

THE SYNCRETIC AND SECULARIST STRANDS IN THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF SREE NARAYANA GURU

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Abstract : This paper attempts to analyse the syncretic and secularist strands in the religious philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru. Guru's religious philosophy was a syncretism of various religious ideas and secularist concepts that existed in the world. As Kerala society was divided and degenerated because of religious obscurantism Sree Narayana Guru made use of religion as a weapon for social reform. Through a novel, perpetual, impartial religious ideology, he changed a superstitious, ignorant and dark society of Kerala into an enlightened and civilized one. Through his ideology Narayana Guru proved that all religions are only a means to the ultimate end.

Introduction

From the dawn of civilization onwards religion had played a prominent role in moulding the destiny of the people. Religion makes men unaware of the realities around them and by wearing the blanket of religion, many cruelties and exploitations had taken place all over the world and are still continuing. Among the prominent personalities who tried their level best to reduce religious tensions and turmoil, a great saint, philosopher, poet, educationalist and social reformer, Sree Narayana Guru from Kerala holds an important position. Through his novel, perpetual and impartial religious attitude, he could change a superstitious, ignorant and dark society of Kerala into an enlightened and civilized one. In the present scenario of religious fanaticism, the ideas and messages of Sree Narayana Guru are very relevant.

Perceptive to the pulse of the people, Sree Narayana Guru made use of religion as a weapon to his social reform programmes. The syncretic and secularist elements of his philosophy gave him a unique position among the other social reformers. Syncretism is the harmony or synthesis of differing systems of belief.¹ Sree Narayan Guru's religious concept was an amalgamation of the good aspects of different religions and cultures. Secularism, another prominent feature of the Guru's religious philosophy, is a system of doctrines and practices that neglected or rejects any form of religious faith and worship. In his words, deeds and literary works we can see the deep-rooted elements of both these aspects.

Temple Installations of Sree Narayana Guru

The syncretic and secularist elements of the religious philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru had its first reflections in his temple installations. The greatest specimen of his syncretic strands in his religious ideology is visible in the very first installation of Aruvippuram - in the form of the famous dictum inscribed on the temple wall, "*Devoid of dividing walls of caste or race; Or hatred of rival faith; We all live here in brotherhood; Such, know this place to be this model foundation.*"² The opening of the doors of the temple to all without any caste or religious distinctions and establishment of a school and offering education to all without any differences at Aruvippuram, the alpha of his socio- religious revolution itself, reveal the syncretic and secular fibres in his religious philosophy.

In the early phase of his social reform activities, the Guru consecrated large number of temples according to the wishes of the people. Being a member of a Hindu family, the brethren of his community first approached him for their religious needs. Though the Guru installed so many temples and wrote *stotras* for Hindu deities, he followed a tolerant policy towards all religions and once he opined if Christians or Muslims reached his side and wanted to consecrate churches for them, definitely he will do so. In later stages, at many occasions the Guru denied the need of temples and temple rituals.³

Sree Narayan Guru's concept of temple was entirely different from others. He never desired his temples to be mere religious centres, but, they should be the nucleus of education, culture, cleanliness and centres creating self-respect and self-confidence. To him a temple must have an open space where abundance of air and sunlight must be available and should be surrounded by beautiful garden and trees. In such an atmosphere, people would come, sit and discuss there about many matters. Guru also opined that temples should arrange good discussions by eminent personalities of different religions. Guru appreciated churches for its spacious halls and wished that temples can be constructed in such a way to conduct discussions. In these discussions people would get a clear picture about different religions and they can understand about the aims of each religion and it would help them to reach a conclusion that the aim of all religions is same. The Guru also stressed the need of libraries along with temples, containing books of various religions and through them the people would get an opportunity to understand all religions and it will reduce religious tension and problems.⁴ Through these innovative temple concepts the Guru tried to disseminate a syncretic and secularist outlook of religion among the masses.

The second phase of the temple installation process of the Guru started with the Sarada Installation of 1912 and through it the Guru wanted to prove knowledge is synonymous to God. In this period the Guru gave consideration to the secular aspect of

knowledge than religious consideration. Guru's Sarada was an epitome of all knowledge and the temple was completely free from all traditional worship system and practices.⁵ In 1917, Sree Narayana Guru declared that there is no further need of temples; main temple should be the educational institutions. He considered temples only as a symbol, but prime consideration was given to education.⁶ Almost all the temples consecrated by Sree Narayana Guru, at this phase had schools and libraries attached with them.

In the next phase, instead of idols the Guru gave importance to ideals and there was a beginning of the symbolic and philosophic representations of the temple installation process of the Guru. Through the installation of a Lamp at Karamukku in 1921, the Guru fulfilled the great Upanishadic Philosophy of *Tamasoma Jyotirgamaya*.⁷ By this installation, Sree Narayana Guru expressed the idea that all the darkness of ignorance can be purified by the light of knowledge.⁸ The syncretic and secular aspects of Indian philosophy are reflected in this installation and the Guru lifted up the devotees to a higher level. The greatest religious ideology of the Guru is reflected in the symbolic representation of a Bronze Plate at Murukkumpuzha Sree Kalakandeswara Temple⁹ by inscribing the Indian philosophic concepts of *Satyam* (truth), *dharmam* (logical dirties), *daya* (kindness) and *santhi* (peace) in the surroundings of the *pranava* mantra "Om". In the place of an idol, the Guru installed this plate and wanted the people to follow these ideals in life to reach the side of God. Through his last installation of Mirror at Kalavamcodam and *Pranava* ("Om-karam") installation at Ullala, the Guru takes the devotees to a superior level of *Advaita* philosophy,¹⁰ which is the greatest specimen of his true religious ideology.

All Religious Conference

It was in order to enlighten the elite as well as the layman of the basic truth of religions, to make the people aware about the real aims and principles of all religions, that Narayana Guru organized an All Religious Conference on 3rd and 4th May 1924, at his ashram at Aluva. It was the world's second and the first of this kind in Asia. Experts from different religious faiths came and conducted lectures on their respective religions. The two days conference proved the message depicted in the entrance that "not to argue and win, but to know and to be known". At the close of this conference, he officially declared a decision to establish a *mata-mahapatasala*, a school to teach all religions with a sense of sympathy and a quest for knowing, at his ashram at Varkala. In this institution all religions could be studied by everyone and advices should be provided by proficient men in each religion.¹¹ This became the University of the Guru's religious ideology. The All Religions Conference at Aluva helped greatly for developing the idea that there is no need for religious tensions and rivalries and the ultimate aim of all religions are the happiness of human beings.¹²

Sivagiri Pilgrimage

Sivagiri Pilgrimage was another important weapon of the Guru to fight for religious toleration. The ultimate aim of all religions, the material and spiritual purity of man, was taken as the prime aim of the pilgrimage. The syncretism of various religious ideas can be seen in the idea of Sivagiri pilgrimage. *Panchasuddhi* suggested by the Guru for the pilgrimage, was taken from Buddhism. The date of the pilgrimage was selected from the Christian's New Year and the yellow cloth of the pilgrims from Hindu deity Krishna. Experts from various religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam were invited and delivered lectures on different religious questions. From these speeches people can reach the concept of oneness of all the religions. The secular aspect of the Guru's ideology can also be seen in his selection of eight topics, such as education, cleanliness, devotion to god, organisation, agriculture, trade, handicrafts and technical training for conducting discussions. Experts in these areas were invited to conduct lectures and the pilgrims listen attentively and spread the messages to their areas. Sivagiri Pilgrimage is a true reflection of the religious ideology of Sree Narayana Guru.

Messages of Sree Narayana Guru

Teachings and messages of Sree Narayana Guru are straight forward and simple, bringing out spiritual, moral and material revolution. They are the direct specimens of his syncretic and secularist philosophy. The earliest example to show his religious ideology was the message delivered by Guru at the time of Aruvippuram idol installation. On the walls of this temple Guru wrote: "This is a model abode; where all men shall live as brothers; without caste distinctions; and religious rivalries". Through his famous dictum "One Caste, One Religion and One God for Man" delivered at the SNDP Yogam annual meeting at Pallathuruthy,¹³ the Guru explicitly declared his caste and religious concepts.

Guru felt great regret for the misuse of his name for the cause of caste consolidation. So in 1916, at Pattathanam in Kollam on the eve of the inauguration of a building of Achutan contractor, the Guru openly expressed his attitude towards caste and religion.¹⁴ On May 28th 1916, Sree Narayana Guru gave it as a written message to the public and it published in the *Prabudha Keralam* Magazine. The public declaration that he made was known as *Jatiyilla vilambaram*. It stated that "it is a few years since I eschewed all caste and religious considerations, I no long consider myself as belonging to any caste or religion. Though this is my real and true position, today a certain caste seems to still consider me one of them. This, it appears has created some misunderstanding in the minds of some people regarding my true position. I do not belong to any particular caste or religion. I publish this for the information of the public".¹⁵

The message given by Sree Narayana Guru to the *Sahodara Sangham* Annual meeting conducted at Aluva Advaita Ashram in 1921, that "whatever may be the differences in man's creed, class, language etc., because they all belong to the same kind of creation, there is no harm in dining together or having marital relations with one another"¹⁶ is considered to be the greatest specimen of his religious ideology.

Sree Narayan Guru's Attitude towards Religious Conversions

In the early 20th century large number of *Avarnas* from Hinduism converted to other religions in order to escape from social humiliation and to attain better status. Because of the activities of Christian missionaries, Muslims, *Akalis* from Punjab, Arya Samaj and Sikhs, lakhs of people abandoned Hindu faith and converted to other religions in 1920s. The educated Ezhava leaders like C. V. Kunjuran,¹⁷ Mitavadi C. Krishnan,¹⁸ Sahodaran Ayyappan¹⁹ and others led propagation in favour of religious

conversion. By knowing the idea of equality and oneness of all religions in their aims and basic principles, Sree Narayana Guru opposed religious conversions. When Sahodaran Ayyappan asked Guru about religious conversions, he opined there is no need to religious conversion and “whatever be one’s religion, it is enough that man becomes good”.²⁰ Religion is not a matter, betterment of man is necessary. According to the Guru, for the development of the depressed classes education and economic self-sufficiency is necessary rather than religious conversions. His religious concept and ideology helped greatly for the reduction of religious conversions among the low caste society.

When a number of men decided to change their religions and wished to become the followers of the Guru, he advised them to remain in their own religions to follow Sree Narayana ideologies. His attitude towards a European- Ernest clerk,²¹ Chakko - a Christian student in Aluva Advaita Ashram,²² a Muslim named Khader in Sri Lanka,²³ Muhammed who studied in Sanskrit *Patasala*²⁴ and so on attests the syncretic and secular strands in the religious philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru.

Sree Narayana Guru’s Religious Concept

Being a member of the Hindu family, Sree Narayana Guru was a devotee of Hindu pantheon in his early days. But after the austerities and meditations at Maruthvamalai great maturity attained in his writings, religious faith and philosophy. Though he came to the public sphere through the consecration of large number of temples and wrote a lot of *stotras* praising Hindu Gods and Goddesses, he was not an ardent advocate of Hinduism. He used religion only as a tool for his social reform programmes. He reinterpreted the values of his own religious tradition and he was well acquainted with other religious tenets like Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam and so on.²⁵ Those people who considered the Guru as a Hindu is just like those who consider the butterfly as a caterpillar. Just like the different stages in the growth of a butterfly, the Guru also passed through several stages and finally he denied all religions.²⁶

His conversations with famous personalities like Vagbhadananda,²⁷ Gandhiji,²⁸ a Buddhist believer²⁹ and others proved that he did not give any special consideration to a particular religion. Sree Narayana Guru’s conversation with C. V. Kunjuraman reveals his religious concept. Guru opined that “though the religions had different ideologies or principles, the basic elements of all religions are same and they are the path finders to reach the ultimate reality. The existence of different religions is just like different rivers from mountains joined in the ocean and when the rivers joined the ocean, they lose their separateness. Similarly, when we reach the Absolute, there were no religious distinctions. The quarrels between nations and people end when one defeated the other. But fight between religions never end because one religion cannot win over the other”.³⁰ Sree Narayana Guru also opined that “before starting religious quarrels, one must study about his own religion. If they deeply or thoroughly knew about it, they had an open mind to love all other religions and they can study and understand them with free mind and equal attention”.³¹ On the basis of this religious universalism the Guru formulated his doctrine ‘One Caste, One Religion and One God for Man’. One religion of the Guru did not mean a particular religion. It is the nut shell of the deep study of all religions which include the good aspects of all religions.³² Religion is not an end itself; it is a way, a means to a supreme end and self-satisfaction.³³ Sree Narayana Guru’s literary works like *Atmopadesa Satakam* (Sloka 44 to 49), *Darsanamaala*, *Advaita Dweepika*, *Daivadasakam*, *Brahmavidya Panchakam*, *Anukampa Dasakama* and so on were greatest paradigms of his religious concept.

Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam

For propagating the religious and *dharmic* principles of Sree Narayana Guru and uniting and strengthening the depressed classes, the Guru started an organisation called Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam in 1903³⁴ and through the Yogam he made deep rooted changes in the socio-religious traditions of the society. Under the banner of the Yogam he sent many experts to different parts of the land to provide education on the basic issues of morality, religion, education, industry and so on. Though Dr. Palpu and some of the Ezhava leaders who gave early succour to the Yogam intended it mainly for the uplift of the Ezhava community, Guru’s idea was of a cosmopolitan organisation which will cater to the social, educational and industrial improvement of the socially backward communities of Kerala. Narayana Guru opened its door for all people irrespective of caste or religion. But when, in later years, the Yogam started deviating from the basic principles of oneness and equality of castes and openly renounced the ideologies of Sree Narayana Guru, without any hesitation he broke away from it.³⁵ Though the 17th annual meeting of the Yogam in May 1920, under the initiative of T. K. Madhavan decided to open its membership to all irrespective of caste and religious differences till 1927 it remained in papers only. Guru wrote a letter to the Yogam’s Secretary on 30th January 1927 stating that “without an organisation no community will achieve progress or strength. I have founded the SNDP Yogam twenty-five years ago on this principle. *Ezhava* does not refer to any caste or religion. Therefore, all can join the Yogam irrespective of caste or religion. May many members join the Yogam”? The Guru’s attitude towards the Yogam was a true proof of his religious ideology.

Religious and Secular Education Programmes

By understanding the fact that lack of knowledge about various religions was the major reason for religious tensions, Sree Narayana Guru wished to provide religious education to the people and make aware them about the oneness of all religions. For that purpose, the Guru started many informal education programmes under the banner of SNDP Yogam and sent many experts to different parts of the land to provide education on the basic issues of morality, religion, education, industry and so on. Along with this, the Guru started his secular education programmes by starting of schools and libraries along with the temples installed by him. He also started *Brahma vidyalaya* at Sivagiri and gave admission to students from all walks of life. All these reveals his syncretic and secular approach to religious matters.

Conclusion

Safeguarding social harmony is one of the most important imperatives of modern society. Sadly enough, lack of this harmony creates many problems that continue to torment the modern human race nearly everywhere in the world. The role played by

religious intolerance in this disharmony is formidable. Men should be open-minded and practical in their religiousness rather than being dogmatic, close-minded and impractical. Such an open-heartedness with regard to religion is imminently the need of this age. It was Sree Narayana Guru who accrued to the mission of creating such an atmosphere of open-heartedness in Kerala by laying the foundations of a syncretic and pluralistic society and religious outlook. Sree Narayan Guru gave the connotation of religion as 'opinion' and changing of religion as meaning changing of one's opinion. The Guru's principles and ideology were a great answer to the question, whether anyone can remain as a *sanyasin* without a religion? For the practical implementation of his religious ideologies Sree Narayana Guru utilised *Advaita*, the basic concept of which syncretism and universalism is. By syncretising various religious ideas and secularist concepts, the Guru proved that all religions are only a means to the ultimate end and the prime concern of all religious concepts was self-satisfaction and self-realisation.

Notes and References

- ¹ *American Heritage Dictionary*.
- ² *Jaathibhedam-mathadvesham ethumillathe sarvarum sodarathvena vazhunna mathruka sthanamanithu*
- ³ K. N. Shaji (ed), *Sree Narayan Guru Viswa Manavikatayude Pravachakan* (Mal.), Prabhat Book House, Trivandrum, 1992, pp. 426-427.
- ⁴ S. Mohandas(ed.), *Viswaguru* (Mal.), S.N.Club, Trivandrum, 1998, pp 86-87.
- ⁵ K.K. Manoharan, *Sivagiri Charitham* (Mal.), Gangothry Publications, Pattom, 2017, pp. 225-231.
- ⁶ E. D. Davis (ed.), *Kerala Navodhanavum Yukthi Chinthayum* (Mal.), Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishat, Trichur, 2015, pp. 27-28.
- ⁷ Pavamana Mantra of *Brihad Aranyakopanishad* 1.3.28.
- ⁸ S. Mohandas, *The Prophet of One World*, Trivandrum, 2016, pp.139-140.
- ⁹ K. P. Balakrishnan, *Aruvippuram Mutal Omkareswaram Vare* (Mal.), Nitya Books, Kannur, 2002, pp.321-323.
- ¹⁰ K. Balarama Panikker, *Sree Narayana Guru Prabandhangalilude* (Mal.), Sree Narayana Dharma Sangham Trust, Varkala, 1969, pp. 19-29.
- ¹¹ Mangadu Balachandran, *Sree Narayana Guru- A Comprehensive Study*, Sivagiri Mutt Publications, Varkala, 2015, pp. 152-158.
- ¹² K.A. Kunjakkan, *Sree Narayana Guru: An Apostle of Humanism*, Trivandrum, 2005, pp.65-68.
- ¹³ K. Vivekanandan, *Sree Narayana Darsanavum Manava Munneettavum* (Mal.), National Book Stall, Kottayam, 1986, p.165.
- ¹⁴ Satchidananda Swamikal (ed.), *Sree Narayana Guru Prabhashanangalilude* (Mal.), Vol.I, Sivagiri Pilgrim Platinum Jubilee Celebration Committee, Sree Narayana Dharma Sangham Trust, Varkala, 2007, p.215.
- ¹⁵ P. Chandra Mohan, *op.cit.*, p. 230.
- ¹⁶ Swami Sudhananda, *Sree Narayan Guruvum Ekaloka Sidhanthavum*, in S. Mohandas (ed.), *Viswaguru* (Mal.), S. N. Club, 1998, pp. 278-281.
- ¹⁷ C. V. Kunjuraman, a prominent follower of Sree Narayana Guru, was a social reformer, a journalist, the founder of *Kerala Kaumudi* News Paper and a leader who worked for the upliftment of the downtrodden sections had the opinion to convert the *Ezhavas* into Christianity to raise their status.
- ¹⁸ Mithavadi C. Krishnan, a community leader, social reformer, journalist and the editor of *Mithavadi* News Paper was a follower of Sree Narayana Guru who believed in Hinayana Buddhism and supported the religious conversion to Buddhism.
- ¹⁹ Sahodaran Ayyappan, popularly known as *Pulayan Ayyappan*, was a social reformer, thinker, rationalist, journalist and a politician of Kerala was a follower of Sree Narayan Guru. He organised *misrabhojanam* and formed an organisation called *Sahodara Sangham* and also famous for his slogan *jati venda, matham venda, daivam venda manushyanu*. He supported the religious conversion to Buddhism because of the absence of casteism and equal consideration of all.
- ²⁰ Sukumar Azhikodu, *Guruvinte Dukham* (Mal.), Lipi Publications, Calicut, 1993, pp. 59-66.
- ²¹ A European named Ernest Clerk was attracted by Sree Narayana ideologies and became the disciple of Sree Narayan Guru. At the time of *Sanyasadeeksha*, the Guru denied many of the rituals related to it like tonsure and practice of some *vratas* to him and provided a coat, pants, shoes and tie instead of *Kashayavastra*. As a part of the ritual, the Guru put the shoes to his leg and tied the tie to his neck and gave him the name Swami Ernest Clerk and wanted to continue his culture and heritage.
- ²² Satchidananda Swami, *Sree Narayana Darsanam Irupathionnam Noottandil* (Mal.), Swami Geethanda Gayathri Ashram Trust, Chalakkudy, 2000, pp. 25-37.
- ²³ When Sree Narayana Guru visited Sri Lanka in 1918, a Muslim named Khader attracted by the ideologies of the Guru and became a great devotee. When the Guru visited Sri Lanka again in 1926, the Guru saw the man in a *sanyasa* dress by changing his name as Kantha Swami and was waiting for the consent of the Guru to join his *Sanyasa Sangha*. Guru agreed to admit him to the Sangha under the condition of change his name and religion and advised him no need to change both of them to believe in Sree Narayana principles.
- ²⁴ When a Muslim named Muhammed, who studied in Sanskrit *Patasala* tried to change his religion, the Guru advised him not to convert his religion and follow the ideas and principles of Muhammed Nabi and Quran.
- ²⁵ V. T. Samuel, *One Caste, One Religion and One God- A Study of Sree Narayana Guru*, Sterling Publishers Pvt Ltd., Delhi, pp. 110-128.
- ²⁶ Pratheepan Pampirikunnu (ed.), *Sree Narayana Guru Punar Vayanakal* (Mal.), Progress Publication, Calicut, 2016, pp. 101-111.

- ²⁷ When Vagbhadananda strongly criticised the mismatching of *advaita* and temple installations, the Guru replied that without idol installation people did not allow me to remain calm and I consecrated temples for satisfying their needs and create cleanliness among them.
- ²⁸ By looking the mango tree at Varkala, Gandhiji opined just like the branches and leaves of this tree different from one another, the individuals and their religions are also different. Contrary to that the Guru opined that though the shape, size and colour of the leaves are different, all have the same content. Through this example the Guru proved his universal concept of religion.
- ²⁹ Sree Narayana Guru's conversation with a Buddhist believer at Ceylon in 1918 reveals the syncretism of many of the Buddhist ideas in the religious philosophy of the Guru.
- ³⁰ *Atmopadesa Satakam, Sloka*. 46.
- ³¹ K. Sreenivasan, *Sree Narayan Guru- Saint, Philosopher, Humanist*, Jayasree Publicatons, Trivandrum, 1989, pp.125-135.
- ³² T. Bhaskaran, *Sree Narayana Darsanam* (Mal.), Grass Roots, Mathrubhumi Books, Calicut, 1984, pp. 68-72.
- ³³ *Atmopadesa Satakam, Sloka* 49.
- ³⁴ In 1901, instigat by the advice of Swamy Vivekananda, Dr. Palpu along with Kumaranasan visited Sree Narayana Guru at Aruvippuram and planned to expand the *Vavoottu Yogam*, a small organisation formed after the Aruvippuram Temple Installation. They decided to register it into a Joint Stock Company and thus, *Aruvippuram Kshetra Yogam* was renamed and registered as Aruvippuram Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, popularly known as SNDP Yogam.
- ³⁵ In 1916 the Guru wrote a letter to Dr. Palpu which states "since it is seen that the Yogam takes all its decisions without my knowledge, that is showing any favour in matters of my interest and that it is becoming increasingly caste oriented, I am severing my connections with the Yogam". P. Chandra Mohan, *Developmental Modernity in Kerala, Narayana Guru, SNDP Yogam and Social Reform*, Tulika Books, Delhi, p. 230.

