

**SOCIAL REFORM IN TWENTIETH CENTURY
MALABAR: VAGBHADANANDA AND THE ATMA
VIDYA SANGHAM**

*Thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
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DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation entitled, 'Social Reform in Twentieth Century Malabar: Vagbhadananda and the Atma Vidya Sangham', submitted by me in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is my original work and has not been submitted for the award of any degree of this or any other university.

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1

Introduction

Phases of Social Reform

The nineteenth century has been associated with Hindu socio-religious reform in British India, owing to the emergence of different strands of intellectual thought and activity amongst the upper caste, English-educated, professional class. This group emphasized on the notion of ‘progress’, which was sought to be achieved by absolving Hinduism of its putatively degrading practices.¹ Social reform overlapped with religious reform because social relations were primarily structured on the hierarchical notions of caste and gender which were intertwined with Hindu religious thought and practices. The reinforcement of a religion-based identity, promoted by Western missionary education² and the infusion of European scientific ideas into the colony, prompted the emergent middle class to carry out a task of introspection of their own community. For these social groups who came directly into contact with colonial institutions, reform was primarily related to the question of self-identity.³ These attempts occurred at a time when colonial rule had entrenched itself across the subcontinent through its legal-judicial and military apparatuses.

In this changing scenario, British administrators and Orientalist scholars undertook the study of Hindu cultural traditions and social practices alike, in an effort to justify the supremacy of the Western civilization and to rationalize colonial domination.⁴ On the one

¹ See Amiya P.Sen, *Social and Religious Reform: The Hindus of British India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

² For a detailed analysis of the impact of missionary education on forging a religious identity in colonial India, see Parna Sengupta, *Pedagogy for Religion: Missionary Education and the Fashioning of Hindus and Muslims in Bengal* (California: University of California Press, 2011). Sengupta argues, with the introduction of mass schooling and western education, religious education became standardized. Religious identity became a parameter for self-fashioning.

³ M.S.A Rao, “Themes in the Ideology of Protest Movements”, in *Dissent, Protest and Reform in Indian Civilization*, ed. S.C Malik, (Shimla: Institute of Advanced Studies, 1977), 58

⁴ Orientalist scholars and evangelicals shared many common ideas on ‘religion in India. For details, see Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793-1900*,

hand, the Orientalist scholars undertook a project of opening India to the gaze of the Europeans through its project of translating and interpreting different texts from the classical languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian into English, and on the other, administrators used institutional methods such as census surveys, anthropological and ethnographic studies to categorize, classify and objectify the peoples of the subcontinent and their cultures.⁵ But one cannot neatly compartmentalize the actions of Orientalist scholars and British administrators. Their varying approaches towards understanding Indian society and polity fed into each other at different junctures. It was argued, as part of these scholarly and administrative knowledge production, India was a cradle of spirituality but ill-equipped with the conditions and values required to achieve industrial and scientific advancement. This material void was explained in terms of religious traditions that guided the Indian polity.⁶

The British also targeted Hinduism, stating the prevalence of a complicated social order based on caste, prescribing numerous dos and don'ts for its members, as the major reason for limited social and occupational mobility. This was coupled with the Western racial prejudice which treated Indians as lazy and primitive, desperately in need of a civilized existence. Many officials and non-officials, including missionaries, posited this idea of a 'superior' West to an 'inferior' East, emphasizing on religion as the axis of the social order in India. They considered Hinduism as the factor that bred superstition instead of science. Despite producing such images of the colony, the government hesitated to intervene on the premise that religious traditions were integral to people's lives, constituting their private domain and projected an image of the state as neutral in such matters. This policy of non-interference in religion suited colonial interests because they did not have to risk

(New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2006), 95-114. However, there existed various strands within Orientalist thought. For instance, William Jones, one of the founders of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, glorified Hindu civilization and believed in governing India according to indigenous traditions. See, Michael J. Franklin, *Orientalist Jones* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). On the other hand, missionary orientalist were sharply critical of Hindu cultural practices. The Scottish Missionary Alexander Duff was extremely critical of Hinduism, and labeled it as a 'stupendous system of error'. See Dipesh Chakrabarty *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), 24 .

⁵ Bernard Cohn, "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia", in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Gerald N. Barrier ed. *The Census in India: New Perspectives* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1981) .

⁶ Peter Van Der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). The collection of essays looks at the debates on religion and secularism in colonial India

antagonizing the Brahmins and other traditionally educated upper castes that derived incomes from their zamindaris and collaborated with the administration in providing crucial knowledge and service towards maintaining its dominance. It also allowed the British to allay any fear of them being viewed as agents of Christian proselytization. For instance, they prevented Christian missionaries from entering the British Indian territory until the declaration of the Charter Act of 1813. The presence of Christian missionaries troubled the administrators who were attempting to project the British rule as heralding 'civilization' and stimulating commercial interests, and not imposing a foreign religion.

In the colonial period, with the dissemination of print and the scrutiny of religious traditions, new avenues of expression emerged. Now, religion was no longer perceived as a prerogative of a privileged few, namely the Brahmin priesthood, but was open for debate amongst the educated middle classes.⁷ Scriptural traditions became exposed to the critique of the Hindus, from within, and of the Europeans, from without. With the coming of Protestant missionaries in India, the challenges to traditional authority held by the Brahmins intensified. Although missionary critiques and responses of Hindu reformers were varied, a general idea of an evil-ridden Hinduism, devoid of moral and rational values, began to be imparted. Geoffrey Oddie emphasizes on the three main criticisms of Hinduism which has repeatedly echoed in the missionary literature of the nineteenth century; Hindus were passive beings steeped in superstition and ignorance, committed inhuman and brutal acts in the name of religious worship, and lastly, Hinduism was tied up with sexually immoral transgressions.⁸ Moreover, caste was perceived by the missionaries as a single major impediment to conversion.⁹

Socio-religious reformers began to employ literary expressions and form associations, to assert their demands and make counter-critiques of the missionaries. This was also the beginning of the creation of an idea of a monolith religious community. While accepting the

⁷ M.S.S Pandian argues in the context of colonial Tamil Nadu that colonialism opened up new forms of 'speakability', in which contending groups could participate in discussions in the public sphere. See, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007), 12. This 'speakability' has been a major factor in social reform initiatives across the country.

⁸ Geoffrey A.Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism 1793-1900* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006) 73-75.

⁹Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*,(Permanent Black,2001) 26.

ideas of Western science and philosophy and realizing the need to critically examine traditional structures of power and authority, the reformers sought to invent a modernity of their own by engaging with their opponents. As Aravind Ganachari argues in the context of Maharashtra, the Western educated liberal classes sought out, ‘a project of cultural resurgence through the transfer of ideas, but were quick to distinguish between the ethos of English education and the ethos of western science and philosophy.’¹⁰ The production of texts in regional languages also opened up new arenas of debate between Indians and Europeans, resulting in shifts in approaches to education in the colonial period. For colonial South India, Stuart Blackburn has shown how non-Brahmin groups drew upon print to reproduce folklore traditions to forge a non-Brahmin Dravidian identity.¹¹

In a discernible first phase, early reformers in the nineteenth century were more concerned with the ‘woman’s question’, and took up issues such as sati, female infanticide and widow remarriage. Most of the research on social reform in India has remained restricted to these aspects, and traced the contours of the debate and controversies surrounding gender-based norms and practices.¹² Some of these studies have provided insights into the workings of colonial law and their implications. Such reform activities, however, rarely gave space for women’s opinions and participation and remained at the level of what male reformers thought best for the community. To disprove the colonial accusations that the backwardness of the Indian society was due to the low position accorded to women, reformers such as Rammohun Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar of the Brahmo Samaj tried to prove the irrationality of practices such as sati by re-reading the scriptures, which was hitherto monopolized by a priestly class. From the 1840s onwards, they attempted to pull the state’s legal institutions into the ambit of religion and provoked widespread debate and discussion on community reform. The legislation for the abolition of sati in 1829 and the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 are two cases in point.

¹⁰Aravind Ganachari *Nationalism and Social Reform in a Colonial Situation* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2005), 12.

¹¹Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore, and Nationalism in Colonial South India*, (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 15.

¹²For some of the major studies, see Tejaswini Niranjana et.al. *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, (Calcutta: Seagull, 1993), Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*, (California: University of California, 1998), Sumit and Tanika Sarkar, *Women and Social Reform: Volumes I and II* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007).

But the Brahmos under Rammohun Roy constituted a group within the newly rising section that sought to examine their socio-religious environment with a bourgeois modern and rational framework. Universalism was a dominant strand in their critique of traditional authority. It necessarily did not mean a rejection of religious scriptures; but instead, a return to these texts for a closer and a revisionist study, without calling upon the priesthood. As Panikkar argues, 'A rational and scientific basis for social change, instead of traditional authority and religious sanction, was thus sought to be employed'. This critique based on reason was also linked to a humanist perspective.¹³

The immediate aim was to instill self-respect and confidence amongst their class and prove that Indians were fit to manage their own affairs contrary to Western perceptions. Although their aims, aspirations, propaganda, and methods of organization differed from those of the preceding period, the extent of their success and failure was largely determined by their ability to negotiate with new networks of power and knowledge, brought about by colonialism.

Unlike Christianity and Islam, different sects in Hinduism do not have a central reference point, which made the task of bringing them together under a common fold difficult. There existed varied conceptions regarding worship, ritual and social organization; and by the second half of the nineteenth century, many nationalist reformers, philosophers, writers, intellectuals and activists began to consolidate sections of the community to construct monolithic Hinduism, centered on the idea of an essential unity of thought.¹⁴ Although scriptural authority became questionable, efforts were made to locate the unifying reference point in a singular text and imbue it with greater authority over others. For the Brahmo Samaj, it was the Upanishads, for the Arya Samaj, it was Vedas, and for the leaders of the national freedom movement such as Tilak and Gandhi, amongst others, it was Bhagavat Gita.¹⁵

¹³ K.N. Panikkar, 'Culture and Consciousness in Modern India: A Historical Perspective', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 18, No. 4, April 1990: ,8.

¹⁴ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'* (London and Newyork: Routledge,1999), 96-117.

¹⁵ Peter Van Der Veer discusses the process by which certain texts assumed canonical status as part of the Indian national imagination. See, 'Monumental Texts: The Critical Edition of India's National Heritage', in Daud Ali ed., *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

By the 1880s, another phase emerged in which social reform was deeply interconnected with nationalist political activity, wherein distinctions began to blur. The Indian National Congress, with its avowed political character was facing internal ruptures; and debates arose between the Indian National Congress and the National Social Conference¹⁶ on the question of did social reform precede political reform or vice versa? The rise of the extremist faction, led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, in opposition to the earlier host of moderate activists, set the stage for an open clash of ideological persuasions. The extremists' anti-reform position and non-acceptance of state intervention in matters of religious practices led to a split between the Social Conference and the Congress in the late 1890s. They were suspicious of the leaders of the Social Conference such as Ranade¹⁷ and considered the issue of social reforms to be politically divisive. However, these nationalists also relied upon the idea of reinterpreting traditional, textual authority and custom to reconstruct gender relations.¹⁸ This meant a reordering of relations, with the inclusion of many concerns, while excluding certain crucial ones focusing on women such as the question of their right to private property, civic rights, access to higher education and employment, and scope for women's activism. By carving out a 'domestic space' as the uncolonised essence of the nation, the 'woman's question' was relegated firmly within the private sphere and the ambit of nationalism.¹⁹ Gradually, dissent against Western stereotypes and interventions began to be rooted in a framework of cultural nationalism.

Composed in 1857 by Bankim Chandra as a song as part of a novel, *Vande Mataram*, became the rallying cry for nationalists, particularly Hindus, during the early nationalist phase and was later appropriated by Hindu communal organizations such as the Rashtriya

¹⁷ Charles Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 205-229.

¹⁸ The founding of the Arya Samaj by Dayanand Saraswati, based on the infallibility of the Vedas, worked towards changing oppressive practices towards women but did not alter them radically. While female education formed a major part of the Arya Samaj's agenda, the role of the educated 'Hindu' woman was increasingly relegated to the domestic sphere, nurturing of the family and children. The Arya Samaj had a different curriculum for girl students in their gurukulas, with an emphasis on domestic training and religious instruction. See, Madhu Kishwar 'The Daughters of Aryavarta,' in Sumit and Tanika Sarkar ed., *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2008), 201-229.

¹⁹ Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question", in *Recasting Women*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989)

Sevak Sangh from the 1920s onwards.²⁰ The song which deified the land of the nation gradually isolated the Muslims from the envisioned nation. Similarly, in 1893, the revival of the Ganesh Chaturthi festival in Maharashtra by Tilak, as a counter to the Muslim celebrations of Muharram, brought religious iconography into the framework of nationalism.²¹ With the nationalist discourse assuming a predominantly 'Hindu' tone, other social groups such as lower castes, tribals and religious minorities were also increasingly marginalised. However, the one text that nationalists harked back to was the Bhagavad Gita and its the main message which, they argued, was embedded in the theory of *niskama karma*, i.e. doing one's duty without desiring/expecting any fruits or results. The text underwent various interpretations during different phases of the nationalist movement across the country. The counter arguments to Western domination harped on the spiritual legacy of India to fulfill its people's lives as against the hollow promises made by the West's material advancement.

Most reformers and intellectuals did not agree upon every aspect of Hinduism and held varying views with regard to the nature of socio-religious reform and the extent to which the state administrative apparatus and subordinate castes could be involved in the nationalist project. Things took a different turn when Gandhi took over the reins of the nationalist movement, and exhorted hitherto marginalized sections to join it. He brought social reform into the Congress's political programme.

We can employ satyagraha even for social reform. We can rid ourselves of many defects of our caste system. We can resolve Hindu-Muslim differences and we can solve political problems...but it should never be forgotten that they are all closely, say, inter-related. It is not true to say that neither religion nor social reform has anything to do with politics.²²

²⁰ Tanika Sarkar, "Imagining Hindu rashtra: Hindu and Muslim in Bankim Chandra's writings", in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Delhi:Permanent Black,2001), 163-190.

²¹ Richard I. Cashman, *The Myth of the Lokamanya: Tilak and Mass Politics in Maharashtra* (California: University of California Press, 1975)

²² Dennis Dalton ed., *Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Political Writings*, (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1996) 57.

From the 1920s, anti-untouchability became a major plank of action, linked to the larger agenda of alleviating the depressed classes. However, Gandhi's positions seemed to be contradictory. While calling for the abolition of untouchability, he also upheld the ideal of a varna system, because he viewed the problem of untouchability primarily as a religious problem. The Vaikom satyagraha in Kerala for the opening of temple roads for untouchable groups were initiated under the Congress' banner, but Gandhi did not participate in such latter day protest movements.²³

His actions, considered 'paternalistic' and partial to the upper caste orthodoxy invited acute criticism and scorn from lower caste leaders who felt that his campaigns were nothing short of an eyewash. In 1932, when the British accepted B.R Ambedkar's proposal for a separate electorate for depressed classes, Gandhi went on an indefinite fast, which compelled the former to concede and sign the infamous Poona pact.²⁴ Gandhi, instead, allowed for the provision of reserved quota of seats for the untouchables in elected assemblies.

Social reform in Western India: The Case of Maharashtra

The moderate religious reformers of Maharashtra comprised a small section of the Western educated elite. They were influenced by the missionary propaganda and British views of Hindu traditions. Convinced that the degeneration of the 'Hindu' society was owing to religious and social hierarchies, they asserted the need to create a common intellectual/social space for all human beings.²⁵ But with the emergence of student radicals in the mid-nineteenth century influenced by European ideas, these moderate opinions did not gain widespread popularity. Instead, there occurred a culmination of anti-caste sentiments into a strong lower caste protest movement in Western India.²⁶ One of the leading figures was

²³ Claude Markovits ed., *A History of Modern India, 1480-1950*, (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 462.

²⁴ For details of Ambedkar's critique of Gandhi, see, his *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the untouchables*, (Bombay: Thacker, 1946). E.V.Ramasamy was also discontented with Gandhi's political tactics. see, M.S.S Pandian *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin*, 190-191.

²⁵ Rosalind O' Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 88-102.

²⁶ There have been a few extensive studies on lower caste protests and social reform in Maharashtra. See Rosalind O' Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in*

Jyotirao Phule, the founder of the Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873 who extensively critiqued the Brahmin-dominated social order. He drew upon the Western idea of natural theology and indigenous popular protest traditions to invest the non-Brahmins with a positive identity that did not exclude untouchables. The struggles by him and his followers against the Brahmanical hegemony were interconnected with the demand for an abolition of untouchability. His first work, *Ghulamgiri* (Slavery), exposed the workings of a caste-based social system, which enslaved majority of the people. Adopting a new vocabulary to narrate the history of the lower caste oppression, Phule fused together anti-Brahmin radicalism, rationalism and universal humanism into an anti-caste ideology.

In Maharashtra, the lower caste reformers sought to write an alternative history for oppressed groups through a language devoid of symbols of Brahmanical domination. It was not certain form of religious reform aimed at reforming a particular community's belief system and practices, but fostering a secular, casteless society that would allow peasants an equal share of their produce. Phule viewed the government rather favourably, in the light of the Abolition of Slavery Act of 1833 introduced in America, and hoped that the British would introduce in India a modern system of education. At the same time, he was also wary of the administration which was viewed by him as being hand in glove with the Brahmins and doing little to improve the condition of the lower castes. He notes,

I sincerely hope that Government will ere long see the error of their ways, trust less to writers or men who look through high- class spectacles and take that glory into their own hands of emancipating my Sudra brethren from the trammels of bondage which the Brahmins have woven round them like the coils of a serpent... Let there be schools for the Sudras in every village; but away with all Brahmin school-masters! The Sudras are the life and sinews of the country, and it is to them alone and not to the Brahmins that the Government must ever look to tide them over their difficulties, financial as well as political.²⁷

Nineteenth-Century Western India , (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Gail Omvedt, *Cultural revolt in a colonial society: the non Brahman movement in western India, 1873 to 1930*, (Bombay: Scientific Socialist Education Trust, 1976).

²⁷ Jotirao Phuley, *Slavery*, (New Delhi:Critical Quest, 2008), 8-9 Jyotirao Phule,who spearheaded a strong lower caste protest in nineteenth century Maharashtra argued how the root of exploitation lay in the caste system, headed by the Brahmins and upper castes. In the pre Congress era, he was not constrained by a specific agenda

Phule also equally emphasized upon the importance of education for societal progress, especially female education and set up the first Girls school in Pune in 1848 and encouraged his wife, Savitri Phule, to participate in its functioning. However, by the 1920s, the non-Brahmin politics in Maharashtra began to adopt a conservative stance and got mobilised on the lines of caste, with the sharpening of Maratha/non-Maratha distinction. The Samaj's departure from Phule's initial position inhibited its radicalism and blunted its programme.²⁸ Later, it merged with the Congress, gradually distancing itself from the problems faced by the untouchables.

During the same period, under the leadership of Bhim Rao Ambedkar, the Dalit movement resurged. The untouchable groups made demands for civic inclusion, to gain public access to schools, temples and water resources. Self-respect and dignity became the central tenets of the emerging discourse on the Dalit self. Having got portions of the *Manusmriti* to be burnt publicly during the Mahad satyagraha in 1917, Ambedkar openly attacked symbols of caste orthodoxy. He did not believe that Congress' anti-untouchability and temperance campaigns were the panacea to social evils prevalent in the country.²⁹ Perceiving social reform as incomplete without political representation to untouchable groups, he called for a rejection of the oppressive caste order.

Under a constant and steady fire from the Congress platform and from individual Congress leaders, the Social Reform Conference was burnt down and reduced to ashes. When the untouchables lost all hope of their salvation through social reform, they were forced to seek political means for protecting themselves. Now for congressmen to turn around and say that the problem is social is nothing, but hypocrisy. It is wrong to say that the problem of the untouchables is a social problem.

of nationalism, and could speak against caste exploitation, appealing to people across languages and territory .See Rosalind O' Hanlon *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma JyotiRao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India* (Cambridge,1985).

²⁸ Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonies*, (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006), 43.

²⁹ Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (California: University of California Press, 2009), 79.

For, it is quite unlike the problems of dowry, widow remarriage, age of consent etc., which are illustrations of what are properly called social problems? Essentially, it is a problem of quite a different nature in as much as it is a problem of securing to a minority liberty and equality of opportunity at the hands of a hostile majority which believes in the denial of liberty and equal opportunity...viewed in this light, the problem of the untouchables is fundamentally a political problem.³⁰

Ambedkar radicalized caste conflicts and posed a major obstacle to upper caste reformers who intended to address untouchability, by sidelining other structural inequalities arising out of caste divisions. He advocated political representation through reserved electorates. However, Jaffrelot argues that in his early phase, Ambedkar was favourable to Sanskritisation but from the 1920s, he advanced an anti-caste ideology that brought him at logger heads with Gandhi and other contemporaries.³¹ The Bahiskrit Hitakarini Sabha (Association for the Amelioration of the Boycotted; BHS), the key organisational force behind the Mahad satyagraha, emphasized the primacy of education, capturing the essence of its politics in the motto: 'Educate, Agitate, Organize'. Founded on 20 July 1924, the BHS opened free hostels, vocational schools and reading rooms for Dalit children, and held Bahishkrit Parishads across the Bombay-Konkan region.³²

South India

It is usually argued that until B.C. Pal's touring of South India in 1907, in the wake of the Partition of Bengal, social reform activity did not gain ground in the region. But this is not true. It was not until this time that reform activity in the south began to function within the nationalist framework but mass movements calling for equal civic rights, namely in education and job opportunities, had risen in various parts of the South India much earlier. Many of

³⁰ B.R. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi have Done to the Untouchables?*, (Delhi: Gautam Book Centre, 2009), 183.

³¹ Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 45.

³² Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question*, 80.

these movements emanated within lower caste communities who used political tools to mobilize and agitate against the Hindu orthodoxy and the administration. The Madras Presidency witnessed extensive European missionary presence, especially in the field of education.³³ G. Subrahmanian Iyer founded the Hindu Social Reform Association in 1892. In 1904, Annie Besant of the Theosophical Society inaugurated the Madras Hindu Association and voiced support for establishing schools for women. The Madras Hindu Social Reform Association, founded in 1892, was, however, critical of Besant's position on reform along nationalist lines and extended considerable support to the National Social Conference.³⁴ K. Nataraj's *The Indian Social Reformer* acted as the mouth piece of all India reform and shifted base to Bombay from Madras. Many such social reform associations in Madras were dominated by Brahmin professionals, who also monopolized positions in public institutions, including the Civil Services. Thus, social reform and nationalism in Madras was characterised by its stress on Sanskritic cultural traditions and excluded other linguistic populations in the presidency, much to their discontent.

Kandukuri Viresalingam (1848-1919), a Telugu Brahmin, hailing from coastal Andhra, drew language reform into the ambit of social reform, using it as tool for educating people about the traditional discriminatory practices and propagating scientific and moral values through literature.³⁵ Through his journal, *Viveka Vardhini*, he advocated measures for female education and marriage reform. In 1879, Viresalingam established the Rajamundhry Widow Marriage Association, and successfully organized a widow re-marriage in 1881. As a leading figure of Andhra social reform and nationalism, he contributed towards the shaping of a regional consciousness through his aggressive writings against the orthodoxy. Karen and John Leonard argue that Telugu literary and cultural activity was inextricably tied up with the

³³ A. Mathew, *Christian Missions, Education and Nationalism: From Dominance to Compromise, 1870-1930* (Delhi: Anamika Publishers, 1988) and Elizabeth Susan Alexander, *The Attitudes of British Protestant Missionaries Towards Nationalism in India: with special reference to Madras Presidency, 1919-1927* (Delhi: Konark, 1994). For colonial Andhra, see, Chinna Rao Yagati, 'Education and Identity Formation Among Dalits in Colonial Andhra,' in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya ed., *Education and the Disprivileged: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century India* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2002).

³⁴ Details of the debate between Indian National Congress and National Social Conference have been analysed by Charles Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

³⁵ John and Karen Leonard has studied Viresalingam's thought and actions, assessing his contribution to the making of a regional consciousness in Andhra. See, "Viresalingam and the Ideology of Social Change in Andhra", in Tanika and Sumit Sarkar eds. *Women and Social Reform in Modern India* (Permanent Black, 2008), 230-258.

course of social reform in the region, and despite occasional setbacks, Viresalingam played a crucial role in imparting fresh ideas to the younger generation. His campaigns also provided the initial experiences of political activity for many young men and women.

In 1928, E.V.Ramasami (EVR), famously known as Periyar, launched the Self-Respect Movement declaring,

The much talked of social reform of the present day is one of the crafty weapons of the educated and the wealthy classes who are competing with one another in an attempt to gain popularity and influence over the people. Such methods of social reform are not intended to confer any benefit on those whose welfare they are apparently intended. These methods are adopted to serve the selfish interest of those so-called reformers themselves...The most important of the evils that stare us in our face is that which is responsible for the division of the people into superiors and inferiors in society on the basis of birth.³⁶

EVR had initially joined the Congress but became greatly dissatisfied with the former's inability to address the issues of non-Brahmin groups. He viewed Brahmanism synonymously with Hinduism and considered it as the biggest impediment for the advancement of the masses.

Our country has the monopoly for see-me-not-isms and touch-me-not-isms. A country where there is a class of people who are not entitled to walk in public streets, who are not allowed to worship God in their own temples, who are prevented from using the common wells and tanks ... Is it not shameful on the part of such a country to aspire for Swaraj, Dominion Status or complete Independence? Politicians may say that untouchability will go if we get Swaraj. To them I say not merely Swaraj but Dharma Raj, Rama Raj, Harichandra Raj and the Raj of the very Gods – these were responsible for originating and organising this blot on humanity... I appeal to the

³⁶V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai eds., *Revolt - A Radical Weekly in Colonial Madras* (Chennai: EVR Dravidar Kazhagam,2008), 115.

reformers both social and political to carry on the mission of removing the sin of untouchability.³⁷

The Self-Respect movement did not demand only education and jobs. Instead, it offered a radical critique of caste and religious orthodoxy and helped refashion the ‘non-Brahmin/Dravidian’ identity in opposition to the Brahmin/Sanskrit/Aryan identity. Most significantly, there was an active participation of women in the Self-Respect movement which initiated debates on gender inequalities.³⁸ EVR politicized the women’s question, including matters such as marriage and strove for a positive treatment of women. The movement articulated radical ideas on contraception and family planning.³⁹ He combined atheism, rationalism and humanism, encouraging people to oppose Brahmin monopoly over resources and knowledge. Figures like EVR and Ambedkar in the twentieth century were not constrained by the agenda set by nationalism.

In his study on coastal Andhra, John Leonard argues that ‘religious polemic sanctioning social change became part of regional ideology during early twentieth century’. This is true as well of nineteenth century Kerala, comprising the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, and British-administered Malabar. Unlike Bengal, the idea of a renaissance in Kerala is rooted in the social reform movements heralded by lower caste leaders, questioning traditional authority based on caste hierarchies. Most prominent amongst these had been the Ezhava reform movement, under the aegis of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) and Narayana Guru.

³⁷ Ibid.,119.

³⁸ For an overview of these debates, see S .Anandhi, “Women’s Question in the Dravidian Movement c. 1925-1948”, in Tanika and Sumit Sarkar esd. *Women and Social Reform in Modern India* (Permanent Black,2008),389-403.

³⁹ On contraception and the Self Respect Movement, see S. Anandhi, Reproductive Bodies and Regulated Sexuality: Birth Control Debates in early Twentieth century Tamilnadu' in Mary E. John and Janaki Nair (eds.), *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India* (New Delhi: Kali For Women, 1998); and Sarah Hodges, *Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce: Birth Control in South India, 1920-1940*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

Lower caste protest in Kerala

In 1888, Narayana Guru consecrated a temple for lower castes, at the banks of Aruvipuuram in Travancore, challenging the Brahminical hegemony over temple worship and entry. This marked the beginning of a long drawn out protest against caste orthodoxy in the region, with the gradual mobilisation of lower caste communities for civic, educational and later, political rights. The Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), an organization, comprising a motley group of Ezhava intellectuals, literary figures and activists, initiated community reform and led reform campaigns. These were largely centered on the notions of self-help and self-improvement as articulated by Narayana Guru, the spiritual mentor of the SNDP. He camouflaged his anti-caste critique in the garb of a religious philosophy that was easily comprehensible to the people. Based on *advaita* and using popular religious idioms, he debunked hegemonic notions held by the upper castes. In the initial phase, there were calls for launching a movement for civil rights such as right to education, temple entry, and access to public roads and jobs. The Ezhavas also sought to engage in occupational diversification and take advantage of the new economic opportunities thrown open by capitalist production.⁴⁰ Led by a middle class leadership, they traversed the path of political action by participating in the Indian National Congress' temple entry and anti-untouchability campaigns; and later, consolidated its position within Kerala society, while the 'slave' castes such as the Pulayas were mostly excluded from its fold.

Narayana Guru's social philosophy also influenced many political activists and reformers of the period. In Cochin, K. Ayyappan, who later came to be known as Sahodaran Ayyapan, began the Sahodara Sangham and organised inter-dining events. He received support from Guru, his ideological mentor and who approved of inter-dining in 1917. Narayana Guru's declarations of 'Strengthen through Organisation and Liberate through Education' capture the dynamism of the movement. The consecration of temples and temperance campaigns were not only a part of religious reform. Instead, it was an expression of dissent towards upper caste restrictions on temple worship and relegation of the lower castes to a ritually 'inferior' status by virtue of their manual work and system of worship. Having envisioned temples as centres of learning, he built schools and work centres,

⁴⁰ Thomas Issac and Michael Tharakan , '*Sree Narayana Movement in Travancore, 1888-1939, A Study of Social Basis and Ideological Reproduction*', Working Paper No. 214, (Trivandrum: Centre for Development Studies, 1986).

admitting members of all castes. 'Organisation' was a guiding principle for reform efforts in a bid to consolidate these communities to create new identities. This has led some scholars to conclude that the discourse of Sanskritisation dominated the lower caste protest movements such as that of the SNDP. While we can observe certain Sanskritising tendencies among lower caste reform endeavors, these efforts were also open challenges to caste orthodoxy, and feudal domination over land, property and education.

The emphasis on education was, thus, integral to the larger project of democratising knowledge and breaking down barriers to access formal and informal schooling. By focusing on a reformed self, with the body assuming centrality, Ezhavas and other lower castes were rewriting narratives of their past selves.⁴¹ By the turn of the twentieth century, the community rearticulated its history in a manner to portray themselves as constantly evolving modern entities. At the core of this project of forging new modern and collective identities lay the notion of work.⁴²

Sunil Elayidom cautions against a glorified reading of the renaissance in Kerala as an uninterrupted chain of events. He argues that the Kerala renaissance was distinctive because of the role played by lower caste reform movements that critiqued the caste system. However, the humanism, he argues, preached by such movements as the one headed by the SNDP echoed Brahmanical ideologies and failed to provide adequate space to movements of erstwhile outcaste communities such as the Pulayas.⁴³ This exclusion revealed a severe limitation of the process of social transformation that sought structural reordering and not a complete overhaul of the social system. Essentially, he emphasizes that mainstream movements such as the SNDP were sanskritising in nature because of the means they adopted.

The exclusionary tendency of the dominant SNDP-led Ezhava reform movement can be understood by examining the nature of the organizational leadership in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Steered by a middle class, bourgeois leadership, the SNDP began

⁴¹ Udaya Kumar, "Self, body and inner sense: Some reflections on Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan", *Studies in History*, Vol. 13 No. 2, (1997): 247-270.

⁴² Filippo and Caroline Osella, *Social Mobility In Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict*, (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

⁴³ Sunil P. Elayidom, *Cross - Currents within: A Cultural Critique of Kerala Renaissance*, Paper presented in the seminar on 'Kerala : Towards New Horizons' organised by JanSanskriti, Delhi in connection with the Birth Centenary Celebrations of E.M.S.Namboodiripad on 21 Feb. 2009.

to function more like a caste association for political ends. By posting itself against the Nairs and the Syrian Christians, with whom they were competing for education and jobs, and reinforcing caste-based identity, the leadership failed to live up to the vision of a casteless society envisaged by Narayana Guru, thereby inhibiting the scope of social reform activity.

Narayana Guru's humanist outlook provided a wide canvas on which these reform efforts could be based. Amidst this upheaval, there arose Ayyankali from the Pulaya community, who rejected Hinduism, and considered education as the single important goal for the liberation of bonded, slave castes. In 1907, he established the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (Association for the Welfare of the Poor) and used political means for making demands on behalf of his community. As a member of the Legislative Council, he demanded the right of Pulaya children to attend government schools and receive education alongside upper caste students. He did not indulge in temple consecration, for he argued that the dire conditions of existence of the Pulayas was a direct result of the Brahmin-landlord controlled caste system and an upheaval was required to alter them. He also appealed to the British government to put an end to the proselytizing work of the missionaries. Sanal Mohan's study of the Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha highlights the appropriation of history and practices of history writing by untouchable communities in their quest for constituting modern identities. He concludes, for the Pulayas, Parayas and Kuravas of Travancore, 'It was colonial modernity that provided the matrix for the transformation that led to the creation of these new selves.'⁴⁴ This can be said to be true of all the processes of community identity formation, across castes, in the twentieth century Kerala.

In British administered Malabar, questions of social reform could not remain divorced from the nationalist movement. The Khilafat agitation and the Congress-led Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements witnessed mass political activity in the region. Moreover, the Congress' anti-untouchability campaigns, increasingly turned out to become an upper caste, particularly Nair, affair. Enthused by Narayana Guru's temple consecrations and abolition of the putatively lower forms of worship, the emergent educated Tiyya elite requested him to establish temples in towns. Guru visited Malabar and established three prominent temples.⁴⁵ However, contrary to guru's exhortations, the elite excluded other lower

⁴⁴ P. Sanal Mohan, 'Religion, Social Space and Identity: the Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha and the Making of Cultural Boundaries in Twentieth Century Kerala,' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 28: 1, 61-62.

⁴⁵ Jagannatha temple, at Thalassery; Sundareswara at Kannur and Srikanteswara at Kozhikode.

castes from entering the temples and sought to build a culture of exclusive worship around these temples, which also became a status marker. After 1921, generational differences and internal ruptures were also threatening the Tiyya community at large. These tensions fed into the process of constituting a 'Hindu' identity in the region at the time, compounded by the Mappila rebellion of 1921. Dilip Menon has illustrated the parallel processes of formations of a lower class and temple culture amongst the Tiyyas and argues that they chose to stand outside the fold of Hinduism.⁴⁶ However, one cannot assume that the emergence of an exclusive Tiyya temple culture replacing shrines in the rural areas meant a rejection of Hinduism. On the contrary, it seemed to be an attempt to create a separate 'Hindu' community within a totalizing Hinduism, opposing caste orthodoxy and upholding egalitarianism. Owing to the influence of the prominent ideology of social reform, as espoused by various Tiyya/Ezhava reformers and their virulent opposition to Brahmanism, there was an intensification of self-awareness to create a community of equals. However, this occurred in opposition to an emerging "Muslim" identity, paving the way for religious tension and conflicts.⁴⁷

In Malabar, there were individuals and organisations which combined their critique of untouchability and caste along with support for the anti-imperialist movement. One such figure was Vagbhadananda and his organization, the AtmaVidya Sangham (Organisation for Self-Knowledge), which is the subject of this study. Hailing from the Tiyya community, Vagbhadananda (also known as V.K. Gurukkal) established the AtmaVidya Sangham (AVS) in 1917, which spearheaded many campaigns against untouchability, alcoholism and denial of right to temple entry. The Sangham was formed with the intention of heralding a spiritual transformation which denied any role to caste-dominated structures and instead, focused on the individual self and the right to make choices. Vagbhadananda drew upon the philosophy of non-duality, *advaita*, the significance of which, he believed, was equality, as it did not make any distinction between beings or between beings and God. The main challenge was to spread knowledge and organize lower caste communities in the struggle for equality.

⁴⁶ Dilip M. Menon, *Becoming 'Hindu' and 'Muslim': Identity and Conflict in Malabar, 1900 - 1936* Working Paper No, 255, (Thiruvananthapuram: Centre for Development Studies, 1994)

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Vagbhadananda was a brilliant orator and scholar who travelled widely across Malabar and Travancore, preaching the message of 'atmavidya' (self-knowledge) and vociferously opposing idol worship and temple building, considering them as sectarian in nature. Having made close acquaintances with people, cutting across religion and caste, he advocated the idea of a harmonious association of individuals upholding peace and non-violence. Most significantly, he linked his agenda for abolition of untouchability with a sharp critique of feudalism and priesthood. During the nationalist phase, the Atma Vidya Sangham also extended support to the Congress, in particular to Gandhi, and the satyagraha campaigns at Vaikom and Guruvayoor. Vagbhadananda shared Gandhi's belief in the political usage of satyagraha and the varnaasram dharm, perceiving it an ideal form of social organization that judged individuals by merit, and not birth. Through his magazines, *Abhinava Keralam* and *Atmavidya Kaahalam*, he wrote editorials, urging people to join the nationalist movement. A defender of peasant and workers' rights, he also participated in the activities of the Karshaka Sanghams (Peasant organisations) and workers' strikes in the 1930s. He won many admirers from all walks of life, some of whom rose to become important figures in the history of contemporary Kerala.

Vagbhadananda has been hailed as one of the makers of modern Kerala but few studies have attempted to capture the regional specificities of the movement led by him in parts of Malabar and Travancore. Biographies of him have tended to glorify his status as a reformer, without examining other parallel developments of the period. This thesis seeks to understand the dynamics of the reform movement headed by him and lower caste resistance in the twentieth century Kerala. It is a modest attempt to explore facets of Vagbhadananda's life and work in Kerala as a means to understand the impact of caste reform on the building of community and individual consciousness. The study mainly seeks to enlarge research on the social history of Kerala by looking at a lesser known social reform organisation.

The first chapter will examine Malabar's social, economic and political conditions and trace the various developments that have occurred from the late nineteenth century onwards. It is an attempt to understand the socio-economic and intellectual milieu in which Vagbhadananda functioned and the key influences on his thinking and work. The second chapter forms the central part of the study that seeks to analyse Vagbhadananda and the AtmaVidya Sangham. It is also an attempt to try and understand the reasons for the AtmaVidya Sangham's decline from the 1940s onwards. In the final chapter, a short

comparison between Narayana Guru and Vagbhadananda shall be made, to ascertain their differing approaches to social reform, and the extent of their impact on Kerala society.

Malabar in the Nineteenth and the Early Twentieth Centuries: An Overview

As noted in the introduction, the last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a huge mobilisation of public opinion amongst the lower castes in Kerala. The propagation of print by the missionaries led to the spread of religious and secular literature; and various journals, newspapers and books began articulating the demands of these communities using religious idioms as a form of redefining the self. These debates on colonial modernity were an attempt to project an alternate vision for these oppressed groups and the larger society as such. In an effort to understand the changing dynamics of the region and the emergence of various streams of intellectual and political thought which gave rise to new forms of community consciousness and identities, this chapter attempts to map the major socio-economic, political and intellectual developments in Kerala, primarily Malabar during the late nineteenth and the first few decades of the twentieth century.

Caste Structure and Practise of Untouchability in Malabar

Located in the south western region of peninsular India, the state of Kerala was divided into the princely states of Travancore and Cochin and British administered Malabar, until its formal integration in 1956. The state has been known for extreme caste rigidities that marked its social system over centuries. The system relied on untouchability and worse forms of discrimination, namely unseeability and inapproachability. It was based on the ritual notions of ‘pollution’ and ‘purity’, prescribed by Namboodiri Brahmins, and non-Brahmin castes such as the Nairs. The ranking of castes was pervasive right down to the lowest castes that they also tended to observe regulations of distance and touch pollution amidst them. The so-called lower castes and untouchables were considered ritually ‘low’ and capable of ‘polluting’ the upper castes if they approached or touched the latter. The customary regulations lay down that the Ezhava or Tiyya who were amongst the lowest in the caste hierarchy had to maintain a distance of at least sixteen feet from the Nair, and thirty-two feet from the Namboodiri. The slave castes comprising Parayans, Cherumans and Pulayas had to

be at least fifty-four feet away. Between an Ezhava and a Pulaya, a minimum of thirty feet had to be observed.¹ It was perhaps not possible to observe these distances meticulously but it nevertheless indicates the upper castes' control and domination over the lower castes. While travelling, it was common for the Namboodiri or the Nair accompanying him to shout, 'Ho! Ho!' to warn the lower castes to move away from sight.² Dress and jewellery also became caste markers. Lower caste women were not allowed to wear the breast cloth and both men and women could not cover their knees.³ While addressing the upper castes, the untouchable groups had to be extremely subservient in manner and use words such as *adiyan*, *kuppamaadam*, *vilimozhi*, *thirumeni* amongst others, reinforcing the former's domination over the latter.⁴ Such contempt was also displayed for the food cooked by lower castes.

In Malabar, the caste hierarchy, as mentioned above, was widely prevalent although caste was not always a determining factor. The British had, at least by law, declared all public schools open for the lower castes. Yet the untouchable groups were socially ostracised and barred from gaining formal education.

The Tiyyas

In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese traveller Duarte Barbosa wrote of the Tiyyas thus in his description of the Malabar coast:

Of low people zivil tiver (Tiyyar in Malayalam, also known as Tiyyas in English), there are eleven sects, which no respectable people touch under the pain of death: and between each other there is a great difference and separation, and one family does not mix with another. The best of these are labourers, whom they call tiver. Their principal employment is to till the palm trees, and gather their fruits, and... they hew stone, and gain their livelihood by all kinds of labour. Most of them are serfs of the

¹ Dharmaraj Adat, *Navothanatinte Suvarnashobhakal* (The Golden Personalities of the Renaissance), (Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhat Book House, 2006), 11.

² T. Bhaskaran, *Maharshi Sree Narayana Guru* (Thiruvananthapuram: The State Institute of Languages, 1985), 2-3.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, *adiyan* (slave), *vilimozhi* (call/order), *kuppamaadam* (garbage), *thirumeni*(Sacred one)

nays, to the king of the country gives them, in order that their masters be supported by their labour...⁵

Writing two centuries later, William Logan described the Tiyyas as,

...the numerically strongest section of the Hindu population, numbering in all 559,717... the planters of the ancient Hindu constitution, and this character they still to a very large extent retain, as they hold to the present day a practical monopoly of tree climbing and toddy drawing from palm trees. One of their caste names Tiyan denotes that they came originally from an island, while the other caste name Ilavan denotes that that island was Ceylon.⁶

The 1911 Census of India recorded the Tiyya population in Malabar at 760,970; and by 1921, they accounted for twenty one per cent of the total population of 3.9 million in Malabar.⁷ A sizeable number of them migrated from the interior provinces and settled around the port towns of Tellicherry and Kozhikode, engaging in the task of supplying provisions to European traders and military troops until the beginning decades of the twentieth century. Some Tiyya women also forged matrimonial alliances with these European men but their offsprings were often looked down upon. However, with the favourable treatment meted out to them with respect to education and employment, children of mixed breed, though very small in number, began to be slowly accepted into the Tiyya community during the later decades.⁸

⁵ Duarte Barbosa, *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar: In the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1866), 137-38

⁶ Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 602. There are many theories regarding the origin of the tiyya/ezhava community. Many scholars have also pointed to the prevalence of astrologers and ayurvedic physicians in the community as proof of the Buddhist heritage. For a more detailed discussion, see Cyriac K. Pulapilly, "The Izhavas of Kerala and their Historic Struggle for Acceptance in the Hindu Society," in Bardwell L. Smith ed., *Religion and Social Conflict in South Asia*, (Brill, 1976), 25-32 .

⁷ Toshie Awaya, "Some Aspects of the Tiyyas' Caste Movement," in *Caste system, Untouchability and the Depressed*, ed. Hiroyuki Kotani (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1997), 144.

⁸ Pullapilly, "The Izhavas of Kerala", 33-34.

The complex of rituals within the Hindu belief in the region was such that there were many other lower castes whose lives were entwined primarily with that of the Tiyyas. These castes offered their services predominantly to the Tiyya community who exerted control and pressure on them. The Kavutheeyans, considered to be lower in status, were designated as barbers for the Tiyyas. Although the latter considered them defiling, they could engage in hypergamous alliances, i.e. a Tiyya man could enter into a sexual alliance with a female from the Kavutheeyan community. But they followed the *sambhandam* system and not legal marriage.⁹ Following the matrilineal system of social organisation within these communities in north Malabar, children born out of such unions belonged to their mother's caste usually. Apart from cutting hair, Kavutheeyans were also allowed to perform certain other tasks. They could inter-dine with Tiyyas and light the lamp at the *kavu*, if there was no one else to do so.¹⁰ They also played an important role in the domestic rituals, such as the purification rituals, observed by the Tiyya community. These purification rituals were performed after an individual's death depending on the economic status of the family. One of them was *ettu* performed on the last day of a series of death rites. The popular belief was that this ritual was necessary to remove what was known as *pula* (impurities present after an individual's death).¹¹

There also existed other rituals associated with women. The dominant Hindu view has been that women are carriers of impurity, primarily because of bodily changes they experience in the course of life. The caste that had been assigned the task of washing clothes was called Vannan. The female members of this caste were called Vannathi. A purificatory ritual known as *Vannathimaatu* was observed among the Tiyyas when a girl attained puberty and pregnancy. It was believed that unless a new piece of cloth was not handed over by the Vannathi to the Tiyya woman during these occasions, the latter would remain impure.¹² Similar beliefs were also held by Namboodiris and Nairs, who invited the Vannathi to make a cloth offering during such ceremonies. This was an interesting feature of the system that

⁹.T.Ravi Varma, *Marumakkathayam: Gotra Marumakkathayavum Vadakkan Sambradayavum* (Thiruvananthapuram: The State Institute of Languages, 2004), 237-238

¹⁰ Ibid. Kavu refers to groves or shrines, considered to be sacred shrine. For details, see, J. R. Freeman, "Gods, Groves and the Culture of Nature in Kerala." *Modern Asian Studies*, No.33 (1999):257-302.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

otherwise sought to follow a strict code of conduct regarding inter-caste interaction. It only reflected how castes, involved in different occupations, were in one way or the other dependent on the system of obligations imposed by the caste system.

The Colonial Rule and Land Relations in Malabar

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the British descended upon the Malabar Coast to extract their share from the spice trade, particularly that of pepper. The East India Company ousted the Portuguese and Dutch traders and soon, sought to establish political control. In 1792, after defeating Tipu Sultan, they brought the province of Malabar under the direct administration of the Bombay Presidency and later, in 1800, transferred it to the Madras Presidency.

One of the first attempts of the colonial administration was to model Malabar on the lines of European standards of law and order and apply European notions of sovereignty. However, these clashed with notions of sovereignty prevalent in Malabar at the time administered through rajas or local rulers.¹³ Marked by ignorance of traditional structures and driven by economic and political ambitions to control the province of Malabar, the British introduced substantial changes inwith regard to policies on civil and legal administration, land, taxation, and trade. In order to assess the agricultural produce of the region for purposes of revenue collection, they created a group of superior right holders to forge alliances with. The old *desams* were brought together into *amsams*, which were larger administrative units with *adkhiaris* as their heads.¹⁴ These *adhikaris*, appointed by the British government, were responsible for tax collection. In 1793, a Commission instituted to record the daily affairs of the region, proclaimed that the *jenmis* (dominant landholders, mostly upper castes) were the absolute owners of the land.¹⁵ This recognition of the authority of the *jenmis* resulted in the loss of land and security of tenure for tenants, mostly Tiyayas and Muslims. The *jenmis*, backed by colonial legal authority, increased rents and threatened their tenants with evictions

¹³ Margret Frenz, "A Race of Monsters". South India and the British Civilizing Mission in the Later 18th Century', in Fischer-Tiné, Harald and Michael Mann (eds), *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission. Cultural Ideology in British India* (London: Anthem, 2004), 49-67.

¹⁴ Ibid., 55.

¹⁵ Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India: Agricultural Labour in the Madras Presidency during the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 87.

and over-leases. Namboodiris constituted only two percent of the population, but were nearly forty-six percent of the principal *jenmis*. In a similar vein, the Nairs were fourteen percent of the population, but forty-one percent of the principal landlords.¹⁶ The reconfiguration of socio-economic relations also helped the landlords to refrain from fulfilling their customary obligations towards tenants during times of economic distress and to undermine the pre-existing 'traditional' communal rights to land held by the latter.¹⁷ That the new land system ushered in by colonialism was markedly different from pre-colonial times was recognised by some British administrators. In 1887, William Logan¹⁸ stated,

In Malabar the hereditary property (*janmam*) was freely bought and sold long before the Mysorean invasion took place. And it was the buying and selling, and in particular the wording of the deeds in which such transactions were recorded, that misled the early British administrators and caused them to form erroneous views on the general subject of the Malayali land tenures.¹⁹

He concluded that the British had a superficial view 'which led to *janmam* being regarded as equivalent in all respects to the dominium of the Romans.'²⁰

The introduction of the idea of private property deteriorated the condition of the peasantry, who were already highly differentiated within a complex agrarian system based on sub-leased tenures. Apart from *jenmis*, three basic categories of peasants could be identified in Malabar.²¹ Firstly, the *kanakkarans* (the first set of intermediaries and mostly comprising of Nairs), who held the status of a tenant and leased in land from the *jenmi* by giving him a fixed sum of money on which he was entitled to receive interest from the latter. The

¹⁶ . P. Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles, Land Reforms and Social Change: Malabar, 1836-1982* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989), 39.

¹⁷ Some of these pre-existing rights of tenants included right to wastelands, forests surrounding cultivable lands and forest produce such as wood, fruits etc.

¹⁸ William Logan was a British Collector, who headed the Special Commission on Malabar in 1881-82 to trace the history of land tenures in the region.

¹⁹ William Logan, *Malabar Manual*, (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, Fourth Reprint, 2004), 602.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Prakash Karat, "Agrarian Relations in Malabar: 1925 to 1948. Part One," *Social Scientist*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (1973),: 24-37.

kanakkarans usually sub-leased the land to tenants and supervised rent collection. Generally, the *kanam* tenure was renewed every twelve years and there existed various kinds of *kanam* tenures such as *kuzhikannam* and *kuttikanam*.²² The *kanam* tenure was not similar in north and south Malabar. In the south, it was more or less a mortgage and in the north, a lease.²³ Since many *kannakkarans* in the north were directly involved in cultivation, the new tenurial relations meant a further appropriation of their rights and surplus produce by the landlords. Below them were the *verumpattakarans* who were sub-tenants of the *kanakkarans* and most often, mere tenants-at-will. They constituted the bulk of the peasantry consisting of Muslims and Tiyyas. Finally, the lowest rung in the agrarian system of Malabar consisted of numerous landless agricultural labourers from the Paraya and Pulaya castes.

The colonial administration by investing *jenmis* with absolute ownership rights created obstacles in improving agricultural productivity.²⁴ Malabar became a net food importer despite a large proportion of cultivable waste land remaining uncultivated.²⁵ Commercialisation of agriculture began making inroads into the economy by the late nineteenth century but did not bring about substantial changes in the mode of production. The feudal elite who held property rights even over wastelands showed the least interest in raising capital and bringing them under the plough but continued to subsist on the money rent received from garden lands. In the 1830s, when prices of products such as pepper, coconut, ginger and cardamom rose, they imposed higher rents on tenants.²⁶ Often, small tenants took to cash crop cultivation on garden lands not only owing to fluctuating market conditions but also heavy rents and eviction rates on wet lands.²⁷ Many of them took to agro-processing such as coir manufacturing, copra-making and oil pressing to increase their incomes and yet,

²² P. Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles, Land Reforms and Social Change*, 5-7. Kuzhikanam referred to a tenure, in which the tenant paid rent for twelve years, at the end of which he obtained an ordinary lease from the landlord, or surrendered after receiving the value of improvements, if he had made any. Kuttikanam applied to forest lands.

²³ V.V. Kunhi Krishnan, *Tenancy Legislation in Malabar, 1880-1970: An Historical Analysis*, (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1993),13.

²⁴ B.A Prakash, Agricultural Backwardness of Malabar During the Colonial Period,: An Analysis of Economic Causes, *Social Scientist*, No.6/7(1988):59-60.

²⁵ K.V.. Joseph, "Migration and the Changing Pattern of Land Use in Malabar ," *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy* , No. 1, (2002): 63-81.

²⁶ V .V. Kunhikrishnan, *Tenancy Legislation in Malabar*, 16.

²⁷ M. Kabir, 'Peasants and Politics in Malabar,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, No. 18, (1997): 942-950

depended heavily on their landlords because of lack of alternate sources of rural credit and thus, fell into heavier debts.²⁸ Their world was still dominated by the exploitative landlords who resorted to coercive methods of surplus extraction. The producers, subjected to the vagaries of international prices and demand, were part of a chain of commodity production dominated by European firms in port towns and it benefited some of them when the prices were favourable. But overall, the integration of cash crop cultivators into the world capitalist economy did little to alter their position in the traditional hierarchy which remained feudal.

In 1844, when the British government declared that English educated persons would be given preference for government jobs, the Tiyyas seized the opportunity unlike the Namboodiris who were slow to respond. With the Western missionaries opening schools for untouchables, they were also able to better avail of opportunities to gain primary and secondary education. But when it came to higher education, Tiyyas were denied entry into the two colleges in Malabar, the Zamorin's College and Brennen College, until 1918.²⁹ However, a small number pursued university education and comprised slightly more than one tenth of the migrants from the province of Malabar to Madras during 1905-20.³⁰ Yet, these developments did not translate into a general advancement for the community as a whole. Educational progress only aided the emergence of a small elite within the Tiyya community in the initial decades. Out of the total Tiyya population of 760,970 in 1911, only nine percent was literate, which included 3,443 persons who had acquired English education. This was less than the proportion of literacy amongst the Nair population with whom they competed for jobs in the government.³¹ In 1911, only 390 Tiyya women had acquired English education as compared to 3443 men and it was not until the 1940s that they began to acquire education in larger numbers.³²

Most public jobs were occupied by Namboodiris and Nairs, but the entry of Tiyyas into missionary schools saw an expansion of English education amongst them, and later,

²⁸ Dilip M. Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar 1900-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 9-40.

²⁹ Dilip Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in Malabar*, 64.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ 26.1 percent of the Nairs were literate and 6,113 English educated. Toshie Awaya, "Some Aspects of the Tiyyas", 144.

³² Ibid.

many rose to become professionals, teachers, lawyers, journalists, administrative officials and politicians.³³ The educated Tiyyas consolidated their newly founded social position by forming caste based associations and assuming the role of spokespersons for the entire Tiyya population, the majority of which continued to be involved in manual labour and remained outside the ambit of formal education.

The Basel Evangelical Mission

One of the factors often cited for the social transformation that occurred in Kerala has been the contributions of Western missionaries, especially in the field of education. In Malabar, the activities of the German Basel Evangelical Missionary Society (henceforth, The Basel Mission) had a significant impact. Based in Basel, Switzerland, the mission reached the Madras Presidency in 1834. Their first mission station was established at Mangalore. Four years later, in 1838, they extended their work southwards by setting up a base at Thalassery. By 1842, two stations became active – one at Kannur and the other at Kozhikode. They established a network of primary and secondary schools.³⁴ Dr. Herman Gunderdt of the Basel mission established a primary school as early as 1839 at Nettoor in Tellicherry and later, a high school at Kallayi in Kozhikode in 1848.

After Benjamin Bailey of the Church Missionary Society introduced the printing press with metal types and the first Malayalam dictionary was published in 1821, Gundert also founded a press at Thalassery in 1838. These innovative developments resulted in a spurt in publication of grammar lexicons, religious and secular literature; and by the end of the nineteenth century, various newspapers began to be published, articulating a range of demands, both by the missionaries and Malayalis. The first newspaper, *Rajyasamacharam*, by the Basel Mission at Thalassery (Kannur) started publication in June 1847 and another newspaper, *Keralopakari*, started by a German missionary in 1874. *Al-Ameen* newspaper was

³³ The first Malayali Deputy Collector in the 1850s was a Tiyya. Various members in the local boards/municipalities included several educated Tiyyas. For instance, Oyitti Krishnan was elected as Chairman of Kozhikode Municipality four times, Kottiyath Krishnan was the Mayor of Tellichery. Murkoth Kumaran, distinguished litterateur and journalist was a long standing member of the Teliicherry Municipality and Malabar Educational Board.

³⁴ Jaiprakash Raghaviah, *Basel Mission Industries in Malabar and South Canara, 1834-1914: A Study of its Social and Economic Impact* (New Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1990).

started by Muhammad Abdu Rahiman in 1924 from Kozhikode with the objective of bringing Muslims into the stream of the national movement. In the same year, another newspaper *Kerala Kesari* was published from Vadakara in Kozhikode and its publisher was Moyarathu Sankaran.³⁵ Other popular journals from the region included *Mitavadi* and the *Malabar Spectator* (later known as *West Coast Spectator*).³⁶

Unlike the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) which worked towards mass conversions of the untouchable communities in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, the Basel Mission turned their attention towards improving the 'quality' of their small number of converts amongst the Billavas of South Canara and Tiyyas of Malabar. They focused on providing them alternate employment and conditions in which their lives could be disciplined according to Christian beliefs.³⁷ The missionaries insisted that the converts break sharply from their past, renounce caste divisions and adopt a Christian code of conduct in all spheres of their life.³⁸ But conversion to Christianity led to the loss of livelihood for lower castes because they were often ousted from their fields by upper caste landlords. They were also socially boycotted, denied work or threatened so as to make them return to their native religion. Besides, toddy-tapping, one of the traditional occupations of these communities was looked down upon by the Mission which objected to any association with alcohol.³⁹ H. Hofmann, the Agent for Basel Mission Industries, wrote in 1913,

Caste prejudices in those days were strong, and people desiring to embrace Christianity had to make heavy sacrifices. They were regarded as outcasts by their communities, and so they lost all employment and pecuniary help from their relations and friends, and were hence only dependent for their livelihood on the Missionaries.

³⁵ Moyarathu Sankaran was an eminent nationalist and member of the Communist party who was later killed in police custody. See his autobiography, *Ente Jivithakatha*, Kozhikode, 1965.

³⁶ K.K. N. Kurup, *Modern Kerala: Studies in Social and Agrarian Relations*, (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988), 86.

³⁷ Raghaviah, *Basel Mission Industries in Malabar and South Canara*, 33.

³⁸ S.D.L. Alagodi, *The Basel Mission in Mangalore: Historical and Social Context*, in Reinhard Wendt ed. *An Indian to the Indians: On the Initial Failure and Posthumous Success of the Missionary Ferdinand Kittel (1832-1903)*, (Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden, 2006), 144.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

These pathetic and difficult circumstances activated the pioneer missionaries to devise ways and means to find employment for their first converts who might thus find some means of livelihood, and so the Basel Mission Industries came into existence.⁴⁰

Thus, alongside the establishment of schools, the missionaries also undertook agriculture in the hilly tracts of north Malabar, began printing and publishing units, small cottage industries, such as weaving, dyeing, tile making and book binding, intended primarily for their lower caste converts. Initially, the agricultural operations were unsuccessful although they bought large tracts of plantation land to settle families of converts.⁴¹ Later, the Mission Trading Company was formed in 1852 (subsequently incorporated into the Commonwealth Trust Limited) and the managers thought it best to engage in industrial activity in those areas that were not already monopolised by the European colonial powers or local manufacturers. Many of these small industrial establishments were the first ones to organise non-agricultural labour and begin production for the international export economy.

The Mission was known primarily for its tile and weaving units. The first tile factory in Malabar was set up by the Mission at Kozhikode in 1873 while weaving units began way back in Cannanore in 1852. Later, new units were set up at Tellichery, Chombala, Codacal amongst others in South Canara. Caste regulations had restricted untouchable communities from tiling their roofs but with increasing number of tile factories, roofing houses with tiles also gained popularity.⁴² Weaving factories catered to the demand for cotton products from Sri Lanka, Burma, and Europeans living in India.⁴³ The introduction of the fly shuttle technology and khaki dye by the missionaries resulted in many local weavers setting up small units in the region and aggravating competition.⁴⁴ A rise in demand for a technically oriented labour force was felt in the second half of the nineteenth century and many of those who had worked for the Basel Mission spread to other arenas. Some also established their own weaving units. The establishment of missionary schools and factory units, coupled with the

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Jaiprakash Raghaviah, *Basel Mission Industries in Malabar and South Canara*, 56.

⁴² M.T. Narayanan, *Agrarian Relations in Late Medieval Malabar*, (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 2003), 179. As per the Census Report of 1871, ninety-eight percent of houses in Malabar were thatched ones.*

⁴³ Raghaviah, *Basel Mission Industries in Malabar and South Canara*, 56-60

⁴⁴ Ibid.

provision of cash wages, had in fact, allowed many Tiyya workers to enjoy an economic mobility that had not been open to them before.

The Basel missionaries is said to have discouraged caste divisions amongst the workers because they believed it would hamper their vision of forming a casteless Christian community. Their schools and factory units' pedagogy aimed at converting the 'undisciplined, ill mannered' heathen converts into 'good, hardworking and moral Christians'.⁴⁵ Over the eight decades they worked in the region, they opposed caste rules and encouraged inter-caste marriages among their workers. The process of erasing caste distinctions was crucial in order to make the converts cut all links with their previous community and customs. The decentralized nature of functioning and the organisation of factory labour in their units also aimed at creating a social group comprising of converts from various castes, working side by side. This experiment of creating a casteless industrial workforce accentuated the process of social mobility by offering a chance for the Tiyya and Billava castes, including non-converts, to seek an existence outside their caste-based occupations. As on 1913, out of a total number of 3,633 employed in the Basel Mission industries, only 954 were non-Christians.⁴⁶ However, the Mission's operations came to an end after the First World War when the British Indian Government took over their possessions under the Enemy Trading Act of 1916, classifying them as 'aliens'.⁴⁷

Emergence of Protest Movements

The experiences of upward mobility enjoyed by some were not enough because the Tiyyas' social position had not substantially changed even until the 1930s. Widespread discontent amongst the newly educated culminated in various protest actions. These protest actions, combined with social reform whipped up a stir which influenced community reforms amongst upper castes as well.⁴⁸ Manali Desai discerns two phases of social reform in Kerala

⁴⁵ Raghaviah, 58

⁴⁶ .D.L. Alagodi, The Basel Mission in Mangalore: Historical and Social Context, in *An Indian to the Indians: On the Initial Failure and Posthumous Success of the Missionary Ferdinand Kittel(1832-1903)*, ed. Reinhard Wendt (Harrassowitz Verlag:Wiesbaden, 2006), 156.

⁴⁷ Raghaviah , 59-60.

⁴⁸ The Namboodiris began the Yogashema Sabha in 1908 and the Nairs, the Nair Service Society in 1914, to initiate marriage reforms and inheritance laws within their own communities.

in the first half of the twentieth century. In the pre-1920s period, reformers resorted to moderate means of agitation and the major demands were those of education and occupation. The underlying principles behind their agendas echoed of self-help and self-improvement. From the 1930s onwards, there ensued a second phase in which a radical critique of caste began to be articulated, combined with a movement for tenancy reforms and participation in the nationalist movement that was sweeping the country. A combination of protest actions, including petitions, *jathas*, pickets, boycott campaigns and rallies were employed by lower caste movements as well.⁴⁹

The beginnings of organised dissent initially arose in Travancore. In 1896, an Ezhava Memorial, on the lines of the Malayali Memorial, signed by 13,176 Ezhavas was submitted to the Maharaja of Travancore, stating their grievances and demanding immediate redress.⁵⁰ They wanted the administration to treat them at par with those Ezhavas who had converted to Christianity and were conferred with rights to education, temple worship and roads. The Ezhava memorial, it has been argued, sought ‘new frames of reference’ based on modern ideas of rationality, representation, accountability and democracy.⁵¹ However, there was no concrete response from the Maharaja and the emergent middle class Ezhava leadership continued to consolidate its base and intensify their agitation against the government. Soon, demands were also made for the provision of employment opportunities in the various administrative departments and significant protest movements across Kerala began to take shape, growing in strength over time. Though these initiatives were limited to community reform and caste associations, in the long run, they helped enrich the intellectual milieu of the period and lay the foundations for a socio-political transformation.

Social restrictions imposed on untouchables included the prohibition of temple worship, using the roads around the temples that were owned and managed by Brahmins, and denial of education, land ownership, and political representation; and stringent rules of

⁴⁹ The Punjabi word, ‘jatha’, entered Malayalam vocabulary when a team of supporters came from the North to join the Vaikom satyagraha in the 1920s.

⁵⁰ The Malayali Memorial was a mass petition submitted to the Maharajah of Travancore in 1891 expressing the grievance of educated, unemployed Malayalis over the dominance of Brahmins, particularly Tamil Brahmins in administrative jobs in the state and demanding reservations for Malayalis. -The key figure behind the Ezhava memorial was Dr. Palpu, the first Ezhava doctor of Kerala, who was denied entry into the Travancore Service and had to join the Mysore Service instead.

⁵¹ Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala – Modernity and Identity in Conflict*, (London, 2000), 192.

distance pollution. The primary agenda of social reformers included issues of equal opportunity in the fields of education, employment, and political representation, and access to public resources. By the 1890s, organisations such as the Brahma Samaj, the Theosophical Society, the Ramakrishna Mission and the Arya Samaj, which had their bases in other parts of the country slowly set foot in Kerala. But they failed to gain prominence unlike the reform organisations that emerged from within the state, which was true in the Tamil-speaking region as well.

In Malabar, Ayyathan Gopalan was responsible for ushering in the Brahma Samaj's activities.⁵² In 1898, he established the first branch of the Brahma Samaj in Kozhikode. He organised inter-caste dining and marriages and advocated equal rights for women in all spheres of life. By the 1920s, various other branches sprung up, covering as far as southern Travancore. While working in Alathur, Gopalan was on the lookout for someone who could compose monotheistic prayer hymns for the Samaj. Soon, he got acquainted with a school teacher, Karat Govinda Menon, who agreed to do the job. Within a few days, Menon composed the hymns dedicated to Brahma and won over Gopalan, who bestowed upon him the title, 'Brahmananda'.⁵³ He later became well known as Brahmananda Sivayogi, the founder of Ananda Samajam and exponent of the philosophy of *raja yogam*.⁵⁴ Sivayogi was an influential philosopher in North Kerala, known for his repudiation of caste, rituals, priesthood and idol worship. His expositions attracted many followers to the Siddha Ashram, located in Alathur. He exhorted *ananda* or bliss as the ultimate goal of every human being, and argued that one could attain it only by mastering the art of controlling the mind. Emphasizing on the capacity for rational thinking, he urged people to control the impulses and instincts emanating from their inner self. This, he believed, would prevent violent acts and imbue values of goodness, peace, and harmony in society. He drew from the Tamil Siddha tradition and argued for the identification of God within one's self. The body became the abode of God which required no external mediation such as priests, rituals or temples.

⁵² K.K.N. Kurup, *Modern Kerala: Studies in Social and Agrarian Relations*, (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988), 94. Ayyathan Gopalan, belonged to the Namboodiri community and was a doctor by profession.

⁵³ Pavanan, *Brahmananda Sivayogi*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Cultural Publications, 1997), 22.

⁵⁴ Rajayogam is a philosophical tenet that discusses a particular path of attaining liberation for humans, through intense meditation. The mind becomes the most important factor in keeping one's senses in control and calm.

Sivayogi also argued strongly for the need to educate women, emphasizing equality between men and women.⁵⁵

He opposed organised religion and caste, arguing that they were irrational man-made creations. Sivayogi condemned violence committed in the name of religion and appealed for the restoration of humanism in devotion. Deeds such as yagam, penance, donation, pilgrimage and various other rituals, he stated, were only different forms of violence inflicted on the human body by people due to their ignorance about the ultimate truth that the mind was the true abode of god.⁵⁶ He called for the abolition of such practices which resulted in self-denigration and bodily pain and offered nothing but superficial happiness:

If one does not fulfil yaga (sacrifice), will Indra or other devas murder you for not doing it? Will Vishnu or Siva cut our heads off if we do not starve ourselves by observing fasts on certain auspicious days?. Will Viswanathan or Rameswaran kill us in a fit of rage if we do not roam pilgrimage places such as Rameswaram and Kashi? If we do not erect temples, install stone idols and worship them, will Siva kill us...? No... Even the atheists, who do not believe in God, are not known to be troubled by God or the devas...⁵⁷

Sivayogi critiqued all those rituals observed by different castes at various stages of life and festivals. He pointed out that the creation of these rituals by a class of priests was intended at dominating and exploiting the masses by dividing them and denying them education. According to him, this class had instituted these practices to dominate over impoverished people and monopolise land and property by making people believe that their present existence was the result of past actions i.e., their *karma*. Sivayogi argued that religion was man-made and the nature of religions varied from time to time depending on the changing thoughts, knowledge and actions of religious leaders.⁵⁸ It was a tool to consolidate political support for economic benefits.

⁵⁵ Pavanan, 27-28.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁷ As quoted in *Moksahpradeepam* in Dharmaraj Adat, *Navothanathinte Suvarnashobhakal* [Golden Personalities of the Renaissance], (Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhat Book House, 2006),85.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 40.

Can't we do the pujas ourselves? Isn't it foolish to hire someone else to do it? If we are all god's children, isn't it enough that we do the pujas ourselves.⁵⁹

He argued that additions were made to the Bhagavad Gita by various sages in order to make it legitimate.

How is it possible that in the midst of a battle, when there were thousands of soldiers and war animals present, that Arjuna and Krishna could conduct a long philosophical debate? And even if they did so, did Arjuna really hear it amidst the entire din?⁶⁰

Between 1893 and 1923, he wrote extensively; and some of his important works such as the *Sivayoga Rahasyam*, *Mokshapradeepam*, *Siddhanubhuti*, *Streevidya Poshini* and *Anandadarsanam* reiterated his philosophy and critique of caste orthodoxy. But Sivayogi preferred to restrict his work to the Siddha Ashram and rarely travelled. He had a close circle of followers and chose to communicate his philosophy through his writings to the rest of the world. But if there is one name synonymous with the history of social reform movement in Kerala, it is that of Narayana Guru's. He created ripples in 1888 by consecrating what he called an Ezhava Siva temple at Aruvippuram in Travancore. In 1905, under his ideological mentorship, Dr. Palpu, along with the poet Kumaran Asan, established the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) which was envisaged as a platform for the Ezhavas of Travancore, Cochin and the Tiyyas of Malabar to collectively fight for their rights. This proved to be the main catalyst for an organised Ezhava social reform movement and inspiration for various other reform endeavours amongst upper caste and untouchable communities in Kerala. Narayana Guru's philosophy, based on universal humanism and his popular message of 'One Caste, One Religion, One God for All', provided an overarching framework for these other movements in Kerala to define their agenda and methods of struggle. The flexibility shown in his outlook allowed for a variety of different approaches to be assimilated into a larger programme of social and later, political action. On the walls of the Aruvippuram temple were inscribed the following,

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 123-124. He states that most of the verses in the Gita reflect vested interests which have excluded portions of *ananda yoga*. The Gita espouser upholds yogam not yaga. Yaga advocates violence and caste differences negating the idea of living through hard work in one's life.

Here is a model abode

Where men live like brothers

Bereft of the prejudices of caste

Or the rancour of religious differences⁶¹

The organisation with Guru at its helm, undertook many significant steps to enable the Ezhavas to disassociate themselves from the 'low' status designated to them by virtue of their occupations which were considered 'low' in the occupational hierarchy. The movement gained momentum and shot the Yogam into prominence, allowing it to act as the representative of the community with the founding of numerous temples and schools. Narayana Guru disapproved of religious conversions and as early as 1906, brought together smaller sub-castes within the larger Ezhava caste fold. It provided an opportunity to the middle class elites of the Ezhava/Tiyya community to express caste solidarity with their poor brethren and consolidate themselves as a monolithic caste unit.

Ezhava social reform had two major objectives. First, it aimed at breaking the symbolic system of domination wielded by the upper castes by establishing temples for themselves. They embarked on a project of introducing marriage reforms, changes in ritualistic practices and encouraging mobilization of financial resources within the community. Second, it was only after the breakdown of this hegemony that the social consciousness of the lower castes was diverted to political mobilization by the emerging middle classes within the community. They now aspired to erase their caste status that prevented them from progressing in the class structure.⁶² By the 1930s, an emergent Ezhava middle class leadership within the movement took over the reins and steered the community into a course of political action, going beyond modest petitions.⁶³

The expansion of the SNDP in Travancore struck a resonance amongst the educated Tiyyas of Malabar. The establishment of temples became the focal point of organisation and mobilization of the emergent Tiyya elite, comprising professional classes and few civil servants. Several caste associations also sprung up. In 1906, 'The Society for Awakening of

⁶¹ A.Sreedhara Menon, *A Political History of Kerala*, (Kottayam: DC Books, 1987), 206

⁶² Genevieve Lemercinier, *Religion and Ideology in Kerala* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1983), 247.

⁶³ S.Omana *Sree Narayana Guru* (New Delhi: Critical Quest 2005).

Knowledge' (Sri Gnanodaya Yogam) was founded at Tellichery.⁶⁴ They constituted the Managing Committee of the Jagannath Temple consecrated by Narayana Guru in 1908 which was open only to Tiyyas. It became an important pilgrimage site and countered the temple shrine culture of the villages of north Malabar. Narayana Guru also founded the Srikanteswara temple at Kozuhikode and Sundareswara at Kannur in 1916. In 1925, the Tiyyar Malabar Association was formed under the leadership of C. Krishnan.⁶⁵ The North Kerala Tiyya Maha Jana Sabha and the Sree Narayana Guru Smaraka Samajam were also established during that year.⁶⁶

Reform endeavours

The lives of Tiyyas were subsumed in various rituals dictated by caste Hindus who claimed scriptural authority over them. The observance of these ceremonies imposed huge financial burdens on the lower castes whose fear of being socially boycotted or being punished, prevented them from non-adherence. By declaring these rituals as products of Brahmanical hegemony, reformers attempted to abolish them and reduce the unequal occupational dependence underpinning such relationships. Customs such as *talikettu*, *thirandukuli*, *pulikudi* etc., were sought to be abolished.⁶⁷

There also existed a hierarchy in the pantheon of gods worshipped by different castes. While the *savarnas* claimed to be the devotees of 'superior' gods such as Vishnu, Siva and Brahma and erected temples in their names, the Ezhavas/Tiyyas and other untouchable

⁶⁴ The Gnanodaya Yogam was founded by Kottieth Rammuni, a lawyer at the Tellichery courts and K.Chantan, a retired Deputy Collector in 1906, to organize alongside the SNDP.,

⁶⁵ C. Krishnan belonged to a landowning Tiyya family and was the editor of *Mitavadi*, a popular journal published from 1913 onwards in Malabar that advocated rights of lower caste peasants and workers. He was a key figure in the SNDP's reform endeavours and through his writings, transformed journalism into a tool for political agitation. He advocated Buddhism as an option for untouchables to escape the caste disabilities imposed by orthodox Hinduism

⁶⁶ G. Rajendran, *The Ezhava Community and Kerala Politics*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Academy of Political Science, 1974), 33.

⁶⁷ *Talikettukalyanam* referred to child marriage that was held before girls attained puberty but did not mean a legal marriage. Later, these girls did not often marry the same boy-child.. *Thirandukuli* meant a celebration when a girl child attained puberty, and involved preparing a feast for a large number of people. *Pulikudi* meant the drinking of the juice of sour fruits when a girl reached the seventh month of pregnancy.

groups worshipped ‘animistic’ deities and pre-Aryan gods such as Kali, Durga, Bhagavati who were accorded an inferior status by the Brahmins. These gods were consecrated mostly at *kavus* (shrines/sacred groves) or in pre-Brahmanical settlements.⁶⁸ The worship at *kavus* and rituals associated with them included animal sacrifice, offerings of meat, singing of songs laden with ‘vulgarity’, spirit possessions and trance. Such practices were abhorred by Narayana Guru and his contemporaries for the violence inflicted on animals, and what they thought was an inappropriate display of sexual behaviour in drunken indulgence. They urged the lower castes to abstain from alcohol and *kavu* worship, and campaigned against such rituals. Alongside the struggle for gaining right to temple entry, guru also encouraged Ezhavas to officiate as priests in important ceremonies, thereby launching a direct attack on the hegemony of the Brahmin priesthood. Rules of distance pollution, prescribed by caste regulations, were also stringent in matters of dining and marriage. More than the act of eating, it was the idea of defiling that kept people away from coming together. The Brahmo Samaj had organised inter-dining events on a small scale. However, in 1917, when K. Ayyappan, an Ezhava, organised an inter-dining event at Cherayi, in the state of Cochin, it shocked members of his own community, especially the elites who virulently opposed him and his organisation, the Sahodara Sangham, for a long time.⁶⁹ An oath was read out at the venue after which a few Ezhavas, led by Ayyappan, ate alongside two Pulaya boys. It stated, ‘The caste system is unscientific, harmful and unnecessary and I, wholeheartedly resolve to fight for its abolition by all lawful means possible.’ Ayyappan was disturbed at the rigidity of caste structures that prevented Ezhavas from even dining with castes considered below them, such as the Pulayas and Parayas. By upholding inter-dining, he opposed caste orthodoxy and sought to imbue values of humanism amongst the people. Appealing to his community, he stated,

It is certainly important to create opportunities for the lower castes to gain education and wealth. The advocates of inter-dining also do not disagree with the establishment of schools and workplaces for them. However, what is most required is that these

⁶⁸ J. R. Freeman, “Gods, Groves and the Culture of Nature in Kerala.” *Modern Asian Studies*, No.33 (1999):257-302.

⁶⁹ M.P Sheeja, *The Complete Works of Sahodrana Ayyappan* , (Thrissur,2009), 26-27.

castes are given the biggest opportunity to attain progress through their own efforts. The caste system that treats them worse than animals must be abolished.⁷⁰

The ideological significance of such efforts was best captured by Narayana Guru with whom Ayyapan maintained a close relationship: 'Whatever is the religion, dress, language, amongst other traits of the people, there is no harm in inter-marriage or inter-dining as their caste is one.'⁷¹

Ritual status and social divisions of labour were closely linked and attempts to move away from it, resulted in redefining notions of work and status. Such linkages were the cause of acute material deprivation and limited occupational mobility for the untouchables and lower castes.⁷² However, in his study on the transformation of caste identities in Malabar, Dilip Menon argues that every social relation was not based on the unitary idea of a hierarchical society.⁷³ He stresses that structures of caste inequality were sometimes inverted during religious festivals, especially at *kavus*.⁷⁴ According to him, there existed a multiplicity of options which the Tiyyas could use to either subvert or come together with the uppcastes, at least for a brief period, as equals.⁷⁵ These festivals asserted a relationship of both hierarchy and interdependence. While it is partly true that these shrine festivals asserted both a sense of interdependence and hierarchy, one has to examine how far these relations were maintained and shaped by the power wielded by the Namboodiri *illams* and Nair

⁷⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁷¹ Ibid., 29.

⁷² Recent studies on early twentieth century Uttar Pradesh has also revealed to what extent ritual status and work were linked. Lower caste protest movements arose to break away from such associations between 'low' status and 'low' occupation. See Nandini Gooptu, 'Caste and Labour: Untouchable Social Movements in Urban Uttar Pradesh in the Early Twentieth Century' in Peter Robb ed. *Dalit Movements and Meanings of Labour* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993)

⁷³ Dilip M. Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in Malabar*, 50-61.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Dilip M. Menon, 'Intimations of Equality: Shrines and Politics in Malabar, 1900-1924' in Peter Robb ed. *Dalit Movements and Meanings of Labour*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993). 250-261. Hears that the upper caste Nairs and lower caste Tiyyas came together to form a 'community of equals' during worship at certain shrines. But this argument is problematic because it fails to take into account the deeply entrenched caste inequalities in Malabar and even during shrine festivals, castes had to perform certain caste specific roles and upon failing to do had to meet dire consequences. See M. Kabir, 'Peasants and Politics in Malabar' *EPW*.

*tharavadus*⁷⁶ These *illams* and *tharavadus* specified roles for different groups during shrine festivals and although a ‘community of equals’ may have emerged in the course of worship, the fact remains that these dominant Nair households controlled both the *kavu* and granary. The lower castes were denied entry into temples and many *kavus* all year around, except on festivals and certain occasions. In such a scenario, the upper castes had to make provisions to impart a temporary sense of equality to reassert their labourers’ allegiance to the dominant household. The assumption of equality tended to be fleeting and often, got relegated to the symbolic level. Upper castes worshipping lower caste deities at shrine festivals and offering rice and cloth to their labourers during certain days of the year was no remedy to the problem of caste discrimination and exploitation entrenched in the social system. The system was maintained and perpetuated by upper caste groups who depended on their prestige to enforce authority despite their dwindling economic status in later decades.⁷⁷ Projecting a new identity required the lower castes to distance themselves from their past selves. Temperance became an important plank on which the Ezhava social reform movement tried to redefine the status of the community.

Menon argues that this was one of three factors that strengthened the move towards temperance. This included the excise policy followed by the government, missionary attitudes and temperance campaigns, coupled with lower caste protest movements which took up the cause of temperance and merged later with the nationalist movement.⁷⁸ Drunkenness was considered to be a major problem amongst the lower castes, whose daily living depended extensively on toddy tapping. It was seen as restrictive and the educated members of the community sought to stay away from those who continued to practise this occupation, even if the latter had gained significant economic advantages from it.⁷⁹ The movement to check intemperance in India had been largely influenced and shaped by British and American

⁷⁶ The elaborate households around which joint family relations were structured came to be known as *illams* by Namboodiris and *tharavadus* by Nairs. These households owned considerable amounts of land and acquired the allegiance of tenants and sub-tenants working on them. Most *illams* and *tharavadus* also worshipped particular family deities, around which certain rituals were observed.

⁷⁷ M. Kabir, “Peasants and Politics in Malabar,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, No. 18, (1997).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 261-276

⁷⁹ Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala*, 65-67. . In 1905, Narayana Guru declared, ‘Liquor is poison, make it not, use it not’, and made a direct call to the community to give up toddy tapping, its sale, and consumption as part of the movement for self-respect.

missionary activity, both abroad and within the country from the nineteenth century onwards.⁸⁰ These temperance campaigns were also determined, to an extent, by internal social and political developments. The missionaries took a lead in this movement for a variety of reasons. On the one hand, they had to confront the problem of not being able to evangelise the upper castes as they had initially expected and had to contend with reaching out to the lower castes, whose living conditions made them more amenable to the promise of an egalitarian order within Christianity.⁸¹ The missionary discourse attempted to portray Christianity as a religion that instilled virtues of sobriety, thrift, equality and salvation for all. The problem of drunkenness amongst the lower castes was certainly a matter of concern for the missionaries but they were equally perturbed by the government's excise policy which sought to regulate the manufacture and consumption of liquor. The 'so-called' Christian government's policy conflicted with the missionary enterprise of depicting Christianity as a favourable option for the upper castes.⁸²

The British administration from the 1820s onwards, followed a policy of auctioning and farming out licences for setting up of distilleries.⁸³ This gave rise to an excise bureaucracy that imposed higher taxes and restrictions on Tiyya toddy producers. While some like the Murkoth family in Tellichery maintained a monopoly over toddy production and distribution because they could afford to buy extensive licenses, the smaller producers had to shut shop following heavy taxation. In February 1930, C. Krishnan noted in a *Mitavadi* editorial,

The masses will not take them seriously so long as they continue the present system of opening toddy shops in every nook and corner of the country and at the same time

⁸⁰ Lucy Carroll, 'The Temperance Movement in India: Politics and Social Reform', *Modern Asian Studies*, No. 3 (1976): 417-47.

⁸¹ G.A Oddie, *Social Protest in India: British Protestant Missionaries and Social Reforms, 1850-1900*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1979), 199.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 205.

⁸³ 'Forms of licences for renting out the exclusive privilege of manufacturing country arrack, toddy...and of retailing spirituous liquors shall be prepared by the Board of Revenue, and no renter shall be allowed to establish a still or shop, until he shall have obtained such license from the collector of the district...The license shall specify the amount of rent by the year to be paid during the period for which the rent is farmed. Richard Clarke, *Regulations and Acts in Force Within the Madras Presidency- The Regulations of the Government of Fort St.George, in force at the end of 1847, East India Company*, (London, 1848), p. 400

engaging them in moral propaganda against liquor. The government's commercial attitude is mainly responsible for the spread of this evil. The government should strictly put an end to this state of affairs.⁸⁴

Issues of Anti-Untouchability and Temple Entry

With the establishment of the Home Rule League in Malabar in 1916, protest movements were no longer confined to their localities and the general wave of the Indian National Movement spread. In 1917, C. Krishnan, along with Manjeri Ramayyar, walked on the road near the Tali temple in Kozhikode, which was prohibited for the avarnas. He wrote to J.A. Thoran, the Zamorin Estate's Collector, urging him to take 'harsh steps' against official violation. However, Thoran did not take any action and merely informed Krishnan that he had received his letter. Later that year, a procession of fifty Tiyyas walked through the public roads that were barred to them. Although the Zamorin wrote to the government alleging pollution of the temple, no action was again taken.⁸⁵ However, the fight to attain civil rights such as temple entry and access to public roads intensified with the Congress a resolution at its Calcutta session in 1917. This marked the beginning of a Congress-led campaign against untouchability, spearheaded by Gandhi who linked it to his 'Harijan uplift' programme.

This Congress urges upon the people of India the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed by custom upon the Depressed Classes, the disabilities being of a most vexatious and oppressive character, subjecting these classes to considerable hardship and inconvenience.⁸⁶

T.K. Madhavan, a member of the Congress and Secretary of the SNDP, raised the issue of untouchability in the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly in 1921, and moved a resolution

⁸⁴ K. Sabukuttan, *C. Krishnan and Social Change in Kerala*, (Kottayam, 2002), .29.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸⁶ David Keane, *Caste Based Discrimination in International Human Rights Law*, (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 55.

at the 1923 Kakkinnada Congress session stating temple entry as a universal birthright.⁸⁷ An anti-Untouchability Committee on Madhavan's insistence was formed in 1924 within the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee and the Vaikom satyagraha was initiated in Travancore.⁸⁸ Madhavan argued that untouchability could never be resolved until the right to temple entry was attained. Protests intensified in the following months and soon Mannathu Padmanabhan, Kelappan, C.V. Kunhiraman, E.V. Ramasamy, amongst other prominent political activists, joined the agitation.⁸⁹ Gandhi visited the place and held talks with the Rani Regent of Travancore, urging her to allow temple entry for all. During the course of the Vaikom satyagraha, there was talk of Narayana Guru disapproving of Gandhi's tactics and was said to have suggested that the satyagrahis must scale the barricades and dine with those inside the temple. In response, Gandhi objected by claiming it as an open call for violence.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ The Travancore Popular Assembly was the first elected legislature in the country, founded in 1904 by the princely head, Sree Moolam but there was disproportionate representation of the Ezhavas in it.

⁸⁸ On March 30, a section of the Congress activists agitated for rights to use temple roads. In a strong protest action, Kunjapy (Pulaya), Bahuleyan (Ezhava) and Govinda Panikker (Nair) defied the ban on passage through the temple roads. Only Panikker was allowed to pass by the police and later all three were arrested.

⁸⁹ Mannathu Padmanabhan was the founder of the Nair Service Society that organised the Nair community for internal reform as well as in the struggle to demand jobs and political representation from the government. His actions have resulted in consolidating the Nairs in the competition for education and jobs vis-à-vis the Syrian Christians and Ezhavas. But under his leadership, the N.S.S also extended support to the cause of abolishing untouchability and Indian National movement. For details, see, Mannathu Padmanabhan, *Reminiscences of My Life* (Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Cultural Publications, 2003) and V. Balakrishnan and R. Leela Devi, *Mannathu Padmanabhan and the Revival of Nairs in Kerala* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1982). Kelappan, founder President of the Nair Service Society and a supporter of Gandhi's political programme. C.V. Kunhiraman was a pioneering journalist who propagated Malayalam as a mass medium and worked towards de-Sanskritising it. Hailing from the ezhava community, he was editor of *Malayala Rajyam* and *Kerala Kaumudi*, two popular weeklies that advocated social reform and political demands. EVR or Periyar, as he was known, was the leader of the Self Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu who was staunchly anti-caste and initiated a movement for abolishing Hinduism and asserting the dignity of the people. There is extensive literature on his movement and struggles. See V. Geetha and SV Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samya, 1998), M.S.S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007).

⁹⁰ Narayana Guru stated in a later interview that his words had been misunderstood. "The report of the interview K. M. Kesavan had with me in the railway train, published in the *Desabhimani*, seems to have been prepared without correctly understanding my meaning. That report was not shown to me before publication, nor did I see it soon after it was published. The removal of untouchability is quite essential for the attainment of social harmony. I have no objection whatsoever to the satyagraha movement started by Mahatma Gandhi to fight this evil nor to the co-operation of people in that movement. Any method of work that may be adopted for eradicating the evil of untouchability must be strictly non-violent.", Interview to Associated Press of India, 1-7-1924, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 28., 278

If Congressmen connected with the Vaikom movement entertain the suggestions said to be favoured by the Tiya spiritual leader, there would be a case for penance and, therefore, suspension, but not otherwise. I would, therefore, urge the organizers at Vaikom to make redoubled efforts and, at the same time, keep stricter watch on the conduct of those who take part in the movement. Whether it takes long or short to reach the goal, the way is the way of peaceful conversion of the orthodox by self-suffering and self-purification and no other.⁹¹

Gandhi's views on untouchability consisted of contradictory positions. On the one hand, he argued that removal of untouchability was the topmost priority for the Congress and nationalist movement and yet, on the other, he attempted to portray it as an all Hindu affair, requesting non-Hindus to stay away from agitations related to temple entry.⁹² In November 1931, a bill for Temple Entry was placed in the Madras Legislative Council, aimed at removing the social disabilities faced by depressed classes in the region. However, it received immense opposition from the Sanatanists who went hammer and tongs against Gandhi and the Congress for pursuing the agenda. They also attacked many anti-untouchability fronts present in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The Sanatanists claimed that rules of distance pollution were prescribed in Hindu scriptures for the maintenance of the social order. They mobilized support at public gatherings to denounce Gandhi's anti untouchability campaign as a sham and to stall the administration from taking a sympathetic view of the matter. The Santanists held that lower castes were ill equipped and incapable of learning religious scriptures and meant to serve the former. They organised themselves into Sanatana Dharma Sabhas around the country and declared to be the sole defenders of Hindu traditions, viciously attacking all those who critiqued rules of distance pollution and participated in the widespread temple entry agitations during this period. Due to the wealth and political influence they possessed, they were also able to lobby support from within the colonial administration on many

⁹¹ *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume.28 : 22 May 1924 - 15 August, 1924 , excerpt titled ' Vaikom Satyagraha', 171.

⁹² George Joseph, a Congress activist participated in the Vaikom satyagrah initially. However, Gandhi dissuaded him from taking part further, stating that it was an issue concerning the Hindu community alone. He also objected to the participation of a group of Sikh volunteers who came to set up a free community kitchen at Vaikom. See George Gheverghese Joseph, *George Joseph: the Life and Times of a Kerala Christian Nationalist*, (Orient Blackswan, 2003)

occasions as well as from certain echelons of the Congress, led by upper caste leaders. In their attack on Gandhi's anti-untouchability campaigns in the wake of the Temple Entry movement in South India in the 1930s, they wrote to Viceroy Willingdon extending support to the British.

On 1 January 1933, the Congress in Kerala decided to picket the Guruvayoor temple. Kelappan Nair, an activist, decided to go on a fast unto death to fight for the opening of the temple for the lower castes and untouchables. In sympathy with the fast, Gandhi issued a statement,

Whatever the intended consequences of the contemplated fast may be, apart from its being a question of honour, it must be taken up, if the occasion arises, for the additional reason that it is certain to stir to worthy effort tens of thousands of people who have faith in me. Such must be the case in every movement of a religious character.⁹³

But Gandhi later convinced Kelappan to postpone his fast and wrote to the Zamorin of Kozhikode demanding the opening of temple or a referendum to gauge public opinion.

Around the same time, the SNDP and the Hindu orthodox administration were caught up in the issue of mass conversion of Ezhavas to other religions. Many prominent Ezhavas approached the Church of India regarding mass conversion. In Malabar, C. Krishnan, was discussing conversion to Buddhism, and C.V. Kunhiraman in the pages of *Kerala Kaumudi* in Travancore called for mass conversion to Christianity or Islam.⁹⁴ This threat stirred the princely government out of its intractability and the administration sought ways of appeasing the Ezhavas. The Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 was seen as a significant achievement of the pressures of mass struggle.⁹⁵ However, untouchables continued to be excluded from the Devasom Department in Travancore even after it.

⁹³ Statement on Untouchability-IX, 26-11-1932, *CWMG*.

⁹⁴ Osella and Osella, 158.

⁹⁵ Sree Chithira Thirunal, Maharajah of Travancore in 1936, issued a proclamation, throwing open government administered temples in the state to untouchable communities. The text reads, "Profoundly convinced of the truth and validity of our religion, believing that it is based on divine guidance and on all-comprehending toleration, knowing that in its practice it has throughout the centuries, adapted itself to the needs of changing times, solicitous that none of our Hindu subjects should, by reason of birth or caste or community, be denied the consolation and the solace of the Hindu faith, we have decided and hereby declare, ordain and command

The Nationalist Movement comes to Malabar

In 1921, the Congress was organising support for the Non-Cooperation movement in Malabar which was popularly linked to the Khilafat Movement and demands for tenancy reform. Khilafat committees were established alongside non-cooperation and tenancy committees. However, Malabar was distinct from other parts of India involved in the national movement because of an absence of no-rent campaigns.⁹⁶ It was not a coincidence either that most of the Congress and Khilafat leaders in Malabar were also leaders of the tenancy movement. E.M.S. Namboodiripad states that the two most controversial resolutions considered and ultimately passed at the Malabar District Political Conference held at Manjeri in 1920 were those supporting non-cooperation and tenancy reform. Thus, the struggles launched were dual in its aims -- it was anti-colonial and anti-*jenmi* at the same time.⁹⁷ The leadership was provided by educated Nairs and members of the emerging lower middle class, mostly primary school teachers. Many of the activists-teachers belonging to peasant families combined in themselves 'the interests of the worker, the social reformer and the young radical nationalist'.⁹⁸ But the Mappila uprisings that occurred in Ernad and Valluvanad taluks of south Malabar during this period had far reaching repercussions. Gandhi declined to take any responsibility and soon the Congress disassociated itself from the peasantry. The administrative backlash crushed the Muslim peasantry and their leadership were continuously hounded by the police and the judiciary. The participation of Muslims in the emerging nationalist movement turned weak, and a rebellion of similar proportions never erupted again. After the passage of the Malabar Tenancy Act of 1929, *kanakkarans* left the movement, and the demands of the lower tenants were left unaddressed.⁹⁹

that, subject to such rules and conditions as may be laid down and imposed by us for preserving their proper atmosphere and maintaining their rituals and observances, there should henceforth be no restriction placed on any Hindu by birth or religion on entering or worshipping at temples controlled by us and our Government."

⁹⁶ K. Gopalankutty, "The Task of Transforming the Congress: Malabar, 1934-40" *Studies in History*, August No. 5 (1989): 177-194.

⁹⁷ P. Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles, Land Reforms and Social Change*, 73-4.

⁹⁸ K.P.Kannan, *Of Rural Proletarian Struggles: Mobilization and Organization of Rural Workers in South-West India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 100

⁹⁹ Radhakrishnan, 73.

Gandhi's popularity surged with the advent of the Civil Disobedience movement which spread to Kozhikode, Cannanore, Payanur and Kasargod between 1931 and 1933. Picketing occurred at various places in Malabar and for the first time, a large number of young people engaged in direct political action. Kelappan, the president of the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee, organised a Salt march on 15 April 1930, on the lines of the Dandi march. A *jatha* of thirty-two men marched from Kozhikode to Payannur.¹⁰⁰ But the campaign did not receive much support from lower caste peasants, labourers and small shopkeepers.¹⁰¹ Soon, within the Indian National Congress, the Congress Socialist Party (henceforth, CSP), a left-leaning group, emerged in 1934, increasingly dissatisfied with the Gandhian tactics of the Congress. They viewed the tone of the Congress as one of the dominant caste Hindu's and decided to engage with mass political activity. The CSP workers realised the difficulties of organising a peasantry divided by caste and had to resist the *jenmis'* opposition to the tenants who joined the movement.¹⁰² In several villages in Malabar, Karshaka Sanghams (Peasant Associations) sprung up, culminating in the formation of the All Malabar Karshaka Sangham in 1938. The young CSP activists kick started in the region a public library movement which resulted in formation of numerous reading rooms and village libraries. These would become centres of political education, mobilisation and activity in subsequent years. The teachers' unions, religious associations and reform organisations such as the SNDP also established village libraries, in a bid to democratise knowledge as well as to mobilize the rural populace.

A Social Reformer Emerges: Vagbhadananda Gurudevar

In this politically charged and socially dynamic milieu, emerged a number of philosophers who articulated an 'indigenous social philosophy' critiquing caste orthodoxy and feudal exploitation in Malabar.¹⁰³ They provided an ideological backing to the peasant and workers'

¹⁰⁰ Robin Jeffrey, Matriliny, Marxism, and the Birth of Communist Party in Kerala, 1930-1940, *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. XXXVIII, no.1, November. 1978: 85.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Johnson Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala: A Study in Political Adaptation* (California: University of California Press, 1982), 70.

¹⁰² K.P.Kannan, *Of Rural Proletarian Struggles*, 100.

¹⁰³ K.K.N Kurup, Peasantry and the Anti-Imperialist Struggles in Kerala, *Social Scientist*, vol. 16, no.9 September 1988: 38.

struggles against caste discrimination and economic exploitation and couched their radical critique in religious terms. It is significant that these philosophers did not confine themselves to the realm of spiritual discourse, but also actively undertook social reform and engaged with questions of material deprivation. One such figure was Vagbhadananda Gurudevar from north Malabar, who combined his oratorical skills and profound scholarship to organise the lower and untouchable castes.

Born in 1884, at an old *Tiyya tharavadu* at Patyam in Tellichery, Vagbhadananda, known as Kunhikannan in his childhood, was born to Vayaleri Cheruvamma and Thenakandi Vazhavalappil Koran Gurukkal.¹⁰⁴ Koran Gurukkal was a knowledgeable Sanskrit scholar in the region, known for his outspoken views against prevailing customs and rituals within Hinduism. Kunhikannan studied philosophy and Sanskrit under his father until the age of fifteen. He is said to have been a bright and intuitive child, and by the age of twelve mastered most of the major literary works in Sanskrit. He assumed the role of a teacher for many of his father's students and earned the title 'Gurukkal' when he was thirteen.¹⁰⁵ For further studies, he was sent to be tutored under another well-known scholar in the region, Parampathu Rairu Nair, and later, under M.K. Gurukkal, who introduced the young boy to an extensive world of grammar, logic, and philosophy.¹⁰⁶ Soon, Kunhikannan Gurukkal shifted to Kozhikode and in 1906, set up a school for imparting Sanskrit lessons, 'Tattvapraakashika'. In the morning, Sanskrit classes were attended by younger children and later in the evening, by adults. This centre of Sanskrit learning is said to have attracted students across Malabar cutting across communities.¹⁰⁷

At this time, he got acquainted with Ayyathan Gopalan, the head of the Brahma Samaj in Kozhikode and began to participate in their programmes. In 1910, V.K Gurukkal, as he was then known, heard for the first time Brahmananda Swami Sivayogi expound his

¹⁰⁴ *The Complete Works of Vagbhadananda* (henceforth,TCWV), Mathrubhumi Printing and Publishing Ltd. (Kozhikode, 1988), i, Patyam is a village situated to the east of Tellichery in North Malabar . Many Tiyyas families followed the matrilineal system and a married couple usually resided in the wife's ancestral house.Gurukkal was a title referring to learned scholars.

¹⁰⁵ Champadan Vijayan in *Mahacharith Mala Series No.72* (Kottayam, 1982), 44-45

¹⁰⁶ TCWV, .45.

¹⁰⁷ *Brahmavratam*, 26.

yogabased philosophy at the Kozhikode Town Hall.¹⁰⁸ Narayana Guru, at the request of wealthy Tiyyas, was consecrating temples in Malabar during the period, and Sivayogi critiqued the practice as antithetical to humanism. Having got attracted to the latter's expositions on spirituality, V.K Gurukkal travelled to the Siddha Ashram at Alathur and met the philosopher. Sivayogi was overjoyed at having found a disciple in a young man, well versed in matters of logic, religion, philosophy, and literature.¹⁰⁹ Soon, he accepted him as his spiritual mentor and got involved in the task of disseminating the philosophy of *rajayogam*, which was being propagated by Sivayogi as the right way towards attaining liberation.¹¹⁰ Two phases of intellectual activity can be said to have been present in Vagbhadananda's life. The first phase was in the years preceding 1917, when he enthusiastically espoused *rajayogam* and agreed with Sivayogi's tenets. The latter's influence on the young philosopher's intellectual development is undeniable. In 1911, he established the *Rajayoganandakaumudi Shala* at Kallayi. Enthused by Sivayogi's teachings, deemed radical for those times, he travelled across Malabar and parts of Travancore, putting his oratorical skills to good use by organising public discourses, covering a range of topics related to religious scriptures. He warded off challenges posed by orthodox Malayali and Tamil Brahmins who were appalled at a lower caste man's courage to critique their social power based on caste regulations with such authority over the scriptures. They labelled him 'casteless' and a 'destroyer of idols' and attacked him during many debates, verbally and with threats to his life.¹¹¹ On a particular occasion, Sivayogi was faced with rampant criticism regarding his major founding treatise, *Mokshapradeepam* ('The Light of Salvation'). His critics argued that the inclusion of an invocatory line in the beginning of the text indicated Sivayogi's worship of Siva. Gurukkal rose to the challenge and responded, pointing out that the word under contention did not refer to Siva, and instead, meant 'in the praise of one's guru'. Upon hearing this argument that saved him from further contempt, Sivayogi gratefully composed an ode and bestowed the name 'Vagbhadananda' on the young man, which meant 'the brave defender of the Goddess of speech' and it is by this title that the

¹⁰⁸ Pavanan, *BrahmanandaSwami Sivayogi* (Department of Cultural Publications, Thiruvananthapuram, 1997), 65.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Brahmavratam, 45

philosopher-activist has since been known. Vagbhadananda also launched a magazine, *Sivayogi Vilasam*, in 1914, along with another fellow disciple, P.Samikutty, to take the work of Ananda Samajam to the masses, but it failed to gain any popularity.

Both Sivayogi's and Vagbhadananda's anti-brahmanism was primarily targeted at the upper caste claims to superiority in all aspects of life. They both disputed those claims and argued that it was nothing but ideological hegemony to oppress the lower castes. They considered the ultimate path to salvation and societal harmony was to cleanse one's inner being of all evil thoughts and denounce violence. The mind assumed centrality in their expositions. They conceded that it was not enough to stay clean externally, but to remove all those problems plaguing society and religion by achieving mental happiness and strength. Hence, they believed that penance, sacrifices and holy baths were only means of torturing one's body and mind, and did not lead to anything meaningful. They also spoke against the practice of animal sacrifice and similar customs that forced poor peasants and labourers to bear extreme economic debts.

In 1914, Vagbhadananda met Narayana Guru at Aluva and shared his thoughts on religion and reform. A part of their conversation was published in the August-September issue of *Sivayogi Vilasam*.¹¹² Vagbhadananda questioned him on the utility of establishing temples for he found them to be antithetical to the idea of demolishing caste barriers. Differing with Guru on the issue of temple consecration, he argued that the preaching of *advaita* and temple worship did not go hand in hand.¹¹³ He felt that the practice of establishing temples for the lower castes would only lead to sectarianism and obstruct a transformation of caste relations. Although he agreed to Guru's larger vision for change, he could not reconcile to the tactics the former had adopted to achieve it.

During the same period, strains began to emerge between the Sivayogi and Vagbhadananda, which later culminated into the latter's departure from his mentor's religious philosophy.¹¹⁴ The young reformer had been an *advaita vedantin* before meeting Sivayogi

¹¹² Pavanan 68

¹¹³ TCWV, .x.

¹¹⁴ Swami Brahmavratam, Vagbhadananda's disciple and biographer states that one of the reasons for the latter's departure from his mentor was owing to an incident involving an unknown man. At Calicut, Vagbhadananda met this stranger who is said to have deeply influenced him philosophically.

while the latter's expositions revealed his disagreement and distancing from the philosophy of Vedanta.¹¹⁵ In 1916, the printing of *Sivayogi Vilasam* was suspended and came to be issued as *Sivayoga Vilasam*, a sign of the deep tension that had arisen between the two.¹¹⁶ Sivayogi did not believe in the existence of an ultimate creator known as god although he acknowledged the presence of a certain grand force guiding matter on earth.¹¹⁷ He expounded the need to control the mind's fluctuating desires to work towards attaining bliss (*ananda*). Vagbhadananda felt that Sivayogi gave pre-eminence to the mind, bordering on atheism. Any rejection of religion, he felt, was harmful to society:

Religions help us to move away from our primitive nature and embrace civilization and humanity... Just because certain unnecessary and wrong elements are present in religion does not mean one should abandon them completely or negate...¹¹⁸

Vagbhadananda joined Sivayogi in opposing idol worship and temple consecration but could not agree on other philosophical issues. His tract *Mokshapradeepa Dhwasanam* was a hard hitting critique of Sivayogi's philosophy of *rajayogam* and *anandam*. The young reformer did not publish it in his own name in the first edition, but later scholars have argued that the tone and tenor is certainly his, and not anyone else's.

However, Sivayogi's influence on Vagbhadananda have been significant and is reflected in the working of his separate organisation. When Sivayogi died in 1929, Vagbhadananda wrote in the *Atmavidya Kaahalam*, depicting Sivayogi's contribution to what is now known as the Kerala Renaissance,

He espoused that caste differences, polytheism, idol worship, and other such practices were obstacles to human progress. One had to change them in order to uphold principles of 'one caste, one god, one religion' and successfully move forward...He woke the people of Kerala from their deep slumber, and re-examined texts such as the

¹¹⁵ Pavanan, Brahmananda Sivayogi, Department of Cultural Publications, (Trivandrum, 1997), 70

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 71

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 74

¹¹⁸ The Complete Works of Vagbhadananda (TCWV), Mathrubhumi, (Kozhikode, 1988), 487

Upanishads and Bhagavadgita, motivating even his opponents to do so. It would not be an exaggeration to say that most of his life was directed towards leading Malayalees on the path of reform.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Vagbhadananda, *Atmavidya Kaahalam*, editorial, 1929 in Pavanan, *Brahmananda Sivayogi* (Thiruvananthapuram: Dept. of Cultural Publications, 1997), 215.

Vagbhadananda and Atma Vidya Sangham

AtmaVidya Sangham: Early Years and Philosophy

Inspired by Narayana Guru's socio-religious vision and strengthened by Sivayogi's rationalist outlook, Vagbhadananda set out on his own and established the AtmaVidya Sangham (henceforth, AVS) in 1917. The intention was not to initiate a new religious movement but, as the name suggested, the idea was to spread the message of 'atmavidya' (self-knowledge /consciousness) and create an organised force consisting of people from different religions and communities to promote universal brotherhood. Vagbhadananda defined atmavidya as, 'that knowledge which cleansed religion of all evils and through its practice attained, salvation and assimilation with the One'.

¹ He proclaimed the essence of all religions to be the same, which was reflected in the Hindu philosophy of *advaita*. He held that figures such as Christ, Prophet Mohammed, Buddha, amongst other religious founders, taught their respective believers to focus the mind on the inner self rather than external objects such as images and idols. Only the paths of attaining salvation differed.²

The establishment of the AVS was intended at ushering in a spiritual transformation that would enable people to adopt 'atmavidya', a path based on harmony and peace. This inner transformation, he hoped, would subsequently aid in alleviating the status of depressed communities and link their spiritual and material progress together. The AVS did not concentrate on community reform alone with regard to religious practices. It also laid the foundations of an initiative that critiqued the existing feudal order in the first decades of twentieth century Kerala, under colonial rule. Their motto, declared in the pages of *Abhinava Keralam* (Modern or New Kerala), which began to be published in September 1921 and became the mouthpiece of the Sangham was - 'Awake, remember the creator, Arise and fight

¹ *The Complete Works of Vagbhadananda* (henceforth,TCWV), Mathrubhumi Printing and Publishing Ltd. (Kozhikode, 1988), xxiv

² TCWV, 411.

against injustice'.³ Initially, the AVS had no guiding document and it was only in 1925 that Vagbhadananda wrote a treatise, *AtmaVidya*, later known as the organisation's manifesto. In its preface, he writes,

Friendship and peace are the only solutions to violence and rivalry. The AtmaVidya Sangham is composed of that mass of people who believe in this truth.⁴

Dismayed at Western depictions of India as a 'stagnant, degraded and primitive culture' and Swami Vivekananda's description of Kerala as a veritable lunatic asylum' owing to the rigidities of inter-caste codes of conduct, speech, food and dress, Vagbhadananda worked towards changing such opinions through his organisation. He was troubled that despite the presence of many progressive thinkers and reformers in Kerala who had empathy for people's suffering, outsiders had labeled the region a 'madhouse' due to the prevalence of untouchability and caste regulations.⁵ He expounded AVS' philosophy as one that did not confine itself to the dictum of 'One caste, One religion, One God' as declared by Narayana Guru. Instead, the Sangham, he stated, 'was faced with the prospect of creating a world in which people aspired to attain peace, satisfaction, harmony by transcending all human made barriers'.⁶ He called for the abolition of priesthood, arguing that the priests constituted a class of 'fake saints' exploiting people, especially the lower castes and untouchables of their lack of knowledge about God being formless or the scriptures. He considered idol worship, caste system based on birth and *sagunopasana* as the three main points of difference between atmavidya loyalists and the orthodox priesthood.⁷ *Atmavidya* was envisaged as a secular rubric to the extent that it did not hinder non-Hindus from being a part of the endeavor, although the philosophy was drawn upon certain tenets of Hinduism, particularly from the Upanishads, Smritis and Bhagavad Gita.

Through the AVS, Vagbhadananda embarked upon an enquiry about the self, the core of his philosophy drawn from the Bhagavad Gita. His aim was to oppose the hegemony of the

³ *Abhinava Keralam*, Book 1, Issue 1, 1921.

⁴ Vagbhadanandan, *Atmavidya*, Atmavidya Prasiddheekarana Samiti: Kannur, 1996) .viii

⁵ TCWV, 882.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 885.

⁷ *Atmavidya*, 5. *Sagunopasana* refers to worship of God with attributes.

Brahmins over scriptural texts, which they used to legitimise their dominant status. By elaborating upon its contents, he reiterated the need to dismiss the arguments put forward by caste Hindus. He attempted to show that the text, contrary to popular notions, upheld equality amongst all believers and did not distinguish between the rich and the poor. His purpose was democratization of knowledge and that meant, chiefly, democratizing religious scriptures. Opposing brahminical claims that the *jnanamargam* (path of knowledge) as espoused by the Gita was barred for the ordinary populace, he stated,

What does Gita say about god?... Gita teaches us that God is formless. It does not perpetuate the myth that god resides on top of Kailasa, Palazhi or above the Himavan. It also does not tell us that god is black in color, has four hands, six heads, twelve hands... does not advise us all that... Instead, it shows us that the formless being is omnipresent.⁸

Further, he argued,

It is utter foolishness to believe those who claim that *jnanamargam* (path of knowledge) is not open for sinners and unintelligent people. The pundits claim it is only their prerogative, but it is stupidity to believe that... It is like believing that only the rich Brahmins have the right to gain relief from the heat by stepping into cold water... if anybody ever claims there is a hierarchy amongst those who may follow *jnanamargam*, understand that it simply emanates from irrationality.⁹

Although Vagbhadananda drew upon the Gita, he did not believe it to be sacrosanct and infallible. Instead, he stressed upon the need to exercise reason before accepting any of its philosophical messages.

Different people have different opinions about the Bhagavad Gita... no matter what differences exists one must reject anything that comes across as irrational. It will be a mistake to view the text through the lens of blind, traditional belief and accept every

⁸ TCWV, 472.

⁹ TCWV, 439.

word in it. Neither Vyasa, the author of the Gita, nor any sage teaches us that everything present in the text is the ultimate truth.¹⁰

He attempted to initiate a discourse about the self in a hierarchised and ritualistic society.¹¹ This meant embarking upon notions of what constituted the 'individual', as opposed to the notion of 'caste', which subsumed the interests of the individual within the collective caste-community. An understanding of the self was essential to know how the individual was positioned viz-a-viz the larger community. Self-discipline became an important aspect of the means towards gaining *atmavidya*. To attain oneness with the inner being, one had to lead a disciplined life and get rid of unhealthy habits, addictions and negative behavior, all of which he argued, stemmed from irrational thinking. It is according to the desires of the mind that the body reacts in different ways.¹² Hence, for dharma to succeed, a healthy and clean mind is required. If one removed harmful thoughts such as that of violence, anger, jealousy, and greed, it would help in individual betterment and social good.

Even if you are the biggest sinner amongst sinners, you will cross the wide sea of sins easily on the boat of knowledge.¹³

Vagbhadananda's expositions were mainly centered on the idea of self-improvement, a dominant framework underlying lower caste reform movements during the period. Acute caste and religious differences marked social relations, and there were widening gaps between the rich and poor, rulers and ruled. Vagbhadananda did not believe that a change of heart amongst the upper castes would occur and help the poor and the exploited. He also did not think that time would take its own course. What he advanced was the idea of a process of constant deliberation and intervention on the part of human beings in material processes that affected their future. Vagbhadananda believed in the higher intellect possessed by humans compared to other living creatures and urged them to put their capacities towards the building of peace. He felt it was man's arrogance that was the reason for his downfall and propounded

¹⁰ TCWV, 44.

¹¹ Asokan Mundon, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Calicut, 2005.

¹² Ibid., 439.

¹³ TCWV, 440.

the need to forget all differences, and work in the spirit of brotherhood towards general progress. Everyone, from the rich to the poor was obliged to fulfill this duty, i.e., one duty for all, unlike under varnashrama¹⁴ He exhorted people through his speeches to not only instill good habits and thoughts in themselves but organize and work towards bringing about change, without expecting anybody else to come to their rescue.¹⁵ This notion of progress underpinned the philosophy of *atmavidya* and guided the Sangham's activities. Saddened by the events of the First World War and the destruction it brought along its wake, Vagbhadananda noted,

Man was committing injustice by baring his animal instincts, and not cultivating goodness. Unless humans strived to behave as humans, there was going to be no visible change in the world.¹⁶

He was concerned about the putative dangers of not realising that the Supreme Being rests within one's self. Those who did not possess this knowledge or self-realisation, he argued, would not be able to feel for fellow beings, 'and those without empathy and affection for others would be unable to propound the message of harmony and peace.'¹⁷ According to him, what was required was an extension of spiritual equality to the material realm as well. For that to succeed, *atmavidya* had to be the rubric under which internal divisions, that of caste, class and gender, were to be de-emphasized to build a unified community of believers. Every individual was required to fulfill his obligations according to his/her station in life, without expecting anything in return, *niskarma karma*.

Vagbhadananda did not resort to donning the garb of the sanyasin and absolving himself of all worldly responsibilities. According to him, renouncement was not the right way to practise *advaita*. In 1922, he married Vagdevi amma in Kozhikode, who hailed from the Kaloor family which had supported Vagbhadananda financially during his initial years. Brahmavratam, writes about how the reformer, even when pursuing a project of restoring the spiritual heritage of India and taking its message to the people was aware that for those suffering poverty and exploitation, dignity, equality and justice carried greater meaning than

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ TCWV, 294.

¹⁷ TCWV, 45.

the right to debate and discuss philosophical nitty gritty. He gave up wearing the saffron robe in 1923 and adopted khadi. His writings in the *Atma Vidya Kaahalam*, which started in 1929 and lasted till 1933, also antagonized the British government

Atma Vidya Sangham: Amongst the Masses

With the support of seven families, the first units of the AVS were established in 1917 at Karakkattu (now known as Nadapuram Road) and Cheruvanoor in Kozhikode.¹⁸ Karuppayil Kanaran Master and Kunnoth Kunjekku Gurukkal, amongst a few others, all belonging to the Tiyya community, invited Vagbhadananda to speak against the feudal and discriminatory practices prevalent at the time. He delivered a speech at the Karakattu temple premises on the futility of temple worship and rituals associated with it. It was attended by a large number of people from neighbouring villages. Following this, he mobilized support and pulled down the temple.¹⁹ This was the beginning of protest action by the organization and soon, some of the earliest members of the Karakkattu AVS had to face a lot of hardship at the hands of their upper caste landlords and prominent Tiyya community lords who socially and financially boycotted them by denying work, education, and security of tenure.²⁰ The services of Kavutheeyans, the traditional barbers designated specifically for the Tiyyas, were suspended, and the latter began cutting each other's hair in protest. In many cases, the landlords tried all means to prevent marriage alliances and children of these families from attending schools. Worried about their future, the Sangham called for a public meeting to discuss these pressing matters and Vagbhadananda urged his friend, the Raja of Kadathunadu, to stop the ousting of AVS members from their lands.²¹ It was then decided, as per the philosopher's suggestion, to establish a lower primary school in the name of Atma Vidya Sangham so that the Tiyya community could undertake the task of educating its children. Thus, the Atma Vidya Sangham

¹⁸ Swami Brahmavratam, *Maharshi Vagbhadananda Gurudevar*, (Thottappally: The Institute of Vagbhadananda Memorial Research, 1971), 88. Brahmavratam was Vagbhadananda's closest aide and worked with him until the latter's demise. He was also the pioneer of the modern theatre movement in Kerala, introducing song and dance into dramas.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Karakkattu *Atma Vidya Sangham Pirakkunu* (Karakkattu Atma Vidya Sangham is Born), p.4

²¹ *Atma Vidya* (monthly magazine) Book 2, Issue 9, 1995 June-July, p.34. Kadathunadu was one of the principalities of North Kerala, comprising the modern taluk of Vadakkara, near Kozhikode.

Lower Primary School came into existence in 1922. To curb the financial boycott, a credit facility under the *Aikya Nanaya Sangham* (United Credit Cooperative) was established in 1924. Both these endeavours continue till the present day. At such a time when work was being denied, , the *Uralungal Koolivelakarude Paraspara Sahaya Yogam* (Uralungal Wage Labour's Mutual Aid and Cooperative Society) was founded in 1925, under Vagbhadananda's guidance. It was re-registered in 1967 as Uralungal Labour Contract Cooperative Society and continues to employ more than a thousand workers. At Cheruvanoor, P. Raghavan, Ullathodi Eembachi Kuttan, K. Choyyikutty, all from the Tiyya community, provided leadership to the Sangham. In 1922, they established the first Atmavidya Mattom there.²²

Azhikode in Kannur has been another major centre of AVS' activity. The year 1921 was significant for the region.²³ A group of enthusiastic, young lower caste men, led by Mathan Karuvan, came together to teach and discuss matters related to philosophy and spirituality. They agreed to bring together representatives of religious reform organisations in Kerala on a common platform for a debate and decided to join the one which would answer their spiritual enquiries satisfactorily. However, only Sadhu Sivaprasad Swamikal of the Arya Samaj, M.K. Govindanandan of the Ananda Samaj and Vagbhadananda of the AtmaVidya Sangham attended the gathering that was organised in April 1923. At the end of the event, the group welcomed the spiritual mentorship of the AVS and began working for them. In May, later that year, Vagbhadananda was again invited to speak, this time on the Gita and a debate was held with Ponmattam Krishna Swamikal.²⁴ After a long debate, the latter, impressed with the former's staunch commitment to *advaita*, remarked,

I have examined all the religious movements in Kerala but only Vagbhadananda advocates pure *advaita*. Such an occasion will never come again.²⁵

Later, in May 1924, at the premises of the Sree Vidyakaruna Reading Room situated at Puythiyakandathil, a three day long religious conference was held. Well known scholars who

²² Ibid., 120

²³ 80th Anniversary of the Azhikode Inter-dining event, Kerala AtmaVidya Sangham, 2007 p.6- 9.

²⁴ Ibid. Ponmattam Swamikal, also known as Vayath Swamikal was a prominent philosopher from Kozhikode.

²⁵ Ibid..7.

attended the programme included K. Ramapanikkar, K.T. Chandu Nambiar, Swami Aryabhadan, Swami Brahmavratam, Swami Sadhu Sivaprasad, Ponmattom Krishnaswamikal and Vagbhadananda. On the final day, Swami Aryabhadan spoke on 'Religion and Atma Vidya' and encouraged people to start a unit of the AVS. That same night, the Azhikode branch was formed, comprising of forty one members.²⁶

An AVS unit was founded at Vagbhadananda's birthplace, Patyam, on 1 November 1926, with a fifteen member committee. It extended its work to the villages of Mokkeri, Panoor, Vallyayi, Naravoor and Koothuparampu and was named the Patyam Atma Vidya Mahasabha.²⁷ Under the leadership of Vagbhadananda's contemporary and Sanskrit teacher, V. K.K gurukkal, the Sabha waged protests against the observance of *ettu maatu* ritual.²⁸ A conference was organized in 1929 and a wedding conducted according to the Sangham's norms. It was a simple ceremony meant to be an example to the lower caste tenants to discourage them from wasting money on feasts and elaborate rituals, which were meant to please the upper castes. At the venue, Vagbhadananda spoke on 'Atma Vidya and Truth', and stated that the upper castes were low on spiritual welfare. He emphasized upon the AVS' aim of forging an Atmakeralam (loosely translated as United Kerala), in which the higher castes would be convinced peacefully of the need to unite with the lower castes.²⁹ By then, owing to the active participation of a large number of spirited men and women, and guided by Vagbhadananda's wide ranging scholarship and appeal, the Sangham expanded into a considerable force and had its branches in Thalacolathur, Sivapuram, Kuttiyadi, Pannoor, and Pathayakunnu in Malabar, and at Pallana, Karunagapally, Kumarapuram, Haripad, Thottapalli in Travancore.³⁰

Vagbhadananda also befriended many prominent figures of the time belonging to upper caste families who were involved in matters of community reform and political activity. C. Krishnan, the most prominent leader of the Tiyyas in Malabar, and Mannathu

²⁶ Ibid., 8.

²⁷ Patyam Ramakrishnan, *Navothanacharyan Vagbhadanandan*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publications), 57.

²⁸ Ibid., 58.

²⁹ Ibid., 59.

³⁰ *Brahmavratam*, Vagbhadananda Gurudevam, 40.

Padmanabhan, the founder of the Nair Service Society, on many occasions, presided over AVS' annual conferences. Vagbhadananda was also close to scholars such as Madhusoodhanan Thangal, well-known eye doctor, Ramunni Vaidyar, poet and secretary of the SNDP, Kumaranasan³¹, and other contemporary literary critics.

. Emphasizing reason over faith was central to this project and Vagbhadananda's reform efforts were largely targeted at the practice of untouchability and caste discrimination. Throughout the thirty years of his activism, he staunchly opposed untouchability, while not finding the fourfold varna classification problematic. For him, the root cause of human misery was caste, not religion. He held that varna was not the same as caste, and an individual, depending on his/her ability and condition, could belong to any of the four varnas.³² The dominance of Brahmins was a degradation of what had prevailed in ancient times, and removing those exclusionary principles propounded by them would make the varna system more acceptable. Here, one can discern the extent to which Vagbhadananda had internalized the brahmanical notions of the system, despite not supporting the idea of ascriptive status in society. He writes,

...a Sudra could be termed a Brahmin if found to be intelligent and scholarly while a Brahmin with menial habits can be considered a Sudra.³³

This implied that those who comprised the category of Sudra were meant to 'serve' the upper castes. That was their station in life. One could not be a Sudra and a scholar at the same time without violating the basic principles of social organisation, or going against what was seen as one's dharma.

Vagbhadananda mounted a concerted attack on those Sanatanists opposing equal rights to untouchables for entering temples and sharing public places. According to him, they were the ones responsible for bringing shame upon Hinduism.

³¹ Kumaranasan died when his boat capsized in the Pallana lake. It was the members of the local AVS unit who helped find his body and conduct the funeral.

³²TCWV, 823.

³³ Ibid., 827.

We have two important goals. Firstly, to drive out all those superstitions, untoward practices and lies that have crept into the sphere of religion and to put into practice sanatana dharmic principles such as truth, equality and freedom. Secondly, to prove that a spiritual life is what life really is about and religion has the central place in it and with that, to unite everybody under the fold of One God.³⁴

Challenging the nexus between social power and religious authority, he made frequent appeals to the untouchable groups such as Parayans, Pulayas and Mukkuvars³⁵ to unite with the Tiyyas against upper caste dominance. But this unity could only be forged by eliminating practices that were corrupting what he felt was the 'pure' essence of Hinduism.³⁶ In his writings, he constantly referred to the story of Vishwamitra and Vyasa to ridicule Santanist claims about their ritual superiority. He argued that Vishwamitra was the son of a Pulaya woman and the Gayatri mantra and Smritis were his creations. In a similar vein, he reminded the Brahmins about, the author of Mahabharata, Vyasa's Mukkuvar origins.

What is this religion that allows cats, dogs and even donkeys to come near humans, but does not allow another human being?... You recite our great ancestor's verses... enjoy that philosophy but look at us in contempt and abuse us. But then remember to seize upon this moment to ask us for forgiveness for the grave mistake that you are committing of not remembering who taught you those verses.³⁷

Vagbhadananda was also critical of the British government's policy of non-interference in religious matters. He urged the government to shun their policy of non-interference in religious matters, which did little to help the lower castes.

We have been suffering for long. We will appeal to the government to alleviate our conditions and punish those who mete out inhuman treatment to us. They have banned

³⁴TCWV, 414.

³⁵ Mukkuvars refers to the fishing communities of Kerala.

³⁶ TCWV, 820.

³⁷ TCWV, 913.

sati arguing that the practice is unscientific, then why cannot they ban untouchability?³⁸

In the *Atmavidya*, he wrote extensively about the ills of polytheistic worship and the need to oust the pantheon of brahmanical deities, dominated by the *trimoorthis*, comprising Siva, Vishnu and Brahma, their various off springs and consorts, who were also elevated to the status of deities.³⁹ Vagbhadananda based his argument on the Upanishads and Gita, arguing that Siva and Vishnu were only the representatives of two violent, conflicting groups that existed in the country. He chided the Saivites and Vaishnavites for worshipping such figures who indulged in violence and misled people.

Siva and Vishnu's greatness expanded in our land only when they began to be worshipped after their deaths. It is a matter of curiosity for our people to worship those who indulge in violence... The *trimoorthis*, their various forms and offsprings' cruel expressions were portrayed as dharmic... and efforts were made to establish stories around them.⁴⁰

Quoting a verse from the *Sivajnana Deepika*, he tried to depict the human character of the *trimoorthis* and the hollowness of their sacrosanctity. Writing under the pseudonym Swayamprabha, he published debates espousing the philosophy of advaita in his journals. In one of the debates involving two characters, Raman and Krishnan, Vagbhadananda discusses various issues. Krishnan, who seems to resemble Vagbhadananda, tries to reason with Raman and prove to him the futility of idol worship and temple consecration. He attempts to debunk the notion that the *trimoorthis* were immortal beings.

Siva is a mortal being, who married Parvathi, bore children and later, died. It is foolishness to believe that he is immortal. It is better to believe in the Supreme Being

³⁸ Ibid., 835.

³⁹ *Atmavidya*, Chapter 8, 141-159.

⁴⁰ Ibid., .152-153

who is eternal and formless, and lead a good life. God need not to assume many other forms to bless his devotees, and he will never assume the form of any idol.⁴¹

Further, in the *Atmavidya*, Vagbhadananda argues,

Deities like Siva, Vishnu and Brahma, and their offspring like Ganapati do not exist anywhere in this world, and in my firm opinion, the rituals and customs surrounding them are only inappropriate and futile.⁴²

Vagbhadananda did not escape counter challenges and, had to constantly face the ire of the orthodoxy. But he was enthused with debating and always liked a challenge. *Brahmavratam* records how the philosopher immersed himself in travelling to various parts of Malabar and Travancore and participating in philosophical debates. The Brahmins, on the other hand, never lost any opportunity to muster support against the young reformer to humiliate him. Sometimes, they physically threatened him as well.

Vagbhadananda was also in close association with the Araya fishing community of central Travancore. He was a good friend of Aandi Arayan, a prominent member of the Araya community in Ambalapuzha, who was deeply influenced by the former. Along with Vagbhadananda, Aandi Arayan opposed caste discrimination and practices of distance pollution.⁴³ During the former's later years, inflicted by ill health and financial hardship, Aandi Arayan helped him generously.

Oppositor to Rituals and Breaking taboos

Rituals dominated by brahmanical ideology had always been a part of people's lives and the task of reforming involved immense patience, persuasion and risk. Putting an end to them made many lower castes vulnerable to the wrath of their upper caste masters and community

⁴¹ TCWV, 359-360.

⁴² *Atmavidya*, 152.

⁴³ *Brahmavratam*, 55.

lords. Even within the Tiyya community, the AVS members had to face excommunication on the dictates of prominent Tiyya men.⁴⁴

Vagbhadananda urged people to do away with the pilgrimages to Kottiyur and Kodungalloor. In the first decade of the twentieth century, he opposed the elaborate rituals and offerings at the Kottiyur temple festival, arguing it were a loss of the community's wealth. Why does a rock require ghee, he argued and led a troupe to Kottiyur, singing mockery.⁴⁵ The Atma Vidya Sangham unit at Kunnothuparambu on 1927 initiated a campaign against the ritual of *ettumaatu*, apart from calling for the abolition of rituals involving women. Instead, the only practices that the AVS adopted were prayer and meditation. The practice of community prayer was intended at bringing members together on a common platform. As in the Brahma Samaj and the SNDP, Vagbhadananda composed many hymns that were to replace elaborate rituals on special occasions such as birth and marriage. He composed prayers, catering to different groups such as women, children and the elderly. They were written in a lucid and poetic style, conveying his philosophy.⁴⁶

Under the aegis of the AVS, inter-dining and inter-caste marriages were also conducted. Vagbhadananda attributed a new meaning to such endeavours. He believed that the act of dining together or marriage between members of different castes was not enough to achieve the desired results of a casteless society. Such occurrences should happen not out of compulsion, but volition. He coined the term *preethivivaham* and *preethibhojanam*, referring to affection/happiness (*preeti*) as the basis for such actions.⁴⁷

In 1928, an inter-dining event was organised at the Pulaya habitation at North Vattakandiyil in Azhikode.⁴⁸ It was held at the premises of the Government Labour School run for lower castes. For the past five years before this event, the well-known eye doctor, K. Ramunni Vaidyar used to provide payasam for the students at the school on his birthday. However, that year, Sahodaran Ayyapan, a leading socio-political reformer and founder of

⁴⁴ K.K.N Kurup and M.S Nair, *Vagbhadananda Guru: The Power of Renaissance*, (Calicut: Kelu Ettan Study and Research Centre, 2012),. 72.

⁴⁵ Patyam Ramakrishnan, *Navothanacharyan Vagbhadanandan*, 29-31.

⁴⁶ TCWV, 165-241.

⁴⁷ K.K.N Kurup and M.S Nair, *Vagbhadananda Guru: The Power of Renaissance*, (Calicut: Kelu Ettan Study and Research Centre, 2012), 74.

⁴⁸ 80th Anniversary of Azhikode Inter-dining event, AtmaVidya Sangham Kerala State Conference, 2007: 8.

the Sahodara Sangham, was expected to arrive in the village and hence, the event was converted into an inter-dining one.⁴⁹ He gave a resounding speech to the lower castes and untouchables gathered there.

Don't caress the feet of those upper castes that trample upon you. You must defy traditional boundaries in such a way that they will label you as *dhikarikal* [rebels]. It is only then that you can rise.⁵⁰

But Ayyapan left after his address and did not participate in the event, inviting a lot of ridicule from upper caste men present at the venue. However, Ramunni Vaidyar rose to the occasion and instructed that food be served. Panic gripped the crowd and many left. Many young, upper caste children who ate the *payasam which was served* were punished by their parents and made to either vomit or consume *kalasha vellam* in order to purify themselves.⁵¹ But inter-dining was not actively taken up by the AVS on a large scale and its impact was limited. Even in the 1940s, many caste communities were reluctant to eat along with other castes, and it diluted the effect of social reform initiatives.

Similarly, inter-caste marriages were also organized by the AVS. It is known that the Sree Ramakrishna Asram at Harippad, under the aegis of Nirmalananda Swami, organised one such event in 1913. Brahmavratam mentions that it was under the leadership of the Brahma Samaj that the first inter-caste marriage was organised in Kerala.⁵² It occurred during the Annual Conference of the Brahma Samaj at Varkala, on 28-31 December 1921. Vagbhadananda was asked to preside over a session on religion at the conference. The wedding happened during this particular session, between a Brahma Samaj activist, from the Nair caste and an Ezhava woman. This event has been influential in prompting Sree Narayana Guru, Vagbhadananda and others to take forward such initiatives.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., 9

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 11. Kalasha vellam refers to a drink that would supposedly purify the body after consuming toxic substances.

⁵² Brahmavratam, *Maharshi Vagbhadananda Gurudevam*, 108.

⁵³ K.K.N Kurup and M.S.Nair, *Vagbhadananda Guru*, 85

Temple Worship

The AtmaVidya Sangham opposed temple consecration because it believed that the spread of temples encouraged polytheism and went against advaita.⁵⁴ They propagated temple buildings as ordinary structures which did not help people attain spiritual salvation and instead, diverted them from understanding the workings of their inner selves. This ignorance led people to indulge in illogical practices, aggravating their mental and physical unhappiness.⁵⁵

Temples are being filled up like the jails...temple rituals impoverish households, because people blindly take that money to priests...in short, you buy superstition with your own money! At a time when the country is increasingly suffering from poverty, it is shameful that people are despicably pouring tons of oil, coconut water, ghee and rosewater over stones and thorns.⁵⁶

One of the first tasks by lower caste religious reformers in Kerala was to discourage and prevent lower castes from the rituals performed at *kavus*. They advocated that such rituals involving animal sacrifice, alcohol and food offerings were only occasions for economic wastage, blind belief, display of vulgarism, and sexual transgression. Such acts were condemned for bringing disrepute to the 'Hindu' community in general. Vagbhadananda believed that *kavu* worship gave an opportunity to the Christians and the Muslims to ridicule and portray the Hindus, and mainly lower castes, as 'savages who upheld primitive beliefs'. The absence of a 'civilized' religion affected him greatly, because he thought, it prevented Hinduism from welcoming people into its fold. It also gave a reason for foreigners to impose their rule in the name of ushering in a civilized society and polity. Moreover, such customs did not have any acceptable scriptural validity.⁵⁷ Vagbhadananda

⁵⁴ *Karakkattu AtmaVidya Sangham Pirakkunu*, (The Karakkattu Atma Vidya Sangham is Born). (Azhikode: Azhikode Prasadheekarana Samiti), 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁶ TCWV, 366.

⁵⁷ TCWV, 427.

found the culture of *kavus* degrading and corrupting. He called them the hiding places of looters and robbery gangs in ancient times.

Earlier, these raiders and *vyabhi* entered into vulgar sexual acts which were witnessed by hapless people who believed their prayers would be heard. They donated coconut, rice, alcohol, money... In today's times, how can one tolerate this? Besides, why do we give Christians and Muslims the chance to insult us by saying that drunkards, meaningless, cruel primitive creatures are being worshipped as Hindu gods and goddesses? It is corrupting our religious tradition and morality. It also corrupts our younger generations who grow up seeing such blatant violence and immorality.⁵⁸

In the pages of his journals, Vagbhadananda mocks people for blindly following the dictates of the *velichapaadu*, a prominent figure and a mediator in the *kavus*, and for mercilessly slaughtering animals. Depicting the character of the *velichapaadu* as despicable, he notes,

Why does the *velichapaddu* grin and flash his teeth? Why does he roll his eyes? Why does he shake his body violently? Why does he jump around? These are just antics of a useless rascal, drunkard's excessive indulgences. It can't be argued otherwise⁵⁹

Such practices, he argued, went against arguing that Hinduism's compassion and love for all living creatures.⁶⁰ Besides, according to him, they had a negative impact on the women of the community. Women were supposed to be the ideal carriers of morality who had to be guarded from all external influences.

Women are fragile creatures. We should propagate beautiful and strong principles amongst them. It is only then that good values would be transmitted to their off springs.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ TCWV, 426-427.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ TCWV, 429-30.

He appreciated the Namboodiris in this regard for not letting their women go to such shrine festivals. The AVS had separate committees for women activists to discuss issues concerning women, especially in central Travancore. The AVS activists advocated equality and independence of women and argued for the need to educate them for a progressive society.⁶²

Temperance Campaigns

Vagbhadananda considered alcoholism as one of the biggest dangers in society because he held that it dimmed one's senses and led the person to commit violent, irrational acts. He appealed to them to give up alcohol.

...makes men beat up their wives, makes them believe that their fathers and mothers are servants, that trees standing are their opponents and provokes them to have a fist fight, paralyzes one's hands and legs causing them to fall unconscious on the street...destroys money and encourages shameful acts and ill feelings...⁶³

To practice the philosophy of atmavidya, Vagbhadananda urged people not to be addicted to any particular substance because it would be difficult to focus upon the inner self, and control one's wayward impulses. For social reformers like him, the campaign against alcohol was also related to the programme of persuading members of the Tiyya community to give up toddy tapping as an occupation, an activity increasingly viewed as degrading and unfit by those within and outside the community. Vagbhadananda wrote,

Tiyyas have all the opportunities to lead a decent and dignified life. They know how to use the axe and cut trees. They are skilled at breaking stone and building houses. In this age of development, it is terrible that they are involved in the making of this mad drink and ending up guilty in front of the entire world.⁶⁴

⁶² Patyam Ramakrishnan, 67-68.

⁶³ TCWV, 430.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Building Hindu unity: Temple Entry Agitations

Vagbhadananda's vision of reforming the Hindu community was closely associated with the task of constructing a Hindu identity, absolved of all those rituals and customs that hampered different castes from coming together. Such a project required the building of a new consciousness. All those ritualistic practices that non-Hindus, especially the Christian missionaries had criticized and ridiculed had to be removed in order to provide Hinduism with a new lease of life. He constantly urged different castes and sub-castes to congregate and unite like the Christians and Muslims for enterprising endeavours. A lack of unity within the Hindu community concerned him with regard to the religion's future. The Christians and the Muslims, he felt, were gaining in numbers because of their organised strength. According to him, these religions envisioned a world without borders, constantly striving to increase their numbers. On the contrary, the Hindus tried to push their own people out.⁶⁵

In 1924, an Anti-Untouchability Committee was formed within the Kerala Congress and the Vaikom satyagraha was initiated, at the insistence of activist T.K. Madhavan. Allroads, except one, were thrown open by the Maharani Regent in June 1925 after a long and protracted struggle. When the Vaikom satyagraha began, Vagbhadananda went to participate in it. But when one of his followers asked him whether the issue contradicted his principles or not, he is believed to have said, 'Temple entry is a matter of human rights. Whether one should worship in the temple or not is a different issue altogether.'⁶⁶ It was an issue concerning the Hindu community at large. Through the *Kaahalam*, he extended his support for the agitation.

Most Hindus consider god to be the great father and yet some of them deny others from approaching, touching others and moving around. Instead, they violently push them out of the temple premises. The AVS believes that crores of people will come out in support of those Congress activists who are trying to destroy this terrible, inhuman and primitive evil.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ TCWV, 898.

⁶⁶ M.S. Nair, *Vagbhatananda Guruvum Samoohika Navodhanavum* (Vagbhatananda Guru and Social Renaissance) (Thiruvananthapuram: Dept. of Cultural Publications, 1998), 106.

⁶⁷ TCWV, 435.

The AVS supported T.K. Madhavan's efforts and bestowed him with a memento in a public meeting organised on 3 May 1926, at the Kavarattu temple at Harippad in the princely state of Travancore. The gathering was presided over by Mannath Padmanabhan. Besides acknowledging his contribution to the temple entry movement, the Sangham also made another appeal,

You have the reputation of being known as the pussy footer of Travancore. Although the government has agreed to shut down liquor shops and... ashrams in the near future, we appeal to you to direct your attention towards the issue of temperance in the region as well.⁶⁸

In his reply, Madhavan stated,

Although my domain of activity is largely political, the inspirational force behind it is linked to matters of religion. From the conversations, writings and mementoes received earlier, I can ascertain that many people have not recognised this important fact. I appreciate that the AVS, on the contrary has realised this... Temple entry agitation is only one aspect of the larger programme of reforming Hinduism and upholding Hindu dharma. This has also been mentioned repeatedly by Gandhi who was not keen in making this a Congress led agitation but instead wanted it to be organised under the aegis of the Hindu community as a whole.⁶⁹

In 1932, an agitation for temple entry began in Guruvayoor. Kelappan, with Gandhi's approval, went on a fast. Vagbhadananda, along with scholars like Madhusoodhanan Thangal and K.T. Chandu Nambiar went to Guruvayoor.⁷⁰ There, they spoke against the orthodoxy's high handedness and Vagbhadananda critiqued Sahodaran Ayyappan for opposing Gandhi. Although he was against temple worship, Vagbhadananda gauged the importance of lower

⁶⁸ *Atmavidya*, Volume 5, Issue 4, 29- 31.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Madhusoodhanan Thangal was a prominent Namboodiri landlord in Malabar, member of the Madras Legislative Council and President of the Yogashema Sabha in 1933-34. K.T Chandu Nambiar (1889-1948) was a well known orator, writer and advocate from Thalassery, closely associated with the reform movements of the period.

castes gaining temple entry and using public roads around them. Such rights would mark the gradual destruction of upper caste domination and impart equality vis-a-vis the question of public access. However, the question of Tiyyas excluding untouchable castes such as Pulayas and Cherumas from worshipping in their temples remained an uncomfortable and thorny issue in later years for the community as a whole.

During the agitation, Vagbhadananda wrote,

The sastras proclaim that god resides within everyone... God does not suffer from this madness called distance pollution. Instead, it is those controlling temples who find this practice necessary. But they do not realize that they bathe and go to worship a God that touches everyone... God is not paranoid about untouchability. Perhaps, those who sit at the helm of temple affairs need a dose of distance pollution.⁷¹

Impressed by Gandhi's political usage of satyagraha in the anti-untouchability and temple entry campaigns, he extended support to his actions.

Gandhi raised a few questions to the upper castes who were opposing the satyagraha for temple entry. A Sanatanist, Pulpakkara Damodaran Namoodiri replied to them in a newspaper editorial of *Santana Hindu*, questioning Gandhi's religious authority and intentions. In an essay titled, *Gandhijiyum Shastra Vyakhyavanum* (Gandhiji and Scientific Interpretation), Vagbhadananda wrote a scathing critique of Damodaran Namoodiri in the *Atmavidya Kaahalam*, deconstructing each of his answers and claiming them to be unscientific and irrational. Vagbhadananda had been impressed with Gandhi's use of satyagraha in the fight for political freedom and held similar views on untouchability, varna and right to temple entry.⁷² He praised Gandhi for symbolising a moral force, so badly wanting in Indian society. His participation in the national movement arose from the understanding that social freedom should go hand in hand with political freedom. Under colonial rule, the movement for social equality would remain hollow and incomplete.

⁷¹ TCVW, 834.

To understand Vagbhadananda's association in the nationalist movement, let us briefly examine the questions posed by Gandhi and Damodaran Namboodiri's replies.⁷³

Question 1: According to the Shastras, what is untouchability?

Answer:...untouchability is that substance which defiles the human body upon coming into contact with the lower castes, and can be destroyed only by bodily cleansing.

Question 2: Does the term 'untouchables' referred to in the Shastras apply to those present today?

Answer: Yes

Question 3: What are the prohibitions imposed on the untouchables?

Answer: (Namboodiri refers to a plenty of things, in particular, the prohibition on intercourse. By the grace or will of God, if intercourse occurs, a Sanatanist has to undergo a series of expiation rites. He also remarks that this question is a foolish and cruel one)

Question 4: Can a person attain liberation from untouchability during his/her lifetime?

Answer: No

Question 5: What are the rules regarding interaction between untouchables and untouchables in the Shastras?

Answer: No answer.

Question 6: Under what circumstances does the Shastras allow temple entry to the untouchables?

Answer: Only in the matter of temple building.

Question 7: Which are the Shastras?

⁷³ Vagbhadananda Gurudevan, *Gandhijiyum Sastra Vyakhyavanum* (Gandhiji and Scientific Analysis) (Kannur: Azhikode Prasadheekarana Samiti, 2002), 7-9.

Answer: Shruti and Smritis.

Question 8: How will you prove the reliability of the Shastras?

Answer: Despite Guruvayoorappan propounding the extraordinariness of the Sastras', one cannot make a shameless heretic yield to it.

Question 9: If there is a difference of opinion between the Shastras and its various interpretations, how is one to decide?

Answer: Just choose the interpretation of 'Mahimanastotra'.

Question 10: What are your decisions?

Answer: One should live without violating a single rule of distance pollution.

Vagbhadananda analysed each of those answers, claiming them to be unscientific and irrational. The Guruvayur satyagraha was targeted at wresting the right to worship in the Brahmin-controlled Guruvayoor temple in Malabar. Despite extending his support to the anti-untouchability and temple entry campaigns, Gandhi succeeded in convincing Kelappan to give up his fast. He wrote to the Zamorin of Calicut demanding the opening of temple or a referendum to gauge public opinion.

Regarding the question of who is an untouchable, Vagbhadananda argued that the Shastras did not refer to any particular group of people. Instead, it was a label for deceitful, jealous and hot tempered people and those who did not maintain personal hygiene.⁷⁴ He stated the similarity with Gandhi's position. Untouchables were non-adherents to physical hygiene and religious purity. He gave a stinging response to Namboodiri's statement that if God willing, intercourse happened upper castes had to purify themselves. Interestingly, Vagbhadananda points to communal rivalry and tension prevalent in Malabar during that period. He comments that when God became enraged at the endless gluttony and greed of the upper castes that never cared to acknowledge the hard physical labour of the untouchables, the former was punished by thrashings at the hands of their Muslim brethren. During such occurrences, the upper castes would hide in the humble dwellings of the untouchables, otherwise shunned away from sight. Afterwards, when the turmoil subsided, they secretly

⁷⁴ Ibid., 17.

escaped from these houses like rats and indulged in expiation rites. These rites included drinking a mixture of a cow's urine and faeces.⁷⁵ He states further, 'Only God can make Sanatanists commit such acts. If this is God's will, then so be it!'

Thus, his exposition of Gandhi's views on untouchability elaborated upon the irrationality of the system. He ridiculed the Santanists for dividing the community and bringing dishonour by falsely interpreting the Shastras. Vagbhadananda defended Gandhi's interference in matters deemed religious. Vagbhadananda refused to bow down to the Sanatanist attack on Gandhi that he was involving himself in temple entry to manipulate believers.⁷⁶ He countered their critique that politics and religion were two separate issues. Sanatana Dharma is meant to propagate the message of peace and non-violence not war, writes Vagbhadananda. But such a world can only be realized in the political realm of people's lives, not in forests.⁷⁷ For that, great political activists are required, not cowards.⁷⁸ In the history of the world, all founders of major religions have also been political leaders revolting against the exploitative system.

When God became enraged at the endless gluttony and greed of the upper castes who never cared to acknowledge the hard physical labour of the untouchables, the former was punished by thrashings at the hands of their Muslim brethren. During such occurrences, the upper castes would hide in the humble dwellings of the untouchables, otherwise shunned away from sight. Afterwards, when the turmoil subsided, they secretly escaped from these houses like rats and indulged in expiation rites. These rites included drinking a mixture of a cow's urine and faeces.⁷⁹

The *Kaahalam* played a prominent role throughout the 1930s supporting the mainstream nationalist movement led by Gandhi. Through its editorials, Vagbhadananda argued in favour of the Congress' anti-untouchability, khadi promotion, and temperance and Harijan upliftment campaigns. The AVS' anti-colonial and anti-imperialist positions were

⁷⁵ Ibid., 20-21.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁷⁷ Vagbhadananda Gurudevan, *Gandhijiyum Sastra Vyakhyavanum*, 38.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 39.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 21.

clear when many of its prominent activists, namely M.T. Kumaran, T.V. Ananthan, P. Achutanandan, T.V. Kutty and A. Chatthu Master courted jail imprisonment for their participation in the nationalist movement.⁸⁰

Workers and Peasant Struggles

Under Vagbhadananda's leadership, the Sangham could not divorce itself from issues of agrarian labour and exploitation as long as it sought to break upper caste control over land and property resources. The *jennmis* attacked the organisation by denying work to those agricultural labourers who had become its members. At that crucial juncture, Vagbhadananda aided by a group of workers decided to form the *Uralungal Koolivelakkarude Paraspara Sahaya Sangham* (Uralungal Contract Labour Cooperative Association) in 1925. It was premised on the idea that cooperation is strength.

The Madras Cooperatives Act had been passed in 1912 and there was a spurt in cooperative societies in the Madras Presidency, mostly consumer cooperatives. It must have been possible then that Vagbhadananda was familiar with the idea of cooperatives as a form of labour organisation. The Board of Directors, which was known as Panchayat then, consisted of fourteen members, all of whom were involved in manual work, except Vagbhadananda who only provided the initial ideological thrust to it. These labourers were engaged in tasks such as extracting fish oil, digging wells, building cane fences, harvesting and stone cutting. The labour cooperative intended to supply contract labour for the Public Works Department of the British administration. The first meeting of the Society was held at the premises of the AVS' prayer hall. Sixteen persons were given membership on that day. One of the bylaws of the Society states,

The objects of the Society shall be: - to promote the economic interests of the labourer and of the society and to find suitable and profitable employment for them by obtaining contracts from Government, public, private bodies or individuals, and by

⁸⁰M.S.Nair and K.K.N Kurup, 50.

executing those contracts through or with the help of the members and to encourage thrift, self-help, and cooperation among the members.

Membership was restricted to workers from Uralungal, a village in Kozhikode. Every member was allowed to take a minimum of one share, but not more than ten; and initially an entrance fee of four annas was charged.⁸¹ In 1926, the Malabar District Board had sanctioned a loan of Rs. 500 for the Society but they did not receive any contract for a major part of the year. There was talk of dissolving the Society, but Vagbhadananda intervened and appealed to the Registrar of Cooperative Societies in 1928, following which they received their first contract.⁸² Initially, the Board borrowed cash on credit from financially well-off people from the region and paid the workers. Subsequently, three small contracts amounting to Rs. 926 were received and at the end of the work, a profit of twelve rupees was made and until 1964, the Secretary was not provided any regular salary. It was owing to the determination of the earliest members that they were able to manage the work and affairs of the Society without expecting any monetary benefit in return.

The seasonal nature of agricultural work also allowed these labourers to take up contract labour and make attempts to move away from their dependence of landlords all year around. This attempt at breaking down dependent relations was crucial in enhancing a notion of the 'free self'. Although contract labour necessarily did not translate into occupational mobility, it nevertheless allowed agricultural labourers to distance themselves from their traditional obligations. It was re-registered in 1967 as Uralungal Labour Contract Cooperative Society (henceforth ULCCS) and has since retained its name. The ULCCS has been able to retain its self-reliant character and those involved come under three categories: members, non-member workers and employees.⁸³

One is not sure whether Vagbhadananda envisioned cooperatives as an alternative to capitalism or not. His idea of setting up a cooperative can be partly traced to the general political developments of the period but largely, it was circumstantial. He was more

⁸¹ Anna is a currency unit, formerly used in India, equivalent to one-sixth of the rupee.

⁸² Karakaatu Atmavidya Sangham Pirakkunu, 10

⁸³ Rajindar Choudhary, 'The ULCCS: An 80-Year-Old Construction Labour Cooperative,' *International Journal of Rural Management*, October 2005 1: 263-284.

particularly concerned with questions of faith as a form of self-redefinition.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, his effort to build a labour cooperative as part of socio-religious reform is a pioneering one. It remains to be explored how labour organisation could be integrated into a project of social reform in an agrarian colonial economy. It is a highlight in the history of contemporary Kerala and cooperative movement in India because the ULCCS recently completed 86 years and continues to remain a participatory body reaching out to a number of workers.

Vagbhadananda also extended his support to peasant and workers' struggles. He did not view caste and land relations as independent of each other. Under his leadership, the AVS became actively involved in the agitations led by peasant associations known as Karshaka Sanghams (Peasant Associations). An *Abhinava Kerala Yuvak Sangham* came into existence in Karivelloor, organised by A.V. Kunhambu.⁸⁵ The name of the organisation seems to have been inspired by Vagbhadananda's *Abhinava Keralam* owing to Kunhambu's association with the reformer. Vagbhadananda extended his solidarity to the peasants and presided over the first annual meeting of the Yuvak Sangham at Karivelloor. The Yuvak Sangham formed numerous small Karshaka (peasant) committees and through them initiated programmes such as night schools, propagation of Hindi, building nationalist consciousness and safeguarding the financial interests of the peasants. Later, the committees merged with the Communist movement that emerged in the 1940s.⁸⁶ He also participated on the side of the workers. In 1932, he wrote about the inhuman exploitation of workers when a worker was brutally assaulted at the Calicut Commonwealth Company by the European manager.

...the company owners who have no sort of brotherly attachment and not even social attachment and who have no hesitation in beating the workers with their chappals...do these millionaires live happily sucking the life blood and breath of the workers, and lying on the beds of the dry nerves and skin of the workers, in the multi storied

⁸⁴I thank Janaki Nair for making this point.

⁸⁵ A.V. Kunhambu was a youth leader of the peasant agitations, who later joined the Communist party.

⁸⁶K.K.N Kurup, *Modern Kerala*, 99.

bungalows built on the skeleton like bodies of the starving lakhs crying with deadly pain, see the sadness of the workers who are on the verge of death?⁸⁷

Later, in 1936, a Dalit worker was assaulted to death by the manager in the Feroke Tile factory. Under the leadership of K.P. Gopalan, who later became a major leader of the Communist movement, a ten day-long hunger strike was waged. Vagbhadananda supported this agitation and spoke out against the exploitation of workers by the management aided by the government's anti-poor measures.⁸⁸ Alongside, the CSP also embarked upon a project of reaching out to a wider audience through the setting up of village libraries and bringing together progressive writers and artistes. Vagbhadananda enthusiastically campaigned for the establishment of rural libraries in North Malabar. In 1936, a library in Vagbhadananda's name was established at Patyam, his native village. 'Vagbhadanada Vilasam', Kuthuparamba, Kannur (May 1929), Pattiam Gurudevavilasam Library, Thalassery, Kannur (August 29, 1936), Sree Vagbhadananda Library, Azhikode, Kannur (1939), SreeVagbhadananda Gurudeva Memorial Library, Kuthuparamba, Kannur (1956), SreeVagbhadananda Library, Eranhipalam, Kozhikode (1939) are libraries established by the Atma Vidya Sangham.⁸⁹

In 1939, owing to ill health, Vagbhadananda became bed ridden and soon passed away. His death left a glaring absence in the organization, which had by then been absorbed largely by the emergent peasant associations and Communist movement.⁹⁰ The Sangham's popularity waned but it has nevertheless continued to uphold its principles.. The following chapter is a short comparison between Narayana Guru and Vagbhadananda to discern the means and ends of both the reformers, and their place in contemporary Kerala history. In order to understand the reasons for Atma Vidya Sangham's gradual decline in the State, it is imperative to examine the trajectory followed by the SNDP and the changing political contours in the region, with the growth of identity based politics.

⁸⁷ K.K.N.Kurup and M.S. Nair, 35

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ A. Sudha, 'Organisation, Administration, Resources, Services, and Utilisation of the Public Libraries in Malabar: An Evaluative Study', Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (University of Calicut, 2007), 88.

⁹⁰ Kurup, *Modern Kerala*, 99.

Narayana Guru and Vagbhadananda

An examination into the reasons for the decline of the Atma Vidya Sangham must take into consideration other contending historical characters and factors of the period. This chapter deals with a short comparison between Narayana Guru's and Vagbhadananda Gurudevar's approaches to social reform. The former has received extensive attention from historians who have sidelined other social reform movements of the twentieth century Kerala, either as an off shoot of his work or largely influenced by it. A comparison is being undertaken here to put into perspective the specificities of Vagbhadananda's reform activities through the AtmaVidya Sangham. Both Narayana Guru and Vagbhadananda were advaitins, and worked for the betterment of lower castes, primarily the Ezhava community to which they belonged. However, the reasons for their varying success and shortcomings are owing to the different ways in which they reinterpreted philosophy for social change. Narayana Guru (1856-1928) worked mostly in the princely Travancore, and Vagbhadananda's activities were significantly based in the British Malabar and this difference in location affected the nature of their endeavors and the responses towards it, from a range of state and non-state actors.

By the turn of the twentieth century, a certain section of the Ezhavas of Travancore, benefitting from education and diversified employment, waged a struggle to achieve civil liberties such as right to education, right to use public roads and temple entry. It is this motley group of English educated Ezhavas, which formed the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) in 1903 to bring together the community for greater self-assertion, both socially and economically. They sought to seek an ideological backing for their civil rights movement, and found this in Narayana Guru's radical interpretation of vedanta espousing egalitarianism.⁹¹

Sengaku Mayeda, "Sankara and Narayana Guru", in *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, ed. Gerald James Larson, Eliot Deutsch, (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishing, 1989) 184-202

Apart from the demands for education, the emergent middle class Ezhavas also mobilized support to pressurize the government for the right to land ownership and government jobs. Although such demands stood to benefit only a particular group of professionals and activists, it nevertheless propelled the SNDP as the representative of the Ezhavas and Tiyyas across the princely states and British controlled Malabar. During the same period, Malabar was reeling under economic distress, immense agrarian unrest and administrative backlash. Coupled with the caste order, the Tiyyas suffered numerous disabilities under feudal exploitation. Their changing economic status due to the availability of education and jobs, was not reflected in their social status. But the growth of caste associations helped to mobilize the Tiyyas and other untouchable groups towards both social reform and political activity. Unlike Travancore, the movement in Malabar could not isolate itself from the nationalist struggle for long, and the anti-caste sentiments of the untouchables were intertwined with anti-imperialist protest actions as well.

Narayana Guru: An All-Embracing Philosopher

Narayana Guru, known as Nanu Asan in his earlier years, was born into an Ezhava family in 1856, at Chempazhanti, in the erstwhile princely state of Travancore. He received primary education in Sanskrit and later learned Tamil, which allowed him to read the works of Saivite saints who exerted a considerable influence on his literary works and philosophical thought. He was closely associated with Chattampi Swamikal and Thycaud Ayya, who taught him yoga and various scriptures.¹

After leading a wanderer's life, at the age of thirty three, he decided to settle down and came to Aruvippuram.² There, he meant to lead a solitary life, but soon got acquainted with the people. After listening to the injustices meted out to them by the upper castes and restrictions imposed on temple worship, Narayana Guru decided to consecrate a temple. This event marked the beginning of his life as an ardent social reformer, and he interpreted

¹ Chattampi Swami was a Hindu social reformer, hailing from the Nair community. He worked to consolidate the Nairs and extended support in the struggle against untouchability. For more details, see R. Raman Nair and L. Sulochana Devi, *Chattampi Swami: An Intellectual Biography*, South Indian Studies, 2010) and Velayudhan Nair, ed. *Vidyadhiraja Chattampi Swamikal* (Trivandrum: Vidyadhiraja Visvakendra, 1995). Thycaud Ayya (1813-1909) was a scholar and Saivite saint who lived in Trivandrum. He was an exponent of siva rajayoga.

² T. Bhaskaran, *Maharshi Sree Narayana Guru* (Trivandrum: The State Institute of Languages, 1985), 51-61.

Sankara's philosophy of non-duality for completely different ends.³ Befriending the poor and needy during his many travels gave a practical orientation to Guru's philosophy. 'Out of these disparate experiences', argues Sreenivasan, 'as an ascetic and as a man of the world, and also owing to them, there evolved his philosophy, which accords pride of place to atma vidya or self-instruction.'⁴

By installing a stone idol, and calling it an Ezhava Siva at the banks of Aruvippuram in 1888, Narayana Guru directed a stern challenge to the upper castes and their sole claim to priesthood.⁵ By observing the consecration rituals on his own, he exhorted the untouchables to build temples for their own social good. Temples, according to him, were not merely places of worship but centres of socialization, cultural and literary activity. He accorded more importance to building schools, gardens and libraries around them. Opposing brahmanical prejudices that the laboring castes were unhygienic and degrading, he urged his followers to maintain the temple premises clean so as to enable it to be a place for people to come together, discuss matters and organize for action. No caste or religious discrimination was to be observed. Opposing the practice of rituals and elaborate ceremonies, he advised people to donate money to temples so that it could be used for the welfare of the poor.⁶ He is one in whom, writes Nataraja Guru,

the same advaita vedanta is treated with a freshness often startlingly and unique and simple, taking into its scope and purview, more consciously and wakefully, not only subjective idealistic varieties, but also all those secondary implications that vedants has, or can have, bearing on such human topics as equality and justice.⁷

³ Sengaku Mayeda, "Sankara and Narayana Guru", in *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, ed. Gerald James Larson, Eliot Deutsch, (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishing, 1989) 184-202

⁴ K Sreenivasan, *Sree Narayana Guru: Saint, Philosopher, Humanist (Trivandrum: Jayashree Publications, 1989)*, 24.

⁵ T.Bhaskaran, 53.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁷ Nataraja Guru, *The Word of the Guru: The Life and Teaching of Guru Narayana* (New Delhi: D.K Printworld), 61.

According to advaita, the Ultimate Reality or Supreme Being was formless, and no idol could replace it. Yet, Guru founded temples for practical purposes because that was the site for revolting against brahmanical domination, and what the people understood and wanted. The biggest challenge for the lower castes was within the social system, and not external to it. The prevalence of exploitative practices such as untouchability had led to acute misery for these groups, whose social and occupational mobility was limited due to lack of education and property. Caste was intertwined with Hindu religious thought, and any opposition to it had to be based on the language of religion to gain popular legitimacy.

Acceding to the requests of the Ezhava/Tiyya community across Kerala, Narayana Guru founded numerous temples. But he argued that these did not imbue meaning because people worshipped god, not the stone idol.⁸ It is estimated that he founded around eighty eight temples and alongside each of them, set up ‘desha sabhas’ or area management committees, to look into the affairs of the temple and help the populace of the region.⁹ The consecration of Siva, Subrahmanyam and Visnu, considered to be upper caste deities was a symbolic breaking down of the latter’s hegemony over temple worship. Narayana Guru sought to substitute lower caste ritualistic practices with those of the upper castes, claiming equal treatment for all. However, his consecrations, especially two of them, have gained immense significance for their uniqueness. It was done to signify the teachings of vedanta. At Murukkumpuzha, he installed a lighted lamp, and at Kalavamkod in Chertala, he placed a mirror with ‘om’ inscribed on it.¹⁰Guru’s actions highlighted his non-belief in *maya*, compared to Sankara. The latter proclaimed the material world to be an illusion, and the brahman or the absolute was the only real thing. But Narayana Guru did not perceive *maya* as an evil, and disagreed that the phenomenal world and reality are different from each other.¹¹.By denying this duality, he emphasized on the oneness of all substances. This knowledge is what he calls *arivu*, which forms the pivot of his philosophy.

In 1903, the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam was formed to carry forward Guru’s endeavours for internal reform in a collective manner. Its stated aims were to manage

⁸ T. Bhaskaran, *Maharshi Sree Narayana Guru*, 248.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹ Sreenivasan,34.

the temples under its banner, provide education to the Ezhava community, encourage agriculture, industry, and craft and build temples, schools, work centres and credit facilities to achieve them.¹² But it was not meant to advance Narayana Guru's philosophical expositions. The Ezhava community was seeking to organize itself to achieve economic well-being, and stake claims to public resources, such as education and employment. Their efforts were driven by a sense of self-awareness and community consciousness. In the first meeting of the SNDP, Dr. Palpu stated,

What we must try to do through this organization is to try for the prosperity of our caste by every means...there should be no man without primary education...There is no one who has that much skill as ourselves in farming, craftsmanship and trading...¹³

Narayana Guru advised the leaders of the SNDP to work towards expanding education, which he perceived to be a major tool for mobility and breaking down ignorance to usher in harmony into the world.¹⁴ He also campaigned for female education and stressed the need to educate women in Sanskrit and English, an indication that the community had to adapt itself to changing times. Following Dr. Palpu's suggestions, Stree Samajams (Women's Associations) were decided to be held alongside annual SNDP conferences.¹⁵ The fortnightly magazine, *Vivekodayam*, the SNDP's major mouthpiece, also began its publication in 1904; and in it, Narayana Guru constantly made appeals for reform. He opposed the redundant rituals prevalent in the community, including *thalikettu*, *thirandukuli* and *puli kuli*, and urged people to reform ceremonies such as marriage. He also dissuaded the Ezhavas from worshipping animistic deities in groves and shrines, considered to be a lower form of worship. In a bid to alter the community's social position, he urged them to abstain from rituals involving animal sacrifices, singing of vulgar songs and offerings of toddy and other produce, for their spiritual well-being as well.

To the animal lover who

¹² T.Bhaskaran, 98.

¹³ Thomas Isaac and Michael Tharakan, 'Sree Narayana Movement in Travancore, 1888-1939, A Study of Social Basis and Ideological Reproduction', *Working Paper No. 214*, CDS, 1986:

¹⁴ Bhaskaran, 99.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

Neither harms nor ropes

Nor kills any creature,

Accrues the supreme happiness.¹⁶

Narayana Guru never stayed in a particular place for long and in 1904, moved to Varkala, near the coast. There he founded an ashram on top of a hill and named it Sivagiri. He consecrated a Sarada temple here in 1912, conceiving Sarada, traditionally known as the goddess of learning, as the eternal mother, and dedicated a hymn, titled, ‘A Bouquet of Nine Gems to the Mother’. This installation symbolized the importance of knowledge, considered to be equivalent to financial wealth by Guru¹⁷ Near to this was situated the Varkala Janardhana temple which annually witnessed a flood of people thronging to observe rituals for the deceased. But lower caste people attending it were discriminated. To put an end to this, Guru opened the Sivagiri temple premises for everyone to come and perform the required rituals.¹⁸ However, he left for Alwaye soon where he established an advaita ashram and a Sanskrit school, providing free residence for students belonging to all castes.¹⁹

By 1917, Guru expressed discontent at the practice of establishing temples, owing largely to the refusal shown by the Ezhavas to allow entry for Pulayas. He declared,

Temple consecration must not be further encouraged. People’s faith in temple worship is declining. There is a chance that they shall grieve about the money spent on building temples. But people will not pay heed to my exhortation. If need be, let small temples be founded but the main place of worship must be schools...I thought temples would bring together people, cutting across caste differences. But experience has shown otherwise. Temples have perpetuated caste distinctions. We must now attempt to build more schools for people. Let there be knowledge.²⁰

¹⁶ Narayana Guru, Complete Works: Translated and Introduced by Muni Narayana Prasad (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2007), 329.

¹⁷ Sreenivasan, 60-61.

¹⁸ Ibid., 91.

¹⁹ T. Bhaskaran, 109.

²⁰ Ibid., 251.

This was a sign of the strains that had arisen between him and the SNDP which was moving towards an intensified agitation for gaining political rights, and building an exclusive Ezhava identity. But they all sought Guru's moral authority. Yet, a small Ezhava elite were also making profits from the toddy business, which was disapproved by Narayana Guru. These tensions culminated into Narayana Guru seeking to distance him from the affairs of the organization and admit that the SNDP had exhibited sectarianism and particularism instead of embracing universalism.

The notion of community was central to Guru's social reform. It was the site of individual and collective practices, as Udaya Kumar points out.²¹ When the constitution and bye laws of the SNDP was read out to him in the first meeting, Guru objected to the meaning implied in the word, 'samudayam'. His followers were not willing to include all untouchables into its fold, and restricted itself to the Ezhavas, Tiyyas, Billavas and Nadars.²² The philosopher emphasized on the distinctions between community and religion, and did not subordinate one to another. He sought to redefine the body of the community, just as much as he wanted to denude the human body of the false differentiations imposed upon it by caste. Placing the body at the heart of the discourse, a modern subjectivity for the Ezhava community was sought to be created.²³ The caste system perpetuated inequality through a range of markers on the body, which distinguished individuals from one another, through clothing, hair, jewelry, conduct.²⁴ To break this inequality, one had to destroy these markers of differentiation. With his proclamation of, 'One caste, one religion, one god for all', Guru stressed on the commonality of certain conditions of existence shared by human beings. Humanity was the only caste to which people belonged.

Within a species, does it not,

Offspring, truly breed?

That human species, thus seen,

²¹Udaya Kumar, Self, body and inner sense: Some reflections on SreeNarayana Guru and Kumaran Asan, *Studies in History*, August 1997 13: 247-270.

²²S.Omana, *Philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru*, (Varkala: Narayana Gurukula, 1984), 27.

²³ Udaya Kumar, Self, body and inner sense: Some reflections on SreeNarayana Guru and Kumaran Asan, *Studies in History*, August 1997 13: 247-270

²⁴ Ibid., 257-59

To a single species belongs.

Of the human species

Is a Brahmin born

As is a pariah too.

Where is caste difference, then?

Amongst the human species?²⁵

By arguing that both the Brahmin and the Pariah belonged to the same species by virtue of their origins, he argued for the removal of distinctions between them, reinforced primarily by caste.

As knowledge of oneself shrinks,

Conscience becomes prevalent

It assuming names and forms

In a most terrible fashion,

Looms here ghost-like.²⁶

The reference to a ghost-like demon is a reminder of the injustices of the caste system, a human creation.

With the body assuming centrality, hygiene became an important aspect of redefining the body of the Ezhava. Narayana Guru's exhortations for hygiene were an attempt to invert the logic of distance pollution by 'placing the onus on the self'.²⁷

Ask for the name,

Place and calling.

²⁵ Muni Narayana Prasad trans.,331-32.

²⁶ Muni Narayana Prasad, 280.

²⁷ Udaya Kumar, 256.

(of someone you meet).

“do not ever ask

:who you are (by caste)?”

Because the body itself

Tells you of the truth.²⁸

This practice of observing hygiene was translated to other spheres of individual and collective Ezhava activity. On 16 October 1905, at the SNDP's Paravur annual conference, Narayana Guru called for the abolition of customs like *talikettu*, *thirandu kalyanam*, animal sacrifices and toddy drinking.²⁹ Under the banner of the SNDP, temperance campaigns were also launched. However, owing to changes in excise regulations, many Ezhavas became abkaris and bought a significant number of licenses for toddy production and distribution. Guru was against the accumulation of such wealth from the toddy business because it was antithetical to what he had preached. The low status attributed to the Ezhavas was largely because of their occupational association with toddy tapping, perceived as polluting by upper castes. Guru gave a clarion call to stop toddy tapping and drinking. He stated, 'The toddy tapper's body will stink, his dress will stink, his house will stink, indeed whatever he touches will stink..³⁰ Moreover, it was also a call to the community to diversify their occupations, and take advantage of the new economic activities thrown open by the commercialization of agriculture and plantation economy.

The Indian National Congress had restricted its political activity to British India; the impact of the Non-Cooperation movement was felt in Travancore only by the 1920s. The lower castes of Travancore were humiliated by the disabilities imposed upon them by the orthodox Hindu administration. As I have noted earlier, upon T.K Madhavan's insistence, a satyagraha was launched at Vaikom by the Congress in 1924 to protest against the prohibition of public roads around temples for untouchables. Narayana guru extended his support to the satyagrahis. He offered the velloor mattom and raised funds for the agitation. However, a

²⁸ Muni Narayana Prasad trans., 334.

²⁹ Raman Karunakaran, *Darsanamala of Narayana Guru*, (Sri Sankara Sanskrit Vidyapeetham, 1983),8.

³⁰ Karunakaran, 10.

newspaper report surfaced during this time, stating that Guru suggested the use of force to scale the barricades of the temple. Gandhi condemned this by saying it was an open call for violence. However, the former sent him a letter, clarifying that the journalist had misunderstood him and he was totally against the use of violence in any protest against untouchability. Later, in 1925, Gandhi reached Vaikom to break the deadlock in the satyagraha and visited Narayana Guru at Sivagiri. They conversed on conversion and Hinduism. Unlike Guru who held there was that all religions were the same, Gandhi espoused that there would be as many religions according to people's experiences, thoughts and approaches to life's problems. He upheld the varnasrama dharmacclaiming it as a healthy and effective form of social organisation.

Narayana Guru did not propagate religious conversion. But he knew that lower castes were turning towards Christianity and Islam owing to the inhuman practices followed within Hinduism. Varna and caste, for him, were synonymous, and there was nothing inherently good or permanent about the two.³¹ The hierarchical social system, based on heredity, was a disharmonious, destructive and inhibiting structure, which had to be abandoned. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the idea of religious tolerance. There was a negative connotation to tolerance, which could only be truly achieved by generous, large hearted people. One had to move beyond the notion of tolerance and attempt to learn the goodness of every religion and share their knowledge.³²

Guru practiced an all-embracing philosophy which allowed different shades of opinion to coexist. This is perhaps the biggest reason why rationalists like Sahodaran Ayyapan and Congress loyalists like T.K.Madhavan could also find a place within his fold. Guru inspired the Ezhavas of Cochin and Malabar to organize for their struggles, and provided the impetus for the community to unite. Moreover, he envisioned a casteless society, and worked to reform it from within. Although, he focused upon the Ezhavas, Guru attempted to expand their boundaries and do away with caste distinctions to make society inclusive. Yet, by the 1930s, caste-based and communal organisations gained wider appeal in Travancore, and entered the political arena. The SNDP, which began as the spokesperson for

³¹ Bhaskaran, 149-151.

³² Bhaskaran, 256.

the rights of untouchables reduced itself to an exclusive caste organization that concentrated on their material and political benefits alone.

Many scholars have argued that Narayana Guru's reform endeavors signify sanskritisation.³³ The replacement of a plethora of lower caste deities by upper caste ones is cited as the key instance of his sankritising tendencies. However, following Chandramohan's argument, we find that Narayana Guru's critique was not couched strictly within the framework of sanskritisation or western modernization. It was a blend of pre-colonial popular protest traditions and an anti-caste ideology that was expressed through religious idioms, since religion was the language comprehensible to all social groups at that point in time. Besides, by consecrating Brahmanical gods, Narayana Guru was breaking down upper caste hegemony over temple entry and worship. The quest for forging a modern identity was integral to lower caste reform movements, and Narayana Guru was no exception. The clarion call for education was an indispensable factor in the creation of a modern self, devoid of past histories of oppression.

The SNDP wished to spread to Cochin and Malabar, and despite the presence of activists from the region in their struggles in Travancore, felt the need to form local associations. C. Krishnan, Rarichan Mooppan, Murkoth Kumaran, Ravunni Vakeel, amongst others from Malabar provided leadership to the SNDP's campaigns in Travancore. In the fourth annual conference of the SNDP, planning sessions were organized in Thalassery and a conference at Kannur.³⁴

Vagbhadananda and AtmaVidya Sangham (AVS)

The histories of the SNDP do not mention Vagbhadananda despite him hailing from the Tiyya/Ezhava community. This is perhaps because, before founding the AtmaVidya Sangham in 1917, Vagbhadananda was actively involved in propagating Sivayogi's philosophy of *ananda*, and the latter was known to be critical of Guru's practice of temple consecration. Moreover, it was in the same year that Narayana Guru expressed his dissatisfaction openly at the way some wealthy members of the Ezhava community were excluding other untouchable groups from accessing temples build by the former as well as

³³ Geneviève Lemerçinier and Francis Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Kerala*, (Delhi: D.K Agencies, 1984)

³⁴ Bhaskaran, 85.

turning the toddy trade into a profitable business, sidelining his opinion on many counts. These differences on temple consecration were highlighted when Vagbhadananda met Guru in 1914 at Alwaye. At the time, the former was involved in propagating Sivayogi's expositions on *rajayogam*. However, Narayana Guru explained his position and led the young reformer to conclude that both of them were traversing the same path.

Narayana Guru: Who are you?

Vagbhadananda: I am an enemy of yours.

... I have heard that you are someone who is building temples for the Ezhavas and Tiyyas of the Hindu community by installing stone idols and spreading ignorance. On the contrary, I am labelled me your enemy but I am not so.

... I think your practice goes against what the sages have preached..I believe that you are strengthening idol worship.

Narayana Guru: That is wrong. I am on your side only... I shall explain...The great Hindu religion has been degraded because of meaningless caste divisions and idol worship. But how much ever you tell this to Hindus, they will not listen... those who wish to donate one rupee to the temple end up giving five rupees, but for whom? For people who abuse those who donate. We must stop paying wages to these abusive people. If a Tiyya converts, then he shall not give those wages, and nobody shall ever abuse him again. Hence, I am advising them to invest all their money they throw into the sea on land.³⁵

Further, Guru stated that he had not consecrated any idols and that those were done by young, strong men who accompanied him on his travels. Vagbhadananda urged Narayana Guru to convey this to the people, owing to the latter's popularity and dispel the myths held by them about the Guru's so-called powers.³⁶ After the conversation, the young reformer was also invited to speak to the residents of the ashram. In a meeting, presided by Guru, he spoke sharply against idol worship and caste, upholding *advaita* and *rajayogam*.

³⁵ *Atmavidya*, Volume 5, Issue 4, October 1997: 38

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Later, in the *Sivayogi Vilasini*, Vagbhadananda made an appeal not to view Narayana Guru in a wrong light as was being done and urged readers to understand the truth of his philosophical expositions. He felt it went against advaita, which claimed god to be formless in nature. Instead, he emphasized upon opposing practices such as untouchability and rituals which prevented the lower castes from enjoying the same privileges as the upper castes. He linked his critique of priesthood and brahmanical domination with that of feudalism, as the upper castes also constituted the landlord class. Rituals, for Vagbhadananda, was wastage of the produce earned by the lower castes, which went in ensuring the status of the Brahmins who condemned manual work. His various speeches and debates highlighted the need to abolish those rituals observed by lower castes that perpetuated their misery even further.

At a time when the Ananda Samajam and the SNDP followers were at loggerheads, this meeting between the two philosophers was of significance. Vagbhadnanda's followers have claimed that Narayana Guru was deeply influenced by the former's expositions on idol worship, and realized the futility of building temples, which was reflected in his 1917 declaration. However, Vagbhadananda viewed temple entry as an issue related to freedom of choice and human rights and not a religious obligation. On this premise, he extended support to the Congress-led temple entry satyagrahas at Vaikom and Guruvayoor.

Post 1917, the Atma Vidya Sangham was involved in opposing rituals such as *talikettu kalyanam*, *thirandukuli*, *pulikudi*, *ettu maatu*, amongst others observed by the Tiyya community, and supported peasants and workers struggles. On the other hand, Narayana Guru's overarching presence in the SNDP's actions was visible from the way they did not take up campaigns which did not have his direct ideological backing. At the 1927 Kunnothuparambu AVS annual conference, Vagbhadananda, along with Moyarath Sankaran and the SNDP activist and lawyer Kottieth Krishnan, spoke on the *ettu maatu* ritual. In his concluding remarks, Krishnan said,

...ettu maatu is one of the most important rituals of our community. Whether we should abolish it or not, I cannot say unless I consult with Narayana Guru.³⁷

Vagbhadananda disapproved of Krishnan's understanding and responded,

³⁷ Patyam Ramakrishnan, *Navothanacharyan Vgabhadanandan*(The Man of Renaissance) (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha, 2012), 61.

Sree Narayana Guru was born into a community that suffers from caste inequalities, but not in the womb of a mother who has observed *ettu maatu*. The Atma Vidya Sangham is obliged to not only oppose *ettu maatu* but also oppose all the temples, including the ones consecrated by Guru and idol worship and defeat them.. And what right do people who have not bothered to learn a word from Narayanan Swamikal to call him their guru?³⁸

In another instance, while Vagbhadananda and his disciples were attempting to put an end to the festivities at Kottiyur including animal sacrifices, Narayana Guru appealed to the people to stop making offerings there, and instead do so to the Jagannatha temple consecrated by him. The support of an economically stronger group for the SNDP allowed it to override individual centric endeavours undertaken by the AVS.

As described in the previous chapter, Vagbhadananda was spearheading a movement in the villages of Malabar against the feudal system and exploitation by priests. He broke down their claims to a superior status by re-reading the scriptures and explaining them to the masses in a lucid manner. He exhorted people to apply reason before acting upon anything. Arguing for the centrality of rationality in human thought and action, he insisted that anybody, including a child had to be paid attention to if he/she was making a rational argument. Like Narayana Guru, self-knowledge was essential to Vagbhadananda's expositions, which was the key to introspection. The need of the hour, he said, was to reform 'our inner selves and gain many strengths from it', and control wayward impulses and desires of the mind.³⁹ A person with self- knowledge alone was capable of acquiring good habits and positive values to make the world peaceful for existence.

Vagbhadananda did not establish schools for untouchables, except for the AtmaVidya Sangham primary school for children of Sangham members, denied admission by upper castes. Instead, he relied largely on the power of words, and through oration and journalism, conveyed to people about the problems of the system. His attempt was to participate in the debates of the public sphere and voice his social concerns.

³⁸ Ibid., 61.

³⁹ TCWV, 414.

His forays into journalism aided his reform work to a large extent. Vagbhadananda is said to be one of the earliest religious reformers who published a journal only to discuss matters of religion and spirituality and later, for supporting the national movement. Vagbhadananda expressed his opinions and critiques on a range of burning issues of the time through the *Abhinava Keralam*, *AtmaVidya Kaahalam* and *Yajamanan*. This was a distinct characteristic of his work because it enabled him to interact with people from all walks of life.

As we have already seen, he also encouraged inter-dining and inter-marriage, labeling them as preetibhojanam and preetivivaham.. He campaigned against the upper castes landlords and factory managers for exploiting labourers and paying meagre wages, imposing caste based inequalities. One of his contributions has been the formation of the Uralungal Labour Contract Cooperative Society in 1924. It was founded following the loss of work by peasants who had joined the atma vidya sangham'. The upper castes denied them work on agricultural lands and threatened many with evictions. The labour cooperative emerged at a time when the British were penetrating Malabar with large scale public works, especially roads and railways. This was an unexplored opportunity for Tiyyas at large to engage in contractual labour.

In a speech at the Feroke tile factory strike, Vagbhadananda declared,

Nobody has right to accumulate wealth which is to be spent for the common happiness of humanity. There is no sanction or authority for such an accumulation.⁴⁰

Can we, then, call Vagbhadananda's movement a 'class' and not a caste movement? Vagbhadananda realized the importance of forging alliances but could not move beyond social reforms and was unable to join hands with stronger organisations such as the SNDP. Caste was a major hindrance in the progress i

n class structure and various movements prevalent in Kerala could not form alliances to fight for the transformation of the class relations. Instead, their protest was limited to reforms emanating largely within the religious sphere. This is also because religion was considered as the legitimate entry point, to discuss about social reforms, and any change in class relations had to deal with changes in the caste relations. Many lower caste organisations

⁴⁰ K.K.N Kurup, *Modern Kerala: Studies in Agrarian and Social Relations* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988), 97.

in the princely states did not participate actively in the anti-British nationalist movement, but relegated themselves to the domain of fighting caste inequalities because the upper caste orthodoxy and exploitation was considered as the immediate enemy to contest with. The lower caste communities who also constituted the class of agricultural labourers saw the landlord as the immediate danger, who could directly affect their means of livelihood and existence.

Vagbhadananda did not build ashrams but moved with the people he worked with. Through his writings and speeches, he called for the building of a renewed Hindu community, opposing religious conversion. In comparison to Guru, he was not treated as a possessor of miracle powers or a semi-God. He was wary of the mass conversions amongst untouchables to Christianity during the period. He emphasized on building a Hindu identity, absolved of caste differences so that members could organize for their progress. He also shared Gandhi's position on the varnashram. Narayana Guru, however, differed with Gandhi because the latter, despite his opposition to untouchability, upheld the varnashram as ideal. For Guru, the atman was beyond any distinctions of caste, class or religion' and for Vagbhadananda, on the other hand, varna was a fourfold classification of society based on individual ability and merit.

One can discern a change in Vagbhadananda's thought after the Mappila uprising of 1921. Although he does not make any explicit reference to it, there is a sense of apprehension and discomfort in Vagbhadananda's writings and a sense of urgency in his frequent appeals to the Hindu community to end untouchability to form a unified community. Constant exhortations are made to the Hindus to unite under a common fold, upholding universal principles of equality and justice. Moreover, he also advocates religious and social reform as part of political change. He supported Gandhi's usage of satyagraha as a political tool. In *Gandhiji and Scientific Analysis*, he challenged the Sanatanists on the issue of untouchability and critiqued their arguments and phobias.

However, a comparison of the two philosophers will remain incomplete without a discussion of their organizational differences that has had a direct impact on their working. Both Narayana Guru and Vagbhadananda placed their thought within the framework of individual betterment and self-help. But the formation of the SNDP and its ideological and financial backing made it an undoubtedly more powerful and influential force in comparison to the AVS. Various strands can be discerned in the SNDP's movement. The struggle for

civil liberties through moderate and conservative means in the early years was replaced by a radical stream of activity in the 1930s. By then, the SNDP had expanded its membership and reorganized its functioning. This enabled the SNDP to reach out to a large number of working class Ezhavas in the coir, handloom and beedi industries of Travancore, who were also joining the emerging trade union movement. The SNDP gave up its singular focus on internal reform and made demands for public employment and political representation for Ezhavas. They were joined by aggrieved Nairs and Christians who advanced the same demands for an end to savarna domination in education, employment and legislative assembly. The abstention movement, as it is known, fanned communal passions, with every community demands reservation in public service and electoral representation. This politics was a break from the SNDP's earlier path of community reform and an abandonment of the secular character envisaged by Narayana Guru. The growing caste solidarity within the organization, prompted by the emergence of a landed Ezhava bourgeois class resulted in ruptures with those who remain socially and economically low. These tendencies led the SNDP to give up its support to the nationalist and working class movement and turn itself into an exclusive caste association. Despite the widespread influence of Guru's egalitarian philosophy amongst the working classes, the leadership of the SNDP gave up the original goal of breaking down caste barriers, and instead used it to forge class alliances with those of other communities. The spread of the SNDP in Malabar engulfed many regional associations, formed for advancing demands of lower caste communities. With an increased membership, and larger organizational apparatus, the SNDP was able to include many groups under its fold for political agitation. But the consolidation on the basis of caste shed its secular character.

Meanwhile, Malabar in the 1930s was impacted by the Non-Cooperation and the Civil Disobedience movement, and organisations such as the Atma Vidya Sangham supported Gandhi's khadi, temperance and anti-untouchability campaigns. Unlike the SNDP, the AVS did not enjoy the support of a middle class, educated elite but made its mark in the villages of Malabar, where it established libraries and reading rooms and linked reform struggles with the larger anti-colonial movement. The fifty and more units of the Sangham drew their inspiration from Vagbhadananda and were involved in reforming the community's image of self. At the same time, they aimed at building alliances between workers, peasants and labourers to build a solidarity cutting across caste lines. Vagbhadananda was one of the few reformers who was closely acquainted with the Araya fishing community, and sought help

from their leader in Alappuzha, Aanndi Arayan. He was also on close terms with Mannathu Padmanabhan, the head of the NSS, Thus, as K.K.N Kurup points out, the AVS has been able to remain secular, intellectual movement to a larger extent, owing to its composition. A large number of teachers and intellectuals were members of the Atma Vidya Sangham, Neither could they embark upon collective mobilisation nor provide sustained economic backing to support the organization in its endeavours.⁴¹ Vagbhadananda and his followers were also keen to open the organization to members of other religious communities since the idea of self-knowledge was a universal one. This imparted openness to the Sangham which also enjoyed support from Muslims and Christians in Malabar. The organisation also resisted efforts by the SNDP to include it into their larger fold, since they differed fundamentally on its caste sectarianism and control of temples. The accumulation of wealth by the middle class leadership of the SNDP and their retraction of support to the national movement was unacceptable to the Sangham in Malabar, and by the 1940s, many of their units became defunct. Many members of the Sangham also left the organization to join the national movement, trade unions, and emergent communist movement, and have acknowledged Vagbhadananda's contributions in laying the foundation for an anti-feudal struggle. However, after Vagbhadananda's demise in 1939, the Atma Vidya Sangham experienced a slow decline.

⁴¹ Kurup, *Modern Kerala*, 99.

Conclusion

In 1917, Vagbhadananda formed the Atma Vidya Sangham at Kozhikode and set out to propagate his teachings based on the *advaita* and Bhagavad Gita. However, he went beyond the espousal of religious philosophy, and like Sivayogi, linked it to the socio-political developments of the time. One of the major reasons for the organisation's decline has been the absence of any dynamic leadership to guide it. This lack of leadership can be attributed to Vagbhadananda's weaknesses as well, after his death. He did not encourage anyone from amongst his followers to emerge a leader, but remained the pivot of organizational endeavours for over twenty five years. Moreover, he never accumulated adequate funds for the running of the Sanghams, which resulted in numerous obstacles for their proper functioning. . Unlike the SNDP, which has consolidated into a caste based group vying for political gains, the AVS continues to emphasize upon its secular character and has refrained from merging with the SNDP or participating in electoral politics.

In contemporary Kerala, caste, far from being removed, seems to be the basis of socio-economic and largely, political relations. The younger generation does not find the philosophy of *atmavidya* appealing, and in a fast moving materialist world, it does little to satisfy their aspirations. In such a scenario of competing interests amongst caste groups and religious communities, a study of Vagbhadananda's anti-caste ideology, coupled with a philosophy of social change assumes significance. Vagbhadananda donned the role of a philosopher, socio-religious reformer, journalist, poet, literary critic and supporter of the nationalist movement, and contributed towards the building of self-awareness amongst the Tiyyas. He advocated a universalism based on humanism, and urged individuals to reform themselves before setting out to change the world. This lesson of 'individual good' was prominent in his philosophy of *atmavidya*. Upon taking a closer look, we can also see that *atmavidya* was a subtle critique of brahminical domination of religion, education and social relations. By elucidating religious philosophy in the layman's terms, Vagbhadananda took upon the task of fighting brahminical hegemony. He fought for people's right to be treated humanely and to make individual choices, based on rationality and scientific analysis. He heralded a concept of the 'modern' individual who relied on his/her capacity to think and act

with reason as the criterion for assessing the truth. Wary of the pitfalls of modern living, industrialisation and Westernisation, he appealed to people to imbibe values of equality and justice. He encouraged the working classes to struggle for their equal share in all spheres of life. Religion was the domain in which debates on social change occurred in the nineteenth century, and Vagbhadananda used that as a useful entry point to advance his ideas. With all his shortcomings of falling prey to religious particularism in the later days of his life and inability to successfully mobilize larger numbers, Vagbhadananda has encouraged a generation of activists in Kerala to be critical of traditional authority and work amongst the people to understand ways of solving problems. As E.M.S writes,

Though he could not obtain a universal name or fame like Narayana Guru swami, Vagbhadananda Gurudevar...was one who had greatly contributed to the growth of society... Superior in his scholarship and eloquence to Narayana Guru...through his own independent organisation the Atma Vidya Sangham initiated programme against castesim, consumption of liquor, etc. and even made a few high caste members his disciples. No doubt, that he had a significant role in the growth of society in North Malabar.

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Vagbhadananda was also one of the few socio-religious reformers of twentieth century Kerala who looked beyond his immediate circumstances and commented on contemporary socio political developments. His forays into journalism is an indication of this ability to link the local with the national and has scope for further study, along with an assessment of his contributions to Malayalam literary criticism. His direct association in the nationalist movement reveals the impact of nationalism on the agenda of caste reform in modern India and the successes and failures that have plagued many such endeavours. The historiography of social reform in Kerala has not given adequate attention to Vagbhadananda's contributions to the region's intellectual and social history but it remains a fact that the movement laid the foundation for the Communist movement which arose to wage mass struggles in Malabar during the later decades. A study of the Atma Vidya

¹ E.M.S, *Keralam Malayikalude Mathrubhoomi*, Namoodiripad was a member of the Congress Socialist Party, and later one of the founding members of the Communist Party of India. He was the Chief Minister of the first elected Communist Ministry in Kerala in 1957.

Sangham brings out the specificities of a reform movement that tried to address religious concerns as social ones, and the trajectory it followed in identity formation amongst lower caste groups. The organisation's major task has been a redefinition of religion, self and society.

It will be useful to explore these aspects in detail and examine the links between the Atma Vidya Sangham and latter day progressive movements. An extensive comparison of the SNDP and AVS will also help to understand the reasons for the former's continuing dominance. Despite the closing down of many of its units across Travancore and Malabar, the Atma Vidya Sangham continues to survive. Nevertheless, with the changing political contours and growth of acruce religiosity in Kerala, the organisation is hoping to retain its significance. In the face of increasing caste based politics and communal tendencies, the Sangham's history is a reminder of the need to strive for peace, justice and human liberation from various indignities, and bring back reason to the heart of the debate.

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