Section : II

SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF

SRI NARAYANA GURU
Chapter : 4

THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND AND CASTE STRUCTURE OF KERALA

When Narayana Guru came on the scene in the mid 19th century Kerala Society was under the clutches of ugly caste system with all the evil effects, divisions and sub-divisions based on caste hierarchy. The Purusasukta has the first reference to the division of Hindu society into four varnas. The divine origin of caste is referred to in the post Vedic period also. The Purushasukta says “Brahmanah Mukhamasit, bahuh rajanah krutah; Ututadasys yadvaisya, padbhyaṁ sudra ajayataḥ”. Purusha sukta gives the divine origion for the varna system. It says Brahmana has originated from the head of the purusha (God) and King from the arms Vaisya from the thighs and Sudra from the feet of the
God. Traditionally, the duties for the four varnas also have been assigned. Study and teaching were assigned to Brahmin, protecting the territory etc. was assigned to warrior, agriculture, protection of cows and business was assigned to Vaisya and service to the above three higher varnas is assigned to sudras.

Gita accepts this varna system in accordance with the Guna and Karma of an individual.

It says:

चालुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागं ||

तत्रयं कर्तारंपि मां चिद्वियकर्तारं कर्मव्ययम् || 4

That means even according to Gita varna system has divine origin. Even western Philosopher like Plato and Bradley have accepted the natural division of human beings into philosopher king warrior, Artisan and the like.
But in the history of mankind birth became the chief factor for deciding one’s own varna (caste) than Guna and Karma. Hence varna has been deteriorated and converted into caste. Hence according to sanart there are more than thirty thousands of castes in this country! The society has followed caste system rigidly. hierarchy was maintained, the higher varna people are called upper-caste and lower varna people were called lower-caste and lower caste people were being exploited by higher caste people. Some among them were (even now) treated as untouchables. The discrimination was the root cause for the turmoil among the suppressed and oppressed people in the country especially in Kerala.

Sri Narayana Guru himself who was born in lower strata of society (ie Ezhauas) and had to face the torture of the caste system. The Brahmins and Namboodiris
stood at the top of the social ladder in Kerala, Nairs, Ambalava comes after next. The chief occupation of the Nairs was fighting. According to Sreedhara Menon ‘the economic condition of the Nairs was satisfactory. Their houses were thatched with leaves as the privilege of roofing them with tiles was denied to them. The Nairs were famous for their fidelity of loyalty. The Portuguese therefore employed them as changatams (suicide squads) charged with the duty of defending with their lives any person or property entrusted to their charge’.6

The Ezhavas, held the highest place among the lower caste. They are known as Tiyyas in Malbar. According to Genevieve Cemereinier, their (Tiyyas) economic function was concentrated mostly on the cultivation of palm trees and on the exploitation of their products today, coir fiber, Juggery (unrefined sugar) and weaving. But at the beginning of the 19th century Buchanan
already noted that there were also to be found in other occupations, that there were wood-cutters, boatmen, farmers and even a few small traders, school masters, and ayurvedic physicians'.

After Ezhaus other lower castes like the fisherfolk, pulayas, kuruvas and parayas who were subjected to many kind of discrimination and illtreatments. Even professional group have formed themselves in caste and sub castes and fisherman, carpenter, the smiths, washerman etc, formed separate castes.

Regarding the untouchability as practiced in Kerala Gennevieve Lemereinier opines as follow: 'It was the group who had no land, and whose work was not free i.e., the slaves which were naturally concerned with most servile, and hence the most, defiling jobs. All the members of the groups were therefore, more or less, permanently liable to contaminate others, they were
considered as being in a permanent state of muttuchittu or total ritual defilement’.\textsuperscript{8}

This was the tragedy of low caste people and Ezhavas in the Kerala sociatal structure. Of course, this applies to entire Indian country. The Brahmin’s Kshatriya, Nairs and others were expected to observe caste rules scrupulously. The violation of the rules led to social ostracism. The hideous custom known as palappadi or mannappedi or parapedi was prevalent during this era and the lower caste like pulaya, mannans were harassed and abducted higher caste women’s. Those whom were carried by the pulayas were considered polluted and treated as outcastes. Sreedthara Menon oppines as follows: "Apart from untouchability unseeability and un-approchability also existed in a dreadful form: a namboodiri who happened to be seen by a Nayadi or pulaya considered himself to have been
polluted. The pulaya had to keep a distance of 60 feet from Nair etc.

There was a extreme deterioration in the moral character of people during this period and Janmi (Feudal) system had full powers over the slaves in Kerala. The slaves were under the custody of the Janmis. They could not enjoy social amenities like acquiring land holding, keeping milk cows, wearing fine clothes, living in foiled houses using metallic utensils etc. Women all lower castes including the Ezhavas were prevented from covering the upper parts of the body and members of the low castes had to pay a certain fee in order to conduct marriage. They also had to pay a kind of tax for their huts.

Janmi (Feudal) were like neo-Brahmins and maintaining caste structure and the hierarchical system, and they were opposing inter caste marriages and inter
dining. In Kerala society child marriage and polygamy system was common. In the 19th century, even Ezhavas and other Backward community people could not walk on the road. Once a teacher C.Keshavan was moving through a road along with Brahmin students, one of them warned Guru as follows "Sir the people of your caste are not allowed to walk through this way".10 During the days of the Narayana Guru backward class and Ezhava students were not allowed even to Government-schools. Mr.K.Kunju Panikar spoke about open admission to all school and colleges irrespective of caste and creed but his request was neglected by Government. Government has replied that "It was impossible to provide to all girls and boys in the same school with Nair or Brahmin students together."11
Ezhavas community has contributed much to history of Kerala. The community is also known as the chovans and Tiyas. From Quilon southwards they are known as the Ezhavas. From quilon to Cochin in the north they are called as the chovans. In the malbar region, north of Cochin they are known as the Tiyas. And Idigas, Deevas, Deeveru, Namadhari, Billava in Karnataka. The Edhikas in the Kalinga, the Ekkeris in coorg and Mysore, the shopakas in Maharrastra and the Nadar in Tamilnadu, all belong to the Ezhavas.

The most inhuman condition was practiced in those days was denial of rights not only to the Ezhava, but also other backward communities. 'The right to walk through public Road was prohibited to the low class people. But the irony of the system was dogs and pigs were walking everywhere. This law could not prevent to higher class people in Kerala.'

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Further during the same period Government at the behest of higher caste people put up a sign board that the entry of low caste people is prohibitory where upper caste people reside.

Although religion is a personal affair and right to worship automatically goes with individual and it must be enjoyed by all on an equal footing. But Ezhavas and other backward people had no right to worship in temple even the construction of temple by them was prevented by the Nairs and other higher caste people in Kerala. Even, while, punishing a guilty, there was discrimination between low caste and high caste people. If a Brahmin commits a murder will not be hanged, but tonsuring of his head was enough. But Sudra commits murder he was tortured to death. If a Sudra attempt to preach the scriptural as text, his tongue was used to cut and whatever organ of the body of a Sudra harmed a Brahmin.
that organ was used to be cut off. The former should surrender to Brahmin without keeping even a single grain for his lively-hood. The sex-organs of the non-brahmin sudra who has sex with a Brahmin woman used to be cut off. Every beautiful women of whatever caste or community she belongs is the property of the Brahmin. And whatever they say was law, whatever they practice was the rule and order.

Thus, the Brahmins and other high caste people were treated as devatas for themselves and the Sudras and other low caste people were treated worst than the beast and animals. This was the social background and caste-ridden societal situational in Kerala before Sri Narayana Guru.
Footnotes:

1. See, Radhakrishnan: *Indian philosophy*, vol.1, P.111

2. *Rigveda*, X: 90, 11-12

3. See, *Gita*, XV, 9-11

4. Ibid, IV. 13

5. See, *Caste in India*, Sanarth, P.95


8. Ibid, P.156.


11. Ibid, P.53