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Sree Narayana Guru: Reflections on Liberation of Marginalized and Promotion of Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Sree Narayana Guru had achieved liberation of the backward communities in a short span of time through a peaceful movement. How Guru had laid a strong foundation for the remarkable achievement of the backward communities in the social, economic, and political domain. Any change in the society is possible only by convincing the people about the truth with ample evidence from daily life that they are experiencing. In a society which is fragmented on the basis of caste and religion it was a phenomenal task to convince the people about the oneness of humankind. The contacts across caste groups were limited as the multitude of castes and subgroups led a compartmentalized way of life. The society in Kerala was too fragmented and disunited not only due to social inequality but also the inequality in the economic and political sphere. It was a time when superstitious socio-religious practices such as untouchability and unapproachability were enforced as the rule of life. There is no surprise that Swami Vivekananda during his visit to Travancore – Cochin Province in 1898 qualified the Kerala society as "Lunatic Asylum". The people of Kerala lacked any serious exposure to the idea of organization or the relevance of enhancing the common good. More than 70 per cent of the backward communities were illiterate and ignorant, public places including entries to schools, place of worship were denied to them.

Keywords: Liberation, Social Justice, Humane, Dignity, Caste

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SREE NARAYANA GURU CHALLENGED THE CASTE SYSTEM THROUGH HIS WRITINGS

Unlike other social reformers Guru had taken a different path. He had travelled through the length and breadth of Kerala and understood the social and economic problems of the downtrodden people through constant interaction with them. The problems of the society in general were comprehended by him through long travel and meditation. Guru at first challenged the rationale of caste system through his writings. His ideas on caste system and its fallacy were exposed mainly in three short poems:

1. *Jathi Nirnayam*

2. *Jathi Mimamsa*

3. *Jathi Lakshnam*

He had clearly exposed in these three short poems his theory on oneness of human race:

1. Caste is artificial, unreal, and meaningless
2. He had objectively provided convincing biological reasons to prove his claim that all human being belonged to a single race.



3. These three works are evidence of his indisputable scientific revelations on human genealogy.
4. Guru listed factual evidence from Nature on different species and compared and contrasted the basic biological attributes of each being in support of his theory on the oneness of human race³.

In *Jathi Nirnayam* guru defines human being as one race

1. The first verse was written in Sanskrit (which was considered as the language of the upper class) - *Manushyanam Manushyathwam*. The first quality of human being is humane in nature.
2. Human beings are to be considered as a race or caste.
3. It should be based on the natural traits common to all human being characterized as *Manushyathawm* (human nature). It is the quality of human nature which is the common quality visible in every human being.
4. Guru then confirms the commonality of human race by composing the following lines

- *Oru jathi Oru matham oru Daivam maushyanu*

- *Oru yoni oru Akaram oru Bhathavum illithil*

Meaning:

- Human race is one in kind one in faith and one in God.
- They make birth through the same biological process.
- In physical features as well, there is no notable difference⁴.

Thus, Guru had challenged the tradition bound edifice of caste system and its practice through scientific evidence and also through depiction of convincing examples from real life situations. Therefore, none could challenge his expositions regarding caste system and other evil practices prevalent at that time. And also, a vast majority of people belong to various castes, and religion accepted his elucidations as it was based on common comprehension. Even today no belief system including religious dogmas or social practices go unchallenged if it is not able to withstand the test of common logic of common people².

SREE NARAYANA GURU'S VIEWS ON RELIGION

It is interesting to examine Guru's exposition on religion. Guru considered that all religions are transformative paths for leading humans towards righteousness. All religion aims at the common welfare and contentment of individual. He had comprehended the teachings of all religions and came to the conclusion that there was no fundamental difference between their basic principles

though they take different means to achieve the same ends. The aim of all religions is to attain a contented life. The action leading to self-contentment should be the essence of all religions. Therefore, he exhorted "one religion, one caste and one God for humankind". He also believed in the essential oneness of humankind irrespective of caste, creed, religion, and region. He was also an internationalist who never made any distinction between various nationals.

His view on One Religion is elucidated through the following works:

- *Atmopadesa Satakam*
- *Arivu*
- *Daiva Dasakam*
- *Darsanamal*
- *Advaita Deepika*
- *Brahmavidya Panchakam*

Sree Narayana Guru exhorted that each human being has, in his mind, consciously or unconsciously, a notion about his goal in life, as well as of the means of achieving it. Always accompanying this awareness is the freedom to choose one's goal as well as the means of achieving it. If this freedom is denied, life becomes meaningless. Therefore, this freedom in human life is fundamental to human growth¹¹.

Sree Narayana Guru also maintained that life is a sort of progression from the past to the future. In this process, it becomes inevitable for human beings to reckon with the unbridled sense of freedom on the one side and total dependence on nature on the other, and to harmonize these two extreme poles. Here comes the necessity in human life of harmonizing the free will of a person with the will of nature, otherwise known as destiny. This harmonization, in fact, is what every religion enables man to attain. Even atheists, who outright denounce all religions, have their own religion, for they too suggest an alternative way for man to harmonize himself with the total.

In this context, religions promise that people can reconcile their personal freedom with the overall flow of nature which seems to care for nothing. Religion prepares us to perceive these two faces as pertaining to a neutral overall Reality and scheme of life. On its own, that Reality transcends the above mentioned dual poles. Nothing outside this One Reality happens in either the "free" personal life or the total nature. Religion thus shows us how to unite ourselves with the total Reality rather than with either of the opposite poles, thereby enabling us to fill our lives with peace and sense of fulfillment¹.

The process of unifying the will of individuals and the will of the total could be thought of as possible in two ways.



One way of doing it is to bring down the will of nature in conformity with the individual's Will. This apparently is not possible for the simple reason that the will of the total nature works in a way quite incomprehensible to human minds. Then the possible way is the second alternative - that of raising the individual's will in tune with the will of God. To comply with God's Will means to leave the will of the individual so flexible as to be in tune with the unpredictable and unthinkable will of God. That means, to make God's unforeseeable will as one's own, or to remain fully satisfied to what nature confers on us. Dependence on nature then becomes transformed as being one with nature. This sense of oneness with the whole renders life filled with the feeling of blissfulness and fulfillment. Life then is felt as being lived meaningfully. Such is the hope that all religions promise to mankind though they adopt different path towards it. This shows the essential oneness of humankind though they live in different compartments of caste and religion, created by human beings. This exposition, in fact, challenged the basic foundation of caste and religion structure¹.

SREE NARAYANA GURU'S SOCIAL ACTION

Having strengthened the intellectual foundation Sree Narayana Guru further moved towards social action. His consecration of Siva temple at Aruvipuram near Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala state has been considered as a revolutionary movement towards establishing the right of an individual to preach and practice religion according to one's will. Till then it was the prerogative of upper caste to consecrate temple. It is important to note that nearly five decades before the official declaration of "Temple Entry" to backward caste this remarkable initiative was taken. Thus, the Aruvippuram temple consecration of 1888 has been considered as revolutionary initiative to the liberation of backward caste by establishing their right to worship. This in fact had boosted the self confidence in the downtrodden people, as they also felt equal to the upper castes that have enjoyed certain special privileges in the Kerala society. Through this social action the lower caste people got the freedom to worship, which was denied to them.

SREE NARAYANA GURU'S ACTION IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION

Sree Narayana Guru had assigned great importance to education. He had realized that only through education liberation of the downtrodden is possible. This was mainly because the age old social customs and practices ingrained in their mind can be removed only through education. The lower caste people had themselves believed that it was their fate or destiny to remain as underprivileged. And it was all the more difficult to convince them that they are also equal to the upper caste in terms of all faculties of human being. The mindset of the educated upper caste could change

easily and therefore convincing them of the natural equality of mankind was much easier than convincing the lower caste. Therefore, education of the lower caste assumed great significance in Guru's social action. He had established several Sanskrit schools and also exhorted disciples to start schools in their locality, mostly in rural area. He had also encouraged his disciples to learn English; though it was considered as a foreign language at that time. Guru considered temple as a tool to promote education and to organize people. Guru had designed the temples in such a way that it also has a library, reading room and common hall to formulate common ideas. Another notable initiative was skill development. Guru had urged everyone, irrespective of caste, religion and gender, to engage in skill development and creative works. Guru has emphasized diversification of profession according to changing time and requirement^{5, 9}.

FORMATION OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATION SNDP YOGAM (1903) FOR THE LIBERATION OF BACKWARD

Another notable initiative Guru had taken was the formation of SNDP Yogam (organization) for the upliftment of downtrodden communities. He had realized that only through organization collective advancement of backward caste people are possible. Therefore, Guru had provided great significance to education and organization. Guru exhorted that "educate and be free, organize and be strong". The SNDP Yogam was open to all people irrespective of their caste, creed, religion, and gender. The Yogam worked to gain self-respect and enable everyone to lead a life with dignity⁸.

The formation of the SNDP was a milestone in the social advancement of Kerala society. The SNDP took the challenge to build up equal, just and free society under the leadership of Sree Narayana Guru, and the first revolutionary steps were mass education both formal and informal, spiritual and materialistic. The newly established organization had invited experts and leaders to deliver lectures on all aspects of human life; on organization, agricultural, trade, handicrafts, medical and technical education. Such an action had facilitated the people in Kerala State to acquire sufficient knowledge to put an end to ignorance, belief in superstitions and to acquire practical knowledge to alleviate poverty. Guru exhorted the people to abolish several ceremonies in connection with marriage and other family functions, which ultimately push them into debt trap. Similarly, Guru also urged the people to abstain from production and consumption of alcohol. He believed that the consumption of liquor not only adversely affects the individual mental and physical health, but it also has a negative impact in the family and social life. In short, Guru had initiated a holistic approach towards human progress, both spiritual and materialistic.



CONCLUSION

Sree Narayana Guru had understood the real problem of backward communities as he felt that “without proper education and knowledge people will remain immature and ignorant beings. Until they develop themselves, they will remain incapable of grasping the essence of noble ideals”. This observation Guru had made a century earlier is still relevant. The central and state government envisaged several programme for the upliftment of the weaker section including the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes, however, even after 79 years of incessant efforts their living condition is still deplorable. This clearly shows that unless the initiative to come up in life comes from the individual no amount of subsidy would bring the necessary transformation in the society. Again, we spent more on maintaining an administrative structure in the execution of different welfare programme for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, which again is a huge waste of money and energy. Instead, we have to follow the advice of Sree Narayana Guru in the welfare schemes addressed to the weaker section especially the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Like good

teachers who inspire their pupil, the government should empower the weaker section towards development⁸.

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