



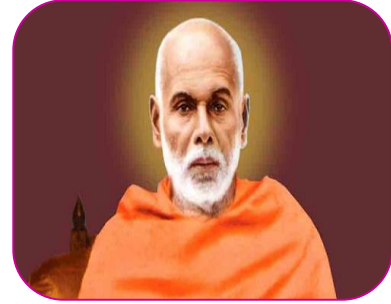
SRI NARAYANA GURU - A GREAT REFORMER OF MODERN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Narayana Guru was born in 1854 in a poor family of peasants of the Ezhava Community at Chempalanthi in Trivandrum District. The district was a bilingual area of Tamil and Malayalee culture. His father MadanAsan was a cultivator as well as scholar in astronomy and medicine. His mother was Kuttu. He had four daughters and three sons.¹Like VaikundaSwamigal, he too revolted against Brahmin ascendancy and campaigned for the mitigation of the rigorous of caste. He was an exponent of the principle of equality of men and an opponent of the inequalities in religion and society. He rendered great services to promote the welfare of the people belonging to backward and downtrodden communities.²



KEYWORDS: Narayana Guru , backward and downtrodden communities.

INTRODUCTION :

During his younger days Nanu was very active. He was also curious and inquisitive. From a village teacher by name Mutta Pillai, he learned to read and write Malayalam. Then he studied Sanskrit and principles of medicine from his uncle Krishna Vaidyan. Nanu was dedicated in the study the drammatrical literary works of *Thirukkural*, *Tholkappiyam*, *Manimekalai*, *Silappatikaram* and *Thiruvacakam*.

At the age of thirty, Nanu left his house, informing nobody, but after keeping a letter together with a gift of cloth for one of his friends, and walked southward to Marthuvallmalai located on the southern range of the Western Ghats near Suchindram and entered into a cave to perform *tapas*. When he had no food, he came out of the cave but could get nothing. At that time, an aged leper offered him a share of his food to him. He welcomed it and both of them ate the food. It is believed that as soon as they finished the lunch the old man disappeared. Subsequently, he spent his whole life for promoting the welfare of the people. He began his public activity as a rebel against the Brahminical tradition³. The right to install idols, and to conduct pujas in temples were the monopoly of Brahmins, but Narayana Guru opposed this practice. After bath and prayer, he took a stone of the shape of Sivalinga from the bed of the river Neyyar and installed it for worship at Aruvipuram a village near Neyyatinkarai. Afterwards, he moved from place to place and established more than sixty temples. He declared that of all men are equal before God, and thus, he argued the social revivalism in the society.⁴This bold act of Narayana Guru, upset the Brahmins who dominated the consecration of temples and other ceremonies connected with them.

The Brahmins questioned the propriety of Narayana Guru to consecrate a temple. But, Narayana Guru boldly replied that he did not consecrate Brahmin Siva, but an Ezhava Siva⁵. This reply attracted the people of Ezhava community and they considered him as their Guru and became his followers. They themselves officiated as priests in the temples founded by him.⁶On the walls of the temple, he inscribed his religious principles.

Sri Narayana Guru was closely associated with the untouchables and intermingled with them. He also took a few low-caste boys to his *Ashram* at Varkala and cultured them to adopt his principles with

regard to caste. He also instructed the students of his institutions not to ask any one of his caste or reveal to anyone his or her own caste⁷. He also campaigned against the observance of certain practices such as *Talikettukalyanam*, *Tirandukali* among the Ezhavas and achieved a large measure of success in persuading them to give up these practices.⁸ He believed that casteism was the main obstacle in the way a social, economic and political emancipation not only in Travancore but the whole of India. It is foolishness to think that there number of gods.⁹ He emphasized the fundamental oneness and equality of mankind and declared. One Caste, one Religion, one God for man¹⁰. He was concerned about man, rather than religion. His conviction was that religion is for man and not man for religion. One of his famous statements runs as follows: Whatever be the religion it is enough if the man is improved.¹¹

On 7 January 1904, Sri Narayana Guru, Dr. Palpu and poet KumaranAsan, Jointly invited many leaders of the Ezhava caste to attend a meeting at Trivandrum to discuss the idea of forming an organization to uplift the Ezhava community under the spiritual and social leadership of Sri Narayana Guru. This meeting decided to form an organization for the propagation of the ethics of SreeNarayana Guru, and he was made as its life President and KumaranAsan its Secretary¹². Thus the organization 'SreeNarayana Dharma ParipalanaYogam' (S.N.D.P) was established on May 15, 1903. It's first annual session was held at Aruvipuram in 1904 under the guidance of Sri Narayana Guru. The basic aim of the *Yogam* was to popularize the message of Sri Narayana Guru and bring about the social and spiritual regeneration of the Ezhavas and other backward communities. The S.N.D.P. attracted the untouchables of Kerala with its socio-religious programmes and united them.¹³

"Do not encourage the construction of Temples. If it is necessary to build small Temples, schools should be the important Temples. People should show much interest in raising money from the people and putting up schools. Attempts should be made to educate the people and that is the medicine for their betterment"¹⁴.

NaryanaGuru sought external help for the education of the people. He even asked the Pulayas to collect money from among themselves and with that money to educate their children.¹⁵ He realized that the distinctions of caste and untouchability were serious stumbling blocks to the progress of man. According to his philosophical understanding all are equal before the supreme being.

He had the vision of a casteless society in which all are equals. The idea of 'equality' had been popularized in India through western education, and through the spread of western thoughts, even though most of the people from the West maintained their racial superiority in their relationship with the people of India, the idea of equality, writes Nataraja Guru, the well known disciples of Naryana Guru, is perhaps the greatest single contribution brought by western culture to the east, where the stress is on the individual and the subjective and yield its full benefit and had turned tonic to life.¹⁶ Narayana Guru accepted this idea of equality and presented it to the people in a religious and philosophical setting which was truly Indian in every respect.

Thus Sri Narayana Guru set in motion a radical socio-religious reform movement. Throughout Kerala, from one end to the other, he built and consecrated scores of grand Temples of Sanskrit deities for lower castes and encouraged others to do so. Farther, he established Vedic Patasalas and invited Pulayas and other depressed classes to join in worship and study. Even though Ezhavas were highly caste conscious, they did not demur at the Guru's radical innovation. In his Mutts, he admitted all castes and creeds. Even he employed Pulayas as cooks. This was not a half-hearted tinsel reform introduced as a measure of social expediency, its permanency and seriousness permeated the whole life pattern of Kerala. But, unfortunately other provinces and states in India did not care to look at this welcome radical mass movement and imbibe its spirit. As a result of this movement, morally and materially Ezhavas became a force to be reckoned with. At the turn of the century, they were a weak community as a suckling swallow; but by 1920, their voice in the political, social and economic fields was something unequalled in Kerala by any other single community¹⁷. As they were now ripe for receiving social and political equality, the feeble flutter was still heard in the devotees of the Malabar society. But the major portions of the orthodox section had changed

their attitude and approach to social problems and admitted in their thought revolutionary ideas against distance pollution and untouchability. This was the result of the work done by Sri Narayana Guru.

The idealistic and pragmatic philosophy was put to practical use by Sri Narayana Guru for the uplift of millions of down-trodden people of Kerala. As Roman Roland said, 'He preached if one may say so, a jnana of action, a great intellectual religion, having a lively sense of the people and their social needs. It has greatly contributed to the uplifting of the oppressed classes in Southern India and its activities have in a measure allied to those of Gandhi'.¹⁸Untouchability, unseeability and unapproachability had become things of the past. Today caste distinctions are less pronounced and inter-caste marriages are general in Kerala when compared to other states.

CONCLUSION:

Through the work of Sri Narayana Guru, the untouchables have entered upon a new age, and made a discovery of their own personality. An unprecedented sense of self respect made them proud people and in the later politics of Kerala they were destined to play a major role. A wave of reforming activity surged over the land at the beginning of this century is a result of the teachings and social works of Sri Narayana Guru. Hence he can be said is a great reformer of modern India.

FOOTNOTES

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10. *Ibid.*, p.226.
11. KesavanVaidyar, C.R., *SreeNarayanaChinthakal* (Malayalam), Kottayam, 1972,p.73.
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16. Nataraja Guru, *op.cit.*, p.275.
17. S.N.D.P. *YogamGolden jubilee Special*, 1953, p.27.
18. Quoted in Krishna Chaitanya, Kerala, National Book Trust, India, 1972, p.54.