

SHAPING A NEW DAWN: THE ENDURING LEGACY OF SREE NARAYANA GURU IN KERALA'S SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Dr. Vinitha Mohan

*Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy,
HHMSPB NSS College for Women, Neeramankara, Thiruvananthapuram, India*

ABSTRACT

Sree Narayana Guru, a luminary among India's visionaries, left an indelible mark on Kerala's social fabric through his transformative philosophy and actions. From challenging caste-based discrimination to advocating for education and societal unity, Guru's teachings continue to resonate in modern times. This article explores Guru's life, his contributions to social reform, and his timeless message of unity and equality, emphasizing its relevance in addressing contemporary challenges. Through his pragmatic approach and unwavering commitment to humanist ideals, Guru's legacy serves as a beacon of inspiration for fostering societal harmony and progress.

Keywords: *Social transformation; Social reform; Caste discrimination; Education; Unity; Equality; Spirituality*

Sree Narayana Guru shines brightly among India's illustrious visionaries, embodying the essence of saintly wisdom and profound philosophical insight. His unwavering commitment to humanist ideals propelled him to champion transformative social reform, harnessing the depths of his spiritual enlightenment to sculpt a fresh tapestry of societal harmony and progress.

A few decades ago, Kerala, often referred to as 'God's own country', was notorious for its severe social and economic disparities, so much so that Swami Vivekananda likened it to a "lunatic asylum". A significant portion of its population endured the stigma of untouchability. However, today, Kerala presents a starkly different tableau. The state stands as a beacon of social development, surpassing many others in the nation. This remarkable metamorphosis owes much to the visionary leadership of one of India's greatest spiritual luminaries, the pragmatic Advaitin, Sree Narayana Guru. His mission embodied a dual approach: striving towards the ideals of love and camaraderie through transformative social reform efforts.

Sree Narayana Guru formulated a philosophy aimed at catalyzing a social revolution. His active engagement in public life spanned over four decades, from 1888 to 1928, during which he orchestrated a profound transformation in the social landscape of Kerala, surpassing all expectations. He orchestrated a radical shift in the societal status quo, particularly for those

marginalized by caste-based discrimination. Narayana Guru, deeply connected to the common people, prioritized their welfare above theological debates or the establishment of a new religious order, as recounted by his disciple Nataraja Guru in "The Word of the Guru." Narayana Guru's mission focused on purifying religion from distortions, aligning it more closely with reality.

The initiation of his public endeavors began at Aruvippuram, located around 25 kilometers south of Trivandrum, near the Nayar river's cascade. In 1888, Narayana Guru defiantly consecrated a Shiva temple, challenging the tradition that restricted such religious rites to Brahmin priests exclusively. The Guru left a poignant inscription on the temple walls, signaling his vision for societal transformation.

Here is a model Abode

Where men live in Brotherliness,

Sans prejudices of Caste,

And with religious canour none.

(Dr. K. Sreenivasan, Sree Narayana Guru (Thiruvananthapuram: Jayasree Publications), p.43.)

These messages, given to meet the challenges of social justice, have to be re-translated into the tongue of contemporary events. Today the teachings are thrown away and man fight in the name of the teacher. Here one is reminded of the words of Jiddu Krishnamurti, "I am certainly for sharing one's thoughts with others. In that light I would be willing to accept Christ or Buddha or anyone else. I only object to a cult being woven around them where the figure of the teacher becomes more important than his words or his thoughts."² The whole of Kerala, nay the world at large, this holy man conceived as a model abode where human values prevailed and love and brotherhood flourish.

The act of consecration marked the dawn of a new era in Kerala, symbolizing a departure from orthodoxy and superstition. This bold gesture, which saw a non-Brahmin installing an idol, earned him the revered title of Sree Narayana Guru. Predictably, opposition and protests arose, questioning the propriety of an avarna undertaking such a task. In response, with his characteristic wit, Guru humorously declared that he had installed an "Ezhava Siva," effectively quelling further objections. This adept use of reasoning was typical of Guru's approach, disarming opposition through rational discourse.

Following the events at Aruvippuram, Guru continued to consecrate temples, but only in response to specific requests from the community. Moreover, he actively encouraged renovation efforts, gradually shifting his focus away from the construction of new temples. Instead, he advocated for

the establishment of schools, emphasizing the transformative power of education. "Educate to be free," he would often assert, underscoring the importance of knowledge in achieving liberation.

"No group can gain strength and achieve prosperity by any means other than organized effort. It was on this principle that the Yogam was established twenty five years ago. The term Ezhava does not denote caste or religion. Therefore any can be made a member of the Yogam. I wish many more joined."

Guru's life vision centered around opposing caste divisions and religious conflicts, aiming to unite all marginalized and exploited segments of society. He advised the S.N.D.P. Yogam to enlist proficient speakers to address moral and spiritual matters, emphasizing topics such as religion, morality, education, and industry for the community's benefit. Guru advocated for debunking superstitions and discouraging harmful customs, while also promoting strategies for improving agriculture, trade, and handicrafts. He stressed the importance of hard work and cautioned against speeches that could inadvertently offend or breed resentment among different caste groups. Guru sought to instill genuine concern for the progress and well-being of marginalized sections, underscoring his commitment to their upliftment.

The Guru's vision for education bore fruit with remarkable progress among the marginalized communities in Kerala. Access to teachings traditionally reserved for Brahmins, such as Sanskrit and the Vedas, was now made available to non-Brahmins. Reflecting on this development, in 1912, following the consecration of a temple in Cochin, the Guru expressed: ... *any caste can be uplifted by means of good education. If we have any plan of improving the condition of downtrodden masses, we must educate our children.*" (Luis, S.R.Vas, ed., *The Mind of J. Krishnamurti* (Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1975, p.51.)

He urged affluent individuals to support the education of underprivileged children showing promise in learning, advocating for scholarships and financial aid. Guru encouraged students to pursue higher education abroad and emphasized the importance of learning English. He also championed equal educational opportunities for women.

Sree Narayana Guru served as the inspiration and driving force behind the reformist movement known as Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam. Recognizing that the advancement of all communities necessitated the eradication of prevalent social injustices, he spread his message of social reform through close associates and the annual gatherings of the SNDP Yogam. Branches of the association served as conduits for disseminating his ideals nationwide, with figures like Dr. Palpu and Kumaranasan playing pivotal roles in its organization.

While the Yogam initially focused on uplifting the Ezhava community and promoting their civil rights, Guru became concerned that its political agendas were fostering division and jeopardizing the unity and universalism he advocated. In response, he established an Order of Monks dedicated

to upholding his broader spiritual and moral objectives. Despite initially creating significant awareness among the Ezhava populace and intelligentsia, the Yogam's evolution into a primarily Ezhava-centric organization conflicted with Guru's vision of a classless, casteless society. In an effort to address this disparity, Guru conveyed a message to a Special Conference of the Yogam held at Sivagiri, expressing his concerns.

On his 64th birthday made a sweeping indictment. "Liquor is poison; brew it not; vend it not. The tapper's body stinks, clothes stink, his home stinks, and whatever he touches stinks."

While both the wealthy and the impoverished, irrespective of caste or religion, indulged in this harmful practice, it was the households of the poor that suffered the most from its detrimental effects. Guru's message was a call to action for society at large. He believed that only through moral and spiritual renewal could society be reshaped, with economic relations restructured to prioritize equality and fraternity.

Whatever may be the difference in man's creed, dress, language etc. because they all belong to the same kind of creation, there is no harm at all in their dining together or having marital relations with one another." (Cited in Nartaraja Guru, Life and teachings of Narayana Guru, p.13.)

This marks the Guru's initial, explicit stance against caste differentiations, including the associated taboos on inter-caste dining and marriages. Another significant milestone occurred in Always with the 1924 conference on All Religions, personally spearheaded by the Guru. This groundbreaking event inaugurated the study of comparative religions in Kerala, with the Guru articulating its purpose as:

To understand

To inform, and

Not for disputation."

The annual conference, inspired by the Guru's vision, continues to be organized by his followers, drawing scholars from diverse religious backgrounds from India and beyond. According to his vision, resolving conflicts between religions and related ideologies requires embracing an open, dynamic, unifying, contemplative, and universal approach that resonates with the broader populace.

One faith in another's view is low , and the doctrine

Cardinal as taught in one, in another's measure, lacks;

Know confusion in the world shall prevail so long

As the unitive secret herein remains unknown. (Nnataraja guru,p.4)

Following India's independence, the Yogam underwent a transformation, diverging from its previous role as a force against the oppression of marginalized communities under the Guru's influence. However, in its later stages, it shifted focus towards establishing infrastructure for college-level education. The formation of the S.N. Trust led to the establishment of over two dozen colleges and numerous other educational institutions, effectively realizing the Guru's call to "Educate to be free."

Narayana Guru quietly but resolutely confronted the injustices, fanaticisms, and barbaric practices prevalent in society. He challenged Brahmanical prejudices by installing deities himself, despite belonging to an untouchable caste. His teachings emphasized the synthesis of divinity and humanity, urging individuals to introspect and recognize their inherent worth. Through his greatest message of "One caste, One Religion, and One God for Man," he advocated for a unified and inclusive approach to spirituality.

He envisioned a comprehensive understanding of Creation, advocating for the material prosperity of all as essential to societal advancement and promoting an inclusive, universal religion transcending regional and sectarian boundaries. This dynamic philosophy, revitalized by global dialogue, resonates profoundly.

Rabindranath Tagore, following a momentous encounter, vividly described Guru's radiant countenance and yogic gaze fixed on a distant horizon, evoking a sense of divine illumination. Guru's public ministry, characterized by directness, integrity, and brevity in both speech and action, demonstrated his profound wisdom and compassionate dedication to the people.

Despite facing opposition and challenging socio-economic circumstances, Guru tirelessly traversed Kerala, parts of South India, and Ceylon, extending his mission of assistance beyond geographical and societal barriers. The inscription on the walls of Advaita Ashram in Alwaye, founded in 1913, underscores his vision of human unity and equality.

One in Kind, one in faith, one in God is man, Of one same womb, one same form , difference none there is at all” (Nataraja Guru, The word of the Guru, Ernakulum: Paico Publishing House,1968) pp.3-4

Even today, the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru retain their relevance, addressing enduring challenges confronting humanity. Despite the evolution of the world since his time, the fundamental issues remain unchanged. Guru's unparalleled efforts over nearly four decades as an

organizer, preacher, and reformer left an indelible mark, particularly in uplifting marginalized communities, demonstrating the extraordinary impact of his work.

The life of the Guru was in every detail of it an example of the principle he enunciated as follows:-

The other man's interest, that is ever mine; what to oneself

Is beneficial is so for the other man also; such is the course of

Discrete conduct; all acts aiming each man's self-happiness

Must spell at once the happiness of the other fellow-man"

Nataraja Guru, One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction (Atmopadesa Satakam) - Translation and commentary. Varkala: Gurukula Publishing House, 1969, p.110

The transformative impact Sree Narayana Guru had on the marginalized communities in Kerala becomes truly evident when compared to the plight of their counterparts elsewhere in India. His paramount concern was the liberation of society as a whole. Unlike flashy preachers or verbose theorists, Guru embodied his philosophy through his actions, living his beliefs every day.

Sree Narayana Guru's life and work give us a practical demonstration of the way in which even the highest ideals of universal brotherhood and religious fraternity could be effectively used to reconstruct society. Even in the modern era, Guru's teachings retain their profound relevance. While the world may have evolved since his time, humanity still grapples with enduring challenges, ranging from pervasive corruption to existential nuclear threats, from entrenched social injustices to rampant violence. In this tumultuous landscape, what is urgently needed is the voice of a common man, speaking simple truths and propagating practical wisdom capable of penetrating the human conscience with the force of spiritual and material power. Guru's life exemplified his message, emphasizing the universal principles of unity, equality, and individual excellence.

His philosophy of oneness in humanity, religion, and the divine is applicable universally, transcending divisions of color, class, creed, and nationality. Let his message inspire a universal social vision and spiritual unity, enabling individuals to realize their full potential as members of the same cosmic family under the Supreme.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Jati mimamsa: - Sreenarayana Guru.
2. Life and teaching of Narayana Guru; Nataraja Guru. Srinivasapuram, India: East University publication,1990.
3. Nataraja Guru, The integrated science of the absolute. varkala: east west university of brahmavidya,1967.
4. Swami Vivekananda, complete works. Vol 1.
5. The word of Guru- an outline of the life and teaching of the Guru, by - Padmanabhan Natarajan.
6. Sree Narayana guru; K. Sreenivasan; Trivandrum: Jayasree publication 1989.
7. Atmopadesa Satakam : one hundred verses of self-instruction, written in Malayalam circa 1897.