

# Deconstruction Of The Economic Principles In Thirukkural With Special Focus On Ethics And Aesthetics

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## **Abstract:**

*Thirukkural is considered one of the oldest ethical treatises offering the highest moral values to people across all cultures. This incomparable ethical treatise is rightly praised as Tamil marai, Muppal, Theva nool. Valluvar, the author who created the splendid verses is praised as Mudharpaaval, Maadhanubangi. The economic model in which Valluvar lived was centred around the monarchy and as it was a pre-industrial age where there was not as much technological advancements as today, the agricultural sector was the leading sector influencing the growth of the economy. Thiruvalluvar not only gave moral guidelines to people to live a long and healthy life but also an economic outlook which helps them function as an ideal society. This economic outlook is driven by his aesthetic pursuit. Economics deals with Beauty or the Ideal; Aesthetics deals with usefulness; and Ethics deals with Right and Wrong (Ragsdale).*

**Keywords :** *Thirukkural, Economic Principles, Ethics and Aesthetics*

## **1. CAREER IN THIRUKKURAL**

The economic growth of a human being is shaped by their career. When equal opportunities are provided, it is upto the individual to progress in his trade by his hard work. The social standing of a person is dependent chiefly on his wealth which is a result of his accumulated toil in his career. Therefore it is vital that everyone has access to the career of their choice and the right to progress in that field through their hard work. Even though it was written in an Age where farming was the chief occupation, Thiruvalluvar mentions businessmen (120), weavers (785), fishing (931), carpenting (1020), blacksmithery (828), goldsmithery (95), umbrella making (1034), palanquin making (37), salt making (1302).

### *Farming*

In the Agricultural Age, farming was considered the only occupation that produced value. It was the farmers who were in charge of the well being of society as everyone was dependent on them for food. Since everyone came to the farmers to buy their produce in exchange for other products or money, there was no need for the farmers to go in search of other businesses. They were the chief producers and everyone else were consumers as is mentioned in “Who ploughing eat their food, they truly live/ The rest to others bend subservient, eating what they give.” (1033)

Thiruvalluvar says that if the farmers stopped ploughing their fields, then even the hermits who have rid themselves of any materialistic desires cannot continue living. Since everyone is dependant on farming, agriculture is the primary career as can be seen in the following

couplet “Howe'er they roam, the world must follow still the plougher's team;/Though toilsome, culture of the ground as noblest toil esteem.” (1031)

### *Ethics of Trade*

Thiruvalluvar speaks against laziness and lays down hard work as the guiding principle for everyone willing to advance in their career. Career growth should be a result of one's honest toil and it should not be gained through any corrupt means. Behaving ethically is more important than career growth and that it outweighs the benefits of accumulating large wealth through unethical means.

“Though her that bore thee hung'ring thou behold, no deed  
Do thou, that men of perfect soul have crime decreed.” (656)

It becomes clear Thiruvalluvar considers an ethical life to be one where the ideal life as decreed by ethical men or socially held praiseworthy is followed. Society and wise people (“men of perfect soul”) become the observers of the piece of art i.e., the life of a person. Just like classical poetry had conventions (rhyme, meter etc) it had to follow, an aesthetic life has to follow ethical conventions.

In fact, Thiruvalluvar goes as far as to say that it is more important not to disgrace oneself by indulging in a morally dubious act than to save one's starving mother. Even though it is the duty of the son to provide his mother with food, it does not justify fulfilling his duty through any unethical means as that would disgrace him in the eyes of wise men, the invisible observer of the aesthetic life. According to Dobson, aesthetics concerns the relationship between the object, and the subject judging the object.

Compared to the primary duty to provide food for the family, the accumulation of wealth and career growth is secondary and the author states clearly that it is better to live in poverty than to do an unethical act (658). This couplet, which demonstrates self creation even if it affects or changes others is an illustration of “the aesthetics of existence (which) is concerned not only with the personal venture of self-creation, but involves the others as partners and even purposes of the ethical work” (Nica, 56).

Thiruvalluvar compares the burnt clay pot to the strength of a human being. The clay pot becomes a vessel to hold water only after it has been burnt. Before being burnt, it remains clay and it cannot hold water as it is porous. According to Thiruvalluvar, ethical principles make a human strong and the absence of it makes humans as weak as the unfinished pot. Even though a person can earn money and progress in his career through unethical means, they remain like an unfinished pot (660). An unfinished pot may be considered aesthetically pleasing but it doesn't have a utilitarian purpose (economic value). According to the writer, good and wise persons will not accept any wealth which is received through ethically dubious means (755).

### *Individual Economics*

Thiruvalluvar makes it clear that everyone should always adhere to ethical principles to find work. He speaks against laziness and advocates hard work. The accumulation of wealth as a result of one's honest toil should be shared with other people so as to adhere to the ideal aesthetically pleasing life. This, according to Thiruvalluvar, gives one supreme pleasure.

“See that thy life the praise of generous gifts obtain;  
Save this for living man exists no real gain.” (231)

Wealth is given less importance than the praise of ethically good men in society. Thiruvalluvar's approach to personal economics is derived from shaping one's life according to the ideal life as defined by Ethical principles by ‘good’ men. More than accumulation,

the sharing of wealth was given importance as only that will make the individual design his life according to the ethics. This economic model is concerned more with the aesthetics of an individual's life on ethical considerations than with purely economic reasoning.

As mentioned in Puranaanooru (182), a text written in classical Tamil Nadu, hospitality and charity were considered the supreme qualities which any individual can have. It was considered the ideal to which all humans should aim for. Thiruvalluvar also advocates the same and encourages everyone to live so that our lives reflect the ideal life.

#### Expenditure

Income and expenditure which are calculated in a budget is dealt with in a different manner by Thiruvalluvar.

“Incomings may be scant; but yet, no failure there,  
If in expenditure you rightly learn to spare.” (478)

Expenditure exceeding credit, that is to say, living on credit is not advocated by Thiruvalluvar.

“Who prosperous lives and of enjoyment knows no bound,  
His seeming wealth, departing, nowhere shall be found.” (479)

This advice is not given only to individuals but also to rulers of countries. The head of state and the head of the family should be aware of the income before they start spending. They shouldn't assume anything and borrow from their potential future earnings and spend it in the present. Spending on things that are not necessary for the ideal life should not be given importance and if they are given importance, they will only result in the downfall of the kingdom or the family as the case may be.

#### *Economic Inequality*

Economic inequality was present in Thiruvalluvar's time, too. The difference between the ruling class and the ruled (the working classes) is mentioned: he mentions slave (608), possessor of wealth and non-possessor of wealth (395). Only when economic inequality exists does it make sense that Charity is given prominence in the ideal life as defined by Thiruvalluvar. The hardships of poverty are described in great detail in Thirukkural in these three chapters: Poverty (105), Seeking Alms – A Satire (106) and The fear of seeking alms (107). He says that nothing gives as much pain as poverty, it will burn more than fire. The solution out of poverty, according to Thiruvalluvar, is hard work. Only through hard work will an individual prosper, making the families rich and kingdoms grow as can be seen in these chapters: Possessing zeal (60), Not Being Lazy (61), Perseverance (62), Means of wealth generation (76). It can be interpreted that there were opportunities for individuals to work hard and that the author advises people to make use of all available resources.

"The connection between aesthetics and ethics depends upon how aesthetics is figured. It depends equally upon the model of ethics employed" (Bennett). Ethical consideration of Thiruvalluvar is inclined towards socialism and he states that life saving medicines as well as life sustaining food and resources should be made available for all in the chapter titled 'Awareness of, and alignment, to the ways of the world'. Bharathi's socialistic principles in which he states that everyone should have free and complete access to land and water is derived in part from Thirukkural (95).

The wealth of men who love the 'fitting way,' the truly wise,  
Is as when water fills the lake that village needs supplies. (215)

A tree that fruits in th' hamlet's central mart,  
Is wealth that falls to men of liberal heart. (216)

Unfailing tree that healing balm distils from every part,  
Is ample wealth that falls to him of large and noble heart. (217)  
Thiruvalluvar observes that the ideal generosity should be like a tree that gives because it is its function to do so. Similarly, the function of good men should be to help other people.

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of giving back to society i.e., the wealth that is more than necessary to satisfy one's basic needs should be given back to help the underprivileged in the society, is also mentioned in Thirukkural (51).

Let those that need partake your meal; guard every-thing that lives;  
This the chief and sum of lore that hoarded wisdom gives. (322)

The worthy say, when wealth rewards their toil-spent hours,  
For uses of beneficence alone 'tis ours. (212)

From these lines, it is evident that Thiruvalluvar approaches economics as a means to achieve the perfect or the ideal life, that is to say, perseverance and accumulation of wealth is needed to shape our lives according to the standards dictated by ethics. Like the tree, it becomes the function of a wealthy man to benevolently give back to society. This is the prevalent view in Classical Tamil Nadu as reflected in Puranaanooru (212).

#### *Practical Aspects of Thiruvalluvar's Economic Philosophy*

Ethics dictates that charitable acts are considered good. Charitable acts that directly satiate the thirst and hunger of those in poverty is the crowning charitable act as hunger is insufferable. There is even an old proverb in Tamil that states this: "When hunger comes, everything else disappears."

When people are experiencing unbearable pangs of hunger, they can easily find a cure for their hunger through unethical means. It is highly probable that a person who finds an easy cure out of poverty will continue in his unethical actions to find sustenance. To prevent people from being led on an unethical path, they should be given sustenance till they find a work suitable for them which they can do in an ethical manner and where they can progress through perseverance. Therefore, it becomes the duty of a wealthy man to ensure that nobody strays into an unethical path because of hunger or want. According to Thiruvalluvar, charitable acts that remove hunger and want become the wealth of the rich person. His wealth is measured in his good works.

Let man relieve the wasting hunger men endure;  
For treasure gained thus finds he treasure-house secure. (226)

Whose soul delights with hungry men to share his meal,  
The hand of hunger's sickness sore shall never feel. (227)

When a society is built around these economic principles, the need for accumulation is not as great as it is in a society in which there are many people experiencing great want. Since the fear of loss or being in want is a factor that makes people accumulate, it is to follow from this

principle that when want is removed, the need for accumulation is erased completely in society and no one will ever experience it.

Their ample wealth is misery to men of churlish heart,  
Who nought themselves enjoy, and nought to worthy men impart. (1006)

When he whom no man loves exults in great prosperity,  
'Tis as when fruits in midmost of the town some poisonous tree. (1008)

From off their moistened hands no clinging grain they shake,  
Unless to those with clenched fist their jaws who break. (1077)

Amid accumulated millions they are poor,  
Who nothing give and nought enjoy of all they store. (1005)

Accumulated wealth, according to Thiruvalluvar can be defined as the wealth that is excess to the spending capacity of a person, that is to say, this wealth is not used by the hoarder as well as by others. A person who indulges in accumulating is keeping wealth away from those who need it for their basic wants. In short, the wealth accumulated by a miser is actively harming those in need of it. Thus, the miser directly harms people. Thiruvalluvar compares such a person to a poisonous tree. By not sticking to ethical principles, the life of the miser does not get the approval of the invisible observers i.e., it fails on aesthetic consideration and so his economic principle should be changed to accommodate aesthetic consideration. Kompatsiaris states that in economic approaches "value is often reduced to 'price,' their focus on how an item becomes commodified in moments of exchange often underplays the socio-cultural implications of acts of valuation." In this context, the value or "price" is based entirely on socio-cultural implication of how the act of valuation takes place. The more aesthetic one's life is, the more it increases in value.

### *The role of Government*

A country is prosperous when the predominant sector (agricultural sector) of the country is booming. Since almost all the people were dependent on the agricultural sector, a prosperous sector leads to a prosperous economy with the flourishing of other trades. Only money that is willingly given by people should be collected as Tax by the Government.

Make money! Foeman's insolence o'ergrown  
To lop away no keener steel is known. (759)

The primary duty of the ruler is to safeguard the country from attack by enemy states. A strong army has to be paid wages collected from taxes. Therefore, only when the agricultural sector is flourishing will the kingdom be really secure.

## **2. CONCLUSION**

The economy of a person should revolve only around his expenditure and not solely on accumulation and that "value" is decided on aesthetic considerations. Wealth should be grown through hard work and perseverance and aesthetic principles based on ethics should always be the guiding principles throughout. According to Thiruvalluvar, benevolently helping the underprivileged with the excess wealth at one's disposal is the ideal aesthetic life.

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