

KERALA, CONVERSION, NARAYAN GURU: RE- READING THE NARRATIVE OF CASTE AND REFORMATION IN VIJAY JAYAKUMAR'S, 'SREE NARAYAN GURU-A CRITICAL STUDY'

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Swami Vivekananda's sojourn through the southern part of India took him to Kerala, often perceived as 'God's own land' and which has been constantly eulogised in several literary historical accounts as the epitome of 'just land' or 'dharma rajya'. But much to the chagrin of the reformist Hindu sage, his close encounters with the ridiculously stringent casteist practices made him realize the appalling untruth inherent in such glorified accounts and he was forced to observe that the continuance of such disastrous, artificial and discriminatory caste practices befits a lunatic asylum rather than a land that claims civilization. Much pained at the sight of the people of Kerala being held in the disabling grip of orthodoxy and the resultant inhuman social customs, he emphasised upon the urgent need to rectify such wrongs, else he argued, the repercussions would be fatal. At this point one might wonder at the need for such a long exposition about Hindutva's leading light, Vivekananda's observation, but I would like to point out that such an account is necessary to comprehend and highlight the fundamental premise of Narayan Guru's politics and achievement as an iconic social reformer.

A cursory glance at the cover page of the book on which this essay is based reveals a significant facet of Guru's larger worldview. The image of Tagore and Guru facing each other points at the 'reformative' impulse shared by both the luminaries. A nuanced reading only confirms for the readers the aptness of such iconography. Thus we have two of the greatest progressive Hindu modernist reformers with their respective renovation projects to redeem the lost prestige of Hinduism. To this can be added the initial observation made in this paper regarding the centrality of Vivekananda's role in understanding Shri Narayan Guru's ideological landscape. It could be claimed at this juncture that, much like Tagore and Vivekananda, Narayan Guru's cosmopolitan, reformist, revivalist zeal was predicated upon the hope for an united Hindu front that vigorously shunned the possibility of dividing the flock through the process of their conversion to other religions. Guru emerges as one of the guiding lights of the nationalist Hindu project that tried to co-opt dissent rather than violently asphyxiate them. The repeated attempts at equating Guru with the other illustrious Hindu imperialist saint, Shankaracharya can thus be seen in such a context. What should interest the readers further was the account of the circumstances under which Guru was born and the description of his childhood and his physical and spiritual travails through the extremely 'Indian topography' till the time he acquired enlightenment and that too curiously under a 'Bodhi' tree.

This was almost like a moment of *déjà vu* for the myriad Hindu followers who were given a glimpse into the life of their saints and the super imposition of the particular circumstances of Gautama Buddha's life trajectory on the Guru's journey can only be seen as symptomatic of the Hindu machinations of blunting the efficacy of Buddhism by portraying Buddha as a Hindu *avatar*. This tendency was in line with Shankara's efforts to curb the

growing significance of Buddhism during his time. However the interesting point of departure was that Shankara's project aimed at decimation and complete annihilation of Buddhism as a rival force, whereby Guru's cosmopolitan schemata allowed a more peaceful and accommodating approach. This might be owing to the separate subject positions enjoyed/suffered by each of the two stalwarts. While Shankara was born in the privileged Brahmana household, Guru was born and nurtured in the Ezhava family, accursed with the status of untouchability. Thus while the former could attempt to be more unforgiving towards dissidence, Guru had to consciously adhere to the path of least resistance premised upon reconciliatory gestures. Hence the genealogy of Guru's 'silent revolution' aimed at achieving social upheaval can be comprehended as a conscious and pragmatic negotiation strategy rather than as a sign idiosyncrasy.

A cursory reading of the text reveals its structural binary, as the author painstakingly creates two distinctive portraits of the Kerala society before and after the arrival and interventions of the Guru. His repeated emphasis on the reality of the inhuman living conditions of the *avarnas* and the daily humiliation heaped upon them by the *savarna* Hindus, particularly the Namboodiri Brahmins occupies much of the initial narrative space thereby highlighting the enormity of the Guru's achievement in such a hostile community terrain. In fact it would be apt to note that the primary ire is reserved for the Namboodiri Brahmins, who have been held responsible for the degradation and subsequent inhumane characteristics acquired by the Malayali society. The narrative of greed that they unleashed over the course of time engulfed the aspirations of all the other castes, and while the others starved and struggled for their daily bread, the Namboodiris fattened themselves on ill begotten privileges.

The account of their myriad and constant display of callousness peppers Vijayalayan Jayakumar's testimony and one can read his work as an effort to unravel the politics of historiography which ever favours the ruling proportion in any society. Jayakumar's scholastic endeavour brings to the fore the operational complicity between the warriors and intellectuals in the Kerala society which aimed at systemic degradation of the labouring section who constantly toiled to create wealth but was denied their share. Thus one is given a glimpse into the economic dimension of caste whereby this criminal system was framed to strip the original and aboriginal holders of land rights and resources of their legitimate demands. The deliberate initiation of the cult of Brahmanism was thus portrayed not as a divine providence but a testimony to human greed that denigrates and dehumanizes both the victim and the victimizer. The Brahminist intervention thereby destroyed the organic unity of the community and the condition of primordial egalitarianism. Thus Jayakumar 'denaturalizes' the role of the Brahmins as benevolent social patriarchs, an image deliberately created by Brahminical scholars like Manu over a sustained period of time. Instead Jayakumar succeeds in emphasizing on the fact that Brahminical machinations, also supported by the Ksatriyas of the land, gave birth to an unnatural and artificial structure which is not supported by the organic laws of nature and hence was liable to be abolished.

By dwelling and delving in the details of a historical time period of the pre-chaturvarna reality, Jayakumar notes the manner in which temples were deliberately transformed into sites of caste discriminations only to accord unlawful privileges to the minority Brahmins. His account also brings to focus the violent past of Hindu imperialism whereby the dissenters were physically tortured and their bodies were subjected to hideous pain and finally mutilation and death. Thereby the subsequent claims made by numerous Hindu ideologue regarding the benevolent and non-violent genome of Hinduism are made untenable. I quote from the work here- "...The means adopted by them in the name of Hindu regeneration were through such monstrosities as murder, arson, loot and vulgar songs. Even when with such manoeuvres they could not send the backward people packing, they resorted

to the heinous tactic of declaring them as untouchables and consequently as outcastes'. Thereafter he makes it clear that the tenets of Brahminism was not merely anti-civilisational but also anti human in nature as it refuted that the primary claim that all men were created equal, a tenet otherwise supported unequivocally by Buddhism.

However, Jayakumar's exposition about Buddhism is not uncritically celebratory as he realizes the curious flaw in it whereby Buddha only argued against the practice of caste differences, but did not evolve a scheme with the motive of eliminating the caste system. This is a project Jayakumar would like us to believe was rather initiated by the contemporary Buddha, Narayan Guru. Though there are several references to resistance movements that threatened the Hindu juggernaut in the course of History, Jayakumar doesn't dwell in detail. Instead he positions Guru as the successful iconoclast who conceptualized a viable anti Brahmin cult. Thus Narayan guru is conceptualised as a messiah of the Ezhava community who succeeded in organizing and integrating all the downtrodden sections and moulded them into a fighting group, conscious of their own potential. Though Jayakumar acknowledges the immense role played by the Christian missionaries in alleviating the condition of the so called *untouchables* and their commendable achievement of abolishing human slavery from the Kerala society, it is however only the Guru who finally could materialize the 'dreams' of the *untouchable* in its true spirit. Thus even when the English colonialists like Munro's contribution is accorded profuse praise, Jayakumar's final eulogy is reserved for the Hindu reformer, Guru who is accredited as the harbinger of renaissance in Kerala, much like what Raja Rammohan Roy achieved for Bengal and subsequently for the rest of Bengal.

Hence it is Narayan Guru's experience of the reality of the Malayali society which he gained over a sustained period of time through his extensive travels that finally allows a lasting solution to end rigid orthodoxies and the Christian and colonial interventions are seen as incidental acts of benevolence. The idea of an untouchable uprising premised upon self-consciousness and aroused subjectivity couldn't be ensured merely through external interventions and only an inward glance can ensure it. This according to Jayakumar could only be ensured by the orchestration of an *insider like Narayan guru*. What struck me as curious was the similarity of argument between Jayakumar (endorsed by Guru's speeches and activities) and the Hindu progressives, who were in favour of *renaissance* in the Indian society without absolutely westernizing them. This insider/outsider perspective or rather role playing was what also influenced the project of colonial modernity that evolved as a *reactionary* gesture.

Also significant is the deliberate use of the metaphor of the wandering Yogi that has traditionally captured the Indian psyche, to describe the journey of the Guru from the Ezhava household to the centre stage of social action. Related to this is also the image of the yogi as a scholar who is alone capable of integrating the material and spiritual discourse for the benefit of his fellow beings. Thus, we see Jayakumar allowing substantial narrative space to Narayan Guru's knowledge of contemporary literature, primarily written in Sanskrit and Malayali. He almost seems to imply that the revolutionary acumen of the Guru was also due to his assimilation of the rebellious potential of literature itself. At this juncture it would be worthwhile to point at the primacy accorded to learning and particularly English education as a panacea to centuries of oppression. Guru's insistence on educating the *outcastes* and subsequently training them for viable economic projects is an apt reminder of the intricate link between the religious and secular sphere, whereby reformation of the former needs to be predicated upon the reformulation of the latter. Guru's primary contribution has been to wed class with caste and strengthening the material and spiritual predicament of the downtrodden in unison, rather than viewing them as separate problems with separate origins. Much like what Babasaheb achieved for the oppressed, Guru also succeeded in inculcating the primacy of economics and resource distribution in the narrative of caste. I quote "...The services of

the Yogam in fostering schemes for the organisational resurgence of the backward, their education, and their industrial and economic progress and all round development are inestimable.”

However, Guru’s insistence on economic and intellectual self-sufficiency was not premised on a binary understanding of the society into the oppressed and the oppressor. Much like his illustrious contemporary, M.K Gandhi, Guru also theorized about the dehumanizing impact of the evil purity norms on the upper caste Brahmins themselves. The operation of the strange caste detection system as well as the Namboodiri practice of illegitimate coupling with Nair women are shown to be responsible for the former’s spiritual and material denigration which also wrought havoc on the Namboodiri family structure and transformed them further into a numerically minority group. What is also significant is the cataclysmic effect of the lascivious tendencies of the Brahmin patriarchs on the hapless Namboodiri women, who were mostly destined to be unwed daughters or young widows. Thus when the *avarana* women smarted under the dictum of laying their upper body bare and also prostituting themselves under the garb of the *devadasi*-system, the *savarna* women were reduced to living in oblivion as mere desire-stripped shadows. Hence when the women of the Ezhava community and other castes of the *avarana* section had by law to pay *mulakkaram* or *breast tax* over the years, the *savarna* women struggled to make their bodies ‘visible’ to their men folk who were more inclined to indulge in sex outside matrimonial alliances after performing the simple ceremony, *Mundukoda*, or cloth giving just for the enjoyment of sex. The swami preached against such kind of atrocities too thereby trying to repudiate the ills of Hinduism, taking an universalist Humanist stand.

My reading of Jayakumar’s work makes me conceptualize Shri Narayan Guru as a lower caste social reformist whose spectral horizon was determinedly Hinduistic. His commendable efforts to uplift the oppressed sections of the society were nevertheless structured to re-formulate the Hindu fabric and his staunch disavowal of conversion as a panacea for the *untouchables* is derived from his deeply entrenched Hindu subjectivity. As Jayakumar observes “...he was a theist with faith in religion, who taught and subdued the Brahmin priests who had kept God in their custody for centuries...” What lay behind the egalitarian project was the intense desire to found a society which assimilated within itself the creative potential owing its origin to Humanism. He is definitely a crusader for caste equality, but he did not endeavour to formulate a ‘dalit’ subjectivity, a project that was ably undertaken later by another doyen of Indian radical intellectual history, Dr. B. R Ambedkar. Babasaheb’s political and intellectual virtuosity and his commendable understanding of the Indian social apparatus allowed him a rare insight into the inherently oppressive Hindu religion which invariably acted as the bedrock for the *Indian* way of life. In this context it would be of some use to quote Meera Kosambi who quoted Pandita Ramabai thus-

“As regards social custom, it may be said that the daily life and habits of the people are immensely influenced by religion in India. There is not an act that is not performed religiously by them...each custom when it is old enough to be entitled ‘the way of the ancients’, takes the form of religion, and is scrupulously observed.”

Considering such a vice like grip of religion on the Indian psyche it was only apt for Dr. Ambedkar to fight the devious caste system in the country by first attacking the soul of the venomous hydra Hinduism itself. However when the realization dawned upon him regarding the impossibility of reforming Hinduism to wholeheartedly embrace their persecuted brethren, Babasaheb rightly endeavoured to venture out in search of a more accommodating religious structure, a step that was immediately castigated by the Hindu Nationalistic ideologues terming it as a betrayal. In fact such a response from that particular quarter was hardly surprising since right from the time when U.N Mukherji’s serialised essay in *The*

Bengalee June 1909 entitled ‘ A Dying Race ‘ spoke about the urgent need for Hindu demographic consolidation, any attempt on the part of the lower castes to secede had been seen with deep anxiety and suspicion. Thus proselytizing impulses were seen as existential challenges to the monolithic conceptualization of Hinduism and the Hindu reformist projects were hawked as panacea for caste oppression. And as has been initially discussed in the paper , even lower caste social reformists viz. Narayan Guru unwittingly fell prey to such insidious machinations as the lure of *belonging* in the Hindu fold often proved to be addictive.

It is in this context of religious, philosophical and political dilemma and the constant threat of being termed as a *betrayer* I intend to look at the significant debate that centred around the issue of conversion between two of the titans of Indian political philosophy who subsequently established the markers to guide the fate of a young nation which woke at the stroke of midnight after almost 200 years of slavery when the rest of the world was asleep. The conceptualization of India as a modern nation state was tied with the question regarding the possible religious texture it would eventually adopt for herself. Such was the ensuing tension over the issue that it finally became *free* with severed limbs and pangs of pain that still troubles her incessantly. Due to the historical benefit of numerical superiority enjoyed by the Hindus, they have been perennially concerned about maintaining their status and any attempt by the untouchables of the community to rectify and augment their pitiable material condition by refurbishing their religious spiritual belonging has been vociferously opposed by the same high castes who otherwise cringed at the very mention of the possibility of touching them.

Thus, continuous and well-orchestrated efforts were made to co-opt all voices of dissent and the juggernaut of Hindu reformist modernization was set into motion for similar purpose. The breakneck speed at which Western, European modernity was infiltrating the traditional bastions of Hinduism greatly alarmed the high priests of Hindu nationalism. The onslaught of changes that altered the otherwise submissive psyche of the oppressed castes made it imperative for the vanguards of orthodox Hinduism to conflate the ideas of national and religious belonging in order to keep their numerical superiority intact against the operations of the *foreign shepherd*, Christ.

Hence, the conscious reinvention of the Maratha ideal of Hindu Pad Padshahi happened and the beginning of events viz. like Ganesh Chaturthi and Shivaji festival was systematically popularized as nationalistic projects. This particularly gained currency during the 1920s and 1930s when the Ambedkar-Gandhi debate was raging over separate electorates. It was particularly during this historical juncture that religious conversion became intricately linked to the possibility of caste assertion. Infact it is during this time itself that Periyar’s virulent criticism of Hinduism threatened to lead a large constituency of the oppressed to embrace atheism instead. The promise of material and spiritual uplift offered by Christianity also played instrumental role in raising the degree of hostility against Hinduism. The disillusionment of the lower castes, seething with anger due to centuries of exploitation, sought immediate redress and the clamour to lead this sizeable proportion of populace became deafening within the Indian National Congress that chose to be blissfully ignorant about their aspirations until then. The predominantly upper caste leadership of the Congress led by M.K Gandhi jumped at the opportunity to expand their mass base with token gestures viz. renaming the untouchables as *Harijans* and some half-baked measures to augment their living conditions which were left unattended once the dust settled after the Poona pact. It is significant that Gandhi vehemently opposed conversion and in his arguments often implied that religious belonging merited an upper hand over individual rights. This irked Babasaheb who was trained in the western school of thought and was well aware of the primacy of human rights and individual merit over herd behaviour. Thus while the Gandhian school attempted to reinvent the *original tradition* of the Hindus, Dr. Ambedkar viewed religious

belonging in conjunction with the promise of material development it offered. Therefore while he tried to conceptualize proselytization within the larger rubric of material philosophy and individual rights and liberties, the Gandhians stuck to their refurbishing project. Narayan Guru's project of teaching his followers the need for economic independence and the material accomplishments initially seem to be akin to the stand Babasaheb endorsed but the former's inability to conceptualize an alternative hagiography in case Hinduism(or in that case SNDP which also followed the Hindu iconographical model) failed to deliver on its promise of egalitarianism and his inward reformist trajectory limits his ambit as a lower caste reformer. Thus his iconoclasm gets tinged with the same submissiveness that he rebelled against in the first place. The subversive edge that he thus sacrificed however doesn't in any way devalue the immense contribution he has made by providing a ray of hope to millions through his selfless Humanist acts.

This paper aimed to unravel some of the inherent dynamics that guided Indian socio political history through a meandering path and tried to establish the centrality of a phenomenon that has been related to the destinies of millions of hapless Indians who have been regularly threatened with disavowal by the same religious fold that persecuted them ruthlessly. Ironically once they attempted to chart their own path the same religion showed reluctance to let them go. The classic *Catch 22* predicament sadly continues to haunt them even till this date. Even post -independence the debate over conversion has remained equally poignant and the appointment of the Niyogi Commission in the 1950s only proves to be an apt testament to the raging imbroglio. Even when the report of the commission was published in the 1980s , around thousand Dalits converted to Islam and named their settlement *Rahmat Nagar* . The establishment of the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* in the 1960s only affirms the centrality of the concern over proselytization in the nation's psyche. The *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement and the religious and political frenzy whipped up during the process and the subsequent cultural jamboree are threatening testimonies of the same. Even the token gesture of making a dalit consecrate the icon at the site should not read as a symbol of reconciliation that was originally planned by the Hindu reformists but merely as an act of political tokenism entrenched in democratic compulsion where stitching together a numerically large constituency paves the path to power.

Thus the efforts to conflate and co-opt dissent that gained momentum during the pre-independence era to counter the growing supremacy of the European power has merely shape shifted and the efforts of social stalwarts viz. Shri Narayan guru and Babasaheb needs continuous support. The clarion call for socio-economic conversion has been given by them and the future course of the Dalit movement will alone be able to decide if the war would be won even on the religious ground.

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