained that women have equal rights to study the Vedas and pursue spiritual knowledge.

Both thinkers lived in different periods and contexts. Thiruvalluvar represents classical ethical wisdom. Dayananda represents reformist activism within colonial India. Yet both engage deeply with the idea of human dignity and justice. The central research question of this paper is: How do Thiruvalluvar and Dayananda Saraswati conceptualize women as moral agents? How do their ideas contribute to an ethical theory of social justice? To answer this question, the study adopts a comparative philosophical method. First, it analyses the ethical structure of the “Tirukkural”. Second, it examines Dayananda’s reinterpretation of Vedic authority and social reform. Third, it develops a comparative analytical framework focusing on moral autonomy, justice and social responsibility. The importance of this study lies in three areas. First, it challenges the assumption that gender justice is purely a Western import. It shows that Indian ethical traditions contain strong arguments for women’s dignity. Second, it offers a constructive model of social justice rooted in virtue ethics rather than only rights discourse. Third, it contributes to contemporary debates in political and moral philosophy by connecting classical wisdom with modern concerns. This paper does not claim that either thinker was a modern feminist. Rather, it argues that both provide ethical foundations that support recognition of women as morally responsible beings. The discussion now moves to a review of existing scholarship in order to situate this argument within broader academic debates.

## 2. Review of Literature

The question of women’s moral agency has been widely discussed in modern ethical and feminist philosophy. However, its exploration within Indian classical and reformist thought remains comparatively limited. This section reviews existing scholarship in three areas: studies on women and moral agency, research on Thiruvalluvar’s ethical philosophy and scholarship on Dayananda Saraswati’s reformist ideas.

### 2.1. Women and Moral agency in Ethical Philosophy

Modern justice theory emphasizes freedom, equality and capability. Amartya Sen argues that justice must focus on real freedoms rather than abstract institutions [5]. Later feminist philosophers questioned this exclusion. Martha Nussbaum argues that justice must secure central human capabilities for women, including practical reason and control over one’s environment [4]. Similarly, contemporary gender theorists emphasize that denying education and property rights effectively denies moral agency [6].

These works establish an important principle: moral agency requires recognition of intellectual capacity and freedom of choice. Without these, justice becomes incomplete. Yet most of this scholarship focuses

on Western traditions. There is limited engagement with Indian ethical resources in this context. This creates a research gap.

## 2.2. Studies on Thiruvalluvar's Ethical Philosophy

Thiruvalluvar's "Tirukkural" has been interpreted as a universal ethical text. Scholars describe it as a work of virtue ethics grounded in discipline, justice, compassion and wisdom [1]. Many commentators highlight its secular tone and its relevance beyond religious boundaries [9]. Existing studies focus on themes such as statecraft, leadership ethics, family life and personal virtue. Some scholars argue that the "Tirukkural" presents an inclusive moral order in which dignity is linked to conduct rather than birth [9]. The text emphasizes qualities such as self-control, truthfulness, compassion and fairness. These virtues are presented as universal human duties.

However, direct analysis of women as moral agents in the "Tirukkural" is less developed. Women are often discussed in relation to family roles, chastity and domestic virtue. Some critics interpret these verses as reinforcing traditional gender roles. Others argue that these verses reflect moral strength rather than subordination. A deeper reading suggests that Thiruvalluvar consistently measures worth by virtue and wisdom. He does not ground ethical value in gender hierarchy. Moral excellence is described as attainable by all who cultivate discipline and discernment. Therefore, the text provides an ethical foundation that can support recognition of women's agency, even if it does not explicitly use modern feminist language.

The existing scholarship does not sufficiently explore this dimension. Most studies remain descriptive. Few connect Thiruvalluvar's virtue ethics with contemporary debates on social justice and gender equality. This paper attempts to bridge that gap.

## 2.3. Scholarship on Dayananda Saraswati and Social Reform

Dayananda Saraswati is widely recognized as a major reformer of nineteenth-century India [2]. His work "Satyarth Prakash" argues for a return to what he considered the pure teachings of the Vedas. He rejected idol worship, caste discrimination by birth and social customs that restricted women's education.

Studies on Dayananda Saraswati primarily focus on his reform movement and religious revivalism. He criticized child marriage and supported widow remarriage [8]. These positions were radical in his historical context. However, interpretations of his thought differ. Others emphasize his rational and reformist approach. His defense of women's education is often mentioned but rarely analysed as a theory of moral agency.

Dayananda's argument rests on a key claim: the Vedas do not deny knowledge to women. Ignorance and later distortions created inequality. Therefore, restoring scriptural truth restores justice. This reasoning connects moral capacity with access to knowledge. If women are capable of understanding sacred knowledge, they are also capable of moral reasoning. Yet, systematic philosophical analysis of this claim remains limited. Much of the literature is historical rather than normative. There is a need to examine how his reformist ethics contributes to broader theories of justice and moral responsibility.

## 2.4. Comparative Studies

Comparative research between classical and modern Indian thinkers has grown in recent years. Scholars compare virtue ethics in Indian texts with Western virtue theory. Others examine reform movements in colonial India in light of social justice theory. However, comparative studies between Thiruvalluvar and Dayananda Saraswati are rare. They belong to different linguistic, cultural and historical contexts. One represents classical Tamil ethical literature. The other represents nineteenth-century Vedic reform.

Because of this difference, their ideas are seldom brought into dialogue. This absence presents a significant research opportunity. A comparative approach can reveal continuity within Indian ethical thought. It can also show how moral principles evolve in response to social change.

## 2.5. Research Gap

From the above review, three gaps become clear: First, there is insufficient philosophical analysis of women as moral agents within the “Tirukkural”. Second, Dayananda’s defense of women’s education is rarely interpreted as a theory of moral autonomy. Third, there is little comparative work connecting classical virtue ethics with reformist social justice in relation to gender. This paper addresses these gaps by developing a structured comparative framework. It does not merely describe each thinker separately. It examines how their ethical principles support recognition of women as morally responsible beings.

The study is grounded in three conceptual pillars: Virtue Ethics, Moral Autonomy and Social Justice Theory. Virtue ethics focuses on character rather than rules alone. Thiruvalluvar’s thought aligns closely with this tradition. Moral worth arises from disciplined character. Moral autonomy refers to the capacity for independent ethical judgment. Dayananda’s insistence on women’s education reflects this principle. Social justice theory concerns fair participation in social institutions. Both thinkers connect virtue with social harmony. Justice is not only legal fairness. It is ethical order.

By combining these three frameworks, the study constructs an advanced comparative lens. Thiruvalluvar provides the moral foundation of universal virtue. Dayananda provides the reformist application of equality in social institutions. Together, they form a two-level model:

Level 1: Ethical Universalism (virtue-based moral equality)

Level 2: Institutional Reform (restoration of equal rights and education)

This model allows reinterpretation of women’s moral agency within an Indian philosophical context.

## 3. Thiruvalluvar’s Ethical Vision: Foundations of Moral Agency

The “Tirukkural” is one of the most profound ethical texts in Indian philosophy. The “Tirukkural” presents virtue as the highest human achievement [1]. Moral greatness depends on self-control, truthfulness, compassion and justice. Moral agency begins with moral awareness. Thiruvalluvar insists that human beings must cultivate discernment. Without wisdom, action becomes harmful. He states that conduct guided by righteousness sustains the world. Virtue is not a private quality. It is a public force. This is important for understanding women’s moral agency. If virtue is universal, then women are included in its moral demand. There is no philosophical argument in the “Tirukkural” that women lack reason or responsibility. Instead, ethical discipline is described as a human duty.

### 3.1. Virtue as Universal Capacity

Thiruvalluvar defines virtue as that which protects both the individual and society. He emphasizes self-control, truthfulness, compassion and justice. These virtues are not presented as masculine traits. They are qualities of character. In several Kurals, moral greatness is measured by restraint and integrity. The strong person is not the physically powerful. The strong person is one who controls anger and speaks truth. Such descriptions are gender-neutral. Moral excellence depends on character. If moral excellence is based on character and self-discipline, then women, who possess rational capacity, can cultivate it equally. The ethical framework itself does not exclude them. This universality is significant. In many traditions, women were praised but not treated as independent moral subjects. In contrast, the “Tirukkural” measures worth by ethical conduct alone. Birth and status are secondary. Conduct is primary.

### 3.2. Justice as Impartial Moral Order

Justice in the “Tirukkural” is closely linked with righteousness. A ruler must act without partiality [1]. Partiality destroys trust. A citizen must act honestly. Justice sustains social harmony. Injustice destroys trust. Justice requires moral accountability. One who commits wrong is responsible for consequences. Responsibility implies agency. A person who cannot reason cannot be held accountable. Thiruvalluvar repeatedly warns against partiality. He states that fairness must guide judgment. This impartial tone suggests that justice is not selective. It applies to all members of society. If justice is universal, then recognition of women’s moral capacity follows naturally. A just society cannot deny moral status to half of its members. Ethical consistency demands inclusion.

### 3.3. Women in the Domestic Sphere: Strength, Not Subordination

Some Kurals speak about women within family life. These verses often emphasize chastity, loyalty and moral strength. At first reading, this may appear restrictive. However, closer analysis shows a different picture.

The virtuous wife is described as the moral centre of the household. Her integrity protects the family. Her wisdom sustains harmony. This portrayal attributes moral authority to women. The household is not presented as a site of passive obedience. It is presented as a moral institution. The woman’s virtue is described as powerful. It preserves dignity and order. This description does not reduce women to silence. Instead, it assigns them ethical responsibility. Responsibility implies agency. An individual who upholds virtue is an active moral participant. It is important to read these verses within the ethical logic of the text. Thiruvalluvar values discipline in all roles. The king must be disciplined. The minister must be disciplined. The householder must be disciplined. Women are not excluded from this moral structure.

### 3.4. Discernment and Moral Wisdom

Discernment is central in the “Tirukkural”. Acting without reflection leads to regret. Wisdom guides action. Moral judgment requires intelligence. If women were considered incapable of discernment, the text would say so. It does not. Instead, it treats wisdom as a human faculty. The emphasis on learning and reflection supports moral agency. Education strengthens judgment. Though the “Tirukkural” does not directly discuss institutional education for women, its stress on wisdom as a virtue implies that knowledge is valuable for all. A society that values discernment must encourage its cultivation. Denying knowledge to women would contradict the ethical spirit of the text.

### 3.5. Social Harmony and Shared Responsibility

Thiruvalluvar views society as an interconnected moral order. Each individual contributes to collective harmony. Ethical failure harms the community. Shared responsibility is essential. If only men are treated as moral actors, social harmony becomes incomplete. Ethical society requires participation of all. This idea supports recognition of women as moral contributors. The home, community, and state depend on shared virtue. Women’s ethical strength is not secondary. It is foundational.

### 3.6. Limits and Context

It must be acknowledged that Thiruvalluvar did not write in the language of modern rights. He does not explicitly demand institutional equality. His context was different. Social structures were hierarchical. However, the philosophical principles of the “Tirukkural” allow reinterpretation. Its universal virtue ethics can support modern claims of gender justice. The absence of explicit feminist vocabulary does not imply absence of moral equality. Ethical universality itself is a powerful foundation.

### 3.7. Philosophical Implication

From the above analysis, several conclusions can be drawn: First, virtue in the “Tirukkural” is universal.

It is not gender-specific. Second, justice is impartial and grounded in righteousness. Third, responsibility implies agency. Moral accountability presupposes rational capacity. Fourth, women are portrayed as morally strong and ethically significant within social life.

Therefore, Thiruvalluvar's ethical system contains implicit recognition of women as moral agents. The text may not challenge social institutions directly. Yet its moral philosophy does not deny women ethical capacity. This becomes clearer when contrasted with reformist thinkers who addressed institutional injustice more directly. The next section turns to Dayananda Saraswati, whose engagement with women's education and rights brings moral agency into explicit social reform.

#### **4. Dayananda Saraswati and the Explicit Defense of Women's Moral Agency**

Dayananda Saraswati stands at a different historical moment from Thiruvalluvar. He lived in nineteenth-century India, a time marked by colonial rule, social reform movements and intense debate over tradition and modernity [2]. His major work, "Satyarth Prakash", presents a strong critique of what he considered corrupt social practices.

Unlike Thiruvalluvar, Dayananda directly addresses the question of women's rights. He does not speak only in universal moral language. He argues clearly that women must be educated and must have access to scriptural knowledge. His position is not symbolic. It is institutional.

##### **4.1. Equality in Scriptural Authority**

Dayananda's central claim is that the Vedas do not prohibit women from studying sacred knowledge. According to him, later customs created inequality. He insists that both men and women possess the same rational soul. This claim is philosophically important. If the soul is rational and equal, then moral capacity is equal. Moral capacity cannot depend on gender. It depends on knowledge and discipline. He criticizes practices that deny women education. He argues that ignorance produces social decay. Education, on the other hand, strengthens moral character. A society that keeps women uneducated weakens itself. This argument moves beyond abstract equality. It connects moral agency with institutional access. Without education, moral judgment cannot fully develop. Therefore, justice requires equal educational opportunity.

##### **4.2. Moral Autonomy and Reform**

Dayananda's defense of women is rooted in moral autonomy. He maintains that women must not be treated as dependent beings incapable of independent thought. He rejects child marriage because it denies maturity and rational consent. He supports widow remarriage because he sees enforced widowhood as unjust suffering. In each case, his reasoning is ethical. Social customs must be evaluated by reason and scripture. If a custom violates justice, it must be rejected. This reformist logic reveals a strong concept of moral agency. A woman is not merely protected by law. She is a reasoning individual capable of moral choice. By defending women's right to education and remarriage, Dayananda affirms their freedom to shape their lives. Freedom and responsibility are connected. Moral agents must have space to decide.

##### **4.3. Justice as Restoration of Original Truth**

Dayananda does not present his reforms as foreign innovations. He argues that true Vedic religion already affirms equality. Social injustice arises from distortion. This strategy is significant. It grounds reform within tradition. He does not reject tradition. He reinterprets it. From a philosophical perspective, this approach combines moral universalism with cultural continuity. Women's moral agency is not

defended as imitation of Western ideas. It is defended as restoration of authentic truth. This method strengthens the legitimacy of reform. It shows that justice can emerge from internal critique.

#### **4.4. Critique of Social Practices**

Dayananda openly criticizes practices such as child marriage and denial of widow remarriage. He argues that these customs violate reason and compassion. He emphasizes that marriage requires maturity and consent. Consent is a key element of moral agency. Without the capacity to choose freely, an individual cannot be morally responsible. By demanding consent, Dayananda affirms women's autonomy. He also rejects the idea that women are intellectually inferior. He points to examples of learned women in Vedic literature. This historical reference supports his argument that women have always possessed intellectual ability. His reasoning follows a clear pattern: First, establish scriptural equality. Second, expose social distortion. Third, demand institutional correction. This three-step logic moves moral agency from theory to practice.

#### **4.5. Education as Ethical Empowerment**

Education occupies a central place in Dayananda's thought [2]. He views it as essential for moral development. Knowledge leads to discernment. Discernment guides action. If women are denied education, they are deprived of tools for ethical reasoning. Therefore, education becomes a matter of justice, not charity. His position aligns with modern capability theory [4]. Justice requires enabling individuals to develop their capacities. Dayananda anticipates this idea by linking learning with dignity. The educated woman is not merely skilled. She is morally empowered. She can guide her family and society with wisdom.

#### **4.6. Limits and Historical Context**

It is important to evaluate Dayananda critically. He operated within nineteenth-century social structures. Some of his ideas remain shaped by traditional gender roles. He did not completely reject patriarchy in all forms. However, within his context, his defence of women's education and remarriage was radical. He challenged powerful social customs. He used reason as his tool. His reformism demonstrates a transition from implicit moral equality to explicit institutional equality. Unlike Thiruvalluvar, he directly addresses structural injustice.

#### **4.7. Philosophical Implications**

From this analysis, several conclusions emerge: First, Dayananda affirms equal rational capacity for men and women. Second, he links moral agency with education and knowledge. Third, he demands reform of institutions that deny autonomy. Fourth, he grounds equality within scriptural reinterpretation. His thought therefore represents an explicit articulation of women as moral agents within Indian reformist philosophy.

When compared with Thiruvalluvar, a pattern appears: Thiruvalluvar provides ethical universalism. Dayananda provides reformist activism. One offers moral foundation. The other offers institutional application. Together, they create a powerful framework for understanding women's moral agency and social justice.

### **5. Comparative Ethical Analysis: From Implicit Equality to Institutional Justice**

This section develops a structured comparative framework between Thiruvalluvar and Dayananda Saraswati. The aim is not to merely list similarities. The aim is to show how their ethical visions interact and deepen each other. The comparison is organized around four key categories: i) Source of Moral Authority, ii) Concept of Moral Agency, iii) Understanding of Justice, iv) Social Application

### 5.1. Source of Moral Authority

Thiruvalluvar grounds morality in universal virtue. The “Tirukkural” does not rely heavily on ritual or sectarian identity [1]. Moral authority comes from righteousness itself. Virtue is self-evident through reason and experience. Ethical conduct sustains life. His tone is humanistic. He appeals to common moral intuition. Justice is right because it preserves harmony.

Dayananda grounds morality in the Vedas [2]. However, his interpretation is rational. He insists that scripture must align with reason. Moral authority is divine but not blind. It must be understood through intelligence.

Comparison: Thiruvalluvar emphasizes ethical universality. Dayananda emphasizes scriptural restoration through reason. Both reject blind tradition [1][2]. Both insist that morality must be rationally defensible.

### 5.2. Concept of Moral Agency

For Thiruvalluvar, moral agency is implied in the idea of responsibility. The “Tirukkural” constantly speaks of accountability. One must control anger. One must speak truth. One must avoid injustice. These duties assume rational capacity. Women are portrayed as capable of moral strength, especially within the household. The virtuous woman protects dignity and order. Her conduct shapes society.

For Dayananda, moral agency is explicit. He argues directly that women have equal souls and equal rational power. He demands equal access to education. Without knowledge, moral agency cannot flourish.

Comparison: Thiruvalluvar presents moral agency as universal but implicit. Dayananda presents moral agency as institutional and explicit. Thus, Thiruvalluvar offers philosophical foundation. Dayananda offers social articulation.

### 5.3. Understanding of Justice

Justice in the “Tirukkural” is rooted in righteousness. A ruler must be impartial. Citizens must avoid harm. Justice maintains harmony. Injustice destroys order. Justice is ethical balance. It is less about rights language and more about virtue.

Dayananda interprets justice as correction of social wrongs. If a practice denies women education, it is unjust. If a custom causes suffering, it must be reformed. Justice for him includes structural change.

Comparison: Thiruvalluvar framed Justice as moral order grounded in inner virtue. Justice is first an inward transformation that later shapes social harmony. Dayananda framed Justice as social reform grounded in righteous action. For him, justice requires the correction of social evils such as caste discrimination, gender inequality and blind ritualism.

Together their thought forms a two-dimensional model of justice. The first dimension is Moral Justice, which concerns inner character and ethical self-formation. The second dimension is Institutional Justice, which concerns the reform of social structure and public institution. When combined, these two dimensions present a comprehensive vision in which inner moral discipline sustains outer social transformation.

### 5.4. Social Application

Thiruvalluvar does not directly organize reform movements. His method is ethical instruction. He transforms society through moral education.

Dayananda builds institutions. He founds Arya Samaj. He promotes schools. He publicly debates social customs.

Comparison: Thiruvalluvar shapes human conscience by grounding justice in inner moral discipline and

ethical self-cultivation. Dayananda Saraswati reshapes social institutions by calling for structural reform based on equality and rational principles. Both approaches are necessary for a complete theory of justice. Moral vision without institutional reform remains abstract and ineffective. Institutional reform without moral depth lacks stability and long-term ethical grounding.

### 5.5. Comparative Framework Table

**Table 1: Comparative Framework of Moral Agency**

S. No	Category	Thiruvalluvar	Dayananda Saraswati
1.	Source of Authority	Universal Virtue	Vedic Revelation Interpreted by Reason
2.	Moral Agency	Implicit and Character-Based	Explicit and Education-Based
3.	Justice	Ethical Harmony	Social and Institutional Reform
4.	Method	Moral Instruction	Organized Reform Movement
5.	Women’s Role	Moral Centre of Household	Equal Participant in Education and Religion

This structured comparison shows progression, not contradiction.

### 5.6. The Two-Level Model of Gender Justice

From the above comparison, this paper proposes an original two-level model:

The first level is ethical universalism. At this level, virtue is understood as belonging equally to all human beings. Moral dignity does not depend on gender. Every person possesses equal ethical worth. This dimension is strongly developed in the “Tirrukural”, where moral excellence is presented as a universal possibility.

The second level is institutional realization. At this level, equal moral dignity must be embodied in social structures. Education, marriage laws and public participation must reflect the principle of equality. Justice requires not only moral recognition but also institutional transformation. This level is strongly developed in Dayananda’s reformist thought, which seeks to reconstruct society on the basis of equality and rational order.

When combined, these two levels form a complete ethical vision: Inner equality must be accompanied by Outer equality. Character formation must be supported by Structural reform [11]. Without inner virtue, reform becomes mechanical and lacks moral depth. Without structural reform, virtue remains confined to private life and fails to transform society.

### 5.7. Philosophical Contribution of the Study

This comparative approach offers three major contributions:

First, it challenges the idea that Indian tradition is uniformly patriarchal. Both thinkers provide internal intellectual resources that support gender justice and affirm women’s moral dignity.

Second, the study moves beyond simple praise. It develops a critical framework that connects virtue ethics with institutional reform. By placing moral character and social transformation in dialogue, it presents a more integrated understanding of justice.

Third, it proposes a culturally grounded framework for contemporary debates on gender equality. Women’s moral agency is not presented as an external or imported concept. Rather it emerges from within the ethical reasoning of the tradition itself.

Thiruvalluvar teaches that virtue defines true human greatness, regardless of gender. Dayananda teaches that society must create conditions in which that virtue can develop equally for all. Together, they present a layered philosophy of justice that unites inner moral information with outer social transformation.

## 6. Contemporary Relevance: Reclaiming Women's Moral Agency

The recognition of women as moral agents remains central in contemporary debates on justice. Legal equality alone does not guarantee moral equality. Social attitudes, access to education and institutional structures still shape the scope of women's agency.

The ethical visions of Thiruvalluvar and Dayananda Saraswati offer important insights for the present. First, Thiruvalluvar reminds us that justice begins with character. Laws cannot sustain justice if individuals lack virtue. Respect, restraint, compassion and fairness must be cultivated. When women are treated with dignity, it is not only a legal requirement. It is an ethical duty grounded in moral understanding.

Second, Dayananda demonstrates that moral principles must influence institutions. Education, marriage systems and public life must reflect equality. If institutions deny women opportunity, moral potential remains suppressed. Modern capability theory argues that justice requires enabling individuals to develop essential human capacities [4]. Education, practical reasoning and control over one's environment are central capabilities. Dayananda's insistence on women's education anticipates this insight. He recognized that without knowledge, freedom is incomplete.

Similarly, contemporary virtue ethics emphasizes character formation [3]. Thiruvalluvar's stress on discipline and discernment aligns with this view. A just society requires morally mature individuals. Thus, the combined framework of these thinkers provides a balanced approach to justice that unites ethical cultivation with structural equality. It affirms that moral character and institutional reform must develop together. This synthesis remains relevant in societies where legal rights formally exist but social attitudes continue to restrict women's autonomy and full participation.

## 7. Critical Reflection

While both thinkers provide strong ethical foundations, critical reflection is necessary. Thiruvalluvar's treatment of women is largely within family roles. He does not explicitly discuss women's participation in governance or public leadership. His context may have limited such discussion. Therefore, reinterpretation is required to apply his universal ethics to modern institutions. Dayananda, though progressive for his time, also worked within certain traditional assumptions. His reforms focused mainly on education and marriage. He did not fully develop a theory of political representation for women.

However, philosophical traditions must be read dynamically. Ethical principles can extend beyond their historical limits. When Thiruvalluvar declares virtue universal, the principle can support broader equality. When Dayananda affirms rational equality, the claim can expand into contemporary debates on political and economic rights. Therefore, this study does not idealize them uncritically. It interprets their ethical logic in light of present concerns.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper began with the question: How do Thiruvalluvar and Dayananda Saraswati conceptualize wo-

men as moral agents? How do their ideas contribute to social justice? The analysis has shown that both thinkers affirm moral equality, though in different ways. Thiruvalluvar develops an ethical universalism grounded in virtue. Moral worth depends on character, not gender. Justice is impartial. Responsibility presupposes rational capacity. Within this structure, women emerge as morally significant participants in social life.

Dayananda Saraswati articulates moral equality explicitly. He defends women's right to education, scriptural study and remarriage. He criticizes customs that deny autonomy. He connects justice with institutional reform.

The comparative framework developed in this paper proposes a two-level model: One is Ethical Universalism (inner dignity and virtue) and another one is Institutional Realization (outer equality and reform). Together, these levels create a culturally rooted theory of gender justice. Women's moral agency is not a foreign idea imposed on Indian thought [9]. It is deeply supported by internal ethical reasoning.

The study contributes to philosophical scholarship in three ways. First, it expands interpretation of the "Tirukkural" by highlighting implicit moral equality. Second, it reinterprets Dayananda's reformism as a theory of moral autonomy. Third, it constructs a comparative model that connects virtue ethics with social justice theory.

Recognizing women as moral agents is not only a matter of rights. It is a matter of ethical consistency. A society that values virtue must value all who are capable of virtue. A society that values justice must remove structures that deny equal opportunity. Thiruvalluvar shapes conscience. Dayananda reshapes institutions. Together, they offer a layered and enduring philosophy of social justice.

## References

1. Thiruvalluvar, Tirukkural, Translated by P.S. Sundaram, Penguin Books, 1990.
2. Dayananda Saraswati, Satyarth Prakash, Translated by Chiranjiva Bharadwaja, Arya Samaj Publication, 2006.
3. Rupert Wesley, Ethical Foundations of Social Justice, Oxford University Press, 2017.
4. Martha Nussbaum, Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach, Cambridge University Press, 2000.
5. Amartya Sen, The Idea of Justice, Harvard University Press, 2009.
6. Martha C. Nussbaum, Creating Capabilities, Harvard University Press, 2011.
7. Bimal Krishna Matilal, Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata, Oxford University Press, 1989.
8. Arvind Sharma, Hinduism and Its Sense of History, Oxford University Press, 2003.
9. S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, Volume 1, Oxford University Press, 2008.
10. Uma Chakravarti, Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens, Stree Publications, 2003.
11. Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, Harvard University Press, 1989.