

Narayana Guru's Concept of One Caste

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Abstract:

Casteism basically is a perplexing social phenomenon caused by ignorance, both of the orthodox and the heterodox, both of the privileged and the under privileged, regarding their true nature and their identity with the ultimate Reality ātma, Brahman or God. This article deals with the evil of inequality and exploitation it engenders across the entire spectrum of the Indian society and the way Narayana Guru dealt with it. The Guru's method is helping those of the lower strata to rise upwards economically and even socially through such affirmative actions is apparently at the cost of they becoming more caste-minded. Securing equal opportunities for all for economic and social parity is one thing. Much different is the goal of doing away with caste identity.

The Guru instructed his followers to ignore caste consentiously. Hence he gave the directives do not ask caste, do not tell caste and do not think of caste. He recommends inter-dining and inter – caste marriages.

Keywords: *Casteism, Varṇa, Jāti, awakening, happiness.*

1. Introduction

Narayana Guru was one of the epoch-making seers of the modern era, who has dynamically effected a radical change in the

social, moral and spiritual value – visions and behavioural patterns of his contemporaries in India. The Guru confronted the course of history and shook the conscience of the very people who had been exercising the worst kind of social iniquity on the authority of an assumed caste superiority. He boldly encountered the orthodoxy and performed the miracle of arousing self – esteem among the down trodden. Out of the clutches of an age – old custom, he brought out a new civilization, which is fighting for equality of opportunity and social justice in its own right even today.

In this article, an earnest attempt is made to focus on the originality and scientific validity of the Vedantic teachings of Narayana Guru, by examining how he looked at casteism, exploring possibilities of impacting discourses on caste, in order to animate processes to undermine caste prejudices. The Guru's social reform activities were an outright application of his philosophy of 'Oneness of Consciousness. But this real causal force behind them is not observed by the historians and people of India. The Guru was a living example of his own highest ideal.¹

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¹ S.Omana, Devotion and Dissent in Narayana Guru - in the Book Devotion and Dissent in

Indian History, Edr, Vijaya Ramaswamy, 1 Edn., Foundation, 348, (2014).

orthodox and the heterodox, both of the privileged and the under privileged.¹

Caste – discrimination forbids marriage between people of different caste groups, and their cooking and dining together. Those of the lower caste were not to enter the house of the upper caste people. Touching each other was considered to pollute those of the upper caste. In certain cases, even seeing each other be if accidental, was counted as polluting. Economically, those of the higher strata owned all landed properties and the others, had to be satisfied with being workmen mainly in agriculture.

The English word caste is derived from the Portuguese word ‘casta’ which means ‘race’. Varṇa or colour and jāti or race are the two commonest words in Indian languages which are interchangeably used to denote ‘caste’.

Varṇa in classical Sanskrit generally means colour and so it has been argued that the varṇa system was based on the differences in skin colour between the Aryan and pre-Aryan residents of India.

Before understanding Narayana Guru’s reform activities, a brief outline concerning references to caste in ancient India is essential.

2. Caste in Ancient India

Vedas are the earliest source of Indian philosophy. Vedas contain the intuitive vision of Ultimate Reality by the seers of the ancient India. The four Vedas are Rig Vedā, Yajur Vedā, Sama Veda and Atharva Vedā. Though various references to the concept of Chaturvarṇa or the four - fold

division of society are found both in the Vedic and post - Vedic literature,² this inquiry is limited to (a) the Rig Vedā, the earliest, (b) to the Laws of manu (Manu Smṛiti) to (c) Bhagavad Gīta and to (d) the Mahabhārata.

3. Caste in Rigveda

References to the division of society into various classes can be found in the Rig Vedā. When they divided the Purusha into how many parts did they arrange him? What was his mouth? What his two arms ? What are his thighs and feet called?

The Brahmin was his mouth, his two arms were made the rajanya (warrior), his two thighs the vaisyas (trader and agriculturalist) his two feet the Sudras (servile class) was born.³

4. Caste in Manusmṛiti

In Manusmṛiti, we see a new division of the four varṇas, the twice – born and not twice – born. The first three castes (Brahmana, Kshatriya and Vaisya) were regarded as twice-born-those who were privileged to study the Vedās – whereas the last varṇa, the Sudras, were shut off from knowledge and the reading of sacred texts. Moreover, the twice-born castes were exhorted to go through the Chaturāśrama Dharma or the successive four stages of life, i.e., the student, householder, forest dweller and wandering ascetic⁴

5. Varṇa in the Bhagavad Gīta

Varṇa, literally meaning ‘colour’, is purely a psychological factor, not of any

¹ Muni Narayana Prasad, Guru, The Philosophy of Narayana Guru, 3 Edn., D.K. Printworld, 100, (2017)

² Iravati, Karve, Hindu Society: An Introduction, 1 Edn., Poona, Decan College, 51, (1961)

³ S. Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, Eds, A Source Book in *Indian Philosophy*, 1 Edn., Princeton University Press 10, (1967).

⁴ V.T. Samuel, One Caste One Religion On God, 1 Edn., sterling publishers, 60, (1976).

social bearing. It shows the mental nature of each individual person. Variety, always true with nature is, true with the characteristic traits of individual beings also. Such personal traits are classified in the Bhagavad Gīta as four – Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya, Sudra and are admitted as pertaining to the Absolute, meaning it is just part of nature or prakriti. One has to be fully aware of what one gets maximum opportunity to give expression to one's characteristic personal traits and thus find the joy of actualising oneself. The distinguishing marks of each varna are fully described in the last chapter of the Gīta. The varṇa concept of the Gīta thus does have nothing to do with any social hierarchical order.¹

6. Caste in Mahabhārata

Even at the time of Mahabhārata caste discrimination had spread its claws. Many examples can be quoted, in this respect. Though Vidura was the son of Vyāsa like Dritharastra and Pāndu, he was considered as an untouchable because he was born of a Sudra woman. Though Karṇa was only the foster son of charioteer Athiradhan, he use to be referred to and insulted as a charioteer.

7. Narayana Guru's Concept of Caste

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the Age of Enlightenment at its full bloom. This enlightenment triggered the intelligent and sensible amongst the sufferers to rise against this injustice. Their voices started becoming pronounced. Exactly at that time the presence of Narayana Guru as an enlightened person began to be noticed though this enlightenment meant something much

different from the one the age of the enlightenment embodies.

The Guru's enlightenment readily came out as a formidable support to the cause the other enlightenment made stand out. His sincerity and whole heartedness towards their issue was so strong. The Guru's enlightenment that everything is but one ātma variously manifest, could not countenance any social discrimination among humans whether based on caste, religion or any other consideration.

8. The First Ideal Society in the World

Narayana Guru installed a Sivalinga at Aruvippuram in Thiruvananthapuram District on 13th March 1888. It was a landmark in the social and spiritual history of India. At that time only the Brahmins had the right to install deities in temples. The Guru was neither a Brahmin nor even a Sudra. He came from a community which was totally outside the four-fold varnas of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyaas and Sudras. Like Sankara, he was also a dravidasishu. In winding up the proceedings of the day, the Guru had merely a few words to say. These he put in the form of a motto:

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!

Such, then, was the manner and such the character he gave his work. It soon overflowed the limits of the province and spread its seeds far and wide.

¹ Muni Narayana Prasad, Guru, *The Philosophy of Narayana Guru*, 3 Edn., D.K. Print World, 103, (2017)

That was, how Narayana Guru established the first ideal society of mankind (manava samudayam) at Aruvippuram in the history of the world.

In ancient Greece, Plato the well known philosopher described an ideal society in his Republic. But he failed to establish such an ideal state in Greece. In India, Mahatma Gandhi described his Ideal Society as a Rama Rajya. Rama personified the social virtues of the Aryans. A Vaishnava sense of equality as noticeably implied in this Gandhian outlook to which India responded characteristically, particularly adopting it in the struggle for emancipation. But political unification is not the end. Integration has to be deeper still, spiritual.¹ Swamy Dayananda Saraswathy stressed the importance of the Vedic and Aryan virtues of equality. Swamy Vivekananda defended Hinduism. Ravindra Nath Tagore sang songs breathing something of the freedom of the Upanishads across modern India. All of them aiming at raising the status of India in the world.²

The Guru wrote two poems also Jāti Mimamsa (Critique of Caste).

It is also known as Jai-Nirnayam and Jati – Lakshnam (kind defined).

9. Jāti Mimamsa

This small work of six verses, the first one in Sanskrit and the rest in Malayalam. It shows how biologically and commonsense wise, caste as a social hierarchy is meaningless.

The Guru states there is actually no difference between man and man. Caste distinctions have no basis in actuality. Subjected to the most drastic of scientific tests, Homosapiens falls within the human

species. Castes such as brahmana and pariah have no reality; man should realize his true humanity and unitive solidarity and realize also that terms like brahmana and Pariah are ideas superimposed on this reality that is human nature, which is essentially one and fundamentally the same.

In the fifth verse of his Critique of Caste the Guru quotes the example of the saintly characters, Paraśara and Vyāsa, who are recognized everywhere and worshipped as such by all castes in every home in the Hindu world, are themselves outstanding reminders that mere prejudices linger around the notion of caste, since they come from the much misunderstood pariah line and not from the brāhmana stock at all. Hence, here is the ultimate contradiction to be faced of the brāhmana not only accepting and adopting the pariah Guru but putting him on a pedestal as a sage of supreme value from the Vedic point of view. In the contradictory absurdity thus proved, all caste prejudices based on heredity and dynasty and blind tradition must be dispelled and the social atmosphere of the present, ultimately and finally be cleared of this major caste impediment.³

10. Jāti-Lakshnam (kind defined)

Jāti - Lakshnam is the other work and it is of ten verses.

All caste prejudices have ignorance and selfishness as their basis.

Identity with caste which is born of ignorance, is to be given up by becoming enlightened about our one and only identity, our natural and real identity, with one ātma. Human beings in no way are of different kinds, but are of one self – fraternity

¹ Nataraja Guru, *The Word of the Guru*, 2 Edn., Paico Publishing House, 23, (1968)

² S. Oamana, *The Philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru*, 2 edn. Narayana Gurukula, 39 (2018).

³ Omana. S., *Vedanta The Science of Consciousness*, 1 Edn., D. K. Print World, 84, (2022)

(ātmasahodara). Proclaiming this eternal and unquestioned truth, Narayana Guru said: Those discerned differently as that person or this person, when given thought to are revealed to be one primeval Self alone appearing in various forms.¹

Of these different appearances of one's self none is superior or inferior to another. No one derives to do anything harmful to oneself, seeing oneself alone in everything brings about a total change in the model of one's activities. What one does for one's own happiness naturally ensures the happiness of all else, for the others are not different from oneself in essence. Thus, both existentially and subsistentially, the distinction of caste becomes meaningless.

11. The Guru's Method

Prompted by his compassion for all beings, the method employed by the Guru is helping those of the lower strata to rise upward economically and even socially, through affirmative action is apparently at the cost of them becoming more caste minded. Securing equal opportunity for all for economic and social parity is one thing. Much different is the goal of caste identity. The method the Guru resorted to for this purpose was strictly scientific while being an out right application of his philosophy of oneness.

12. The Guru's Directives

The Guru directed people to ignore caste difference conscientiously.

Hence his directive "Do not ask caste, do not tell caste, do not think of caste". A slow and steady educative process, this includes doing away with references to caste in official records. It is in the light of all this that we have to comprehend the connotations of his well-known dictum "One in kind, One

in faith (religion), One in God - is man". The Guru does not deny outright jāti in the scientific sense of 'kind' or "species". Therefore, instead of denying jāti altogether, he says the entire human race belongs to One Jāti (kind). No different Jātis are there, therefore, amongst human beings, but rather all belong to one jati.

Species forms part of genus also called jāti in Sanskrit. If the scope of genus or jāti is broadened to its maximum, then we reach the genus that includes within its scope all the genera.

This genus of all genera, virtually, is none other than God or ātman "The Guru's categorical assertion "One in God" implies this.

13. Conclusion

We have seen the Guru's concern for his fellow human beings and the steps he took to bring socio-economic and spiritual set up of his contemporary society. The Guru states there is actually no difference between man and man. The ideas Brahmana and pariah have no reality, they are ideas super imposed on their reality, that is human nature which is essentially one and fundamentally the same. It is the one primeval Self – ātma alone appearing in various forms. Hence none is superior or inferior to another. Every one has to realize that he is non-different from ātma, Brahman or God.

During Narayana Guru's lifetime, he was not very much known outside Kerala. Now as years pass, he is increasingly recognized and several enthusiasts are studying his philosophy in all six continents of the world. There are universities in the name of the Guru. The charisma of a futuristic Guru lies in his power to affect in a growing dimension the attitude and value – visions of people who are born and brought

¹ Narayana Guru, *Atmopadesa Satakam*, 3 Edn., Narayana Gurukula, 60, (1960)

up outside the geographical perimeter of his historical influence. The increase on the number of his adherents as time marches from one generation to the next is a clear indication of the worth whileness of his teachings.

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