

SRI NARAYANA GURU- PHILOSOPHER OF THE SUBALTERN INDIA

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The history of the Philosophy (darshan) in India has been dominated by partisan descriptions of alien narratives made both by the Indologists and also by Indian scholars. It is depicted that the intellectual and epistemological contribution of the Native Indians consisting of the major chunk of the population was negligible if not zero before the advent of the Aryan language speakers around 1500 BC. It is curious to observe that the Harappans or their predecessors in and around the Indus or their expansive presence in the subcontinent had no knowledge systems to reckon with in the mainstream representation of Epistemology. How could a population that had built cities and even dry docks on the West coast and remnants of trade found with Romans on the East Coast in the prehistoric period endured without any knowledge however rudimentary it could be? Scholars like D.P Chattopadhyay¹, N.N. Bhattacharya² and others have written treatises on the contradictory nature of Veda and Tantra, the latter being an extension of the dualist philosophy of Sankhya. The epistemology of Tantra or the Asura View of life is the original thinking process with its own metaphysical elucidations as noted in Tantra and other practices and creations.³ There are parallel systems of thought in India representing the tiny or creamy layer of dominant alien thought and the subaltern thought of original people of the land called Native Indians suppressed, appropriated, giggled as superstition and marginalized. But, the Native tradition continued at the grassroots and in the every day practices of the so called lower caste people despised as untouchables. Buddha, the historical person, Nagarjuna as his follower, Vasubandhu, Dignaga, Dharmakirti and the Nalanda intellectual circle created sufficient ontology and epistemology drawing from the natives and expanding it as Vajrayana and other sects till the time of Kabir, Ravidas, Nanak and others can be considered as rival tradition to Brahmanism or Hinduism after 19th century. It is in the same tradition of dissent from within Sri Narayana Guru has emerged in Kerala.

Sri Narayana Guru was the epitome of the Renaissance movement in Kerala. It is amazing to reflect that within a period of one hundred years, a socially cynical, amiably inhuman and culturally cruel and economically abundant in resource base region was converted in to one of the most advanced states in India in terms of Human Development Indicators. The contribution of Sri Narayana Guru and his associates along with others in achieving this gigantic task is to be recorded and the message is to be disseminated for other states and countries to learn from the ideas , experiences and experiments from the crusade of Sri Narayana Guru (here after Guru). It is not a simple accomplishment by an ordinary person who was considered as an untouchable, despicable and unknown to the ritual learning of Kerala that was fully mired at that time in orthodoxy. The narrative of the kind of conditions of living and the religious mostly Hindu practices imposed on the majority of the toiling masses that produced food and provided comforts to the select few were treated like less than animals unheard of in any part of the World that had experienced slavery. Scholars indicate that Kerala (Chera) was never like the narratives recorded by the occasional visitors and traders of the medieval and colonial period, before. They provided us stories and narratives from folk literature and practices including the most significant festivity of not only Kerala but also the whole of the Deccan including Maharashtra, about the era of king Baliraj or Mahabali. How is it that Kerala that is considered today as God's own country for inviting tourists had silently suffered? How an institution called Temple has changed the ecosystem of a beautiful region in to an asylum? What are the human conditions of living material and non material circumstances that led to Guru to initiate a comprehensive movement of liberation?

There are few studies on the socio-economic conditions of the poor and the marginalized people in the mainstream academic World in India. The Indologists (Orientalists) seem to have not bothered about the social practices in operation, but only considered the rituals and the so called rich literary and cultural traditions of the few families mostly the feudal lords and their clique based on the written scripts available. It was the colonial civil servant who was posted in India after training found peculiar and typical social institutions at the

local level as alien and started reflecting ingeniously and recorded. Perhaps they must have observed the dichotomy between the classics that were translated in to English and made available to them at Oxford and the contradictory life styles of majority of the population at the ground level. They have started recording their observations as field notes and reports to the head quarters. A systematic approach to observe, study and report took place both in the presidencies and on request in the princely states after the first Census conducted in 1872 and thereafter. It is only through these documents the world came to know about India and not through the classics that represented the literati only. It is strange to find that a great savant like Swamy Vivekananda after visiting Kerala remarked that he found a lunatic asylum depicting the inhuman treatment meted out to the toiling masses. In fact his younger brother Bhupendranath Dutta wrote more on the social polity of India recording his observations as a trained sociologist. However, no serious attempt was made by scholars to reflect on his studies though he was a freedom fighter, a revolutionary and a comrade of M.N Roy. We may reflect on how the lower castes were treated as per the Census Commissioners who recorded their observations and the reports made by Riseley and others on 'People of India'. The lower castes were treated as animals and in certain conditions worse than animals as animals like cow, dog and others were permitted to roam around temples, but not human beings. In other words, the dignity of life as human was denied and several indignities were imposed to survive as human beings on certain people that were not the case in classical slavery in the West. Everything in the Hindu universe was reflected through the prism of the Hindu Temple an institution that came up on a large scale after the downfall of Buddhism, Jainism and Ajivaka practices. Interestingly, the historians particularly the ones whose approach was claimed to be materialist interpretation never considered the Temple and the dharma sastras that regulate it as a factor in the relations of production. Leaving the limitations of the data and studies, we have culled out some information about the conditions of the marginalized from the records of the civil servants as noted below.

Indignities Coerced on Low Caste Keralites

The dignity of human being was first reiterated by Thomas Paine in his classic 'Rights of Man' during the French Revolution and American War of

Independence. He has stated that 'natural rights are those which appertain to man in right of his existence'. This was echoed in the 1948 UNO Declaration of Human Rights. In the UNDHR list of rights, at the number One right, it is resonated that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." The idea of human dignity as emphasized here is the inherent value of every human person as worthy of respect being human. If the human is subjected to treatment that makes him feel ashamed and offends his position of self respect, it amounts to indignity. India is known for such indignities inflicted on humans by fellow others who arrogate themselves to be superior by birth. The infamous episode of how Nangeli a low caste woman protested against the breast tax imposed on women of lower castes like Ezhavas in the Kingdom of Travancore is a typical case in point. This is the highest form of indignity unheard of in any part of the World. We have record of such indignities as rules of conduct in religious scriptures, but their practice was recorded in the modern period through census operations.

The Census Report of 1931¹ refers to the three broad classifications of Hindu castes based on the right of entry into temples as;

- (i) Those who can enter into the 'Nalampalam' and the inner premises of the temple, and worship from the sides of the 'Sopanam', the steps leading to the Srikoil (the sanctum sanctorum). They are the high-caste Hindus.
- (ii) Those who can enter into the outer premises of the temple, i.e., the portion between the outer enclosure and the 'Pradaksanavithi' or the Nalampalam, in some cases. These may be treated as partially depressed or backward classes.
- (iii) Those who are not allowed to enter even into the outer premises, but can only remain outside the walls enclosing the precincts of the temple. These are the real depressed classes."

The regulator of castes, the gods on earth who descended on Kerala as per some scholars happened around 8th century AD from North India. They are known as Namboodri Brahmins has a different status. It is reported that " in appearance the Nambudiris were handsome in complexion. They grew the Kuduma or 'tuft of hair' on the bonnet. The Nambudiri lady too commanded winning physical charm. Being strictly Ghosa the women were confined within

their residences (Illams). Even in heavy down pour, the members of the other castes had to expose themselves, without donning an umbrella which was an exclusive right of the Nambudiri. So also their women alone had the unquestionable right to wear golden ornaments and neat and costly dress. Hence, they were the only privileged class, who had no social disabilities and whatever they dictated, was obeyed by all."²

In the caste hierarchy, at the apex, there was the Brahmins or the Nambudiris who were considered as the custodians of Vedic knowledge and so they were the authorities in the matters of Vedas and Mantras. The Kshatriyas were placed next to them. They, being a small section of the population, were the rulers of Kerala, exercising their sovereignty over their respective dominions. A group of the intermediate castes constituted the Ambalavasis and the Samanthans came below the Kshatriyas. The samanthans were the superior section of the high caste Nayars. In status, they were inferior to the kshatriyas, though a few among them were ruling chiefs. The Nayars, who came next, constituted a considerable bulk of the population.

The members of the low caste, whom the high caste looked in askance, included the Kammalas, Kaniyans, Ezhavas, Velans, Arayans or Mukuvas. Then came the Pariahs, Pulayas, Nayadis and hill tribes. Outside the periphery of the caste system, were two major communities, the Christians and the Mappilas, who grew in strength through proselytism of local people. Each village was practically a citadel of caste tyranny and it withered under the denial of social rights. Each village was practically a citadel of caste tyranny and it withered under the denial of social rights. Each caste group had its own residential area and the whole village looked up to the chief of the temple for security and for the maintenance of social peace. The Nambudiris were also the legal proprietors of the land. It is reported that the tenants of Nambodri, "bow down to him not simply as a landlord, but as their royal liege and benefactor, their suzerain master, their household deity, their very Ood on earth.. His person is holy; his directions are commands; his movements are processions; his meal is nectar. He is the holiest of human beings. He is the representative of God on earth."⁴ Another peculiar feature of the caste system was the observance of pollution. The idea of ceremonial pollution either by touch or proximity of a member of a

lower caste has been developed, with much elaboration in Kerala. " while a Nair can pollute a man of higher caste (Nambudiri) only by touching him, people of the Kansnalan group/ including masons blacksmiths, carpenters, and workers in leather, pollute at a distance of twenty-four feet, toddy drawer (Illuvan or Tiyan) at thirty-six feet, Pulayan or Cheruman, cultivators at forty-eight feet, while in the case of Pariyan (Pariahs) who eat beef, the range of pollution is stated to be no less than sixty-four feet.⁵ Thus, there was pollution due to proximity, which was known as inapproachability. Again, there was pollution due to contact, which was known as untouchability. A third kind of pollution was also there, which was known as unseeability. All these three kinds of pollution, viz., unapproachability, untouchability and unseeability were strictly observed by the lower castes in relation to the higher castes in the society. Later in the usual parlance untouchability is used as a general term without reference to the grades as noted above.

The concept of pollution had its sway not only on groups and individuals, but also to places. The same was true with the concept of purity. The temple precincts were generally regarded as sacred. Even the Nambudiri Illama lay far away from public thoroughfares, lest it should be polluted. The Kshatriyas who constituted the ruling class were kept by the Nambudiris under their effective control. The Rajas or the Kings had to execute the orders of the Nambudiris. The former were the nominal heads of the state. The relevant decisions were taken at the temple, in matters of State. In the words of K.P. Padmanabha Menon, the Nambudiris "were the Ministers of the Rajas, their judges on the Bench, their Generals in the field and above all their spiritual preceptors."

Among the slaves the Pariahs and Pulayas constituted the majority. They were regarded as untouchables and unseeables and lived in the most wretched and subhuman conditions. They were the worst among the untouchables and victimized at the hands of all other castes. The concept of Public Road was a contradiction in terms. Should the untouchables be engaged in work, in or near the road, they were compelled to place leaves, as a mark to warn the high caste of the former's presence, who, on seeing it, shout at the untouchables to retire, while the high caste pass through. The criterion of punishment too had its own conflicting features. Choice of punishment had its top weight on the

caste, not for the crime. Brahmins had the mantle of the Judge and their verdict never bore even an iota of justice. All sense of human honour and dignity got eclipsed, when the Brahmins sent the members of the lower caste to gallows. Another anachronism of graver reflection was that, even a king had no power to punish a Nambudiri, even if the latter deserved severe punishment. Still, it was a fact that the King should carry out the verdict announced by the Brahmins. But any verdict on the Brahmin, lays in the King's discretion hardly matters. There might be incidents, when the Brahmin decided against the King.

The above narrative is supported by the studies of a historian who said that, "using religious myths and symbols as a device for the glorification of contemporary rulers has had a long history in Brahminical tradition, and is not exclusive to Ramology. Ideas regarding the divinity of the king and the divine origin of kinship are traceable to the later Vedic literature."⁶ The brahminical appropriation of the fascinating Ramayana saga did cause some reaction in non-brahminical circles. The Buddhists stopped using the Rama legends in their discourse once Valmiki Ramayana gained wide popularity and Rama was integrated in the Brahminical pantheon. The Jains were combative. The Jain poets wrote number of Jain Ramayanas, broadly on Valmiki but in accordance their own ethical notions. The supernatural elements are eliminated. The Jain version of Paumacariyam, the earliest of Jain ramayanas was not acceptable, it makes Sambhuka son of Chandranakha (Surpanakha version) sister of Ravana. It is reported by Babhtosh Datta that the Ramayana in Bengali brahminical circles strongly resisted religious narratives in vernacular language saying "whoever listens to the eighteen puranas and the story of Rama in the vernacular language, would be condemned to Raurava hell." Tulasidas had also face stiff opposition from Kasi pundits. Prior to Tulasidas, Vishnudas translated Valmiki into Hindi. Tulasidas was against Kabir as he was from a low caste convert. Caste values were spread through Ramacarita Manas of Tulasidas.

Among the untouchables the Ezvas were considered to be large in size constituting three denominations. The historic origin of the Ezhava community is a matter of dispute among the scholars in the absence of proper material evidences. However, there are various views expressed by different authorities like William Logan, the author of Malabar Manual, an often quoted authority

who held the view that Ezhavas were not the aborigines of Kerala, but a group of people, migrated from Ceylon, between the first and the fifth century AD. They came originally from an island, while the other caste name (Ilavan) denotes an island that was Ceylon. There are other interpretations like Sanskrit Dvipan indicating Tivan, sometimes referring to the caste as derived from island. In the records of the Tellcherry Factory, the caste is generally alluded to as ' Tivee ' . Sinhala was the ancient name for Ceylon, and the other caste name o f the planters must have passed through Simhalam. This theory was on the origin of the Ezhavas, was vehemently opposed by Prof. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, N .R . Krishnan, E .M .S. Nambudiripad and others. P .C. Alexander holds the view that the Ezhavas descended from the Buddhist community in Kerala, which included Ceylonese immigrants and Malayan converts. Islam came in the medieval period while Christian antecedents such as St. Thomas are not infrequent. In the opinion of Kunjan Pillai that Brahmins alone came from outside Kerala and all others are indigenous. It was also noted by several scholars that Kerala as Chera was a confederacy of Tamilakam or Dravidian country. Jainism, Buddhism and Ajivaka and other Dravidian systems of thought prevailed and survived till the entry of the Vedic Brahmins who saw to it that their hegemony prevails over others.

Advent of Sri Narayana Guru- Silent Social Revolution

The Kerala of nineteenth century was found to be in excess of chaos, imperious Vedic Brahmin tyranny, Feudal encroachments under the hub of Temple complexes, social decadence and practice of inhuman slavery with agricultural productivity declining. The three princely states of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar under the protection of East India company later British India government have created terrible problems for the people. It appears that Kerala of the nineteenth century was different from its earlier self as a Dravidian or Tamilakam confederacy that stood tall against the Aryan expansion giving scope for typical customs, restrictions and archaic practices. It was never like this during the time of Chera king Senguttavan as depicted in the Tamil classic written by his brother Ilango in Silpadikaram. It is noted by K.B.Krishna that, "we find the division of society in to groups on functional lines. We see the merchants, courtesans, shepherds and goldsmiths, all living in separate quarters and carrying

on their occupations amicably."⁷ The author has further noted that in Kural, Tolkapiyam and Manimekhalai there is no reference to 'Sudra' and the rudiments of caste was challenged in Manimekhalai. It appears Caste and Sanskrit learning along with the Advaita intellectual genius of AdiShankara appeared to have emerged all at a time in Kerala on the West Coast of India. Sreedhara Menon, the historian notes that 'the first batch of Brahmin settlers reached here (Kerala) only in the 3rd century B.C in the wake of the advent of the Jains and the Buddhists'.⁸ The Kadambas, Tuluvas, Chalukyas, Pallavas and Rashtrakutas were some of the realms through which the Brahmin settlements started in and around 64 settlements in the region of Chellur. The impact of Aryanisation and their profound influence over the rulers who were persuaded by them to conduct yagas for long life and prosperity prevailed. The Brahmins eventually came to be looked upon as superior class of citizens entitled to special privileges. They came to be in possession of enormous landed properties and continued to enjoy special privileges as 'Janmis' and introduced charurvarnvya .The orthodox practices of pardah, the institution of sambandham and other unknown rituals and practices were imported. The sway over the kings and rulers some of them were created with their blessings' helped to spread to create a creamy layer of society and the vast majority as sudras and atisudras to serve them. It has come to such an extent that Swamy Vivekananda remarked that Kerala became asylum of mad people with inhuman practices. In fact his younger brother Bhupendranath Dutta, a trained sociologist and revolutionary who met Lenin along with M.N Roy wrote in one of his books that it was after Ramanuja , the concept of pollution spread throughout.⁹ There are other studies and writings along with the protest movements in the form of Bhakti poets in the North, Alwars, Nayanars and other forms of protest against the social and cultural decadence in the country in general and Kerala in particular have swayed.

Philosophy of Sri Narayana Guru

Sri Narayana Guru has emerged on the horizon of a decadent society to reform, renovate and reestablish the significance of the Malayali culture. It was during the East India Company later British India government, the princely states in India and the three kingdoms of Kerala went under the protection of the British and followed some of their policies. The neighboring Madras presidency

and Mysore princely state were found to be liberal in providing education and social allowances from that of caste order and have democratized education. This concession has helped some low caste Ezhvas, Sanaras and other untouchable castes like Dr Palpu to taste the non sectarian knowledge. It was around this time Nannu, the future Sri Narayana Guru was born in Chembazanthi 12 KMs from Trivandrum in 1856.¹⁰ His father Madan ashan a teacher and Ayurveda physician sent him to Mootha Pillai a savarna to learn Sanskrit and his uncles used to teach him at home. He has undergone training under Kummanapally Asan and became a teacher as Nannu Ashan. Like some of the protest ascetics, Guru had wandered for some years doing tapas in a cave, meeting people, observing Christian, Muslim, Paraya and other low caste people to gain knowledge about the function of caste system and culture that was parochial at that time.

The consecration of Sivalingam at Aruvippuram in 1888 is the most significant event in the social history of India. It was here that Guru declared that he has Ezhva Siva as distinguished from that of Namboodri Siva when some of them opposed him installing the stone as lingam. It is noted by some scholars that Guru declared "let shiva be here first, the spirit of life(atmabalam) will follow".¹¹ This is a serious assault on the hegemony of orthodox Brahminism at a young age of 32. No sage or ascetic or reformer has ever made this kind of a statement. We have Kabir in the 14th century; Ravidas whose abhangas became part of Sikh prayer, the protest poets including Vemana of Telugu country did never declared that we have a different god if not our own caste god whom I call Bahujana Hindu worship traditions from below. All that they used to pray in protest was about discrimination and inhuman practices in the name of god. But here Guru made a departure from the previous tractions of protest. This was a shock treatment that initiated a silent social revolution without violence. Geetha Suraj noted that Guru found the best means of solution to the Brahmin practices by using the very same temples 'to remove a thorn with another thorn' in a subtle manner. Like the Tantric Natha tradition of North India in the works of Minanatha, Matsyandranatha (also in Buddhism), Gorakshanatha, Kaivarta and Hadipa all are from lower castes, who opposed Brahminical traditions and asked their fellowmen to follow their own crafts that will lead them to liberation, Guru

initiated a different design of protest .¹²

It is reported that Guru has personally consecrated about 51 temples and by 1921 he changed the mode of installations with three pronged brass lamp and declared that let there be light and enlightenment. By the end of his life around 1927 the type of object to be kept in the temple is changed to a Mirror, perhaps a symbol of unity of the finite and conveys that god lies within you. He has written around 35 books in Malayalam, Sanskrit and Tamil describing his spiritual encounters, programme of action and instructions to his followers including the registration of SNDP and participation in Vaikom satyagraha initiated by T.K.Madhavan , Periyar EVR Mahatmai Gandhi and others. The following are the main teachings of Guru.

Adishankara and Guru compared

Guru's Advaita is different from Adishankara though the approach may be the same. In fact, it was not Shankara who discovered the metaphysics of nonduality as some experts eulogize him as such. It was already there in the Western tradition of Monism of Parmenides, Democritus, Heraclitus and in the medieval period Descartes, Locke and others have developed it further. Adi Sankara puts the entire philosophy of Advaita in half a verse where he says: 'Brahman is real; the world is an illusory appearance; the individual soul (jiva) is Brahman alone, not other (Brahma Satyam, Jagan mithya, jivo-Brahmaiva napara). The non duality of Brahman, the non-reality of the world, and the non difference of the soul from Brahman- these create the teaching of Sankara. For Sankara, there are three grades of reality. Prathibhasika-Satta (Illusory reality Vyavaharika-Satta (Empirical reality) All the objects experienced in our normal waking consciousness are accorded the vyavaharikasatta. Paramarthika-Satta (Ontological reality) Brahman alone is paramarthika satta.¹³ For resolving the contradiction on the realization on Brahman, Sankara hypothesizes two standpoints: the absolute (paramarthika) and the relative (vyavaharika). The supreme truth is that Bahaman is non-dual and reactionless.

On the other hand the Guru has used the term Arivu (knowledge) for denoting the Ultimate Reality. The philosophy of Guru summarized by Krishnan who noted that Guru uses the term Brahman only in the Darsanamala and

Brahmavidya Panchakam.¹⁴ The Guru gives a clear definition in positive terms as to what Atma is. The Atma is defined in the Upanishad as Sacchidananda. As per Sri Narayana Guru, the world is the apparent concrete form assumed by the one abstract Reality, Atma or arivu (knowledge). Sri Narayana Guru expresses his concept of illusionary vision and reality. All this (world) is of mind-stuff: the mind, however, is not anywhere. Like the blue and so on in the sky the world is seen in the Self. In the work Jatinirnayam he has attempted to confront the devil of caste discrimination. In the eyes of Veda, all creations are from the same creator. Therefore, all are brothers, born of the same parent or Creator, 'If this is so, where is the justification (place) for the existence of class discrimination? Using the same medium of Sastras, based on which the upper castes tried to establish their superiority, Guru pointed out the fallacy of the caste system, by proving that it is against the scriptures. Humanity is the race of humans. There is no difference between one man to another man and man to the woman at all. All differences are created by lunatics and fanatics.¹⁵ It is noted that there is a basic unity among human beings both physically as well as in scientific findings. In a plant, he said, 'there are roots, trunks, branches, leaves, flowers, and fruits, etc. Apparently, there seems to be a difference among these, but the sap flowing all through the entire tree is the same. "All men belong to one race and one caste. There is only one religion and one God.

Thus, it is clear that the approaches of Adisankara and Guru though appear to be the same, their ultimate objective of proving the truth of non duality between man and man, man and society are different. The obscure logic invented by Shankara barrowing it from his teachers who were Buddhist scholars of Madhyamika School was used to create an aura of Maya or illusion in the minds of the people who were at that time disapproving the excesses of upanishadic mantras and ritual bigotry perpetuated with the abetment of feudal lords who were just emerging. It was obliged by Shankara to link perhaps the alienated Nambodri Brahmin who just arrived in Kerala to link them with their North Indian blood brothers. Sankara used the Buddhist logic of Gaudapada , Dignanga, Dharmakirti who have shattered Mimamsa of Kumarila to reestablish the superiority of the Brahmin. Guru has developed his own concept of society, it is an expression of absolute reality. The non duality of beings is the answer to

social evils, advaita alone brings oneness. In his Atmopadesa, Guru resonates that all humanity is one caste, one religion and one god. It is in this context we can understand his retort to Gandhi and his ideas on caste. In a way we can interpret he is very close to Buddhist Sangham Saranam Gacchami. This philosophy qualitatively and spiritually different from that of Ramana Maharshi, KrishnaMurty and other Hindu seers whose ultimate aim is liberation of the Individual while Guru has endeavored for social liberation.

In one of the articles on the controversy between Muraleedharan the union Minister and Rajesh Education Minister from Kerala , Arun Murty a Professor Philosophy in his article in the 'Wire' retorted that "the oneness that Shankara expounded as a conscious principle is merely an empty commentary with abstruse expressions for erudite Sanskrit scholars to revel in. Beneath the veneer of scholarly sophistication lies the ugly sectarian view of Shankara as revealed in his own words."¹⁶ In his commentary on the Vedanta-sutras (aphorisms on Vedanta whose author is one Badarayana), considered to be his magnum opus, Murty has said that Sankara has made many references to these treatises in different contexts. At one place (his commentary on sutra II.i.1), he enthusiastically supports the Vedic text that declares "whatever has been spoken by Manu is a curative medicine". But one that is glaringly regressive is to be found in the commentary on the sutras I.iii.36 and I.iii.38. In his commentary (on I.iii.36), Shankara cites Manusmriti (X.126) in denying the purificatory rites for the sudras thus "the Sudra belongs to the fourth caste and has but a single birth" (Manusmriti X.4).¹⁶ This reminds us of the controversy between two Marxists EMS Namboodripad supporting Sankara and Kanai Benerjee his comrade denouncing him for distorting materialist traditions of Marxism in the journal 'Social Scientist' during 1990. It is interesting to notice that Benerjee has drawn the attention of the readers not only about the writings of D.P Chattopadhyay, but also Buddhist Madhyamika tradition that had full of Buddhist Logic as preserved in Abhidhamma pitaka. It is strange that none of the scholars has ever referred to this while discussing the Indian tradition of scientific enquiry that facilitated reason and social revolution in China, Japan and other countries where it was adapted. It is heartening to notice that Guru has sincerely studied,

reflected and put in practice the Buddhist logic in enunciating his programme of action to liberate the marginalized not only in Kerala but also in 'Casteist India'.

Guru has touched the conscience of the teeming millions who were suffering from discrimination and denial under the Brahminical tyranny not only in Travancore, Cochin, Malabar princely states but also in Madras and in the whole of India through his relentless struggle. This has inspired several groups and leaders to unite and join the social resistance movement under the leadership of Guru such as Ayyankali, Dr.Palpu, T.K Madhavan, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Mahakavi Kumaran Asan, Swamy Dharma Tirtha and several others including Periyar EVR at the Vaikom temple entry struggle . Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and other national leaders ardently followed his silent and determined movement of awakening the morality for human dignity in India.

Disseminating Sri Narayana Guru Crusade against Indignities

Guru was not a traditional vedantin confining himself only to preaching and providing illusory solace to the suffering millions of marginalized castes. He was a pragmatist in action. It appears that Guru used the Advaitic logic to explain the contradictions in the inhuman caste practices, rituals that harmed the human beings whose liberation through linking of Atma with Brahman, Adisankara toured India, leaving Kerala to be a lunatic asylum. Guru was a realist and a sage of universal perception in social praxis has designed and put in operation several programmes and schemes that should help augment educational strategies not only to propagate his mission but also to implement them as Educational modules. The following are some of the teachings and messages identified that can be translated in to action.

1. "Discretion is not automatic; you have to read a lot."
- 2 "Vidya is not to argue or win, but to know and convey."
3. "Religion is only a means of becoming God, the religion is not God."
4. "This world is in the truth, so don't lie. Only tell the truth."
5. "Everyone worships Ishwar not idol".
- 6."It is not right to be lazy."
7. "Start with cleanliness in the kitchen".
8. "It is not possible to make a fortune without industry."
- 9."Farming is the backbone of life."
- "Whichever the religion, it suffices, If it makes a better man."
- 10."One in kind, one in faith, One in God is man of one same womb, one there is at all."
- 11."All are of one Self-fraternity Such being the dictum to avow, In such a light how can we take life and devoid

of least pity go on to eat" 12."Ask not, Say not Think not caste" 13."Acts that one performs for one's own sake should also aim for the good of other men." 14."Love of others is my happiness, Love that is mine is happiness for others. And so, truly, deeds that benefit a man must be a cause for other's happiness too." 15.Grace, Love, Mercy -all the three Stand for one same reality - Life's Star He who loves is who really lives." 16."Whatever may be the difference in men'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 relation with one another." 17."Liquor is poison Make it not, Sell it not, Drink it not" , 18."Devoid of dividing walls of caste or race or hatred of rival faith we all live here In Brotherhood", 19. Girl's Education . 20. Industrial development and promotion of MSME, 21. Environmental protection , 22. Cooperative farming, 23. Technology development , 24. Cultivate Human Dignity 25. Human Rights education 26.Upskilling and Reskilling 27. Common School and brotherhood, 28.Oppose superstitions 29. Smritis are not gospel truth, interrogate 30. Industrial and Cultural exhibitions.

ODE as Medium to disseminate Guru's Message

The educational philosophy of Guru can be derived from his philosophical writings and his actions and programmes that have educational value. In fact, Guru in his early career acted as a teacher and in our ascription we fondly call him Guru, itself is a great tribute to a universal teacher working for the liberation of marginalized and oppressed community. In his Sanskrit works on Advaita and his assertion on self righteousness as interpreted by Nataraja Guru and others contains deep knowledge about the personal self and social self and their unity. He was insisting on discipline and devotion to duty the two important principles that guided all educational curriculums in the World was equally emphasized by him. Though Guru is not a materialist but a dialectician likes Buddha, he advanced several arguments including the importance of righteousness in life, can be interpreted as the ultimate goal of education. Like Paulo Freire in his 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' for Latin America, Guru developed an indigenous approach in creating Organic Intellectuals to fight against social oppression and economic exploitation. In his panchasuddhi he has elaborated on the purity of body, mind, word, senses and home. This

resembles the panchashila of Buddhism. This reminds us about the Buddhist Vinaya for the monks. It is noted that in his *sahodara sammelanam* of 1924, Guru mentions about the greed of human beings that has been responsible in destroying environment. He has also organized Industrial exhibitions to promote industrialization and for relocation of the traditional caste occupations in to modern professions. It is with great pride and surprise we notice that Guru stood for modernization and secularism. In all his philosophical writings and preaching one fails to notice any theological or Hindu or particular religious allusion, except universal appeal for peace and development. This philosophical approach of Guru enables us to draw inspiration and theoretical setting to design courses of study both in formal system or ODE.

Formal education was denied to the marginalized castes in Kerala as they were not even allowed to walk on the public roads. Sri Narayana Guru after studying the pitiable conditions of not only Ezhvas, pulayas and other marginalized groups including women, waged a war against superstition, discrimination, ignorance, illiteracy and other related issues during the 19th century that ushered in a silent revolution in Kerala otherwise a socially and educationally backward region. Though the natural resources of the region were conducive for everyone to share and develop, the religious and caste restrictions did not allow the people to modernize their occupations and take advantage of the fruits of science and technology due to illiteracy. Though scholars project that religious missionaries and some charitable organizations initiated schools and hostel for the education of the people in the early part of the 19th century, the literacy rate of the most backward castes like Ezhva was 1.37 per cent and Pulaya 0.09 in 1875. This has not crossed even one digit level in the case of Pulayas and just 11.5 per cent among Ezhvas by 1911.¹⁷ It was Guru and the programmes of SNDP Yogam through establishment of educational programmes under a scheme of Common School for all caste children within the precincts of the temples built and schools constructed with the voluntary contributions of the people. Guru has prepared the ground for a takeoff of educational and social welfare measures of the democratically elected governments in the newly formed state after 1956. The impetus given by Guru for educational development, Social upliftment and other constructive programmes the majority of the people of Kerala

who constituted Ezhva, Pulaya, Paraya, Kammalan etc and women of all castes got the opportunity to get educated in formal institutions. Kerala now boasts as the most literate state in India with 94 per cent literacy and number one in HDI rank (0.7), life expectancy of 75 and low poverty level in the Country. Along with the progressive governments that took interest in peoples programmes, the contribution of Guru in motivating people and the government to achieve this unique record is admirable.

It is under this background, we need to translate some of the 30 and odd initiatives of Guru listed above as educational programmes. As we are concerned here with Open Distance Education, we need to translate some of Guru's teachings in to educational modules. A module is a self contained subject matter with clear learning outcomes as part of semester course work. Before getting in to the division of the course in to modules, we should first identify the subjects or disciplines under which Guru's work can be studied. The following academic subjects can be identified for this purpose.

1. Philosophy
2. Sociology
3. Education
4. Malayalam
5. Linguistics
6. History and Culture
7. Development of Guru Hermeneutics

In addition to the above broad subjects, some of the subject matter that Guru created through his writings and the subjects under which his work can be studied as part of interdisciplinary studies. The subjects noted above are only the established faculty in which some units of Guru related knowledge can be incorporated as a unit of study and or optional paper. It is possible to encourage scholars and faculty to work on the above areas so that sufficient quantity of publications and literature are created so that Sri Narayana Guru as such can be offered as a Post Graduate course. An educational programme in modern period should address contemporary issues, identify gaps and design course to address the gaps. Kerala is an advanced state as far as education is

concerned, but the amount of human resources that are used within the state for development appear to be low in terms of huge outmigration. The out migration from Kerala, mostly educated constitute 24 lakhs in 2013 has however come down to 21 lakhs in 2015. The studies of CDS indicate that out of the current migrants 78.0 per cent belong to OBC, 7.5 per cent to S.C and 14.4 per cent to general category. It is interesting to note that 77.2 per cent of return migrants constitute OBC, S.C 7.6 per cent and general category 15.2 per cent. In other words, the proportion of out migration and return migration workers among the social groups remain the same with more from general category in the return migration.¹⁸ Though the study is related to a survey relating to Covid, the trend from other sources appears to be the same. This information is important for an economy that relied at one time mostly on remittances and was placed number two position after Maharashtra not only to the economy but also for adjustments in the employment market. It is here higher education and skill development play a role of upskilling and reskilling to make them employable after return. The manpower needs of an economy need to be linked with the education in general and higher education in particular for a growing economy that is undergoing structural changes, like Kerala.

The status of higher education in Kerala can be seen in terms of the number of colleges per lakh of population that stands at 50, next to Karnataka and Telangana. The number of universities in Kerala are considered to be one of the lowest with 23 while the neighboring Karnataka has 72. However, Kerala is promoting Open Distance Education as it has a total of 3.5 lakh students pursuing through ODE, of which undergraduate students are 2.9 lakhs and P.G around 60 thousands. This data indicate the room for PG courses through ODE of Sri Narayana Guru Open University. The economic statues of the state in creating employment opportunities appear to be open ended as agriculture sector contributes more jobs with less income ie 46.8 lakhs with 18.6 per cent in GSDP and service sector is not contributing as much in employment as in state income of 53.6 per cent. Keeping the above conditions, the ODE courses particularly the identified areas of study relating to Guru desires to be designed at the university.

ODE today has multiple sources of competition to survive in an age of AI.

AI is becoming a leviathan for online courses and formal educational programmes as it is providing easy access to the so called knowledge at anywhere- anytime basis free of cost or at reasonable price. India has developed SWAYAM, Shodganga, Digital Library and other sources of knowledge platforms for learners to access. However, Open Universities have certain advantages of a structured system with established traditions including teaching learning experiences awarding degrees with legislative sanction is different. They can overcome the onslaught of AI and related issues, provided ODE systems creatively design courses and the delivery mechanism with native flavor to make the courses native. It is exactly here that the learning material on Guru will make the course domestic or indigeneous. It is reported that the present structures of contact classes, evaluation methods and feedback mechanism are given little attention that defeat the purpose why ODEs were created in developing countries to meet the needs of the poor, unreachable and socially and educationally backward. You can continue with the outreach agenda not through AI or online sources but with direct human touch with learner support centres/ study centres. In fact, Sri Narayana Guru has worked all through his life to awaken the community to make every man and woman equal with the same endowments. ODE is one source that creates opportunities to meet the unreachable if designed and disseminated with care and empathy.

*(Modified version of Key Note address delivered at Sri Narayana Guru International Literary and Cultural Festival at Sri Guru Open University, Kollam, Kerala on 1st December 2024)

End Notes

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