

Seminar on
**Guru's Revision of Advaita Vedanta and its impact
in the trajectory of Indian Renaissance Movement**

Dear Friends,

My pleasant duty here is to give the valedictory address to this important national seminar. At the outset I would like to congratulate the ICPR for choosing this theme for a serious discussion and also for collaborating with the *gurukula* for organising it. I am sure that fruitful deliberations on various aspects of the topic have taken place during these days.

When Dr. Sreekala invited me, I asked her the topic on which I am expected to deliver the address. She graciously told me that I am free to choose any subject. I was much relieved.

I can share with you some of my stray thoughts in an informal manner without resorting to the usual high-sounding academic jargons. Anyhow, I will confine the talk to the role of Sree Narayana Guru in the renaissance movement in Kerala in the first half of the 20th century.

1. As you are aware, this tiny state of Kerala has many firsts to her credit – the only state with cent percent literacy, which has helped her to gain high mortality rate and very low birth rate. It is also a state which has implemented many schemes with social responsibility including the abolition of feudalism and various affirmative actions to improve the position of the marginalised groups. It leads the country in the lofty principles of secularism, socialism and equality, the very foundation of our republic. The renaissance movement that created a new social order and political system breaking the rigid social structure enabled Kerala to achieve these goals. Of course,

Sree Narayana Guru was the central figure in this great movement. He inspired the masses and instilled new confidence among the less privileged in the society. He used philosophy as a tool to achieve this great transformation. Guru was a 'philosopher in action' and he became the architect of modern Kerala.

2. The term renaissance has been misused in the Indian context. Rajaram Mohan Roy is considered the father of renaissance in India. It is true that Roy fought against some social evils like sati and child marriage. It is interesting to note that Roy had two houses – in his house in the city he received his friends in full western suit; and in the village house in his traditional Brahmin attire. This split-character was always the curse of Indian renaissance – the conflict between tradition and modernity. It affected only the creamy layer and disappeared without any impact to the majority who were in the lower layers. In the case of Periyar the movement was directed against the Brahmins; we know where his Dravidian movements stand today. Miserable was the failure of these creamy layer attempts, they were steps for social reformation, not movements of renaissance in the strict sense of term. The fate of movements led by Mahatma Phule, Dr. Ambedkar and others were also not different, though they emerged from the lower strata of the society. Dalits continue to be dalits in the Indian Republic. It is in this background that the form, content and the impact of the renaissance movement of Kerala gains significance.

I need not go into the details. Renaissance in Kerala brought out a total revolution and liberated those enslaved for centuries in the name of caste, class or religion. I can swear before you that a Rohith Vemula will never have to commit suicide in any

campus in Kerala. This distinguishes the Kerala experience of renaissance from that of the others.

3. Sree Narayana Guru was the leading spirit of this movement. He cut an alternate path for him to walk through. We call such people in Sanskrit *Pathikrth* – who makes the road for them to walk on.

Guru had a multifarious personality – renaissance leader, philosopher, poet and revolutionary – all rolled to one. Romain Rolland rightly qualified him as a ‘Jnani of action’ while our former president K.R. Narayanan ‘as the light of hope of downtrodden people.’ His greatness lies in the fact that he did not criticise orthodoxy or the caste hierarchy. He simply told them that my way is different, it is not the same that you walk on. Regarding the Aruvippuram installation he said that this is not your Siva. There is no need to quarrel with us. Let us walk with our Siva. This assertion has a background peculiar to Kerala. Kerala had a strong influence of Buddhism. There were many *viharas*. They were called *Palli* in Malayalam. Every *Palli* provided facilities for learning, *Pallikkotams*. This Sramana tradition continued even after the *Viharas* were destroyed. They became popular village schools in every nook and corner of the state. They were headed by *asans*, a corrupt form of *acharya*. Sri Narayana Guru was an *asan*, he learned Jyotisha, Vedanta and Yoga from Raman Pilla Asan who had sixty students learning under him. Sri Narayana Guru was known as Nanu Asan, N. Kumaru was also an Asan. There were also *acharyas* in the *salas* attached to the temples popularising studies in the brahmanical order. These two streams of Asans and Acharyas, Pallikkotam and Sala, continued as parallel channels until recently, ie., till they were replaced by modern schools. The *salas* were for those

belonging to the savarnas and the others were for the untouchables. The point to be noted here is that due to these parallel streams the underprivileged who were excluded from the *varnavyavastha* in Kerala were not illiterates as their counter parts in other states of the country. This explains the emergence of an Itty Achyutan celebrated Ayurvedic Physician who was responsible for the composition of Hortus Malabaricus. There were great scholars among the untouchables. There were two distinct streams of learning, which were mutually exclusive. Gurus approach was that we are not encroaching to the Brahmanical realm, this is our Siva, Let us worship him. Leave us alone. Our place of worship is not exclusive, it is inclusive.

This is the model abode
 where all men shall live as brothers
 without caste distinctions
 and religious rivalries

PmXn-t`Zw aX-tZzjw
 GXp-an-ÃmsX kÀÆcpw
 tkmZ-c-t\z\hmgp¶¶
 amXr-lm-Øm-\-am-Wn-Xv.

He was breaking the exclusivity of the temple hierarchy. He did it by putting the concept of *manushya* as the focal point. It is not one's religion or caste that matters. It is your *manushytva* that is important.

Guru declared in Jatinirnaya :

a\p-jymWmw a\p-jyXzw PmXnÀtKmXzw Khmw-bYm
 \c-Pm-Xn-bnÂ \n¶¶t{X]nd-¶¶o-Sp¶¶p hn{]\pw
]d-b³Xm-\p-sa-´p-Å-X-´cw \c-Pm-Xn-bnÂ.

‘Of the human species is even the Brahmin born, as is the Pariah too
 Where is difference them in caste as between man and man’

Clubbing the Brahmin and Paraya together – None can think of it in India even today.

4. Diverting the focus from the superhuman to human enabled him to profess the lofty principle of *advaita* to eradicate the distinctions of caste/creed or religion. The logic was simple. If everything around is the manifestation of the one and the same absolute, why there should be distinctions of caste, *savarna* or *avarna*, touchable and untouchable?

Advaita was a matter for intellectual discourse to the orthodox pundits. But for Guru it was a tool to ensure social responsibility and affirmative actions in the society. He shifted the focus to the humane aspect whatever be the other things – caste, religion or ritual. If the absolute is the one and the same and all else are its manifestations then why distinguish one from the other on the basis of caste/religion. To him what advaita teaches in universal brotherhood. There cannot be any distinction of high and low, rich and poor, pundita and chandala.

5. His installation of deities in the new temples was in itself highly symbolic. First he consecrated concrete deities; as a next step he installed lamp and later on mirror. He was moving progressively from concrete to abstract, from idol to ideal and finally established through mirror the concept – *tat tvam asi*. Guru consecrated 60 temples on requests from his follows. None of them was the replica of existing Brahmanical centres. The next and most revolutionary act of Guru was the abolition of the system of hereditary priest-hood in the new centres of worship. Guru provided training to the young and engaged them in the service of temples he had consecrated for the believers.

6. Gurudev was not either following or complementing the existing Brahmanical order; instead he carved out a new belief-system focusing on human beings based on the concepts of compassion and universal brotherhood. He was re-inventing the basic tenants of ancient wisdom to suit the needs of a modern democratic, secular society.

This was an alternate or parallel way to walk through. It may be remembered that Guru was not alone in his journey. He did the miracle by leading a movement where in the entire society moved along with him – there were people belonging to all creeds in the crowd; some were believers in god, some were staunch atheists, some agnostics, and some were freedom fighters. There were people belonging to all faiths in the crowd. We cannot isolate guru from this crowd and de-contextualize him; then it will not be our guru but someone else. He was a sanyasi, but not a traditional sanyasi. He did not prescribe kashayavastra even for the pilgrims to Sivagiri – instead he prescribed the peetha vasha – yellow. He explains – It is the dress of Sri Krishna and Sri Buddha. He prescribed them *panchasudhi* of Sri Buddha not the chanting of Mahavakya for them to follow.

Let us conclude. This movement transformed the caste-ridden Kerala society to what it is today. The Guru has tuned the intellectual and emotional mind-set of Kerala and the influence still continues. Guru's voice is more relevant to us today.

Thank you.