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Philosophy

FROM CASTE TO HUMANITY: NARAYANA GURU'S VISION FOR A MORE EQUAL SOCIETY

KEY WORDS:

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ABSTRACT

The non-duality of individual self and the divine self in Advaita philosophy influenced Sree Narayana Guru and the notion inspired him to the assertion of the non-duality of individual selves. This notion encouraged him to oppose the then prevalent caste system in his society. He wrote so many verses through his writings, but his opposition to the amoralities and superstitions were expressed through his actions. The caste system and its direct off shoot untouchability were degenerated form of traditional Chaturvarnya which was based on the division of people according to their family occupation. The Guru states that caste restricts man's freedom and destroys his intelligence. He also says that the ignorant people do not recognise the truth that the essence of all religions is one and the same. The teachings and actions contributed by Sree Narayana Guru for the upliftment of the downtrodden people in Kerala, are very much pertinent in contemporary situation in all over India. The philosophy put forwarded by him have renowned mission in the current chaotic condition of the contemporary society in all over the globe. This paper examines the various philosophical notions contributed by the great activist thinker of Kerala, Sree Narayana Guru, especially the oneness which was put forwarded for the maintenance of equality among the humanity.

INTRODUCTION

Sree Narayana Guru was the greatest spiritual and social master of Kerala. His life and work give us a practical demonstration of the way in which even the highest ideals of universal brotherhood and religious fraternity could be effectively used to reconstruct society. Universality of outlook constitutes the striking feature of the great life and thought of Narayana Guru. He persuades for the applicability of the principles of Vedanta to daily life. His philosophy envisages practical and theoretical approach towards pluralistic society. His viewpoint is instantaneously advaita and pluralistic. The Guru's dictum of one in Kind, one in Religion and one God for man is a dynamic pointer to one world religion or universalism. According to the Guru, man is of one family because of the unitive and all-embracing nature of the self as expressed in *Atmopadesa Satakam*:

*The repealed I, I contemplated from within
Is not many but remains are divergent egoity
Being multiple with the totality of such
The self-substance too continuing assumes. (Nataraja Guru p.493)*

Guru's message of 'one caste, one religion, one God' is urgent importance in India whose democratic system is based on secularism. This is one of the most importance messages of the Guru and it helps us to purify the hearts and minds of Indian humanity. In his message we can see practical Vedanta. According to him, the man of the whole world belongs to the same species. Being different manifestations of the Unitive Brahman, the self and the external world are one and the same. This is one caste and one God. By one religion he declared that the essence of all religions is the same. According John Spiers, (John Spiers p 8) "as there being only one External Reality, dedicated service to that is the true religion; and since all men are capable of that service, and since all people, all life and all things move and have their existence by that one, all separateness and division into race, caste, colour and creed are nothing but illusions foisted on the minds of man by ignorance and forgetfulness of this Sole Universal Reality. (John Spiers p 9)

One Caste

The non-duality of individual self and the divine self in Advaita philosophy influenced Sree Narayana Guru and the notion inspired him to the assertion of the non-duality of individual selves. He opposed caste system on the basis of this notion. The caste system and its direct off shoot untouchability were degenerated form of traditional Chaturvarnya which was based on the division of people according to their family occupation. Chaturvarnya is contrary to the very spirit of Advaita. The famous message of

the Guru, 'One Caste, One Religion, and One God for men' has great relevance for us today when the traditional family occupations have broken down. People belonging to different social groups have been taking up occupations that are alien to their classes. The Guru's teachings enable us to fight against caste system and untouchability which still persist in our country.

The theory of one caste based on non-dual knowledge is the basic principle of the theory of one Religion of the Guru. So, one caste shall be accepted on the basis of human religion and the present caste system shall be abolished in every sphere of life. For various historical reasons the critical revaluations of the subject of caste in the light of full implications of contemplative non-dual self-knowledge was avoided in India. In our times this neglect has led to extreme forms of social inequality and discrimination known today as caste, exclusive and segregatory, leading to the extremism of untouchability. It is Brahmin versus Pariah dialectics. The Guru states that castes such as Brahmin and Pariah have no reality. Caste distinctions have no basis in actuality. "Racial distinctions do not amount to distinctions in the species in any strict terms. Like languages and customs these may give an appearance of variety to the species; but they are only superficial factors of no importance intrinsically to biology". (Nataraja Guru pp.274-75) According to the Guru, the asymmetry may be in the appearance of one or the other is fictitious and quite irrelevant to spirituality. Humanity is one and indivisible in kind. There is no room for any multiplicity at any level of human nature, socially, religiously or contemplatively. In *Atmopades Satakam* the Guru says that 'Atman is one only without a second. So, the whole humanity is one in kind. The distinction between caste and out caste is artificial and unspiritual. The Bhagavad Gita explains the fourfold order based on guna (aptitude) and Karma (function) and not jati (kind-birth).

"The fourfold order was created by me according to the division of quality and works. Though I am its creator, know me to be incapable of action or change". (Radhakrishnan, S. p 160) Sloka is:
*"Ekavarnam idam Puraanam
Viswam aaseet Yudhistira;
Karma kriya viseshana
Chaturvarnyam pratishthitam."*

The interpretation of some scholars in support of caste system is due to the misunderstanding of the word 'Varna' as caste in India. The Vedas are not in favour of any discrimination of caste system which was prevailed in India. Mahabharata explains: The whole world was originally of one class but later

it became divided into four divisions on account of the specific duties. The present morbid condition of India broken into castes and sub castes is opposed to the unity taught by the Gita, which stands for an organic as against an atomistic conception of society. (Radhakrishnan, S.p 161).

Buddha was the only great Indian philosopher who would not recognise caste. Like Buddha, the Guru boldly proclaimed the theory of one caste and dedicated his life to the well-being of humanity. Being human all men belong to the same caste according to the Guru. Since there is no difference between man and man, both Brahmin and Pariah are essentially one in human species.

The few verses of his short poem 'Jaati Nirnayam' convey the essence of his views on universal religion. With the aid of this short poem, the Guru established the undoubted fact of human solidarity of one kind genetically, of one fundamental faith religiously and one supreme value considered under the many synonyms of God. He adds that the present caste system shall be abolished in every sphere of life.

In another poem Jati laksana, the Guru explains that the group or the caste of animals can be determined on the basis of the common or essential characteristics possessed by the members of a particular group. The Guru defines casteism scientifically and gives the common characteristics on the basis of which caste can be determined. Humanness is the Samanya laksana of human beings. We need not ask about one's caste because his Jati laksana, humanness is the same for all human beings and it can be perceived directly. So, there is no such distinction as lower and upper caste. The Guru holds that the group or inam is nothing but the vivarta of arivu or knowledge. According to him, group is the waves that arise from the ocean itself. So, the group is Arivu or knowledge. The knowledge is essentially the nature of the self. So, there is no difference between one's self and the others.

The Guru states that caste restricts man's freedom and destroys his intelligence. Caste makes it impossible to take up professional according to aptitude. So, progress becomes impossible due to caste system. Nowadays instead of this caste system there emerged a new moral arena of life called community or samudayam. Hence Nair community and Ezhava community in Kerala have been synonymous to Nair caste and Ezhava caste.

The concept of humanism or human equality put forth by the Guru differs from that of Mahatma Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi wished to implement a modern network of the village republics to combat caste oppression. Guru was bringing Vedanta down from the intellectual heights to the laymen. As a 'jnanin of action' he sensed the social evils of his day and contributed to the elevation of the oppressed classes in Kerala.

The Guru declared that all humanity belongs to the same species. This knowledge he acquired was because of the Aatmajnana attained through the study of Advaita Darsana. The declaration made by the Guru in the last Millennium is now proved to be true scientifically by two famous scientists – Francis Collin (Director, H.G. Project) and J. Craig Venter (Director, Celeia Genomics) based on their study on Gene mapping. And on 26th June 2000 the then American President Bill Clinton announced the world that all human beings in the world belong to one and the same human species. (Kunhappa, Moorkoth p 40)

Universal Religion

Many lakhs of people in Kerala have been benefited by the divine efforts of Sree Narayana Guru. He taught a better way of life based on Advaitic theory of religion to all humanity including spiritualists and materialists as well. The Guru declared the theory of one Religion based on one ultimate reality. To him the whole world was one family (Vasudhaiva

Kudumbakam) and he accepted and honoured all religions including Christianity and Islam.

Through his message of one religion the Guru has emphasised the basic unity of all religions based on Advaita Vedanta and he never denied the usefulness of any particular religion. He stated that "the aim of all religions is one. Once the different rivers run into the sea all of them merge into it; the differences disappear. The aim of religion is to lift the thought of man towards the highest point. After this goal is achieved, each individual will find his way to it on his own. For the man who has experienced the ultimate truth, the aid or religion is no longer needed. He becomes the source of religious faith for other men. The Buddha did not attain the ultimate in enlightenment by studying Buddhism. He realised and then he preached what he had realised. And the sum total of those teachings became Buddhism. This is true of other religions also. (Kunhappa, Moorkoth p 42) Veda, Mimamsa, Dvaita, Advaita, Visistadvaita, Saiva, Sakteya, Vaisnava all these are forms of Hinduism. If this entire gamut of beliefs can be called one religion viz., Hinduism, then all religions Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. can be collectively known as 'One Religion'. (Kunhappa, Moorkoth p 42)

He also stated that 'if the religion preached by its founder and subsequently elaborated into different branches by his followers, can be called 'One Religion' and given the name of the founder, the spiritual tenets preached by the different Acharyas can also by an extension of this principle be termed as one religion. People should see the phenomenon of unity in diversity as it exists between different religions. (Nataraja Guru p 587) According to the Guru, the essence and the goal of all religions is the same. The gist of the Guru's message is that the texts of religions should be studied without any discrimination. The religion of the Guru tolerates all forms of worship as alternative approaches to the Reality. It shows tolerance and universal outlook and provides for the fellowship of faiths and inter-religious unity. He practiced and taught the Advaita way of life, i.e., One Religion.

The Guru says that the ignorant people do not recognise the truth that the essence of all religions is one and the same. Their ideas may be compared to apparently conflicting views of the blind men who cognised the elephant in many forms, touching the different parts of its body and interpreted the shape of the animal in different manner depending up on the particular portion each one touched (Nataraja Guru p 589).

The Guru then explains that the rules of one religion or faith may not be valid for another religion. Different religions came to be established under the influence of different external conditions, which make them appear as different, but they are essentially one and the same. So, the arguments based up on illusion about the superiority of one religion over the other, has no meaning at all. Here the Guru is stressing the message "One Caste, One Religion and One God for men" (Nataraja Guru p 594). The people who quarrel in the name of religions are ignorant of the fact that ultimately there is only one faith and religion. The people who make no discrimination between different forms of faith know the secret. The Guru expressed this view in Atmopadesa Satakam verse 47 (Nataraja Guru p.593-595).

CONCLUSION

The philosophical implications of One Religion that is explained by the Guru in the six verses of Atmopadesa Satakam, verses 44 to 49 can be summarised as:

- (a) All religions have common aims and end, i.e., happiness.
- (b) Ardent mutual adoptions are implicit in religious affiliation.
- (c) Rival religions argue for the same value.
- (d) Essence of all religions is the same.

We can say that each individual has a separate religion of his own. If Hinduism has twenty crores of individuals these twenty

crores of religions are grouped under one religion, Hinduism. There are some features common to all religions. But the study of all religions would reveal the fact that there is no difference in their basic principles. Religions are mutually complementary and one cannot exist without the other. No religion is nobler than the other. No religion can survive unless it has a hard core of certain internal truths, dharma. Owing to the factors of time and place, it becomes necessary to give priority to one or the other. Eternal values are of equal significance. The Guru put forth a suggestion to all to study and understand all religions with open minds and equal attention and tries to give each other the knowledge so gained. Then we could realise the conflict was due not to religions but the pride, and the basic tenets of all religions are the same. He says that the followers of any religion do not speak of caste and why should the Hindus alone be branded with caste.

The teachings, contributed by Sree Narayana Guru for the upliftment of a group of people in Kerala, are very much relevant in contemporary India. In most part of our country caste system and untouchability are prevailed strongly as such in the ancient times. Science, technology and impacts of modern thinking made changes in the peripheral realm of life in India. But we have to change our attitudes and outlooks as per the great teachings of our great thinkers.

Though casteism still exists today, untouchability has been almost eradicated in Kerala. This is a great achievement that has been accomplished through the life and work of the Guru. His religious teachings and messages have contributed a great deal towards the making of modern Kerala. His teaching was a system based on Philosophy which helps the betterment of man to the level of Universal Consciousness. He was the first to realize that casteism was the bane of Indian social and religious organizations.

The world of one religion is still a distant dream. To materialise this ideal society, we should study and practice the Guru's teachings. If this is put into practice, we can ward off the frequent communal riots which constantly threaten the peace and harmony of this multi religious nation. The Guru's vision of society is quite conducive to Kerala and India as a whole. Keeping a firm foot in this peaceful and harmonious land of Advaita, through his great message of unity of mankind, importance of education of the masses and idol installations he led the march of the spiritual revolution of Kerala to victory.

The Guru states that caste restricts man's freedom and destroys his intelligence. He also says that the ignorant people do not recognise the truth that the essence of all religions is one and the same. The teachings and actions contributed by Sree Narayana Guru for the upliftment of the oppressed people in Kerala, are very much pertinent in contemporary situation in all over India. Untouchability as well as atrocities to 'Dalits' which are to be thrown away from the civilized society are practiced in various parts of our country even today. Some cases from Tamil Nadu have been reported in a book written by Thirumaavalavan in 2003.¹⁷ Recently, newspapers reported various cases of 'honour killing' in various parts of India, which also show that the evils are still alive in our society. Casteism and untouchability are strong in our country, the country which is known for its secular outlook. The persons who upheld the philosophy of Non duality treat the downtrodden people as something different from their own identity in practice. Even the personalities who can preach for hours also mostly show duality in their attitudes and behaviour towards their fellowmen. The relevance of the philosophical thoughts of Guru is one of the living systems of Indian Philosophy. The objective of his philosophy is not merely to advance in knowledge or to find a correct way of thinking; it is more a right way of living. It is not a mere view of life but a way of life.

Narayana Guru's ideas inspire movements against casteism

and social inequality. His emphasis on individual worth and merit challenges traditional power structures. His vision of casteless society encourages unity and equality among diverse communities. Also, Guru's philosophy resonates with Dalit, Feminist, and environmental movements.

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