

Principles of Health and Hygiene in the Temple Concept of Sree Narayana Guru: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT: Sree Narayana Guru, a scholar, saint, poet, philosopher, and social reformer, aimed to elevate the low castes in Kerala from the status of polluting segments through various methods, including temple installations, travels, educational activities, literary works, and anti-toddy campaigns. He viewed temples as a social paradigm for a reformed society with clean habits and mental attitudes, aiming to eradicate untouchability and caste degradation. Guru installed over sixty temples in Kerala, introducing *satvik* godly concepts and clean offerings. He also started *kulisanghams*, bathing fraternities, to disseminate cleanliness and hygiene lessons among the common man. Guru's concept of *Panchashuddhi*, or the five purities, emphasized the importance of cleanliness and hygiene in a society. He enshrined this concept in his work, *Sree Narayana Dharmam*, which outlines the five purities: cleanliness of body, mind, words, food, and deed. His ideas were incorporated into his *Sivagiri Pilgrimage*, which aimed to promote cleanliness and morality among the lower rungs of society. Guru advocated for abstinence from alcohol and the profession of toddy tapping, arguing that alcohol distorts the brain and is derided by various people. He called for the use of hard-earned money to educate children and advised against drinking. His efforts led to a significant transformation in society, with many low caste men abandoning jobs and focusing on small-scale industries like weaving and coir making. Through his efforts, temples played a significant role in creating a healthy and hygienic society in Kerala.

KEYWORDS: *Sree Narayana Guru, Health, Hygiene, Temple, Kerala*

The progress of a nation depends upon the existence of a good society and at the same time the success of a country depends upon the happiness of its citizens and every individual have their own role in it. For the happiness of individuals both physical and mental health are necessary. Health refers to a person's overall wellbeing and focused not just on one's physical state but the mental and social state as well. Having a sound body and mind constitutes good health. Hygiene correlates to health and both go hand in hand. Hygiene refers to conditions and practices that helps to maintain health and prevent the spread of diseases.¹ In the present world, where pollution levels are rising and numerous diseases emerging, good health and hygiene are a necessity. Adopting healthy and hygienic practices are not just benefit to individuals but the society as well. A healthy community helps a nation grow more robust. No one prefers to sit in the company of a person who is unclean and unhygienic. But a person who stays healthy is respected and admired by everyone. If we want to get focused and successful in life, then we must develop a habit of cleanliness. The more we keep cleanliness, the more we will stay healthy too.² In the modern period, health has been declared as a fundamental human right. It implies that the state has a responsibility for the health of its people.

From ancient period onwards, Indian culture gave great importance to health and hygiene in our daily life. The archaeological excavations at Mohanjodaro and Harappa revealed the advanced knowledge of sanitation about 4000 years ago.³ They had very good sanitations that are the first known examples of their kind. The evidence of private and public baths, fully covered drainage system, ancient world's most sophisticated sewage systems and water flush toilets verified how much care they had given to health and sanitation. Cleanliness of body, mind and soul was paramount⁴ in Vedic times. They considered purity and cleanliness as the stepping stone to spiritual life. In the succeeding periods also health and hygiene holds an important position in Indian life.

In Kerala, hygiene had an important role in the life and status of the people. In the early period, the social restrictions that existed in Kerala were mainly based on cleanliness. The *avarnas* in Kerala were always in

a dirty condition because of their occupation, religious practices and customs and ceremonies.⁵ It was the caste system which imposed impure customs and practices upon the *avarnas* and in due course those became one of the reasons for the lack of cleanliness of the low castes. The religious system pushed the *avarnas* into a dirty position and degraded status. Being untouchables, they were not permitted to worship the superior gods of Hindu pantheon. They possessed a handful of tutelary deities in the form of goblins like *Pey*, *Bhootam*, *Pisasu*, *Madam*, *Marutha*, *Yakshi*, *Kali* and so on. They worshipped these gods with blood, meat, fish and toddy. Human as well as animal sacrifices were performed to appease their deities. Even though these were part of the 'little tradition', the higher society considered these worship patterns of their ethnic gods, animistic and bloody practices, consumption of non-vegetarian food materials, etc. as impure and relegated them from the mainstream labeling as polluting. In addition to these their habit of drinking, traditional job like toddy tapping, arrack brewing, etc. were responsible for their dirty situation.

It was at this juncture, Sree Narayana Guru, a great scholar, saint, poet, philosopher and social reformer, emerged from the *Ezhava* community and made strenuous efforts to elevate the low castes from the status of polluting segments. Through his multi - faceted activities of socio-religious reforms and intellectual, ethical and spiritual dictums, Guru transfigured the age-old social apparatus of Kerala into an enlightened order. Through multiple ways of responses to the challenges posed by the then existing social stratification system, Narayana Guru led a silent but powerful revolution and transformed the severely diseased society of Kerala. Though belongs to an inferior caste in social status, emergence of Sree Narayana Guru marked the beginning of an era of enlightenment in the annals of history of Kerala. He observed that an overall transfiguration of the socio-religious system of Kerala was inevitable for the implementation of healthy and hygienic atmosphere. This necessitated the initiation of radical change in the social system, its ethnic and customary rites, religious beliefs, practices and popular mentality.⁶

As a practical philosopher, Guru intended to create a sense of pride

within the downtrodden segments of population and empowered them to think that they are also the part of civilized society. The majority population restricted the *avarnas* from the main stream. Guru realized that lack of cleanliness was one of the major reasons for the exclusion of *avarnas* from the main stream and their social degradation.⁷ Sree Narayana Guru opined “Can anyone asks a clean person his caste identity and to keep a distance? If asked so, will anybody do so? Cleanliness was a way found out by the Guru for eradicating the evils of untouchability.”⁸

Sree Narayana Guru applied diverse methods for the implementation of his plan for the creation of a healthy and hygienic society. Through his temple installations Guru inaugurated a new era of purity and cleanliness in the Kerala soil. The formation of *Kulisanghams* and many of the organisations started along with the temples installed by Sree Narayana Guru acted as instruments for the propagation and implementation of his ideologies of health and hygiene. The travels and the educational activities in connection with the temple installations also helped for the creation of a hygienic society. In addition to these Guru’s life practices, dictums and mottos, literary works, Sivagiri pilgrimage, anti-toddy campaigns, etc., could create a sense of purity of body and mind among the people of Kerala. To him, cleanliness must be a way of life, the part and parcel of our life style.⁹

Temples as Paradigms of Health and Hygiene

For Sree Narayana Guru, ‘temple’ was a social paradigm - an archetype of a model society with reformed and clean habits and mental attitudes. Cleanliness was a way found out by the Guru for eradicating the evils of untouchability and caste degradation and through it he wanted to negotiate a social paradigm of the *avarnas*. He utilised temples as a medium to create self -respect and self confidence among the *avarnas* through perusal of purity of body, mind and thought.

To save the *avarnas*, the Guru conceived to eradicate crude forms of traditional worship and to introduce *satvik* forms of godly concepts. The worship of ethnic gods like *Chathan*, *Chamundi*, *Marutha*, *Yakshi*, *Kali* and their mode of worship of offerings of meat, fish, toddy and animal sacrifices always kept the low castes untidy and intoxicated. Guru installed

more than sixty temples all over Kerala and through these temples; the Guru introduced great changes in the concept of god and in the modes of worship. By changing the ethnic gods Guru installed *Satvik* gods like Siva, Vishnu, Devi, Subrahmanya and others. In the place of primitive forms of worship and offering of meat, blood and toddy, the Guru introduced *satvik* and reformed ones like offering of fruits and flowers. Through these initial steps he could create a sense of cleanliness among the *avarna* groups. Guru also insisted that the people must come to the temples with neat and clean body and dress. In that way Sree Narayana Guru utilised his temples to make the low caste infused with advanced ideas of sanitation which naturally led them to imbibe self- confidence and self- respect. Thus, the Guru taught them the first step towards social mobility and higher standards in the eyes of the *savarna*.

The Guru reshaped the concept and model of the temples and modes of worship to inculcate the habit of cleanliness and created a healthy and hygienic atmosphere there. He believed that if the temples were kept neat and clean, definitely that would have its impact on the devotees. So he insisted that temples should be constructed in a simple manner with provisions for abundance of fresh air and sunlight to enter. They should be wide rather than dark rooms smeared with bat's smell. The Guru always made it a point to select neat and beautiful locations with fine natural surroundings for his temple constructions. Along with the temples his vision was the creation of beautiful gardens, fruit trees and medicinal plants. With his own hand Guru planted trees in many of the temples he installed like Aruvippuram Siva Temple, Kunnumpara Subrahmanya Temple, Kulathur Kolathukara temple and so on. Guru envisioned that the devotees coming to the temple with neat and clean body and dress would be turned into physically pure and mentally satiated by enjoying the beauty of the place and breathing the fresh air. All these ideas found practical application in most of the temples founded by the Guru which acted as cleansing and sanitizing sanctums. *Satvik* forms of worship, the presence of trees and gardens, open spaces, fresh air and untainted water facilities of the temples consecrated by the Guru purified the devotees physically and mentally.¹⁰

Kulisangham

It is an interesting fact that the Guru started *kulisangham* (a bathing fraternity) along with the temples in many parts of Kerala to disseminate the idea of physical cleanliness among the untouchable castes. On many occasions, the Guru specified the need for the formation of *kulisanghas*. Through individual cleanliness, the Guru decided to build a healthy atmosphere in the society. On one occasion, he suggested that *kulisanghams*¹¹ or bathing fraternities are more needed to the people than temples for their upliftment and development. When Sree Narayana Dharma Teerthar decided for the formation of a *Bhajana sangham* in the name of Sree Narayana Guru in northern Travancore, Guru wanted him to start a *kulisangham* there instead of *Bhajana Sangham*. The *kulisangham* helped greatly for making the devotees neat and clean and it helped to remain them as healthier. On another occasion the Guru gave advise to the *Gurudeva Bhajana Sangham* at Vakkom for the formation of a *kulisangham* there and wanted the natives to bath every day and must be taken it as a part of their culture.¹² When Guru started *kulisanghams* along with the temples installed by him and insisted *avarnas* to bath before entering the temples, they accepted it whole heartedly. When they became the regular visitors of these temples, the *kulisanghams* created them a habit of bathing regularly and gradually it became a part of their daily life and culture. To avoid unhygienic situation, the Guru suggested pipe water for bathing of the devotees rather than temple ponds.

Cleanliness through Temple Organisations

For the management and functioning of temples, Sree Narayana Guru started organisations along with many of his temples. Hindumatha Dharma Paripalana Sabha in Moothakunnam Sree Narayana Mangalam Sankara Narayana temple, Vijnana Vardhini Sabha in Cherai Sri Goureeswara temple, Sree Dharma Paripalana Yogam in Palluruthy Sree Bhavaneeswara temple and so on acted as instruments for the propagation and implementation of his ideologies of purity and cleanliness among the common man. The leaders of these organisations travelled through the length and breadth of Kerala and propagated the lessons of health

and hygiene among the people. The regional foundations, *Sanghams* and *Samajams* mostly in affiliation with the temples consecrated by the Guru, acted as harbingers of cleanliness among the people.

Along with them the Guru started many formal and informal awareness programmes under the banner of SNDP Yogam to create an awareness of cleanliness among the masses. The Guru cleverly utilised *Vivekodayam*, the mouthpiece of SNDP Yogam in a creative and invincible way. By the creation of physical and mental purity among the relegated segments of society, depressed classes, the Guru prepared the path for their social and total elevation.¹³ Temple organizations played a great role for spreading Guru's ideas of health and hygiene to every nook and corner of Kerala.

Idea of *Panchashuddhi*

The strong messages, literary works and activities of Sree Narayana Guru also specified the concept of purity. Lack of hygiene created many diseases and one of the most noted and exalted maxims of the Guru were enshrined in his code of total hygiene – *Panchashuddhi* (concept of the five purities) - purity of body, mind, words, food and deed.¹⁴ His guidelines and injunctions specified behavioral pattern for a purer ethical, moral, physical, mental and spiritual life of individuals in society and enshrined in a notable work compiled as *Sree Narayana Dharmam*. The core of the principles was no doubt the concept of individual and social cleanliness. *Sree Narayana Dharmam* specifies five purities, i.e., cleanliness of body and home, purity of the mind, word and sense organs.¹⁵ By cleanliness of body or *dehashuddhi*,¹⁶ Guru destined proper cleaning of body parts, wearing clean clothes, breathing fresh air, eating good food and drinking fresh and clean water. Using of words in appropriate situation which do not irritate others and express truth and equanimity in a pleasant manner, with beauty and nobility will always be enjoyed by others, such words are included in *vaakshuddhi*¹⁷ or purity of words. The factors that contribute to the purity of mind or *manashuddhi*¹⁸ are sincerity, kindness, love, gentleness, courage, modesty, concentration and absence of anger. For maintaining *indriya shuddhi*¹⁹ or purity of sense organs Guru advised to avoid unnecessary and undesired interference, do not harass or pamper your sense organs and do not praise anything that is not praiseworthy.²⁰

Intended for *grihashuddi*²¹ or purity of home and surroundings, the Guru recommended well-ventilated houses with abundance of sunlight and fresh air, daily cleaning of home and surroundings, getting rid of spoilt and dirty things, avoiding excrete in the areas immediately surrounding the house, and daily practice to fumigate the interior with incense both in the morning and evening. Guru discoursed that whoever practices these five rules of purity, which are the basis of physical and spiritual well-being, will enjoy fame all along life in this world, with the energy of youth in his body and perpetual pleasant thoughts in his mind. Through his concept of *panchashuddhi*, the Guru desired to purify the individual and society physically and mentally.²²

Sivagiri Pilgrimage

In itinerary through temple installations in various parts of Kerala and particularly after he set up the Sarada temple at Sivagiri, Sivagiri Pilgrimage and educational activities also stressed the concept of purity. The cardinal pre-condition that the Guru set forth for the Sivagiri Pilgrimage was the principle of *panchashuddhi*. Among the eight goals of the pilgrimage purity or cleanliness holds an important position.²³ The Guru directed that a chain of speeches on the centre stage of the pilgrimage on the subjects like cleanliness, agriculture, industry, handicrafts, education, devotion and technical training, organisation by eminent personalities should be organised. He also advised that all participants coming as pilgrims should carefully listen to the speeches and discussions and put into practice the ideas in their life. Following the Guru's injunctions, the pilgrims observed the *panchashuddhi* during their pilgrimage period and gradually it became a practice and they continued it in their life. The concept provided a moral and ethical upgradation to a person and naturally it disseminated into the lower rungs of society and was hoped to bring progress and development of the downtrodden. The farsightedness of Sree Narayana Guru revealed in his concept of purity of the body, mind, word and deed of man became a lamp of light and morality not only for the Sivagiri pilgrims, but for society at large.²⁴

Anti-toddy Campaigns

As a means of creating cleanliness among the people, Sree Narayana Guru started campaigns against the impure professions of toddy tapping and arrack brewing and the consumption of these intoxicants. The Guru utilised the occasions of temple installations and his journeys connected with them to different parts of Kerala for anti-liquor or anti- drinking campaigns. Realising the role of occupation and consumption habits in determining social status, economic self-sufficiency and self-respect of a person, Sree Narayana Guru wanted the *avarna* sections, especially the Ezhavas to abandon their profession of toddy tapping and arrack brewing which always kept them dirty, intoxicated and degraded. Guru opined that the occupation of a person depends upon his ability, interest and qualification rather than his caste.²⁵

Guru found that making and consumption of liquor is one of the most important causes that the *avarnas* became or came to be considered as polluted and degraded. So he stood against the occupation of toddy tapping and arrack brewing and using those intoxicants. He said that “the person who makes liquor stinks. His clothes and house also stink. Anything he touches also stinks in the same way”.²⁶ On the *Jayanthi* Day (his birthday) in 1920, the Guru gave his famous dictum: “liquor is poison, don’t make it, sell it and drink it”.²⁷ He had great hatred towards liquor and he even compared toddy tapping with chronic diseases like plague and leprosy. He opined how as leprosy spreads to the entire body and destroys the individual, toddy tapping affects and destroys the whole society.²⁸ As we cut off the diseased limb, so the tappers should be cut off from the society. In the opinion of Sree Narayana Guru any earning from liquor business are impious. The wealth earned by selling liquor by destroying so many lives will not be good for the benefit of the man and his family and this wealth will not be everlasting. So, in the opinion of the Guru this despised job must be abandoned and the toddy tapper should find out some work which would benefit his family and society.²⁹

Sree Narayana Guru considered tapping and selling of toddy as heinous sin. He called such people as sinners and cruel. On the occasion of his conversation with a devotee, the Guru opined that toddy tapping is more

sinful than fishing.³⁰ When one devotee favored toddy tapping in the sense of employment opportunity, the Guru mockingly advised him to divide the knife used for toddy tapping into four pieces and make four shaving knives. It showed that any other job which was considered socially low was indeed nobler than the job of toddy tapping.³¹

Not only toddy tapping and liquor manufacturing and its distribution, but consumption of the intoxicants, in whatever form were denounced by Narayana Guru. He opined that “liquor distorts brain. Therefore, none shall drink it”.³² According to him “a drunkard is derided by his wife and children, parents and siblings, and even God. Therefore, liquor should be given up”.³³ The anti-drinking attitude of Sree Narayana Guru was clearly expressed in his address in an assembly of Pulayas held at Muttathara in Thiruvananthapuram in 1916.³⁴ In this meeting he made a clarion call for stopping of the consumption of liquor. He said “You all work and earn every day and spend on drinks. Saving a portion of it will make you to educate your children”.³⁵ In his speech he clearly mentioned that the hard earned money of the *Pulayas* must be utilised for the education of their children and he advised that every day they must keep one *ana* in a common fund to educate their children. Education is must and if you get that, money, cleanliness and all will follow. He also advised that children should not be allowed to drink and the elders should change their attitude and restrain from spending money on drinking habits in order to stop that habit in their children and deviate their attention to education and other constructive programmes.³⁶ Thus by abandoning liquor, they can save their next generation and by providing education, they can take the next generation to the main stream.

Abstaining from liquor is clearly mentioned in the *Sree Narayana Dharmam* as one of the five codes of ethics or *Saamaanya Dharmam* or *Pancha Dharmam*. The codes of ethics referred as *Pancha Dharma* by the Guru was explained by him as consisting of *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *astheyam*, (non-covetousness), *avyabhicharam* (not committing adultery) and *madyanishedham* (denial of liquor).³⁷ In stanza 82-88 the Guru specifically detailed the different types of intoxicating liquor and the evil effects of their consumption.³⁸ He discoursed the

reviled condition of alcohol in society and stressed the need of abstaining from this.³⁹ Wise men considered liquor as a poison which affects the senses and intelligence and therefore, they were against it. Toddy, opium, ganja, and even tobacco leaf generates abnormalities in the mental functions and these are also considered liquor.⁴⁰ It generates deadly sins. Hence, intelligent men never buy it for themselves, sell or give it to others or store it with any of these intentions.⁴¹ Even young children avoid shameless drunkards. Wise men deride them as if they are suffering from some infectious disease like cholera.⁴² One's own parents, siblings, wife, children and even God are angry and irritated with an alcoholic. Hence the Guru advocated that no one should consume liquor.⁴³

Guru's exhortations and rigorous stipulations for abstaining from alcoholism and the profession of toddy tapping had a great impact on the society of the time. Gradually, the member of *Ezhavas* and other low caste men engaged in the profession of toddy tapping began to be reduced. In tune with the ideology of Sree Narayana Guru, the SNDP Yogam also played an outstanding role in ending the so called traditional job of a section of the *Ezhavas*. By the anti-liquor campaign of Sree Narayana Guru many persons abandoned their job of toddy tapping and took other small-scale industries like weaving and coir making. Under the initiative of Kottiyathu Ramunni Vakkil, the anti-liquor campaign of Sree Narayana Guru spread all over Malabar.⁴⁴ As a result of the combined efforts of Sree Narayana Guru, his followers and organisations in relation to the temples he founded, a great transformation occurred particularly among the community as well as in society in general. With the change of profession many engaged earlier in toddy tapping got reformed in their appearances and persons. They became neater, tidier and devoid of the intoxicated and half-conscious state of being.⁴⁵

As a man of practical genius, Guru started educational institutions along with his temples, to qualify those engaged earlier in toddy tapping and arrack brewing for better jobs. He also propagated job-oriented education and started many training centers along with temples for offer better professional opportunities. The organisations started along with his temples gave training to people on cottage and small-scale industries

and turned them from their pollutant traditional jobs. At Aruvippuram and Sivagiri weaving training centers were started for train people for new jobs. At Kumarakam Sree Kumara Mangalam temple, a note book making unit was started and trained people in note book making.⁴⁶ Such types of innovative training centers were started along with many of the temples installed by Sree Narayana Guru. It helped them to turn from traditional jobs to some modern and beneficial jobs for family and society. Thus through his educational activities, starting of training centers along with temples, messages, travels, organisations and disciples, Guru can save a large number of people from the clutches of liquor and able to create healthy people both physically and mentally.

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Conclusion

Among the multifarious activities of Sree Narayana Guru to create health and hygiene among the people of Kerala, temples played a prominent role. Guru utilized temples as a means to reach his goal of creating a healthy and hygienic society. He never considered temples as mere religious places, but as combined centers of education, culture, cleanliness, progress and development. He reshaped the concept and model of the temples and modes of worship to inculcate the habit of cleanliness and created a healthy and hygienic atmosphere there. Along with his temples, Guru cleverly utilized his travels, messages, educational institutions, organisations, disciples, etc. for the creation of a healthy and hygienic society.

By the far sighted activities of Sree Narayana Guru the low caste people turned from the condition of mere creatures to physically and mentally fit human beings with self-respect and self-confidence. Among the other Indian states Kerala holds a high position in the scenario of health and hygiene and she occupies a top spot in the Health Literacy Rate and Health Index Rate. Sree Narayana Guru played a prominent role for tuning the

people of Kerala into a healthy and hygienic one. The pandemic situation created by COVID 19 disease proved the relevance of the hygienic lessons preached by Sree Narayana Guru. It also urged the people the need of keeping cleanliness in their daily life for keeping their health and life better.

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