

Sree Narayanaguru-The Social Revolutionary Of The South

Dr. S. Tamilponni,

Associate Professor and Head,(Retd.), Department of History, C. Kandaswami Naidu
College for Women, Cuddalore

Introduction

Sree Narayana Guru was a great Social reformer. He was an educational thinker, Philosopher and a revolution list. The greatest message of Sree Narayana Guru was "One caste, One religion and One God".¹ He was the first man in India who gave the darian call against Caste system. He believed in the oneness of god. Guru considered temples as educational institutions. Narayana Guru is not to be confined to a section of the society he was a boon to the entire Community. Sree Narayana Guru advocated that the humanity is the only one caste of mankind. The essence of Narayana Guru's message is that God exists in the heart of every one, all are the sons of the same God and all are equal and brothers before God.

Early life

Sree Narayana Guru was born on 26th August 1854 A.D. He was born at the Village called Chempazhanthy in the suburb of the city of Trivandrum, the present capital of Kerala State. His father was Madan Asan, he was a farmer. He was versed in Sanskrit, Astronomy and Ayurvedic medicine and he was a teacher as his name "Acharyan".² His mother Kutty Amma. She was sensitive and pretty woman. He was the only son of his parents in the family of Vayalvaram, the small cottage still remaining a Bhavathi temple called Manakkal. His family belonged to the Ezhavas which was considered untouchables. His original name was Narayanan and he was called by his parents as "Nanu".³ Nanu was a village boy. His silence, his voice and his kindly harmonized values expressed in his life work. Homes and relatives did not attract

Nanu. Nanu was also fond of sitting on the spread out branches of tree. During these years Nanu also took to gardening. It agreed with his sensitive nature to see seeds germinating and plants bringing forth the delicate flowers and edible fruits. Nanu was at the age of six a death occurred in his family. He was shocked by the grief of the relatives. Two days after the cremation the young Nanu was found missing. They searched everywhere and at last they found him sitting in a wood. When he was questioned he said "The other day when one died everybody was crying. Hardly a day passed and all of you started laughing as if nothing had happened.

Spiritual Activities

Narayanaguru was a religious man. He stood for spiritual development of people as well. The release of the soul from the bondage of worldly interests is the highest aim of life to him. As a practical philosopher Guru knew that without achieving development in his life no spiritual growth can occur.⁴ Narayana Guru left his hermitage in the maruthuvamalai in Kanyakumari district and he settled at Sankarankuzhi in Aruvipuram is a thick forest on the banks of river Neyyar in south Kerala. From 1884 to 1904 Narayana guru stayed mostly at Aruvipuram. He lived for sometime in the wood without being detected by anyone. One day, a young boy who had been grazing his cows near the forest went deep into the woods looking for a cow which had gone astray. This boy's name was Parameswaran Pillai. He became the first disciple. Day by day he received him as his devotees. Gradually people from all over Kerala began to visit the guru at Aruvipuram. Guru felt the necessity of establishing a temple at Aruvipuram.⁵ On the day of Sivarathri of 1888, in the presence of several hundreds of people the Guru concentrated an idol of Sivalinga at Aruvipuram. A small hut was built there a temple soon came up and was thrown open to all irrespective that this temple would be casteless and non-religion institution for

all together as brothers. It was an open challenge to the Brahmin Priesthood. A great Brahmin scholar came to questions the right of an Avarna, on Ezhava to install a deity. The answer given to the Guru has become famous "This is not a Brahmin Siva", "This is an Ezhava Siva".⁶

Social Reforms

The comprehensive scheme of activities which the Guru suggested to the downtrodden to take up for their advancement included social reforms also. As far back as 1912, he summed up the various proposals which he had been suggesting at the different times in response to the needs of each occasion. Education is the basic of all progress; society did have enough promising boys who could grow up as assets to any community. Lack of money was the main obstacle that prevented them from rising to higher levels. Rich men should come forward to help these intelligent, studious, hard-working lads by granting them scholarships and other monetary aids. Women education should be encouraged, and should never be neglected. Suppressed humanity should be made to stand up on its own legs. The masses should be provided with cottage industries and work places in the co-operative sector. Instead of continuing as suppliers of raw materials to the affluent countries and purchasing finished products from them at the high cost they should produce manufactured goods in this country itself and thus help the poor.⁷ Adult literacy and establishment of libraries in every locality should be encouraged. Learned men should inculcate modern ideas and culture in the illiterate through speeches, songs, dramas and similar means of development of culture.

Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam

The SNDP Yogam founded with its leader Sree Narayana Guru tried to fulfill the just aspirations of the needy in Kerala. On the social front, enthusiastic young Ezhavas like Dr.Palpu were trying of their community. Following the advice of Swami Vivekananda, he sought the spiritual leadership of Guru Narayana. The result is that the temple association of Aruvipuram was converted in to “Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yoga” (SNDP).⁸ The birth of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam is a milestone progress of the Ezhavas. The Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam or S.N.D.P.Y as it is popularly known, was a society founded in 1903 under the aegis of the Guru for the dissemination of the ideals of Sree Narayana Dharma among the masses and for the uplift of the down-trodden caste of Kerala. Anyone from any caste could be a member of the society. Quite naturally the reins of the society came into the hands of the Ezhavas, who happened to be in an overwhelming majority among its members. The Swami’s ideal, which was one of Universal was not affected by this circumscription of the society’s leadership because everyone of them working under the Guru was heart and soul for the uplift of all depressed castes. They were the more willing group to follow the Guru on the score that the Guru was born in their midst. This uniformity of the S.N.D.P membership facilitated the smooth management of the society.⁹

The Ezhavas were numerically the largest caste, a factor which lent strength to their movement. They had a pivotal position, being at the top of the hierarchy of the untouchables and just below the Nairs. What they achieved inspired all castes below them to emulate their movement for betterment, and induced the higher caste to examine and improve the customs and ways of their respective caste. The Ezhava tradition of Vaidhyas and Sanskrit scholars, landlords

and rich men on top among them equipped them for quick progress up the social ladder. Their leader was a great saint and so the whole movement was imbued with a spiritual aura. Moreover, they had already made some trial movements earlier towards bettering their position in life, and achieved some success although those attempts involved some sporadic violence. They, therefore, welcomed this opportunity of struggling with greater dignity. The S.N.D.P.Y had its vast annual gatherings. They were graced in its earlier days by the presence of the Guru who gave them guidance and determined the tenor of the deliberations. People assembled in hundreds and later in thousands, some special meetings having more than half-a –lakh of people who listened in pin-drop silence to speeches made without the aid of loud speakers.¹⁰ Those meetings would very often be addressed by the higher castes and also by officialdom, including the Dewan of Travancore and Cochin. The disabilities of the depressed castes dropped one by one like leaves in autumn until at last they could walk along public roads without fear of polluting anyone, use roads around temples, get admitted to schools, colleges and hostels, secure jobs in government services and even have certain percentages of jobs reserved for different groups of castes and then finally came the entry into temples in 1936. Travancore was the first state in India to grant those privileges to all castes what a miraculous achievement for the Guru who passed away or attained his Samadhi as the saying goes in 1928.

Vivekodayam:

Vivekodayam a monthly publication was started to give publicity to the activities and message of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yoghams which aimed at raising the cultural level of the ordinary man by a process of selective modernization. Kumaran Asan who edited the journal, was the greater disciple of the Swami and one of the greatest thinkers and poets of

Modern Kerala. Religious practices social customs and rites often have, the swami said, symbolic meanings which should not be overlooked. The magazine advocated a modern approach to inter-communal marriages and also in reforming and shortening the duration of various ceremonies as well as in the economizing in their cost. The status of marriage rites was raised to that of a sacrament, costly, meaningless customs were to be abolished. The orthodox who did not quite appreciate these changes raised the canard that Asan was writing on his own, without Swami's consent or even knowledge. This suspicion was cleared by swami at one or two public functions when he advocated the need to adopt these reforms by the community. In those days the marriages of non-Brahmins were, as a rule, merely social functions, the Brahmin marriages alone being sacraments with players, mantras, vows, poojas and all the rest of it, taking up three or four days time.¹¹ Swami converted the non-Brahmin marriages also into sacramental ceremonies with the performance of pooja, the chanting of Vedic verses, the exchange of vows, and with other concomitant observances, all of them handpicked by the Guru out of the elaborate rituals of the orthodox Hindu marriage system. And for those who were too busy for that, he prescribed an abridged version that would last only ten minutes. The Ezhavas and some of the higher castes used to conduct a mock-marriage prior to the regular marriage which took place only after a girl came of age. A small ornament called the Tali which was the symbol of the marital status was tied round the neck of the child by the person who conducted the ceremony.¹²

The real marriage ceremony, however, was performed after the girl had grown up, the bridegroom being someone else altogether. The Guru declared that this Talikettu function was meaningless and ordered its abolition. In some cases, he sent messages to this effect direct to the

parents of the children. In one or two instances, he walked into the midst of the crowd at the eleventh hour of the function and persuaded the fathers to agree. It is noteworthy that at one instance it was the mother of the child who agreed to the stoppage of the functions more readily than the father. Another custom stopped by the Guru was the public feast and function conducted, when a girl-attained puberty. These and other similar functions abolished by the Guru saved the families the thousands of rupees which were being lavishly squandered in carrying out social ceremonies that had become redundant in this age. In the due course of time the Nairs and other castes too stopped observing these functions after the Ezhava community had carried out the reforms at the instance of the Swami. Space does not permit the narration of all the social changes brought about by the Guru. Among them, however, the amalgamation of small castes deserves special mention.¹³ There were certain castes in Kerala who were numerically so small that those microscopic minorities suffered certain disabilities peculiar to themselves. They were unable to stand up against the atrocities committed on them. As they were scattered in different localities, they found it difficult even to get their children married to members of their own fold and thereby saved them from a social crisis. The year in which he did this was as early as 1906. As early as 1921, Sree Narayana stated that "Liquor is poison. It should not be produced, sold or consumed". It was more or less in this connection that he asked almost in despair. "A casteless society has to be formed who will work for it?". The thought led to the formation of the Sree Narayana Dharma Samaj consisting of Sanyasis whom he had enrobed and enrolled into the Samaj.¹⁴ The members of the Samaj were drawn from different castes including Brahmins, Nairs, Ezhavas and others. The institutions at Sivagiri, Alwaye, etc where caste distinctions had been wiped away from the beginning were run by this Samaj of

sanyasis who were brahmacharis with no worldly burdens of wife, children, family, etc. to restrict their service to their weal of mankind. They also run religious institutions, schools, charitable dispensaries, etc. Illuminating the minds of the lowest castes by the philosophy taught by the swami is also part their missions. For any social reform, an organization is essential.

Dr.Palpu

Dr. Palpu was belongs to Ezhava family in Thiruvananthapuram. He had his medical education at Chennai and served as Director of Health in Mysore. It is said, when Vivekananda visited Mysore, he stayed in Dr. Palpu's house. On that occasion he had discussions with Vivekananda about the upliftment of the Ezhavas whose condition was worse than animals in Kerala. Vivekananda advised him that if any sanyasi who earned the respect of the people in Kerala lead the movement for reform that would certainly prove successful. Dr. Palpu was the head of the public health department of Mysore on 13th may 1892 Dr.Palpu an assistant surgeon denied employment in Travancore but he had succeeded in getting the job under the Mysore government. Dr.Palpu was also a great social organizer. He propagates the ideals of Sree Narayana Guru. Sree Narayana Dharma in the model of a Sangha.¹⁵ Sree Narayana Guru's high dignity and sense of oneness with mankind did not allow him to give vent to anger or protestation against any particular person or community. He believed that there was only one caste for man and that was humanity. In this attitude he was uncompromising.

The humble temple association became a great social force. Though it was not a caste based organisation the whole community of Ezhavas where united under its banner. The name of the organisation meant an association for the maintenance of Narayanadharma. The basic aim of the Yogam has been popularise the message of Sree Narayana Guru and bring about the Social

and spiritual regeneration of the Ezhavas and other backward communities.¹⁶ Sree Narayana Guru was the first president of Sree Narayana Dharma paripalana Yogam, Dr. Palpu was elected as the Vice-president and Mahakavi Kumaran Asan as the General secretary. The Yogam took up the formal education of people and struggle for social justice. Eminent scholars and social workers like Kumaran Asan, Dr.Palpu, T.K.Madhavan, C.Krishnan and M.Govindan lived up behind the Guru to lead the yogham in the name of Sree Narayana Guru. On the advice of the Guru the Yogam conducted enlightened the people on matters of religion, morals and industry. At present there are nearly 150 educational institutions under Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam. The Guru visited Cochin State in 1903 in 1904 the second anniversary of the Yogam was celebrated at Cochin. Having been impressed by the advice of Vivekananda Dr. Palpu visited Thiruvananthapuram and enquired about Sree Narayana Guru. He came to learn that he was a social reformer and visited him at Aruvipuram. In the long, discussions he had held with Narayana Guru, he impressed upon the Guru to found an organization called Sree Narayana Dharmapariपालana Yogam in 1903.¹⁷ Dr.Palpu was instrumental in founding this organization. The Organisation under the editorship of Kumaran Asan brought out its media organ, Vivegodayam Both Dr. Palpu and Kumaran Asan under the leadership of Narayana Guru tried to taker efforts to uplift the Ezhava community. There after a number of educated and intellectuals from the Ezhava community developed the social reform movement for the Ezhavas. It is true that a society which was deeply religious and believed in superstitious practices began to look at Narayana Guru as God or the representative of God. The supporters of this social reform movement proceeded with on agenda that by any means the social status of the Ezhavas should be improved.

Guru Became a Social Revolutionary

In the last phase of his life one could notice a metamorphosis in his philosophy taking place and pushing him view the certain practices in rationalist way. In a letter addressed to SNDP Yogam in 1908 he said: “there is no need to build new temples at a huge cost. There is no need for the spending of money on temple festivals and other related activities. What we need is clean spacious rooms and halls for the people to sit and discuss about development. Each and every temple should have gardens and schools and there should be technical training centres attached to those temples for the benefit of training children. The offerings made to temples should be utilized for the benefit of the people”.¹⁸ Narayana Guru began to analyse the concept of God critically. He says “Both Siva and Rama were none other than the leaders of the people during different periods of time. It is likely that Lord Siva might have been the leader while wandering in the forest along with its associates. He might have been strong and virtuous. The star and other belongings of Lord Siva must have been added to his image later. I believe Rama must have been a great warrior of valour and courage. He must have been strong and had a helping tendency to help the needy people. It is likely that such a person had been made God.” In the year 1916 there is a turning point in the life and mission of Narayana Guru. He made a proclamation at Kollam as under: “we don’t have any personal relationship with any religion. We treat all religions alike. One can follow one’s own religion of one’s liking. Even if the Christians and the Muslims seek any help in their religious matters, we are glad to help them too. Sree Narayana Guru was not fully happy with the works of the SNDP Yogam.”¹⁹

In a letter addressed to Dr. Palpu in May 1916 Narayana Guru expressed his willingness to dissociate himself from the organization as it was tilting towards promoting the welfare of one

particular caste. This metamorphosis in his thinking clearly shows that Narayana Guru was above caste and religion. While delivering a lecture at Kollam in 1916 he said “the caste distinction created and practiced by our people have no meaning and purpose. They should be abolished forthwith. The feeling that one belonging to higher caste and the other lower caste is farce. I have made it clear long ago”. Narayana Guru was strongly opposed to the depressed classes being called as Harijans and lowest of the low castes. He says: “there is no lowest caste. There are pure and impure people and the distinction between the rich and the poor. That’s all”. Sree Narayana Guru advocated “one caste, one God and one religion” concept. He viewed the human society as one single entity. It indicates the establishment of a casteless society. It also ensures a society of not too many religions and the society wherein people lived with a sense of equity and co-existence. In one of his poems “Caste Determination” Sree Narayana Guru opens his mind and heart thus: “A man needs one caste one religion and one God. Since there is one feeling and one Vulva there is no distinction. If this is the situation how a generation takes its birth from caste. If we think of this, it would transpire that there is only one caste in the society.²⁰ Thus Sree Narayana Guru emphatically denied caste and totally opposed to the ideological and physical basis of caste system. Time and again Sree Narayana Guru insisted that people should have the liberty and freedom to declare that “there is no caste and religion”. While he was offering his views to newsman at Alwaye Advaita Ashram he said: “there is no opposition to our views about the avoidance of caste. The feeling about caste should go. We should do away with caste marks and affiliations: we should not show our caste in any of our writings. We should get permission from the Government to that effect. We should have right to deny or adopt any religion.²¹ If it materializes the caste system would disappear automatically

from the society”. Sree Narayana Guru found fault with Sankaracharya and Vyasa. He alleged that both of them advocated caste system. Again he openly criticized Sankaracharyar who deliberately stood in favour of caste system. In addition to his progressive ideas about caste and religions, being great humanist he had a piece of advice left for the wholesome development of human beings.²²

Conclusion

Narayana Guru was a modern prophet of benevolence. He fought for against caste system. Narayana Guru was the real beginner of Temple Entry movements. Narayana Guru can be considered as the fighter for rights and privileges of the weaker sections of humanity. He advocated women's education as a means of social progress. Narayana Guru was fought for against untouchability He stands out as a Shining example cultural culmination and spiritual fulfillment of true Jeevan mukta Karma Yogi, who identified himself as in the problem of common people. Sree Narayana Guru abolished animal sacrifices, he says that killing and eating animals is a sin. During this period child marriage was practiced. He had witnessed the ill-effects of child marriage and hence wanted to put an end to this practice.

REFERENCES

1. Ayyappan. A., *Social Revolution in a Kerala Village*, Bombay, 1965, p.121.
2. Moorkoth Kumaran, *Biography of Narayana Guru*, Calicut, 1971, p.154.
3. Nataraja Guru, *Life and Teachings of Narayana Guru*, Varkala, 1990, p.98.
4. Nataraja Guru, *The word of the Guru*, Varkala, 1990, p.76.
5. Kesavan. C.O., *M.K. Madhavan and Sree Narayana Guru*, Varkala, 1954, p.67.
6. Omana. S., *Philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru*, Varkala, 1984, p.78.
7. Parameswaran, *Sree Narayana Guru Swamikal*, Calicut, 1971, p.134.
8. Rajan Gurukul, *Cultural History of Kerala*, Vol.I, Trivandrum, 1999, p.187.

9. Raveendran, *Asan and Social Revolution in Kerala*, Trivandrum, 1972, p.176.
10. Sanoo. M.K., *Narayana Guru Swanu*, Kottayam, 1976, p.102.
11. Ramasami. E. V., *Social Reform and Social Revolution*, Madras, 1965, p.133.
12. Sathya Bai Sivadas, *Sree Narayana Guru, the practical philosopher*, Trivandrum, 1996, p.166.
13. Viswambaran. M., *Narayana Guru*, Kottayam, 1980, p.156.
14. Thurston, Edgar, *Castes and Tribes in South India*, Vol. IV, New Delhi, 1975, p.174.
15. Sathya Bai Sivadas, *Sree Narayana Guru, the practical philosopher*, Trivandrum, 1996, p.77.
16. Sreedhara Menon. A., *A Survey of Kerala History*, Madras, 1988, p.53.
17. Panikar. K.K., *Sree Narayana Paramahamsan*, Alleppy, 1976, p106.
18. Rajan Gurukul, *op. cit.*, p.132.
19. Kesavan Vaidyar. C.R., *Guru Charanangalil*, Thrissur, 1984, p.102.
20. Omana. S., *op. cit.*, p.58.
21. Nataraja Guru, *The word of the Guru*, Varkala, 1990, p.76.
22. Sreedhara Menon, *Political History of Modern Kerala*, Madras, 1987, p.166.