

# **MAKING A HARMONIOUS SOCIETY**

## **THE CONTRIBUTION OF SRI NARAYAN GURU**

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### **Introduction**

There are three categories of people in the society. The first category flows along the current of life. To be in the flow is life for them. They merely conform themselves to the prevailing patterns of life. The large majority of people belong to this category. The second category flows different from the main current. They exert a considerable force in order to diverge from the existing models. They break new grounds. They give birth to new streams of thoughts, interpretations and life styles. A minority of people chooses to live their lives in this manner. The third category of people flows against the current. They have in them an extra-ordinary human and spiritual stamina to stand against the deep-seated negative forces of social life. They make a significant paradigm shift in understanding and living human life. They become archetypes of a new social order. They become founders of new traditions of human life. They are radical human beings who are capable of rewriting the human history. Only a few people qualify themselves to belong to this highly privileged category. Sri Narayan Guru was one of those singular human beings in the world.

### **Sri Narayan Guru: His Person and Life**

20 August 1854 witnessed the sprout of a highly meritorious life in Chempazhanthi, Kerala. That was the person of Sri Narayan Guru who pioneered a unique revolution in social life. The journey reached its culmination on 28 September 1928. Sri Narayan Guru was a unique blend of philosopher, poet and social reformer. He was also a dramatist and a literary critic. He was a seer, a teacher, a mystic and an enlightened spiritualist, as well. He was a yogi, a humanist and a scholar of Sanskrit, Vedanta and Upanishad. He lived a simple life. Above all, he was a Guru of his own right. He had a clear vision in life and also the quality of determination to achieve it. He told his wife: 'We are all born in this world to serve some purpose. I have my work to do and You have Yours. Let me go my way and You go Your own way'. No wonder, he emerged as a great leader of his time. His life was one of renunciation, purity and simplicity. He performed the miracle of transforming millions of lives. He made a very successful combination of idealism and realism. He was practical in his approach to life. He fostered the perennial values of human life. He was a rare saint who harmonized spiritual fulfillment and cultural elevation. He was a leader of the common man.

Sri Narayan Guru contributed the most to the making of the modern Kerala. He was the social and spiritual force behind the social renaissance of Kerala. His message and actions had immense universal appeal. The Cultural Revolution he initiated in Kerala was capable of facilitating a release from the bondages of human life. He set his axe at the root of superstitions and discriminatory ways. He launched a campaign against unsociability. He preached the gospel of love and equality. He attacked the false practices that were prevailing in the name of religion. He shook the social conscience of Kerala. He played a major role in re-establishing the lost equilibrium of social life. The most outstanding milestone in his life was the parliament of religions he organized in 1924. This Parliament of Religions on 'Religions, Unite for One World, One Humankind, with Peace and Justice' at the 80<sup>th</sup> year of his Samaadhi is the most befitting homage to the unparalleled human being of his stature.

### **His Temple Philosophy**

During the time of Sri Narayan Guru temple had become what they were not supposed to have become. They were breeding grounds for meaningless rituals and customs. Temples had become places of discrimination and domination. They had become tools for systematic enslavement and suppression of the common folk. Aryan invasion made the situation worse. The local Dravidian temples were captured by the Aryan Brahmin pujaris. The illiterate and the poor, the Ezhava community in special, became victims of the superior-inferior considerations of the Brahmins. This phenomenon disturbed the dignity of the religious sentiments and disintegrated the society beyond all proportions. A situation of total turmoil and confusion was the consequence. In the words of Vivekananda, 'the balanced and integrated society of 1000 years became degenerated into a lunatic asylum'. The temples had to be transformed into places of serious search into the highest values of life, like equality, fellow feeling and love. They had to be recast into places of growth and progress.

The temple philosophy of Sri Narayan Guru was a revolutionary thinking. He got five temples constructed. They were five symbolic deeds that translated this revolution into action. Siva Pratishtha at Aruvipuram was the first one. Only Brahmin purohits were authorized to install statues in the temples. But Sri Narayan Guru himself did it. When Brahmin purohits reacted he asserted that it was an Ezhava Shiva he installed and not a Brahmin Shiva. Obviously, this non-violent protest against the exploitation of the arrogant priestly class was the right retort to the irreligion in disguise. A radical philosophy of equality of all human beings was the foundational vision that motivated this bold step.

The second symbolic gesture was constructing the temple of Sharada Devi. Sri Narayan Guru conceived Sharada Devi as a symbol beyond the traditional communal confines. She was the representation of the deity of knowledge or truth. She was accepted as the goddess of education. This temple oriented people towards the pursuit of knowledge and truth that was to be attained through a process of education. Education would help people to be enlightened. Education would help the humans attain human and spiritual values in life.

The Temple of Lighted Lamp was the third symbolic structure Sri Narayan Guru erected. It symbolized illumination of hearts with love, duty and compassion. The lighted lamp is intended to dispel all forms of darkness from the society. It is the darkness of ignorance, selfishness, discrimination and hatred that causes disharmony and violence in the society. Awareness of the divine presence is the Light that awakens human beings to positive inclinations. Light helps everyone to see and understand the different objects. The Lighted Lamp is the living symbol of the Divine that ignites, enlightens, awakens and empowers the human spirit.

The Temple of Mirror was the fourth temple in the series. Mirror helps one to see oneself. 'Know Yourself' is the message of the Mirror. This message was in line with the Upanishadic experience of 'Tat Tvam Asi' and 'Aham Brahmaasmi'. The Reality is one and that is Divine. The human has a coat of 'maayaa' or ignorance around him or her. When ignorance is removed human being realizes that he or she is the Divine. The Mirror facilitates this realization. The Mirror is the living symbol of the Divine that invites the humans towards self-realization.

The fifth temple Sri Narayan Guru installed was a Multi-Purpose Hall. This Multi-Purpose Hall was the culmination of the temple philosophy of Sri Narayan Guru. This was not a temple in the traditional sense of the word. This was a place where people could gather, pray, study, discuss and educate themselves. This was a place where people could get enlightened, strengthened and organized. This was not like a temple that is used only for some time during the day for ritual performances or prayer. This was a place that could be made use of any time and by anyone. This was a place that is open to all human beings, irrespective of one's affiliation to caste, class, profession, ethnic origin, language, ideology and culture.

The temple philosophy Sri Narayan Guru was an exposition of a radical and comprehensive philosophy of life. It is an evolution of thought that broadens its horizons step by step. The religious thought evolved into a secular perspective of life. Secular for some people is worldly or irreligious. But secular is a broadened understanding of the sacred. A line from Mahatma Kabeer makes this point clear: 'Jit dekhoon, tit toon', i.e., 'Wherever I look, Oh! Divine, You are there'. This is the idea

of secular, in the real sense of the word. The secular perspective of life developed by Sri Narayan Guru and applied in the temple philosophy is unique and is highly commendable.

### **His Advocacy for Renewing Life**

Sri Narayan Guru assessed the phenomenon of conversion from one religion to the other from a sociological perspective. He realized that discriminatory behaviour is the fundamental reason for the same. He condemned all sorts of superior-inferior considerations in the name of caste, creed, and the like. He stressed on ensuring everyone his or her social and economic rights for a meaningful life and growth.

He firmly believed that the whole humanity is one, because the same divine spirit glows in all human beings. The philosophical base for his thinking was the non-duality of the individual self and the Divine Self. Difference in the colour of the skin, language, religion, etc, is superficial and unreal. He condemned the caste system and unsociability as totally baseless, artificial and arbitrary. It is against the spirit of advaita. It offends human dignity, as well. The sad predicament of the humans is that they live in the prison of caste. He decided to promote education as a means for freedom from the enslaving elements of life.

He also challenged the highly expensive life style of the richer section of the society. He advocated the spirit of sharing to be practiced by the haves with the have-nots. He insisted on economic and simple ways of celebrations among those associated to him. He suggested gatherings in connection to marriage, death and feasts to be of maximum 10 people. He argued for total abstinence from taking liquor and recommended the traditional profession of tapping toddy to be stopped.

### **His Slogans for a United Society**

Sri Narayan Guru coined many meaningful slogans. Some of them are: ‘One in God, one in faith and one in humanity is man’; ‘One caste (humanity), one religion (humanity) and one God (universal spirit) for man’; ‘Education for freedom and organization for strength’. ‘Ask not, say not and think not caste’; ‘Whatever may be the religion, be a good human being’; ‘No religion is superior or inferior to another. Source of all religions is the same’; ‘If people are not allowed to go to the temple, let temple go to the people’; ‘Liquor is poison. Do not make it, do not vend it and do not drink it’.

These slogans of Sri Narayan Guru summarized his radical vision of life. They touched upon almost all areas of human life, especially the corrupt ones. They were direct, categorical and comprehensive. They were capable of penetrating into the deep-seated negative habits of people, both in thought and behaviour. They effectively communicate his message that is for all times and for all people. They have a universal appeal in them. They have awakened millions of people down the decades and have in them an inherent power to ignite a revolutionary renewal wherever necessary.

### **Towards Cross-Religious Boundaries**

Sri Narayan Guru was herald of a new social order. He shook the foundation of the old ideas of religion and society. He was a Guru above the religious boundaries. He never declared himself as a religious. He was happy to call himself a man. He assimilated the spirit of all religions. He was a contemplative Buddha, ever-loving Christ and delightful Krishna. He lived like a Hindu. He achieved great spiritual attainment. He exhorted his disciples to believe in God and not in any caricature of God. He was unhappy that the mentally ill people conceive religion as a niche for them to walk on the even road of life's uncertainty. He was shocked to find people self-complacent with the God of religion, the God of the temple, the church and the mosque. He affirmed the search for the God of Life.

It needs to be mentioned with great esteem and regard that Sri Narayan Guru organized the first ever All Religions Meet of India at Alua in 1924. He introduced inter-caste dining, too. Addressing the leaders, philosophers and thinkers of different religious backgrounds and social persuasions, he said 'We meet here not to argue and win, but to know and to be known'. His firm conviction was 'Rituals and stories are not religion. Code of conduct is religion. All religions in essence help man to evolve into a perfect human being.' He facilitated people to transcend one's own human-made confines of caste, creed, class, profession, ideology and culture. Through this endeavour he preached the gospel of universal religion. He initiated a culture of love, solidarity and equality. His pioneering effort for re-constructing human life and society is greatly commendable and inspiring.

### **Contribution to Making a Harmonious Society**

Sri Narayan Guru was a prophet of socio-cultural as well as spiritual transformation. He meditated on advaita and made a practical application of the same to life. He was a visionary and missionary at the same time. His philosophy of life was practical and was grounded on the unity of the reality of life. Reality is one and its expressions are diverse. He did not spare any pains in eliminating the basic ignorance of discriminating among the diverse expressions of that very same reality. He awakened the Ezhava

community, organized them, educated them and made them capable of standing on their feet as human beings. He liberated the human society, especially that of Kerala, from the superior-inferior complexes and succeeded in rectifying the equilibrium of social life. His spiritual perspective of life enabled him to go beyond all types of boundaries and to embrace every human being, in a spirit of brotherhood and love. He highlighted the most fundamental and meritorious reality in life by his own example 'be a good human being'. He directly targeted the areas of disharmony in the society and contributed greatly to making a more harmonious society.

## **Conclusion**

Created existence is characterized by multifarious limitations. Human life is a complex reality with immense ambiguities, as well. A few exceptionally superior human beings, through the merit of their own lives, have articulated the details of human life. Their unique perspectives have brought lot of clarity to the direction human lives ought to take. Their life styles became outstanding examples for maintaining the fundamental equilibrium of life, too. The contribution of Sri Narayan Guru to the making of a more harmonious society is a great source of inspiration not only for the people in Kerala and India but for the entire human society of all times.

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