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 INDIAN CULTURE

 **ज्ञान-विज्ञान विमुक्तये**

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1. Introduction:

The second half of the 19th century witnessed various social and religious reform movements in Kerala. The most important aspect of these movements in Kerala was that it awakened the lower caste people of the Kerala society from their age long slumber and their struggles against the evils of the Hindu society. This period marks an important turning point in the history of modern Kerala, as it paved for the revolutionary changes in the social life of the people especially Hindus. It is a reaction against the irrational practices and customs prevalent in the Hindu society. The dominant feature of Hindu society at that time was the predominance of the upper castes and relatively subordinate position occupied by the lower castes. The principles of social freedom and equality found no place among the Hindus. So this reform movement has as its aims the eradication of untouchability, the break-down of inter-sub-caste barriers and the abolition of many costly and wasteful social practices and customs. These Hindu reform movements were led by outstanding leaders like Sri Chattampi Swāmikal and Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru in Travancore and Brahmānanda Śivayogi, Vagbhatananda and Swāmi Ānanda Theertha in Malabar. All of them revolted against the then existing social order in which Brahmins (and other upper classes of the Hindu society) enjoyed a monopolistic position and eventually helped in ushering in a new social order in which the non-Brahmin communities came to have their legitimate place. Here we will deal with the social philosophy of Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru.

2. A Brief Biographical Sketch

Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru was an important figure in the modern Renaissance movement which inaugurated a new era in the history of Kerala by bringing about a radical change in the

traditional structure of the caste-ridden Hindu society. He was born on 20th August 1854 in an *Ezhava* family at Chempazhanti, near Thiruvanthapuram. His father was Madanasan. He conducted classes in Kudipallidoodam and was also a good farmer. His mother was Kutti Amma. She was a simple and pious lady. He was the only boy among the four children of his parents. From his childhood days onwards, he had developed a mental attitude towards devotion and spirituality. He had his first lesson in Malayalam and Sāṅskrit from Chempazhanthy Mootha Pillai, a good scholar of the locality. His uncle Krishna Vaidyar taught him Āyurveda, Sāṅskrit and astrology. He also acquired proficiency in Tamil. At the age 23, he was sent to Kummanpally Raman Pillai Asan, a renowned scholar at Kayamkulam, and there he acquired sound scholarship in logic and philosophy. It was here he became well versed in the Vedāntic and *Upaniṣadic* wisdom. He returned to Chempazhanthy after two years and started imparting knowledge and wisdom in local schools known as Kudipallikoodams to local children. These children were particularly, of the depressed and oppressed sections of the society.

But during this period of his life, Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru was passing through a mental struggle because on the one hand, he was obliged to support his family by fulfilling his duties and on the other hand, he was faced with an ever increasing inner urge for spirituality. Though his family members made him marry at the age of 28 to divert him, after a short period of married life, he left his house and became a wandering *sanyāsi*. He left his home in search of Truth and met several men, discussed with the ways to attain self realization. It was during this journey that he met Sri Chattampi Swamikal. He joined with Swāmikal in raising his voice against the predominance of the *Brāhmins* in all sphere of social life and in working for a new social order based on the principles of equality and justice. In those days he was known as Nanu Asan. Chattampi Swāmikal introduced him to Thykkattu Ayyavu who was a *Yogācāryan*. He studied under him for some years. Later he went to Maruthvamai in Tamil Nadu and was in contemplation for many years. There he attained supreme realization. After that he wandered in and out of Kerala and met all types of people. He dined with them, helped them to do their work in a better way and sometimes entered into religious discourses with them.

Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru's active public career started in 1887, when he established a Śiva temple at Aruvipuram near Thiruvananthapuram by installing a Śivaliṅga there. According to the Vedic tradition, the installation of the deity was the right of the Brahmins, but here the installation was done by an Ezhava. This act of Guru provoked the upper caste Hindus and they questioned him. He gave them a simple reply that he had installed an '*Ezhava Śiva*' and not a '*Brāhmaṇa Śiva*'. This reply was enough to shake the age old religious hegemony of

the *brāhmins* and other upper castes and it also represented the self determination of the lower caste people to fight against the caste rigidity and the upper caste domination. Thus Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru initiated a social reform movement through the 'Aruvippuram Installation'. This was a silent revolution to eliminate all evils in the Hindu society and to establish a society based on social equality. In continuation of the Aruvippuram Installation he established several temples in various parts of Kerala and appointed Ezhava priests in these new temples. Even the untouchables like *pulayas* were permitted here.

In 1905, he shifted from Aruvippuram to Varkala. Here Swāmiji constructed a temple and installed Sārada Devi (Sarañwathy), the Goddess of wisdom and education. Another important temple, set up by him is the Jagannath temple at Thalassery in 1908. In 1913, he founded the Advaita Āśram on the banks of the river Periyar at Alwaye. But this was not dedicated to any particular deity. One will have to worship the all pervading universal self as he likes. It is regarded as the highest form of temple worship. He wanted to show that the devotees can worship God with or without idols. Here he himself took classes to students in the *Gītā*, *Upaniṣads* and sometimes in Sāṅskrit also. In 1920, he opened a temple with the idol of Chidambaranatha (Śiva) at Karamukku in Thrissur district. His last installation was at Kalavmkodam at Cherthala Taluk where he installed Śakteswara, a combination of Śiva and Pārvathi.

The most far reaching and the most meaningful concept of idol-worship is enshrined in the mirror or *Kannadi pratistha* at Kalavancodam. The *Kavalancodam prathistha* reflects Guru's deep insight and extraordinary foresight. Through this process he demonstrated that worship is a psychological principle and that the effect of worship depends not on what a person worships but how he worships- in other words, his approach. With Kavalancodam, Gurudeva withdrew from temple construction and insisted upon the construction of educational institutions. Several centers were established with educational institutions, libraries and reading rooms. Through this, his aim was to make *Ezhavas* and other lower castes free from the dominance of the upper caste.

Before the installations of these temples by Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru, the *avarṇas* or the backwards worshipped evil Gods like Chattan, Chamudhi, Marutha etc. They were not allowed to worship other Gods, Śiva, and Viṣṇu etc. He stated a net work of temples throughout the state where *avarṇas* were also permitted to worship. He also removed all idols of evil Gods, and gave them new *mantras* to worship other Gods and asked the people to follow it. He abolished animal sacrifices also. Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru campaigned against the observances of the customary rituals and ceremonies like Talikettu Kalyanam, Pulakuli etc and gradually persuaded Ezhavas to give up these irrational practices. He was also against

the luxurious way of conducting the marriages. He asked the people to conduct the marriage in a most simple way. He also gave a call to the *Ezhavas* to give up the occupation of toddy tapping and to take to learned professions and industrial pursuits. He asked people to stop drinking and advocated not to do liquor business. He said that the earnings from liquor business are something earned by destroying so many others and their families and therefore it is a sin. He had to face stiff opposition from the caste Hindus for his works against caste domination and the caste rigidity and from his own *Ezhava* community also, for his reform movements within the *Ezhava* community. But in the long run, these reform movements initiated by Guru gave way to steady progress of the community in the educational and economic fields.

In May 1903, Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru founded the Śrī Nārāyaṇa *Dharma Paripālana Yogam* (SNDP) and personally guided its activities as life President till death. The great Malayalam poet Kumaranasan, a devout disciple of the Guru, was the secretary of the Yogam in its early years. This organization fought for many social rights denied to the lower castes. Its first annual session was held at Aruvippuram in 1904. But later Guru set up residence at Varkala which became his permanent headquarters thereafter.

In the later years Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru stressed the fundamental unity of the human race and took the view that religion should not consist of external and meaningless practices and rituals. He enunciated the famous dictum 'One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man' (*Oru Jati Oru Matam Oru Daivam Manushyanu*). Another famous saying of Guru was 'Whatever be one's religion, it is enough if the individual becomes good.' (*Mathmethayalum Manushyan Nannayal Mathi*). In short, according to him, the basic objective of every religion was to elevate the moral character of the individual and hence no religion or caste was inferior to any other. He also advocated inter caste marriages as a means of achieving social cohesion and thereby evolving a classless and casteless society. In his teachings he emphasized the imperative need for tolerance and goodwill among the members of all communities. K. Ayyappan was an ardent follower of Guru who started the brotherhood movement (Sahodara Prasthanam) in 1917 and made a crusade against untouchability. Guru also encouraged the Vaikom Satyagraha which was for the right for the backward classes to walk through the road near Vaikom temple. He met Gandhiji during this struggle on 12th of March 1925. He told Gandhi that to have the real freedom, the caste system and other evil customs existing in the society should be eradicated. Years later, Gandhi spoke at Kolkatta endorsing Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru's views. In 1924 he took the initiative in bringing together the followers of different religions on a common platform and he himself presided over the All Religious Conference held at Advaitāśramam at Alwaye. He stated that the aim of the conference was

'Not to argue and win, but to know and make known.' The aim of this conference was to expose to the world that the cardinal principle of all religions was one and the same and ultimate aim was self realization.

The *Darśanamāla* in Sāṅskrit is the most important among the literary work of Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru. In this the swami presents his views on Advaita Vedānta with remarkable clarity. In *Jātimīmāmsā* he exposes the irrational nature of the caste system. The *Ātmopadesaśatakam* in Malayalam provides a brilliant exposition of Vedānta philosophy.

By the time of his death on 20th September 1928, at Śivagiri, the social revolution started by him had become a reality. His sublime message, full of love for humanity was not to be restricted to only one community. Within a short span of time the works and message of Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru led to an awakening of the lower caste people and it paved way for the revolutionary changes in the social life of the people in modern Kerala.

3. Advaitic Re-interpretation in the Philosophy of Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru

Ādi Śaṅkara's interpretation of Advaita philosophy, recognized by the world over as the greatest exposition of Indian thought, speaks of the absolute oneness of man with Brahman. But the unfortunate twists and turns in its interpretation of '*varṇāśrama*' let the Hindus into a caste-ridden society, dividing man against man and degrading a vast section of society into 'untouchables'. Religion lost its credibility as a spiritual binding force for mankind and the caste system stood a rigid barrier against the progress and development of human society. It was at this time of misery that the Guru was born as a harbinger of hope and succor and as a crusader of freedom and self respect by re-interpreting the Vedic philosophy in its purest perspective and propounded the theory of Universal brotherhood of mankind. The application of *Sanātana dharma* and eternal truth in the day to day life of the humanity was his greatest achievement. His teachings were committed to the creation of casteless, creedless society respecting all the religions by understanding that the essence of all religions is the same.

Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru's philosophy is basically a revaluation and restatement of Advaita Vedānta. Reintroducing the same wisdom in the modern age of science giving full recognition to the scientific midst of the days in which he lived, was what Śrī Nārāyaṇa guru did. Exemplifying how non-dualism, as an applied wisdom, enhances the value of human dignity both in individual and social dimensions is the crowning touch of Guru. The Guru expounded the philosophy of Advaita (non-duality) in his own way in his works such as *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam*, *Advaita Dīpika*, *Darśana-māla*, *Vedāntasūtra*, *Brahma-Vidyā-Pañchakam* and numerous hymns. The non-duality of *bhāva* and *sat*, the non-duality of the

apparent world and Brahman or *ātman*, the one Reality, is established in these works. He held that ultimately it is one Absolute Reality or Ātman that unfolds itself in each of us, as our physical bodies, as the animating principle in us, as all the internal and external functional faculties and as everything in the world.

According to Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru the mind is what conducts the search for the all underlying Reality. That Reality is none other than the substance that has assumed the form of ht every same mind. Therefore what the searching mind has to do to know the all-underlying *ātman* is interiorize its search and realize 'That Thou Art' or '*tat tvam asi.*' The Reality that underlies my bearing is that which is real in another as well. Myself and others, being one substance, what is good and dear for me should naturally be good and dear for others as well. This principle, when applied in ethics, turns out to be the universal and eternal norm: 'The actions that ensure happiness to oneself and others alike are good; the actions that ensures happiness to oneself and causes unhappiness to others are evil'. This is an original idea contributed by the Guru to philosophy in general. In *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam* he wrote, "A compassionate man without any vested interest works both day and night for the welfare of others...whatever one does for the happiness of one's own self should also include the happiness of others. What is good for one and might cause disasters to another is opposed to the unity of the self." The Advaitic vision thus leads Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru to affirm human equality.

The Advaita philosophy of Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru is based on the essential oneness and identity of all life. He said that we should serve man as man, first because everyone belongs to humanity and secondly because that Ātman, the reality in man is non-different from Brahman, the ultimate reality. Man should attempt to attain the Ultimate Truth by discriminating between reality and unreality. God is the Universal Reality behind the world. To realize this basic unity is the supreme goal of man. For this one has to vertically ascend from one's individual consciousness of 'I' to a transcendental consciousness of being one with all. To attain this *Ātmavidya* (self-knowledge) of *Brahmavidyā*, man has to remove the veil of ignorance (*Avidyā*) through wisdom (*Vidyā*).

In *Ātmopadeśa Śatakam* Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru expounds his philosophy in its entirety, stating that there exists only one reality-the atman, unconditioned consciousness in essence. This is the entity that pervades through all beings, from the mind, the subtlest of manifestations, to the limitless physical world, the grossest of manifestations. Just as waves cannot exist separately from the ocean, the world of everything in it, including oneself, cannot exist apart from *ātman*, which is also known as Brahman. Inherent within *ātman* is the mysterious *māyā*, the power that causes all illusory phenomena to appear within itself. The world thus takes

from, branching into the internal subjective world and the external objective world. In essence, ultimately everything becomes reduced to *sat-cit-ānanda*.

A sage of science, Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru restates *Brahmavidyā* from the scientific point of view. The emphasis is given to *ātman* or *aham*, unconditioned consciousness/arivu in essence, which helps to resolve many of the philosophical riddles more easily. Ātman or *sat* is the substance that manifests itself as all that appears to be, either real or unreal. *Cit* is the consciousness that unfolds itself functionally as all forms of knowledge. It means consciousness or *arivu* and is most intimately experienced as one's self consciousness. As *ānanda* it is the measuring rod that evaluates every experience of ours as happy, painful or arousing indifference. The *ātman* or Brahman we are seeking, thus in essence is *Sat-cit-ānanda*. Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru in *Darśanamāla* exhorts to all that it should be everyone's goal to reach the state of salvation or the absolute merger with the Brahman from which there is no retraction.

The philosophy of oneness found expression in Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru's life as compassion towards everyone and towards every being. As each living being is simply a different manifestation of one and the same *ātman*, killing a living being means to kill one self or one's own brother in the self, an act no one would consciously choose to do. The Guru therefore became an ardent promoter of *ahimsā*. This very same compassion found expression in another way as his campaign against casteism, a social phenomenon that categorises human society into various levels from the untouchable pariahs to the most pure and holy *Brāhmin*. This social system has existed all through the history of India, vitiating its entire social fabric. The social movement against casteism that was inspired by the Guru's call was something unprecedented in the history of Kerala. Despite all such social developments that grew up around him he remained a yogi, a *tapaswin* par excellence, unmarried by anything, although sharing an interest in all things, helping each individual to liberate himself from the *avidyā*.

Thus Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru struggled for the equality of the whole of humanity in a positive way, by educating and developing the so called low caste people. He affirms the Advaitic vision as guaranteeing the equality of all human beings.

4. Social Philosophy of Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru

During the latter half of the 19th century, there existed a supreme challenge in Kerala in the form of social evils like caste discrimination, untouchability, extreme form of communalism, child marriage, economic exploitation, superstition etc. It was these social evils that made swami Vivekananda to call Kerala 'a lunatic asylum' because the caste system and other social evils prevalent at that time were utterly inhuman and barbarous. Huge proportions of

the population here were considered outcastes and were treated as untouchables. The *avarnas* were denied access to temples, schools and places of public resort and there were restrictions even on their freedom to walk without fear along the public roads. The practice of pollution was widely held. They were denied education and employment and government jobs were not given to the lower castes. They were not allowed to wear proper cloths to cover their nakedness. To the higher caste the untouchables were just meant to serve them with the lowliest of the menial jobs. They were tutored to believe that it is their fate to serve the higher caste Hindus and live in servility. This is a brief sketch of the pathetic condition of *avarnas* in Kerala during the last decades of 19th century. In to the vortex of such darkness and misery the Guru came as a divine messenger and revolutionized and reformed the society.

Today the picture is quite different in Kerala. Though caste still lingers in the mind of people, the rigid caste system disappeared in Kerala. Education has been made open to all and many of the *avarnas* now wield intellectual power and professional skills. Untouchability is unheard in Kerala. This transformation was brought about largely by the steps initiated by Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru. He based his philosophy on Advaita Vedānta and had a great concern for man and the social reality in which he lived. So he worked for the betterment of humanity and inspired man to seek self realization with a view to achieve self perfection which will result in social perfection. Now let us analyze his social reforms which form the basis of his social philosophy.

The caste system prevalent in India brought untold miseries to the *avarnas* or lower castes in Kerala. All human rights were denied to them. They were made to think that they are created by God to serve the *savarnas* (upper castes) without any wages. It was Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru who effectively fought against this caste system in Kerala. The writings in his work '*Jātilakṣaṇam* and *Jāti Nirṇayam*' advocated the message of 'One Caste, One Religion and One God for Men'. He was against the variations of religions and the many number of castes. He stated that the God almighty is the one for all religions. He advised the people that man should become good, irrespective of his religious belief. He called on the people to strengthen them through organization and to free them through education. He had given much importance to education.

5. Eight-fold Path of Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru

Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru initiated a series of measures to mitigate the rigors of the caste system and also to bring about a social and moral advancement in the society. For making an ideal society he advocated an eight-fold path which consisted of:

1. Education: Guru was of opinion that education leads any community to higher standards, and therefore we have to encourage it. Women also should be educated. He asked his followers to explain the benefits of education and encourage people for it. He held that those who are rich should try to educate poor students interested in higher education. He also asked to enthuse and help people to open schools and libraries in order to promote education.
2. Cleanliness: Cleanliness is next to Godliness. Hence Guru asked the people to keep the body and mind clean. He was of opinion that once we keep our body clean, the cleanliness of food and house will follow. One who has achieved this can achieve everything.
3. Piety/*Isvarābhakti*: Guru asked people to have *bhakti* or devotion to God. It is enough if one is having *bhakti* and faith. According to him, life without *bhakti* is like food without salt. It is enough if one is having faith. If faith is there, the result *bhakti* will follow.
4. Organization (*Saṅghaṭana*): Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru asked people to get strengthened through organizations. He was of opinion that small organizations should become the corner stone for the society's organizational strength. He opined that the working of these organizations shall be intelligent since it will be the harbinger of all future progress. He says that in the modern age, it is organizations and not individuals that are significant.
5. Agriculture: All shall do agriculture as it is the back bone of the mankind. It is also useful to make money.
6. Trade: He made it clear that improvement and progress in our society is possible only through trade and industry. It is the rich who have to undertake this. If sufficient money is not there societies and limited companies may be formed. Though the path to prosperity is open, men of our community do not have the courage to step out. We have to change this situation, says guru, because according to him development is possible only through trade and industry. People should try to practice what they have learnt and thus achieve success.
7. Handicrafts: He stressed the need for development of handicrafts. It shall provide jobs for more people and more utilization of indigenous materials.
8. Scientific and Technological training: Now a day's skilled workers are more required. Therefore scientific and technological trainings are essential. It provides jobs not only this country, but also in other countries.

To sum up, we can say that Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru stressed religion, morality, education and industry for the social, economic and spiritual development of mankind.

His Ten Commandments are as follows:

1. "Be enlightened with education
2. Be strengthened with organization
3. Make progress through industry
4. Do not speak caste, ask castes, and think caste.
5. One caste, One Religion, and One God for mankind
6. Whatever be the religion, it is sufficient if it is good for mankind
7. Whatever be the difference in faith, dress or language, as all humanity belongs to one caste, there is no harm inter marriage and inter dining.
8. Do not make liquor, do not drink it and do not sell it.
9. Spend judiciously
10. Man who knows dharma should work hard for the progress and well being of his neighbor."

Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru came from a section of a large population of Indian masses, who were totally neglected, oppressed and suppressed over thousands of years and exploited by the higher classes. They were worse than slaves and they could never think of being human beings. That was the condition of the masses called the depressed classes. These lowly people found a savior in Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru He stressed the need for education, culture and spiritual enhancement of his people. He consecrated temples, prescribed Sanskrit as well as modern education, economic and social development. He asked his men to stand on their own, with self respect and self help to increase their inherent capabilities. He gave shape to a net work of institutions to serve the people in the social, economic and religious needs. Thus in all his deeds and thoughts, Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru stands as the supreme symbol of hope and redemption to the depressed classes.

6. Summary

In the present chaotic world, the values of humanness, liberalism, secularism and universalism advocated by Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru for human solidarity and world peace seem to have been forgotten. Today we have religion but not faith. The universal and sublime philosophy of 'One Caste, One Religion, One God for men'-the clarion call made by guru is the only solution to all the ills affecting mankind. The teachings of Guru have relevance in

the contemporary world more than ever before because it is committed to the creation of casteless and classless society respecting all religions by understanding that the essence of all religions is the same.

