

Creating an Alternative Reality with Practical Advaita and the Mirror Idol

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Abstract

Sree Narayana Guru, the eminent sage of Kerala, profoundly shaped modern philosophical, religious, social, and intellectual discourse in South India. His ethical aphorisms and public interventions reveal a deliberate socio-political engagement with the temple-centered public sphere, through which he sought to mobilize socio-religious reform as an instrument of emancipation (Beissner et al., 2018). Guru's vision is increasingly recognized as comparable to that of modern thinkers such as Ambedkar, Gandhi, Aurobindo, and Vivekananda (Thadathil, 2005). Recent scholarship has further demonstrated that Guru's interventions constituted not merely spiritual reform but a reorientation of knowledge, education, and social consciousness directed toward dismantling caste hierarchy (Pratheesh & Saritha, 2025a; Pratheesh & Saritha, 2025b; Pratheesh & Saritha, 2025c). This study re-examines Kerala's socio-religious transformation within the broader context of caste structure and anti-caste movements in southern India, highlighting Guru's decisive influence on anti-caste resistance, the temple entry movement, and the formation of new caste alliances in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Kurien, 1994). Building on recent interpretations of Guru's philosophy as an epistemic and juridical intervention in religious practice (Pratheesh & Saritha, 2025b), the article focuses on the installation of the Mirror Idol at Kalavankodam as a symbolic reconfiguration of temple authority. Interpreted through the Advaitic principle *Aham Brahmasmi*, the Mirror Idol articulated a radical ethics of self-recognition that challenged ritual exclusion and caste-based mediation. Reinforced by Guru's educational vision of dignity and empowerment (Pratheesh & Saritha, 2025a), this symbolic practice advanced his ideal of "one caste, one religion, and one God for humankind," offering both a philosophical and social framework for confronting untouchability and entrenched structures of caste oppression.

Keywords: socio-religious transformation, alternating reality, Sree Narayana Guru, Advaitic principle, Mirror Idol.

1. Introduction

The upper-caste interpretations that have been dominant have been challenged by the philosophical teachings of Narayana Guru, opening up new spaces for the oppressed and offering a more inclusive and approachable way of looking at the world (George. P, 2020). The Guru's philosophy emphasizes the historical veracity of brahminical violence and social reform initiatives (Houtart & Lemerminier, 1978). His understanding of religion, caste, and god emphasizes spiritualizing and universalizing social values. His philosophy is based on the Advaita-Vedanta school of metaphysics and Vedanta, with strong undercurrents in the Lokayata and other non-Vedic traditions (Mayeda, 1988). Regardless of caste, creed, or religion, his attempts focus on the

reform of the dalits and other oppressed groups (E. M. S, 1996). His philosophical vision became the “formidable weapon” to defeat all social evils.

Sree Narayana Guru believed that image worship was the beginning of liberating lower caste members and protesting against castism. He built temples with various idols to emphasize the importance of these symbols and educated people about their social rights (Cleetus, 2007). Within a decade, he founded nearly a hundred temples or worship centers on the west coast of India, which are now centers of educational, philanthropic, and economic activity (Sujatha, 2004). His mission was influenced by the people of Kerala's readiness for change and his belief in the importance of education, wealth, and organization for worldly advancement (K. K. N. Kurup, 1994). He presented them with “Savarna Gods” (Shiva, Vishnu, Sharada) and a sequence of temples where the icons rose in significance. The Advaita Ashram at Aluva provided a place for all believers to meet, talk, live, and pray together.

2. Review of Literature

Sree Narayana Guru built temples and installed idols throughout Kerala, parts of Tamilnadu, and Sri Lanka. Baby Sujatha, V. M. (2004) provided a thorough account of these exploits in her research thesis, “Religious Philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru: Social Aspect.” According to the study, the Guru's ethos was essentially realistic and modern because he understood that temples could be used to awaken the community to its religious and social obligations. The Guru had a tremendous impact on Hinduism because he cleared the path for the development of the Advaita school of thought and the construction of more than a hundred temples in Kerala.

George Thadathil's 2005 study explores the Sree Narayana Movement and the Narayana Guru's vision of liberative religiosity. The Guru's approach emphasizes the Absolute as the ultimate reality, transcending Primary Dualism and embracing a neutral, absolutist, contemplative, and non-aligned stand. The Guru's approach prevents discrimination based on preference for any one country, people, or religion, and truly liberates individuals by transcending affiliations to religions, nations, race, and language. The study highlights the power of religion to set people free. The study highlights that religion has the power to set people free by pointing them towards transcendental aspects of existential reality.

The study “Sri Narayana Guru (1856-1928) and His Significance in the Temple Entry Movement in Kerala” of Emily Beissner et al. (2018) investigate the role of Sri Narayana Guru's motto in the temple entrance movement in Kerala, India. The study investigates the reasons and implications for Narayana Guru's political involvement, as well as whether this involvement is reflected in his adages. It contends that his concern in the temple entrance movement is unswervingly reflected in his adages, indicating his intention to use the reverberation among socio-religious bondage, emancipating the mass from caste-based temple practices and social issues to advance his ideals.

Appan. K. P (2000), Balakrishnan. P. K (2008), Bhaskaran T (2010), Amal. C. Rajan (2020), George (2020), Prasanth. V. S. (2020), Janaki Abraham (2022), Anil Kumar (2022), Mahesh. V. (2022), Shaikh Zeeshan Ahmed Fakhre Alam (2023) and Ullekh. N. P (2023) through their studies presented the following claims regarding the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru. Narayan Guru fought against ignorance, poverty, exploitation, and casteism in addressing religion and tradition. He believed in ultimate oneness as the basis for equality and social solidarity, preventing conflicts based on ethnicity, racial, caste, and religion. He issued the maxim that “One Caste, One Religion, and One God” to emphasize the importance of education for human progress and prosperity. Guru believed that unethical and selfish enjoyment of desires by few leads to exploitation and discrimination. He emphasized the unity of human nature and the importance of

education. He urged against caste-discrimination and emphasized the need for a system based on quality, capacity, and interest to promote a more harmonious and balanced society.

Shaji Anirudhan (2021) in his study “Sree Narayana Movement and Social Transformation of Modern Kerala: A Bird’s-Eye View” argued that the Sree Narayana movement played a crucial role in the transformation of Kerala into a modern democratic society. The movement’s leaders understood the importance of political power and worked with non-Hindus to strengthen their position. Through protests, conflicts, and assertions, they transformed Kerala’s pyramidal social structure into a pillar structure, elevating caste victims to decision-making positions. He concludes that Narayana Guru’s philosophies and pragmatic approaches for the material and spiritual advancement of backward caste people contributed to the social transformation from structural to human relations.

P. Chandramohan’s study explores the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam), an early social reform movement in Kerala, focusing on issues such as education, government employment, industrialization, abolition of cyclical rituals and caste, anti-alcoholism, and a new law of inheritance. Drawing inspiration from the traditionalist Sree Narayana Guru, the Yogam aimed to create a modern outlook among the masses. However, the movement’s focus on the interests of the privileged Ezhava community led to its decline, highlighting the importance of caste solidarity. Recent scholarship has reinterpreted Sree Narayana Guru’s socio-religious reform as a transformative project grounded in education, spiritual sovereignty, and caste critique, positioning his thought as both philosophically Advaitic and socially emancipatory (Pratheesh & Reema, 2024; Pratheesh & Saritha, 2025a, 2025b). Pratheesh and Saritha (2025c) further conceptualize Guru’s intervention as an “epistemic turn” that challenged caste hierarchies through ethical consciousness and institutional reform. Importantly, studies attentive to Alappuzha’s socio-economic and cultural landscape show how Guru’s egalitarian ideals intersected with labour, community organization, and gendered social change, particularly within coastal and industrial milieus (Padath, 2025a; P., Reema & Florence, 2024). Together, these works demonstrate that Guru’s reforms were not merely theological but materially embedded in everyday social practices, with enduring implications for regional modernity and civic life (Padath, 2025b; Pratheesh, 2025c).

3. Study’s objectives

- To assess the Socio-Religious Reformations of Sree Narayana Guru by means of his temple installation strategies.
- To determine the socio-religious reformation ideal that underlies Kalavamkodam installation of Mirror Idol.
- To examine Mirror Idol’s philosophical stances with an emphasis on Advaita and humanism.
- To look into how the installation of mirror idols has affected Kerala’s socio-religious customs, especially those of the lower caste.

4. Methodology

The study uses historical method and secondary sources like Susan Bayly’s book, *Kenneth Jones’ Socio-religious Reform Movements in British India*, and Robin Jeffrey’s work to support hypothesized statements. Using philosophy and history together, the study investigates the historical process of spiritual destruction through spirituality. It makes the case that an ideology’s application and outcome can vary even if it stays the same throughout history. Caste

systems were established using the Advaita Vedanta, which advocated unity between God, the universe, and each individual soul. This ideology was later used by the Guru to demonstrate that there are no castes. The study also makes use of language and linguistics methodology for the syntactic presentation of different arguments, as well as history, criticism, and comparison methodology for analyzing Bacon's ideology and Guru's interpretations of religion.

5. Socio-religious reforms dimensions

In India, upper castes were considered religiously pure, while lower castes were considered impure (Dirks, 2011). Economic status was separate from caste standing. In Kerala, the varṇa system centered on the Nampūtiri Brahmins, with non-Nampūtiri individuals often considered impure. The upper caste's handling of lower-caste members in Kerala was severe (Bayly, 2001). The caste structure in the country was more fluid before colonial British period, but after colonization, it became rigid, leading to discrimination, violence, and restrictions on temple access (Ammukutty, 1980). Narayana Guru, a prominent figure in Indian society, used the terms *jāti* and *varṇa* to describe caste. *Varṇa* refers to four classes of society: Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śudras. The term *jati* is used to denote to some specific group of people or sections in the society, with each group classified along the spectrum of the *varṇas* (Singh, 1968).

Caste is the most common form of exploitation and discrimination in Indian society, especially in Kerala. Birth gives one group all immunities while imposing hardship and obligatory slavery on the other. Narayana Guru led a crusade against caste-based social evils as well as socioeconomic, political, and educational discrimination in Kerala society (Deshpande, 2000). He believes that equality, unity, brotherhood, love, and respect are required for global peace and harmony. He urged his people that in order to combat caste discrimination and untouchability, we must educate and raise awareness about these inhuman practices. He preached that being untouchable is a crime against God because we are all born equal. Understanding Advaita, equality, and fraternity can help put an end to these inhumane practices and achieve complete development. He taught his followers that Vedic philosophy promotes living in unity, peace, and harmony, avoiding unnecessary differences and manipulation.

The right to freedom of worship, customs reform, modern family formation, education promotion, agitations against human insult and movement for human rights including the right to walk freely on public roads, agitations for Avarnas to be given opportunities for government employments, representation at legislative assemblies and socio-cultural and political progress, expansion and guard of the agricultural and industrial segments, emancipation and empowerment of women, promotion of science and logical considerations instead of traditional superstitious observes, and other progressive means were the main channels of force he used to combat all the prevalent social evils of his time. For these, he established educational institutions to eradicate illiteracy, hospitals for health care, job opportunities, and the imparting of a liberal outlook. He also used symbolic idol installations to restructure metaphysical outlook, caste organizations of SNDP (1903) and Sree Narayana Dharma Sangham (1916) for socio-political progress, and he propagated the message of humanism through his works, words, and social actions.

6. Reforming worship, the Temple Movement of Guru

Until the 20th century, the lower castes, particularly the Ezhavas, could only worship animals and primitive demon deities known as Maadan or Marutha. They were not allowed to enter temples owned by the upper caste or worship any Aryan deities. The truth that their release from this bondage is necessary for the general advancement of the lower caste was realized by Sree Narayana Guru. Thus, he started the temple movement, which aims to give the lower caste the opportunity to worship the god of the upper caste by having number of temples throughout Kerala

build him. Temples are essential for personal cleanliness, meditation, and social uplift, especially for those who have faith in idol worship (Michael Tharakan, 1984). They should have spacious rooms for congregation and discourses, and the funds received from aficionados should be used for the benefit of the underprivileged.

The Aruvipuram Siva Prathishta (installation) was a re-consecration of the undying Dharma, promoting tolerance, reconciliation, and national integration (Kumar, 2017). The Guru's restructuring of worship opened with the consecration of Phallu (Shivalinga) at Aruvipuram, leading to the establishment of numerous centers of worship. He replaced deities associated with animal sacrifice and liquor consumption. Shiva and Subramanian were the main gods that the man installed in various temples and carried out in various installation rituals. These temples were built between Mangalore and Kanyakumary with the intention of reducing temple rituals and providing spiritual settings for a range of socio-educational activities. By sharing joys, work, and ideals, they sought to uplift followers and make life more meaningful. By meeting their religious, educational, and socio-cultural needs, the temples have made a significant contribution to the advancement of the Ezhava and Tiyya communities. Additionally, they have discouraged idol worship, pushed for respect and morality, and highlighted the value of temples for physical and mental purification.

In addition to meeting the public's spiritual requirements, these temples and Mutts have inspired people to do good deeds, promoting love and brotherhood. They also propagated spirituality and moral conduct, providing vocational and craft-oriented training and specialized education. All castes, lower and higher, are welcome to use the temples, which are meant to help those who really need it (Nadkarni, 2008). The Guru's legacy endures today in the form of his temples, memorials, and statues, which serve as reminders of his teachings to the populace. Temples are necessary for the purification of mind and body, and the Guru's message is that people should think of God rather than idols when visiting them.

7. From Phallu to Mirror, philosophizing symbol idols

"Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* identifies four idols that hinder scientific understanding of the world and nature. These idols are influenced by human nature and language, and are specific to each individual. Bacon aims to clear away these idols, revealing the iconoclastic nature of science and the dependence on the mind's species. He believes reason can correct the deceptions of the senses and determine hidden causes. The Idols of the Tribe, Cave, Market Place, and Theatre represent the various aspects of human nature and language, and Bacon believes reason can correct these errors" (Ioan P, 1987).

According to the history of religion, the first manifestations of worship were trees, animals, mountains, and other natural forces such as the wind, rain, sea, fire, and thunder. This phase, known as naturalism, is what turns these natural forces into gods that are human. We refer to this phase as anthropomorphism. Polytheism results from such figures, which create numerous gods. Because there were so many gods, people soon loved to worship them in accordance with auspicious occasions, a practice known as henotheism. This then develops into the worship of an individual god, which initiates the bhakti movement. The idea of monotheism, which holds that there is only one divine being who is the ultimate, omnipotent, omniscient, creator, sustainer, and destroyer, comes next. In its most developed form, monotheism gave way to monism, which holds that everything has a single, ultimate principle and that there is neither a god nor any other force or power. In actuality, the reason Hinduism hasn't advanced to this point is that individuals haven't been able to pinpoint the origin, effects, or resolution of monism—an abstract idea. Despite this, the Advaita philosophy and related texts maintain a monistic understanding of Hinduism.

The priests continue to interpret the stories of incarnation and ancient worships for the benefit of their livelihood.

If Bacon's *Novum Organum* identifies four idols that impede scientific comprehension of the earth and nature, Sree Narayana Guru utilizes the religious idols, which were prevalent at the time, to unveil the true essence of the physical and metaphysical realms. Initially, Sree Narayana Guru uses the "phallu" idol to question the beliefs of the upper caste regarding worship and caste hierarchy, as well as to initiate his philosophical and metaphysical revolution aimed at elevating the lower caste. With the goal of proving that God, the ultimate reality, does not discriminate against creations based on birth and that man is free to worship his creator without limitations, he used the installation of idols to free the lower caste from the forced hardships imposed by the Brahmanical hierarchy.

Sree Naryana Guru uses his temple movement to symbolically present this lengthy tale of religious development. "Shiva Linga" of Phallu was installed as a worship object during the first stage, and in the later stage, he placed the mirror idol to represent the monistic idea of 'power resides within', also known as the Advaita philosophy. Aruvipuram, located on the banks of the river Neyyar, is the initial place of worshipping consecrated by the Guru. On February Shivarathri day in 1888, the Narayana Guru consecrated a Sivalinga (phallus) on the plinth and performed abhisheka in the presence of hundreds. This incident signalled the end of a period in Kerala's history when caste was used as an excuse to continue massive injustices and disparities. At Aruvipuram, Guru's famous message was engraved in granite "Devoid of dividing walls, we all live here in brotherhood," was considered the most beautiful slogan in the world. A school for teaching poor children was also erected there (Jones, 1989). The society established in 1899 to oversee the temple's operations eventually grew into Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (S.N.D.P. Yogam) to further the Guru's teachings.

The Guru's five main temples are located across India, dedicated to various deities. The Temple at Parlikkad is dedicated to Balasubrahmapyan, while the Ananda Bhutheswara Temple at Mezhuveli is dedicated to Subrahmanya. The Mankuzhi Akalpantha Prashobhini Subrahmanya Temple was constructed by Mankuzhi family members. The Sree Kumaramangalam Temple in Prakulam was consecrated in 1903 and features an idol of Gavapathy, a photograph, and a silver idol of Subrahmaqya. The Velayudha Mangala Temple in Anjalummood was consecrated in 1891 A.D. and renovated in 1951-52 A.D. The Narayana Guru's temples in Tamil Nadu include the Kunnumpara Temple, Ganapathy Temple, Bhavaneeswara Temple, Sree Chitambara Temple, and Kalakanteswara Temple.

The temple of Kalavamkodam, consecrated in 1927, located near Cherthala, Alappuzha. After scraping off a portion of the mirror, Narayana Guru placed an unusual idol of the Mirror bearing the sacred symbol "AUM" (Kumar, 2017). This representation, which is often misinterpreted as a mirror, represents the Advaita teaching of the Guru in concrete form and is a philosophical idol representing the realization of Brahman within oneself. In Hinduism, the phrase "AUM" is extremely important because it is what all Vedas proclaim, what austerities proclaim, and what men focus on when they live as spiritual pupils. Through the erection of a mirror with the holy emblem of AUM, the Guru highlights the Advaita principle that the self, AUM, or the Absolute Self, and the image are one and the same even though they appear to be different.

As the Guru states in *Atmopadesam*, the duality between the world of appearance and the world of reality is denied (Kumaran, 1930). This demonstrates the pinnacle and results of his endeavor to transform worship, which began with idols and concluded with his sponsorship and demonstration of the Nirguna form of worship—the stage of bhakthi that is sublimated (Abraham, 2022). The mirror installation is a highly intellectualized symbol of the Guru's philosophy of Advaita. Thanks to these philosophizing symbolic idols, which ranged from phallu installations to mirror, his mission of religious and spiritual education was thus successfully accomplished.

Through his temple movement, he began with the primogenitive symbol of worship, the phallu, and progressed through several stages, including polytheistic, henotheistic, and monotheistic symbolic representations, before concluding with the mirror idol, which represents the ultimate monistic, no-dualistic bond between man and God.

8. Kalavamkodam Temple Idol – Holding a Mirror to the soul

In carrying on from the previous discussion, let us confirm the mirror idol's metaphysical and educational value. Since he is aware that deeds speak louder than words, it is like holding a mirror to the soul in a way. Bacon's "The Advancement of Learning" positions the imagination between perception and understanding powers, representing it as a site and agent of mediation. Bacon argues that the fantasy serves as the mediating faculty between sense and the mind and between thought and action, but its mediation can be corrupted or perverted. Therefore, Sree Narayana Guru uses this philosophical symbol of a mirror to act as a judge by putting the imagination between perceptions and comprehending the metaphysical reality that underlies our material world.

Bacon's project seeks to liberate the mind from the idols that confuse and deceive it, while also allowing for the positive potential of a revelatory imagination that transcends reason. Similarly, Sree Narayana Guru attempted to liberate the lower caste from all religious and social bonds imposed by traditional religious beliefs and impart the knowledge on ultimate non-dualistic reality through the mirror idol. Unlike Bacon, who believes that religion and faith help control the imagination and keep it in proper subjection to God, Guru believes in the realization of understanding and the merging of the individual soul with the universal soul in a spiritual master. He installed the mirror idol at the Kalavamkodam temple in response to these realizations. Individuals in his era, and even now, remain bound by religious bonds, and they require a supernatural explanation for the events in their lives. Therefore, he installed the mirror idol and used his temple movement as the ideal educational program in order to draw in spiritual minds. This was the ultimate socio-religious significance of mirror idol.

In more clear sense, the mirror idol performs the dual roles of deity and conduit for the worshipper's exposure to her divinity. Seeing oneself in the holy mirror is thought to represent a transformation. Gazing into it is the realization of the divine within, erasing boundaries between the self and the god. People of all classes welcomed the mirror idol in the temple without question because they have spiritual significance. The Guru's goal in doing this was to invoke the Upanishadic aphorism "tat tvam asi," which means that the self and the universe are one (Kumar, 2017). He made use of it because he recognized their significance in religious and cultural rituals. One can clearly see that the Guru used it to spread the ultimate knowledge among his people, not for the benefit of religion or temple belief, if they look into the iconographic significance and historical background of it in the area.

The social significance of the temple movement is unique since the concept of administration of these temples was progressive (Jeffrey, 1976). Upper caste Hindu temples were spaces for chants, worship, and prayers, while Guru insisted on following regulations: having a library, schools, vocational training centers, parks, and no money spent on elephants, fireworks, or festivals. Guru believed that temples should have spacious rooms for everyone to sit and that building those in the style of Christian churches would be beneficial for conducting prayers and delivering speeches (Jeffrey, 1974). He also suggested that worship spaces for Christians or Muslims could be constructed if they requested (Dileep, 2018). The Sree Narayana Guru temples have been the site of numerous experiments and reforms, but the Guru never considered them to be a comprehensive answer to all social injustices. He stated in 1917 that temple building should no longer be promoted since people are losing faith in them and may think the money spent on them was unnecessary. Allow them to continue building temples if necessary (Rothermund, 1992).

The Guru's philosophy was essentially practical and contemporary since he understood that temples could be used to awaken people to their spiritual and social obligations (Suresh, 2017). The Guru had a tremendous impact on Hinduism because he cleared the path for the development of the Advaita school of thought and the construction of more than a hundred temples in Kerala. With Guru serving as its president, Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam) was founded in 1903 under the Company Act (Nair, 1979). The group gained prominence during Kerala's Renaissance by advocating for women's emancipation, sociopolitical upward mobility, prosperity and preservation of the agricultural and industrial sectors, education, human rights activism, current family formation, freedom of religion, and the progress of science and reason.

9. Conclusion

Narayana Guru, a social reformer, emphasized non-violence, generosity, and human fraternity, incorporating Advaita concept of conscious equality and combining humanitarian traits with spirituality to promote a God-centered, God-centered humanism. Guru consecrated over fifty Ezhava temples in Kerala, challenging the caste system and Brahmanic hegemony. He emphasized the importance of spacious rooms, libraries, schools, vocational training centers, parks, and no spending on elephants, fireworks, or festivals in these temples. His influence on Hinduism was significant, leading to the spread of Advaita philosophy. His mirror idol serves as a deity and conduit for worshippers to experience their divinity. It symbolizes transformation and the realization of the divine within, breaking boundaries between the self and God. The Guru used the mirror idol to invoke the Upanishadic aphorism "tat tvam asi," meaning the self and the universe are one, and to spread ultimate knowledge among his people, not for religious or temple beliefs. Its iconographic significance and historical background highlight its significance in religious and cultural rituals. The installation of the mirror idol and the advaita perception that led Sree Narayana Guru to act in the 19th century to create an alternative reality against the rigid caste system and its religious beliefs were confirmed by the study.

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