

THE REFORM AGENDA OF SREE NARAYANA MOVEMENT: A SPECIAL STUDY OF GURU'S DISCOURSES ON EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

By

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Abstract

"Be enlightened through education, be strengthened through organization, and make progress through industry" (Sree Narayana Guru: 1910)

During the 19th century, the Ezhava population in Travancore was relegated to the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy which hindered their social, educational and economic mobility. However, the Sree Narayana reform movement brought about a significant paradigm shift, empowering the Ezhava community to break free from their socio-economic shackles. By promoting education and entrepreneurship, the movement enabled Ezhavas to access better livelihoods, fulfil their basic needs, and ultimately, improve their overall wellbeing. This paper examines the role of the Sree Narayana reform movement in transforming the Ezhava community from a disadvantaged group to a thriving, educated, and entrepreneurial class, thereby redressing the social and economic disparities of the time.

Keywords: *reform, mobility, education, employment, entrepreneurship.*

Introduction

The problems of reforming the customs, standard of living, education, employment and economic development are to be considered together since these were correlated to each other. Clearly, education plays a pivotal role in tying these elements together, as it impacts individuals' understanding of customs, their ability to secure employment, their access to economic opportunities, and their overall standard of living. Therefore, addressing these issues in isolation may not yield sustainable solutions, as they are all intertwined and dependent on each other.

This study elucidates a movement from the economic history of the state of Kerala (Travancore) entitled as Sree Narayana movement most importantly, to understand how Sree Narayana movement has been related to Ezhava mobility in terms of education, employment and entrepreneurship from 19th century to 20th century. The study is mainly based on primary and secondary sources both published and unpublished.

In Kerala, the work done by the Christian missionaries and spread of English education acted as a catalytic agent and the background for the reformatory and the

transformatory work initiated and effectively carried out under the leadership of Sree Narayana movement. The transformatory movement which originated first among the Ezhavas, a community which occupied the upper layer of avarna caste hierarchy, could influence and transform the communities both above and below them (K.Reghu 2005). Sree Narayana Reform Movement served as a stimulant for various other reform movements, not only within the Hindu community but also among Christians and Muslims. This movement ignited a desire for social, political, and economic liberation, inspiring individuals from different religious backgrounds to strive for freedom and equality. The impact of this movement extended beyond religious boundaries and fostering their needs for socio-economic wellbeing.

Of the untouchable castes, the Ezhavas were the most numerous and ritually superior (P. Chandramohan 2016) caste in Kerala. The Ezhavas, a lower-middle caste in the social hierarchy of Kerala, had within their rank's persons of relative prosperity and social prominence. Since the distribution of such persons was uneven, their social position as a caste was also uneven within various local communities in the region (Michael Tharakan 1997). The Ezhavas primarily held the role of tapping and caring for coconut palms, and they made up the largest portion of the polluting castes in Kerala. They were polluting a Nambudiri from 36 paces and a Nair from 12 (Jeffrey 1976) because of the caste structure in Kerala. Ezhavas started a

movement of emancipation on social and religious grounds, circumstances due to British colonization being unfavourable to the ancient hegemony of the Brahmins (Francois Houtart 1977).

Sree Narayana Guru played a pivotal role in the history of Kerala by taking a significant step that left a lasting impact. In 1888, he performed a momentous act by consecrating an idol of Siva at Aruvippuram. This act, which symbolized his spiritual beliefs and teachings, resonated deeply with people from all castes and communities in Kerala. Sree Narayana Guru's actions were not only significant in terms of religious and cultural significance but also in terms of fostering upliftment in terms of social and economic among the low caste population of Kerala. Recognizing the need for a formal organization to uphold and propagate his discourses, Sree Narayana Guru established the S.N.D.P.Y (Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam) on May 15, 1903 (N. K. Bhaskaran 1982). This organization was registered under the company law, solidifying its status as an association or company. The establishment of S.N.D.P.Y marked a turning point in the history of Kerala, as it provided a platform for the followers of Sree Narayana Guru to come together, support each other, and work towards the betterment of society. The main objective of the Yogam was to promote and encourage religious and secular education and industrious habits among the Ezhava community (File no. 8338/1903. TGER, Kerala Secretariat, Trivandrum). At first, the organization's membership was restricted to

individuals from the elite or middle class within the community. This exclusivity allowed for a certain level of prestige and status among its members, as they were considered to be part of a select group. However, as time passed, the organization began to open its doors to individuals from all walks of life, regardless of their economic status. The decision to expand membership without any economic discrimination was a pivotal moment in the organization's history, as it signalled a shift towards a more egalitarian and inclusive approach. This move not only helped to strengthen the community ties, but also allowed for a more diverse range of perspectives and experiences to be shared among its members about upliftment. Through Guru's actions and the establishment of S.N.D.P.Y, Sree Narayana Guru left an indelible mark on Kerala's social and cultural fabric. His teachings and the inclusive nature of his reform movement continue to inspire people, promoting harmony and equality among people of different castes and communities. Thus, the consecration of the idol at Aruvippuram and the formation of S.N.D.P.Y stand as testament to Sree Narayana Guru's vision and his unwavering commitment to social reform and upliftment. However, the path from the Aruvippuram consecration to the establishment of SNDPY was marked by significant milestones for Narayana Guru and his disciples and other followers encountered various challenges and underwent numerous transformations along the way. Each phase of their journey

presented various obstacles for shaping their attitudes and actions.

From the perspective of the Ezhavas, the failure of the Malayali Memorial (Which was presented to the Government in 1891 demanding greater representation for Malayalees (especially Nairs) other than Tamil brahmins in Travancore government service. When diwan described the occupation of Ezhavas as toddy tapping and spinning of coir) was a significant setback in their quest for social and educational upliftment. In 1895, Dr. Palpu, a prominent Ezhava leader, took the initiative to address the grievances and disabilities faced by the Ezhava community. He submitted a detailed petition to dewan Shungarasoobyer, highlighting the various challenges and limitations imposed on the Ezhavas. However, despite Dr. Palpu's efforts, there was a lack of response from the government, but the dewan promised to open as many government schools as possible for the Ezhavas (N. K. Bhaskaran 1982). Unfortunately, when a few Ezhava graduates eagerly applied for jobs in government sector, they were met with disappointment as they were informed that there were no vacancies available (P.Bhaskaranunni 1988). This turn of events further deepened the disillusionment and frustration among the Ezhava community, as they felt that their aspirations for social and educational progress were being neglected. The failure of the Malayali Memorial, Dr. Palpu took the initiative to establish an organization known

as the Travancore Ezhava Sapha with the aim of advocating for the rights of the community (N. K. Bhaskaran 1982). In September 1896, Dr. Palpu led the Ezhavas in a significant constitutional movement aimed at addressing their social disadvantages. This movement took the form of a petition of rights, commonly referred to as the Ezhava Memorial. The memorial, signed by an impressive 13,176 Ezhavas, including a substantial number of land tax payers (K. Saradamani 1980), sought to bring attention to the plight of the community and advocate for their inclusion in government schools and employment opportunities under the government. The Ezhava memorial was a groundbreaking initiative that marked the first formal expression of the Ezhavas' demands. It served as a platform for the community to voice their grievances and assert their rights. The memorial's primary objective was to challenge the social disabilities faced by the Ezhavas and seek redress from the government. Despite the significant support garnered by the Ezhava memorial, the government responded to their demands with disdain and rejection. The authorities dismissed the petition, refusing to acknowledge the legitimate concerns raised by the Ezhavas. This rejection, however, did not diminish the significance of the Ezhava memorial. It was recognized as a pivotal moment in the history of the Ezhava community, as it marked the first organized effort to address their social disadvantages and assert their rights.

In light of these unfortunate circumstances, Palpu sought counsel from Vivekananda, who suggested the establishment of a robust statewide organization, ideally with an ascetic figure as its leader. This, Vivekananda believed, would greatly enhance the organization's appeal to the Ezhava community in Kerala. Following this advice, Dr. Palpu journeyed to Trivandrum where he connected with Sree Narayana Guru (P. Bhaskaranunni 1988), a highly esteemed figure among the residents of south Travancore. Known for his spiritual prowess and his fearless rejection of traditional beliefs and practices, Sree Narayana Guru had garnered widespread admiration and support. The revered saint, who had even performed the consecration of a Siva idol at Aruvippuram, had already made a significant impact on the local populace. His reputation for spiritual enlightenment, coupled with his progressive views, had endeared him to many. In 1887, Sree Narayana Guru established a temple at Aruvippuram and formed a small committee to oversee its management. This committee, known as the 'Vavoottu Yogam', (N.K Bhaskaran 1982) later evolved into the Sree Narayana Darma Paripalana Yogam under the guidance of Dr. Palpu. The reorganization was suggested by Dr. Palpu, with Narayana Guru assuming the role of president and Kumaran Asan serving as the secretary, the Yogam played a crucial role in upholding the principles and values advocated by Sree Narayana Guru and it became a prominent organization dedicated

to promoting social reform and enlightenment in every sphere of their community. The establishment of the SNDP Yogam had a profound and exhilarating impact on the Ezhava community. The SNDP Yogam became a driving force in the lives of the Ezhavas, propelling them towards progress and development. Through its various initiatives and programs, the SNDP Yogam empowered the Ezhavas to actively participate in social, educational, and political spheres, leading to a remarkable transformation in their socio-economic status.

The prerequisite of spreading education among the Ezhava community occupied a fundamental place in the discourse and activities of Sree Narayana reform movement. At all times, it stressed education as the most appropriate measure to ensure the community's progress. Education has long been recognized as the key to upward social and economic mobility within the system of caste hierarchy. The ability to acquire knowledge and skills through education has historically provided individuals from lower castes with a means to break free from the constraints of their hereditary occupations. The sustenance of living for individuals in lower castes was heavily reliant on their hereditary occupations, which often limited their social and economic prospects. However, education offered a way for individuals to challenge and overcome these limitations. By gaining an education, individuals were able to pursue more vivid opportunities that

were previously inaccessible to them due to the rigid caste hierarchy. It is to be noted that, education is a way to improve the standard of living and give promotion of outcastes in the society. Moreover, Commercialisation of Travancore economy initiated more demand for modern education among people for getting various job opportunities in the administrative as well as in trade and plantation companies during the colonial period (Michael Tharakan 1997). However, in the late 19th century also, the Ezhavas faced exclusion from public educational institutions as a result of caste discrimination. The denial of educational access based on caste was a significant barrier to social mobility and progress for the Ezhavas during this time period. Thus, education was central to the Sree Narayana reform movement. Specifically, in a speech delivered to the Vinjana Vardhini Sapha at Cherai in 1910, he said; 'liberate through education' (P. K. Balakrishnan 1954). Educational attainment was the core concept of Sree Narayana reform for achieving social and economic mobility of Ezhava community. Especially, Guru and his disciples mainly focussed on English education than vernacular or Sanskrit education. (M. K. Sanoo 1976). Guru founded a school at Aruvippuram and another at Varkala, in which the medium of instruction was English. From his perspective, education offered a means of improving the position of the group in society, of transforming irrational social customs involved in the social situation of the group (Houtart, Lemercinier 1978). Guru also promoted professional and scientific

education by initiating the establishment of schools and industrial training centres associated with temples (P. K. Balakrishnan 1954, M. K. Sanoo 1976). Therefore, in 1875, according to the census figures, Ezhava male literacy was only 3.15 percent. In 1891 it was 12.10 percent and this figure rose to 46.5 percent in 1941 (Census 1875, 1891, 1941).

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the Ezhava community faced significant barriers when it came to accessing government jobs. Due to the prevailing caste-based discrimination, these positions were predominantly occupied by individuals from the caste Hindus. Consequently, the first two graduates from the Ezhava community encountered immense challenges in finding suitable employment opportunities in Travancore state. They were left with no choice but to explore opportunities in other regions, with one of them eventually finding employment in Mysore State and the other in British India. As a result, their entry into the new class of occupation that is their occupational mobility which restricted by their birth. The concept of occupational mobility is closely tied to social stratification and the ways in which individuals are able to move within the social hierarchy. By occupational mobility means, it is the movement of one occupation to another. There are two aspects to this movement; one may be called the inter-generational and the other intra-generational. By intra-generational mobility means men moving from one occupation to another during their

working life and by intergenerational means the movement off springs as compared to the occupations of their parents (Narayana: 1981). Thus, in the region of Travancore, the social hierarchy known as the caste structure had a significant impact on the lives of its people, particularly those belonging to the lower castes. This hierarchical system dictated that individuals were bound to their hereditary occupations, which resulted in limited opportunities for upward mobility within and across generations. This lack of intra-generational and inter-generational mobility further perpetuated the social and economic disparities between castes.

Traditionally, the occupations of Ezhavas were coir-making, coconut trade, drawing of toddy, trade of toddy and arrack, various handicrafts, head-load work, artisanal occupations etc. (Aiyer 1937-39, Aiya 1906). Sree Narayana Guru helped them to exploit the new opportunities of modernization of the economy through his powerful words. Thus, he said "Improvement is possible only through trade and industry". It's mainly because of the difficulty to get government occupations and the encouragement of Sree Narayana Guru (P. Chandramohan 2016) as well as they preferred more profitable enterprises. For this, Guru initiated to organize presentations and speeches on trade, industry and commerce to the community. He also recommended that the relatively rich members of the community invest in industries and they should provide jobs for weaker sections (P. K. Balakrishnan 1954). He also encouraged Ezhavas to

pursue various forms of industrial training. He promoted small-scale industries and established a weaving industry at his ashram in Varkala to teach skills in spinning and weaving. As a result, Ezhavas invested in several industrial ventures, including textile mills, cashew factories, banking enterprises, and brick factories. According to the census figures, in 1931, there were 42,438 Ezhava traders, along with 2,326 individuals working as lawyers, doctors, and professors, and 346 who were government employees (Houtart, Lemercinier 1978).

Guru encouraged his followers to organize agro-industrial exhibitions throughout Kerala, aiming to educate the people, particularly those from lower castes, about technological advancements and their effects on production. The first exhibition took place during the second annual general meeting of the SNDP Yogam in January 1905 in Quilon, followed by a second exhibition at the fourth annual general meeting of the SNDP Yogam in March 1907 in Cannanore. Exhibits included finished products, production tools, and machinery designed to modernize cottage industries, sourced from various regions of India, Burma, and Ceylon (P. Chandramohan 2016). They brought about a significant change within the Ezhava community. As a result, by the turn of the twentieth century, Ezhavas established various industries, including weaving, banking, and factories for cashews and bricks. In 1914, Guru founded the Malabar Economic Union with a capital of Rs. one lakh, where he served as a director, to

promote Ezhava entrepreneurship (P. Chandramohan 2016). By the mid-twentieth century, Ezhavas owned several industries in Kerala, such as the Quilon Thamarakkulam Ottu Company and the Kerala Vyavasaya Company (P. Chandramohan 2016). The rise of Ezhava entrepreneurship stemmed from the Guru's focus on education, technology, occupational mobility, and industrialization. Consequently, many enterprises were owned by Ezhavas, allowing them to emerge as successful entrepreneurs. This development boosted their economic status and opened up numerous opportunities for transformation.

Conclusion

In order to create a progressive community, Sree Narayana Guru pursued various objectives such as reforming caste systems, promoting education and employment, providing scientific and technological training, and fostering entrepreneurship. As a result of his impact, Ezhavas had evidently gained a social status through economic development by the end of the 20th century. These economic prosperity and educational development are the inevitable contributions of the Social Reform Movement initiated under the leadership of Sree Narayana Guru. As a result of his guidance, a considerable segment of the Ezhava population has flourished as affluent farmers, skilled professionals, and successful entrepreneurs. Moreover, they proved they were a hardworking and industrious people.

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