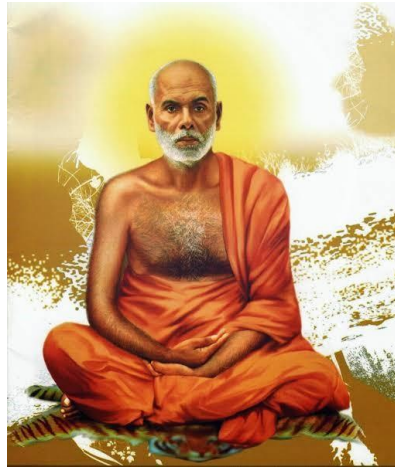




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Shri Narayan Guru

It was a time when the evils of the caste system cast a nasty shadow over Kerala. The 'avarnas,' as the low castes were called, lived on the fringes of a society that found their very shadow also polluting. It was at such a time that Narayana was born. As a child, he shocked his elders by questioning the system. As a guru, he strove to educate people about the oneness of God and humans.



Shree Narayana Guru was born on August 22, 1856 (1032 Chingam in the Malayalam calendar) in a Chempazhanthi near Thiruvananthapuram. His father was Madan Asan, a farmer; his mother, Kutti Amma, had three sisters. His father named him Narayanan; he affectionately called him Nanu, a short name for Narayanan. His family belonged to the Ezhava caste, and according to the social beliefs of the time, it was considered 'Avarna.' He gave the famous slogan,

"One caste, one religion, one God" (Oru Jati, Oru Matham, Oru Daivam, Manushyanu).

In the 19th and 20th centuries, India had the good fortune of having many eminent social, religious, and political reformers; the most important were Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi. These men have received international

acclaim either due to their ability to reinterpret the vedoupanishadic ideals of Hinduism and its relevance to modern man or their charismatic leadership. Shree Narayana Guru has not received this aura in the same tradition of socio-religious reforms, far more effective at the grassroots level and far more successful in bringing about concrete and creative social reformations in South India, especially in and between around Kerala. During extreme social ostracism and rigid religious orthodoxy, Narayana Guru preached the maxim of "One In Kin, One In Faith, and One in God is Man." He interpreted the Advaita philosophy as **"ALL MEN ARE EQUAL AND EQUAL TO GOD"** in its most universal social form. This philosophy made an indelible imprint of equality among the fertile minds of the people of Kerala, which ultimately helped to create socialistic thinking in the entire populace of Kerala.

There was no set pattern of actions that Narayan Guru followed, but his public ministry is distinguished by directness, correctness, and brevity in word and deed. He remained fully active yet filled with practical wisdom and compassionate concern for the people. He traveled from place to place throughout Kerala, South India, and Ceylon. Though his activities were mostly confined to Kerala, his mission of helping the needy people struck across geographical boundaries and the barriers of caste and religion.

The first act of his public work was at Aruvipuram, some 20 km south of Trivandrum, near a cascade of the Nayar river, where in 1888, Narayana Guru consecrated a Shiva temple defying the tradition that only a Brahmin priest could officiate at such religious acts. On the walls of this temple, the Guru inscribed the following:

"Without differences of caste, Nor enmities of creed,

Here it is, the model of an abode Where all live like brothers at heart".

(Inscribed on the walls of the Shiva temple erected by the Guru)

This temple was consecrated for those who were denied access to Hindu temples. Near this new temple, he also founded a monastery(Ashram) and formed an organization to protect temple properties and the welfare of the worshippers. This organization later became Shree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP, the society for Shree Narayana Dharma Propagation) with hundreds of branches all over Kerala, the most significant social force in Kerala, and the first such organization in India.

Shree Narayana Guru presided over two crucial conferences in Alwaye. The first was the annual meeting of the All-Kerala Association of Brotherhood in 1921, when the Guru proclaimed the following message:

"Whatever may be the difference in man's creed, dress, language, etc., because they all belong to the same kind of creation, there is no harm in dining together or having marital relations with one another."

This is the Guru's first open, definite, forthright statement against caste distinctions and its corollary of prohibition of inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriages. Shree Narayana Guru established three types of temples and brought about three specific reforms.

Firstly, he consecrated higher Gods in place of evil spirits and appointed trained, dedicated Sannyasins from the lower strata to function as priests, thus elevating them religiously. Most of his temples have a garden and a reading room to have an atmosphere of worshipping God with the purity of intent.

Secondly, he instructed his followers to build new temples in simple, inexpensive ways to utilize energy and money for other purposes. He reduced the customarily elaborate and extended temple worship to a more straightforward and shorter form. Regarding the building of new temples, his instructions were:

"Temples should not be built as expensive as was the ancient custom. No money should be spent on elaborate festivals and their pomp. Adjacent to the temple should be schools and reading rooms. Small-scale industrial training schools should also be attached to temples. The offertory at the temple should be used for the welfare of the poor people."

Thirdly, and most importantly, a notable change is reflected in Shree Narayana Guru's attitude towards idol worship. He wanted to elevate man to God, to sublimate idolatry to the pure level of abstract virtues, to lead the stem of devotion to the boundless ocean of Brahmin, the changeless and imperishable "Tat Tvan Asi" and "Aham Brahmasmi."

As we have seen earlier, the Guru lived in a period of renaissance in India: cultural, social, literary, and political, the abolition of Sati among Brahmins being one of the best examples. Shree Narayana Guru realized that if all of the communities need to progress, the cobwebs of many prevalent social evils must be eradicated. He propagated his message of social reform through the help of his close associates and the annual meeting of the SNDP yogam. The members of innumerable branches of the association were the agents to spread his message throughout the country.

The best-known of messages of Shree Narayana Guru is the one encouraging his followers not to observe caste distinctions. Right from the Vedic period, except perhaps during the Buddhist period, the caste system prevailed in Indian society. Adi Shankara's advent and emphasis on Chaturvarna (the four-tier social system)

aggravated this situation. The caste tradition was too deeply rooted in people's minds to be corrected by mere advice or preaching.

Nonetheless, Guru lived the life that he wanted others to live. He abolished all kinds of disparity in his headquarters, and all were admitted to temples consecrated by him. Poor children were taken as free scholars, and he taught them sacred books. Although the Guru did not live long to see the full effects of his campaign, his work helped to release the forces, which eventually contributed to the removal of untouchability entirely in Kerala.

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Shree Narayana Guru started a campaign against caste prejudices and religious bigotry based on this philosophy. He brought an awareness of human rights and an awakening of a sense of social brotherhood among all sections of society. The people at the lower social strata were craving to raise themselves socially; for them, he showed the religious and spiritual channels in the first place and the social means in the second instance for upliftment.

Shree Narayana Guru proposed three essential steps for social progress: organization, education, and industrial development. He believed in the necessity of organization in the fight against social evils, for organizations give strength to the people. In 1912 after consecrating a temple in Cochin, he said:

"... any caste can be uplifted through a good education. If we have any plan of improving the condition of oppressed masses, we must educate our children."

He preached to the rich to provide education to poor children who had an aptitude for learning. He encouraged students to go abroad for advanced study. He also advocated equal educational opportunities for women.

When people asked him to consecrate temples, Shree Narayana Guru sometimes urged them to start schools instead. As the Guru hoped, education had brought tremendous progress to the oppressed communities in Kerala. Unfortunately, this is hardly realized seriously in other parts of India. A significant shift in thinking is required in this direction. Thus, his reforms were directed toward the emancipation of the entirety of human life-the soul, mind, and body. It was an integrated approach to social development.

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