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## The philosophical platform of social reformation in Kerala: A study based on Narayana Guru's Poems

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### Abstract

The neo-moral values and the anti-caste concepts Sree Narayana Guru had proposed had made Kerala walk to a new cultural space. After the decline of Buddhism and until the arrival of Narayana Guru's neo-moral fundamentals and values, the righteousness in the Kerala society was that of the fundamental values which existed within the boundaries of the caste system, and the piety was to uphold the caste system. Social interference Guru had made in the caste system, religion, Gods, mixed feast, mixed marriage, abolition of liquor, education, organization and so on was influenced by many factors such as the Christian missionaries, Advaita philosophy and so on, in which it needs to be analyzed whether any one philosophy had its influence more on his activities of social transformation than the others. Narayana Guru had made his stand on related social issues clear through his poems, which are known also as belonging to the instructive genre of poems. This article takes into consideration those poems as the main source of the study.

**Keywords:** Sree Narayana Guru, Advaita Philosophy, Social Reformation in Kerala, caste system, cāturvarṇyam

### Introduction

The neo-moral values and the anti-caste concepts Sree Narayana Guru had proposed had made Kerala walk to a new cultural space. After the decline of Buddhism and until the arrival of Narayana Guru's neo-moral fundamentals and values, the righteousness in the Kerala society was that of the fundamental values which existed within the boundaries of the caste system, and the piety was to uphold the caste system. Social interference Guru had made in the caste system, religion, Gods, mixed feast, mixed marriage, abolition of liquor, education, organization and so on was influenced by many factors such as the Christian missionaries, Advaita philosophy and so on, in which it needs to be analyzed whether any one philosophy had its influence more on his activities of social transformation than the others. Narayana Guru had made his stand on related social issues clear through his poems, which are known also as belonging to the instructive genre of poems. This article takes into consideration those poems as the main source of the study.

### Caste and cāturvarṇyam

The first social activity which Guru had indulged in after his meditation at Marutva-mountains was the consecration at Aruvippuram. Narayana Guru was introduced to the Saiva philosophy from the time he had joined Thaikattu Ayyavu, and the philosophy had played major a role in transforming Guru into a warrior who fights against the caste system. He imbibed qualities and concepts from the Tamil Saiva tradition which had not had any caste differences among its followers. It shall also be noted that the Tamil Siddha-Saiva tradition had not supported idol worship much. Guru's consecration of temple at the time therefore also indicates Guru's shift from the Siddha-Saiva tradition of philosophy. Guru had understood that caste injustices cannot be cut off with the image of a god existent only in the frame of poetic experiences rather it would need a physical embodiment of the divine presence which so shall be achieved through an idol of Gods.

When the existence of caste was practiced through the customary traditions of temples where idols of gods and goddesses were placed, Guru had used the same medium to deconstruct the traditional religious practices and the caste system behind it and declared his temples to be open to believers or people of all castes and religions.

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The consecration of Avarna God by Guru was, in short, aimed to brandish the caste system.

The maxim 'One caste one religion one god for mankind' which Narayana Guru had upheld has become the phrasal sign of Sree Narayana Darmam or philosophy. The ideology of Ayya Vaikunda Swami who was the life force of social reformation at the time before Narayana Guru was 'one caste one religion one god one universe one language'. The origin of the 'one caste one god' proverb of both Ayya Vaikunda and Sree Narayana Guru lie in the Tamil Saiva Siddha philosophy as can be seen in the verse "on-re kulaṁ on-re tevan" in *Tirumantram*.

Narayana Guru modified this ancient Saiva concept into his concept of caste. Guru wrote that as being a cow is the caste of a cow, being human shall be the caste of human beings and not Brahmin, Kshatriya or so on. Guru expanded his logic as written below:

Oru jātiyuru matam  
Oru daiṁvaṁ manuṣyaṁ  
Oru yoniyorākāram  
Oru bhedavumillatīl-  
Narajātiyil- ninnatre  
Piṛannīṭunnu vipraṇuṁ  
Paṛayan- tānumentuḷḷa  
Tantaram narajātiyil-?  
Narajātiyitor-kkumpoḷ-  
Oru jātiyiyilulḷatām<sup>[i]</sup>. (Jāti nir-ṇyaṁ)

Guru's logic was that the human kind itself is a caste, which means that all mankind is of one caste- the human caste. He dissected the cātur-var-ṇyaṁ system of belief with the scientific logic that all mankind are part of the same species, the population between the male and female genders of this species gives birth to the next generation, which was helpful enough for Guru to reject all the customs and traditions that had been part of the caste system. The declaration Guru wrote in his own handwriting and published from Aluva Advaita Asram in 1917 clearly states, "however different human languages and dress styles are, there is no problem in their inter-marriage and inter-feasting as they all belong to the human caste"<sup>[ii]</sup> (*Sree Narayana Guru Vaikhiri* 128). Guru theoretically disproved the caste law which stated men shall not intermix with other men of other castes in any function including marriage and feast by stating that men are one caste and therefore all sorts of relations are possible between them in any manner. Guru had received the nucleus of the one-caste concept from the Tamil Saiva tradition including the *Tirumantram*. If Guru had been influenced by the puruṣasūktas and smṛtis of the *Vedas* instead of the Dravidian concept of the unity of human caste and God, his perception of the caste system would have entirely become antagonistic.

Non-violence, exclusion of liquor from life, male-female relation, and many such matters which Guru handled had its initial bud in the Tamil literary culture of the time. T Baskaran points out the influence of *Tirukkural* in Guru while interpreting Guru's works such as *Jīvakaruṇya pañcakaṁ* and *Anukampā daśakaṁ*. He has explained the following sloka by Guru on the basis of various kuṅgals from the 33<sup>rd</sup> chapter titled "kollāmai" in *Tirukkural*:

Kollāykilguṇamuḷḷa pumān-  
Ilḷaykilmṛgattoṭu tulyanavan-

Kollunnavanilla śaraṇyata  
Mattellā vidha nanmayumār-nniṭilum<sup>[iii]</sup>  
(*Jeevakaruṇyapanchakam*).

He has also explained with examples the conceptual and symbolic similarity the fourth sloka of *Anukampā daśakaṁ* has with the eighth chapter, the "anpuṭe maiyyoṭu" of *Tirukkural*:

Aruḷillayateṅkil- asthitol-  
Sira nārūnnoruṭampu tānavan-  
Maruvil pravahikkum āmbuva-  
Puruṣaṇ niṣphala gandhapuṣpamāṁ<sup>[iv]</sup>.

The first mantra of *Tirumantra* also encourages non-violence, abstinence from meat and alcohol and so on. Guru gave importance to make aware the community to abstain themselves from the consumption of alcohol. The community into which he was born was one which was forced to take up the job of collecting toddy or producing liquor as their hereditary vocation. Guru asked his people to stop the collection and production of alcohol in any format as well as vocation related to the same. He had taught his followers that, "alcohol is poisonous, and it shall not be made, sold or consumed" (*Sree Narayana Guru Vaikhiri* 101). To stop the use of alcohol was a social need of the time because liquor had become an unavoidable part of Avarna life where alcohol had found its way even in their worships. Guru took away violence and alcohol from their worship. Being a person who had observed the ill effects of alcohol consumption in daily life and society, it is no wonder that Guru took a stand against the production and use of alcohol. The attempts to avoid alcohol from worship and daily life may find its root in *Tirukkural* and *Tirumantra*. The ninety-third chapter of *Tirukkural* is titled "kaḷḷunṇāmai", which also is the title of the last part of the first mantra in the *Tirumantra*. *Tirumantra* not only opposes the consumption of alcohol but any form of worship which use alcohol (*Tirumantra*, Tantra one).

The Aruvippuram consecration saw a young sage stepping foot into the social realm, to transform it, wielding the fundamental values of his philosophy. The period which was dark with constraints of cātur-var-ṇyaṁ and religious injustices, had to be fought, the energy for which Guru had found in another spiritual ideology which rejected the caste system and ill practices. His open-mindedness to accept modernity and logic along with his spiritual perception placed Guru in the lead among the social reformers in Kerala. The synchronization he had in his philosophy and practices made him more acceptable for the general public. Followers with modern education and the use of science and technology of the colonial modernity immensely boosted the circulation of his philosophical doctrines. The doctrines of Sree Narayana Guru and his organizations accepted democracy while following the western style in industry, job, and organization, which gave a new model and direction to Kerala. Guru thus becomes the first among the sculptors of Modern Kerala.

Guru was able to design a spiritual code of humanism which wonderfully conjoined with the democratic consciousness and humane values of colonial modernity. He found the medicine inside another philosophy of the land to overcome the hardship brought by the social system of Kerala and gave the newfound philosophy a functioning platform which

would work along with all progressive values. Guru's acceptance and position as a leader of renaissance and social reformation is the result of his success in merging the newfound spiritual philosophy to alleviate the pain and hardship the Avarna people had faced at the hands of social systems, culture, and practices in Kerala.

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<sup>i</sup>. Humanity marks out,  
Of what species humans are.  
Even as bovinity  
Does with cows.  
Brahminhood and such  
Do not do so in this case.  
No one does realise, alas!  
This apparent truth.

Of one kind, one faith, one God is man;  
Of one womb, of one form  
Difference herein is none.

Within a species, does it not,  
Offspring truly breed?  
The human species, thus seen.  
To a single species belongs.

Of the human species  
Is a Brahmin born  
As is a Pariah too.  
Where is caste difference, then,  
Amongst the human species?

Of a Pariah woman  
Was born the great sage  
Parasara in bygone days.  
And even the sage who  
Condensed the Vedic secrets  
Into great aphorisms,  
Was born of the daughter  
Of a fisherman.

Species-wise, does one find,  
When considered,  
Any difference between man and man?  
Is it not that  
Difference exists apparently  
Only individual-wise?

<sup>ii</sup>. The mixed feast which Sahodaran Ayyappan had organized at Cherai in 1917 became a controversy. The declaration, handwritten by Guru, points out Guru's opinion on the events that happened following the mixed feast.

<sup>iii</sup>. Not-killing-vow is great indeed  
But greater still is not-eating to observe.  
All in all, should we not say  
That even to this amounts  
The essence of all religions,  
O men of righteousness?

<sup>iv</sup>. The gift of Grace lacking,

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A man is merely an inert  
Body of bones, skin, nerves and foul smell.  
That person merely is  
Water flowing in desert sand,  
Or a flower without fragrance  
That is also infertile.

Is he not the worshipping form  
That once with holy ashes  
Drove out high fever  
Working in unworldly ways?  
Or yet is he not the *siddha*  
Who, wandering in agony  
And singing, allayed  
The abdominal pain severe?