

## Life As Philosophy: An Essay on Sreenarayana Guru's Integrity

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### **Abstract**

*This paper tries to place Sreenarayana Guru in the context of Kerala modernity. Guru's relation with the historical context is complex as the sources of his original thinking were non-modern. He criticised caste system out of his ontological realisation that hierarchies in social world are groundless. His practice on himself, sanyasa is seen as an aesthetic crafting of self, following Michel Foucault's model. Relationship between his actions and thoughts is analysed by foregrounding the ethico-political relationship with knowledge which was integral to him. It is argued that his allegiance to advaita was accidental, though the context for that accident was provided by colonialism. The in-between nature of Tiyya community into which Guru was born played a key role regarding the efficacy of his political interventions. Guru gained cultural capital by acquiring the standards of tradition. This was dubbed as sanskritisation by some critics but this paper argues that there was an orientation of moving-down in his deeds and philosophical positions. He wrote *Atmopadesa satakam, One Hundred Verses of Self Instruction*, as he was aware that instructing advaita to others was absurd. He was not a doctrinaire advaitin.*

**Keywords:** *Modernity, Sreenarayana, Karuna, Advaita, Asceticism*

Discourses on saints, sages and other holy men traditionally and commonly take the form “the life and works of ----”. It quite often tries to find the contradiction between these two seemingly conflicting aspects of a holy life, discrediting one side, hymning the saintly personae. According to the hierarchy of priorities hidden in the writings on Sree Narayana Guru<sup>1</sup>, the social and economic themes are generally seen to be privileged. I would, however, contend that his greatest work [*oeuvre*] is his life itself. Perhaps this could be named as integrity borrowing a concept used by Akeel Bilgrami while writing about Gandhi. (Bilgrami, 2013). Bilgrami was pointing at the way in which Gandhi's political strategies in specific contexts flowed from ideas very remote from politics. Here, we are looking at how knowledge, actions and ethics coalesce in an integral manner when the incessant existential/ ontological awakening of Guru flows effortlessly into political interventions.

Actually, the difficult task of self articulation is the point of origin of modernity itself. Modernity does not involve accepting the self as it is in fleeting moments. On the one hand, it is predicated on the difficult transformation the self has to subject itself to [in order to be...]. For Sree Narayana, asceticism was transforming his existence, behaviours, emotions and body into a work of art. *Sanyasam* was not self realization or knowing the self but self expression and engendering the self to him. It could be construed as an aesthetic process.

It is strange that the Guru who did not know English became the inaugurator of modernity in Kerala. He lived the life as of a 'modern' despite the enabling thinking traditions on which his originality drew were non-modern. Guru's effort was to 'make another world possible'. In it was embedded the task of imagining the present differently and transforming it without destructions, violence or oppositions. We need to analyse the integrity of his thoughts and deeds in order to make sense of this unique groundless politics without antagonisms. It would be particularly interesting against the backdrop of political theories which take antagonism as the inevitable pre-condition of any politics.

### **Asceticism as Art and Way of Life**

Guru's particular mentality towards oneself and the present<sup>ii</sup>, mentioned above, following Michel Foucault, we can call Baudelairean modernity (Foucault, 1984). It involves vigilance towards the existing state of affairs, to engage in practices to modify that and constantly stick to both tasks simultaneously. It was not the study of philosophy, but this sentiment and peculiar attitude that led him to 'sanyasa'. P. K. Balakrishnan points out that Sree Narayana had not formally accepted *sanyasa*.

His white mundu, his white torso-covering cloth, and his shaving regimen- thus he lived till advanced old age. Waiting at Mandapam railway station, ready to go to Ceylon the second time in 1924, Swamy's disciples got him dyed yellow robes to wear. They also removed all his white robes with the determined stubbornness to convert Swami into a *sanyasi*. "Should I wear it?" he asked that characteristic question in his characteristic way, as he donned the robes. (Balakrishnan, 2006,135)

Narayana Guru who wrote philosophical prose in the beginning, was frustrated because there was no academic atmosphere in Kerala (See his dialogue with Vagbhatananda quoted at the final part of this essay). Dr. Nizar Ahmed proposes a surmise regarding the way Guru stayed back in Kerala pursuing his

cognitive explorations in a unique mode: “Sree Narayana did not discover Advaita through metaphysics or epistemology like Sankara. He reached there through *bhakti* or practice on self. His writings are not theoretical treatises but songs of experience [*Swanubhavageethi*]<sup>iii</sup>”. As Pierre Hadot puts it: “it is one’s choice of life which precedes metaphysical theories, and that we can make our choice of life, whether or not we justify it by improved or entirely new arguments” (Hadot,1995, 283). Thus, philosophical justifications are found retrospectively and are accidental. There is no necessary, linear causal connection between them. Here we find ethics taking precedence over metaphysics. Choosing the good is not the consequence of philosophical positions, but vice versa. This primacy of ethics is further seen to collapse with politics in case of Sree Narayana. He was neither following a mode where he addressed the state nor speaking in the language of rights for rearrangements in existing state of affairs. He operated exclusively in the sphere of civil society, never resorting to violence of any sort, and questioned the then existing social arrangements including caste hierarchies. For him caste was unacceptable from the existential intensity he naturally maintained. We may call it an advaitic position on reality, but such a justification is not necessary for Guru. As V. Sanil identified, the route is not from the sociological knowledge about caste to knowledge, but the exact opposite in Guru’s case. i.e. from knowledge, which for him was real in itself, to the repudiation of caste system (Sanil, 2018,49). Guru never took knowledge as academic<sup>iv</sup> and thus could never imagine an instrumental or pragmatic relationship with knowledge. Actually, he had taken *arivu* or knowledge as the central notion in his writings. There is one exclusive poem written by him titled “Arivu”. In his masterpiece *Atmopadesa Satakam* or One Hundred Verses in Self Instruction, which inaugurates a unique genre in the philosophical writings of the world, he never uses the word *Brahmam* which will be surprising for those who take him for a hardcore advaitin. What we find instead is *arivu* (knowledge). Dr. T Bhaskaran argues that this is not an accidental absence. Guru did use words like *mahesan* in it and this, according to Dr. Bhaskaran evidences the positive influence of *Saiva Sidhantha* in Guru (Bhaskaran, 2017,40). Dr. Nizar Ahmed calls the politics espoused in it (which comes directly out of ethics) as a politics without grounds. He explains how *advaita* enabled Guru in this as follows:

Narayana Guru, in his version of Advaita, conceives of an identical imagination (*samabhaavana*) that characterises the context of disentangled embodied awakening. In the light of awakening one realizes that the happiness of the other is one’s own happiness. The content of the relation is to be indicated by the question whether it brings happiness to the other. This mutual care on the part of the actors is *samabhaavana*. But the outcome is indeterminate or at least not pre-determined. That

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is, out of mutual caring will emerge an unscripted situation. This could be seen as a politics without grounds (Ahmed, 2017)

A recent book on the thought of Sreenarayana which is written by an anonymous writer, viz: *Guruchinthana:Oru Mukhavura*,<sup>v</sup> elaborates the significance of this notion, *samabhavana* in Guru's life and works as follows:

How may someone who remains in a state of ascetic rejection of the world stay concerned about the lives of other people? What is the ontological (existential) justification for paying attention to the lives of others? This is not, clearly, to attain one's own ends; for someone who has totally reduced his ends, there is not much to attend to. When someone prepares to pay attention towards the well-being of others, what inner mode inspires him/her? When the attention of a person who is marked by *nirbaadhyata*, who has given up both 'I' and 'mine' turns towards others, we must take care to present that moment clearly, that is, in an unblemished way. We must specify that which made this moment uniquely distinct from others. This moment may be considered to be one that happens only from an ontologically upraised plane. To denote it we have a word that has been sadly robbed of meaning from overuse: *karuna*. *Karuna*(compassion), in this way, is an extremely rare ontological state. *Karuna* is that state in which the sense of 'I' has been entirely discarded, and one is prepared for a surrender of oneself in which one's attention is fully oriented towards actions meant to enhance the betterment of others. We may say that what the Guru did was to harmonize his acts compassionately to the deeds of others. People carried out their deeds, reformed or transformed themselves, made advances, and reaped the gains and the losses to themselves. (Anonymous,2017,131).

From such a perspective, the complex relationship between Guru's actions and the transformations within Kerala's social realm could be explained in a different light. We could account for the silent political transformations triggered by Guru's minor interventions in everyday life without ascribing the whole agency of such reforms/ renaissance/ modernising to Guru the person. His own self-consciousness remained unaffected by such happenings around him. He never assumed any agency too. A Sufi is not supposed to indulge in actions in everyday world. Guru, even after experiencing the bliss indulged in *samsaric* life out of compassion which was not vertical but horizontal (Kumar, 2017). Thus, *karuna* or compassion<sup>vi</sup> encapsulates the essence of his politics and life. One cannot teach others to be

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compassionate. Compassion erupts into existence when one acts compassionately. This is the intimate way in which knowledge and action, philosophy and ethics, merged in Guru's approach. Dr. Nisar Ahmed draws the conclusion that Sree Narayana was not a doctrinaire advaitin, because,

Advaitic teaching should begin with self-transformation. Once you are transformed, advaita is of no use to you. By the same token one cannot teach the other advaita. As an emancipatory idea advaita can only be self-instructed. The traditional role of the teacher here is to ensure that the student makes his own effort and realizes the truth. This might put in a nutshell what the guru thought to be the purpose and significance of the teaching of advaita. Preaching it as a doctrine is therefore against its spirit (Ahmed, 2017).

Guru himself was aware of it. That is why he asks this in the context of C.V Kunhuraman's interview:

Religions are only pointers towards deep enquiry of the quintessential truth. Even those who know that essence might not have religion as authority. On the contrary, they are the authority for religion. Did the Budha teach *nirvanamarga* after studying Buddhism? Budha enquired the path of *nirvana* and then preached that way. That later became Buddhism. Is Buddhism of any use to the Budha (Balakrishnan, 2015,80)?

There is no wonder that Guru wrote *Atmopadesa Satakam*. He was aware that one cannot instruct others. The politics arising out of this attitude retains an openness regarding future as the outcome of compassionate actions is indeterminate. It goes against all politics which instructs well scripted action plans resulting from totalising and closing of options.

### **In-between**

Why did Guru establish temples when he did not believe in caste or religion? One of the historically available ways to gain self-respect for the Ezhava community who were caught in an 'in – between' status at that historic juncture was through attaining the standards of the tradition. Sheeju NV, while analysing Shanar revolts between 1822 and 1899, points at the in-between status of Shanar /Nadar caste and foregrounds its similarity with liminality of Ezhava/ Thiyya caste (Sheeju,2015). They are highest among the lowest and the lowest among the highest<sup>vii</sup>. The accidental fact (as all births are!) that Guru was born into Ezhava caste, and he didn't remain one is crucial in capturing the actual impacts of his acts against the background of the inter-community dynamics of Kerala society. This peculiar location in the middle

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simultaneously triggered efforts for gaining upward mobility through acquiring equality in terms of savarna lifestyles and symbols and combating graded caste structure by eschewing privileges. Narayana Guru's life-text had been read as a chapter in Sanskritisation process by many critics. While looking at the afterlife of many of his reforms one could not reject such criticisms easily. But his life-text had travelled in the opposite direction of Sanskritisation too. P.K Balakrishnan had perceptively seen that: "The essence of Guru's social thinking was moving down. It is not that Ezhavas must struggle to become Nairs; They should overcome antagonisms within and become Pulaya" (Balakrishnan,2006,249). Sahodaran Ayyappan, one of the major disciples of Guru, who was also a rationalist emphasised the importance of moving down in annihilating caste consciousness. Though born into a Thiyya family, he was abusively called 'Pulayan Ayyappan' by his community members subsequent to his courageous moves at inter-dining and inter-caste marriages. In an interview given to P.K Balakrishnan, Sahodaran (literally meaning 'brother') quotes Guru to have said that:

...the attempt of the communities which suffer caste oppression should not be to demonstrate equality with those above them but the effort should be to demonstrate equality to those below them. With regard to untouchability swami had said that giving way to upper caste and pushing away the lower caste are two different articulations of the same power. Whereas those who does not push away those below them in the caste hierarchy from public roads will also have the heart, strength, and courage not to give way when they come across those above them (Ayyappan,2010, 585).

The example of another historic figure, a social reformer and philosopher, may help illustrate this point further. Vagbhadananda, born in 1887 in Malabar, also belonged to the Thiyya community and he stood against caste and idol worship. The word 'Vagbhada' indicates skill in argumentation and he was well known for rigorous philosophical arguments. Because of his strict adherence to a strong Advaita philosophy and the fierce opposition to conservative ritualistic practices, he was forgotten in history despite the strength of his philosophical positions. He met Sree Narayana while touring Travancore and had a brief dialogue on Advaita and idol worship.

Vagbhada: I wanted to visit you, as you are an Advaitin ... You are founding temples and supporting idol worship. How do such practices and Advaita go together?

(Silence)

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Sri Narayana: People won't spare me otherwise. They want temples. I too thought that it would ensure some sort of cleanliness among them, at the least.

Vagbhada: You being an acharya, shouldn't you be able to bring people around to your theory?

Sri Narayana: Earlier, I did call them. But nobody came heeding the call.

Vagbhada: Since it is impossible to coalesce Advaita philosophy with belief in temples, we strongly oppose idol worship.

Sri Narayana: That is good. I too stand with you (Bhaskaran,2017,90-91).

### In Lieu of a Conclusion

By way of a conclusion, let me list few observations abruptly:

It was quite accidental that Advaita attained central place in Indian philosophy during nationalist period.<sup>viii</sup>

Equally accidental was the hold Advaita had in Narayana Guru's life and works.

Guru's accidental allegiance with Advaita turned out to be quite productive for Kerala's modernity.

Colonialism provided the context for these accidents.

Guru knew this intuitively. While First World War was going on, he told one of his disciples:

“We should be praying for the victory of British. They are the Gurus who gifted *Sanyasa* to us.”

Disciple: “Usually the procedure is to initiate one by teaching hymns and giving saffron cloths. I am afraid I can't grasp the meaning of it”

Swami: “Even in the time of Sreerama, sudras were not allowed to become *sanyasi*. Doesn't Hindus rule by following *Sruthis*?” (Balakrishnan, 2015, 66).

### Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> Sri Narayana Guru (1855 -1928) is, considered as the founder of Kerala modernity. He is credited with having inaugurating the social reforms. He authored works in Malayalam, Tamil, and Sanskrit.

<sup>ii</sup> Pierre Hadot critically evaluates Foucault's consideration of such practices on oneself as 'arts of existence' and 'techniques of the self' by pointing at another movement toward exterior involved in it. Hadot views it as a new way of being-in-the-world which consists in becoming aware of oneself as a part of nature (Hadot, 2008,211). Interiorisation to Hadot is a going beyond. It is universalisation. This appears to be an insightful way to look at ascetic practices in Indian subaltern *sanyasi* traditions. Hadot's reservation regarding Foucault's model which to him appears as too aesthetic, deserve sympathetic attention. What I find in tune with the key argument in this essay is his observation that the same spiritual exercise could be justified by extremely diverse philosophical discourses. The latter "are nothing but clumsy attempts, coming after the fact, to describe and justify inner experiences whose existential density is not, in the last analysis, susceptible to any attempt at theorisation or systematisation" (Ibid, 212). Hadot slightly twists Foucault's emphasis on present instance as fleeting by arguing that even within this flash, as Seneca says, we can proclaim along with the God: 'all this belongs to me'.(Ibid,p229)."The instant is our only point of contact with reality, yet it offers us the whole of reality" (Ibid,229).

<sup>iii</sup> Shared in personal conversation

<sup>iv</sup> Sankara left Kerala to argue and win whereas Narayana Guru did not keep a distance between knowing and doing. There existed no unethical path towards knowledge in his non- scientific reasoning. The instrumental rationality that he himself was responsible in creating in modern Kerala contradicts this founding wisdom.

<sup>v</sup> *Guruchinthana: Oru Mukhavura* problematises all readings which try to paint a clear picture of Sreenarayana. They being constructs, argues anonymous author, they are subject to hindrances that all constructs face. They are epistemological difficulties. In fact, such issues are analogical to the problem of under-determination of theory by evidence in philosophy of science. People trying to claim Sreenarayana to be Buddhist, saivist or advaitin are found to rely on the same evidences. Then the book proceeds to problematise the *pramanas* (criteria) of knowledge, perception (*prathyaksha*), *sabda* (testimony) and *anumana* (inference). Thus, direct engagement, hearing



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from the authoritative source or reaching at a new idea from the data that is available could not accord any authority to the readings of Guru's life or works. They are not free from pre-judgments. One cannot escape the mediation of *Samskara* or mental conformation which shapes the result of such seeing/listening/deducing. Drawing on Nagarjuna, author defines *Samskara*, culture, as whatever that stands between the knower and what there is. Whatever is acquired brings about a gap between the perceiver and the perceived. When we follow this line of argument, all readings about Guru attempted till now are construed as constructs shaped by the *Samskaras* of the respective interpreters. Then what is possible is to attempt to arrive at the self perception of Guru without making any claim as to the truthfulness of it. *Guruchinthana* attempts exactly that without making any claim about the 'real' Narayana Guru.

<sup>vi</sup> Udaya Kumar in a review article shows how *karuna* complicates our modern understandings of democracy and equality. It is not an affect showed by somebody who is high in the hierarchy toward the other who is at the bottom. The urge to experience together arises by lowering oneself. (Kumar,2017,84)

<sup>vii</sup> It is not totally fortuitous either. Sree Narayana was born in 1855, when the Shanar revolts were at its most agitated phase. It provided the background for his interventions (Jose,2014 and Pandian,1992). Vaikunda Swamikal (1809-1851) took the vaishnava route and Sree Narayana took the Saiva route, but both of them tried to purify community of 'backward' rituals and deities. Both of them were deeply influenced by Siddha tradition too. Inadvertently, both of them provided spiritual alternatives from within Hinduism to the subaltern which functioned as a deterrent to widespread conversions. Vaikunda Swami movement, which opposed the British and upper caste rulers simultaneously is yet to receive decent recognition in the academic and popular imaginations. Samathva Sangham- Collective for Equality- founded by him 65 years before SNDP (Sreenarayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam) was formed, coalesced spiritual and civil rights discourses in imaginative ways. He is the only social reformer who was incarcerated by the rulers for 'instigating' untouchables to break caste restrictions.

<sup>viii</sup> 'Atman', for the lower castes was a constant which made community unification possible. They realized that they also have an 'atman' to realize! It was a universal with Hindu roots. Thus, caste destruction led not to the construction of 'Human' but 'Hindu' community. As M.Muralidharan observes: "The Atman became the most powerful discovery that propelled up the least powerful of

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modern identities: the colonial subject” (Muralidharan, 1994). The Buddhist thinking traditions which problematized ‘Atman’ were not attractive in the colonial context. Atman was an invention which empowered the colonial subject. A constant among the variables.

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