

Brahmasree Virupakshan Namboodiri: The Enlightened Reformer of Kerala
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ABSTRACT

Brahmasree Virupakshan Namboodiri (1900-1983) was a progressive thinker, social reformer, and ardent follower of Sree Narayana Guru and Brahmananda Sivayogi. Born into a Brahmin family in Cheruvathery, Kerala, he mastered Hindu scriptures and Ayurveda but became a vocal critic of caste discrimination and social inequalities. Influenced by reformist movements, Namboodiri led efforts to eradicate untouchability, promoted inter-caste marriages, and participated in historic struggles like the Vaikom and Guruvayur Satyagrahas. He opened his family temple to all, defying orthodox Brahmin norms, and formed the Sanathana Dharma Prachara Sabha to propagate equality. Namboodiri also worked to uplift women in the Brahmin community, advocating for their education and equality. A pioneer in teaching Vedic traditions to non-Brahmins, he left a lasting legacy as both a scholar and a social revolutionary. His contributions extended beyond social reform, with his work in Ayurveda and literature, including translations and original writings. This article explores his multifaceted life and enduring impact on Kerala's socio-cultural fabric.

INTRODUCTION

Kerala is considered a highly developed state, culturally, in independent India. The process of democratization, the rejection of social inequalities based on the caste system, the spread of modern education, the decline of the Janmi system, and the growth of new social classes have contributed to making modern society more dynamic. However, the social conditions in Kerala up until the twentieth century were deplorable. The caste system was the greatest social evil in Kerala, and it was much more oppressive than in other parts of India.¹ The rules and regulations of the caste system hindered social mobility, deepened social divisions, and stifled individual initiative.

In the nineteenth century, Kerala witnessed a cultural and ideological struggle against the regressive elements of traditional culture and the ideological hegemony of the Brahmins. This struggle arose due to structural changes in society and the consequent emergence of a new class—the educated middle class. The reformers of Kerala mainly came from intermediate and lower caste backgrounds, and their perspectives on caste were shaped by the issues they faced, such as casteism, costly and outdated social customs and practices, and education.² In addition to reformers from lower castes, youthful elements from the *savarna* caste actively participated in and even led these struggles, particularly anti-caste movements, which were closely linked to nationalist, secular, peasant, and working-class movements that emerged in the following decades. Many *savarna* Hindus, such as V. T. Bhattathiripad, Kurur Neelakandan Namboodiri, and M. R. B., came forward to eradicate social evils within their own communities and society at large. Among them, one idealistic and shining personality who devoted his entire life and wealth to the upliftment of the downtrodden was Brahmasree Virupakshan Namboodiri.

Virupakshan Namboodiri can be described as a great religious scholar, social reformer, Karmayogi, Ayurvedic physician, and humanitarian. He played a pioneering role in the social reform movements that swept Kerala during the freedom struggle.³ With deep knowledge of the Vedas and Upanishads, he based his fight against casteism and untouchability on these religious texts. He was a revolutionary who worked alongside prominent leaders such as C. Kesavan, K. Kelappan, and Sahodharan Ayyappan. However, due to the lack of proper documentation of his activities, he remains relatively unknown in the history of social reformers in Kerala. This article focuses on the socio-religious activities of Virupakshan Namboodiri, who serves as a true inspiration to future generations.

EARLY LIFE

Virupakshan Namboodiri was the only child of Sri Neelakanda Namboodiri and Smt. Nangeli Antharjanam of Vellathittu Kizhakedathu Mana, located in Cheruvathery, just two kilometers from the Perumanam Temple, Kerala. He was born in 1900. His upanayana (sacred thread ceremony) was conducted in a solemn ceremony at the age of seven, marking the beginning of his education in the Vedas, Upanishads, astrology, and Ayurveda. By the age of eleven, when he became a full dwija (twice-born), he had already gained extensive knowledge in Hindu philosophy, mythology, and ethics. He later went to the renowned Avaniparambil illam to study traditional treatments for snake poisoning as well as Ayurveda. Additionally, he learned Kayakalpa treatment.⁴

From a young age, Virupakshan Namboodiri consistently criticized the rigidity of the caste system and Brahmin dominance in Hindu society. He was greatly influenced by the reform activities of Sree Narayana Guru, who fought against social evils and superstitions. In 1915, he had the opportunity to meet Guru at Koorkenchery, Thrissur, Kerala during the Guru's visit.⁵ Virupakshan Namboodiri asked Guru to guide him on the right path. Guru told him, "Brahmanism is the symbol of pure knowledge. It is manifested through deeds and is not confined to caste or tradition. If a Brahmin by birth is illiterate, selfish, non-vegetarian, and a drunkard, he could be considered an outcaste. At the same time, if a person is truly unselfish, honest, and meek, though not a Brahmin by birth, he becomes a Brahmin by deed."⁶ Sree Narayana Guru encouraged and blessed him in his efforts to uplift the downtrodden masses. All of Virupakshan Namboodiri's subsequent social activities were based on Guru's

principles. He saw Narayana (God) in Nara (humans) and made anti-caste movements his life's mission. He became a devoted follower of Brahmananda Sivayogi, whom he met at the Alathoor Siddhashrama.⁷ When Virupakshan Namboodiri became Sivayogi's disciple, the Brahmin community ostracized him for the first time. However, with the teachings and blessings of these great men, he successfully carried out his mission.

SOCIAL REFORM ACTIVITIES

Virupakshan Namboodiri believed that ignorance and superstition among people were the root causes of social inequalities. Early in his reform movement, he joined the Sidha Samaj.⁸ His efforts were focused on raising awareness about the need for societal change in accordance with the times. Along with Sarva Sree Onkil Parameswaran, Pattathu Narayanan, and M.P. Varghese, he organized *Shahabhojanam* (inter-caste communal dining), marking the beginning of his reform activities. He became an active member of the Temperance Movement under the influence of Sree Narayana Guru. Namboodiri picketed liquor shops in Cheruvathery and surrounding areas, working to convince the lower classes that alcohol was a major cause of idleness, poverty, and crime.⁹ This ideological struggle against the liquor trade took root in the harsh realities of the community.

Virupakshan Namboodiri worked tirelessly for the upliftment of the downtrodden, who had been degraded by the customs and traditions of society. He sought to create public awareness against such oppressive practices. As a stand against casteism, Virupakshan organized *misrabhojanam* (inter-caste communal dining) in several places. The sight of Pulayas and Brahmins sitting together and partaking of food was a direct challenge to the caste-ridden society. The *misrabhojanam* held in 1937 at his own *illam* (ancestral home) was attended by prominent figures like C. Kesavan, Sahodharan Ayyappan, and disciples of Sivayogi, such as Chakkala Ramanathan and Pattathu Narayanan.¹⁰ This bold act infuriated the Brahmin community. To further his cause, he established the Sanathana Dharma Prachara Sabha. Sarva Sree V. Krishnan Namboodiri, Cherukudal Govindhan Namboodiri, and Chennamangalam Sankaran Namboodiri were among the prominent leaders of this movement. Together, they traveled across the state, promoting the abolition of untouchability and the reformation of Hindu society.

Virupakshan Namboodiri also believed that the caste barriers could be eradicated through inter-caste marriages. Many such marriages were conducted under his priestly supervision, including the marriage of his own daughter, Savithri Antharjanam, to an Ezhuthachan youth, despite fierce opposition from fellow Brahmins.¹¹ His ideas were supported by his actions, with his primary aim being to demonstrate the futility of casteism.

PARTICIPATION IN TEMPLE ENTRY MOVEMENTS

The struggle against untouchability in Kerala gained unprecedented momentum during the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924, which aimed to secure the right for all, irrespective of caste, to travel on public roads. As a champion of the oppressed, Virupakshan Namboodiri actively participated in the Vaikom Satyagraha, where he met K. Kelappan, and the two became great friends. In March 1925, Mahatma Gandhi himself visited Vaikom to encourage the satyagrahis. Virupakshan Namboodiri had the opportunity to meet Gandhi in person, which he recalled as one of the most memorable events of his life.¹² Alongside K. Kelappan, he also took part in the Guruvayur Satyagraha of 1931-32.

He actively participated in the temple entry movements of the Kochi Rajya Prajamandalam. Even after ten years of the Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation, no significant action was taken by the Raja of Kochi. The Prajamandalam Kshetra Pravesana Committee, under the leadership of Kurur Neelakandan Namboodiripad, submitted a petition in May 1946 to the Raja of Kochi.¹³ In response, the Raja declared that it was not possible to open government-owned temples to the lower castes, but the government would not prevent the opening of privately-owned temples. In October 1946, the Kshetra Pravesana Karma Samithi organized a convention in Thrissur to discuss the Temple Entry Movement. During the convention, Virupakshan Namboodiri asked the audience, "There are many privately-owned temples in the Cochin State. How many of you are ready to open such temples to the lower castes?" When there was no response from the audience, he boldly declared that he would open the temple owned and managed by his family to all, despite opposition from orthodox Brahmins.

With the support and encouragement of Sarvasri V. R. Krishnan Ezhuthachan, K. N. Nambisan, M. K. Menon, P. Gangadharan, K. R. Kumaran, M. S. Menon, K. Warriar, and others, Virupakshan Namboodiri opened his Thottappai Temple to all on the 27th of Thulam, 1122 ME (13-11-1946).¹⁴ Thousands of Harijans, as well as Christians and Muslims, participated in the ceremony alongside Sarvasree K. Kelappan, Kurur Neelakandan Namboodiripad, K. Karunakaran, K. I. Velayudan, and Kurur Neelakandan Namboodiri, all of whom offered prasadam to the gathered devotees.

This event was epoch-making for several reasons; it marked the first time entry was permitted not only to all sections of Hindus but also to followers of other religions. Sri A. K. Gopalan, the communist leader, once recalled the golden days of the Vaikom and Guruvayur Sathyagrahas, stating that Sree Virupakshan Namboodiri was a volcano that swelled at Guruvayur and erupted at Cheruvathery.¹⁵ Unable to tolerate his decision to open his family temple to all members of the public, the orthodox Brahmins ostracized him and his family, fabricating several criminal and civil cases against him. As a result, he lost all his wealth, including acres of land, while defending

himself in court. His friends who stood by him during these difficult times included Sri Ikkanda Warriar, K. Velayudhan, and K. T. Achuthan. Despite the adversity, Virupakshan faced the challenges with calm and composure.

REFORMIST OF NAMBOODIRI COMMUNITY

The superstitions, evil customs, and degrading conditions of the Namboodiri community motivated Virupakshan to work for their reformation. While other castes marched toward modernity, the Namboodiris were reluctant to refine their customs and practices. The situation of Namboodiri women was particularly dire, characterized by child marriage, denial of education, prohibition of widow remarriage, and restrictions on movement, all of which made their lives difficult. In his childhood, he had a bitter experience, as his mother was a widow at an early age, which made him resentful of these evil practices.¹⁶

Virupakshan Namboodiri urged the Brahmin youths to awaken from their age-old slumber and become aware of the changing world. He advocated for the equality of women with men. An example of this can be found in the biography of K. Kelappan. Kelappan received a letter and a gold ring from Virupakshan Namboodiri as a gift for his kind presence during the opening of his temple to all. The letter was signed by his wife, Neeli Antharjanam, his daughters Savitri and Sarada, his son Neelakandan, and also included the thumb impression of his aged mother, which revealed that the decision to open his family temple to the public was made with the consent and support of the female members of his family. Seeing this, Kelappan became emotional.¹⁷

Virupakshan Namboodiri did not have a revolutionary idea of discarding casteism; rather, he opposed the hierarchical distinctions assigned to various castes. His suggestion for achieving equality was to educate and train non-Brahmins in the Vedic traditions, providing them with the sacred thread when necessary, teaching mantras, and thereby purifying and adapting traditions to suit modern times.¹⁸ He admitted non-Brahmins to the Vedic school at Cheruvathery and taught Dharma Shastras, including the sacred Vedas, at a time when even hearing the recitation of Vedas by non-Brahmins was considered a severe crime, punishable by having molten lead poured into their ears.¹⁹

At Kizhakedath Mana Vedic school, serious seekers of divine knowledge were welcomed with open arms, regardless of their caste. Students underwent a forty-one-day regimen to regulate their food and lifestyle before being initiated into the Vedas. The Upanayana ceremony was then performed, and the students were given the sacred thread. Once the Vedas and Puranas were memorized, the students were taught to perform temple rituals. This tradition of training non-Brahmins in the Vedic school at the illam continues to this day. Unnikrishnan, one of the young priests trained there, belongs to the backward Ezhava caste; he wears the sacred thread like any other Brahmin priest and performs rituals at the Siva temple in Koratty, Thrissur district. His friend Manikandan, who belongs to a fishing community, is also a priest trained by the Vedic school. The two young men recognize that their Brahminhood, which is acknowledged even by the orthodox Brahmin Namboodiris, would not have been possible without the assistance of Virupakshan Namboodiri.²⁰

As a champion of women's upliftment in the Namboodiri community, Sri V.T. Bhattathirippad significantly influenced Virupakshan Namboodiri in this direction. He demonstrated courage by admitting young girls to the Vedic school at his mana (House), which was a considerable challenge to the existing social structure that allowed only Namboodiri males to study the Vedas.²¹ The orthodox Brahmins protested his actions, and as a result, he was ostracized. Virupakshan Namboodiri's intention to free Antharjanams from the dark interiors of the illam succeeded to a great extent. Despite the opposition, he permitted his daughter Savitri to work at a nearby medical shop.²² Savitri even traveled on public buses and went wherever she pleased, which the orthodox community considered immodest.

LITERARY APTITUDE

Virupakshan Namboodiri was a great scholar of the Vedas, Upanishads, and Itihasas-Puranas. He was also an avid reader, possessing a rare collection of eighteen Puranas and their appendices, as well as many age-old Ayurvedic texts in his library at Kizhakedath Mana. He authored a number of poems and books, many of which focus on Ayurvedic treatments. His famous work, *Garalakoodaram*, explains traditional treatments for snake poisoning, while another important work is *Sarasamgramam*. He also translated the Vishnupuranam into Malayalam. Many of his translated works remain unpublished due to financial constraints. Although he wrote numerous poems, only a few were published, while the rest remained in his diary. His autobiography is composed in beautiful verses, and K. Karunakaran, former Chief Minister of Kerala, remarked that its versification is very attractive.²³ The poems reveal his philosophical outlook, with *Sree Chithopadesam*, one of his important work, serving as an excellent example of his vision of the world. In 1980, he also started a trimonthly publication called *Sathsangham*. The main objective of the journal was to propagate the idea of equality and promote Hindu solidarity by providing in-depth knowledge of the Vedas in simple language for the common man.

GREAT PHYSICIAN

Besides being a great scholar and social reformer, he was also a skilled physician specializing in traditional treatments for snake bites. His family inherited special knowledge from their ancestors, and he utilized this unique

expertise in rare Ayurvedic medicine to become renowned for his poison treatment skills. He learned Ayurvedic and Kayakalpa treatments from Avanaparambil Illam. However, he applied his knowledge of Ayurveda not for personal gain but for the service of humanity. Numerous stories attest to his successful cures of terminal diseases.

Virupakshan Namboodiri was indeed a revolutionary in every respect. Although he was a staunch believer in Hinduism, he gave equal respect to all religions. He studied the Bible and the Quran, becoming a prime example of religious harmony. In his own puja room, one could see the pictures of Lord Jesus Christ and Mecca alongside those of Lord Krishna and other Hindu gods and goddesses. He stated, "I am a Hindu, but Hinduism, as I believe, is *Himsayam duyite hindu*. Accordingly, Krishna, Rama, Jesus, Nabi, Buddha, Nanak, Dhayananda, Mahatmaji, Chattambi Swami, Shinto, Satyasaibaba, and their followers are Hindus in my eyes."²⁴ He made history by donating wood and tiles to a nearby church when his mana was renovated and even donated a jackfruit tree from his land to the church. The cupola of St. Francis Xavier at Chevoor on the Thrissur-Kodungallur highway was constructed using the tiles and wood from Kizhakedath Mana.²⁵ This act attracted the wrath of his conservative community. This great personality attained maha samadhi on June 30, 1983.

CONCLUSION

Virupakshan Namboodiri's life embodies ancient wisdom and modern enlightenment, preaching and practicing simple living and great thinking. He devoted his life to the anti-caste movement in Kerala and deserves a respected position among the great social reformers of the state. Although he worked alongside K. Kelappan, Sahodharan Ayyappan, and many other political leaders, he remained secluded and did not seek the limelight. In the history of Kerala's social, cultural, and political landscape, he left an indelible mark. He was a valiant fighter who led a mass movement against inequality, conservatism, and injustice. Sri V. R. Krishnan Ezhuthachan, his close friend and former president of the Kochi Rajya Prajamandalam, states, "It is only natural that his reform activities were based on ancient and perpetual Hindu Dharma Samhitas. His daily life was that of a true Karmayogi, and his aim was to practice what he believed."²⁶ For half a century, he shone as a bright star on the horizon of Kerala politics, revolutionizing the thinking of the masses before suddenly disappearing like a shooting star, shedding everything and burning into oblivion. Brahma Sree Virupakshan Namboodiri did not believe in worldly hypocrisy.

END NOTES

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