

# KERALA RENAISSANCE AND SREE NARAYANA GURU

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## *Abstract*

*Sree Narayana Guru was one of the key figures that developed the ideological premise for the renaissance in Kerala. His role in transforming feudal and caste oriented society of Kerala into a modern community is multi-fold and is hailed as the sculptor of modern Kerala. The life of this spiritual leader-portrayed the spearhead of Kerala renaissance, as well as his polyphonic philosophies, influence Kerala and its society even at the contemporary time. He was the 'avarana sanyasi' or lower caste monk, the spiritual leader of the Ezhava community, a free thinker and a revolutionary who fought for the destruction of caste and removal of untouchability from the social system. Guru was also an ardent devotee, a sage, a hermit, the founder of the temple for his community, Vedic philosopher, poet, organizer and so on in front of the democratic society of Kerala.*

**Keywords:** *Sree Narayana Guru, Kerala Renaissance, Untouchability, Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam and Dharma Sangham*

## **Introduction**

Sree Narayana Guru was one of the key figures that developed the ideological premise for the renaissance in Kerala. His role in transforming feudal and caste oriented society of Kerala into a modern community is multi-fold and is hailed as the sculptor of modern Kerala. This essay will consider the role of Sree Narayana Guru as a social reformer and organizer

### **1. Social Reformer and Organizer**

While accepting Narayana Guru as a social reformer, different opinions exist on the motive of his social activism. Many studies consider him as a progressive humanist. T Baskaran opines, "Guru's ideology is based on non-violence, generosity and human fraternity. Guru found the concept of conscious human equality from Advaita. The fundamental elements of Guru's teaching include truth, equality, fraternity and freedom" (*Sree Narayana Guruvum Manavikathayum* 365). K P Appan described Guru's vision as the 'symphony of ideological humanism'. He analyses Guru's humanism as follows:

“Guru’s humanism was God-centered. But, it did not have any theological fanaticism in it. Guru knew that the width and depth of spirituality had no limit. He clubbed the humanitarian trait with spirituality, as he had known it to function within the complex web of human nature. Guru tried to fill an individual’s spiritual experience with humanity while living amidst an ideologically spiritual humanism (9).

Contrary to the above study, there were other studies which find Guru as a Hindu sage who had worked hard to bring reformation to the social setup of Kerala, as can be found in P Parameswaran’s biography of Guru titled *Sreenarayana Guru Navothanathinte Pravacakan*, for example, where the biographer portrays Guru as a Hindu idealist sage. This chapter does not aim to answer whether Sree Narayana Guru was a social reformer or a religious reformer. Instead, the focus is on the style and nature of philosophies and ideologies that had visibly or invisibly influenced the social reformation of Sree Narayana Guru.

### 1.1 Aruvippuram Consecration and Other Consecrations

The lower or backward castes like the Ezhava caste had not the right to worship gods like Lord Siva at the time. Instead, they were forced to worship the local gods such as māṭan-maruta cāttan- and provide them offering such as liquor or blood of sacrificed animals or meat. Guru started his social activism at a time when the lower castes had not the right to enter the Hindu temple for prayer. M K Sanu says,

“Narayana Guru appeared into the midst of a caste order regulated by Brahmanic hegemony with his Aruvippuram consecration. It is impossible to describe the depth of revolutionary and reformative consciousness Guru employed at installing a rock piece and consecrated Sivalinga during a time when it was believed to be the divine right of the Brahmin caste alone to consecrate and install idols at temples” (Sree Narayana Guru Swami 8).

The consecration of the idol of Siva on a Sivaratri in 1888 was a process in which the right or power over the Gods enjoyed only by one caste of people was opened up for the Ezhava community who were considered untouchable and Avarna by the Upper caste Brahmins. This act had reflected a far wider impact than the need for a temple for the Avarnas. The verse he installed in front of the consecrated Siva idol proves this. Guru wrote,

“Jātibhedam matadveṣam  
Yetumillāte sarvvaruṃ  
Sodaratvena vāḷunna  
Mātrkā sthānamāṇit”

which is translated as ‘this is a model place of brotherhood where everyone, without a difference in caste and in religious customs, may come together’. T Baskaran writes “this sloka summarizes the important theories of humanity and radiates the noble traits of equality, freedom, and brotherhood in it” (“Sree Narayana Guruvum Manavikathayum” 349).

Guru's second phase of life as a social activist, revolutionary, reformer and a leader started with the consecration of the idol of Lord Siva at Aruvippuram. Guru continued the consecration of idols in over fifty Ezhava temples, where the deities were Lord Siva and other gods in the family of Lord Siva. At Kalavamkode, he consecrated Mirror; at Karamukku, he consecrated Lamp and the words 'Satyam' (truth), 'Dharmmam' (righteousness), 'Daya' (kindness), 'Santi' (peace) as gods; and the consecrations extends to Mangalapuram (Mangalore). In 1912, in the end, he consecrated Sarada at Sivagiri without ritual worship. The book *Aruvippuram mutal Omkareshwaram vareby* KP Balakrishnan lists eighty-one temples where Sree Narayana Guru made consecration, where it is said that some of the consecrations were actually made by Guru's disciples. There was one temple each in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka apart from the many in Kerala which Guru had sanctified. They are the Kottar Sree Pillayar Kovil at Kanyakumari and Kudroli Sree Gokarna Natha Temple in Karnataka. The book *Sree Narayana Guru Devan Prathishtta Nadathiya Kshetrangal* by K Sumangee Sadasivan, published in 2017, lists the forty-eight temples that Guru Devan himself had consecrated, and the author says that a few temples were not listed due to technical reasons. These temples were a source of new spiritual consciousness for the people of Avarna caste, as it brought them out of the savage worship methods which had included liquor, animal sacrifices, and violence. The temples were a challenge against the caste system, untouchability, and Brahmanic hegemony. It was beneficial in the sense that it gave the Ezhava community the strength to coordinate themselves into an organization.

The concept of administration of temples Narayana Guru had envisioned was unique. The upper caste Hindu temples at the time were spaces for chants, worship, and prayers, where food and generous gifts were given to Brahmins, and conducted major festivals in luxury and with savage worship customs. On the other hand, Guru had insisted on the following regulations at the temples he had consecrated.

- Temples should have a library.
- Temples should have schools. All religious texts shall be taught.
- There shall be centres to vocationally train the students.
- There shall be parks for people to sit and spend time.
- The amount the temple gets from people in the form of the offering shall be utilized for the benefit of poor people.
- No money shall be spent on Elephant, fireworks, and festivals at the temples.

Guru said that the temples need not be built in the traditional style rather what was needed was spacious room for everyone to come and sit, even mentioned that it would be beneficial to build temples in the style of Christian churches as it would aid well in conducting prayers, and while delivering speech (Sree Narayana Guru Vaikhari 92). Guru had said that temples were built as per the request of those who were fond of worship at the temple, and if the Christians or Muslims ask, Guru had said, worship spaces for them would also be constructed (Sree Narayana Guru Vaikhari 116). It was Guru's suggestion to conduct marriages in the temple like the ones in Christian churches. Although many experiments and reformations happened through the temples of Sree Narayana Guru, it is noteworthy that

Guru never had seen it as a conclusive solution to all social injustices. On seeing his temple structure transforming to theocratic centres, Guru had said in 1917:

“Construction of temples needs not to be encouraged anymore. People are losing their belief in temples. There might be chances that the money spent on temples might be felt a waste. The time has changed. Yet, people will not listen if they are told to forget temples. If needed, let them build small temples. The school must be the main temple. It shall be to the construction of schools that funds may be found for. Temples can create cleanliness consciousness. Temples were expected to become a platform to unify people irrespective of caste or class, but the reality is the opposite. Temples widen the caste difference. Now, the focus needs to be shifted to imparting education to people. Let them gain knowledge. It is the remedy to lead them right”. (Sree Narayana *Guru Vaikhiri* 92)

Sree Narayana Guru's consecration of temples at the time gave space for worship to the people who were rejected of the right to worship at temples. It is not only that Guru had not paid attention to the Brahmanic hegemony that questioned an Ezhava's right to consecrate temple, but also overcame it with logic. He envisioned favourable social centres of public acceptance instead of the sacerdotal power centres which the temples were. His concept of the temple was of a model space where everyone could come together in front of God without caste and religious differences. Although Guru wished the temples to transform into social spaces that support the spiritual and physical needs of the public, it cannot be said that his wish was or is fulfilled in its entirety. It is this realization that led Guru to step back from further temple consecrations at a time. Whatever the present state of things is, it is historical a fact that the temples Guru had consecrated were important milestones in the formation of Kerala's renaissance.

## 1.2 Against Amorality

Guru was against many of the superstitious customs and beliefs that were practiced among the Ezhava community at the time. 'Kettu Kalyanam', 'Thirandu Kalyanam', polygamy, polyandry, consumption of alcohol, animal sacrifice, and other such age-old practices were questioned, and Guru made moral and logical attempts at bringing an end to such practices. He brought a stop to the meaningless practice of Kettukalyanam or the practice of fixing marriage at the childhood of a boy and a girl. He destroyed the savage worship places of the lower castes where animal sacrifices and liquor were offered as offerings to the gods and prohibited any such worship. He made an end to polygamy by introducing a new tradition in marriage among his community in 1916. Guru had strictly prohibited the production and consumption of any form of liquor in any manner. The organization which was formed under Guru's leadership was to spread the fundamental moral values, which he believed ought to be the keystones of life among his people. It and other locally formed groups in Guru's name functioned incorporating the modern ways which

further aided the social transformation among the ones Guru had focused his teachings, as well as had spread his philosophy and ideology well and wide across the state and its people.

### 1.3 Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam and Dharma Sangham

Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam was started in 1903 as per the Company Act, with Guru as its president. This organization became a major channel of force in the renaissance in Kerala. Freedom to worship, reformation of customs, formation of modern family, promotion of education, protests for human rights including the right to walk free on public roads, agitations to provide Avarnas with opportunities at government jobs, representation at legislative assembly and socio-political advancement, development and protection of agricultural and industrial sectors, women empowerment, promotion of scientific and logical thoughts instead of age-old superstitious practices and so on were the areas in which SNDP Yogam made visible their presence within the first five decades of its inception.

Yet, Guru was also concerned with the later contraction of SNDP Yogam to just another caste organization at many places, which forced him to discontinue his affinity with it in 1916, evidence for which may be found in the letters Guru had sent to Dr. Palpu<sup>1</sup>. Guru had but tried to suggest healthy corrections, and made active criticism on the organization's functioning, as one may find written in Guru's biography. Guru had, though rarely, even attended SNDP Yogam programmes later. Sanu says that about this:

The last public meeting Guru had attended was also of SNDP Yogam, in 1928. In the first months of 1928, a special SNDP public meeting was held at Kottayam, in which Guru had participated due to the requests of T K Madhavan. His presence was a moral boost to those who came to participate in the meeting. T K Madhavan requested Guru to inaugurate meetings of all new SNDP Yogam branches to which Guru conceded by giving a certificate of registration to one hundred and eight newly found SNDP branches. This was the last function Guru had attended (*Narayana Guru Swami* 378).

Guru had envisioned SNDP Yogam as an organization to propagate his ideology of one caste and to socially involve into the various spheres of life to help the society and its people. He had prompted, "empower with the organization and rise with education" to his followers. The motto of the organization was 'One Caste, One Religion, and One God for humanity'.

Sree Narayana Dharma Sangham is the second organization Guru had started, on January 9, 1928, at Kurukkancheri Siva Temple in Thrissur. This was a monastic organisation that aimed at treating human beings the way he or she is, without being subjected to an appraisal of other characteristics or traits. This later became Sree Narayana Dharma Sangham Trust (Baskaran T. *Maharshi Sree Narayana Guru* 173).

The eleven disciples who were the first signatories in the formation of the Dharma Sangham besides Guru were Bodhananda Swamikal, Govindananda, Atmananda, Sugunanandagiri, Sankarananda, Narasimhaswami, Ramananda, Dharmatheertha, Neelakandan Brahmachari, Vidyananda and Swami Ernest Kirk. Guru's guideline for the functioning of the Dharma Sangham is delineated in his work 'Ashram'.

The Sree Narayana Dharma Sangham and SNDPY were formed following the modern model of form and function of organizations and notions. The offices at traditional monasteries are usually handed over to the successor chosen by the Abbot of the monastery. But, Narayana Guru, in his legal Will, instructed the members to choose their next leader in a democratic way, where all had opinions and voice. SNDP came into existence as a non-banking finance institution, and as per the Company Act<sup>ii</sup>. Its procedures were also set up in a democratic style. Magazines titled *Vivekodayam* and *Dharmam* were published by the Dharma Sangham to propagate their aim and concepts. The modern organizational style elevated democratic consciousness and the affirmative approach towards modern technology made the secular Narayana Guru the prominent face of the modern renaissance that was agreeable to all in Kerala.

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<sup>i</sup>. The letter Guru had sent on May 22, 1916, to Palpu who was a member of SNDP Yogam executive is as follows:

“As the decisions of the Yogam are made without our knowledge, as there is no be-hoof of the Yogam to our advantage, and as caste constructs are getting increased in the Yogam, I have left the Yogam from our word and action as I had it from our thoughts before. Narayana Guru (signature)” (Sree Narayana Guru Vaikhri Page No.264)

After this, Guru made a legal will of his Asramam and other properties and gave one of his monk-disciple the power of attorney to look after its functioning.

<sup>ii</sup>. P S Velayudhan explains, in *SNDP Yoga Caritram*, with examples, the method in which Sree Narayana Guru had taken decisions within his organization. Each one of his decisions showcases the highest sense of democratic value Guru had practiced. He had the habit of seeking opinions and advice from each and every committee members throughout Kerala through letters before taking any decision, and Guru used to shape the decision only in accordance with the responses to his letters, which was the case even in choosing an editor-in-chief for *Vivekodayam* Daily. Those decisions which faced oppositions or counter-comments were left to be decided by a majority of votes. Guru had practiced this in Kerala and at a time when no prior model existed among the society for an organization to function democratically. (Page No.113)

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