

Thiruvalluvar's Vision: Polity and Economy in *Thirukkural*

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Among the ancient ethical writings of the world that have come down to us is *Thirukkural*. It is written in accessible Tamil in the form of couplets, and its praise has been sung for generations. In recent years, it has been translated into several Indian and European languages (see Pope, Drew, Lazarus, and Ellis 1958 for a collection of English renditions of the work). Among the Tamil-speaking people, *Thirukkural* is revered as the Tamil *veda* (sacred book) for its ethical teachings. Yet this work and its contents are hardly known to historians of economic thought. In contrast, Kautilya's *Artha Shastra*—a Sanskrit text—is better known. For example, Joseph J. Spengler (1971) has a chapter on *Artha Shastra* and a chapter on Manu's *Dharmashastra* in his scholarly study of Indian economic thought. In that work, Spengler (chap. 3, n. 79; chap. 4, n. 47) has footnotes referring to Tamil kings and taxes, but there is no reference to *Thirukkural*. It is therefore the purpose of this article to bring to the attention of an English-speaking audience the ancient work on politics and economics outside of Sanskrit literature.

The couplets take for granted the standard Indian fourfold goals of life: *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*, rendered in Tamil as *aram*, *porul*, *inbam*, and *vedu*. In English these can be translated as righteous living, material living, sensuality, and release from the cycle of births and

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History of Political Economy 37:1 © 2005 by Duke University Press.

deaths. *Thirukkural*, however, deals with only the first three goals. It is presumed that if one leads life according to ethical principles set out in the text, the fourth goal will automatically be achieved.

Traditionally, these couplets are attributed to a single author whose name is given as Thiruvalluvar. The term *valluvar* refers to the weaver caste. To this is added the Tamil honorific title *thiru*, to get the name of the author. We do not know the identity of the individual, although there are several myths surrounding him. As to the date of the work, several authors suggest different periods based on parallel ideas found in writings of different eras.¹ It is dated anywhere from the second century BC to the eighth century AD. Neither authorship nor the date, then, can be considered certain. Further, we do not know whether there were more couplets than have come down to us. There is also the possibility that some couplets may have been later additions. Nevertheless, for our purposes, we treat it as a single-authored work.

Of the three goals in life, topics related to politics, economics, and administration are dealt with in the *porul* (material things) *paal* (division).² These topics must have been considered to be all interrelated.

Polity

Thiruvalluvar's polity (statecraft) is not based on democracy, but on royalty. The king, however, is bound to codes of justice. Thiruvalluvar discusses how an ideal state headed by a just king will look, without any trace of realpolitik or cynicism. Thiruvalluvar's state is, then, an exercise in applied ethics.

The Role of the King and His Desirable Attributes

In keeping with the prevailing system of government during this time, Thiruvalluvar assumed an executive-style state headed by a king. The king is assigned the role of producing, acquiring, conserving, and dispensing wealth. In carrying out these tasks, the king is said to need an army, subjects, food, ministers, allies, and forts.

Thiruvalluvar lists a number of desirable attributes of the king. Among those are courage, energy, liberality, wisdom, diligence, learning, boldness, valor, grace, and virtue. The king is expected to be easily accessible

1. For more details, see the introductory discussion in Sundaram 1990.

2. All the discussions of *Thirukkural* in this article are based on the translations in Sundaram 1990.

and soft-spoken. Thiruvalluvar also lists attributes that detract from the king's virtues. Among them are bias, niggardliness, and keeping attachments secret.

Thiruvalluvar describes a state distinguished by law and order with equal justice for all. He emphasizes that the king should provide just rule. He enjoins the king to conduct proper inquiry and be impartial in meting out justice and punishment. He observes that it is not the sword but the scepter that triumphs in the end. Meting out punishment is a duty, and Thiruvalluvar does not exclude the death penalty for the wicked. It is somewhat ironic that he should advocate the death penalty, since the overall tenor of his work is that of nonviolence.

In the executive form of government that Thiruvalluvar describes, there is always the possibility of tyranny, which he strongly condemns for its self-destructive effects. He calls a sinful and oppressive king worse than a murderer. Cruelty of the king and the tears of the oppressed, he predicts, will lead to depletion of the wealth of the state. A king who indulges in terrorism, he predicts, will perish. He says that injustice on the part of the king even causes natural phenomena such as rainfall to cease and the cows to yield less milk. Thus, injustice will lead to disasters. Eventually the tyrant, Thiruvalluvar categorically states, will lose everything.

In summary, Thiruvalluvar's view of the king and the state is of an orderly system governed by laws enforced impartially. He emphasizes justice as a cardinal principle of state administration. The king is virtually assigned the role of a social planner.

Administrators of the Kingdom and Their Desirable Attributes

The king requires advisors, soldiers, and other administrators to run the state in an efficient manner. Thiruvalluvar has much advice to offer on the roles and the qualities of these functionaries. He describes how to select them and how to manage them. Thiruvalluvar describes the ministers as king's eyes, and counsels care in selecting them. He advises recruiting known personalities and putting them through a trial period. After that, the king should assign tasks without mistrust. In modern parlance, he is saying, once the king trusts an appointee, the king should not look over his shoulders. He is emphatic that these should not just be "yes men," but trenchant critics, unafraid to express their views. He expects

the ministers to be learned, intelligent, capable of delivering timely advice, practical in their approach, and not harborers of treachery.

The state has its diplomatic missions and a corps of envoys. Thiruvalluvar asks the king to look for the following qualities in an envoy: amiability, breeding, loyalty, intelligence, sociability, courage, persuasive scholarship, and sagacity. He expects the diplomat to use pleasant and unoffending language. The diplomat, even when threatened with death, should maintain that his king is good.

In addition to diplomats, the state also needs an espionage capability. Thiruvalluvar is clear on its role: no spies, no success. Spies are the king's eyes and are necessary in order to know what is happening. Their job is to watch king's employees, kinsmen, and enemies. Thus, Thiruvalluvar expects spies to be involved in both domestic and foreign operations. Spies should be beyond suspicion, intrepid, and close. They should go everywhere, even in the garb of holy men, whose capability in gaining access is better than that of ordinary people. Thiruvalluvar, keeping in mind the need for reliability, advises obtaining confirmation of the spy's information through another source. In order for this to work, it is important spies should not know each other. In the interest of protecting their identity, Thiruvalluvar advises the king never to honor a spy in public.

No king can be without his courtiers. Thiruvalluvar has some choice advice to offer the courtiers on how to conduct themselves. They are supposed to be neither too far from nor too close to the king. He warns them not to exchange knowing smiles in front of the king, nor to pursue his secrets. They should be experts in gauging the mood of the court and should speak useful words. Of course, they are to treat the king splendidly.

On War and Strategy

In order to conduct war, the king must have good defensive as well as offensive capabilities. The best form of defense at that time was a fort. A good fort, says Thiruvalluvar, will have blue waters, open space, hills, and thick forests. The fort must be made of high, thick, and impenetrable walls. It should be hard to seize and well supplied with nourishment, in case of a siege.

It should have a garrison with mighty men of action. A winning army will overcome enemies' tactics and advance. In such a winning army there is no place for desertion, disaffection, and niggardliness. Thiruvalluvar

recognizes the hierarchical nature of the military organization and states that without leadership, the army will melt away.

The king's army, if it consists of fearless and well-mannered soldiers, is said to be his wealth. Thiruvalluvar describes a number of desirable attributes for the soldiers to possess. They are to be beyond corruption. Nobody should be able to buy them off. They should stand together and defeat death itself. They should possess courage, honor, and steadfastness. The main virtue of a soldier is valor, and Thiruvalluvar praises this quality. He observes that valor in battle is the mark of manliness. A valorous soldier is said to be ready to give up life for posthumous fame.

Thiruvalluvar makes many observations on strategy in war. He advocates choosing the right place to fight as the first step in conquering one's foe. Yet, he is careful to note that men on their own turf are hard to tackle. Next in importance for achieving victory, after choosing the right place, is the choice of timing. He advises the king that when it is the right time, the king should seize the chance to attack.

Thiruvalluvar recognizes that zeal is no substitute for knowledge. So, he advocates careful weighing of the strength of one's own forces, the contemplated deed, and the positions of enemies and allies before launching any action. In keeping with this advice, he advocates avoiding war with the strong and choosing the weak as opponents in war. Who are these easy targets? Thiruvalluvar provides a long list of weak qualities to look for in other kings. Cowardly, ignorant, and unsociable kings are said to be easy targets. So are those who are erring in their ways, remiss, and shameless. Kings with blind fury and excessive lust are also said to be easily overcome.

Strategy is important in picking and choosing enemies. In launching wars, Thiruvalluvar advocates planning, strengthening, guarding one's own positions, and firm action. He warns that foes despised but not defeated will attack and defeat the king. At the same time, one must guard against being a lone fighter surrounded by many enemies. Specifically, if faced with two enemies, Thiruvalluvar advocates making one a friend. He also sagely advocates keeping all options open when facing adversity.

Despite these observations, one cannot conclude that Thiruvalluvar is a warmonger. He is far from taking that position. He is eloquent in stating that war is such an evil that it should not be desired, even in jest. One can realize that Thiruvalluvar's heart is really in favor of peace when the poet says that the world is secure under a king who can make friends

out of foes. Given this worldview, it is clear that Thiruvalluvar takes a pragmatic viewpoint, without any trace of cynicism.

Economy

Thiruvalluvar's commentary dealing with the economy does not constitute a comprehensive treaty on economics. It rather focuses on important topics of poverty and prosperity: he condemns poverty and explores ways to promote prosperity. He articulates a vision of cooperative endeavor for the common benefit of society.

Poverty Condemned

Thiruvalluvar condemns poverty in no uncertain terms, although he does not explain how poverty is generated. Poverty, he says, is no joy. It does not provide the means to salvation. Poverty means misery. A poor man's words carry no weight. In a telling couplet, Thiruvalluvar says that even a mother would look askance at a poor person.

On the subject of begging, Thiruvalluvar takes a somewhat contradictory position from that implied from his position on poverty. In a couplet which seems to advocate begging, he says that it is a pleasure if one can get things without pain. Since giving alms is considered a meritorious and charitable act in Indian culture, he says that without charity, this world is a mere stage for puppets, that is, beings without hearts. While noting the need for charity, Thiruvalluvar is caustic in describing the demerits of begging. He states that begging is not a cure for poverty. It is better to earn one's own keep by working for it. In a clinching argument, he condemns begging as disgraceful.

These opposing points of view are found in different passages of *Thirukkural*.

The Importance of Agriculture

Among all activities, Thiruvalluvar gives central place to agriculture. He glorifies the farmer as the one who supports the world. He describes farming as the best occupation. Plowmen, he says, never beg and never refuse beggars. In terms of advice to farmers, he enjoins them to apply manure more than to plow, to weed and guard the crop more than to water it. It appears that Thiruvalluvar saw agriculture as the most important

economic activity, an idea that is echoed in the works of the physiocrats of a later era.

Factors Contributing to Economic Prosperity

Besides agriculture, what factors contribute to economic prosperity? On this issue, Thiruvalluvar does not give a lot of specific suggestions. However, he seems to put emphasis on a number of human relations skills as resources for promoting economic prosperity. In modern parlance, his production function recognizes human skills as factors of production.

One such skill is the ability to learn, to acquire knowledge. Thiruvalluvar advocates lifelong learning. Today we call this the accumulation of human capital. He condemns ignorance. He says that the ignorant are like saline soil: it is there, but totally useless. In a graphic metaphor, he describes the learned as having two eyes in their faces and others only two sores. Identifying learning as wealth, he notes that it never declines. Of course, it is not enough just to learn, but one should live accordingly.

Because one means of learning is through the ear, Thiruvalluvar describes the ear as the wealth of wealths. He notes that men are fed through the ear and asks them to keep their ears open for learning. The ultimate goal of learning is the acquisition of wisdom, which Thiruvalluvar calls an inner fortress. The wise also have foresight. In a nutshell, they have it all. How does one acquire wisdom? Thiruvalluvar opines that it comes from the company one keeps. A good mind, he says, is strengthened by good company.

In order for an economy to produce, it needs human labor as well. Thiruvalluvar offers advice in recruiting and retaining employees. He asks the employers to employ those who will expand income, echoing the theory of marginal productivity of a later era. He asks employers to look for employees with knowledge, wisdom, and loyalty. Once the worker is found to be diligent, he urges the employer not to distrust him. The advice given to kings, as we saw earlier, is good for the commoners as well.

In addition to knowledge and effort, Thiruvalluvar points to energy as a key factor in the pursuit of wealth. If a person has high vigor, he says, wealth will find its way and reach that person. Another asset is a resolute mind—the strong-willed are undaunted by failure. In all cases, he urges one to aim high. He also advocates careful cost-and-benefit calculations in any undertaking.

Thiruvalluvar contrasts the consequences of energy with the consequences of sloth to underscore his point. Sloth, he says, will destroy virtue, multiply sin, and destroy one's house. Among the destructive forces are procrastination and forgetfulness as well as sloth.

He emphasizes manliness as a factor in striving toward excellence in every field. He assures his readers that those who strive undaunted can even defeat fate. This indeed is a strong statement in the context of Indian cultural beliefs. Despite the still-strong belief in fate, people quote this statement frequently even today to inspire those who face adversity. Those who do not strive will end up in a deprived state.

Thiruvalluvar seems to recognize that good health is part of the equation in economic activity. He gives some good folksy advice in health maintenance. He advocates eating in moderation and only after the meal already taken is fully digested. He recommends that doctors take account of the patient, illness, and time. In modern parlance, this would be described as holistic care. Thiruvalluvar advocates staying away from wine. He is also against gambling. Gambling, he notes, leads to the loss of ancestral property, sorrow, disgrace, and loss of reputation.

Life is not always going to go smoothly. Thiruvalluvar advises one to keep a balanced view. He says not to get too ebullient in joy or too far down in sorrow. This advice echoes Buddhism's "middle way." In case of misfortune, he proposes laughing at it. Nothing else can triumph over it more effectively.

Against Miserliness

Thiruvalluvar saw that hoarded wealth is useless wealth, foreshadowing the underconsumption theorists of modern times. Riches are said to be a curse if neither enjoyed nor given to the worthy. A rich person is said to be poor if this person neither spends nor gives away his wealth. Miserliness is condemned in clear terms. Using a powerful analogy, Thiruvalluvar says that a miser making vast wealth is of no more use than a corpse.

Favoring Community Service

Economic activity, for Thiruvalluvar, is not just a pursuit of private interests. He recognizes the need for a sense of social responsibility. Society, he says, will crash without good men. Persisting in the advance of

community is described as glorious. Those who are involved in social service will find that the whole world flocks around them.

The picture he draws of the economy is thus an idyllic one. Farmers are at the center. People are moderate and sober. They possess good human relations skills. They are energetic and hardworking. Wealth is not just accumulated, but spent and spread around. Aside from pursuing private interests, people are also community-minded and charitable. No big cities figure in his economy.

There is virtually nothing said about the role of the state in the economy. Thus it would appear that Thiruvalluvar takes the position of minimal state intervention in economic affairs. He seems to advocate cooperation rather than competition in the pursuit of economic interests. It is appropriate, therefore, to describe his economy as a semisocialist cooperative commonwealth.

Conclusion

There are several notable features about the political and economic ideas expounded by Thiruvalluvar. Unlike Kautilya's *Artha Shastra*, *Thirukkural* is not an elaborate book on statecraft.³ The behaviors it advocates are derived from the general ethical principles that color the work. Thiruvalluvar was not trying to help any specific king to come to power, as is believed Kautilya was trying to do. His writings are addressed as general guidance to anyone running the state. He does not go into elaborate details or specifics. Given the brevity of language and form, he presents the essential points in terse language.

What kind of influence did *Thirukkural* have on Indian economic and political thought? It is hard to know whether it had any influence at all. Since it was written in Tamil, its currency was probably limited to the southern part of the subcontinent. As scholars note, it does contain influences from *Artha Shastra* that, being written in Sanskrit, had a much wider currency. Thiruvalluvar, however, differs from Kautilya on several key points. We note a few of them here. Kautilya elaborated on power. Thiruvalluvar emphasized justice. Also, Thiruvalluvar seems to assign very little role for the state in the economy. Kautilya's state, on the other hand, was far-reaching in its impact on the economy.⁴ Activities such as gambling, prostitution, and alcohol production were state

3. For a modern translation of *Artha Shastra*, see Rangarajan 1987.

4. A brief discussion of *Artha Shastra* can also be found in Dasgupta 1993, chap. 3.

monopolies in the Kautilyan state, but Thiruvalluvar spoke against such activities. *Artha Shastra* was written in the spirit of worldliness and realism. *Thirukkural*, on the other hand, remains throughout a treatise in ethical living. Thus, its influence can be most clearly seen in the daily application of its tenets by ordinary people.

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