



SREE NARAYANA GURU AND THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION: A PRE-CONSTITUTIONAL VISION FOR MARGINALIZED EMPOWERMENT

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This article examines Sree Narayana Guru's educational philosophy as a pre-constitutional forerunner to India's current framework for the right to education. A spiritual leader and significant social reformer in Kerala in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Guru saw education as a vital instrument for social liberation, especially for underprivileged groups facing caste-based marginalization. In addition to opposing the inflexible Brahmanical system, Guru established universal access to education through the founding of schools and the spread of his beliefs – "One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man" – long before Articles 45 and 21A of the Constitution codified this principle. The study contends that Guru's vision aligns with and foreshadows the Directive Principles of State Policy and the Right to Education Act (2009), which legally guarantee free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14. The fundamental principles of fair education enshrined in the Indian Constitution are in line with Guru's emphasis on inclusive, non-discriminatory education, skill development, and holistic empowerment. This research presents Sree Narayana Guru as a visionary educational thinker whose practice foreshadowed national legal requirements, in addition to being a reformist, via historical analysis, philosophical interpretation, and constitutional comparison. His legacy pushes contemporary politicians to reconsider education's role as a vehicle for social justice and structural change in terms of inclusion, dignity, and access.

Keywords: *Sree Narayana Guru, Educational Rights, Constitutional Vision, Social Justice, Marginalized Empowerment*

Introduction

Kerala's historical image as a progressive, educated society is largely due to socio-religious reformers who saw education as an instrument of emancipation, the most renowned of whom was Sree Narayana Guru (1856-1928). Guru emerged from the severely hierarchical, caste-bound terrain of 19th-century Travancore, challenging entrenched Brahmanical supremacy and questioning the majority's exclusion from fundamental rights, like as access to education. His philosophy, summed up in the well-known motto "Educate to be free," saw education not just as a tool for personal development, but also as the foundation of societal revolution.

Guru was born into the Ezhava community, which has historically been labelled as "avarna" and denied access to temples, schools, and scriptures. His early existence was impacted by the repressive reality of untouchability and institutional denial. In response, he established a movement that effortlessly combined spiritual enlightenment with educational and sociopolitical emancipation. Guru's building of inclusive schools and temples, particularly the one at Sivagiri in 1904, provided unparalleled possibilities for the underprivileged to gain knowledge, demonstrating that spiritual and material emancipation must coexist.

Unlike the pre-colonial or colonial education system, which predominantly perpetuated caste distinctions and catered to elites, Guru's concept was egalitarian and positive. He said, "Ask not, say not, think not caste," and lived up to this goal by advocating for "education for all, without discrimination." His educational system went beyond the classroom, stressing hygiene, vocational training, and self-sufficiency, foreshadowing the ideas eventually incorporated in the Indian Constitution. Even though Guru's measures were taken during a period when there was no legal requirement for universal education, they are consistent with Article 45 of the original Constitution (Directive Principles of State Policy) and Article 21A, which was added by the 86th Amendment and ensures that all children between the ages of 6 and 14 receive free and compulsory education. According to this study, the pre-constitutional visionary Sree Narayana Guru established the theoretical and practical groundwork for the eventual codification of educational rights.

Problem and Objectives of the Study

The central concern of this study is an analysis of ‘how Guru’s educational reforms addressed the exclusion of marginalized communities in pre-independence Kerala’ and ‘to what extent they align with the modern constitutional guarantees of education’. Accordingly, the objectives of the study are set, and they are,

- Contextualize Guru’s educational interventions in the caste-driven colonial Kerala;
- Analyse his philosophy and actions in light of Articles 45 and 21A;
- Establish his legacy as a precursor to constitutional educational rights in India.

Literature Review

This section critically traces the intersection of colonial educational legacies, caste-based exclusion, and the transformative vision of Sree Narayana Guru. Through a detailed examination of scholarly insights on both the structural inequities of colonial pedagogy and Guru’s countercultural advocacy for inclusive learning, the review situates the present study within a broader intellectual tradition of educational justice and pre-constitutional reform. This underpinning is essential to assess Guru’s contributions as anticipatory of contemporary educational rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

Colonial Impact on Education: In India, colonial rule significantly altered traditional educational institutions by institutionalizing hierarchies of access and frequently uprooting indigenous knowledge processes. Webb et al. (2010) claim that colonial governments reinforced caste divides through selective educational access by prioritizing Western rationality and missionary education. British ethnographies marginalized inferior castes, such as the Ezhavas in Kerala, by codifying caste identities and limiting access to modern education to dominant groups (Chakrabarty, 2000; Das, 2007). During colonialism, education turned into a weapon of imperial control, justifying the Avarna communities’ exclusion from professional and literacy prospects. Sen (1999) and Gopal Guru (2002) contend that this colonial epistemology routinely denied subaltern populations the ability to exercise agency or build counter-narratives. Education was not neutral; it was a tool for cultural imperialism. As a result, the development of subaltern-led reform movements, including those led by Sree Narayana Guru, posed a direct challenge to this epistemic violence.

Sree Narayana Guru’s Educational Vision: Guru’s educational philosophy is one of the first indigenous counter-narratives against caste-based exclusion. According to Viniitha Mohan (2015), Guru believed that “no community can attain liberation without education,” hence he established schools for girls and oppressed castes even before state-supported universal literacy programs. His vision was both spiritual and educational, with the premise that self-knowledge (atmavidya) provides the foundation for social equality. Scholars such as Pratheesh and Reema (2024) underline Guru’s repositioning of Advaita Vedanta as an instrument for grassroots empowerment. The author’s aphorism “Educate to be Free” emphasizes the importance of education in overcoming internalized inferiority and oppression. Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), established in 1903, carried out this goal through literacy initiatives and inclusive institutional development (Thadathil, 2008).

Education as Emancipation: Guru’s approach is similar to the moral imperatives later codified in the Indian Constitution under Articles 45 and 21A. The RTE Act (2009), which recognizes education as a basic right for children aged 6 to 14, has conceptual roots in Guru’s pre-constitutional practice. According to Gopalakrishnan (2022), Guru’s initiatives anticipated the “substantive equality” subsequently defined in Indian jurisprudence, supporting education as more than simply schooling but also as ethical citizenship. Guru’s “mirror consecration” (putting a mirror in place of an idol in a temple) represented radical reflection, an educational gesture that encouraged students to consider their own agency and potential. Legal theorists such as Bhatia (2019) and Santos (2014) see such behaviours as kinds of ritual constitutionalism, or de facto codifications of ethical principles that challenge hegemonic power.

Relevance to Marginalized Empowerment Today: According to modern studies, caste-based exclusion in schooling remains in many places of India (Mehta, 2011; Hardt & Negri, 2000). However, Kerala’s comparatively strong literacy and human development indicators are generally credited to the Guru’s legacy of democratized education. According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) and Mignolo (2011), Guru’s pedagogy belongs to the “epistemologies of the South,” in which indigenous knowledge systems oppose Western universalism and promote inclusive modernity. Recent studies (Raghavan, 2021; Nanda, 2009) reinforce Guru’s teachings as a sort of indigenous critical traditionalism that provides cognitive justice as well as social equality. His emphasis on vernacular language education and moral reasoning continues to serve as a foundation for inclusive curriculum creation in heterogeneous settings.

Methodology

Entrenched in the research problem and shaped by the above review of literature, the following methodology seeks to examine the extent to which Sree Narayana Guru’s educational initiatives served as a precursor to constitutionally mandated education rights. The study’s two objectives – to contextualize Guru’s educational vision in colonial Kerala and compare it to post-independence constitutional provisions – require a comparative, interpretative, and qualitative methodology.

This study compares Guru’s educational philosophy with the Indian Constitution and the Right to Education Act through a comparative textual analysis. To find conceptual similarities, ideological continuities, and significant differences, legal documents are compared with primary texts, such as the speeches and aphorisms of the Guru. Teachers, historians, and cultural experts with knowledge of Kerala’s socio-educational past participate in semi-structured qualitative interviews. Ten respondents

– including members of the SNDP, educational philosophy researchers, and faculty from Kerala University – were chosen using a purposive sampling technique. Critical theory and social justice frameworks, especially those derived from anti-caste and decolonial epistemologies, are used to thematically code and interpret the interview data. Triangulating historical, legal, and experiential data ensures the study’s dependability and interpretive depth, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the investigation and connecting historical-philosophical interpretation with current constitutional discourse.

Key Themes for Exploration

This part of the article explores the foundational dimensions of Guru’s educational philosophy as the transformative response to caste-based exclusion and colonial subjugation. By examining the themes of autonomy, cultural revitalization, and resistance, it situates Guru’s initiatives within a broader socio-educational framework that anticipated constitutional ideals and redefined the right to education from below.

Autonomy in Education: Guru’s Vision of Self-Determination

Sree Narayana Guru’s educational philosophy was a bold claim of epistemic sovereignty in colonial Kerala, where upper castes-controlled access to information. His emphasis on reading was more than just a pedagogical need; it was a symbolic break in a system that linked caste to intellectual privilege. The Guru’s demand to “educate to be free” exemplified his notion that genuine liberty begins with mental decolonization. Guru saw education as a means of self-determination for underprivileged communities, notably the Ezhavas and other avarna castes. He carried out this goal by establishing inclusive organizations like the Sivagiri Ashram and encouraging vernacular literacy, vocational training, and spiritual contemplation.

In addition to being educational institutions, his establishments served as social experimentation spaces where caste-neutral education could promote personal growth and group agency. The focus on autonomy aligns with the constitutional promise of universal access to education found in Articles 45 and 21A. Decades before the Indian state enacted this right, Guru’s pre-constitutional actions embodied it in spirit, if not in law. His model, which was based on social justice and Advaitic metaphysics, attributed autonomy to marginalized groups’ tangible ability to direct their own educational paths rather than to abstract liberty.

Cultural Revitalization: Indigenous Pedagogy as Epistemic Resistance

Sree Narayan Guru’s educational initiatives went beyond literacy and included acts of cultural regeneration. In a culture divided by caste apartheid, where avarna people were cut off from holy knowledge and cultural narratives, Guru provided a re-scripted history that validated their presence in public and hallowed places. Guru sparked a societal awakening by combining education with spiritual and cultural reclamation via projects such as the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP). His lectures fostered a critical reassessment of old norms and promoted a logical, inclusive worldview that questioned Brahminical orthodoxy.

Guru’s choice to prioritize Malayalam and Tamil above Sanskrit was critical. It symbolizes linguistic decolonization, allowing individuals to access philosophical knowledge in their own dialect. Such vernacularisation foreshadowed subsequent worldwide movements for indigenous knowledge reclamation and educational inclusion, in which language serves as both a tool and a symbol of epistemic sovereignty. This trend is consistent with modern educational institutions’ emphasis on equity and cultural inclusivity. The democratization of learning spaces not only helped to improve historically underprivileged populations, but it also created the intellectual groundwork for today’s multicultural and diverse education in India.

Resistance to Colonialism: Education as Political Praxis

Guru’s educational activities were a sophisticated kind of opposition to colonial and ceremonial conservatism. British colonization reinforced caste divisions through legislative codifications, administrative classification, and a Westernized educational system that excluded the majority. In contrast, Guru’s paradigm represented a vernacular epistemology – a system of knowledge creation anchored in the lived reality of Kerala’s disadvantaged.

The construction of temples without Brahminical consent, as well as the use of symbols such as mirrors rather than idols, challenged both colonial and religious rule. These efforts were revolutionary not just in theology, but also in education: they taught people to question, reflect, and alter. Guru converted education into an anti-colonial practice by combining Advaitic philosophy and living resistance, anticipating the constitutional promise of educational fairness. Guru’s endeavours demonstrate how education may serve as a counter-colonial discourse. His criticism of elite rule over holy and educational areas anticipated constitutional morality and the democratization of public life. While colonial forces solidified social structures, the Guru reinvented society via a radical pedagogy of introspection, rationality, and spiritual equality.

In Sree Narayana Guru’s educational and philosophical endeavours, the three main themes – autonomy, cultural revival, and resistance – are not separate components but rather interconnected tactics. His teachings permeated temples, poetry, rituals, and communal awareness in addition to schools. His extreme views are in line with the current constitutional guarantees of social fairness, cultural rights, and inclusive education. Guru established a style of education that foreshadows and enhances contemporary rights discourses by coordinating ethical training with epistemic justice. His body of work continues to exist as a living archive – a guide for educators, activists, and legislators who want to harness education’s transformational power in an emancipatory way.

Analysis

Sree Narayana Guru's educational interventions embody the vernacular pre-constitutional vision of education and justice that not only anticipated modern constitutional rights but also reshaped foundational categories of access, autonomy, and equity in the context of caste-oppressed Kerala. This section of analysis draws on two core axes: (1) thematic analysis of his philosophical and the pedagogical engagements, and (2) a comparative constitutional framework linking his initiatives with the Articles 45 and 21(A) of the Indian Constitution.

Thematic Analysis: Educational Justice from Below

Sree Narayana Guru's approach to education was a profound epistemic break rather than merely a social intervention. Invoking the idea of inner sovereignty, his philosophy placed a strong emphasis on spiritual dignity and ethical autonomy. He challenged caste epistemology and ritual gatekeeping by providing the underprivileged with an alternative knowledge system that emphasized self-reflection, moral behaviour, and experiential knowledge through vernacular education, literary interventions, and temple consecrations. By establishing inclusive schools and pushing Malayalam and Tamil books over Sanskrit, so shattering the monopoly of Brahmanical scripturalism, Guru's commitment to democratizing knowledge was clear. His idea of Daiva Dasakam, which stresses universal spiritual access and leaves out caste markers, shows how education was seen not just as literacy but as cognitive emancipation. The mirror idol installation at Kalavancode represented a radical act of introspective pedagogy – urging people to see divinity inside themselves rather than search for it outside. This act reflected an epistemological inversion: spiritual knowledge as self-awareness, not ceremonial transmission. This is consistent with Paulo Freire's conception of conscientização, in which learning accelerates action and critical consciousness.

Comparative Framework: Constitutional Parallels and Precedents

For children between the ages of six and fourteen, articles 45 and 21(A) of the Indian Constitution guarantee free and compulsory education as well as their fundamental right to it. Although these were formalised following Independence, Guru's educational endeavours decades before predicted this moral-legal vision. The Guru's support of universal education, regardless of caste, reflects the goal of Article 45 – to remove institutional obstacles allowing children from underprivileged areas access to education. Though they addressed the same populations now safeguarded under constitutional mandates, his village schools and later institutions under the SNDP Yogam predated state action.

Furthermore, institutionalised as a justiciable right by Article 21(A), introduced with the 86th Constitutional Amendment, is the right to education. Guru's policies of free, inclusive education and his critique of hereditary knowledge hierarchies clearly show how already this idea was a de facto realisation of it. His idea that “education is the way to uplift the oppressed” foresaw the contemporary concept of equity in access, so bridging ethical obligations with civic needs. Structural innovations – community schools, literary democratisation, women's access to education, and vocational training – rather than abstract moral gestures – were what Guru accomplished. These complement Article 21(A)'s emphasis on “completing elementary education,” which also goes beyond its scope by including moral agency and economic self-reliance – elements still lacking in official constitutional execution.

Epistemological Synthesis: From Vernacular Justice to Legal Codification

The educational model of the guru serves as an epistemology of release. It highlights the epistemologies of the South – knowledge systems born of the struggles of the underprivileged – that de Sousa Santos (2014) calls. Rather than replicas of current caste-bound models, Guru's schools were alternative pedagogical venues where learning was de-linked from ceremonial purity and connected to ethical dignity. This reorders constitutional clauses not as innovations but rather as codifications of already followed moral standards. Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India, 2018's concept of “substantive equality” in the Constitution finds a great forerunner in Guru's egalitarian consecrations and schools, where caste was rendered useless to human dignity and learning access.

Reclaiming the Vernacular Constitutional Imagination

The study shows that Guru's educational endeavours were live jurisprudence – performative activities that foreshadowed and inspired the Indian constitutional imagination – rather than just historical occurrences. His classrooms served as testing grounds for egalitarian morality and early forms of constitutional citizenship. The Guru exemplified the most inclusive and transformational type of education, not just advocating for it. Guru's approach provides an indigenous pattern that combines education, self-recognition, and dignity as modern India battles with discriminatory schooling systems and the execution of the Right to Education Act. His teachings on cognitive emancipation and ethical reflection are still a powerful appeal to reconsider education as an existential assertion of human value as well as a right.

Policy and Pedagogical Models Inspired by Guru's Legacy

Sree Narayana Guru's educational praxis provides not just historical context, but also a model for solving current difficulties in inclusive and emancipatory education. His concept, based on dignity, equity, and vernacular epistemology, is still important today, as education continues to reflect structural exclusions, particularly along caste, class, and gender lines. Guru's emphasis on ethical self-formation, localised knowledge systems, and community-rooted schooling is consistent with current pedagogical paradigms that promote culturally responsive teaching and decolonised curriculum frameworks (Santos, 2014; Mignolo, 2011). In this light, Guru's legacy can inform at least three aspects of current educational reform:

- **Curriculum Decentralization:** Guru promoted regionally relevant and accessible learning rooted in the lived experiences of marginalized communities. This aligns with contemporary movements for localized curriculum content that respects linguistic diversity and social context (Nambissan & Rao, 2013).
- **Teacher Training for Social Justice:** His vision calls for the educators to become facilitators of the introspection and ethical reasoning. Incorporating caste sensitivity and inclusive pedagogies into teacher education could help operationalize Guru's moral vision within formal schooling systems (Kumar, 2016).
- **Alternative Schooling Models:** Guru's ashram-based learning spaces and inclusive institutional networks resemble the community schools and open learning systems today. Replicating such models can address the educational deficits in tribal, Dalit, and remote communities, ensuring continuity between constitutional mandates and culturally rooted approaches.

Beyond formal access, reviving Article 21A and the Right to Education Act through the incorporation of Guru's educational philosophy into Indian policy discourse has the ability to guarantee epistemic fairness, spiritual dignity, and participatory learning for all students.

Conclusion

The study argues that, even before education became recognised as a constitutional right in post-independence India, Sree Narayana Guru's educational philosophy served as an epistemologically sound, socially revolutionary, and politically subversive template for education as liberation. A radical alternative to colonial pedagogy and caste-based exclusion was provided by Guru's concentration on vernacular pedagogy, inclusive education, and the ethical aspect of learning. His praxis – temple consecration, literary democratisation, and community education – forms a living legacy of pre-constitutional educational jurisprudence, and his vision anticipated the moral reasoning enshrined in Articles 45 and 21A. Guru's contribution is found in his all-encompassing perspective, which saw education as a tool for reshaping the individual, society, and structure rather than just providing access to literacy. He positioned self-awareness, autonomy, and ethical reflection at the core of pedagogy – a notion that is rarely operationalised in the educational systems of today. This study also shows how Guru's institutions and reforms established practical counterparts to constitutional promises by incorporating justice, equity, and dignity into locally driven, vernacular settings. However, the article could benefit from reducing redundancy across portions, particularly Guru's agreement with Articles 45 and 21A in many chapters. Some notions (e.g., mirror consecration, vernacularisation, and epistemic sovereignty) are repeated throughout the introduction, literature review, themes, and analysis without being developed further. Consolidating them would simplify the content and improve clarity.

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