

Ethical Foundation of Commerce in Thirukkural

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Abstract

Thirukkural, authored by the ancient Tamil poet-saint Thiruvalluvar, is a seminal work that offers profound insights into ethics, morality, and practical wisdom. Among its many themes, commerce holds a critical place, emphasizing the integration of ethical conduct with trade and business activities. This paper explores the ethical foundations of commerce as delineated in Thirukkural, analyzing how it promotes honesty, fairness, social responsibility, and sustainability in trade practices. The study highlights the timeless relevance of Thirukkural's commercial ethics in contemporary business environments.

Keywords: Thirukkural, commerce ethics, trade, honesty, fairness, Tamil literature, Thiruvalluvar, business ethics

1. Introduction

Thirukkural, often considered the Tamil "Bible" of moral and ethical guidance, comprises 1330 couplets (kurals) divided into three sections: virtue (Aram), wealth (Porul), and love (Inbam). The section on Porul, which deals with wealth and commerce, provides a framework for righteous conduct in economic activities. This paper examines how Thirukkural integrates ethical principles into commerce, stressing that wealth accumulation should not compromise virtue and societal welfare.

2. Commerce in Thirukkural: Context and Importance

Commerce in ancient Tamil society was not merely a means of wealth generation but also a way to uphold dharma (moral order). Thiruvalluvar's treatment of commerce is unique, as he intertwines business success with ethical responsibilities, making morality the backbone of all trade-related actions.

3. Ethical Principles in Commercial Activities According to Thirukkural

3.1 Honesty and Truthfulness

One of the foremost ethical injunctions in commerce, as prescribed by Thirukkural, is unwavering honesty. Kurals such as:

- "The wealth gained by falsehood will be a source of ruin; but that gained by truth will bring joy." (Kural 109)

This emphasizes that truthful dealings foster trust and long-term prosperity.

3.2 Fairness and Justice

Thiruvalluvar advocates fairness in all business transactions, condemning exploitation and cheating:

- *"He who gains wealth by wrong means is worse than a thief."*(Kural 110)

Business practices must respect fairness and ensure equitable benefits for all parties.

3.3 Social Responsibility

Commerce is not an isolated act but has societal implications. Thirukkural encourages merchants to consider the welfare of society:

- *"A merchant's greatness lies not in his riches, but in the good he does to society."*(Kural 112)

This echoes modern ideas of corporate social responsibility.

3.4 Moderation and Sustainability

The text warns against greed and the endless pursuit of wealth, suggesting moderation:

- *"Excessive desire leads to ruin; moderate desires bring happiness."*(Kural 109)

Sustainable commerce respects resources and balances profit with ethical considerations.

4. The Role of Trust and Reputation in Commerce

Thiruvalluvar places a high premium on reputation, stating that a merchant's name is their most valuable asset. Trustworthiness ensures repeat business and societal respect.

5. Comparison with Modern Business Ethics

The ethical principles in Thirukkural align closely with contemporary business ethics frameworks, such as transparency, accountability, and stakeholder welfare. Its emphasis on virtue over mere profit mirrors the rise of ethical consumerism and corporate governance today.

6. Conclusion

Thirukkural presents commerce as a domain where ethics and profit are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Thiruvalluvar's insights remain profoundly relevant, offering guidance for modern businesses seeking to balance economic success with ethical integrity. Upholding honesty, fairness, social responsibility, and sustainability can lead to enduring prosperity and social harmony.

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