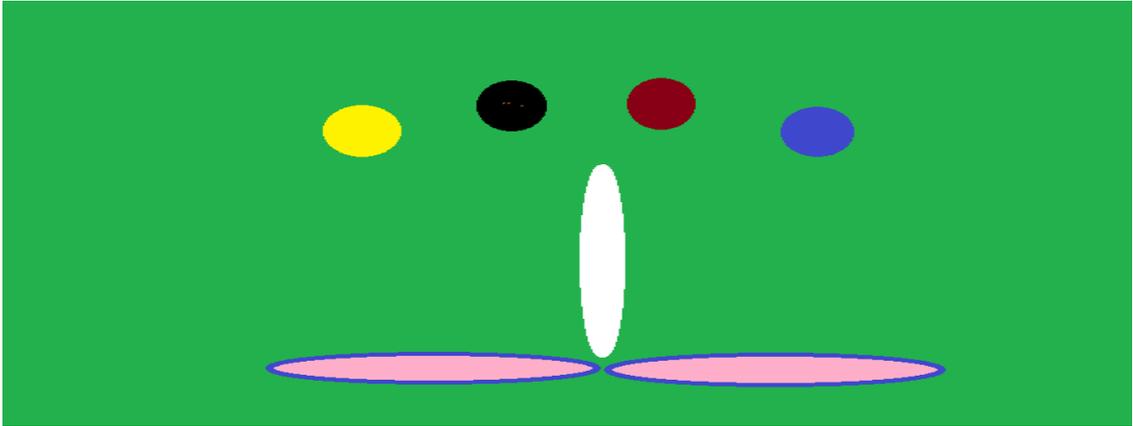




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# **Towards a Casteless Society**

## **The Visions of Navajyotisri Karunakara Guru**

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**Santhigiri Research Foundation**  
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## **The Visions of Navajyotisri Karunakara Guru**

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Much has been said about the caste system by sociologists and social reformers during the past several decades, although they have not been able to show us a path for eradication of this social evil. We shall consider although fleetingly the views often expressed by sociologists on this unjust social order before dealing with the practical and pragmatic path as envisioned by Navajyotisri Karunakara Guru for its eradication.

The caste system, sometime referred by some scholars as India's 'hidden apartheid', divides the whole society into a large number of hereditary groups, relatively superior or inferior to one another with many restrictions in matters of marriage and contact often resulting in negative stereotypes. Contact with and in some instances, even sight of lower castes is viewed as polluting. Despite the fact that untouchability was abolished under India's constitution in 1950, the imposition of social disabilities on persons by reason of their birth remains very much a part of rural India. More than one-sixth of India's population faces exclusion, shunned by much of society because of their rank as lower castes. They are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely face atrocities at the hands of the police and of higher-caste groups.

Caste, as is well-known involves a complex ordering of social groups in Hinduism. Although a person has power and knowledge he is treated as inferior if he belongs to a caste lower in caste hierarchy. The historicity of Varna dharma or caste system is debatable. Nevertheless, some scholars think that 'Varna dharma originated from the conquest and subjugation more than a millennium before Christ of the darker complexioned people of Northern India by fairer complexioned Aryan invaders from central Asia'. There are mythological descriptions of this in the earliest Sanskrit hymns, and one of the meanings of Varna is color. Whatever be the historicity of caste in the Indian society, it has become an oppressive instrument which needs to be eradicated.

In Indian sociological literature, the process in which the castes lower in the hierarchy have adopted for improving their status is characterized as Sanskritisation, the well-known term developed by sociologist M.N Srinivas. During the British period, caste mobility depended upon gaining access to some source of wealth by genealogy and by organizing the caste group by forming caste associations in order to enhance the bargaining power to negotiate with the colonial administrators. Even though some castes achieved a higher ranking due to these actions, this did not change evil practices within the caste system.

Today, through the processes of economic modernization and political democracy, and directly through political action by and on behalf of the 'backward' or 'depressed' communities and due to several legislative measures, taken by the government of post-independence India, the foundation of the traditional pattern of social interaction has weakened. The most important of these measures were the legal reforms to outlaw untouchability.

It is indeed surprising that although caste system is often discussed in relation to Hinduism, there is no religious sanction whatsoever to the concept of caste system. The Hindu laws were codified by Manu more than 3,000 years before the Christian era. However, Manu Smriti is a sociological treatise and not a religious or theological work. It has never been held at par with the Vedas and has never been claimed to be the Holy Book whose authority is unquestionable. Even efforts to find theological justification of Caste in Purusha Sukta of the Rig Veda, in which Brahmins came from the mouth, Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas from the thighs and Sudras from the feet of the Purusha (Supreme Being) could be questioned. It is evident that the whole notion is symbolic and does not mean that the actual birth of human beings is from the different limbs of Purusha. If God wanted, He could have created four castes with different physical features so that there would have been no

confusion in recognizing the caste of a man. Therefore, it is only a symbolic representation of gunas or qualities with which these limbs are related. Going by the theory of guna, one could find a Brahmana, Kshatriya and Sudra among members of the same family. The Bhagavat Gita has mentioned that varna classification is according to the predominant guna in a person (*chaaturvarnyam mayaa srishtam gunakarma vibhaagashah*).

Ever since its introduction, the Varnashrama Dharma was resented by the people. Since the Varnashrama Dharma itself is the creation of the Brahmins, by the Brahmins and for the Brahmins, they have no reason to resent it. Hence, they not only do maintain the system but also are determined to see it observed at any cost. This system of caste is not challenged or shattered by any authority. The protest against the Brahmin supremacy was not successful for many centuries for the simple reason that by enjoying social and cultural supremacy in the society, the Brahmins allowed the Kshatriyas to have a full sway over political authority and exploit society. So far as there existed a good understanding between the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas, no rebellion against the Varnashrama Dharma, either by the Vaishyas, Sudras could succeed.

In the Sixth Century B.C, Buddha and Mahavir questioned the authority of the Brahmins. Because of their direct attack on Brahminism and the caste system, those who revolted were excommunicated from Hinduism. Buddhism, which swept the whole of India for many centuries, could offer for the first time a philosophy and a way of life that has a universal appeal and application. After this Kshatriya revolt, Brahmins developed a new strategy to counter this and to maintain their supremacy by supporting any person from any caste to become the ruler provided the person accepted the Brahmin as the spiritual, social and cultural master of society. This paved the way for anointing rulers not necessarily from the Kshatriya varna. For example, the Nandas of Magadha and the Mauryas were low castes

and the Guptas were Vaishyas. This strategy they maintained even when the rulers were non-Hindus, such as the Muslims or the Europeans.

The Islamic conquest of India in the 10<sup>th</sup> century resulted in widespread and often unpleasant social, political and economic changes. The Hindu society faced forcible conversions and destruction of temples and other monuments by Islamic rulers. The period witnessed constant bloodshed, rebellions and wars. During this period, saints such as Kabir, Ramanand, Ramanuja, Vallabhacharya and others became the architects of a new spiritual renaissance in the form of Bhakti movement. Although these movements attacked the caste system and meaningless rituals and deity worship, all of them ended up as regional spiritual movements sometime representing one or other caste group or creed.

Towards the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the South posed a great challenge to the domination of the Brahmins in society. This led to the formation of an association called the South India Liberal Federation, popularly known as the Justice Party. The Self Respect Movement began by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy opposed the Brahmin domination in the society. Periyar and the movement founded by him questioned not only the Brahmin domination in society, but also waged a sustained war against the very caste system. North-West India also became a hotspot for the first time. Baba Saheb Dr. B. R. Ambedkar adopted a common base for all the untouchables, irrespective of their caste, creed, language or region. This made all the untouchables from Kashmir to Kanyakumari to unite under one banner, to voice and to agitate against the political, social, economic and cultural exploitation by the Brahmin caste. There were also reform movements like Arya Samaj of Swami Dayananda Saraswati and Brahma Samaj of Rajaram Mohan Roy and the Advaita movement by Swami Vivekananda that spoke against caste system among several others. In Kerala, the socio-spiritual reform initiated by Sri Narayana Guru was a powerful movement against caste system.

The rejection of equality prevents the possibility of harmonious existence of societies. It thus blocks human development and progress which is reflected in many indicators and yardsticks of wellbeing. Politically, it makes the functioning of democracy impossible. Mahatma Gandhi strongly condemned the caste system, describing it as a social disease. However, he defended the conceptual basis for Caste. Sri Narayana Guru, on the other hand did not agree with Gandhi's defense of the conceptual basis of caste system. For Sri Narayana Guru, there were no castes, other than woman and man.

Tracing the origin of Caste to division of labour or similar functions is unsatisfactory as such divisions which exist in all societies do not give rise to such rigid practices. Ambedkar said that Caste is a division not of labour but of laborers. 'Caste was the most extreme division of social and political power. The question of balancing interests between groups did not exist, for the simple reason that each Caste was a world unto itself'. The annihilation of Caste, he stated, is an undeniable pre-condition for democracy in India. 'In every respect, Caste rejects the notion of human equality and thus justifies enclosure of each Caste within its own boundaries on the basis of graded inequality. Caste system is one of the major challenges in front of Hindu society in its evolution into a spiritually unifying and socially egalitarian society'.

It is true that India has a few billionaires and a sizable urban and rural middle class. However, according to some statistics, close to fifty percent of its population remains below the poverty line in the ghettos of social and spiritual isolation and backwardness. One cannot negate the fact that the backwardness of India stems mainly from a religious ideology that divides its people socially and spiritually in the name of caste.

Navajyotisri Karunakara Guru disapproved the hierarchical caste system and opened the path of spiritual redemption for all people, especially the downtrodden and women. The spiritual movement of Guru is all-inclusive. His followers belonged to all castes and religions, the backward castes, scheduled castes and forward communities such as Nairs, forming the majority. By distilling a spiritual thought beyond religious dogma, Guru united the people in the thread of pure spiritual love. Guru demonstrated that it was possible to demolish the walls of caste and religion, for which He performed the marriages of his followers with unequal caste groups. The unification of dissimilar caste groups by marriage has been effective in removing the social distance that existed between different caste groups. However, this was possible only when all caste groups were united under an egalitarian and universal spiritual ideology and rituals discarding whatever were to be discarded in the old tradition. However, inter-caste marriages without such a uniting and enlightening spiritual ideology can only lead to a different dimension of social and spiritual anarchy.

Navajyotisri Karunakara Guru did not establish a new religion. He established a new secular and evolving spiritual movement reinterpreting the cosmology and foundational principles of Sanatana Dharma remaining within the age-old spiritual and cultural inheritance of the country shared by the rishi tradition. Guru realized that only by guiding the people into such a spiritual path unfettered by tradition, India can overcome the problem of caste and the consequent disunity among people. In order to evolve into such a spiritual vision liberated of caste system, first the people should know the true basis of Indian spirituality i. Is it based on trimurti tradition (devi-deva worship) or is it based on Rishi tradition?

As we know, the trimurti tradition is based on the ritualistic worship of devi-devas in temples through mantra and tantra, whose authorities are the priests who have been trained in the rituals. One of the justifications for caste system was the ritualistic purity, which was the

privilege of only the priests. Here the medium between the devotee and God is the Priest. On the other hand, the Rishi or the sage tradition (Gurumargam) is founded on the transfer of transcendental knowledge and experience through the relationship between guru and the disciple. Here, the disciple is directly elevated to the spiritual level of the Guru in an experiential way. For the disciple, the only scripture he or she has to follow is the words and instructions of Guru. The utterance of Guru is the revealed scripture or the Veda.

Such a Guru would be a channel of transcendental knowledge, expressed through visions and revelations. He would be a trikala jnani, i.e. one who possess the knowledge of past, present and future times. He would be the spiritual guide of an age with profound spiritual insight into the history of the human universe from its origin going back to millions of years in the scheme of cyclic ages. In the Rishi tradition or Gurumargam, the medium between the devotee and God is such a realized Guru, who has transcended the concept of angelic beings or devi-devas as the medium for spiritual realization. There is no place for priesthood, caste discrimination or such loathsome customs and practices in the true Guru tradition or jnana path. However, almost all the guru traditions under the umbrella of Hinduism are found to be deferential to trimurti tradition, which rests on the concept of caste system and worship of devi-devas as the way for salvation supported by the Vedic rituals. Hence, there is no possibility of escaping from the caste trappings through such guru traditions under the trimurti system.

The trimurti tradition is a deviant and degenerated spiritual culture, which allows the worship of innumerable spiritual entities ranging from evil spirits, ancestral spirits, deities, gods and goddesses supported by superstitious myths and tantric rituals. The Vedic precept '*Ekam Sat, Vipraah Bahudhaa Vadanthi* (there is only One Truth, but the scholars mention it differently) has been wrongly interpreted to mean that any type of worship is fruitful to attain

God and ultimate liberation, which is in conflict with the teachings of Bhagavat Gita that to whatever spiritual entities one is attached, to them goes the soul after death. The famous verse in Bhagavat Gita '*deva vrataan devaan yanthi...*' means that whoever worships the devi-devas, their soul would go to them after death. The trimurti tradition has thus created innumerable spiritual divisions under the three main creeds of Hinduism, i.e. Saiva, Vaishnava and Sakteya that promote allegiance respectively to Siva, Vishnu and Devi as the path of liberation and attainment of Brahma Jnana. However, there was no place for Brahman (The Supreme Universal God) and Brahma Jnani (Guru, the Knower of Brahman) as everything had been brought under Siva, Vishnu and Brahma, the trimurty gods. In place of the eternal and universal spiritual principles, which form the basis of Sanatana Dharma, a digressive and divisive spiritual culture, supported by puranic tales was allowed to grow, which gives prominence to deity worship and caste system and in which the main player can only be the priest, not the Brahma Jnani Guru.

This disintegrative spiritual culture has grown like a weed in the vast spiritual complex of Sanatana Dharma. Caste system is the byproduct of this spiritual culture. This spiritual deviation has occurred due to the mistake of not evaluating the evolving nature of yugas or ages that bring about changes in the modes of worship relevant to each age.

Navajyotisri Karunakara Guru said:

'The two earlier yuga -Treta and Dwapara - were periods of the devas. In these yugas worship could only be channelled through the medium of devas. In the scheme of deva worship the Brahmin elite kept the Sudras away. But the fourth yuga is the hub of authority for all this. If we believe that the earlier three yugas have run their course according to the respective Yugadharma, is it not certain that the fourth yuga would have a dharma of its own to be followed? According to the dharma of the fourth yuga so the Puranas enjoin the devas

lose their authority. The Vedas and Upanishads reflect this idea. If so, should it not come to pass?'

The caste system not only degraded the lives of the downtrodden but arrested their spiritual growth too. Navajyotisri Karunakara Guru says: 'It is said that in Kali the Sudra has the right to rule. Further, if the Sudra is said to have the right even over the Vedas, we will have to concede it. Apart from the denial by the king and the Brahmins there is yet another reason for the backwardness of the Sudras. Take Kerala for example. The Brahmin elite, apart from preventing the Sudras from gaining knowledge or holding authority also had liaisons – sambandham - with Sudra women, disregarding the injurious repercussions this had on the 'pitrus. There might be much to say in this regard. Is it not clear that the Brahmins thus tampered with progeny, and destroyed the role of the child in striving for the spiritual redemption of his ancestors, since the ancestor himself became illegitimate? The Brahmins refused to share vital knowledge, and degraded the people so denied into subject status.'

We know that the protest movements against caste system took the form of new religions. However, they represent only a partial or imperfect aspect of Sanatana Dharma. There is a rational and scientific basis to the concepts of Sanatana Dharma, which cannot be rejected by science as the advances in the fields of physics and astronomy prove. Sanatana Dharma is rooted in the belief in the One Supreme Intelligence, called as Brahman (not Brahma, one among the trimurty gods). It has a system of age calculation with relation to the purpose and evolution of universe, and a tradition of guru-disciple learning and dissemination of knowledge related to the process of spiritual evolution. These are the key aspects of Sanatana Dharma, which are in disagreement with the spiritual concepts of trimurti tradition, which is mainly based on mythology.

In the Sanatana Dharma, the deva-devi or the celestial stage is a stage of *trigunas*, i.e. the three qualities in motion bound to the phenomena, which has to be transcended in order to attain final release from births and deaths. By worshipping the spiritual entities in the deva-devi plane, which includes all angelic beings, a devotee limits his spiritual evolution as true peace and experience of the Absolute lie beyond the field of trigunas. This has been mentioned by the sages in their teachings. For example, in the Bhagavat Gita Krishna advises Arjuna to become unfettered by the three gunas (*Nistairgunyo Bhava Arjuna*). Navajyotisri Karunakara Guru said that the birth of Krishna heralded a change in the spiritual scenario of the country. Guru explains how the protagonists of caste appropriate such sages who stood for the eradication of ignoble spiritual practices including caste system:

‘Krishna came at the end of one yuga and at the beginning of another. He was a Sudra Guru whom the Brahmins tried to reclaim for the Trimurti. Likewise, we have the story of Mahabali, the Sudra King of Kerala who was destroyed by Brahmanism. We are told of this exemplary king who was just and was loved by all his subjects. A god, in the guise of a Brahmin was supposed to have stamped him down into the nether world. Krishna belonged to a low caste family though his mother’s brother Kamsa was a king. The Brahmins appropriate the spiritually endowed evolute in due course. However low or vulgar the persons are, the Brahmins can get close and own them. This tendency is reflected in extra-religious activities too... The Sudra origins of the ‘Twelve Sons of the Pariah Women’ were played down, when these wise men were no more, by the Brahmins. This was done by making them acceptable through suitable writings. While these Gurus were still living, the Brahmins were too hesitant to mingle with them or to recognize their work and vision’.

The spiritual movement established by Navajyotisri Karunakara Guru is the reestablishment of the true concept of Sanatana Dharma. It is the fulfillment of the true vision of the sages and rishis down the ages. There is no place in it for spiritual disunity and other harmful practices such as caste system. Guru said that ‘everyone should get everything’. The ideology of Guru is the spiritual expression of all democratic and socialistic principles synchronizing spiritualism and secularism. Democracy, socialism, secularism and all such egalitarian concepts can develop only on the foundation of such a spiritual base. This philosophy and spiritual movement has the power for a civilizational change, an ascent to a new world-order.

Guru gave the following exhortation for a total spiritual re-organization of our society:

‘A reorganization of our society, of our country is required. All of us, believers, should free ourselves from the destructive effects of the caste system. We should overcome ethnic and religious differences. All children of this land should come together in humility and in devotion to God. That is the way to reorganize. This will give us strength of mind, and power. The community that could contribute greatly towards this reorganization is the Brahmin community. In them intelligence, skill, ability and shrewdness blend as it were. They should give up their varnasrama caste trappings completely and lay the foundation of a composite—samkara—culture, the culture that is meant for Kali, indicated by the author of the Bhagavad Gita. They should unite with others to build a complete society, totally free from caste or class. They should not be distracted by the differences seen today. The pattern of having one mode of worship for themselves and other modes for the rest should change first’.

Navajyotisri Karunakara Guru said that the degradation of the times is due to the refusal to modify the customs that required a change according to the age and the falsification of the ideology that the abode of God Almighty should all the time be with the celestials (deva) and Brahmins' ... The divisions in society have been deliberately created. In this distorted state Sudras were denied the right to study the Veda. They imbibed a decadent culture and their life slid into abjectness'.

Therefore, only by changing the present mode of worship and the institution of caste, India can resurrect itself spiritually from the decadent religious practices. The eradication of caste system calls for a reinterpretation and reinvigoration of Sanatana Dharma. The significance of the spiritual movement of Navajyotisri Karunakara Guru lies here.

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