Revisiting Thiruvalluvar's Thirukkural through the Lens of the Sustainable Development Goals

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ABSTRACT

Existing research reveals a notable gap at the intersection of sustainable development studies and classical ethical thinking. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a comprehensive global framework for addressing contemporary social, economic, and environmental challenges. This study addresses this gap by reviewing Thirukkural, a classical Tamil ethical text by Thiruvalluvar, and using the SDGs as an interpretive analytical lens. Using thematic analysis, the study conceptually aligns each SDG with the ethical principles articulated in Thirukkural, including justice, moderation, compassion, ethical governance, and collective responsibility. The analysis deliberately avoids anachronism and recognises that Thirukkural does not engage with modern institutional mechanisms or global governance structures. Instead, it offers an ethical framework that reinforces contemporary understandings of sustainability. The study argues that sustainable development cannot be achieved through policy design alone but requires moral reorientation rooted in ethical accountability and social solidarity.

In the face of persistent poverty, widening social inequalities, environmental degradation, and climate change, global development discourse has increasingly stressed the need for a more balanced and sustainable approach to progress (UNDP, 2015; Sachs, 2015). Conventional models of economic growth, which largely prioritised output expansion and industrialisation, have shown clear limitations in addressing issues of social justice and ecological sustainability (Sen, 1999; Stiglitz, 2012). These limitations have encouraged the international community to seek an integrated development framework that can simultaneously address economic, social, and environmental objectives (United Nations, 2015).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were designed to integrate economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection into a single global framework. They built upon the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000, which contributed to poverty reduction and improved human development but were limited in scope and focus on inequality and environmental issues. These shortcomings led to discussions about a new development agenda, with the 2012 Rio+20 Conference proposing a global set of SDGs in the document "The Future We Want". Between 2013 and 2015, these goals were refined through extensive consultations with governments and other stakeholders, making them more inclusive and widely accepted.

The SDGs were formally adopted on September 25, 2015, by all 193 UN Member States, under the UN General Assembly resolution entitled "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". This plan includes 17 goals and 169 targets, covering economic growth, social justice, environmental protection, peace, and corporate governance. Unlike previous frameworks, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopt a global, integrated approach, acknowledging the interconnectedness of development challenges and the shared responsibility of all nations.

Scholars argue that the SDGs are largely shaped by technocratic and policy-orientated approaches, often limiting in-depth consideration of ethical considerations and cultural contexts (Sachs, 2015; Sen, 1999). Consequently, many researchers emphasise the need to draw upon local ethical traditions and knowledge systems to strengthen the ethical foundations of the sustainability discourse. These traditions offer clear guidance on how humanity

should interact with nature, society, and each other through values such as moderation, responsibility, and justice. Ancient philosophical texts, particularly from non-Western cultures, provide rich insights into ethical behaviour, governance, and social harmony, which align closely with the SDGs. However, despite their importance, these ethical foundations remain under-represented in contemporary development research and policy frameworks. Thiruvaluvar's Thirukkurall occupies a prominent place in the Tamil ethical and intellectual tradition. Written in short verses, this text addresses virtue (aram), wealth (porul), and love (inbam) and offers guidance on personal conduct, social relationships, governance, and economic life. Scholars widely recognise Thirukkural as a secular and universal ethical work that transcends religious boundaries and addresses issues of justice, morality, and social order ((Pope, 1886; Zvelebil, 1974). Its discussions of poverty, almsgiving, good governance, work, and self-control demonstrate its relevance to contemporary social and ethical concerns.

This paper examines Thiruvaluvar's ethical ideas using the Sustainable Development Goals as an analytical framework. It does not claim that Thirukkural directly predicts or aligns with modern development agendas. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are used as a tool to identify areas where traditional ethical ideas intersect with contemporary sustainability concerns. This approach avoids historical misunderstandings while simultaneously enabling a constructive dialogue between classical philosophy and modern development studies (Laine, 2003).

By focusing on selected SDGs related to poverty reduction, inequality, ethical governance, decent work, and responsible consumption, this study demonstrates how Thiruvalluvar's ideas support an ethical understanding of development. This perspective complements existing policy-focused approaches to sustainability. In doing so, this paper fills a gap in current research by introducing Thiruvalluvar's work into discussions of sustainable development ethics.

The paper is structured as follows: The following section reviews existing literature on sustainable development, ethics, and Thiruvalluvar's studies. This is followed by a section explaining the objectives and methodology of the study. The main sections provide an objective analysis of selected SDGs in light of Thiruvalluvar's ethical principles. The final section discusses the importance of using the Sustainable Development Goals as an analytical framework, the limitations of this use, and suggests directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature relevant to this study encompasses three main areas: studies on sustainable development and its goals, ethical and cultural approaches to development, and academic studies on the Thiruvalluvar and the Thirukkuaral. Reviewing these works helps situate the current study and identify the gap it seeks to address.

Sustainable Development and its Goals

The concept of sustainable development gained significant importance with the Brundtland Commission's definition, which emphasised meeting present needs without compromising the interests of future generations (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Subsequent development discourse has broadened this concept to include social justice, human well-being, and corporate responsibility. The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 marked a shift toward a more integrated framework encompassing the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development (United Nations, 2015).

Scholars such as Sachs (2015) view the Sustainable Development Goals as a comprehensive roadmap for global development, while others have highlighted their normative ambitions, which extend beyond mere political objectives. At the same time, critical studies point to shortcomings in the Sustainable Development Goals framework, including its reliance on measurable indicators, technocratic governance, and insufficient engagement with ethical and cultural foundations (Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Hickel, 2019). These criticisms suggest a need for deeper normative frameworks that support sustainable development beyond institutional mechanisms.

Ethics, Culture, and the Discourse of Development

A growing body of research emphasises that development cannot be understood solely through an economic or

institutional lens but must also incorporate ethical considerations (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). For example, Sen's capability-based approach highlights human freedom, dignity, and moral choice as essential elements of development outcomes. Similarly, development ethicists emphasise values such as justice, responsibility, and social well-being as fundamental components of sustainability (Goulet, 1995).

In this context, interest in local knowledge systems and non-Western philosophical traditions as sources of ethical insights has grown (Shiva, 2016). These studies argue that classical texts and cultural traditions can offer alternative perspectives on development rooted in moral self-restraint, social harmony, and long-term responsibility. However, while these approaches are theoretically validated, their systematic integration into academic analysis related to the Sustainable Development Goals remains limited.

Studies on Thiruvalluvar and Thirukkural

The Thirukkural is a foundational text of Tamil ethical and philosophical thought and has been extensively studied. Early translations and commentaries by scholars such as Pope (1886) introduced the text to a global audience, emphasising its universality and secular ethical vision. Later studies by Zvelebil (1974) explored the philosophical depth of the text, highlighting its treatment of virtue (aram), wealth (porul), and social life.

Subsequent studies have explored Thiruvalluvar's ideas on governance, justice, benevolence, and social order. Studies of property and political ethics in the Thirukkural emphasise good governance, accountability, and the welfare of the people (Subramanian, 1995; Velusamy, 2005). Other scholars have analysed the text's reflections on poverty, work, and ethical conduct, placing them within broader discussions of social ethics (Rajaram, 2010).

Despite this vast body of research, most studies of the Thirukkural remain confined to literary, philosophical, or cultural analyses. Engagement with contemporary global frameworks, such as sustainable development and its goals, is rare and often limited to popular or non-academic discussions, rather than systematic scholarly research.

The Research Gap

A review of the existing literature reveals a clear gap at the intersection of sustainable development studies and classical ethical thought. While the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been extensively analysed from political, economic, and institutional perspectives, their ethical foundation remains incomplete. At the same time, academic studies on Thiruvalluvar have not adequately addressed contemporary development frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach and interpretation called conceptual between Thirukkural ethical precepts and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The analysis does not aim at direct textual historical equivalence between ancient ethical texts and contemporary frameworks. Rather, the SDGs are useful as a heuristic and analytical lens for the ethics convergence section.

This study addresses this gap by adopting an interpretive approach that uses the SDGs as an analytical lens to re-examine Thiruvalluvar's ethical ideas. Care has been taken to avoid the anachronistic claims of the concept emphasising resonance rather than direct correspondence. By placing Thiruvallur's work, Thirukkural, this paper contributes to interdisciplinary research and demonstrates the relevance of classical ethical philosophy in addressing contemporary global challenges.

Thiruvalluvar and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Thematic Analysis

This section analyses Thiruvalluvar's ethical thought through a thematic reading aligned conceptually with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are employed as an interpretive framework to examine ethical convergence rather than as historical benchmarks. The analysis highlights how the moral principles articulated in the Thirukkural resonate with contemporary concerns related to human well-being, social justice, governance, and sustainability.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 1: No Poverty

SDG 1 seeks to eradicate poverty in all its forms everywhere, emphasising not only income deprivation but also vulnerability, social exclusion and the denial of basic human dignity. While Thirukkural does not address poverty through economic indicators, welfare schemes or institutional mechanisms, it offers a strong ethical and moral framework that foregrounds compassion, generosity and social responsibility towards the poor.

The ethical basis of SDG 1 (No Poverty) finds strong conceptual resonance in Thirukkural, particularly in the chapter on Charity (Kurals 221-230), where Thiruvalluvar emphasizes generosity, hunger relief and the moral obligation that wealth has towards the poor. Complementary themes of compassion (Kurals 241-250), avoidance of cruelty (Kurals 251-260), and respect for life (Kural 327) further reinforce an ethical vision that prioritizes human dignity and social responsibility over accumulation.

Although the Thirukkural does not provide explicit economic prescriptions for poverty alleviation, its insistence on moral economics—rooted in generosity, justice, and compassion—offers a conceptual basis for understanding poverty as a violation of human dignity. In this sense, Thiruvalluvar's ethical insights complement SDG 1 by reinforcing the idea that sustainable poverty eradication requires not only material resources but also ethical commitment and social. responsibility.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 2: Zero Hunger

SDG 2 seeks to end hunger, ensure food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable food systems. While the Thirukkural does not discuss food policy or agriculture in modern terms, it provides a strong ethical framework centered on feeding the hungry, hospitality and moral responsibility towards food shortages.

The ethical foundations of SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) find strong conceptual resonance in the Thirukkural through its emphasis on feeding the hungry, hospitality and compassion. The chapter on Charity (Kurals 221-230) treats the alleviation of hunger as a paramount moral duty, while the section on hospitality (Kurals 81-90) frames the provision of food as a social obligation rather than optional generosity. Supplementary reflections on compassion and moderation further reinforce an ethical vision that supports food security and responsible consumption.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

SDG 3 aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all. While Thirukkural does not address health systems or medical care, it offers a moral and behavioural framework that supports physical, mental and social well-being.

Although Thirukkural does not discuss health in clinical terms, it emphasises disciplined living, moderation and avoidance of excessive consumption as central to physical and mental well-being. Ethical self-control and a balanced lifestyle are presented as prerequisites for a healthy life, which is conceptually consistent with SDG 3's holistic understanding of well-being.

The ethical dimensions of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) find conceptual resonance in Thirukkural's emphasis on moderation, avoidance of harmful habits, emotional balance and compassion. Through its reflections on moderation (Kurals 941-950), abstinence from intoxicants (Kurals 921-930), and care for life (Kurals 321-330), the text promotes behavioral and moral principles that support holistic well-being. While these insights do not align with modern health policy, they contribute to an ethical understanding of health based on self-discipline and social responsibility.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 4: Quality Education

SDG 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. While the Thirukkural does not address formal education systems, curricula or institutions, it provides a strong ethical and intellectual framework that values learning as essential for human development and social well-being.

While the Thirukkural does not discuss education in a modern institutional sense, it consistently emphasizes knowledge, wisdom and continuous learning as the foundation of a meaningful life. Education is presented not as the mere acquisition of information but as the cultivation of judgment, moral clarity and rational thinking. Ignorance is treated as a serious social and personal limitation, whereas learning is presented as a lasting form of wealth that cannot be destroyed or taken away.

The ethical dimensions of SDG 4 (Quality Education) find conceptual resonance in the Thirukkural's emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge (Kurals 391-400), the superiority of learning over material wealth (Kurals 411-420), and the importance of wise counsel and understanding (Kurals 421-430). These kurals highlight education as a lifelong process that refines character, promotes social harmony, and enables responsible decision-making.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 5: Gender Equality

SDG 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Although the Thirukkural was written in a historical context shaped by patriarchal social structures, it nevertheless affirms the moral dignity, worth and social significance of women, particularly in the realm of family and ethical life.

The Thirukkural does not deal with gender equality in the modern political or legal sense, nor does it discuss women's rights in institutional terms. However, it presents women as central to moral order, household stability and social well-being. Respect for women, ethical responsibility towards them and recognition of their role in sustaining the family and society are repeatedly emphasized. The text treats the moral character and dignity of women as essential to collective prosperity rather than as subordinate matters.

The ethical dimensions of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) find conceptual resonance in the Thirukkural's reflections on respect for women, the moral strength of households, and the social value of women's virtue and dignity (Kurals 51-60). These Kurals emphasize ethical behavior, mutual responsibility, and honor in social relationships, and offer a normative framework that aligns with SDG 5's broader goal of promoting dignity, respect, and equality. While these ideas need to be read critically in light of historical constraints, they contribute to an ethical understanding of gender relations that complements contemporary discourses on gender justice.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

SDG 6 aims to ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. Although Thirukkural does not address water infrastructure, sanitation systems or public utilities in the modern sense, it does attach significant ethical significance to water as a foundation for life, agriculture and social well-being.

Thiruvalluvar repeatedly emphasizes the life-sustaining role of rain and water, presenting them as essential for food production, social stability and moral order. Water is treated not simply as a natural resource but as a collective good whose proper management determines the prosperity or suffering of society. Water scarcity is associated with hunger, poverty and social distress, while its abundance is linked to harmony and well-being.

The ethical dimensions of SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) find conceptual resonance in Thirukkural's reflections on rain, natural balance and responsible human behavior towards nature (Kurals 11-20). These verses emphasize the dependence of human life on water and implicitly call for restraint, gratitude, and sustainable use of natural resources. While these insights do not correspond to modern water management or sanitation policies, they contribute to an ethical understanding of water as a shared and vital resource.

By highlighting the moral significance of water and ecological balance, Thiruvalluvar's thoughts complement the modern sustainability discourse and support the broader ethical basis of SDG 6.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy

SDG 7 aims to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all. The Thirukkural does not explicitly address energy in the modern sense, such as electricity, fuel or technology. However, it offers an ethical framework that emphasizes moderation, restraint and avoidance of waste, which are central to the

principles of sustainable energy use.

Thiruvalluvar consistently advocates disciplined living and condemns overconsumption and misuse of resources. Energy, broadly understood as the use of natural and material resources to support human life, is implicitly governed by moral responsibility. Excessive consumption and wasteful behavior are treated as ethical wrongs that undermine social harmony and long-term well- being.

The ethical dimensions of SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) find conceptual resonance in the Thirukkural's emphasis on moderation, self-control and responsible use of resources (Kurals 121-130; 951-960). These Kurals promote restraint and balance as moral virtues that align with contemporary demands for energy efficiency and sustainable consumption. Although Thiruvalluvar does not address renewable energy policies or energy access, his ethical vision supports the underlying values of sustainability and intergenerational responsibility that are central to SDG 7.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

SDG 8 aims to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. While Thirukkural does not engage with modern labour markets, employment policies or economic institutions, it offers a strong ethical framework for work, livelihoods, wealth creation and moral responsibility.

Thiruvalluvar treats work as a dignified and necessary aspect of human life. Honest work, independence and effort are praised, while idleness, exploitation and unjust accumulation of wealth are condemned. Economic activity is seen not simply as a means of personal gain, but as a moral process that should contribute to social welfare and stability.

The ethical dimensions of SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) find conceptual resonance in Thirukkural's emphasis on diligence, ethical earnings, just governance and fair treatment of workers (Kurals 601-610; 631-640; 661-670). These Kurals emphasize the importance of work, discipline, and justice in economic life, and suggest that prosperity should be based on ethical behavior and social responsibility. While these insights do not correspond to modern employment regulations or growth models, they contribute to an ethical understanding of work that complements modern development frameworks.

Thiruvalluvar's vision thus supports an inclusive and morally grounded approach to economic growth that is conceptually consistent with the core values of SDG 8.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure

SDG 9 aims to build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation. Thirukkural does not address industrial development, technological innovation or physical infrastructure in the modern sense. However, it provides an ethical framework that emphasizes foresight, planning, skill and wise leadership, which are essential foundations for sustainable economic and institutional development.

Thiruvalluvar repeatedly emphasizes the importance of intelligence, preparedness and competent governance in achieving collective prosperity. Economic and social progress, in his view, depends on rational decision-making, skillful administration and careful use of available resources. Innovation, understood broadly as intelligent problem-solving and adaptation, is treated as a moral and intellectual virtue rather than a purely technical process.

The ethical dimensions of SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) find conceptual alignment in Thirukkural's emphasis on knowledge, strategic thinking and effective administration (Kurals 471-480; 491-500; 511-520). These Kural accounts highlight the value of learning, planning, and foresight in strengthening institutions and ensuring long-term stability. While these insights do not directly correspond to modern industrial policy or infrastructure development, they contribute to an ethical understanding of innovation and institutional resilience.

Thiruvalluvar's ethical vision thus complements the modern development discourse by basing progress on wisdom, competence, and responsible leadership.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

SDG 10 seeks to reduce inequality by promoting social inclusion, equity, and dignity for all. Although Thirukkural does not address inequality in economic or institutional terms, he offers a strong ethical critique of social injustice and moral indifference to the vulnerable. Compassion (irakkam, Kurals 241–250) is presented as a necessary virtue for a just and harmonious society, suggesting that inequality reflects a failure of ethical responsibility rather than an inevitable social condition.

Thiruvalluvar also warns against envy and excessive attachment to wealth (azhukkāṟu, Kurals 161–170), and identifies them as the source of social divisions and imbalances. In addition, the duties of the benefactor (aram, Kurals 31-40) emphasize impartiality, generosity, and concern for the collective welfare. Together, these ethical principles resonate with the goals of SDG 10 of inclusive development by highlighting moral obligations against exclusion and unequal treatment, thereby complementing policy-driven approaches to reducing inequalities.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

SDG 11 aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. While Thirukkural does not address urban planning, housing or local governance in the modern sense, it offers ethical insights into social order, community life and responsible governance that are relevant to the broader goals of sustainable societies.

Thiruvalluvar places great emphasis on social harmony, justice and ethical leadership as the foundations of stable and resilient societies. Societies flourish when rulers rule with justice, citizens act responsibly and social relations are guided by moral conduct. Disorder, injustice and neglect of the vulnerable are presented as threats to collective well-being.

The ethical dimensions of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Societies) find conceptual resonance in Thirukkural's reflections on just governance, social responsibility and communal harmony (Kurals 541-550; 551-560; 561-570). These Kurals emphasize the importance of ethical leadership, public order, and concern for the welfare of people, which resonates with contemporary concerns about sustainable and inclusive human settlements. While these insights do not align with modern urban policy frameworks, they contribute to an ethical understanding of community sustainability.

Thiruvalluvar's thoughts thus complement SDG 11 by highlighting the moral foundations required for resilient and inclusive communities.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

Moderation and restraint are central virtues in Thirukkural. Excessive desire and consumption are criticized as socially harmful, which is strongly in line with SDG 12's call for responsible consumption patterns.

SDG 12 aims to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns by reducing waste, promoting efficient use of resources and encouraging responsible lifestyles. Although Thirukkural does not address modern production systems, industrial supply chains or consumer markets, it offers a strong ethical framework centered around restraint, moderation and avoidance of excessive consumption.

Thiruvalluvar repeatedly condemns greed, waste and uncontrolled desire and presents moderation as a central moral virtue. Wealth and resources should be used responsibly and ethically, not accumulated or consumed in ways that harm society or future well-being. Excessive consumption is portrayed as a source of moral decay and social imbalance.

The ethical dimensions of SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) find conceptual alignment in Thirukkural's emphasis on self-control, simplicity and the measured use of resources (Kurals 121-130; 951-960;

1001-1010). These Kurals promote disciplined living and ethical restraint, which are closely aligned with contemporary sustainability principles. Although Thiruvalluvar does not discuss waste management or production efficiency in technical terms, his moral teachings support the values underlying responsible consumption

Thirukkural thus contributes an ethical perspective that strengthens the normative basis of SDG 12 by promoting moderation and responsibility in human behaviour.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 13: Climate Action.

SDG 13 calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its consequences. Although Thirukkural does not treat climate change as a scientific phenomenon, it offers ethical insights into the relationship between humans and nature, environmental balance and the consequences of moral failure, which are relevant to contemporary climate issues.

Thiruvalluvar presents nature as a life-sustaining system that must be respected and preserved. Disturbance of natural balance, especially through neglect of rain, soil and ecological order, is associated with social suffering, hunger and instability. Human responsibility towards nature is framed in moral terms, with an emphasis on restraint, gratitude and awareness of interdependence.

The ethical dimensions of SDG 13 (Climate Action) find conceptual resonance in Thirukkural's reflections on rain, natural harmony and human responsibility (Kurals 11-20; 741-750). These Kurals highlight the dependence of human life on ecological balance and implicitly warn against actions that harm nature. While these insights do not provide guidance on climate mitigation or adaptation policies, they contribute to an ethical understanding of environmental responsibility.

Thiruvalluvar's ethical vision thus supports the moral foundation of climate action by emphasizing respect for nature and awareness of long-term consequences.

Thiruvalluvar's wisdom on maintaining balance with nature, protecting the environment, and respecting natural resources is highly relevant to contemporary efforts to combat climate change.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 14: Life Below Water

SDG 14 seeks to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources. Although the Thirukkural does not explicitly discuss the oceans, marine biodiversity or fisheries management, it reflects a broader ethical concern for natural balance and responsible human behaviour towards the environment.

Thiruvalluvar emphasises the connection between natural systems and human survival, particularly through his reflections on rainfall, water and ecological harmony. Water bodies are treated as essential for life and livelihoods, and their disruption is associated with social and economic distress. This ethical recognition of water as a shared and life-sustaining resource is consistent with contemporary concerns about the protection of aquatic ecosystems.

The ethical dimensions of SDG 14 (Life Below Water) find conceptual resonance in the Thirukkural's emphasis on ecological balance, restraint and respect for natural resources (Kurals 11-20; 731-740). These Kurals highlight the dependence of human society on water-based systems and implicitly warn against overconsumption and environmental neglect. Although Thiruvalluvar does not treat marine conservation in modern scientific terms, his ethical vision supports the values of stewardship and sustainability that are central to SDG 14. Thirukkural thus contributes an ethical perspective that complements modern efforts to conserve and protect underwater life. Thiruvalluvar's emphasis on respect for nature, sustainable use of resources, and the interconnectedness of life resonates with modern ideas about marine conservation, sustainable fisheries, and watershed protection.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 15: Life on Land

SDG 15 aims to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, including forests, land and

biodiversity. Although Thirukkural does not address biodiversity conservation, deforestation or wildlife protection in modern scientific terms, it offers ethical reflections on the relationship between humans, land and nature.

Thiruvalluvar consistently highlights the dependence of human life on land, rain and natural balance. Land is presented not only as a productive resource but as a foundation for social stability and survival. Disregard for the natural order is associated with hunger, poverty and social decline, implying an ethical responsibility to preserve the ecological balance.

The ethical dimensions of SDG 15 (Life on Land) find conceptual resonance in Thirukkural's emphasis on harmony with nature, restraint in resource exploitation and respect for life-sustaining systems (Kurals 11-20; 731-740; 741-750). These Kurals emphasize that sustainable human existence depends on maintaining balance within natural systems. While the text does not offer guidance on conservation policy or land management, its ethical vision supports the core values that underpin SDG 15. Thiruvalluvar's thinking thus complements contemporary environmental discourse by anchoring ecological responsibility in moral awareness and restraint.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

SDG 16 aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, ensure access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions. Thirukkural does not deal with modern legal systems, constitutional frameworks or state institutions, but it offers a comprehensive ethical vision for justice, governance and social order.

Thiruvalluvar places justice, moral integrity and fairness at the centre of political and social life. Rulers are expected to govern with fairness, impartiality and concern for the welfare of the people. Abuse of power, corruption and injustice are strongly condemned as they are seen as causes of social instability and suffering.

The ethical dimensions of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) find conceptual alignment in Thirukkural's emphasis on just governance, the rule of law, truthfulness and ethical leadership (Kurals 541-550; 551-560; 561-570; 681-690). These Kurals highlight the moral foundations necessary for peace and stable institutions. While these insights do not directly correspond to contemporary legal or administrative systems, they contribute to an ethical understanding of justice and governance that complements modern institutional frameworks.

Thiruvalluvar's ethical vision thus reinforces the normative values underlying SDG 16 by anchoring peace and justice in moral responsibility and responsible leadership.

Thiruvalluvar emphasizes the importance of non-violence and peaceful conduct, values that are consistent with SDG 16's commitment to peaceful societies.

Conceptual Alignment with SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals

SDG 17 emphasizes strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing global partnerships for sustainable development through collaboration, shared responsibility and institutional cooperation. Thirukkural does not address international relations, global governance or formal partnerships between states. However, it offers a robust ethical framework that emphasizes cooperation, interdependence, trust and collective responsibility – values that are central to the spirit of SDG 17.

Thiruvalluvar recognizes society as an interconnected moral order, where individuals, communities and rulers are bound by mutual obligations. Social harmony and collective progress are portrayed as outcomes of collaboration rather than individual self-interest. Kurals that emphasize unity, friendship, and mutual support (Kurals 781-790; 791-800), along with those that emphasize ethical association, trustworthiness, and sound counsel (Kurals 441-450; 451-460), emphasize that sustainable cooperation depends not only on shared goals but also on moral integrity and mutual trust. This ethical vision is conceptually consistent with SDG 17's emphasis on transparent, accountable, and value-based partnerships across institutions and societies.

Although Thiruvalluvar's reflections do not directly relate to contemporary mechanisms such as multilateral agreements, development finance, or global policy coordination, they provide a normative ethical basis for understanding partnerships as moral obligations rather than merely strategic arrangements. In this sense, Thirukkural complements SDG 17 by grounding the pursuit of sustainable development on cooperation, ethical solidarity, and shared responsibility.

This conceptual alignment indicates that Thirukkural embodies ethical principles that closely correspond with the broader objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals. Not all dimensions of each SDG find direct parallels in the Thirukkural. The analysis focuses on ethical convergence rather than comprehensive coverage of SDG targets.Its emphasis on moral responsibility, social equity, restraint, and harmonious coexistence provides a strong ethical foundation for sustainable development. The relevance of Thirukkural therefore lies in its value-based approach, which complements contemporary policy-driven development models.

DISCUSSION: GROUPING SDGS THROUGH ETHICAL THEMES

The thematic analysis reveals that Thiruvalluvar's ethical thought aligns with the SDGs across four broad ethical clusters rather than as isolated goals.

First, human well-being and social justice (SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 10) reflect Thiruvalluvar's concern with dignity, compassion, education, and fairness. Poverty, hunger, inequality, and exclusion are treated as moral failures that threaten social harmony.

Second, economic life and material prosperity (SDGs 8, 9, and 12) resonate with the Thirukkural's moral economy, which values honest labour, ethical wealth, and restraint. Economic growth is legitimate only when guided by virtue and social responsibility.

Third, environmental responsibility and sustainability (SDGs 6, 7, 11, 13, 14, and 15) find indirect but meaningful ethical support in Thiruvalluvar's emphasis on moderation, non-excess, and moral self-regulation. Although ecological concerns are not explicitly articulated, the ethical foundations necessary for sustainability are clearly present.

Finally, governance, peace, and cooperation (SDGs 16 and 17) constitute the strongest area of convergence. Thiruvalluvar's reflections on justice, rule of law, wise leadership, and collective action underline the ethical prerequisites for stable institutions and collaborative development.

Overall, this analysis demonstrates that while the Thirukkural does not offer a development model in the modern sense, it provides a normative ethical framework that complements the SDGs. The value of this approach lies not in establishing historical continuity but in enriching conte

Policy and Practice-Oriented Implications

This study does not propose specific development policies. However, it offers useful ethical insights for evaluating development practice under the SDG framework. The values discussed in the *Thirukkural*, such as compassion, fairness, self-restraint, and social responsibility, can help in assessing the social and moral aspects of development programmes.

In poverty reduction and welfare schemes, the *Thirukkural* highlights the importance of treating beneficiaries with dignity and respect. Along with achieving targets, attention should be given to how people experience development programmes in their everyday lives.

In the area of governance, Thiruvalluvar's emphasis on honesty and impartial conduct provides ethical reference points for evaluating transparency, accountability, and fairness in public institutions. These ideas support, rather than replace, existing legal and administrative frameworks.

Overall, using ethical perspectives from classical texts can help place global development goals like the SDGs

within local social and cultural contexts. While this study remains conceptual, it shows the value of ethical reflection in strengthening development practice.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the ethical vision of Thiruvalluvar through the analytical lens of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, with the aim of exploring conceptual convergences rather than asserting direct historical equivalence. The analysis demonstrates that while the Thirukkural emerged in a vastly different socio-historical context, its ethical concerns resonate strongly with many foundational principles underlying the SDGs, particularly those related to poverty alleviation, food security, social justice, responsible governance, ethical economic life, and collective well-being.

The thematic mapping of selected Kurals onto SDGs 1 to 17 reveals that Thiruvalluvar's thought places moral responsibility at the centre of social and economic life. His emphasis on compassion towards the poor, restraint in accumulation, just governance, dignity of labour, moderation in consumption, and social harmony aligns closely with the normative aspirations of sustainable development. Importantly, the Thirukkural frames these concerns not as policy outcomes but as ethical obligations of individuals and rulers alike. This moral anchoring offers a valuable corrective to contemporary development discourse, which often prioritises technocratic solutions over ethical transformation.

The grouping of SDGs in the discussion further highlights that Thiruvalluvar's ethical framework is holistic rather than sectoral. Issues of poverty, hunger, inequality, governance, and partnerships are treated as interdependent, reflecting an integrated view that reflects the SDGs' emphasis on interconnected development challenges. In this sense, the Thirukkural anticipates a systems- orientated understanding of social well-being, grounded in virtue (aram) as the foundation of prosperity (porul) and social harmony.

At the same time, this study consciously avoids anachronism. The Thirukkural does not address modern institutional mechanisms, global governance structures, or technological dimensions central to the SDGs. Its relevance lies instead in providing an ethical grammar that can enrich contemporary sustainability debates. By employing the SDGs as a heuristic framework, this paper demonstrates how classical ethical texts can be meaningfully integrated into modern development studies without instrumentalising or oversimplifying them.

In conclusion, revisiting Thiruvalluvar through the lens of the SDGs contributes to a broader scholarly effort to decolonise and pluralise development ethics by foregrounding non-Western intellectual traditions. The study suggests that sustainable development cannot be fully realised through policy design alone; it requires a moral reorientation rooted in justice, restraint, empathy, and collective responsibility—values that Thiruvalluvar articulated with remarkable clarity centuries ago. Future research may extend this approach through comparative studies with other ethical traditions or by exploring how such moral insights can inform contemporary pedagogy, governance, and development practice.

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