

# **CSS @ 50 YearS (1969-2019)**

Lecture Series: I

## **FROM THE POETICS OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE TO THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL CHANGE: SREE NARAYANA GURU AS A SOCIAL REFORMER AND PHILOSOPHER-POET**

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# PREFACE

On the momentous occasion of completing 50 years of its voyage (1969-2019) Centre for Social Studies, Surat (CSS) has planned series of activities. We have started with "CSS @ 50 Years Lecture Series"; and this is the printed version of the first of the lecture that was delivered by renowned scholar Prof. E.V. Ramakrishnan.

Founded in 1969 as Centre for Regional Development Studies by our founding director late Prof. I.P. Desai, CSS is an autonomous research institute recognised by MHRD of Central Govt., and receiving financial support from ICSSR, New Delhi and Govt. of Gujarat. Though our faculty strength has remained small over a period of time, they have been representing variety of disciplines of social sciences as CSS has adopted interdisciplinary mode in its research efforts. In terms of approach along with stress on empirical studies, the emphasise of such endeavours has been to seek formulations that would deepen understanding of social reality. Ignoring neither the dialectical interaction between theory and empirical observation, nor the subtle intermediation of ideological preferences in scholarly perceptions, the normal methodological approach at CSS is to move from a sound empirical base to more generalisable propositions. The focus of Centre's research since inception is not only to contribute to theoretical knowledge but also to assist in policy formulations and implementation concerning issues of social development. The key areas of research that CSS has been focussing include issues and problems of marginal communities such as tribals, dalits, working sections, women, minority groups and other such sections; sects and religion, migration, rural transformation, social conflicts, movements, riots and violence, urban society, literature and social consciousness, human resource development (education and health), coastal studies, environmental issues, social impact assessment of development projects, land and credit markets, governance, social justice and civil society. Theoretical contributions of CSS have been well-recognised in the field of social stratification, agrarian relations, social movements, sociology of education, issues related with dalits, tribes and development studies. Institute has accomplished more than 300 research projects till date.

Along with prioritising research, CSS has also been actively involved in publication of books based on research and other academic pursuits of faculty and other scholars. CSS has been publishing quarterly journal in Gujarati ARTHAT since 1981 providing social sciences literature on various themes to Gujarati readership and also a medium to publish articles for scholars and teachers. So far CSS has published 160 books, both in Gujarati and English and also 19 selected bibliographies on important themes.

We are also holding seminars, workshops, dialogues and lectures on various subjects. Till date CSS has organised 107 seminars, workshops and dialogues as well as 400 lectures. CSS has founded I.P. Desai memorial lecture series to commemorate our founding director under which so far 27 lectures have been organised, all of which are published.

Another regular feature is training activity of mainly teachers and researchers. In all CSS organised 47 training programmes including, on 'Application of Computer-SPSS in Social Science Research' – which were held continuously for 25 years as well as on 'Research methodology' and 'Capacity Building', interacting with more than 900 scholars and teachers from all over the country. We also have interacted with another more than 200 scholars pursuing their Ph.D. and M.Phil. under our 'Guidance and Consultancy Programme'.

For the "CSS @ 50 years Lecture Series" the larger theme of "Social Change and Social Movement" is chosen as per CSS central focus in terms of academic pursuit. An introductory few words about present booklet.

Art and literature have played meaningful role in shaping social movement and change. Cultural texts of varied nature prepare a society for re-imagining reality by cultivating a critical consciousness. The essay by renowned scholar Prof. E.V. Ramakrishnan deliberates life and works of Sree Narayana Guru as a social reformer and philosopher-poet that contributed to the radical transformation in the 19th century Kerala. Sree Guru made efforts to unite all depressed castes. Leading life as mendicant, in his formative period, he came into contact with Siddha tradition of

Tamil thought which was egalitarian, iconoclastic, skeptical, rationalist; and challenged caste-hierarchies and orthodox rituals as well as advocated anti-Brahminism. Guru was both a prophet and philosopher, but without a prophet's passion for founding his own faith and without a philosopher's disdain for the common people. Through his ceaseless wanderings he had cultivated intense engagement with everyday life of people. He was a monk with a mass following, a towering presence in the public life of Kerala, mobilizing the masses against the evils of caste oppression while building several institutions that embodied his vision of oneness of the human race. Guru sought in Advaita a philosophy that can deny and defy caste discrimination. The context of colonial modernity also helped him in his pursuits of equality and social justice. Guru wrote, mostly poetry, in Sanskrit, Tamil and Malayalam with equal ease. His works may be categorized into devotional, philosophical and contemporary issues, in terms of subjects. Through them, he radically questioned the hegemony of the state and feudal system. As an act of challenging Brahminial hegemony, he consecrated a temple of "Ezhava Shiva". The author argues that the positivist scientism of modernity does not value his poetic works as it considers them as subjective and personal. He further points out that ontology of modern disciplines like Sociology and Political science cannot accommodate the sense of sacred as a valid ground of constructing reality. Guru's aesthetic was a unique blend of the universal and the personal. He emphasized on critical reflection and essential oneness of humankind. He chose to shape an emancipating ethic in his poetics. Guru had a critical relation with the existing thought systems and literary traditions. He put emphasize on knowledge as emancipator. As a poet he has assimilated multiple traditions and deploys a vocabulary which is unusual in its range, tonality and texture. His works have largely survived through oral tradition. Guru uses knowledge in the abstract to denote knowledge as absolute and universal. He transcended the boundary of castes by recasting issues of power relations as epistemological questions. Guru found Bhagavad Gita a problematic text. In terms of ideas he has more in common with Dr. Ambedkar than Gandhi. In his poems, Guru implies that one become human only in the context of community. In reducing the site of caste difference to the physical plane, Guru questioned both the Sanskrit epistemology of Vedanta rooted in 'Chaturvarnya' and the western epistemology based on racial difference. He displaced the theoretical foundation of caste and sub-caste to formulate the idea of community which was also an alternative to the western model of civil society. Prof. Ramakrishnan argues that Guru should be placed in the context of his own struggles and creative dialogues with history through poetry. He situates Sree Guru beyond the rupture between the domains of contemplation and action and sees him as a unified figure who moves seamlessly from creative expression to social action. Guru devised a system of thought where divisions such as the secular and spiritual, self and the other, body and mind become immaterial. The learned speaker ended with a note that Sree Guru's mould of thought is needed to reshape vocabulary of critical thought and face challenges of the present.

I take this opportunity to express my profound gratitude to ICSSR, New Delhi and the Government of Gujarat for supporting CSS during this long span. I am also grateful to members of our Board of Governors for guiding and steering us, as well as our former and present colleagues, including our administrative staff, who have collectively contributed significantly and immensely to take CSS up to this point of achievement. And how can I forget a vast circle of our friends and well-wishers; scholars from different institutes not only from India but also from abroad, from neighbouring university campus and colleges of different parts; also from other institutes and universities across the country; those organizations with whom we have done collaborative research endeavours; our activist friends who have shared their grass-root experiences to make our research earthy and concerned members of civil society who have been meeting us and attending CSS events regularly and encouraging us. I am immensely grateful to them all.

Also; I am indeed grateful to Prof. E.V. Ramakrishnan for accepting our invitation and delivering an illuminating and insightful lecture. I am also thankful to my colleague Dr. Sadan Jha for supporting in publishing this lecture.

November 2019

Kiran Desai  
Officiating Director  
CSS, Surat

# **FROM THE POETICS OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE TO THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL CHANGE: SREE NARAYANA GURU AS A SOCIAL REFORMER AND PHILOSOPHER-POET**

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Radical changes within a society are possible only when the imagination of people is stirred by a deep sense of involvement and commitment. Social movements shape the course of socio-political evolution of a society enabling its progressive democratization by mobilizing the people in the service of certain ideals and ideologies that have the capacity to redefine the very nature of society. These movements take off only when their objectives capture the imagination of the public at large. It is culture, more specifically art and literature that equip the movements with the necessary means and modes of persuading the people by enlisting them in the service of a higher vision.

In her book *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, Martha C. Nussbaum has argued that texts of exceptional imaginative power are necessary in a culture to instil abstract ideas such as justice, equality and liberty in the minds of people, transforming those ideas into sensuous experiences of intimacy, immediacy and urgency in concrete forms, at crucial moments in the evolution of society. In a liberal society political cultivation of emotions has twofold tasks: the first is to create and sustain "strong commitments to worthy projects that require effort and sacrifice and the second is to keep at bay dark forces such as envy and disgust, the desire to inflict shame on others" (Nussbaum 2013: 1). Cultural texts that discharge such functions include not only poems, plays, stories and novels but

conversations, pamphlets, speeches and performative acts of great symbolic power that prepare a society for re-imagining reality by cultivating a critical consciousness. Mahatma Gandhi's act of defying the imperial ban on salt-making in 1930, and Narayana Guru's consecration of a Shiva temple in Aruvippuram (in Kerala) in 1887 may be cited as examples of such performative acts that charged the imagination of a whole community and changed the direction of history.

In this paper I discuss the life and works of Sree Narayana Guru as a social reformer and philosopher-poet and in the process flag certain issues that intersect the domains of Humanities and Social Sciences. More specifically, these issues pertain to the inadequacies of prevailing discourses on modernity in general, and their inability to deal with the experiential component of reality rooted in the relations between the self and the world, in particular.

We are here concerned with a moment of radical transformation in the 19th century Kerala when the social, political and cultural scene was undergoing a complete transformation. While the first half of the nineteenth century was marked by the standardization of Malayalam language and the emergence of Malayalam prose, the second half witnessed the spread of periodicals and the rise of new literary forms like the novel, autobiography and the essay. The arrival of print and the introduction of English in Kerala partake of the episteme of colonial modernity as they reorient the protocols of reading and writing which had far-reaching consequences for the entire society. Benjamin Bailey (1791-1871), a protestant missionary from England, established the first Malayalam printing press in Kerala in 1821. By the time translation of the New Testament into Malayalam appeared in 1829, modern Malayalam alphabets designed by Bailey had become the standard prototypes for print and writing in Malayalam. By 1849, both Malayalam-English and English-Malayalam dictionaries were published

and the first periodicals in Malayalam had made their appearance. The standardization of Malayalam language led to the creation of prose with a new syntax and vocabulary capable of communicating modern forms of knowledge, giving rise to a public sphere where questions of socio-political and cultural significance found articulation in both discursive and imaginative modes (Ramakrishnan 2017: 34-43, 201-217).

We cannot understand the social structure of Kerala of this period without reference to the caste system. Kerala had more than 220 castes which did not include sub-castes. There were 41 sub-castes among Nairs alone, and among the lower castes there were more than 170 sub-castes (Bhaskaranunni 1988: 175-76). By 1805, Kerala was under British domination, and departments such as revenue, public works, judiciary, jail, police, excise and education were actively involved in redefining relations between individuals and political power. Sanal Mohan rightly terms the lower castes as 'slave castes' as the system of caste oppression prevalent in Kerala was nothing but slavery of the most ruthless kind (Sanal Mohan 2015: 3-7). Slavery in the Malabar region of north Kerala was abolished in 1843, while it was abolished in the Travancore region of south Kerala in 1855. However, this did not make much difference to the material conditions of the lower sections of society. Here it is important to note that Ezhavas, the caste in which Sree Narayana Guru was born, was a heterogeneous group. There were Sanskrit scholars, Ayurvedic practitioners and land owners among them while the bulk of them were engaged in manual labour of various kinds. A small section from the Ezhava caste was slaves as some of the records from the past demonstrate (Barbosa 2000: 61). With the 1819 proclamation, by which all non-agricultural slaves became free, members of the Ezhava caste could no more be counted among slaves. Against such a scenario, the heroic struggles against caste oppression led by the Dalit leader and social reformer Ayyankali (1863-1941), born in the

Pulaya caste, deserves special mention. All through his life, Sree Narayana Guru made efforts to unite all depressed castes, though there were obvious challenges from within the Ezhava caste in forging a common forum along with the Dalit community.

While introducing administrative reforms, the colonial authorities left the caste structures alone, thus deepening the contradictions between social change and political aspirations. Nicholas B. Dirks has argued that “caste became the colonial form of civil society; it justified the denial of political rights to Indian subjects (not citizens) and explained the necessity of colonial rule” (Dirks 2003: 16). It is necessary to understand this transformation of caste as a category in the colonial context, its simultaneous social validation and political suppression, to grasp the significance of Narayana Guru’s (1856-1928) intervention in the socio-political sphere of Kerala. In the absence of its traditional economic and regulative functions, caste now became a ritualistic apparatus that helped the colonial authority to perpetuate their absolute control over their subjects. The taxes levied by the colonial machinery on lower castes increased manifold and there was greater pauperization of these castes forcing them to even sell their own children (Rajeevan 2011: 289-290). Slave castes could be forced to render free labour for the upper castes. Sanal Mohan in his book, *The Modernity of Slavery*, observes:

Most of the lands used to be controlled by the upper castes, while the slave caste labourers, who were slaves juridically till the mid nineteenth century, carried out the actual cultivation. As a result of this, the untouchable slaves continued to exist in the same structural position for very long time, even after the abolition of slavery in 1855 in the Travancore region of Kerala (Mohan 2015: 40).



It is against these abject circumstances of the lower castes in general and the destitution of the majority of the people of his own caste that Narayana Guru's roles as a visionary, thinker, writer and social reformer have to be evaluated. The complex undercurrents of the period reflect transactions between an entrenched feudal system (with Brahminic hegemony built into it), an emergent public sphere with aspirations for modern values rooted in equality and justice and a repressive colonial regime that set severe limits to social mobilization, free expression and collective resistance. What Narayana Guru achieved in the society of Kerala riven with every conceivable social division of caste, religion, class and gender one can imagine and with limited access to any modern education, was made possible by his grasp of the ideological structures that operated in Kerala society. Sanal Mohan notes how the missionaries who tirelessly worked for the abolition of slavery in Kerala failed to understand how the lower castes' subordination "was legitimized by the moral and religious codes articulated through the ideology and practice of 'Hinduism' and caste" (Mohan, 41).

Sree Narayanan was born in an Ezhava middle class family near Thiruvananthapuram in 1856. He was initiated into Sanskrit and Ayurveda, in the traditional format that was current in his times, with the disciple staying at the house of the teacher. He acquired Tamil through his own efforts, as it was spoken in the region. He started a school in his village for children but later, after the death of his parents, left home and took to wandering as a mendicant. After 1884, he never stayed in any place permanently. He had the habit of staying alone in secluded mountains and forests. His close association with Chattampi Swamikal (1853-1924), a reformer who challenged the Brahmin supremacy in Kerala through his writings and Thycaud Ayya (1814-1909), a scholar in the Saiva tradition of Tamil Siddhars, transformed him into a thinker.

The Siddha tradition in Tamil, strongly radical in its content, questioned the legitimacy of Brahminic ideology. David Shulman observes that Sidha tradition which was “egalitarian, iconoclastic, skeptical, and strongly rationalistic” was part of the intellectual and social world of the nineteenth century Tamil Nadu (Shulman 2010: 310). Though there were many sects within the Siddha tradition, they had in common “hatred for caste-hierarchies and orthodox rituals, a Yoga-oriented universalistic ethic, anti-Brahmin sentiments, a generalized social critique and a Tantric metaphysics of body, self and language” (Shulman, 312). That Sree Narayanan came into contact with this Tamil system of thought in his formative period, had a lasting impact on his formulation of principles that inspired the social imagination of Kerala. A materialistic world-view rooted in the body, repeated invocations of ‘jnanam’ or ‘arivu’ (knowledge) as the essence of universal truth in all his major poems and rejection of Brahminic elements of hegemony in the everyday world, clearly follow from Sree Narayanan’s immersion in an alternative tradition that questioned the prevailing theocratic order.

All biographies of Narayana Guru mention his extensive wanderings across the length and breadth of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and beyond. His first major disciple and close associate (who was to become one of the most eminent poets of Malayalam in the twentieth century), Kumaran Asan (1873-1924) writes:

After his parents’ death, it became easy for Guru to escape from the bondage of family relations. His resolve to renounce worldly attachments and devote himself to spiritual enquiry was firm. Having left home, he could be seen in nearby deserted hills, forests and such solitary places, lost in meditation or walking alone (Guru 2002: 25).

Narayana Guru was not a 'monk' in the traditional sense. He was not initiated into ascetic life by any master, nor did he follow any one as his mentor. He engaged in conversations with a large number of saints and scholars across South India, wandering from place to place. He was dressed in a white, till late in life when, during a trip to Sri Lanka, he was forced to wear saffron, due to non-availability of white clothes. He translated several texts from Tamil and Sanskrit into Malayalam, and composed poems of exceptional artistic merit in all these three languages.

In an insightful study, P.K. Balakrishnan, a historian, has argued that Guru was both a prophet and philosopher, but without a prophet's passion for founding his own faith and without a philosopher's disdain for the common people (Balakrishnan 2006: 296). Guru overcame the indifference natural to philosophers towards worldly matters and the missionary zeal seen in prophets to create an institutional framework for their ideas, through his intense engagement with everyday life of people through ceaseless wanderings across South India. Balakrishnan thinks that his formative period during the twenties holds the clue to his transformation:

This unknown period in Guru's life (his life in the early youth) holds the key to understanding his emergence as a fully formed leader of people. Even after becoming a towering figure in Kerala acceptable to all communities, he never lived in one place for more than three days or so. He persisted in this habit, in old age as well. He lived among those considered as 'lower castes', the fisher folk, Muslims, and marginalized communities of every kind, sharing their food, observing their ways of living. He knew the topology of South India like the palm of his hand, and this is what enabled him to love the communities of Kerala with such openness, not in abstract theory but in everyday practice (Ibid, 296-7).

Sukumar Azhikode, a major Malayalam literary critic, has observed that Narayana Guru did not become aware of discrimination based on caste after studying Vedanta. He observes: "He sought in Advaita a philosophy that can deny and defy the practice of caste discrimination and he sought in social reforms a practical course of action to eradicate caste discrimination" (Ibid, 304). Asceticism in India led people to renounce life, but in the case of Guru, it only refined his understanding of the social divisions and reinforced his resolve to fight against it.

Once Guru remarked that it was the British who had granted him 'sanyas'. P.N. Gopikrishnan, a Malayalam poet, has pointed out that Guru's 'sanyas' was not an endorsement of tradition but an interpretation of modernity: "It was his deviation from the Brahminic code that enabled him to reinterpret 'Advaita' philosophy as expounded by Sankara, from a non-Brahmin point of view in accordance with the demands of Kerala renaissance" (Gopikrishnan 2019: 18). The colonial government had graciously granted him exemption from appearing in the court, when some differences between him and his followers became a matter of litigation. While he would have remained an outcaste in the traditional Brahminic scheme of things, the British government recognized his standing as a 'sanyasi' in society. This also provided him a vantage point to view society critically from the margins of the existing narratives about Kerala society. The context of colonial modernity is inherent in his radical pursuits of equality and social justice.

The large corpus of his works in Malayalam, Sanskrit and Tamil, mostly poetic compositions, affirms his status as a major writer at the turn of the century in Kerala. He wrote in Sanskrit, Tamil and Malayalam with equal ease and the bulk of his works belong to poetry. Of the sixty-two works available, forty-four are in Malayalam. For the purpose of discussion, we may group them under three categories: hymns and 'keertans' in praise of Shiva and Shaivaitic deities

like Shanmukha, Ganesha and Devi, philosophical poems outlining Advaita philosophy or questions of Dharma and finally poems that address contemporary questions of caste differences and oppression. He also translated *Thirukkural* and *Ishavasyopanishad* into Malayalam. Apart from these, he engaged in conversations with a wide range of people from all walks of life, as he was sought out by eminent scholars and common people alike. His conversations with Mahatma Gandhi, Tagore and many other contemporary scholars and leaders from Kerala like Sahodaran Ayyappan and C.V.Kunhiraman have been documented and give us acute insights into his ways of thinking and analyzing subjects of contemporary relevance. He also issued statements from time to time, one on the cardinal principles to be followed by his followers in 1909, another against the consumption of liquor addressed to the members of Ezhava caste, in 1920. There were also occasions when he directly intervened and ordered his followers to stop oppressive and outdated rituals such as the sacrifice of animals in the temples.

His poetic works play an important role in reconstituting the social narrative through charged utterances that embody the social energy of the conflictual situations of caste violence and religious strife rooted in social inequalities. His mode of questioning the hegemony of the state and feudal system was radical and unprecedented. In March, 1888 in a place near Aruvikkara, he consecrated a temple of Shiva, breaching the Brahminic authority to establish temples. This was a gesture of far-reaching consequence as it shifted the idea of the sacred from the domain of religion to that of the secular, entailing a redefinition of the ritualistic apparatus of the Brahminic theocratic order. Guru had been frequenting this secluded forest area for many years and people used to throng this place to meet him. He chose the day of 'Shivarathri' to consecrate the new temple. When questions were raised regarding his authority to carry out such an act, he answered that it was "Ezhava Shiva" that he had consecrated. After consecrating the temple, he also wrote

the following lines on a wooden plank with lime:  
"Jatibhedammatadwesham/ Ethumillathesarvarum/  
Sodaratenavazhunna/ Mathrukastanamanithu" (This is an  
exemplary abode of brotherhood where everyone lives in  
harmony without discrimination of caste or religious hatred).  
This is one of his most well-known and earliest poetic verses  
in Malayalam.

In retrospect, the significance of the 1888 event becomes  
clear when we recognize that it was part of a series of iconic  
events that stamped the mark of modernity on the life of  
Kerala. The first 'popular' Malayalam novel, *Indulekha* was  
published in 1889. The government of Madras formed the  
Marriage Commission in 1891 in response to a bill introduced  
in the Madras legislative assembly by C. Sankaran Nair  
demanding changes in the matrilineal customs in Malabar.  
Again, in 1891, the common people of Travancore, for the  
first time, submitted a memorandum to the king, commonly  
described as "Malayali Memorial," demanding equality of job  
opportunities. Collectively, they point to the churning that  
was shaping a new idea of the social where several ideas  
and ideologies were competing for visibility and expression.

In all accounts of Sree Narayanan's life and works, his role  
as a social reformer is at centre-stage while his contribution  
as a poet is relegated to background. Canonical literary  
histories of Malayalam, while occasionally noting his  
devotional works in passing, have not attributed much value  
to his literary output. It is important to recover Sree  
Narayana Guru as a poet *and* (emphasis added) thinker to  
put his life and works in perspective. Our inability to  
appreciate his role as a poet and communicator is traceable  
to the discourses of modernity which give precedence to an  
empirical approach to reality. While Guru's interventions in  
the socio-political sphere can be 'objectively documented,'  
his poetic works bear witness to subjective and sensuous  
ways of apprehending and relating to the world of reality.

The distrust of the personal and the subjective is inherent in the positivist scientism at the core of modernity. The fact that Guru's poetic works speak of 'experiences' which are essentially 'mystical' or 'spiritual' further complicates this problematic. Here we are face to face with the ontology of modern disciplines like sociology and political science which cannot accommodate the sense of the sacred as a valid ground of constructing reality. For instance, his performative act of invoking the sacred by consecrating a stone as "Shiva" and the way it altered power relations between castes in Kerala, helps us understand how he used symbolic gestures to shape the inner life of the community. His poetry partakes of the same objective of awakening of the self within.

Guru was fashioning a new subjectivity through his poetic works which held out a new mode of negotiating social turbulence in contemporary Kerala. He was aware of the resonant intertextuality of Bhakti tradition, well-versed as he was in many languages. Wisdom, in this tradition, is a mode of knowing embedded in language. In spite of his use of the conventions of Bhakti poetry, his individual voice could be heard in his compositions. Guru's works are held together by a distinctive voice of his own, which communicated his sense of the felt experience of the world despite their formal use of the conventional apparatus of bhakti poetry. His locus at the intersection of the traditional and the modern, on the cusp of contested epistemologies ranging from the Sanskritic-Vedic to the colonial-modern imparts him a privileged position of being a participant and critical observer. O.V. Vijayan has observed that Guru's aesthetic was a unique blend of the universal and the personal: "What Guru did was to invest language with spirituality and ground it in the everyday world of untouchables" (Guru, 347).

Caste was at the core of several narratives that emerged in the context of modernity. Pradip Kumar Bose in his I.P.Desai memorial lecture delivered in 2019 comments that "most of the basic treatises on the Indian caste system written during

the period 1880 and 1950 were written by men who had important positions either as census commissioners for entire India or for a province" (Bose 2019: 15). Census was part of a new epistemology which used tabulation, classification and quantification as means of assembling knowledge about the people of India. Statistical methods were deployed to create India as a knowledge subject. The taxonomy of observed data decided the foundational principles of knowledge about Indian society. As opposed to this, Guru's deep sense of experiential reality of caste was rooted in his intimate knowledge of the suffering subject. This understanding of caste system not only contradicts the positivist approach of the colonial state but provides a critique of the foundational doctrines of modern disciplines like sociology and political science. His poetry is an affirmation of the irreducible plurality of the social that cannot be normativized. He transforms a traumatic view of history into philosophical reflections on the nature of suffering. By putting the felt life of the body at the centre of his reflections, he is able to draw into his fold subjects which differed vastly among themselves. Cultural anthropologists and sociologists who study 'pre-modern' cultures, proceed on the assumption that we cannot critically see our way of life from the inside without the disciplinary training offered by modernity. In one of the temples Guru consecrated he put a mirror in the place of the deity. (In fact, in many temples in Tamil Nadu, this practice of installing the mirror at the centre was prevalent.) When Guru used it in Kerala, it was his way of demonstrating the need for critical reflection in a society where caste had reduced people to creatures of habit. He developed the capacity for critical reflection through his efforts of embodying the felt life of the mind in the syntax of poetic form which charged the consciousness of his audience. In poetry he spoke as a critical insider who could evaluate the transient and the contingent from the perspective of the universal. This involved the act of transforming experience into self-knowledge. Bhakti tradition in India had created a new subject which can be in direct



communication with the divine. Guru's invocation of the sacred in his poetry released it from the confines of institutionalized forms of religion, and aligned him with the tradition of dissent and dialogue one finds in Bhakti poetry (Ramakrishnan 2017: 46-64).

Vishnu Narayanan Nambuthiri, a major Malayalam poet, has remarked that Guru's poems realize the anguish and torment he underwent in their composition in their very syntax and diction (Guru, 335-341). In a poem like "Kundalinipattu" (The Song of Kundalini) the snake-charmer and the snake enact several levels of inner struggles for revelation from the sensual to the intellectual. The meanings seem to exceed the words because the metaphorical resonance of the dialogue between two parts of the self, resonates with echoes from several traditions of Bhakti poetry. No contemporary poet could compete with him in his ability to map minute movements of the mind in its struggle for clarity and revelation. He also brought into currency many prosodic patterns and vibrant rhythms of poetic composition which were obscure or lost. Most of them were from oral traditions with deep intertextual relations with Tamil and spoken registers of Malayalam. Guru's immersion in the semiotic structure of the local is inseparable from the nuanced nature of his expression and action as a social reformer that created the modern Malayalam subject at a crucial moment in the history of Kerala.

Poems by their very nature can contain contradictions and multitudes creating an experiential discourse that can persuade the reader through an aesthetic that is rooted in the ethics of difference. They constitute a life form, and enact a mode of knowing, not a definitive statement of truth. Appeals to truth are always concealed attempts to dominate the other. In using Advaita philosophy to question the legitimacy of caste system he was reading it against the grain. This was possible in poetry, not in a philosophical treatise. Here he belongs to the group of poets like

Jnanadeva, Tukaram and Kabir, who used the power of words to stand witness to their times, and address God as a contemporary from the perspective of a suffering subject. Guru's first-hand knowledge of the social divisions had convinced him that there were no easy solutions to the problems that plagued Kerala or Indian society. While concluding his conversation with Guru, Gandhi had asked him, "We are engaged in a struggle for people's worldly liberty. Won't it succeed?" Guru replied, "It will succeed. However, when we think of the entrenched nature of the problems, Gandhi may have to be born again for the project's complete fulfilment" (Guru, 458). These words do appear prophetic when we are commemorating the 75th year of the Mahatma's death. All this goes to prove that it may not be productive to evaluate his work through the binary of tradition and modernity alone. He was one of the few who reconciled their contradictory impulses through his critique of such essentialist ideologies in the layered utterances of a new subject grounded in the local.

Once he was convinced of the unity of human beings through the philosophical explorations of various knowledge systems, he chose to articulate his faith in the essential oneness of mankind through his works as a poet. The rare integration of word and deed, continuity between thought and action in Guru's life came about through his long and solitary meditations on the sufferings of the simple rural folk he witnessed throughout South India. The act of creating a text, addressing a living audience, meant identifying and confronting the other. Ethics meant for him not a set of dogmas but a dialogic relation with the other, to re-invent the self from its perspective. The defining features of his poetic universe are its intertextual relations with Bhakti traditions of dialogue and dissent, his abiding sense of the sacred which transcends the social divisions, and a deeply rooted concern for the other which translates into ethical action. Collectively, these elements bring forth the transformative potential of the social. This is where the

poetics of self-knowledge becomes indistinguishable from the politics of social change. In consecrating a stone from a flowing river on a rock as Shiva, he was performing an ethical act of seizing power from the priestly class on behalf of those who were deprived of their voice. Guru had to shape an emancipatory ethic in his poetics before he acted it out as a political project in the public arena of Kerala's divided social world.

Guru had a critical relation with the existing thought systems and literary traditions. He held Sankara in high esteem, but read Advaita thought against the grain to question the dominant Brahminic thought. Sahodaran Ayyappan who was close to Guru has commented that Guru was a rationalist who never blindly followed any text or master, unless he was convinced of their worth (Balakrishnan 2006: 204). B.Rajeevan has argued that what Sri Narayanan achieved was the 'minorization' of the Advaita philosophy (Rajeevan, 251-3). This means that he displaced Advaita from its pedestal of legitimizing authority wielding a majoritarian perspective. Sree Narayanan deployed it as a living thought system to question the very justifications advanced to legitimate the caste system. 'Avidya' is a term that has great resonance in Sri Narayanan's thought system. It must have come to him through his familiarity with Siddha thought system. However, in Shaivism of the north which continues in the Nath cult of Maharashtra one finds a similar concern with knowledge as emancipator. Sree Narayanan refutes the idea that the world is an illusion. It is lack of knowledge that creates various types of illusions. The world exists as an impediment to self-consciousness to those who cannot transform their self from ignorance to knowledge. His major poems expounding Vedantic thought such as "Advaita Deepika", "Atmopadesa Satakam", "Darshanamala", "Swanubhava Geeti" and "Arivu" are replete with images of light, waves, sea, river, the sun, the eye, vision etc which are deployed to outline moments of sudden illumination and epiphanies that transform consciousness.

One of the recurring themes in his poems and utterances is the nature of knowledge and the relation between the self, the knower and knowledge. Poems such as "Atmopadesa Satakam" (Guru, 157-169) and "Swanubhava Geeti" (Guru, 149-156) convey the sense of torment that accompanies self-exploration. The poet experiences God as an immediate presence and the word becomes the medium of realizing His radiance and benevolence. Through conventional frame of an invocation or 'keertan' or 'hymn' he is able to convey a sense of personal quest that exceeds the context and content of the poem. To evaluate Sree Narayanan as a poet it is necessary to keep in mind that he has assimilated multiple traditions from many regions of South India and deploys a vocabulary which is unusual in its range, tonality and texture. He was a complete outsider to the mainstream tradition of Malayalam poetry which was neo-classical and stereotyped. In addressing a large audience consisting of the unlettered masses from the marginalised sections of society, his poems conveyed as much through sound and rhythms creating a sense of movement and transformation as their profound arguments. Only those who were initiated into philosophy could access his deeper meanings, but the unlettered could never miss their resonant appeal to a higher state of being. His works have largely survived through the oral tradition by recitations of his followers. Sahodaran Ayyappan has noted: "He never wrote down his poems. He would compose a few stanzas and will dictate them from memory. He always had people who read to him books or wrote down what he dictated" (Balakrishnan, 202-203). In this sense, he may be seen as one of the last sant-poets who spoke to the masses from a sense of personal transcendence that embodied the social in its conflictual form.

In the very opening stanza of "Atmopadesa Satakam" he invokes the question of knowledge. One has to control senses to recognize the supreme knowledge that pervades the world. One's inner light determines the way one relates to the world. In the third stanza, he uses the word, "vivarta"

which is commonly used in Vedanta to suggest that the multiple, phenomenal world is nothing but the manifestation of the essential oneness of the supreme being. One of his recurring metaphors to suggest the flux of life and the unity behind this constant change is that of the waves and the sea which we fail to see as manifestations of the same elemental water. Knowledge, the meanings it produces and the knower of that knowledge cannot be differentiated. The poem continuously juxtaposes the mundane world with its grossness and the eternal world with its emancipatory radiance. It is this inner movement that gradually leads to a significant section dealing with the relation between the self and the other. The conflicting view regarding whether this world is real or unreal, what is the essence of 'jagat' (the phenomenal world) that we see, is seen as a futile argument. He has alluded to the impulses and desires that accompany our senses and prevent us from realizing our potential. At this point, he says that one's preference for a caste should not deny or contradict another's preference. One should harmonise one's desires in accordance with the needs of society. He talks of 'sama' which sees the essential unity of things and 'anya' which differentiates and discriminates between things. In "Advaita Jeevitham" he had observed that human beings will always seek happiness. Guru observes: "Conflict between men arises with regard to their objects of desires". The larger question he poses is how to reconcile one's actions with those of others. In "Atmopadesa Satakam" in keeping with its style of sant-vani, sage's advice, he says: "What one does for one's own happiness/ should bring happiness to others as well". He continues: "Remember that any action that ensures one's own well-being but causes suffering to others goes against oneself" (Guru, 160). The words he uses are "Atmasukham" and "Atma Virodhi". Sree Narayanan uses the word "aparan" to mean "the other", not "anyan" which is commonly used in Malayalam to denote "the other" or "the outsider." The use of the word "aparan" recasts the question of the relation between the self and the other as an ethical question. Seen

against the public context of the caste violence, the discourse of the essential unity of the human beings is an attempt to release the caste-marked body from its bondage of slavery and subjection.

The poem reflects on questions of experience in the world, of the world and beyond the world in the next section to invoke the complex process of self-transformation. Towards the end of the poem he speaks of the conflict between the part and the whole. Here again the question relates to the nature of knowledge. Knowledge is not separate from oneself for those who are free from the illusion of division. This is the only way to reconcile the part with the whole. One can go on to discuss poems like "Swanubhavageeti" and "Advaitadeepika" along the same lines, but for the larger part of my argument, the above discussion shows how his philosophical poems intricately construct a critique of the prevailing social practices by setting the abstractions of the Vedanta against the lived reality of gross injustice. It is important to note that the sense of hurt and pain Guru must have gone through is never spelt out in these poems. But it is present in the texture of the lines and also in the tone of address to his fellow-human beings. It is the sense of immediacy and urgency conveyed by intensity of emotion that transforms the poem into a revelation about the inherent dignity of all human beings. If there are two key words that unite his entire corpus of works, it is "manushyan" and "manushyatwam" ('human being' and 'humanness').

"Arivu" is another poem which may be briefly mentioned in this context. At a time when the imperial machinery was engaged in using knowledge as a means of instrumental control, Sree Narayanan theorized it from a perspective that defied and denied the primacy of power in the constitution of knowledge. Ayyappa Paniker has commented that the poem "Arivu" is a hymn to the moment of "union between ontology and epistemology" (Guru, 332). Knowledge is being, it constitutes us from within. The known has a being only when

there is knowledge. Guru uses 'knowledge' in the abstract to denote "Knowledge" as absolute and universal. Knowledge in this sense envelopes the knower and the known. In the world, things exist in a disjointed state and we fail to perceive the underlying unity between them. In the absence of Knowledge, the very knowledge that validates existence of the known, would not survive. The act of knowing is compounded by the duality of the subject and object. We become that which is the knowledge of knowledge. He observes: "It is the self-unfolding of the universal knowledge that creates the knower as well as the impression that "I know" or "I do not know". Even the knowledge that I don't know is also an effect of the universal "Knowledge". In one of the verses of "Atmopadesa Satakam", Guru says: "Without knowledge, I do not exist,/ Without me there is no knowledge, light alone is".

It is worth noting that a canonical text of Marathi Nath Sampradaya, *Anubhavamrut* by Jnandev uses many of the metaphors and images that one sees in the major poems of Narayana Guru, such as river and ocean, light and shadow, mirror and reflection, 'vidya' and 'avidya'. There is a pan-Indian dimension to Sree Narayana Guru's poetic compositions which can be brought out only through detailed comparisons with the dissenting traditions of Bhakti in Tamil, Telugu, Marathi and Hindustani. Dilip Chitre in his Introduction to *Anubhavamrut* comments: "Jnandev's Nath sect, as well as his Kashmir Shaivite precursors, are the philosophical antagonists of Vedanta and neo-Vedanta. All this is heresy to Brahminical ears, whether steeped in the Vedas or schooled in Vedanta" (Chitre 1996: 12). One of the stanzas of *Anubhavamrut* reads like this: "Water and wave either is/ Nothing except water:/ Thus other than the Self/ There is no Being" (Chitre, 177). In the third stanza of *Atmopadeshasatakam*, Guru says: "The world manifests from outside/ from the five elements including light/ May we recognize that the waves and the sea/ are nothing but the same essence" (Guru, 157; my translation).

Sree Narayanan transcended the boundary of castes by recasting issues of power relations as epistemological questions. This becomes his mode of negotiating the Hindu caste system as well as the superior power of Western imperialism. The colonial apparatus of power, while using the Euro-centric epistemology as a 'mask of conquest', had invested the existing caste hierarchy with legitimacy. His interventions in multiple fields cleared an emancipatory space and defined a community-centric political identity that became the social capital for the making of a modern Kerala. He was a monk with a mass following, a towering presence in the public life of Kerala, mobilizing the masses against the evils of caste oppression while building several institutions that embodied his vision of oneness of the human race. Though he was primarily seen as a reformer from Ezhava community, his work exceeded the caste boundaries because he denied primacy to caste in the organization of the social structure. His idea of community, "samudayam" progressively included all oppressed castes. Many of the caste organizations in Kerala were fashioned after the model he used in setting up SNDP (Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam) in 1903. For instance, Ayyankali the Dalit leader of Kerala who was inspired by Narayana Guru, named his organization Sadhu Jana Dharma Paripalana Samgham. Nair Service Society and Yogakshema Sabha (of Brahmins) were also modelled on the principles Guru outlined.

Guru found *Bhagavad Gita* a problematic text. When a specific question was put to him by a disciple regarding the line from the Gita on "Chaturvarnyam" he replied, "That is not the way it should be" (Guru, 355). It is instructive to remember that Dr. Ambedkar held that *Bhagavad Gita* was instrumental in heralding a counter-revolution against the hold of Buddhism in India (Ananya Vajpeyi 2012: 235). Guru has more in common with Dr. Ambedkar than Gandhi, as a modernizer of the depressed castes, but that is a topic beyond the scope of this paper. Guru's elucidation of the nature of 'knowledge' and 'known' should be seen as a



prelude to his critique of caste. This leads us to two of his famous pronouncements on the nature of caste in society. In "Jatinirnam" and "Jatilakshnam" Guru proceeds from the premises he has already established in his discussion of the relations between the knower and knowledge and that between desire and the other. In both these poems, Guru implies that one becomes human only in the context of community. This larger emphasis on community makes it clear that his enquiries have local, contextual dimensions. "Jatinirnam" begins by citing a Sanskrit sloka: "Manushyaanammanushyatwam/ Jatirgotvamgavamyadha/ Na Brahmanadirasyaivam/ Ha Tatvam Vetti Ko Pi Na" (Guru, 202). This roughly means that the only jati of human beings is humanness. As cowness is to cows, humanness is to humans. Attributing caste to divisions like Brahmins has no basis. He proceeds to elaborate the doctrine of one religion, one caste and one god for all human beings. All human beings are born of the same womb ('yoni'), have the same human shape, and there is no essential difference. Both Brahmin and Pariah are born in the same "narajati". He refers to the story of Sage Parasara who was born of a pariah woman. He ends the poem by saying that differences between human beings have nothing to do with caste, they issue from individual's unique qualities and attainments like education and occupation. It becomes clear that for Sree Narayanan 'Jati' implies species. This is carried on to the poem, "Jatilakashanam" where he uses 'inam' as a synonym for 'jati' (Guru, 203). All those beget offsprings through sexual union belong to the same 'inam' or 'kind'. Each kind is characterized by different types of body. Your body reveals your caste, that is whether you are a human being or not. Sexual difference belongs to nature. Human differences in the profession, names and ways of living have nothing to do with nature. Narayana Guru had asked Ezhavas to change their caste names to "Malayalees" as "Ezhava" means "one who came from 'Eezham' or Sri Lanka". Human body is the only mark of difference, as far as Guru is concerned. It may be noted that around this time, ethnography and

anthropology had already begun using race as a category to study caste. Udaya Kumar quotes Thurston and Fawcett to show how it was argued that “Namputhiri was the truest Aryan in South India”. He shows how Guru’s conception of the body “militated against both these ways of ‘materializing’ caste bodies”, the Brahminic and the imperial (Kumar 2017: 71). In reducing the site of caste difference to the physical plane, Guru questioned both the Sanskrit epistemology of the Vedanta rooted in ‘chaturvarnya’ and the Western epistemology based on racial difference.

Guru’s epistemological enquiries were rooted in history and the conditions of his own life in society. As mentioned earlier, he tirelessly travelled across the length and breadth of South India, never staying in one place for more than a few days. Once he was in Sri Lanka for months, and was reluctant to return, as he felt his ideas were not being received in their right spirit. He lived a life of struggle, and his poetic compositions are in the form of arguments with himself and others. His works have strong dialogic dimensions in the sense that they are spoken in the context of others’ speech. His poems were conversations with the world; they were attempts to clarify a path forward, when competing ideas of what is good and bad had compounded his choices. Guru could see that knowledge and truth were produced, sustained or displaced through power structures. He was not averse to accepting the benign aspects of colonial modernity and encouraged people to learn English (Balakrishnan, 2003). Towards the end of his life, he regretted that his initiative in constructing temples did not have the desired results. He suggested that efforts are required to educate the people, and hence there was need to build more schools (Bhaskaranunni 2005: 251).

In the poems mentioned above, Guru makes a primary distinction between caste and religion, dislodging ‘caste’ from the epistemic structure of Hinduism. He held that ‘matham’ which is the Malayalam word for religion merely

means 'an opinion' and cannot constitute an essential feature of one's self-definition. Commenting on the issue of 'conversion' he said: "Religion has two sides — the inner and the outer; which of these two needs a change? If the zeal is for a change on the outside, it is no religious conversion. It is only a social change. Change within takes place gradually in anything individual. It is a change that happens naturally corresponding to the increasing knowledge, it cannot be brought about by anybody. One who follows a particular religion like Hinduism or Christianity, should give it up if one comes to lose faith in it" (Govindan 1973: 219). Here religion is a subjective state of feeling, sensibility and receptivity and not an unalterable code of irrevocable differences. This subtle description undermines the very basis of religion as a symbolic system of knowledge that mystifies everyday world of differences. Guru locates an interior space within the self that gives primacy to knowledge and experience, rather than faith and belief.

This approach is reflected in Guru's dialogue with Gandhi. Gandhi visited Kerala during 8-19, March, 1925 primarily to support the temple entry Satyagraha at Vaikkom Temple. His meeting with the Brahmin priests of the temple was not a success. When Gandhi met Guru he initially asked him about the movement and whether there was any need to make any changes in the movement. Guru said, "I don't think any changes are necessary" (Guru, 256-259). Guru also supported the non-violent mode of Satyagraha. Gandhi went on to ask his opinion about conversion: "Some say that we must resort to religious conversion to attain freedom. Does Swamiji give permission for that?" Guru replied: "It is being seen that those who are converting are gaining freedom. Looking at these, people can't be blamed for thinking that religious conversion is good." Gandhi wanted to know specifically if Guru thought Hindu religion was sufficient for spiritual liberation. Guru replied, "There are ways of liberation in other religions too." Gandhiji repeated the question asking him to leave out the question of other

religions, and Guru replied that he felt Hindu religion was enough for spiritual liberation. But he added that “but people desire material freedom (liberation) more.” Gandhi was insistent and wanted a clear statement from Guru against religious conversion, but Guru held on to his stand and only said that religious conversion was not necessary for spiritual liberation. The underlying tension in the conversation can be traced to Gandhi’s strong faith in ‘varnashrama’ dharma. Guru’s perspective is a continuation of what we discussed earlier with reference to his poems on Advaita where he does not differentiate between the material and spiritual liberations. Guru had pointed at the tree nearby to say that although the leaves are of different shapes, the same sap ran through all of them. For Guru the question of struggle for social freedom was not separate from the quest for political freedom. Unlike Gandhi, Guru speaks from the perspective of ‘dharmam’ (ethical thought) and ‘samudayam’ (community).

This is where Narayana Guru’s intertextual relation with the indigenous Bhakti tradition becomes apparent. Once the basis of caste is shown to be a product of distorted knowledge, he is able to create the category of community as a participatory space; here self-awareness leads to community formation. It is by relocating the self, trapped in the discourse of caste and religion in the narrative of community that Narayana Guru founds a new discourse rooted in history and social transformation. Once caste marks are erased from the body, the social customs that legitimate caste structure will lose their foundation. B.Rajeevan has argued that Guru displaced the theoretical foundation of caste and sub-caste to formulate the idea of community the framework and details of which present us with an alternative to the Western model of civil society (Rajeevan, 294). However, this mode of studying Guru through the lens of Western formulations may not add much to our understanding of Guru’s life and works. What is needed is an attempt to place Guru in the context of his own

struggles and creative dialogues with history through poetry which has intertextual relations with many traditions of dissent in Indian thought.

As he found human-ness as the fulcrum of his vision of equality and justice, he could extend the idea of 'dharma' to the non-human plane as well. In one of his later philosophical poems called "Anukampasatakam" (200-01) he relates the idea of humanness to the quality of compassion. A human being can claim to be human only if he is capable of compassion ("Arul ullavananujeevi"). While the idea of "Samudayam" was based on shared suffering and the need for liberation, the question of 'Dharma' is grounded in Guru's ideas of knowledge, being, and a universal perspective that transcends the human boundaries.

In evaluating Sree Narayana Guru as a central figure of Kerala "Renaissance" we tend to see his contributions through the lens of European enlightenment. This results in the creation of a split figure: a wandering monk given to rational thought and reflection, and a man of action who also produced works of great interiority. My argument above is an attempt to situate Sree Narayana Guru beyond the rupture between the domains of contemplation and action. We have not been able to see him as a unified figure who moves seamlessly from creative expression to social action, the one reconstituting the self in preparation for the other. If Malayali is forced to return to him to locate himself in the 'modern' or 'post-modern' world in the twenty first century, it is because of his ability to transcend such categories. He devised a system of thought where divisions such as the secular and spiritual, self and the other, body and mind become immaterial. The current debates on the failure of liberal humanism should help us retrieve the visionary epistemology formulated by Sree Narayanan that had space for a critique of capitalism and its narrow definition of the human. A poem like "Anukampasatakam" would enable us to

reformulate the human from the perspective of the non-human.

Sree Narayana Guru was deeply grounded in contemporary social concerns. In his address to the members of the marginalized castes he always emphasized the importance of cleanliness, education and industry. His interventions were definitive acts of conviction, never leaving any room of ambiguity of his position on issues of social freedom. We need to recognize that he did not see the liberated self as an end in itself. It remains liberated only when it is in a perpetual state of revolt, struggle and regeneration. By carefully aligning himself with the lived and shared religion of the folks grounded in the dailiness of struggle, he could resist the prescriptive violence of organized religion and also leave a possibility of his own critique by future generations. He found a spiritual lexicon to embody the turbulence of a transformative era and created a permanent testament through his poetical and philosophical works to the struggles of the body and mind to break the limits of language set by the prevailing ideologies. We need to return to his mould of thought to reshape our vocabulary of critical thought and face the challenges of the present.

Note: Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations used in the essay are by the author.

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