

## **Sri Narayan Guru and Ezhava Movement: A Study**

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**Abstract:** *The Sri Narayan Guru (1856-1928) was famous social reformer. He was one of the social reformers of South India. He was one of the Ezhavas or people of Kerala. Through social reforms, he became known as one of the fathers of social movements in India. He is one of the religious and social reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century India. He dedicated his whole life for the development of lower castes. Aravipuram Movement was launched by Sri Narayan Guru on Shivaratri day of 1888. On that day, Sri Narayan Guru defied the religious restrictions traditionally placed on the Ezhava Community, and consecrated an Idol of Shiva at Aravipuram. I have tried to give a brief account of Sri Narayana Guru and his movement in this paper of mine.*

**Keyword:** *Astrology, Education, Ezhava Movement, Narayan Guru, Social Reform.*

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### **Introduction**

Shri Narayana Guru, born in a low-caste Ezhava family, had studied Sanskrit, Malayalam, Tamil and astrology. The Aravipuram pratishtha was a historic event, because a member of a lower caste, forbidden from entering the temple, had himself consecrated the Shiva image in a temple. One the wall of the temple Sri Narayana Guru inscribed the words: "Devoid of the dividing walls as caste or race, or hatred as rival faith, we all live here in brotherhood." Millions saw Shri Narayana Guru as a saint, seer, philosopher, poet and social reformer.<sup>1</sup> Education and organisation were amongst his many slogans for freedom and strength. He held that the essence of all religions is one and the same, and advocated the comparative study of all faiths.

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## **Sri Narayan Guru and Ezhava Movement: A Study**

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Shri Narayana Guru articulated doctrine aimed at improving the Ezhavas' social position. He urged them to abandon the occupation of toddy-tapping and to abstain from liquor. He summed up his message in a slogan: "Drink not, serve not, brew not." He condemned all forms of animal sacrifice, the singing of obscene songs etc. The organisation which he set up to maintain and manage the institutions he had founded later became known as 'Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (Society for the propagation of Sri Narayan Guru's Tenants).'<sup>2</sup>

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Aravipuram movement was given new vigour when to new leaders, Dr. Palpu and Kumaran Asan, joined Sri Narayana Guru, Dr. Palpu was the first Ezhava to receive education in western medicine. Kumaran Asan was a well-known writer and poet. Thus invigorated, the movement began to condemn the caste system as the basis of Hindu social structure.

The Sri Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalana or SNDP Movement was an example of regional movement that arose from the conflict between the lower and upper castes. Sri Narayana Guru Swamy founded it among the Ezhavas of Kerala, a backward caste of toddy-tappers who were considered untouchables and were denied education and entry into temples. During the pre-independence period, a number of backward class movements arose. The backward classes banded together against the Brahmana's in particular, believing that they monopolized much of the socio-economic benefits, leaving the agricultural intermediate caste and communities in the lurch.<sup>3</sup>

### **Evolution of Sri Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalana (SNDP)**

- i) The Ezhava were Kerala's most populous caste, accounting for 26% of the total population.<sup>4</sup>
- ii) On Shivaratri in 1888, Narayana Guru, himself of the Ezhava caste, took a stone from the Neyyar river and installed it as a Shivalinga at Aravipuram.
- iii) It was meant to demonstrate that the consecration of an idol was not limited to the upper castes
- iv) With this, he launched a revolution that resulted in the abolition of many discriminations in Kerala's society.

## **Sri Narayan Guru and Ezhava Movement: A Study**

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- v) As a disciple of Narayana Guru, the movement drew the famous poet Kumaran Asan.
- vi) The 'Aravipuram Keshtra Yogam' (AKY) was founded in 1889, with the intention of growing into a large organisation to assist the Ezhavas in their material and spiritual advancement.<sup>5</sup>
- vii) The Aravipuram Sri Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalana Yogam' was established in 1903 under the Indian companies Act, with Narayana Guru serving as its permanent chairman and Kumaran Asan serving as its general secretary.
- viii) Dr. Palpu's effort in the formation of the SNDP must be recognized.
- ix) He had begun the fight for Social justice through movements such as the Ezhava Memorial and the Malayali Memorial, among others.
- x)

### **Sri Narayana Guru Swamy**

- i) He was born in Chempazhanty on August 22, 1856, to Madan Asan and Kuttியamma, a village near Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.
- ii) He was a member of the Ezhavas community and was known as 'Avarna'.
- iii) Since he was a child, he was cherished solitude and spent a lot of time in deep meditation. He went to local temples to worship and wrote devotional songs and hymns.
- iv) Narayana Guru himself created a Shivalinga at Aravipuram atop Shivaratri in 1888, using a stone from the Neyyar river.
- v) He triggered a revolution in Kerala that resulted in the removal of many sorts of bigotry as a result of this.
- vi) "One Caste, One Religion, One God for all", he coined the now famous slogan. "Oru Jathi, Oru Matham, Oru Daivan, Manushyana".<sup>6</sup>
- vii) He preached equality, but he did not feel that inequalities should be used to carry out conversions and thereby produce social upheaval.
- viii) Animal sacrifices of any kind were abhorrent to him.
- ix) Under the Indian Companies Act, the Sri Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalana Yogam' was established in 1903. He was appointed as the Chairman.

## **Sri Narayan Guru and Ezhava Movement: A Study**

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- x) The Ezhava's right to attend public schools, access to government services, and political representation were all addressed by the SNDP.<sup>7</sup>

### **Objectives of SNDP movement**

- i) To oppose the predominance of Brahmana's and other upper castes in general.
- ii) To enhance the position of the backward castes in the Caste hierarchy by copying upper-caste lifestyles such as higher education and distinguished occupations.
- iii) 'Ethnic' awareness and politicization were generally established as a result as these activities among depressed caste groups.

### **Reforms under SNDP Movement**

The fasters is to help the Ezhava's community, a depressed Kerala community. Narayana Guru established a number of schools and institutions around Kerala in order to provide wider spread education to society. Sri Narayana Guru constructed a number of temples and streamlined the worship, marriage, and death ceremonies. He wished to assist his neighbors in both secular and spiritual things. He traveled around Kerala for 15 years, assisting community measures in developing self-confidence, Social awareness, and a clean and environment.

To begin, he concentrated higher Gods in place of inferior Gods and appointed priest from his own group of devout Sanyasis. Secondly, he advised his disciples to construct additional temples in a simple and cost-effective manner. Thirdly, he made a significant modification in his mission as establishing new temples. He never forced his followers to worship idols. For example, instead of an idol, he constructed "Shivalinga", a massive brass oil lamp (Kammukhya Kshetham in Thrissur in 1920) with the phrase "Let there be light". He concentrated a plain stone with the inscription "Truth, Charity, Love, and Mercy" in another Shrine at Murukkunpuzha.

There are temples where Poojas, or regular worship, are performed, as well as festivals. There are temples with idols, but no Poojas or festivals are held. There are temples that are devoid of idols and images. It is self-evident that he concentrated many types of temples to meet the people's various emotional and spiritual requirements. Emphasis an education and

## Sri Narayan Guru and Ezhava Movement: A Study

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sanskritization using two methods, contemporary education and sanskritization, in about 30 years, Shri Narayana Guru was able to change the Ezhava's from an untouchable population in background caste community. In collaboration with the 'Nair service society' (NSS), he began temple admission programs. He urged his community members to abandon costly practices such as 'mock marriage' (Thalikattu Sampradayam), puberty celebration for girls (Thirukkuli), and Puaikuli, a festival commemorating pregnancy after marriage. He was against the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Jati Mimansa is the essence of his art- critique of caste. And other reforms are- admission to public schools are available in the mission, recruitment to government services, Road access and temple entry, political representation etc.<sup>8</sup>

The Ezhava are community with origins in the region of India presently known as Kerala, where in the 2010's they constituted about 23% of the population and were reported to be the largest Hindu community. They are also known as Ihava, Irava, Izhava and Erava in the south of the region; as Chovas, Chokons and Chogons in Central Travancore; and as Thiyyar, Thiyyas and Theeyas in the Malabar region. Some are also known as Thandan, which has caused administrative difficulties due to the presence of distinct caste of Thandan in the same region.<sup>9</sup> The Malabar Ezhava group have claimed higher ranking in the Hindu caste system than do the others, although from the perspective of the colonial and subsequent administrations they were treated as being of similar rank. Ezhava's dynasties such as the Mannanar existed in Kerala. The Chekavar, a warrior section within the Ezhava's community, served the army of the *Chera* dynasty; there were also renowned *Kalaripayatta* experts among *Chekavars*. Britishers also formed the 'Thiyyar Regiment' in Malabar during the Colonial rule. There were lesser known Thiyyas regiments and 'Thiyyar Pattalan' formed by the friends and British governments in Mahe and Thalassery. The British deployed unit in various military operations.<sup>10</sup>

The earliest use of the word Eelam of Ezham is found in a Tamil-Brahmi inscription as well as in the Sangam literature. The 'Tirupparankunram' inscription found near Madurai in Tamil Nadu and dated on palaeographical grounds to the 1st century BCE, refers to a person as a householder from Eelam (Eela-kudumpikan). The inscription reads, 'erukatur Eela-kudumpikan polalaiyan (resident of Erukathur), the husbandman (householder) from Eelam'.<sup>1</sup>

The Sangam literature 'Pattinappalai', mentions Eelattu-unavu (fold from Eelam). One of the prominent Sangam Tamil poets is known as Eelattu Poothanthevar meaning poothan

## Sri Narayan Guru and Ezhava Movement: A Study

---

thevan (proper name) hailing from Eelam Tamil inscriptions from 9<sup>th</sup> century CE link the word with toddy-tapper's quarters ( Eelap-poodehi ), a class of toddy-tapping (Eelath-ghanran). Eelavar is a caste of toddy-tapper's found in the Southern parts of Kerala.<sup>12</sup> Eela-Kaasu and Eela-Karung-Kaasu are referred to in the Chola inscriptions of Parantaka-I.<sup>13</sup>

There are myths of origin for the Ezhava. According to some Malayalam folk songs like Vedakkan Pattukal and legend, the Ezhava's were the progeny of four bachelors that the king of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) sent to what is now Kerala at the request of the Chera king Bhaskara Ravi Varma, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. These men were sent, ostensibly, to set up coconut farming in the region. Another version of the story says that the king sent 8 martial families at the request of a Chera king to quell a civil war that had erupted against him.<sup>14</sup>

It has been suggested that the Ezhava's may share a common heritage with ' Nair Caste'. This theory is based on similarities between numerous of the customs adopted by the two groups particularly with regard to making various significant life stages such as childbirth and death, as well as their matrilineal practices and martial history. Oral history, folk songs and other old writings indicate that the Thiyyas were at some point in the past members of the armed forces serving various kings, including the Zamorins of Calicut and the rulers of the kingdom of Cochin. Cyriac Pullapilly has said that only a common parentage can explain some of these issues.<sup>15</sup>

The lowly status of the Ezhava meant that, as Thomas Nossiter has commented, they had 'little to lose and Much to gain by the economic and social changes of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They sought the right to be treated as worthy as an English education and for jobs in Government administration to be open to them.<sup>6</sup> An early Ezhava campaigner and their 'political father' according to Ritty Lukose, was Padmanabhan Palpu. In 1896, he organised a petition of 13,176 signatories that was submitted to the Maharajah of the princely state of Travancore, asking to work in public administration and to have access to formal education. Around this time, nearly 93% of the caste members were illiterate.<sup>16</sup> The upper caste Hindus of the state prevailed upon the Maharajah not to concede the request. The outcome not looking to be promising, the Ezhava leadership threatened that they would convert from Hinduism en masse, rather than stay as helots of Hindu society, C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, realizing the imminent danger, prompted the Maharajah to issue the 'Temple Entry Proclamation', which abolished the

## Sri Narayan Guru and Ezhava Movement: A Study

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ban on lower-caste people from entering Hindu temples in the state. Steven Wilkinson Says that the proclamation was passed because the government was frightened by the Ezhava threat of conversion to Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

Eventually, in 1903, a small group of Ezhava's, led by Palpu, established 'Shri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam' (SNDP), the first caste association in the region. This was named after Narayana Guru, who had established an ashram from where he preached his message of 'One Caste, One Religion, One God' and Sanskritised version of the Victorian concept of self-help. His influence locally has been compared to that of Swamy Vivekananda.<sup>60</sup> One of the initial aims of the SNDP was to campaign for the removal of the restrictions on school entry but even after those legal barriers to education were removed, it was uncommon in practice for Ezhava's to be admitted to government schools. Thus, the campaign shifted to providing schools operated by the community itself. The organisation, attracted support in the Travancore but similar bodies in Cochin were less successful. In Malabar, which unlike Cochin and Travancore was under direct British control, the Ezhava's showed little interest in such bodies because they did not suffer the educational and employment discrimination found elsewhere, nor indeed were the disadvantage that they did experience strictly a consequence of caste alone.<sup>18</sup>

The Ezhava's were not immune to being manipulated by other people for political purposes. The 'Vikom Satyagraha' of 1924-1925 was a failed attempt to use the issue of 'avarna' access to roads around temples in order to revive the fortunes of Congress, orchestrated by T.K. Madhaban, a revolutionary and civil rights activist, and with a famous temple at Vaikom as the focal point. Although it failed in its stated aim of achieving access, the Satyagraha (movement) did succeed in voicing a 'radical rhetoric', according to Nossiter.<sup>19</sup> During this moment, a few Akalis – an under of armed Sikhs – came to Vaikom in support of the demonstrators. After the eventual passing of 'Temple Entry Proclamation', some of the Akalis remained. The attracted some Ezhava youth to the concepts of the Sikhism resulting in Ezhava conventions to that belief.

Between the Travancore census of 1875 and 1891, the literacy rate of Ezhava men had been increased from 3.15 percent to 12.1 percent. The 1891 census showed that there were at least 25,000 educated Ezhava's in Travancore. Dr. Palpu had support from Parameshwaran Pillai who was editing the 'Madras Standard'.<sup>20</sup> He raised the issue of the rights of Ezhava's in a

## **Sri Narayan Guru and Ezhava Movement: A Study**

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speech at the 'National Conference' in Pune in 1885, which was also editorialized in the Madras Standard. Pillai and Dr. Palpu also raised their questions regarding Ezhava's in the 'House of Commons' in England in 1997. Dr. Palpu met with Swamy Vivekananda in Mysore and discussed the conditions of Ezhava's. Vivekananda has advised him to unite the Ezhavas community under the leadership of a spiritual leaders. He embraced this advice and associated with Narayana Guru and formed the 'Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam' (SNDP), registered in March 1903. By mid 1904, the emerging SNDP Yogam' operating a few schools, temples and a monthly magazine announced that it would hold an industrial exhibition with its second annual general meeting in Quilon in January 1905. The exhibition was skillful and successful and was a sign of the awakening Ezhava community.<sup>21</sup>

The success of the SNDP in improving the lot of Ezhava's has been questioned membership had reached 50,000 by 1928 and 60,000 by 1974 but Nossiter notes that, "From the Vaikom Satyagraha onwards the SNDP had stirred the ordinary Ezhava without materially improving his position. The division in the 1920s of 60,000 acres or 24,000 hectares of properties previously held by substantial landowners saw the majority of Ezhava beneficiaries receive less than own acre each, although 2% of them to at least 40% of the available land. There was subsequently a radicalisation and much political influencing within the leadership as a consequence of the efforts of the 'Great Depression' on the coir industry what the general notion of self-help was not easy to achieve in primary agriculture environment; the Victorian concept presumed an industrialised economy. The organisation lost members to various other groups, including the 'Communist Movement', and it was not until the 1950 that it reinvented itself as a pressure group and provider of educational opportunities along the lines of the 'Nair Service Society' (NSS), just as the NSS briefly formed the 'National Democratic Party' (NDP) in the 1970 1970s. in an attempt directly to enter the political arena, so too in 1972 the SNDP formed 'Social Revolutionary Party' (SRP).<sup>22</sup>

They were considered as 'avarna'(outside Brahmanical Varna System) by the Nambudiri Brahmins who formed The Hindu clergy and ritual ruling Elite in late medieval Kerala. Kathleen Gough says that the Ezhava's of Central Travancore were historically the highest ranking of the 'higher polluting castes', a group whose other constituents included 'Kanisans' and various artisanal castes, and who were all superior in status to the 'lower



## Sri Narayan Guru and Ezhava Movement: A Study

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polluting castes', such as the 'Pulayars' and 'Paraiyars' ranked socially and ritually higher than the polluting castes.<sup>23</sup> From their study based principally around one village and published in 2000, the Osellas noted that the movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries brought about a considerable change for the Ezhava's, with access to jobs, education and the right to vote all assigning in creating an identity based on more on class than caste, although the stigmatic label all avarna remained despite gaining the right of access to temples.<sup>23A</sup> The Ezhava's are classified as an 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC) by the Government of India under its system of positive discrimination.

Within the Hindu religion, the Shri Narayana movement arose as a reforming and reaffirming movement. It was in change as a whole lifestyle change that included new religious beliefs, rituals, and perspectives. He offered an ideology of seclusion and self-organization that improved peoples self-esteem, honor, and worth. It was a protest ideology against the hierarchical and polluting Brahmanical value system. The movement as a whole resulted in structural changes such as increased social mobility, a shift in conventional power distribution, and the consolidation as 'backward castes' into a vast aggregation.

Some in the Ezhava community in Malabar have objected to being treated as Ezhava by the government of Kerala, arguing that the Ezhava in Malabar (locally known as Thiyyar) are a separate caste. They have campaigned for the right to record themselves as Thiyya rather than as Ezhavas when applying for official posts and other jobs allocated under India's system of positive discrimination. They claim that the stance of the government is contrary to a principle established by the 'Supreme Court of India' relating to a dispute involving communities who were not Ezhava.<sup>24</sup> 'The Thiyya Mahasabha' (a sub-group as the Ezhava in Malabar) has also opposed the SNDP's use of the 'Thiyya' name at an event.

In February 2013, the recently formed 'Thiyya Mahasabha' objected to the SNDP treating Ezhava's and Thiyyas as one group, rather than recognising the Thiyyas in Malabar as distinct. The SNDP was at that time attempting to increase its relatively weak influence in Northern Kerala, where the politics of identity play a lesser role than those of class and the 'Communist Party of India (Marxist)' has historically been a significant organization.

# Sri Narayan Guru and Ezhava Movement: A Study

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## Conclusion

So it can be said that as one of the social reformers of India, Shri Narayanaguru and his movement is a very important chapter in the history of India. Although born in a lowly family, he achieved special prominence in the social and national and political history of India. He established social movements for lower caste people and established them in higher positions. It is regarded as one of the most important events in the social and political history of India. So he is still remembered in the history of lower caste movement.

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