
THE SREE NARAYANA DHARMA PARIPALANA YOGAM – THE VANGUARD OF SOCIAL REVOLUTION IN MODERN KERALA

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Abstract

A peculiarity of the caste and community setting of the early 20th century Travancore was that while the Savarna Hindus and Christians had their own religions to organise themselves, the Sanathana Hinduism was not ready to accept the Ezhavas and other low castes as Hindus. As a result it was extremely necessary for them first to fight against the socio- religious abuses and malpractices. The Ezhavas as the largest polluting caste were denied of all social, political and economic rights. As the first among the polluting caste and the largest among the backward castes in Travancore, it was imperative for them to give leadership to the aspirations of the low castes. Thus unlike the social reform in the British Indian provinces, the movement began in Travancore among the low castes. The central personages of the movement were not high caste intellectuals inspired by the European Enlightenment but low caste Ezhavas and later Pulayyas, Parayyas and members of some smaller caste groups.¹

Keywords: Ezhavas, economic rights, Travancore, caste intellectuals, Pulayyas, caste groups, Sree Narayana Guru

The first Ezhava leader who realised the values of an organisation for the uplift of his community was Dr.Palpu. If Sree Narayana Guru was the Spiritual Preceptor of the Ezhava community, Dr.Palpu was their Political Godfather. He has been hailed as Bucker. T. Washington of Ezhava community.² He was a Philanthropist who always showed kindness towards the suffering people. He showed no hesitation in spending his earnings for the cause of the welfare of his community-men and other low castes. He sent G.P. Pillai to England to plead the case of Ezhavas by spending money from his own pocket. It was he who provided the necessary background and inspiration for the works of both Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan.³ The beginning of systematic organisations among the Ezhavas happened only when Dr.Palpu started an uncompromising struggle to get them their due share in government.⁴ He himself was a victim of the caste tyranny existed in Travancore.⁵ He expressed his resentment against the social abuses and Brahmanic supremacy throughout his life. In a letter written by

him to Mahatma Gandhi in 1925, Dr.Palpu expressed his views about the Buddhist heritage of his community and criticised the legitimacy in calling Travancore as Dharma Rajya. He argued, "The struggle at Vaikom must have shown you the strength and obstinacy of the natural army. It must have also shown that the terms 'Model State' 'Progressive Administration' etc. are all really bunkum, that the supreme power here actually vests even now in old fashioned blindly selfish Priests or 'Poojaries'- enjoying the support of the above natural army- who cannot lay any great claim on character or enlightenment and should generally feel insulted if any ideas of truth, justice, toleration or universal love and service be attributed to them..."⁶

After receiving unsatisfactory response from the government to the Ezhava Memorial, Dr.Palpu decided to form an organisation of the Ezhavas. His idea was to start an agitation by forming an organisation entitled Ezhava Mahajana Sabha. He formulated bylaws for such an organisation and published it through a newspaper, *Malayali* published from Thankasseri, Kollam.⁷ Palpu and his friends started some necessary campaigns in Mayyanad and Paravur for enlisting the Ezhavas for their new programme. But their efforts failed to catch popular appreciation. In 1892 Palpu got a chance to meet Swami Vivekananda in Mysore. Both of them discussed the matter of the Ezhavas of Travancore.⁸ Vivekananda asked Dr. Palpu to "spiritualise and industrialise the masses." He suggested to Palpu that any social reform movement in the Indian context should have a religious foundation, and then only would it go deep among the people. Dr.Palpu had no other option than to meet Narayana Guru, who had, by this time earned a high reputation as a great sanyasin.

Sree Narayana Guru was born in 1856 in Vayalvaram house at Chempazhanthy, a village about ten miles north east of Thiruvananthapuram as the youngest son of Madan Asan and Kutty.⁹ He learned Malayalam, Sanskrit, Tamil and Ayurvedic Medicine. After some temporary engagements, he preferred the life of a sanyasin. He was very much worried about the sufferings of the low castes including his own community members- the Ezhavas who were not permitted to worship in the temples. His first notable activity was the installation of a Siva Deity at Aruvippuram on the banks of Neyyar River in 1888. This revolutionary step was questioned by the savarnas, but Guru had his own explanation, which was powerful enough to solemn, his opponents.¹⁰ A temple was constructed and an eleven member committee was constituted to look after the temple affairs known as Aruvippuram Vavoottu Yogam. The Aruvippuram temple and its property were registered as a trust and P.Parameswaran, Dr.Palpu's brother became the manager of the temple properties. It was through Parameswaran that Dr.Palpu came into contact with Narayana Guru in 1894. A discussion meeting was held in a house known as Kamalalayam Bunglow at Kunnukuzhi in Trivandrum in December 1902 and the participants decided to enlarge the Aruvippuram Vavoottu Yogam to create a new organisation.¹¹ On the advice of Dr.Palpu Vavuttu Yogam was changed as Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (S.N.D.P.Yogam). The leaders

decided to register this organization and an application for registering the Aruvippuram S.N.D.P.Yogam was made in Thiruvananthapuram on 8 January 1903 by Parameswaran and the license was granted by Dewan Krishna Swamy Rao. Thus Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam was registered under the Indian Companies Act 11 of 1882 on 15 May 1903 with Sree Narayana Guru as permanent President, Kumaran Asan as Secretary and Dr.Palpu as Vice President. When it was registered the Yogam had ten share holders paying Rs100/- each for a life membership.¹² An official mouth-piece of the organisation *Vivekodayam* was started which was named after Swami Vivekananda with a Vivekananda Suktam "*Uthistatha! Jagratha! Prapyavarana Nyabodhatha!*" as logo until 1907 when it was replaced. *Vivekodayam* began publication on 31 Medam 1079 M.E with Kumaran Asan as Chief Editor. In 1901 the headquarters of the Yogam was shifted from Aruvippuram to Thiruvananthapuram. After twelve years it was shifted to Shivagiri, Varkala and still later to Kollam.

S.N.D.P.Yogam was started as an organisation for the propagation of the ethics of Sree Narayana Guru. The aim of the Yogam as written in the certificate of registration was to improve industry. Narayana Guru had contributed a lot of ideals and philosophical discourses for humanity irrespective of caste barriers. But one community in Kerala, which largely benefited from his teachings and activities was the Ezhava community, the community that produced the Great Guru. The social and religious reform programme of Sree Narayana Guru was vast and varied and he implemented them not calculating the benefit of Ezhava community alone but the entire avarna castes. Sree Narayana Guru built scores of temples, big and small. His Aruvippuram temple consecration was an act against the established tradition according to which only the Brahmins had the right of temple consecration. Since then he installed images in as many as 64 temples in different parts of Kerala and outside.

Even though Guru consecrated all these temples for the entire downtrodden people of the society his immediate concern was the upliftment of his community and save them from higher caste exploitation. In his temples Guru installed the Sanskritic deities such as Siva and Subramanya instead of the totemic local gods and goddesses like, Maruda, Chamundi etc. hitherto worshiped by the Ezhavas. He introduced sanskritised form of worship and forbade animal sacrifices and offering of toddy. Instead of appointing Brahmin Priests in his temples, Sree Narayana Guru deputed Ezhavas as officiating priests. Sanskritisation of the Ezhava community was the first and foremost aim of Guru. At the same time it contained an element of defiance against the caste order in the act of constructing parallel temples.¹³ He wanted to stop the flow of the wealth of his community to the religious Shrines of the Savarnas. He advised the economical and financial control, not only in temple administration, but also in the day today life of the common people. He also wanted to convert the new temples as community centres and rallying points of Ezhava solidarity. His was a typical example of the Sanskritisation programme of the low caste organisations.¹⁴

In constructing parallel temples, Sree Narayana Guru was not aimed at the mere satisfaction of the spiritual thirst of the Ezhavas and other low castes. He considered these temples as centres of all-round public activity. They were surrounded by monasteries, schools, lecture halls, banks, dispensaries, libraries, rest houses, gardens and similar things, which enabled and enriched the collective life. He used temples not to perpetuate but to demolish old superstitions and introduce reforms. In him we saw not a mere Sanyasin doing his penance but a practical Karmayogin possessing a forward looking Philosophy. Narayana Guru installed not only deities commonly worshiped by the people but also symbols for teaching them the highest ideals of humanity. Narayana Guru stressed great importance for reforms in various customs existed in the Ezhava community. In 1904 a meeting was convened under his presidentship at Paravur in which he suggested reforms in customs. He proposed to annihilate thalikkettukalyanam (marriage ceremony of girl child), thirantukuli (ceremony at the time of attaining puberty), Pulikudi (ceremony performed for a pregnant women during the 6th month of pregnancy) etc. He discouraged polygamy and polyandry. He was against Marumakkathayam system of succession and suggested Makkathayam. He proposed interdining and intermarriage as part of annihilating caste system and stood for freedom of women folk. He believed that his people would become free from social disabilities only if they won respect by morally transforming their own lives. For this reason he persuaded Ezhavas to abandon their traditional occupation of toddy tapping, since he believed that this associated them in the minds of pious Hindu with the evils of alcohol. He exhorted for the establishment of schools and asked everybody to encourage the spread of education. He was an erudite scholar and wrote philosophical works in simple style. If Sankaracharya used his scholarly talents to place the Brahmins in the upper position of the society, Sree Narayana Guru used his Vedanta to demolish the foundation of Varnasrama system. Narayana Guru wrote 39 Malayalam, 17 Sanskrit and 2 Tamil works.¹⁵ Narayana Guru's works reformed not only Ezhava community but others as well. Emulating his example different castes and communities came up with new programme of reforms. His activities were a war cry against all kinds of slavery and it was against a stagnant society. It produced material effects than spiritual consequences. Even though he laid the foundation of temples and muts, the building that came up was one that of social equality. Even though he sowed the seeds of spiritualism, what grew in the field was socio-political rights.¹⁶ His revolution, though started as a movement for the removal of unnecessary customs and traditional evil practices prevailed among the Ezhavas, had produced results which evidently changed the face of the social, political, economic and religious life of Kerala as a whole.

The S.N.D.P. Leaders very effectively utilised Sree Narayana Guru as a principal instrument in the upliftment of Ezhava community. Guru was an indispensable link between the educated Tiyys and the Tiyya masses. The intellectual elites of the

Ezhava community who provided leadership to S.N.D.P. Yogam keenly followed census reports and other ethnological publications to ascertain the improvement of their community and exhorted their members to forge their internal differences to achieve unity. Sub caste divisions were a serious problem faced by the community in the beginning and vast differences in customs and ceremonies existed among these groups. The Ezhava leaders utilised the numerical strength of their community as the major weapon in their forward march. In the annual S.N.D.P meetings the leaders reiterated their followers to use this advantage for the welfare of the community. They also exhorted them to emulate the example of the communities in other parts of India who worked earnestly for this aim. Through their publications the leaders argued that by their very nature, the Ezhavas were enterprising and capable enough to develop themselves. One of the greatest achievements of S.N.D.P. Yogam was the consolidation of the entire Ezhavas of Kerala who were spread out in different regions under different names. It became a binding force to make them a cohesive group. In course of time branches of S.N.D.P. Yogam were started in almost all villages of Kerala, which gave them a cohesive feeling. In consequence Ezhava community was transformed from the status of a polluting caste nearer to dominant caste status in Kerala.¹⁷

The Ezhava leaders put severe pressure on the government for giving adequate representation for their community-men in government services. The Ezhava leaders by following the teachings of Narayana Guru exhorted their community members to dissociate from toddy tapping. T.K. Madhavan, S.N.D.P leader spent his much time and energy for the temperance movement. As a result of their efforts a sizeable number of Ezhavas gave up their traditional labour. S.N.D.P. leaders constantly put their demand for raising the number of their representatives in the Sree Mulam Popular Assembly. They demanded that since the Ezhavas constituted 24% of the total population in Travancore 24 seats should be allotted to them in the assembly. The leaders questioned the application of the concepts of Dharma Rajya and Model State to Travancore and pointed out that the policies of the government were contrary to these concepts. They have challenged the argument of the government that the Ezhavas were unrepresented in the government service due to the lack of qualified candidates from their community. They questioned it by quoting the examples of Dr.Palpu, P.Velayudhan and M.Govindan who were denied employment in Travancore and A.Velayudhan, P.M.Raman and K.N.Kesavan who were forced to serve outside the state.

In the beginning the S.N.D.P. Yogam concentrated in Travancore alone and practically it was an affair of the Travancore Ezhavas. But from its very inception many prominent leaders from Cochin and Malabar attended its annual conferences. While the first three annual conferences were held in different places of Travancore, its fourth conference was held at Kannur in 1907 along with an industrial and agricultural

exhibition under the presidentship of Rarichan Muppan.¹⁸ In Cochin an organisation known as Cochin Ezhava Samajam was started by Bodhananda Swami in 1916.¹⁹ Its name was changed into "Cochin Tiyya Mahajana Sabha" in 1932 and later the name was again changed to Cochin S.N.D.P.Yogam.

The Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam played a crucial role in the progressive transformation of Kerala into a modern democratic society. They have achieved this transformation through continuous involvement in the political struggles. The role played by SNDP Yogam in the Civic Rights Movement, Abstention Movement and the struggle for responsible government in Travancore. Through these struggles the pyramidal structure of the Kerala society was transformed into pillar structure. Through the efforts of SNDP Yogam, the Ezhava community which was once a polluted community elevated their status into a position in which they could freely work for their own destinies. Emulating the works of SNDP yogam similar organizations were started by all other principal communities of Kerala.

References

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3. Kerala Kaumudi, 8 January 1972.
4. R. Ramakrishnan Nair, *Constitutional Experiments in Kerala*, Thiruvananthapuram, The Kerala Academy of Political Science, 1964, p.3.
5. Dr.Palpu was born on 2 November 1863 at Pettah, Thiruvananthapuram as the son of Thachakkudiyil Palpu and Nedungottu Pappamma. He studied in the Government High School, Thiruvananthapuram. In the Medical Entrance Examination, even though he emerged the second among the successful candidates, was denied admission. In 1885 he joined the Madras Medical College for L.M.S. He joined in the Mysore service on 2 November 1891. He functioned as Vaccine Superintendent, Madras, Health Officer, Sanitary Commissioner, Jail Superintendent, Vaccination Inspector and Sanitary Adviser. He died on 25 January 1950;C.R.Kesavan Vaidyar, *Palpu Muthal Panampalli Vare* (mal.), Kottayam, D.C.Books, 1990,p.18; Velayudhan Panikkasseri, *Dr.Palpu*(mal.),Trissur, Current Books, 2002; T.K. Madhavan, *Dr.Palpu* (mal.), Alleppey, 1969.
6. Letter of Dr.Palpu to Mahtma Gandhi on 12 April 1925, Palpu Papers, subject File No.4, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, herein after called N.M.M.L, New Delhi.
7. M.K.Sanu, *Narayana Guru Swami* (mal.), Kottayam, NBS, 1976,p.170; Velayudhan Panikkasseri, *Dr.Palpu* (art.), Vivekodayam Special Supplement, January 1967, p.53.
8. It is worthwhile to notice that the immediate place that Vivekananda visited after his meeting with Palpu was Travancore. It may be due to the information supplied

- by Dr.Palpu in addition to his personal experiences that induced to him to declare Kerala as a lunatic asylum; Velayudhan Panikkasseri, *Dr.Palpu*(mal.),Trissur, Current Books, 2002, p.50.
9. For details about the life and works of Sree Narayana Guru see Moorkothu Kunjappa,*Sree Narayana Guru Charitram*(mal.),Alleppey, Prakasom Publications, 1977; Kottayil Kumaran, *Sree Narayana Guru Charitram*(mal.), Thalassery, Vidya Vilasom Press, 1929; P.K.Balakrishnan, *Narayana Guru Samahara Grantham* (mal.), Palluruthi, 1954; P.Parameswaran, *Sree Narayana Guru Navodhanathinte Pravachakan* (mal.), Calicut, Jaya Bharat Publications, 1971.
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 11. M.G.Kesavan, *Sree Narayana Guruvinte Darsanavum Viswamanavikathayum* (mal.), Kottayam, Current Books, 2000, p.85.
 12. In the beginning the membership fee was Rs.100/- In 1922 it was reduced to Rs.25/- Later when T.K. Madhavan became the Secretary of the Yogam, he reduced the membership fee to Rs.5/-.
 13. During that time avarnas respected the higher class and offered presents to the savarna temples considering it as their dharma. Narayana Guru, after realising the seriousness of the matter, started temple consecration to punish the savarnas and help the low castes; Murkoth Kumaran, *Oru Samudaya Parishkara Margam* (art.), Malayala Manorama (mal.), Investiture Special Number, Kottayam, 1931.
 14. M.N.Sreenivas writes, "He (Sree Narayana Guru) established a set of religious institutions parallel to that of the totalitarian and vegetarian variety of Brahmanical Hinduism. Thus, although the Ezhavas were not born in the upper castes, they could acquire the religious goods and services of the upper castes-something, which had been denied to them for centuries. This helped the Ezhavas both to gain self respect and to adopt a protest ideology to challenge the religious, economic, educational and political supremacy of the upper castes", M.N. Sreenivas, *Social Movements in India*, Vol.1, New Delhi, Manohar Publishers,1978, pp.197-98.
 15. K.Prasobhanan, *Sree Narayana Guru Grantha Suchi* (art.),P.K.Balakrishnan(ed.), *Sree Narayana Yuga Prabhavam* (mal.), Kottayam, NBS, 1969, pp.477-488.
 16. E.M.S.Namboothiripad, *Pakiyathu Adhyatma Chinthayude Vithu, Mulachu Vannathu Samuhya Rashtreeyavakasam* (art.), Deena Bandhu (mal.), Onam Sree Narayana Jayanti Special, 1972.
 17. J.H.Hutton, *Caste in India*, London, Oxford University Press, 1969, p.75.
 18. The first meeting of the Yogam was held at Aruvippuram in 1904 under the presidentship of Mattanchery Govindan Vaidyar. The second meeting was held at Kollam in 1905 under the presidentship of Dr.Palpu. The third annual meeting was

held under the presidentship of Kottiyathu Ramunni at Alappuzha; N.K Damodaran, *SNDP Yogam: Chila Smaranakal* (art.), SNDP Yogam Golden Jubilee Souvenir (mal.), Kollam, 1953, pp.48-57; Vivekodayam, Book 10, Nos.3&4, 1913.

19. Born in 1883 in Cochi, Bodhananda Swami left home in his early childhood and learnt spiritual ideas from north India. After reaching Cochin he started an organisation called Dharmasangam in 1809. He started Cochin Ezhava Samajam in 1916; Sahib.K.Ayyappan and K.R Achuthan (ed.), Cochin SNDP Yogam Souveneir, Trissur, Cochin SNDP Yogam, 1946, pp.21-22.