Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research Innovation and Development
VOL 2 NO.1 (JAN-JUNE 2025)
ISSN - 3048-4685
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https://www.bmsgroup.in/product/multidisciplinary-journal-of-educational-research-innovation-and-development/

# Caste, Consciousness and the Epistemic Turn in the Philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru

**Dr. Pratheesh P**

*Assistant Professor, Department of History, St. Michael's College, Cherthala, Kerala*
*(Affiliated to the University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram)*
*drpratheeshraghav@gmail.com*
*ORCID ID: 0000-0003-3976-5978*

**Dr. Saritha S. R.**

Assistant Professor , *Department of History, Sree Narayana College Cherthala*
*(Affiliated to the University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram)*
*sarithaswingly@gmail.com*
*ORCID ID: 0009-0005-2112-8155*

## *Abstract*

This article explores the conceptual formation of "indigenous modernity" through Sree Narayana Guru's (1856-1928) philosophical and sociopolitical contributions in Kerala's colonial and caste-stratified milieu. Unlike European Enlightenment assumptions and orientalist conceptions, this research examines Guru's praxis as a vernacular intellectual who traversed and negotiated the borders between holy and secular, ritual and reform, and tradition and revolution. Drawing on George Thadathil's seminal articulation of Guru's epistemic interventions and juxtaposing them with postcolonial critiques of modernity by scholars such as Upendra Baxi and Mitra Sharafi, this article situates Guru's vision within a larger project of contextual rationality and legal-cultural transformation. The paper examines Guru's unique use of Advaita Vedanta, his institutional experiments such as the SNDP and Gurukula Foundation, and his symbolic interventions (such as the Aruvippuram consecration) as modalities of a non-Western yet deeply modern social reform. It also situates his ideas within discussions about caste abolition, religious critique, and civic ethics, suggesting that Guru exemplified a different path of modernity distinguished by cognitive integration of emotion and reason, as well as a rejection of colonial binary. The term of retro modernity—as opposed to externally imposed colonial civilizing missions—is used to examine the self-generated nature of changes initiated by Guru and his contemporaries. Ultimately, this study advances a transformational logic based on emotional justice, communal dignity, and epistemic decolonization, helping

to re-theorize modernity from the edges. Furthermore, it asserts that the dialogic negotiation of caste, community, and conscience by Sree Narayana Guru offers a workable paradigm for current discussions on social justice and democratic pluralism in India and elsewhere.

***Keywords****: Indigenous Modernity, Retro Modernity, Sree Narayana Guru, Postcolonial Rationality, Subaltern Agency, Caste Reform, Contextual Ethics*

## 1. Introduction: Caste Hierarchy and Colonial Stratification

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Kerala's social structure was intricately linked to a caste system that was firmly established politically and ritualistically. At the top of this structure were the Namboothiri Brahmins, who had authority over property ownership, religious institutions, and the dissemination of holy knowledge. Spatial, ritual, and occupational isolation served to further solidify this caste-based system, making the avarna castes—mainly the Ezhavas, Pulayas, and Parayas—religiously and socially marginalized. They were often denied access to schooling, temple entry, and the ability to perform religious rites, which institutionalized a kind of ceremonial apartheid. The Savarna-Avarna dichotomy was merely spiritual in nature, but it also served as the foundation of Kerala's socioeconomic system. Legal regulations, temple management, and customary customs all contributed to the region's public sphere remaining organized by caste. While colonial government avoided direct intervention in religious affairs, it did codify caste classifications through censuses, land tenure laws, and educational initiatives, legitimizing and ossifying caste identities.

Against this context, traditional historiography has frequently cantered on elite reform initiatives, emphasizing Western liberal philosophies and nationalist narratives. However, subaltern research emphasizes the limitations of such frameworks in addressing the daily realities of oppressed people. The Ezhava group, to which Sree Narayana Guru belonged, illustrated the contradiction of socioeconomic growth vs ceremonial seclusion. Despite their numerical strength and entrepreneurial mobility, they were symbolically devalued and spiritually excluded. This conflict spurred the rise of vernacular intellectuals like as Sree Narayana Guru, who desired not just political liberation but an ontological reordering of social relations. His reform endeavours emerged not from Western imitation, but from deeply established philosophical criticisms of caste and authority, founded on Advaita Vedanta and reframed for community emancipation.

### 1.1 Sree Narayana Guru: The Philosopher-Reformer

Born into a modest Ezhava family in Chempazhanthy, Travancore, in 1856, Sree Narayana Guru became one of colonial India's most radical and revolutionary intellectuals. His life's work as a mystic, poet, theologian, and social reformer directly questioned theological exclusion, ceremonial hierarchy, and caste orthodoxy. Guru developed a spiritual-ethical praxis that was both profoundly disruptive and peaceful, in contrast to previous reformers who either sought revolutionary violence or Sanskritization (assimilation into upper caste standards).

Guru's deeds, most notably the Aruvippuram consecration in 1888 (where he built a Shiva idol without Brahmanical authorization) and the Mirror idol in the Sanctum of Kalavamkodam temple in 1927 (avoided anthropomorphic deity idol), which challenged the caste monopoly on divinity. His founding of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) and subsequent socio-political interventions demonstrated his critique of ritual middlemen and caste purity and

caste-based power structure. His aphoristic dictum—"One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man"—was not a demand for homogeneity, but a profound evocation of ethical universality based on spiritual interiority.

## 1.2 Philosophy as Emancipatory Praxis

Guru's understanding of Advaita Vedanta was beyond the limitation to spiritual or metaphysical abstractions. Instead, it was re-ethicized and used as a vehicle for collective emancipation. While Brahmins had a hierarchical interpretation and monopoly on Sankara's Advaita, Guru democratized non dualism with collective inclusion. According to Guru, the divine existed in all beings, and worship was a sort of ethical self-recognition rather than caste-based liturgical performance. His use of a mirror idol instead of a figurine deity in Kalavamkodam temple was the radical semiotic gesture, replacing worship with introspection, mediation with immediate gratification, and ceremonial control with spiritual autonomy. This intellectual reversal has socio-political and constitutional consequences. Guru's theology undercut caste's legal validity by redefining spiritual access as a basic human right. Long before the Indian Constitution incorporated Articles 14, 15, and 17, Guru had put their spirit into action.

## 1.3 Need and Significance of the Study

Despite universal acclaim of Guru's contributions to spiritual and social life, academic analysis frequently overlooks the epistemological uniqueness and political sophistication of his interventions. His legacy is frequently exploited under nationalist or heritage narratives, ignoring the dramatic rupture he caused to Brahmanical systems and colonial modernity alike. By concentrating on Guru's symbolic, theological, and epistemological interventions, this work fills a vital gap in caste and modernity research.
It interrogates:

- In what ways does Guru's approach represent an indigenous modernity that defies orthodoxy and does not imitate the West?
- Is it possible to interpret Guru's figurative acts as legal-philosophical declarations on caste, identity, and human dignity?
- How do his teachings foreshadow postcolonial constitutionalism with a vernacular grammar of justice?

Revisiting Sree Narayana Guru's life and ideas again provides historical context and current significance in a time when discussions about caste discrimination, religious access, and cultural decolonization are still ongoing. His vision outlines a paradigm of change that is not only reformist but also epistemologically fundamental, opening the door to new ideas of justice, dignity, and spiritual self-governance.

## 2.1 Literature Review: Genealogies of Reform and Indigenous Rationality

Through a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including political theory, religious studies, subaltern history, and cultural anthropology, the academic community's interest in the life and ideas of Sree Narayana Guru has developed. Guru's legacy is still little understood in terms of indigenous modernity and epistemic justice, despite his enormous impact on contemporary Kerala. Four main sections make up this review, which traces the philosophical foundations of the current study.

## 2.1 Caste, Ritual, and Social Hierarchies in Colonial Kerala

The longstanding relationship between Namboothiri Brahmins and Nairs in maintaining ritual, land, and symbolic authority has been a recurring theme in Kerala's caste histories (Jeffrey, 1976; Tharakan, 1995; Menon, 2007). Beyond religious ceremonies, this caste hegemony pervaded public space organization, work hierarchies, educational opportunities, and geographical mobility. Although caste was supposedly spiritual, scholars like Fuller (1976) and Osella & Osella (2000) have demonstrated that it really served as an embodied system of exclusion, discipline, and purity that was institutionalized through family, temple economics, and legal standards.

Despite their stated policy of not interfering in religious affairs, colonial legal and administrative systems unintentionally strengthened caste divisions. Through the use of instruments like the caste census (Dirks, 2001), the acceptance of laws governing temple trusteeship (Bayly, 1989), and the codify of customs, British rule legitimized Brahmanical claims to ceremonial supremacy while denying disadvantaged people substantive remedies. This historical context of ritual apartheid and caste-coded administration serves as the foundation for understanding Sree Narayana Guru's interventions. His temple consecrations, particularly the bold act of erecting a mirror as an idol at Kalavamkodam, did not just challenge caste; they also defied the semiotic and ceremonial language that encoded it. His rethinking of the sanctuary as a space for ethical contemplation rather than hierarchical mediation challenged the priesthood's interpretative monopoly and ushered in a new rhetoric of ritual democracy (Freeman, 2003; Devika, 2010).

## 2.2 Indigenous Modernity and Vernacular Reform

Recent historiography (Devika, 2007; Gopalakrishnan, 2022; Subrahmanian, 2020) has increasingly located Guru within an emergent framework of indigenous modernity, a term that recognizes the non-Western agents of reform who articulated modern values through vernacular idioms. Guru's trajectory did not follow the paradigms of colonial liberalism or Hindu revivalism; rather, he enacted a model of transformative practice that synthesized Advaitic ontology with egalitarian ethics. The Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) movement, as well as his literary works like Jati Mimamsa and Atmopadesa Śatakam, provided an epistemological criticism of caste based on metaphysical non-duality and social fairness. Scholars such as Bhaskaran (2012) and Gopal Guru & Sarukkai (2012) demonstrate how Guru's critique of caste is consistent with an experiential epistemology, which prioritizes the experienced reality of the oppressed over textual orthodoxy.

Nevertheless, a lot of the popular and academic portrayals of Guru tend to go into one of two extremes: reductionist nationalism or hagiographic spiritualization. Instead, this research aims to establish Guru as a vernacular public intellectual whose symbolic interventions, especially the installation of the mirror, may be seen as acts of epistemic change, semiotic subversion, and legal resistance. Chakrabarty's (2000) appeal to provincialize Europe by comprehending how regional thinking systems subvert the dominance of Eurocentric paradigms of political modernity is echoed in this framework.

## 2.3 Semiotics, Phenomenology, and the Sacred

The mirror, as a non-iconic sacred signifier, resonates strongly with modern semiotic and phenomenological theories that highlight the importance of embodiment, perception, and

symbolic mediation in religious experience. Eco (1976) defines symbols as "vehicles of meaning in motion," capable of reconstructing the semiotic field of the holy. The mirror, by denying human depiction, calls into question the traditional idol as a fixed symbol of divine presence. Instead, it provides an open, self-referential field—where the signified merges with the signifier, making the devotee both the object and subject of devotion.

Turner's (1969) concept of the liminal and communitas is particularly important here: the mirror serves as a liminal symbol, suspending caste-coded boundaries and inviting devotees into a shared, non-hierarchical realm of reflection. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology of perception stresses that vision is participatory rather than passive—seeing oneself in the mirror is an example of embodied religious cognition. As Chidambaram (2015) points out, the mirror "reconfigures sacred embodiment by transforming gaze into grace," particularly in the setting of Kerala's caste-coded ritual frameworks.

According to feminist theologians like Gross (1993), patriarchal theologies that demand mediators act as a bridge between the devotee and the almighty should be dismantled. By transforming the worshipper's own reflection into the location of divine encounter, the guru's mirror does precisely that—it represents what King (1998) refers to as "a feminist re-symbolization of the sacred." Self-reflective rituality is also seen by Dalit theologians such as Rajkumar (2010) as a dramatic break with hegemonic priesthoods that deny the oppressed epistemic agency. As a result, Guru's mirror might be seen as a component of a larger post-representational holy aesthetic in which social inclusion, ethical reflection, and non-duality all come together in a single semiotic gesture. It signifies the extreme democratization of holy form rather than its rejection, making divinity approachable, embodied, and self-affirming.

## 2.4 Constitutional Morality and Religious Reform

A legal-philosophical interpretation via the lens of constitutional morality is likewise encouraged by Guru's mirror. Constitutional morality necessitates a revolutionary commitment to liberty, dignity, and fraternity, as noted by Bhatia (2019). This moral perspective in ritual space is epitomized by the act of consecrating a mirror in lieu of a deity, free from priestly interference, caste-purity, or ritual mediation. Drawing on George Grote, Ambedkar (1950) defined constitutional morality as the assimilation of moral precepts that go beyond majoritarian dogma. Articles 15(2), 17(2), and 25(2)(b) of the Indian Constitution, which forbid caste discrimination, untouchability, and prevent monopolies over religious practices by any specific group, are in direct accordance with Guru's reform in this regard. His mirror is a proto-constitutional act that foreshadows the legal logic of equality, not only an iconoclastic rite.

But Indian constitutionalism frequently ignores vernacular traditions that promote democratic norms outside of official legal frameworks, as Mehta (2011) contends. One example of an epistemic blind hole is the exclusion of Guru's temple reforms from popular legal history. This is criticized by Kapur (2012) as "juridical elitism," in which contemporary law disregards the moral and political implications of native innovations.

Thus, this study suggests a theory known as symbolic jurisprudence, which interprets practices such as the dedication of the Guru's mirror as both legally significant actions and cultural manifestations. According to this perspective, ritual itself transforms into a vehicle for constitutional imagination, rewriting the language of holy space to be consistent with human rights, justice, and dignity.

## 3. Methodological Path

The article addresses Sree Narayana Guru's symbolic and philosophical interventions, notably the consecration of the mirror idol, as acts of epistemic resistance with constitutional implications. Using a hermeneutic-phenomenological lens, the study examines Guru's symbolic innovations as juridical-philosophical interventions with emancipatory implications. The methodological approach moves between text and context, symbol and legislation, ritual and reason, emphasizing how caste is more than simply a social hierarchy; it is also an epistemic regime that may be overthrown via ethical, spiritual, and constitutional techniques.

### 3.1 Statement of the Problem

Sree Narayana Guru's humanism-based activism, often overlooked in legal, philosophical, and semiotic literature, represents a radical epistemic rupture from Brahmanical ritualism and caste-based ontologies. The study argues that symbolic gestures like the mirror consecration at Kalavamkodam are often overlooked in legal, philosophical, and semiotic literature. The mirror serves as a sacred object and a semiotic and constitutional act, redefining divine authority from external ritual to self-reflective inner divinity. Theorists like Gopal Guru emphasize experiential epistemologies of the oppressed over descriptive sociology of caste, but current analyses of caste reform fail to include Guru's interventions, perpetuating the marginalization of transformative indigenous knowledge systems in legal theory and social philosophy.

Despite being generally acknowledged in cultural memory, Sree Narayana Guru's temple reforms, most notably the mirror consecration remain peripheral in scholarly debate due to its consequences for caste, law, and epistemology. The centre of this study is to understand how this symbolic act functions as a kind of ethical teaching, epistemic resistance, and legal philosophy.

### 3.2 Objectives: Accordingly, the study set its objectives as follows

- to examine the mirror idol's phenomenological, juridical, and symbolic aspects in order to critique Brahmanical orthodoxy.
- to place Guru's ritual interventions in the larger contexts of decolonial spirituality, subaltern agency, and constitutional morality.
- to record oral histories and lived experiences from Kalavamkodam as factual archives of the Guru's continuing influence.
- to emphasize non-Western concepts of justice and change in order to add to the conversation on indigenous modernity.

### 3.3 Study's Methodology

The study analyses Guru's figurative epistemology and philosophical practice using a qualitative, multidisciplinary, and interpretative methodology. The study makes use of post-representational semiotics frameworks, experiential epistemology, and symbolic jurisprudence. The hermeneutic approach entails closely examining the writings of the Guru, temple rites, and communal customs via textual and symbolic analysis. The original writings of the Guru, archival documents, interviews, and secondary literature in the fields of philosophy, semiotics,

legal and constitutional theory, sacred aesthetics, Dalit and feminist theology, and semiotics are some of the data sources. Data is arranged using thematic coding into topics including legal symbolism, mirror as epistemic rupture, and ritual decentralization.

While legal interpretation situates Guru's decisions in relation to the Indian Constitution and significant rulings, semiotic analysis decodes the mirror idol as a radical symbol. Merleau-Ponty's concept of perception and selfhood is used in phenomenological interpretation to explain the embodied experience of mirror worship. Respect for cultural and spiritual values, reflexive neutrality, and informed consent are examples of ethical considerations. Finalizing the corpus, conducting field interviews, reading interdisciplinary literature, creating a conceptual and visual map that connects symbolic actions to constitutional ideas, and contrasting Guru's epistemic shift with comparable interventions in subaltern movements are all goals of the project.

## 4. Unveiling Meaning: Symbol, Agency, and Sacred Politics

The next analytical step is to dive into the core of symbolic praxis, where ritual, representation, and resistance come together, now that the methodological underpinnings have been solidified. This section examines the philosophical and political manoeuvres that result from Guru's symbolic interventions, particularly the consecration of the mirror idol, which upend established hierarchies and reinterpret holiness as a place of democratized divinity. These actions are not only aesthetic or religious; they are full of epistemic energy and legal implications, able to reconstitute the very language of the holy and overturn caste-coded ontologies. The mirror is a reflected plane that dissolves ritual exclusivity and metaphysical remoteness, making worship an investigation into ethical selfhood rather than merely an adornment.

Guru's interventions challenge traditional power dynamics in temple architecture and ritual access, reclaim the symbolic as a tool for subaltern self-determination, and introduce a constitutional spirituality rooted in inner sovereignty and justice. The sacred becomes a mirror to conscience, activating political and ontological emancipation. Guru's praxis is revolutionary, fostering new epistemic orders rooted in justice, equality, and self-recognition, rather than seeking inclusion in old frames.

## The Mirror as Semiotic Revolt: Re-signifying the Sacred

Sree Narayana Guru's consecration of the mirror idol in 1927 temple was a purposeful semiotic intervention intended to challenge the iconographic hegemony of Brahmanical ritualism; it was not fortuitous nor unusual. Guru started what might be called a semiotic rebellion by substituting a mirror for the anthropomorphic deity. This revolt flips the directionality of spiritual gaze, making the devotee face their own moral reflection instead of bowing down to a caste-sanctioned deity. This metamorphosis is based on post-representational sacred aesthetics. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology (1962), the mirror reorients the worshipper's embodiment as an active perceiver rather than a passive recipient, making the self the locus of the holy. In Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotic paradigm, the idol is a "symbol," pointing to a transcendent referent via intermediary codes; the mirror, on the other hand, is "index"—it points to the divine inside the immanent subject directly. This non-iconic shift is profoundly subversive within colonial Kerala's religious semiotics, where ritual visibility was organized by caste privilege and temple access was embedded in spatial hierarchies that prohibited admittance to the avarna bodies. The mirror rejects that framework entirely; it does not recognize caste and does not demand ritual cleanliness. It popularizes deity.

Ritual, according to Guru's view, is rebuilt rather than abolished, with a quiet, self-directed interaction replacing conventional rituals mediated by Sanskrit incantations, Brahmanical priests, and caste-segregated temple settings. This is consistent with the Advaitic dictum "Tat Tvam Asi"—not as a philosophical pronouncement, but as an ethical obligation. Oral accounts gathered from Kalavamkodam confirm that commitment here is an act of moral contemplation rather than just symbolic adherence. Devotees describe the process of staring into the mirror as "seeing the divine in their own tired faces (Mukherjee, 2014)," implying that the Guru's mirror lifts sanctity out of metaphysical abstraction and roots it in experienced reality. The codified epistemology of caste, which holds that knowledge and holiness belong to specific bloodlines, is challenged by this democratization of ritual space. Guru's mirror, on the other hand, embodies what Sundar Sarukkai and Gopal Guru refer to as "the epistemology from below"—where self-reflection is elevated to a holy duty and experienced access takes the place of inherited legitimacy.

The concept of the sacred as a public good rather than a private priestly property is reframed by the Guru's involvement. The temple becomes into a place of ethical citizenship rather than ritual sovereignty, where everyone contributes equally to the creation of the sacred, irrespective of caste, gender, or literacy. This is consistent with liberationist and Dalit theological discourses that emphasize the need to reclaim sacred space as emancipatory space. This holy citizenship is mediated through the mirror, which offers dignity realized inside rather than grace from others. Comparative Iconoclasm: The Mirror and Global Non-Iconic Traditions.

Mirrors are valued in Jainism, especially in the Digambara tradition, as tools for self-realization rather than as objects of vanity. Unadorned mirrors are a common element in Jain temples, where the devotee is encouraged to contemplate the fleeting self and acknowledge the soul's capacity for emancipation. Similar to how Guru used the mirror as a spiritual equalizer, these mirrors serve as hermeneutic instruments of reflection rather than as gods. Islamic aniconism, which emphasizes calligraphy, geometry, and introspection as routes to God, forbids anthropomorphic representations of the divine, particularly in Sunni traditions (Nasr, 2002). By relocating deity from material forms to scripture and purpose, the rejection of image-worship in Islam is not only theological but also profoundly ethical, equating believers. This resonance is carried by Guru's mirror, which reflects Islam's emphasis on direct, unmediated devotion by democratizing access by doing away with interpretative gatekeepers.

In Zen Buddhism, the idea of "mirror mind" (kagami no kokoro) is essential, especially in Japanese zazen meditation (Suzuki, 1970). Echoing Zen's minimalist holy aesthetic, the Kalavamkodam mirror, which is free of adornment and ceremonial accoutrements, also calls for quiet presence above performative piety. In a transcultural tradition of post-representational spirituality, where sacredness is separated from form and re-rooted in awareness, conscience, and ethical relationality, the Guru's deed was not an isolated rupture, as these worldwide analogies highlight. Beyond its spiritual aspects, guru's symbolic jurisprudence enacts or foreshadows legal concepts of equality, dignity, and access through ritual action. The mirror represents the spirit of Article 15(2), which guarantees access to public holy venues regardless of caste, and incorporates Article 17's repeal of untouchability by allowing unmediated access to the sacred for everyone (Bhatia, 2019). Here, the symbolic form serves a jurisprudential purpose by making visible a normative system in which justice is embodied rather than abstracted.

Guru's symbolic language is one of rupture rather than accommodation; it destroys the structure of caste-coded sanctity and replaces it with a ritualistic egalitarianism. His work challenges us

to envision a post-caste, post-iconic holy order in which the divine becomes democratic, ritual becomes ethical, and space becomes rights.

## The Epistemic Turn: From Ontological Caste to Phenomenological Equality

Sree Narayana Guru's philosophy marks a major epistemological rupture in Indian intellectual and religious traditions, particularly in Kerala's caste-based society. Unlike the inherited Brahmanical view of caste as an ontologically mandated fact sanctioned by birth and scripture, Guru reimagined caste as an epistemological misrecognition, a distortion caused by avidya (ignorance) and erroneous dualism. His renowned dictum—"One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man"—should not be interpreted just as an ecumenical or mystical motto. Instead, it is a phenomenological imperative, a demand to realize non-duality (Advaita) in both metaphysical and social contexts.

Guru's reconstruction of Advaita Vedanta fundamentally shifts the discourse from philosophical abstraction to embodied application. Classical Advaita, such as Śaṅkara, emphasizes the illusory nature of the universe (maya) and the oneness of Atman and Brahman. However, it generally ignores social hierarchies and ritual exclusion. Guru countered this detachment by combining Vedantic insight with ethical immediacy, transferring the topic of liberation (moksha) from ceremonial performance (karma) or textual adherence (dharma) to experiential knowledge (jnana) based on egalitarian ontology (Nair, 2005; Menon, 2020).

Guru's Vedanta "offers a way of overcoming difference without negating its uniqueness role even in an egalitarian frame," as Thadathil (2008) notes. To put it another way, Guru promoted a humanistic ethics based on equal divine immanence while preserving experiencing variety and affirming ontological oneness. This shift is best shown by the mirror idol, which directs worshippers inward—to face the self as the source of sacredness—instead of outward onto a god enshrined in caste privilege. This epistemic decentralization of divinity is consistent with Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai's (2012) theory of the need to transition from "descriptive sociology"—which simply catalogs caste-based oppression—to "experiential epistemology," in which the oppressed's lived knowledge serves as the foundation of critical social philosophy. Narayana Guru's reorientation accomplishes this by recasting caste as an epistemological breach rather than a social description, and proposing introspective knowledge as a cure.

Furthermore, his epistemic turn foreshadowed postcolonial critiques of caste ontology put forth by academics such as Anand Teltumbde (2018) and Kancha Ilaiah (1996), who contend that caste maintains itself through knowledge regimes that reproduce hierarchies of perception in addition to material oppression. Thus, the visual and ceremonial economy of caste, which historically upheld Brahmanical power through iconography, temple construction, and priestly mediation, is disrupted by the guru's rebuilding of the holy, particularly through aniconic forms like the mirror (Devika, 2007; Rajkumar, 2010).

Notably, Guru's involvement extends beyond theology to include civic virtue and constitutional morality. His emphasis on self-realization as a public deed reframes spirituality as justice, establishing his epistemic shift as a prefigurative model of constitutional morality that was eventually included into Articles 15, 17, and 25 of the Indian Constitution. His practice therefore anticipates Ambedkar's own demand for the "annihilation of caste" through the cultivation of logical ethics, educational empowerment, and moral self-rule (Ambedkar, 1936; Bhatia, 2019). In this perspective, Sree Narayana Guru must be viewed not just as a spiritual reformer or saint,

but also as an epistemic revolutionary—one who rewrote the hermeneutics of divine, shattered ontological hierarchies, and reclaimed holiness as a space of universal equality and cognitive emancipation.

## 6.2 Caste as Epistemic Violation: The Consciousness of Subaltern Injustice

Sree Narayana Guru's challenge to caste was more than just a social reform movement; it was a significant epistemological intervention that revealed caste as a system of cognitive violence and ontological misrecognition. According to Guru's radical re-reading, caste is more than just a tool of exclusion; it is a regime of knowledge—a way of seeing, classifying, and ordering the world—those results in asymmetrical relationships between the self and the other, the sacred and the profane, the pure and the polluted. This premise is powerfully expressed in his writings Jati Mimamsa and Jati Lakshanam, where caste is dismantled as a false epistemic construct that warps the sense of human equality and shared awareness, rather than only being condemned for its social injustices. The theological and symbolic legitimacy of caste is undermined by Guru using philosophical and lyrical language, revealing it as a type of vidya-viparyasa, or knowledge inversion, that separates people from their inherent union with the Absolute (Menon, 2011; Nair, 2005).

Guru's interventions, which, thought to be, draw from Advaita Vedanta but also expand its scope into the ethical and political sphere, reinterpret caste as a dualistic hallucination (dvaita-vibhrama)—a philosophical fallacy with social ramifications. According to Mohan (2020), Guru's epistemology, which is based on the teaching of *'Tat Tvam Asi'* (That Thou Art), substitutes a relational and dynamic notion of selfhood for the ontological fixity of caste. According to this schema, any attempt to distinguish between individuals based on caste is not only unfair, but also philosophically foolish. Frantz Fanon's critique of colonial knowledge systems in Black Skin, White Masks (1952), in which he describes how inferiority is internalized to maintain hierarchies, is consistent with this view. Similarly, the consecration of the Guru's mirror at Kalavamkodam turns into an epistemic intervention that represents self-sovereignty rather than caste hierarchy. The mirror dissolves the epistemic gap between the worshipper and the holy by reflecting the self as divine rather than projecting a god subject to ritual access (Rajkumar, 2010; Assmann, 2011).

A semiotic break in the caste system is created by the symbolic rejection of mediated ritual devotion, which is usually reserved for Brahmin priests. In this case, Guru is changing the definition of sacred space itself rather than just making temples more accessible to everybody. Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization—waking repressed people to their existential and epistemic capacities—is echoed by the mirror installation, which is a radical pedagogical act (Freire, 1970). Guru reclaims the act of knowing as a liberating process and desacralizes caste through this symbolic gesture. Furthermore, this change foreshadows the critical caste epistemology that modern scholars like Annamalai (2018) and Anand Teltumbde (2018) have established. These scholars contend that caste functions as a cognitive enclosure that shapes what may be known, by whom, and under what circumstances. The hierarchical logic of Brahmanical scripturalism is successfully replaced by Guru's internal rather than exterior focus of divinity, which offers an alternative philosophy of knowledge generation based on experience, self-reflection, and spiritual equality.

In Guru's standpoint, caste is therefore an epistemic illusion that must be overcome rather than a social system that has to be changed to fit its own logic. What following theorists would refer

to as "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo, 2011)—the refusal to know and be known within repressive frames—begins with his philosophical praxis. Guru turns the place of worship into a place of cognitive decolonization and the follower into an epistemic actor through symbolic reconfiguration, embodied ritual, and ethical teaching.

## Experience as Knowledge: The Guru's Phenomenology of the Marginal

Unlike classical Advaitins, Guru regarded anubhava (living experience) as a legitimate epistemic source. His ideas are consistent with what philosopher A. Raghuramaraju refers to as "privileging lived Dalit experience." Guru's notion of Atmasukham—the well-being of the soul—provides an internal compass based on ethical self-awareness while rejecting ritualism and caste-based systems. For Guru, liberation (moksha) is not only metaphysical, but also social and emotional. It is accomplished not by seclusion, but rather through ethical connection and relational equality. His observations in Atmopadesa Satakam and Darsanamala underscore the importance of integrating self-perception and ethical duty to achieve authentic knowledge. This discovery is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, in which the body becomes a conduit for perception. At Kalavamkodam, the mirror is used not just as a reflected surface, but also as a phenomenological method to recreate the Dalit self—not as a passive subject of pity, but as an active agent of holy worth.

## Subaltern Modernity: Guru as Architect of Indigenous Rationality

Sree Narayana Guru's intellectual legacy is distinctive in the debate on modernity—not as an adjunct to the European Enlightenment, but as the creator of a genuinely subaltern modernity born of caste oppression in colonial Kerala. Rather than embracing the Eurocentric polarity of tradition against modernity, Guru reimagined both categories by incorporating ethical reasoning into spiritual practice and experiential epistemology into symbolic action. Guru's interventions are a type of "indigenous modernity," as George Thadathil (2008) persuasively argues, a philosophical practice that embraced and overcame the paradoxes of both colonialism and Brahmanism. This modernity was a vernacular rationality, an internally formed cognitive framework based on the lived experiences of subaltern societies, rather than a passive assimilation of colonial logic (Chakrabarty, 2000; Raghavan, 2021). Poetic criticisms of caste, educational reforms, and the consecration of the Guru's mirror all suggest a local epistemology of resistance that opposed colonial secularism and religious absolutism.

Guru maintained a non-dualistic ontological framework in which ethical, spiritual, and social elements are naturally linked, in contrast to Western rationalism, which historically divided reason from emotion, sacred from secular, and individual from community. He embodies what Meera Nanda (2009) refers to as "critical traditionalism"—the capacity to criticize oppression with instruments created inside the tradition itself, as opposed to utilizing externally imposed schemas—by fusing Advaitic metaphysics with the reality of caste segregation. The act of pluralizing reason and approving other ways of knowing and being, which Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) calls "provincializing Europe," is reflected in this non-linear interaction with modernity. This included creating a non-Brahmanical hermeneutics of liberation in Guru's instance, wherein revered expressions such as "One Caste, One Religion, One God" served as epistemic ruptures rather than just phrases of devotion.

Furthermore, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) proposed the idea of the epistemologies of the South, which calls for the recognition and institutionalization of non-Western modes of

knowledge that emerge from the struggles of oppressed communities. Guru's emphasis on education, spiritual democratization, and social equity as transformative tools is consistent with this idea. By integrating political critique into spiritual rejuvenation and developing an emancipatory ethics that is at once logical, emotional, and symbolic, Guru's method foreshadows these modern frameworks by decades.

Crucially, Guru's native modernism was fully expressed. His symbolic interventions, like the consecration of the mirror, are semiotic enactments of novel perspectives on the self and other rather than abstract thought exercises. A retheorization of modernity from below, influenced by the agency of historically marginalized communities, is marked by this presentation of the holy as egalitarian and ritual as reflective. Such re-imaginings are the foundation of radical democratic subjectivities, as Hardt and Negri (2000) imply in their concept of multitude. Guru reimagined the holy as a locus of resistance that went beyond the division between tradition and modernity, as opposed to copying European secularism. His ideas challenge caste as an epistemological barrier as well as a social hierarchy, and his interventions provided a third space between colonial rule and elite nationalism where subaltern subjects might express an emancipatory politics based on moral self-awareness.

## 6.5 Towards an Epistemology of Liberation

Narayana Sree "Ask not, say not, think not caste" is a quote from the Guru that is frequently used as a moral argument against prejudice. But when viewed via the prism of epistemic critique, it shows a more profound, revolutionary education that seeks to free awareness from caste-imposed classifications. This axiom, which recognizes caste as an epistemic residue—a manner of cognition influenced by inherited patterns of dominance and exclusion—is not only prescriptive but also diagnostic. Guru maintains that emancipation starts in the mind, making his bold intervention both ethical and cognitive.

Accordingly, Guru's ideas are consistent with what decolonial theorists have referred to as "epistemologies of liberation"—a lineage of knowledge creation that rejects both casteist essentialism and Eurocentric universalism. The oppressed must unlearn internalized inferiority before they can engage in emancipatory praxis, as Paulo Freire (1970) stated in his philosophy of conscientização (critical consciousness). Such a deconstructive and reconstruction form of consciousness is exactly what Guru's pedagogy is, where knowledge is a practice of awakening rather than passive reflection. Guru saw that caste functions through habits of perception, speech, and interaction—what Bourdieu (1977) referred to as "habitus" and Gramsci would term "common sense"—in contrast to simple social stratification. Guru started a phenomenological detoxification of inherited social imaginaries by promoting cognitive alertness, or "do not ask, do not say, do not think." Similar to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999) refers to as a loss, this is an epistemic ascesis.

According to this epistemology of liberation, vidya (true knowledge) is an ethical state based on social equality and Advaitic insight rather than bookish research. According to Guru, knowledge always has social and moral ramifications. In Jati Mimamsa, he declared that caste is a "superimposed error" (adhyāsa) that may be eliminated by introspection and moral behaviour rather than a metaphysical fact. This is in line with the epistemological criticism of modern Dalit thinking, which includes Gopal Guru's rejection of normative knowledge hierarchies and stress on "experience as a category" (Guru, 2002).

Thus, the mirror becomes a materialization of epistemic clarity rather than merely a sign of ritual innovation. It prioritizes direct phenomenological self-encounter as a means of achieving truth, rejecting idolatrous mediation and ritual substitutes. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), perception is always influenced by the social body and is never neutral. The devotee is challenged by the guru's mirror to notice the frameworks that organize that view in addition to the face. By doing this, it starts a contemplative epistemology in which divinity is acknowledged inside rather than being prescribed or possessed. There are political repercussions to this epistemic revolution. Guru moves the axis of power from scriptural monopoly to spiritual autonomy by recoding the holy as a field of democratic inquiry. It is a knowledge endeavour in the most comprehensive sense—one that is fundamentally inclusive, dialogic, and liberating. It foreshadows Amartya Sen's (1999) idea of freedom as growth, according to which the true test of fairness is one's own talents, especially the ability to see oneself as equal.

Crucially, instrumentalist and colonial epistemologies are contested by this knowledge paradigm. Instead of looking to Western reason for confirmation, Guru's philosophy suggests a vernacular rationality that is grounded in regional cosmologies yet has the capacity to be universal. What Walter Mignolo (2011) refers to as "epistemic disobedience"—a rejection of hegemonic knowledge systems as absolute or normative—is embodied in his teachings. Accordingly, education is a reorganization of community and cognition rather than only literacy or schooling. The mirror temple still serves as an unofficial "people's university," where elders impart knowledge by ceremony, storytelling, and living example rather than through written materials, as suggested by oral histories from Kalavamkodam. These behaviours embody the coexistence of several epistemologies that oppose monocultural dominance, which Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) refers to as the "ecology of knowledges." Thus, Guru's theory of freedom is neither abstract nor utopian. It is practiced on a daily basis—by staring in the mirror, denying caste rhetoric, and declaring one's place in the sacred without intermediaries. It is a daily struggle to caste's ontological enslavement and epistemic colonization of the mind.

### Social Transformation as Ontological Renewal

At the heart of Guru's philosophy is not only a demand for social transformation, but a rebuilding of being. He redefined the person not as a carrier of caste-encoded identity, but as an expression of the universal self (Brahman). This redefinition has far-reaching implications: it undermines caste's metaphysical legitimacy and proposes a new ontological language of personhood. Untouchability, according to this perspective, is an ontological transgression as well as a social sin. It contradicts the fundamental fact of Advaita: that all creatures are one. Thus, the ethical implications of Guru's philosophy extend beyond political justice, aiming to reshape our understanding of the self, the other, and the holy.

## 6.7 Continuing Relevance: From Philosophical Insight to Constitutional Morality

Guru's intellectual contributions are still relevant to the nation's moral and constitutional framework. The phrase "One Caste, One Religion, One God for Humanity," which reflects his appeal for radical self-recognition, is in line with the normative goals outlined in the Indian Constitution. Guru makes a unique contribution by combining societal reconstruction with inward ethical transformation—a process known as "philosophical surgery." This dual movement foreshadows the constitutional notion of substantive equality by grounding external liberation in interior awareness.

The moral rationale for Articles 15, 17, and 25 of the Indian Constitution is foreshadowed by his focus on social equality and inner divinity. In a time of caste violence, social exclusion, and epistemic injustice, his ideas are still applicable today. Though caste was powerfully criticized by intellectuals like as Gandhi and Ambedkar, Guru's contribution is the integration of inner change and external reform—a "philosophical surgery," as Nitya Chaitanya Yati refers to it—that is never fully completed but always relevant. With a vernacular cosmology of justice that is consistent with postcolonial constitutional morality, Guru sits at the nexus of spiritual purity and legal justice. According to his practice, caste's deconstruction as a social structure and a cognitive schema is the foundation of genuine emancipation, which is both metaphysical and material.

Guru's observations offer a counter-epistemology to both religious orthodoxy and neoliberal multiculturalism in contemporary India, where caste-based atrocities, socioeconomic marginalization, and cultural erasures persist. His perspective addresses both symbolic violence and material exclusion, anticipating intersectional justice. As a live metaphor for constitutional reflection, the mirror consecration challenges people to face their moral agency independently of institutional authority or ceremonial hierarchy. His legacy serves as a reminder that constitutionalism is more than simply a set of laws; it is a moral philosophy that has to be continuously revitalized by local ideas about moral and social change.

## Conclusion

Sree Narayana Guru's vision of inner sovereignty—a reordering of subjecthood and sanctity in terms of law, ethics, and knowledge—is the pinnacle of his philosophy. The mirror-cantered practice presents a radical alternative to liberal or statist paradigms of liberation, which depend on external recognition: self-recognition as the main location of justice. The conscience contains the law in addition to the court and the code. The mirror is a constitutional relic that supports spiritual freedom under Articles 15, 17, and 25 of the Indian Constitution. It marks a transition from a ceremonial item to a symbolic infrastructure that promotes equality, abolishes untouchability, and ensures religious freedom. This approach, known as "transformative constitutionalism," questions the traditional assumptions of Brahmanical control over holy access and the state's restricted power to effect social change. Guru's mirror removes hierarchy by symbolically realigning vision, resulting in a new way of perceiving oneself, others, and the divine. This idea is echoed in our constitutional jurisprudence. His pragmatic views align with Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, focusing on justice as a fundamental freedom to achieve well-being. Guru's concept of epistemic clarity, which involves seeing oneself as divine, equal, and deserving of dignity, contrasts with caste's focus on cognitive subjugation and social asymmetry. The mirror, like other traditions, transcends anthropomorphic representation and is politically situated within Dalit ethics, social justice, and vernacular sovereignty. The mirror idol does not reflect caste, ceremonial purity, or orthodoxy; rather, it reflects the face of oneself in the utmost ethical clarity. In doing so, it urges India—and the rest of the world—to become justice rather than just imitate it.

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