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Redefining the Guru: An Epistemological Analysis of Narayanaguru's Pedagogical Vision

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ABSTRACT

The life and work of Narayana Guru has been a source of intense debates, extensive discussions and profound academic scholarship. Nearly a century after his demise, Guru continues to occupy the centerstage of intellectual debates in Kerala— political, cultural, religious and even literary. This article is an attempt to explore Guru's pedagogical vision as an extension of his epistemological convictions. In other words, it seeks to locate the "guru" within Narayana Guru through an analysis of Guru's epistemological outlook as well as pedagogical practice.

Keywords- Guru, epistemology, pedagogy, consciousness, awareness, *Arivu,* Education, inclusivity, episteme*, Athmopadesasathakam, Jananinavaratnamanjari*.

The life and philosophy of Narayana Guru (1856-1928) have been subjected to multiple analyses from diverse perspectives. Primarily, he has been understood as an ace anti-caste socio-religious reformer who spearheaded the social transformation of Kerala in the early twentieth century. As the renowned historian, K.N. Panikkar has observed: "The scheme envisioned by Narayanaguru for the regeneration of Kerala society had three important dimensions: the reformation of social and religious practices, the development of education and industrialization" (ix). Narayanaguru has also been hailed as the true inheritor of Sankara's Advanta Vedanta tradition although his understanding and practice of the same varied significantly from Sankara's. Of late, Narayana Guru's literary work has attracted the interest of scholars who see in them the great qualities of *Kavitvam*, adding to the profundity and complexity of the discourse on Narayana guru. This article analyses Guru's Pedagogical vision as an extension of his epistemological convictions. In other words, it explores the "guru" within Narayanaguru.

Narayanaguru presented his epistemological vision through his meditative and instructive poems like *Arivu, Darshanamala, Adwaitadeepika, Aathmopadeshashathakam* and *Jananinavaratnamanjari*. As Dr. S. Omana puts it: "His position as an original thinker or epistemologist cannot be left unnoticed. The guru is first and foremost an epistemologist" (x). Guru's epistemological outlook runs deep into the core of *Advaita* Philosophy. Guru believed that the individual soul (*Atman*) is only a manifestation of the Absolute, the Universal soul (*Brahman*). He considered self-knowledge the ultimate source of man's holistic progress and development. In his pedagogical vision, Narayanaguru envisaged universal, inclusive education as the ultimate path to liberation of the self and society.

Guru's epistemological vision is well articulated in his poem, *Arivu* (*Epistemology of Gnosis*). In this short poem of fifteen stanzas composed in Malayalam, each beginning with the word "Arivu," Narayanaguru sets out to ponder the nature and origin of knowledge, in a truly Vedantic vein. Guru envisages "Arivu" or the Consciousness of the Absolute as the ultimate reality of the world, encompassing everything in the world— both mind and matter. In this novel Vedantic epistemology posited by Guru, there is little distinction between *Atma vidya* and *Brahma vidya*. The knowing Subject, the knowable object and the very act of knowing— all are different dimensions of Consciousness. It is this awareness of

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Consciousness that leads to oneness with the Absolute, an inner realisation that leads to harmony with the internal and external worlds. Guru observes in the poem, *Arivu*:

> What is known here, when carefully considered,
> Is not anything, other than knowledge,
> As knowledge in this, (as the knower and the known) is one,
> There is not anything apart from knowledge (qtd. in Yati 3).

Guru's preoccupation with knowledge can also be seen in *Jananinavaratnamanjari*. At the beginning of this poem, Guru calls upon the Goddess of learning to awaken with her "thousand tri-basic rays (of knowledge-knower-known)" those fallen thus into the ocean of need and lost altogether." Here guru refers to the need to save those who have fallen into the world of ignorance and materialism because of "Avidya." Guru continues to inform us that the variegated appearances around us—the deer, the fish, the snake, the bird, the earth, the man and the woman all "cognizes here, As the "I," that too is even you" (qtd. in Omana 30).

The teacher persona of Guru is clearly visible in *Atmopadeshashathakam* (One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction). Guru declares at the very beginning of this poem that the true seeker should prostrate before the non-differentiating, universal, enigmatic knowledge of the Absolute. Guru describes the eternal ecstasy of the seeker who attains self realization through knowledge of the Absolute. He compares this new enlightenment to the light of a thousand Suns rising together from the horizon. In verse 35 of *Atmopadeshashathakam,* Guru writes:

> Like ten thousand suns rising at once
> The wisdom of discrimination arrives.
> Once torn off the veil of transient Maya
> What shines is only the primordial sun. (qtd. in Sasidharan 460)

A brief perusal of Guru's poems tells us how much Guru was pre-occupied with the notion of knowledge. His exploration into the origin and nature of absolute knowledge establishes him as an epistemologist par excellence. In fact, Nitya Chaitanya Yati considers Guru's life "an epistemic journey" (1). However, unlike the European philosophers who shared similar epistemological concerns, Guru's epistemology was integral to his spirituality. Here also, Narayanaguru chose to be different. Upon attaining enlightenment after severe penance in the Pillathadam Cave of Maruthwamala Hill, Guru could have remained a self-declared renouncee. It was probably the teacher persona within Guru that prompted him to walk down the mountain trail of Maruthwamala and settle down at the serenity of Aruvippuram where he eventually consecrated a Siva temple and proclaimed his vision of Oneness of the Absolute:

> Devoid of the dividing walls of caste and race
> Of hatred of rival faith, we all live here in brotherhood,
> Such, know this place to be! This model foundation! (qtd. in Nataraja Guru 26)

During his lifetime Narayanaguru found himself at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. As an astute visionary, Guru could see through the strengths and limitations of both. The evolution of the teacher persona and the pedagogical vision of Guru must be understood in this context. Even before his enlightenment Guru had established a school in his native village of Chempazhanthy and admitted students irrespective of their caste and creed. This was how at a very young age Guru had become Nanu Asan (master). Like the great masters of the past, Guru also had his own ideas about the art of teaching and teachers. He believed that a good teacher should have the qualities of great seers.

As an epistemologist, Guru was more than aware of the need to educate oneself. His famous maxim, "Educate, to liberate" stands as an enduring testament to his pedagogical vision. Shortly after consecrating the temple at Aruvippuram, Guru established a primary school next to the temple. Guru continued to consecrate temples but after a period he asked his disciples to build schools instead of temples. It is not accidental that Guru consecrated a Sarada Temple (dedicated to the goddess of learning) at Sivagiri and he declared education as one of the core foci of Sivagiri pilgrimage. It was to mark the consecration of the Sarada Temple that he composed *Jananinavaratnamanjari*. Guru also realised the merits of English education and even established a school exclusively for girls. As Nataraja Guru puts it: "The guru began the role of a gardener, not of plants but of a field of institutions scattered over the west coast of south India" (24).

At the core of Guru's pedagogical vision is its non-discriminatory, inclusive nature. The traditional gurukula system of Sanskrit education was highly exclusionary and was reserved for the privileged. Even during the colonial period, education remained far from being democratised. It remained a forte of the truly privileged classes of the society. The true humanist in Guru found this scenario unacceptable and his pedagogical sensibility pushed him to establish more and more institutions that accommodated students across the caste hierarchy. In his Adwaithashram at Alwaye, Guru started a Sanskrit school to reclaim the past glory of Sanskrit through which lessons in universal truths may be imparted to discerning disciplines from

all castes. Thus, Narayana Guru's pedagogical vision challenged the exclusionary, inhuman and discriminatory practices of traditional as well as colonial epistemologies.

As an astute teacher, Guru was also aware of the complementary and reciprocal nature of the teacher-disciple relationship. It was Guru who detected at a very early age, the innate poetic genius of the great poet, Kumaran Asan and arranged for his higher studies in Bangalore and Calcutta. After completing his studies, Asan returned to his Guru and penned profound poems that voiced Guru's ideas of universal brotherhood, liberty, equality and compassion. Later, Asan paid glowing literary tributes to the mentor in Guru by describing him as the "Sun who destroys darkness." Nataraja Guru was another noted disciple who came under the mentorship of Guru. Nataraja Guru was subsequently sent to Paris where he earned a D.Litt. from Sorbonne University on the topic, "The Personal Factor in the Educative Process." He founded the East-West University of Unitive Sciences to promote the idea of the Absolute propounded by Guru.

Guru's epistemological convictions are remarkably pronounced in his conception of Sivagiri Pilgrimage. Sivagiri pilgrimage is a one-of-a-kind pilgrimage in the world where imparting knowledge is considered the main objective. While sanctioning the pilgrimage, Narayanaguru himself outlined its chief objective: holistic human development by focusing on eight key themes— education, cleanliness, piety, handicrafts, trade and commerce, agriculture, science and technology and organised endeavour. It is remarkable that among these eight areas, Guru gave prime importance to education. To him, education was more than a mere transfer of knowledge; it was a means for liberation from all kinds of bondage through the holistic development of the individual.

Guru envisaged through education a sense of equality and a consciousness of oneness that is rooted in spirituality. He firmly believed that true objective of education is the comprehension and dissemination of self-liberating knowledge. Guru famously said in connection with the World Conference of Religions that he organised in Aluva in 1924: "Not to argue and win; but to learn and inform." Thus, Guru's education was all about understanding the "Other" as a part of Oneself and it was based on the ideals of equality, liberty, fraternity, inclusivity and compassion. It is a testament to the pedagogical genius of Guru that he outlined and practiced these fundamental tenets of contemporary educational practices nearly a century ago.

It is evident that Guru's pedagogical vision cannot be divorced from his epistemological project. It ensues, each of these needs to be seen as a mirror reflective of the other. It is probably his awareness of "awareness" that prompted Guru to assert in his *Gadyaprarthana* (Prayer in Prose): "We are not the body; we are Awareness. Even before the body came into being, We – The Awareness were there." To Guru, education becomes a journey through "awareness," towards self-awareness as well as the awareness of the Absolute.

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