



## Sree Narayana Movement and The Social Transformation of Modern Kerala: Locating The Role Of Democratic Discourses Within The Community

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### ABSTRACT

Among the various factors that contributed for the transformation of Kerala into a modern democratic society the role played by Sree Narayana movement was most significant. Realising that the political power was the master key to social progress, the leaders of the movement came into tacit understanding with non Hindus, made permutations and combinations with them to maintain and strengthen their position in the society. Through their protests, incessant conflicts and assertions, they succeeded in transforming the pyramidal social structure of Kerala into pillar structure. From the position of caste victims they could elevate themselves to the makers of their own destinies. They also succeeded in politicising the social relations. The philosophies and pragmatic approaches propounded by Narayana Guru for the material and spiritual advancement of the backward caste people of Kerala was found successful that contributed for the social transformation from structural relations to human relations and from caste hierarchical structure to inter-personal relations.

**Keywords:** Colonial Modernity, Missionary intervention, Aruvippuram Prathishta, Civic Rights Movement, Abstention movement, Conversion Threat

**Citation:** Shaji A (2021). Sree Narayana Movement and The Social Transformation of Modern Kerala: Locating The Role Of Democratic Discourses Within The Community. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies*, 3(6), 337-343.

### INTRODUCTION

It is interesting to investigate the various factors that contributed for the progressive transformation of modern Kerala into a democratic society from the clutches of caste and class differences, feudalistic patterns and outmoded customs that instigated the sages like Swami Vivekananda to characterise as land of lunatic asylum. Till the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the modern state of Kerala presented a picture of the existence of caste taboos, *untouchability*, *unapproachability*, complicated inheritance laws, irrational customs and manners and unscientific land ownership. The Hindu society was pyramidal in structure where the numerically insignificant population enjoyed the privileges where as the non caste Hindus who constituted the rank and file of the society were denied all civic rights. Kerala was the most caste ridden part of India where pollution was observed in its vulgar form[1]. The Aryanisation brought about *chaturvarnya* hierarchy in the society, but unlike the greater part of India, below the Brahmins and Ambalavasis or temple servants, all other caste groups were treated outside the pale of *chaturvarnya* system. In the case of Non Hindus like Christians and Muslims, the caste hierarchy was not numerous. As per the Census report of 1901 there were 192 principal castes and 1070 sub castes among the Hindus where as there were only 14 Christian divisions and 47 Muslim divisions[2].

In the Kerala society the lower caste people were subjected to slavery, humiliation and exploitation and were forced to live with no voices. They were not permitted to enter into some areas, prevented from constructing big houses, carry umbrellas, wear shoes, use descent languages and study modern science and arts. Their women folk were not permitted to cover the upper parts of their body and wear gold ornaments, but have to use stone chains known then in Malayalam as *kallumala*. Several feudal taxes including breast tax, hair tax etc. was collected from the lower caste people by the state which has been legitimised by the Brahmin law givers. The lower caste Hindus were neither permitted to enter into the public offices like post office and village office nor walk through the approach roads of the temples due to the obnoxious practice of pollution. All public amenities built out of public funds were reserved for the use of upper castes and hence the lower caste people could not use rest houses, public wells and so on and so forth. A system of forced labour known as *uzhiyam* and free labour known as *viruthy* were imposed on the lower caste people. The practice of *brahmadeya*, *agrhara* and *devadana* land grant systems made the socio- economic condition of the higher castes very comfortable. The rulers of the state appeased the higher castes, especially Brahmins through the uttupuras or free feeding houses for the Brahmins and ceremonies like murajapam, thulabharam etc. It was King Marthandavarma, the maker of modern Travancore who introduced the practice of murajapam in 1749. It was a ceremony of chanting verdict manthras which

consisted of sahasranamajapam, mantrajapam, murajapam and jalajapam- the whole ceremony lasted for 56 days. Huge amount was spent from the treasury for appeasing the Brahmins who engaged in the murajapam ceremonies.

In practice the socio-economic system that prevailed in Kerala was nothing but theocratic feudalism. The structure and working of the Kerala society was determined by the caste status and not economic status, where the birth not money that determined the status of an individual, a typical pattern that prevailed in the rest of the country. The purity-pollution dichotomy was the core philosophy that ruled the hierarchical division of the Hindu society of Kerala. Every aspect of life was determined by the caste; whether it is political, social, religious or economic and the class division of the society was only a later development. In traditional Hindu society, this 'divine inequality' was held high as the order of the day[3]. The system that prevailed in the state was like that of the system of slavery practiced in America and apartheid prevailed in African continents. Kumaran Asan, a poet and social revolutionary of Kerala stated that, "the cruelty and ruthlessness shown to the lower castes of Kerala by the higher castes were comparable to the cruelty shown to the aborigines of America by the settlers from Spain. It would have been no wonder if the people of the lower castes decided to leave their villages and go to the forests and live like animals reversing the process described in Darwin's theory of evolution"[4]. The institutionalised oppression prevailed in the Kerala society was so deep that it was impossible to identify it as oppression.

### **Winds of Change in Kerala Society**

Towards the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century winds of change began to appear in the Kerala society, due to the growth of national consciousness and colonial interventions. Introduction of English education and intervention of Christian missionaries brought about changes of great magnitude. The emergence of a powerful leadership from among the people, its perception of the situation and the capacity to act accordingly, the formation of a counter ideology, change in the material conditions of production, in certain situations interface with external forces-vis-a-vis colonial power for instance-may accelerate or even inaugurate the process of change. The social change that took place in Kerala during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was a by-product of all these factors[5]. The colonial rule was instrumental for the introduction of modern education, modern technology and economic reforms.

The British as part of their colonial motives like domination of Indian states and spread of Christian religion attempted to expand their political supremacy over the princely states of Travancore and Cochin as well as British Malabar. The capitalist inroads were made into the feudal social structure of Kerala by the British from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They have introduced drastic infrastructural changes in Kerala suitable to the growth of a mercantile economy[6]. It was with this objective in mind that the British appointed Residents in the Princely states of Travancore and Cochin as a controlling mechanism over the Kings. They have promoted progressive land reforms, changed the agrarian system based on feudalism and advised the Kings to introduce social and economic reforms like abolition of slavery and land ownership rights through the *pandarappattam* proclamation and *jenmi-kudiyam* proclamation. Another important offshoot of the colonial intervention was the growth of public sphere which helped the slave castes to develop their public opinion. Emergence of a public sphere can be considered as a facilitating agency for the modern nationalising project[7].

The missionary works, especially the British and European evangelical missionaries brought about significant impacts in the society. Through the establishment of educational institutions and imparting educational facilities to the poor low caste people, starting printing presses and publishing news papers and magazines and opening hospitals in different places, the missionaries succeeded in making drastic changes in the social fabric of Kerala along with ensuring good number of converts to their faith. It was the work of L.M.S among the Shanars in South Travancore that sparked off the famous controversy in 1835 about the right of Shanar women to wear an upper cloth above the waist which Hindus claimed was the right of high caste women only[8]. The interventions of the missionaries were instrumental in destabilizing the caste structure in Kerala.

People of Kerala responded differently to the changes brought about by the colonial intervention. The upper caste Hindus had both beneficial and adverse impacts where as to the lower castes it produced great opportunities for their social and economic advancement. A new spirit of enquiry and criticism as well as civic consciousness developed among the lower castes[9]. The colonial intervention was capable enough to challenge the hierarchical Hindu social system, changing social conception and developing democratic ideals. It contributed for the transformation of family relationships and providing more spaces for representations in educational and representative institutions and government employment. *Vivekodayam*, the official mouth-piece of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam argued, "The peace and freedom that we enjoy now are not experienced by us under any other dispensation. The education drives away the darkness hidden in every nook and corner of our country and transforms millions who were forced to live like animals into human beings. The administrative policy of the British has granted us the freedom, which was beyond our reach within the framework of Sublime religion. It has abolished the monstrous practices and corruption and extirpated the fangs of the venomous serpent of the inhuman caste system"[10]. Another notable impact of the colonial inroads into

Kerala society was the political awakening that developed among various castes and communities. The innumerable studies and census reports released by the British rule helped for the identity formation and caste solidarity among them. The desire for social mobility was articulated through caste groups. Associations sprang up for each and every caste and these associations stood for the social and economic advancement of their members. In those days the socially backward classes had to look to the European masters for the redemption of their lost rights as human beings and as citizens[11]. Further the social and religious reform leaders were largely inspired from the changes brought about by the colonial interventions. It furthered competitive spirit among castes and communities in Kerala and in the long run the communities that took advantages out of modernisation benefited from it and those who lagged behind were necessarily handicapped in various ways.

### **Emergence of Sree Narayana Movement**

Sree Narayana Guru who hailed from the Ezhava caste of Hinduism was the pioneering figure of social movement in Kerala. The movement initiated by him was calculated with the objective of social revolution and social transformation using religion as an effective channel. Born in 1856 at Chempazhanthy, Thiruvananthapuram as the youngest son of Madan Asan and Kutty, the first revolutionary act of Narayana Guru was the installation of a Siva idol at Aruvippuram in 1888, breaking the right denied to the non caste Hindus. When his *sanskritisation* act was questioned by the caste Hindus, his answer was powerful enough to solemn, his opponents[12]. It was Dr. P. Palpu of the Ezhava community of Travancore who firstly realized the value of starting an organization for the transformation of society, annihilating the caste taboos and guaranteeing the basic human rights for the downtrodden castes. It was he who provided the necessary background and inspiration for the works of both Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan[13].

Being a victim of the caste tyranny existed in Travancore Dr. Palpu started preparation for an organization for his community men immediately after receiving unsatisfactory response from the government to the Ezhava Memorial submitted under his leadership. He formulated bylaws for an organization named by him as Ezhava Maha Jana Sabha and started campaign among his community along with his close associates. When this initiative failed to achieve its desired goal, he met Swamy Vivekananda at Mysore and sought his advice. Vivekananda advised him to select a saint to spiritualise and industrialise the masses for social transformation because the social reform movement in Indian context could go deep among the masses only if it should have a religious foundation. Dr. Palpu had no other option than to meet Narayana Guru, who had, by this time earned a high reputation as a great sanyasin. Guru who constructed a temple at Aruvippuram after the famous installation of the Siva deity constituted an eleven member committee known as Aruvippuram Vavoottu Yogam to look after the affairs of the temple administration. The temple and its roeties were registered with P. Parameswaran, the brother of Dr. Palpu as its manager. It was P. Parameswaran who facilitated the meeting between Narayana Guru and Dr. Palpu and after initial discussions it was decided to start an organization by the name Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam that came into being on 15 May 1903 with Sree Narayana Guru as permanent President, Kumaran Asan as Secretary and Dr. Palpu as Vice President. In order to propagate the ideals of Guru and Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam an official mouthpiece was started known as Vivekodayam, a name selected in memory of Swami Vivekananda and started publication with Vivekananda suktham as its caption '*Uthishtatha Jagratha Prapyayan Nibodhiha.*'

It was for the propagation of the ethics of Narayana Guru and uplifting all the lower caste people that the SNDP Yogam was founded. Narayana Guru had contributed a lot of ideals and philosophical discourses for humanity irrespective of caste barriers[14]. But the Ezhava community that produced the Great Guru largely benefitted out of the pragmatic and spiritual teachings of the Guru. He took initiative in constructing a large number of temples for the lower castes to save them from the exploitation of higher castes, introduced sanskritised form of worship, advocated financial control in the personal and private life and taught the people to abandon outmoded customs and practice reforms. Sanskritisation of the Ezhava community was the first and foremost aim of Guru. At the same time it contained an element of defiance against the caste order in the act of constructing parallel temples[15]. The practical principles advocated by him were later emulated by the social reformers of other communities of Kerala. The principles and messages of Narayana Guru were a war cry against all kinds of exploitation and a pragmatic solution against a stagnant society. His teachings produced not only spiritual effects but also material impacts. Even though he laid the foundation of temples and muts, the building that came up was one that of social equality. Even though he sowed the seeds of spiritualism, what grew in the field were socio-political rights[16].

Sree Narayana Guru treated temples as rallying points of solidarity and centres of all round activity. In order to ensure the collective gathering of the people irrespective of caste differences, Narayana Guru exhorted to establish monasteries, schools, lecture halls, banks, dispensaries, libraries, rest houses and gardens in the surroundings of the temples constructed by him. One can witness in him not a mere sanyasin preaching his ideals but a karmayogi propagating pragmatic philosophy of actions. The interventions in Hindu religious affairs made by Narayana Guru were a move towards the reforming the religion and not its demolition or annihilation. In that sense Sree Narayana Guru can be hailed as a Hercules who purified Hinduism[17]. In order to modernize his community men and all those who do not

belong to the purview of chaturvarnya system Sree Narayana Guru proposed pragmatic changes in social and economic spheres. He discouraged costly marriage ceremonies and polygamy, suggested inter-dining and inter-marriage, exhorted to abandon the traditional occupation of toddy tapping by the Ezhavas of Kerala and propagated the vedantic teachings in simple and lucid language. His interventions benefitted not only the Ezhava community but several other communities of the state and by emulating his preaching, different castes and communities came up with new organizations and programme of reforms. The social movement started by Guru produced revolutionary changes in the social, economic, political and religious life of Kerala as a whole. S.N.D.P. Yogam and Ezhava community were fortunate to get the services of a group of dedicated young men who spread over the whole areas of Kerala. Prominent among them were Dr.Palpu, Kumaran Asan, Sahodaran Ayyappan, T.K.Madhavan, C.Krishnan, Murkothu Kumaran, Paravur Kesavan Asan, C.R.Kesavan Vaidyar, C.Kesavan, C.V.Kunjuraman, K.R.Narayanan and N.Kumaran. These dealers effectively used their pen and platform for a transitional change in the society, a transition from change resistant sacred outlook to change ready secular outlook. Modern Kerala society witnessed their interventions in all social and political protests for transforming the society from its pyramidal structure to pillar structure and ensure political participation and establishment of democratic institutions because they realized that political power is the master key for social progress.

### **Conversion Movement in Southern Kerala**

The one community in Kerala, which started and carried on it to its logical conclusion, the relentless crusade against the social evils like caste system and pollution was the Ezhava community. Ever since the emergence of S.N.D.P. Yogam that guaranteed caste solidarity to different sub-divisions of the Ezhavas, the elites of this community devised various measures and adopted various tactics for the social and political advancement of the members that the community represented. From the very beginning of their community-oriented work itself, the Ezhava leaders earnestly thought and even wrote and spoke on the easy ways available to get rid of the havoc caused by the inhuman practices to their community members as well as to other communities whose social positions were below their rank. They have unequivocally declared that political freedom even if attained from the British rule would be meaningless unless it was backed by social and economic freedom.

Several low caste people of Travancore including Ezhavas converted themselves into other religions especially Christianity since they found it the easiest way to escape from caste tyranny[18]. In the beginning the leadership and the general masses within the community looked towards the leadership of Sree Narayana Guru for a spiritual solace. Guru was silent on the issue of conversion and at the same time started the construction of parallel temples for the Avarnas as part of sanskritisation. In fact what Guru meant was to reform Hinduism and not to abandon it, to purify Hinduism and not to annihilate it. He wanted a fair share to all the avarnas in Hinduism. For the accomplishment of these aims he adopted such measures as simplifying Vedic texts, establishing Sanskrit schools to the low castes, changing mode of worship etc[19].

Guru gifted a lot of principles of humanity, but the leaders of S.N.D.P. never tried to rely only on these principles. Instead they realised that it would be disadvantageous to them if they adopted such principles in practical politics. What they wanted was immediate and direct solutions to many vexed problems faced by their community members. On the issue of religious conversion the opinions of Ezhava leaders radically differed and these differences of opinions they expressed through their publications. From the very beginning itself the official Ezhava publications *Vivekodayam* adopted a moderate stand on many issues including conversion. On the other hand publication like *Mitavadi* of C. Krishnan, *Sahodaran* of K. Ayyappan and *Kerala Kaumudi* of C.V. Kunjuraman adopted extreme radical stands.

### **Democratic discourses on the question of Religious Conversion**

There were at times confusion prevailed about the stand of Kumaran Asan regarding the conversion issue. Like Mulur, a poet of the community who was also called “Sarasakavi” who translated Dharmapada into Malayalam, Kumaran Asan published a few works on Buddhist themes. His works like *Sri Buddha Charitam*(Translation of Edwin Arnold’s *Light of Asia*)created an impression that he was in favour of conversion to Buddhism. But his subsequent speeches and writings undermined this notion. On the question of the conversion of Ezhavas to Buddhism, Kumaran Asan and *Mitavadi* Krishnan expressed their difference of opinions. Though these contradictions and differences on viewpoints touched many areas of intellectual life, the discourse was purely academic and not touching the masses. C. Krishnan wrote the editorial articles both in English and Malayalam through his publication *Mitavadi* dated 28 May 1923. In this editorial he challenged the views expressed by Kumaran Asan about Buddhism while he presided over the S.N.D.P. Yogam meeting held at Kollam. C. Krishnan was of the opinion that the best way to extricate themselves from the caste tyranny was to embrace Buddhism en masse. But Asan through his rejoinder to the editor of *Mitavadi*, strongly proclaimed his stand that Ezhavas should remain in the fold of Hinduism and work for their salvation. He entitled these rejoinders as “Alchemy of Religious Conversion [20].

## **Independent Community Movement**

Along with the conversion, move forwards rationalism also developed among the Ezhavas. From 1920 onwards Travancore witnessed the growth of rationalist movement represented mainly by the radical youths of Ezhava community. In their agenda they had given prime importance to the temple entry demand. A peculiarity of this movement was that instead of appealing for conversion, the leaders exhorted the members of Ezhava community to stand as an Independent Community (Swathantra Samudayam). Karappuram[21] was the strong centre of this movement. An organisation known as Karappuram Seva Sangham of Ezhavas was founded in 1920, which became Karappuram Ezhava Yuvajana Sangham in [22]. The main objective was to effect political and social reforms in Hinduism. Karappuram witnessed the emergence of two other organisations namely the Karappuram Sahodara Sangham of Ezhavas founded in 1920 and Karappuram Ezhava Union in 1930. However Karappuram Ezhava Yuvajana Sangham became very popular and it was later renamed as “All Kerala Thiyya Yuvajana Sangham.”When this organisation was founded the President was Chirappanchira Krishna Panicker of Muhamma and Sathyavathan was its Secretary while Koriampallil Raman became Treasurer. The other major leaders included Kariampallil Vava Vaidyar and K.C.Kuttan. The first meeting of this organisation was held at Cherthala English School under the presidentship of Kunjikkannan Kurukkal. In this meeting Manchery Rama Ayyar and Sadhu Sivaprasad made provocative speeches. Violence broke out in the area and police arrested leaders like Krishnanayyappan.

In the third meeting of the Thiyya Yuvajana Sangham held at Pattanakkad in 1934, E. Madhavan presided[23]. In his presidential address, he exhorted the Ezhava community members to remain as an independent community (Swathantra Samudayam). This speech was reproduced in a book form in October 1934 under the title *Swathantra Samudayam*. The book was highly critical towards all religions and immediately after its publication demands came from several quarters for proscribing its circulation. The Dewan of Travancore asked the Chief Secretary Kunjan Pillai to look into the issue. The Government sought the advice of the Sirkar Vakil who however did not recommend for its proscription[24]. This book was proscribed first in Travancore. Later its circulation was prohibited in Cochin, Malabar and Madras. The book attacked all religions, but the attacks on Hinduism were violent and the Travancore Government was charged with being a caste Hindu Government. E. Madhavan asserted that the Ezhavas and other avarnas received from Hinduism, nothing but harm. So they must throw that yoke and free themselves. To him religion had given to man nothing but harm. It blocked the progress of education and science, suppressed freedom of thought and caused wars. He criticised Gandhiji’s anti-untouchability programme as a mere fake. He also criticised the Suddhi movement as a trick and argued that the savarna leaders must reform the savarnas first before trying to uplift the downtrodden. To him religion was a total waste. He said, “A Christian of the lowest class can become a Kathanar. Muhammadanism does not stand in the way of any Muhammadan becoming a Maulavi. The Brahmin cook of an Ezhava can become a Priest. But the Hindu religion does not allow Holy Sri Narayana even to walk along the public path” [25].

E. Madhavan visualised Ezhava community as an independent community and suggested that without converting to any religion they should opt for atheism. He was attracted to Russian Communism and suggested the communist society as an “idealistic society.” In the concluding remarks of his speech, he addressed the audience as “Comrades”[26]. The Swathantra Samudaya Vadam was an offshoot of rationalism developed among the Ezhavas. All these developments were the results of the community’s ire targeted at the savarna Hindu domination which they wished to break for the establishment of an egalitarian society.

## **CONCLUSION**

Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam was pioneer organization that played a conspicuous role in the transformation of Kerala into a modern democratic society. From the position of the caste victims the Ezhava community and other lower caste Hindus could elevate themselves to the makers of their own destinies. They could politicize the social relations for their advantages that resulted in the social change that involved transformation in social, political and economic organization. This phenomenal change occurred in Kerala was through contradictions. The shift of change was from structural relations to human relations or from caste hierarchical structure to inter-personal relations. For achieving this objective the non Hindus and non caste Hindus made various permutations and combinations. The Socio-Religious reform movements, particularly Sree Narayana movement worked for the creation of an honourable identity for the depressed castes, who were mute millions without a voice in the public realm. In the process of identity formation, the reformers did not wish to wean away the untouchable castes from the larger Hindu identity. The identity of caste was by the Non caste Hindus of Kerala as a powerful weapon against internal colonialism built out of caste principles which according to them more dangerous than external colonialism. Thus before political nationalism caste nationalism had taken root especially in the large majority of people of Kerala who remained outcastes and depressed classes. Political liberty for them was a luxury when compared to the necessary social freedom. Even though they were primarily meant for the material and spiritual uplift of the respective social group, they actively put their head into the political affairs of the state because every social issue had at that given period its political undertones. Protest movements were the vehicles through which the backward castes in Kerala attempted to make social transformation in which the Sree Narayana movement played the vital role.

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26. He said, “We did not get any reform or benefit from our connection with Hinduism. Hindu reforms were not reforms to us. We have benefited not from the Penal code of Manu, but from the British Penal code...If we abandon our religious connection, people will not only respect us but also love and care us...Don't be blind believers but be rational thinkers...Don't bother about the questions whether there is God or no God, whether religion is good or bad, think about the benefits that we will get from these things in this world. If there is another world after our death, we can think about it at that time. Now we need facilities for better life in this world...We have to awake! We have to rise! As in the case of several other reforms we accomplished, we have to take initiative for abandoning religions. In that case the future historians will record the heroism of Tiyya Youths”.