

Muthuramalinga Thevar's Economic Views and Contributions To Post-Independence India

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Abstract: *This article delves into the economic philosophy and contributions of Muthuramalinga Thevar, a significant political figure in post-independence India. It analyses his views on economic welfare initiatives, fiscal strategies, and government planning efforts. Thevar's critical perspective on various government policies, especially regarding taxation, welfare programs, and unemployment, is thoroughly explored. He championed a realistic and action-oriented approach to economic development, with a strong emphasis on generating employment and improving farmers' conditions. The discussion also highlights Thevar's economic acumen, interpretation of socialism, and unwavering dedication to empowering economically disadvantaged communities. His practical ideas on poverty reduction, improving living standards, and promoting equitable wealth distribution continue to be relevant in contemporary economic debates. Thevar's human-centred economic outlook underscores his deep commitment to collective welfare over individual profits.*

Keywords: Muthuramalinga Thevar, Economic Welfare, Post-Independence India, Fiscal Policies, Socio-economic Development

INTRODUCTION

Muthuramalinga Thevar stood out as a leader of uncommon integrity and insight, qualities that clearly distinguished him from other politicians of his era. Coming from a rural, landowning background, he developed a set of economic ideas shaped by his lived experience and practical understanding. Although his association with the Indian National Congress influenced his socialist orientation, his beliefs were never limited to narrow, community-based ideologies. As an astute political figure during both the colonial and post-independence periods, Thevar had a deep grasp of the nation's economic conditions and challenges.¹ He was a tireless advocate for the poor, dedicating his political career to fighting poverty and reducing social inequality. His overarching goal was to ensure freedom from hunger and hardship for all, placing the welfare of ordinary citizens above the partisan interests. His tenure in both the Madras Legislative Assembly and Indian Parliament provided him with a platform to promote economic justice and improve the lives of marginalised communities. A close study of his economic thinking reveals a strong commitment to social upliftment, particularly in response to the exploitation India faced under British rule in both agriculture and industry.²

Given the pivotal role of politics during both the pre- and post-independence eras, Thevar was determined to protect people from economic hardships such as adulteration, black marketing and exploitation. Despite being a zamindar, he lived a modest life and adhered to simple economic principles. His charitable contributions and financial support for the poor were extensive, though largely known only to his close associates. His commitment to improving the lives of the poor and backward communities was evident in his interactions with them, as he freely mingled with them and understood their struggles to survive. His political travels also provided him with firsthand understanding of the economic conditions faced by ordinary people. Thevar firmly believed in equitable wealth distribution and practiced it by sharing his wealth and property with others. He consciously minimised his personal comforts and led a simple life, embodying the economic principles of common people.

PROMOTING ECONOMIC EQUALITY AND STABILITY

Muthuramalinga Thevar believed that the political freedom granted by the British did not improve the economic condition of the oppressed classes in India. The labourers continued to suffer from hunger and remained

in the same economically disadvantaged position as before. He emphasised that in a country without inflation, commodity prices would remain stable, which would greatly benefit the poor by allowing them to live without poverty and fulfil their basic needs.³ When people's needs are met, they are more likely to experience happiness and contentment. Thevar argued that poverty-induced restlessness among the poor could only be alleviated by improving their living conditions. He considered the maintenance of economic equality to be the foundation of his economic politics.

CRITICISM ON THE REMOVAL OF THE RATION SYSTEM

Thevar strongly criticised the decision to abolish the ration system implemented by Rajaji in 1952. He pointed out that under the British, each person received 16 ounces of rice, but after 1947, the Congress government reduced it to only six. He recognised that discontinuing the ration system at that time would lead to severe hardships for the poor.⁴ Without access to essential commodities at affordable prices in the open market, they would face even greater economic challenges.⁵ Thevar also argued that if the ration system had been phased out after the harvest, it would have been easier for the poor to buy the necessary goods. However, removing it before the next harvest, with a long gap until supplies were replenished, undermined the benefits of rationing. He also advocated for a national budget that served the interests of all citizens without any disparities and focused on the overall progress of the country. Furthermore, he criticised the focus on cultivating cash crops instead of food grains, recognising that it would undermine food production and harm the economy. He stressed the importance of increasing food production through the "grow more food" initiative and believed that food grain production should never be compromised. Thevar was a strong advocate of practical, scientific agricultural methods to increase crop yields, and he supported efforts to directly assist farmers with tools, training, and information. He believed that agricultural improvements, paired with proper marketing support, would ensure better outcomes for rural areas in India. Through his hands-on approach and expertise in agriculture, Muthuramalinga Thevar effectively expressed his economic ideas.⁶

CONCEPT OF DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM

Muthuramalinga Thevar had a clear understanding of the concept of "democratic socialism." He believed that the principles of socialism should be instilled in people's minds for them to live comfortable lives. He argued that once people's basic needs are met, democracy should be granted to them. However, he cautioned that attempting to implement both simultaneously could undermine nationalism, potentially rendering democratic socialism ineffective. He emphasised that a thorough and critical analysis of democracy and socialism was necessary for success. Although both are crucial for national progress, they must be implemented at the right time and in an appropriate manner. The context and existing conditions must be carefully assessed.⁷ Thevar's insights into these issues are valuable and practical for achieving the intended goals.

Influence of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Focus on Social Welfare

As a devoted follower of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Thevar shared his mentor's belief that pursuing wealth was sinful. Although his words were simple, they carried deep meaning related to economic philosophy. His ideas were not easily understood by all because they were centred on real-life experiences and practical applications. Thevar lived modestly, taking only what he needed for himself, and devoted much of his wealth to the education and welfare of poor children in his village. He was particularly focused on uplifting the underprivileged and turning the ideals of socialism into reality by spending his resources on their welfare.

Proposal for the Adoption of Scientific Agricultural Methods

Muthuramalinga Thevar suggested that the government should include Harijans as part of the progressive groups in society when distributing land. By providing them with land, they would be able to cultivate it and sustain themselves through their own labour, thus avoiding the need to work as wage labourers or manual workers. Additionally, he proposed that the introduction of scientific agricultural techniques could prevent the migration of unemployed rural farmers to urban industrial areas.⁸ He believed that this would contribute significantly to the development of rural India and benefit those working in agriculture. Thevar further recommended that once the government utilised the services of workers, it should ensure that they were paid fairly for their labour. As a pragmatic economist, Thevar advocated for the introduction of wealth ceilings for the rich, similar to land ceilings for landowners, to address economic imbalances.

Advocacy for the Abolition of the Zamindari System

Thevar criticised the exploitation of farmers by zamindars, landlords, moneylenders, and merchants, who drained the farmers' resources in various ways. He noted that there were no systems in place to help farmers increase their crop yields or sell their produce at fair prices, which led to greater dependence on imports and negatively impacted the state economy. He supported the government's community development programs aimed at uplifting rural areas.⁹ Muthuramalinga Thevar played a key role in the abolition of the Zamindari system in the Madras Presidency, driven by his belief in a socialist economy. He was committed to improving the living standards of the oppressed and worked toward raising their social and economic status.

Simplicity in Life and Protection of Agricultural Economy

Muthuramalinga Thevar lived a life that rejected materialism, often showing disdain for expensive clothing and luxuries.¹⁰ He criticized those who indulged in such extravagance.¹¹ His personal habits reflected his belief in a simple, unpretentious lifestyle—he cared little for gourmet food, seeing it only as a necessity to alleviate hunger. This lifestyle stood in contrast to the excessive spending of others, particularly when many were struggling economically. His practical economic ideas profoundly impacted the lives of farmers, bringing significant changes

to agricultural practices. His policies, which focused on agriculture, played a key role in revitalising the rural economy. Above all, Thevar believed that supporting agriculture was crucial for the overall stability of the national economy.

Focus on Strengthening Indian Markets

Muthuramalinga Thevar strongly advocated for a self-reliant Indian economy, designed to meet the country's specific needs. He believed that India's economic progress should focus on growing and strengthening local markets rather than competing immediately on the global stage. Thevar was wary of foreign investment in Indian industries, fearing it would undermine the nation's economic stability.¹² He also opposed the decline of small-scale industries, such as cottage industries and leather production, which he believed were essential to the economy. He argued that agricultural land should not be monopolised by foreign industrialists or large corporations. In his view, globalisation, privatisation, and liberalisation are obstacles to India's economic growth. He stressed the importance of nurturing the local agrarian economy, as prioritising industrialisation could deepen the divide between the rich and poor. He believed that industrialisation would create a new class of wage earners, but it should not come at the cost of neglecting the agricultural sector.¹³ For the country to thrive, agricultural and industrial revolutions must occur simultaneously. He called for economic policies that would address unemployment, especially among the youth, and avoid creating occupational imbalance. He advocated the use of local resources and technologies to strengthen the national economy. Thevar felt that a truly stable Indian economy could only be achieved through a commitment to Indian identity and self-sufficiency. His views were shaped by his experiences of India under British rule and after independence, allowing him to analyse the changing economic conditions through a comparative lens.¹⁴

Thevar was particularly invested in improving cottage industries, recognising their importance to the livelihoods of the marginalised. He supported their modernisation through the application of scientific methods, a stance echoed by the Forward Block Party, which he led. In the 1952 election manifesto of the Forward Block, Thevar provided definitions and translations of various economic terms, demonstrating his deep understanding of economic theory.¹⁵ His explanations of these terms revealed his practical knowledge of economics, emphasising real-world applications rather than theoretical concepts.

Role of Capital in National Economy

Foreigners often provide the capital required to establish and run industries in India, placing Indian capital in a subordinate position. This dependency increases the exploitation of local populations. In contrast, Thevar believed that capital should play a central role in the country's economy to ensure self-sufficiency and growth.

Income and Economic Control

Thevar advocated for government control over the production and distribution of goods and services. He believed that key income-generating sectors should be nationalised to benefit the common people. This would help reduce reliance on taxes, particularly indirect taxes that often

burden the masses. Instead, he suggested a system where direct taxes would be collected to ensure fairness and minimise exploitation by the rich. Over time, he proposed phasing out indirect taxes, as they tend to foster corruption and manipulation by the affluent¹⁶

Foreign Debt and Economic Independence

Muthuramalinga Thevar argued that the Indian government should make a concerted effort to avoid borrowing from foreign nations. He believed that doing so would eliminate external economic pressures and protect India from the economic risks associated with foreign debt.

Foreign Influence on India's Economy

Muthuramalinga Thevar believed that India should not rely on foreign investments to sustain its economy. He advocated for a self-sufficient national economy that could meet the needs of the people. The Indian government, he argued, should focus on creating conditions that enable the country to thrive using its resources and capabilities. Thevar's economic views reveal his profound understanding of Indian economics. He recognised the lasting effects of colonial rule on the Indian economy, particularly the misuse of its natural resources. Despite formal post-independence planning efforts, the plans were often poorly executed, affecting the country's economic growth. He highlighted issues such as tax policies, rationing, suppression of labour unions, and insufficient support for small-scale rural industries as major obstacles to economic progress. The problems of unemployment and the lack of basic comforts for most citizens have exacerbated poverty. Thevar also criticised bribery, nepotism, and the special privileges given to the wealthy, which led to greater economic inequality.¹⁷ He proposed that families with modest incomes, such as a household earning Rs.1200 for five members, should be exempt from taxes. He also advocated for cooperative farming systems and expanded insurance coverage for agriculture, livestock, and health.¹⁸ Thevar emphasised that the government should take proactive steps to alleviate the economic and natural hardships faced by the people, especially during times of drought or economic crisis. He stressed the need for a responsive and effective system to address these challenges.¹⁹

During periods of agricultural hardship, such as crop failures or natural disasters, Thevar believed the government should assess the needs of farmers and provide swift relief.²⁰ He also argued that the government should implement measures to curb exploitative practices by merchants and moneylenders, setting limits on interest rates and ensuring that loans were repaid fairly.²¹

Thevar was critical of the Western economic model, believing it to be unsuitable for India's diverse needs. He felt that despite political freedom, India had not yet achieved true economic independence, with foreign exploitation still a concern.²² He emphasised that economic policies should be based on the country's unique needs, rejecting the idea of a one-size-fits-all approach.²³ He also advocated for a system that rewarded individual contributions based on ability and need, rather than enforcing a strict equality of income and resources. According to him, a system based on capacity rather than enforced equality would foster personal and societal growth. He believed that promoting the individual would lead

to the betterment of society as a whole.²⁴

While Thevar recognised the value of cooperative farming, he cautioned that it could lead to confusion if it was not properly managed. He believed in gradual, balanced approaches to economic development, ensuring that policies would promote both social and economic equality.²⁵

Thevar also pointed to the food crisis in Tamil Nadu during the 1950s as a key issue in his economic thinking. Rising food prices and food adulteration were harming people across all social strata.²⁶ He criticised the government for allowing these problems to escalate and urged immediate action to control prices and ensure food security for all citizens. He believed that it was essential to address these issues through effective government intervention, including curbing black marketing and hoarding.²⁷

Finally, Thevar underscored the importance of disaster preparedness, advocating for government measures to prevent and respond to natural calamities such as floods and droughts.²⁸ He argued that the government should take steps to repair damaged infrastructure and provide assistance to those affected by disasters, ensuring that communities can recover quickly and effectively.²⁹ His economic philosophy, rooted in fairness, self-sufficiency, and a strong, responsive government, was aimed at promoting the well-being of all citizens, especially the most vulnerable.³⁰

ECONOMIC WELFARE INITIATIVES

Muthuramalinga Thevar was outspoken in critiquing the government's economic welfare programs. For example, he criticised the mid-day meal schemes, arguing that they were poorly planned and caused more harm than good. He pointed out the hardships faced by families who had to beg for rice, which negatively impacted their children's education. Thevar emphasised that such issues were a result of ineffective economic policies, and he stressed the importance of addressing public grievances.³¹ With a strong understanding of economics, Thevar analysed the 1949-1950 Madras Government's budget, which he described as benefiting the wealthy while burdening the poor. He argued that the government should focus on increasing public income through careful taxation while avoiding excessive spending on unnecessary areas. He advocated for a budget surplus that would primarily benefit the common people.³²

Thevar was critical of suggestions to reduce rice consumption and promote alternative grains, arguing that practical solutions were needed to address the food shortages. He believed that improving farmers' access to agricultural tools and livestock would improve their livelihoods with support from both the state and central governments.³³ His views demonstrated a pragmatic approach to economic policy. He was not opposed to the idea of a tax-free budget for the wealthy in a developed society but stressed that taxes should not burden the poor.³⁴ He argued that India's economic issues, such as unemployment, could only be resolved through practical action rather than mere speeches and proposed that the government focus on national development, ensuring that welfare programs aimed at helping the poor were effectively implemented. Thevar believed in learning from the rapid

development of countries like Poland, Turkey, and Russia and applying those lessons to India.³⁵ He urged the government to increase revenue by tapping into the wealth of the rich and ensuring that development benefited the broader population and not just the wealthy elite.

While critical of black marketing, Thevar acknowledged that both capitalist and communist systems had their strengths and weaknesses. He believed in controlling prices and supporting nationalised industries to fund the welfare programs. However, he was also cautious about relying on foreign assistance, urging the government to prioritize self-sufficiency in its economic policies.³⁶

Thevar also stressed the importance of addressing housing issues, advising that the government avoid unnecessary spending on specific schemes and instead focus on practical solutions.³⁷ He advocated for a balance between rural and urban economic development, highlighting the importance of cooperation and reducing wasteful luxury.³⁸ His approach was grounded in practical experience, and he believed that economic welfare should prioritise the needs of the poor and disadvantaged.³⁹ Thevar's economic views were shaped by his deep understanding of the challenges facing India post-independence. His advocacy for equitable wealth distribution, anti-corruption measures, and self-reliant economic policies made him a forward-thinking economist focused on real-world solutions.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Muthuramalinga Thevar's economic ideas were deeply rooted in pragmatism, focusing on addressing the real needs and challenges of post-Independence India. His critiques of government policies reflected a keen understanding of the socio-economic disparities affecting the poor and marginalised, urging policies that prioritised self-sufficiency, equitable wealth distribution, and practical welfare measures.⁴¹ Thevar advocated for a balanced approach to economic development, combining both rural and urban growth, while emphasising the importance of reducing corruption, hoarding, and unnecessary luxuries. His belief in the government's role as a protector of the people's welfare, alongside his emphasis on practical, action-based economic planning, positions his ideas as a valuable blueprint for inclusive growth and social justice.

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