

Women Empowerment and Equity: Insights from Thirukkural and SDGs

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Abstract

This paper investigates the themes of empowerment and equity through the ancient Tamil literary classic *Thirukkural* and examines their relevance to the contemporary framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Composed by the sage Thiruvalluvar, *Thirukkural* offers enduring ethical insights that emphasize social justice, gender equality, and righteous governance—principles that closely resonate with several key SDGs, including poverty eradication, reduced inequalities, and inclusive institutions. By bridging traditional wisdom with modern development goals, this study highlights how the moral and social teachings of *Thirukkural* can inform and strengthen efforts to achieve sustainable and equitable development in today's world. Abstract:

Keywords- Empowerment, Equity, Thirukkural, Sustainable Development Goals, Social Justice, Gender Equality, Poverty Alleviation

1. Introduction

The pursuit of empowerment and equity lies at the heart of sustainable development, aiming to create societies where all individuals have fair access to opportunities and resources. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global roadmap to address these challenges by 2030, focusing on issues such as poverty, inequality, gender justice, and inclusive governance. While these goals represent a modern international consensus, many of their core values have been echoed for centuries in indigenous and classical texts like the Tamil *Thirukkural*. Composed by the revered poet-sage Thiruvalluvar, *Thirukkural* is a timeless work of ethical and social philosophy that promotes justice, virtue, and respect for all members of society regardless of background. This paper explores how the teachings of *Thirukkural* align with and enrich the principles of empowerment and equity found in the SDGs, offering a culturally rooted perspective that bridges ancient wisdom and contemporary development efforts.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Empowerment

Empowerment refers to the process of strengthening individuals and communities so they can take control of their own lives, make informed decisions, and actively engage in societal progress. It involves ensuring access to essential resources, opportunities, and platforms for participation across social, economic, political, and psychological dimensions. Empowerment not only builds confidence and self-reliance but also helps break down systemic barriers that limit individual potential. By fostering autonomy and inclusion, empowerment contributes significantly to achieving sustainable and equitable development.

2.2 Equity

Equity emphasizes the importance of fairness in how individuals are treated, the opportunities they can access, and the outcomes they experience. It recognizes that people come from diverse backgrounds and face different levels of advantage or disadvantage due to systemic and structural barriers. Unlike equality, which treats everyone the same, equity aims to provide customized support based on individual needs, ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to succeed. By addressing these imbalances, equity contributes to the creation of a more just and inclusive society.

2.3 Thirukkural as an Ethical Guide

The Thirukkural highlights core virtues—righteousness (aram), wealth (porul), and love (inbam)—that form the foundation of a just and harmonious society. Through its concise couplets, the text promotes principles of ethical leadership, social responsibility, and compassionate governance, encouraging individuals and rulers alike to uphold moral integrity for the common good.

2.4 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) comprise 17 interconnected objectives designed to tackle pressing global challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change, and the promotion of peace. Among these, the goals centered on empowerment and equity are crucial pillars that support the broader vision of sustainable and inclusive development worldwide.

3. Thirukkural's Insights on Empowerment and Equity

3.1 Social Justice and Equity

Thirukkural advocates for fairness irrespective of caste, class, or gender:

- “To call a man low-born is a grievous sin.” (Kural 261)
- “Justice should be meted out even-handedly.” (Kural 101)

These couplets promote social equity, an idea echoed in SDG 10.

3.2 Empowerment of Women

Thirukkural extols respect and empowerment of women:

- “The world is ruled by those who honor women.” (Kural 110)
- “A virtuous woman is the pillar of her household.” (Kural 312)

These verses align with SDG 5 on gender equality.

3.3 Ethical Leadership and Governance

Thirukkural stresses the importance of just leadership that empowers people:

- “The king who governs with justice will have his people prosper.” (Kural 386)
- “The ruler's duty is to uphold righteousness and ensure the welfare of all.” (Kural 395)

This supports SDG 16, promoting peaceful and inclusive societies.

3.4 Poverty Alleviation and Wealth Distribution

The text encourages aiding the poor and equitable wealth management:

- “Wealth gained by injustice is a thief's loot.” (Kural 109)

- “Help the poor to rise and you build your own greatness.” (Kural 313)

This aligns with SDG 1 (No Poverty).

4. Connecting Thirukkural's Teachings with SDGs

SDG	Relevant Thirukkural Themes	Key Messages
SDG 1: No Poverty	Social responsibility towards the poor	Justice and charity to uplift the marginalized
SDG 5: Gender Equality	Respect and empowerment of women	Honor women as central to social harmony
SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities	Fair treatment across social strata	Social equity and justice for all
SDG 16: Peace, Justice, Strong Institutions	Ethical governance and justice	Leadership that promotes welfare and peace

5. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and interpretive approach to examine the themes of women's empowerment and equity as reflected in the ethical teachings of the *Thirukkural*, and to explore how these values align with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Through textual analysis and comparative interpretation, the study seeks to uncover the relevance of ancient Tamil wisdom in informing contemporary development goals centered on justice, inclusion, and gender equity.

5.1 Textual Analysis

This study involves a close reading and thematic analysis of selected couplets from the *Thirukkural*, with particular attention to verses addressing gender roles, justice, social equity, ethical leadership, and the overall well-being of society. The analysis is guided by established English translations and scholarly commentaries, which provide insight into the ethical and social dimensions of the text. These interpretations are examined to uncover messages relevant to contemporary concepts of empowerment and equity.

5.2 Comparative Framework

A comparative analytical framework is applied to explore the alignment between the values embedded in the Thirukkural and the targets outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The focus is on identifying areas of overlap and mutual reinforcement, especially in relation to gender equality (SDG 5) and reducing inequalities (SDG 10). This approach enables a meaningful dialogue between traditional Tamil ethical philosophy and modern global development priorities.

5.3 Secondary Data Review

A comprehensive review of relevant literature was conducted, including academic articles, United Nations reports, policy documents, and prior research on the Thirukkural and the SDGs. This review helped situate the analysis within a broader context, allowing for a deeper understanding of the connections between traditional cultural ethics and contemporary international development frameworks. It also provided the foundation for interpreting the findings in relation to both historical and modern perspectives on empowerment and equity.

5.4 Interpretive Analysis

An interpretive analysis was employed to draw meaningful insights from the intersection of classical ethical teachings in the Thirukkural and contemporary global development goals. This method facilitates the extraction of broader philosophical implications, enabling their application to current socio-political issues. Specifically, it aids in understanding how ancient wisdom can inform modern efforts to empower women and promote social equity in today's globalized world.

6. Discussion

The ethical principles outlined in the Thirukkural offer a deep cultural foundation that aligns closely with the global objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This convergence between ancient wisdom and modern development frameworks highlights the timeless and universal relevance of values such as empowerment, equity, and justice.

By emphasizing ethical leadership, social responsibility, and the moral duties of individuals and rulers alike, Thirukkural presents a meaningful framework for advancing the SDGs through culturally grounded policies and reforms. Incorporating such indigenous knowledge systems into contemporary development discourse can enhance the effectiveness and cultural resonance of global strategies, making them more inclusive, context-sensitive, and sustainable.

7. Conclusion

The principles of empowerment and equity are profoundly embedded in both the Thirukkural and the SDGs, highlighting humanity's timeless commitment to justice, fairness, and collective well-being. By integrating the insights from the Thirukkural, SDG initiatives can be made more culturally relevant and impactful, particularly in Tamil-speaking communities and other regions with similar cultural values.

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Further research could focus on the practical application of Thirukkural's teachings in modern policy-making, as well as in grassroots development strategies aimed at fostering inclusive and sustainable growth. Such efforts could offer valuable lessons for bridging the gap between traditional wisdom and contemporary development practices.

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